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HOW TO IMPROVE HIGH-RISK HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT AND
WELL-BEING THROUGH USING BEST PRACTICES, PARTICULARLY IN AN
ALTERNATIVE SETTING

By

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A capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of
Arts in Education

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Several life events have led me to my project on: *How to improve high-risk high school student achievement and support well-being through using best practices, particularly in an alternative setting?* Until February of 1978, I had a pretty normal life. I had a strong support system within my family, I had done well academically, and was passionate about school. That February my dad died. I was eleven years old. Everything changed for me academically and emotionally, and nobody at school or home recognized that I was struggling. I was alone often because my mother had to start working after my father died. She had no idea what was going on with me: I stopped bathing, I gained weight, and I was close to failing the 5th grade. No adult in the school reached out to me to help me process my feelings of loss. They passed me on to 6th grade, even though it was questionable.

During a new school year in the fall of 1979, I met a teacher who would have a positive impact on my emotional well-being. She would become a role model and a trusted support system throughout my life. She was an amazing teacher, and she took the time to get to know her students. She was a new teacher, and she was very different than any other teacher I had known. She went out of her way for students; she listened, built relationships, and motivated students to want to do their best. Nobody understood or wanted to talk to me about what I was going through, but she did. The relationship she built with me is what got me through the sixth

grade, as well as the rest of my education. I wanted to become a teacher because of her. I wanted to be there for struggling students like she was there for me.

I continued to struggle through school after the sixth grade, and very few teachers throughout those years were able to help me. In junior high, I became a behavior problem and I would act out. I was sent to the principal's office quite often. I had to complete summer school because I failed a class. I stopped playing sports, and was having medical issues that would bring me to the doctor and emergency room; I was seeking attention for the pain I did not understand. No adult in my life made connections with what was going on with my emotional state.

By high school, I was a risk-taker and I would get in trouble. I never met with my high school counselor until I was a senior in high school. It was his job to meet with seniors about higher education and help make a plan for after high school. During my fifteen-minute meeting with him, he informed me I was not college material. He said my math and science grades were low, so I would not make it in college. He felt I would be better suited to going to beauty school or maybe the military. It was because I believed in his assessment of my potential that I never took the ACT test offered in school. It would take nine years before I could convince myself that it was important for my future to continue with higher education.

Midwest Mexican

Growing up in the 1970s, in a predominantly Scandinavian area, I became aware of my heritage around five years old. I assumed, up until this time, I was Indian. I had brown eyes and long dark hair, and I always wore my hair in braids. One day, a neighbor friend of mine told me her parents said that I was Mexican, not Indian. I was angry at her accusations because I already

knew at a young age how society felt about Mexicans. I did not know what it meant, but I knew it was not a good thing.

My father was born in Mexico and my mother was born in Canada. Together, they had five first-generation Americans. Because of my father's desire to assimilate, he never taught his children his first language of Spanish. My grandmother did not speak English, and I spent every day with her; she was the only grandparent I ever knew. I was immersed in the culture, but the language was kept from me.

I learned quickly that there was a part of me I needed to hide. My father's silent explanation of disapproving looks, whenever I showed that I was integrated Mexican/American, made me realize there is a stigma attached to being Mexican. As a result, I created a façade to hide behind. I felt people would pass judgment over me if they knew what my nationality was, and I wanted to blend in. In high school, my friends would yell down the hallway "Laura Lopez, the Mexican Norwegian; hoes beets, eats lefse!" I, too, laughed at the concept. It was almost as if I were laughing at something that was not a part of me, but it was.

It has been a lifetime of education and discovery to realize I am proud of who I am, and I have a rich history. People from all over the world have been giving up their language and heritage to be accepted in the "American Melting Pot." This is one of the reasons I became a social studies teacher and was part of the path that brought me to working with high-risk students. We all carry the baggage and gifts of our ancestors, and I want to instill into students to be proud of who they are. The more students understand and appreciate who they are, their motivation and achievement for their future will be unimaginable.

Developing a Passion

After high school, with no plans for further education, I started working with adults with cognitive deficits throughout several settings. I loved working with these amazing people with their jobs and teaching them living skills for independence. Working in several facilities over many years taught me that I enjoyed teaching and helping people to learn and grow. I realized I had a lot of compassion for disadvantaged people, and understood that marginalized people needed assistance to overcome their barriers in many aspects of their lives.

It was during this time that I felt I had to find a way to get into college. I had never taken an ACT test, and it had been many years since I graduated from high school; I had to approach entrance into college in a non-traditional way. I appealed to the college to accept me through an application process, and I was denied. I was disappointed and disheartened, but I never gave up. I had to convince the people at the university to give me a chance. I applied again, and they accepted me in an alternative program that they offered on campus for students like myself: older than average, low or no ACT scores, and low high school GPA. If I was successful in this setting, I could start taking classes in the mainstream campus after the first semester. It was a smaller setting where the professors built relationships with all of the students, and I loved learning. These educators were always there to help students with any difficulty a student might be having. Even after transitioning into the main campus for all my classes, I always went back for help from the professors that had connected with me in the alternative setting. They continue to be role-models for me after all these years, as I continue to be for many of my former students.

Career Lesson About Building Relationships

I accepted my first teaching job in a northern district in a Midwestern state. The diversity of this district consisted of White, Native American, and a small population of Latino students. However, there was one commonality among these students: they lived in one of the poorest counties in the state, and many of the families struggled in poverty.

During my interview with the principal, she explained to me that they had a large population of Native American students that open-enrolled into their school. She proceeded to tell me that these students have no role models that look like them, but there were a lot of white people who were blonde-haired and blue-eyed. I was shocked by her comment that she was more interested in my physical attributes than my credentials. In her eyes, I appeared to be Native American, and she cared about these students having someone that looked like them. Until then, I had not understood the importance of having someone in a teaching position that students of color could see in themselves. It is important for students to have the representation of someone that looks like them, so it will reinforce that people of color are successful too.

In 2005, an event took place that shook me to the core of being a teacher and reinforced my objective of building relationships with students. I was a social studies teacher for three grade levels: ninth, tenth and eleventh grade. I taught geography to ninth graders, and when school started that September, I had 36 students in my class. I told the principal that there was not enough space in the classroom for all the students. He told me not to worry about that, because not all of the students would make it, and some drop out. I was shocked that he already had a

preconceived notion about the success of these students. Focus on those that will make it, and do not waste energy on those that will not.

One of my ninth-grade geography students in the fall of 2005 was from a Native American reservation. This student would make the journey from the reservation with about 50 other students to our school. A reservation bus would pick up students, and then drive to the reservation line where they would meet one of our school district busses. The students would transfer busses and continue with another 45 minute drive to school. Some of the students would get on the bus just after six in the morning, just to get to our school by eight. In the two months that he was a student in my class, he was absent a lot. I can remember when he would show up after being absent I would get him the work that he had missed, and try to get him caught up. He was eager to learn but never asked for help. I can still see his face. I liked him, and he was a kind and respectful young man: he was artistic, shy, and well-behaved.

Unfortunately, I learned more about my former student posthumously. I learned that he had wanted a better education and more opportunities; he had removed himself from gang activity and wanted to be a role model to his newly born child. He wanted more than the reservation had to offer, and tried to push through the barriers that were holding him back. He was unable to endure a four-hour daily trek to and from our school, and he re-enrolled back to the reservation high school. On March 20, 2005, another student showed up to the reservation high school armed and killed ten people; my former student was one of the victims.

I was profoundly impacted by this act that took the life of a former student as well as many others. I felt that I did not do enough to help him with his goals, and I had failed him. I became determined that I would never allow a student to pass through my classes without knowing who

they are. I work very hard to do this in the alternative educational setting where I teach, and my former student helped me to understand the importance of connecting to all students and knowing who they are to help them overcome their barriers in education. Educators need to understand how they can help these students overcome their issues to help them be successful. Empowering students through teacher-student relationships has a positive impact on students' social-emotional connectedness to school (Kirk, Lewis, Brown, Karibo, & Park, 2016). This practice can assist teachers in helping students achieve their goals.

Supporting High-Risk Youth

After my experiences in a northern district, I moved to a large metropolitan area in the same state. I was hired to teach a federally supported prevention curriculum, a state grant that my school district had received. For five years, I worked with small groups through a curriculum that focused on self-esteem, decision-making, personal control, and interpersonal communication. Every year, I collected data on the students' overall improvement with attendance, grades, mood changes, and drug use. The improvement these students achieved made a difference in their overall school experience and education. The curriculum was proven to work and helped most of the students with positive changes in their self-esteem, school bonding, and deviant behavior. Many schools do not see the importance of including this type of alternative learning into the educational system. Typically, districts focus all of their resources and staff into helping their high-achieving students. Unfortunately, students with low achievement are not always given the same educational opportunities, including resources and staff that promote their well-being. Thus, in this capstone, I am examining ways of how to improve high-risk high school student achievement and well-being through using best practices

particularly in an alternative setting. This project provides strategies to support educators by making connections with their students to improve student success.

Summary

In Chapter One, I introduced my research by establishing the importance, significance and the need for the study. The journey and experiences of my life have led me to understand the needs of high-risk students. My passion has continued to grow into a lifetime of work to help these students overcome their barriers to success. Many of these students believe that they are not capable because they do not fit the template of the “norm” within our educational systems.

In Chapter Two, I provide a review of the literature relevant to the ideas of my topic and focus in helping high-risk students through building relationships and establishing trust, connectedness and motivation that will help students on their journey toward graduation and higher learning. In Chapter Three, I explain the best practices I have put together based on the review of current literature enumerated in Chapter Two. I also describe how, where, and when I will share these best practices with my colleagues and district. Chapter Four lays out my professional development plan, as well as my reflection on the process and what I learned, including areas of growth.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

Introduction

“Relationships matter. Very few things foster hope and optimism for students like quality relationships with adults” (Jenson, 2017, p. 33). Improving high-risk student achievement and well-being is important for their success, especially for those who have fallen behind.

Student-teacher relationships are key in motivating students to engage with their education and will foster positive outcomes. My capstone question is: *How to improve high-risk high school student achievement and promote well-being through using best practices, particularly in an alternative setting?*

In order to understand the importance of Alternative Educational Programs (AEP) and how these schools support high-risk students, it is crucial to understand how they are defined, and how school districts meet the needs of high-risk students who are at risk for failure. The first section of this chapter provides a definition of what alternative education is, and how these environments support students' educational needs. Furthermore, the diversity of alternative schools is examined, along with teacher practice that promotes building relationships with students to support their social-emotional well-being, motivation, and success.

In this chapter, I explore my research question: *How to improve high-risk high school student achievement and promote well-being through using best practices, particularly in an alternative setting?* I review the relevant literature associated with my research in four sections: Alternative Educational Programs (AEP), At-Risk Students, Building Strong Relationships, and Best Practices to promote positive mindsets. These areas are used to outline the students who are at

risk for failure, and how teacher practice can support achievement, motivation, and well-being. Though the focus of this research is to address the learning needs of high-risk students in an Alternative Education Program (AEP), these strategies and ideas are also important for teachers and students within mainstream settings so they can understand how to support all students.

Alternative Education Programs

Alternative Education Programs (AEP's) are a different approach to education as opposed to traditional education. They may be a public school, private school, charter school, as well as homeschool. The structure of alternative schools differs from conventional schools, by the approach to subject matter, and the informal relationships between students and teachers (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2019). Alternative settings are an intervention for students who struggle in mainstream education for several different reasons: academic, attendance, addiction, pregnancy, as well as social-emotional barriers. These programs work to meet the needs of high-risk students who are struggling to be academically successful and prevent them from dropping out. These different schools are important interventions for at-risk and marginalized students. They were founded to serve students whose education required innovative and comprehensive techniques and methodologies that are absent from most regular education settings (Olive, 2003). There are many alternative schools in the United States, with as many as one million students attending these programs (Jordan, Jordan, & Hawley, 2017). The need for alternative programming is important to meet the needs of at-risk, marginalized students. These programs can be effective and have shown positive outcomes, such as increase student motivation, self-esteem, and academic success (Nichols & Utesch, 1998).

Using different approaches to support students' well-being promotes their achievement and motivation. Best practices are crucial in changing high-risk students' mindset about their educational ability. As pointed out in the achievement triangle theory, to reach marginalized students, educators need to create relationships in order to understand students' learning needs and gain their responsiveness to connecting with the curriculum (Howard, 2006). The relationships that educators build with their students create caring and trusting connections, where students are more invested in their education (Howard, 2006).

Alternative schools are crucial in supporting high-risk students. These schools are defined at the federal level as the following:

A public elementary/secondary school that addresses the needs of students that typically cannot be met in a regular school, provides nontraditional education, serves as an adjunct to a regular school, or falls outside the categories of regular, special, or vocational education. (Porowski, O'Conner, & Luo, 2014, p. 1)

There are many states and districts that provide alternative education opportunities; however, each state defines and operates alternative education differently. Many states provide criteria with whom these programs serve, but they all have one thing in common: to address the needs of the students at risk of failure.

The characteristics of quality alternative education programs can vary, but all provide opportunities for students who have struggled in mainstream education and are at-risk for failure and dropping out. These alternative settings are small enrollment programs that work to meet the unique academic and social-emotional needs of students. They also provide supportive environments that build relationships with peers and teachers (Foley & Pang, 2006). In

addition, students' specific learning needs are addressed: "Alternative education programs are often viewed as individualized opportunities designed to meet the educational needs for youth identified as at-risk for school failure" (Foley & Pang, 2006, p. 10). Alternative education programs continue to support the diverse needs of students and many programs approach these needs differently.

There is not one educational template that works for all students, especially those who are not succeeding, and alternative programs provide another approach to meet the needs of students not successful in the mainstream setting (Raywid, 2001). At-risk students thrive in different environments, and students need to be in a different setting from which they left. It is important for schools to accommodate all students to get them back on track, "However, the necessary first step toward success is not very complicated: it lies in simply recognizing that, when it comes to schools, one size cannot fit all" (Raywid, 2001, p. 582). When one approach does not work for students, alternatives need to be devised to promote student success and achievement.

The more educators understand the issues that students come to school with, the better-prepared teachers are to help students overcome their barriers and achieve academic success. As Olive (2003) pointed out, it is critical that educators of at-risk, high-risk, and troubled students understand the necessity of alternative programs and the best practices that will support our students academically, as well as social-emotionally.

Types of alternative education programs. Students who attend alternative programs have stigmas attached to them as learners. Some educators might deem these students as lazy, low achieving, and incapable of academically learning. The stereotypes that are attached to alternative programs and the students who attend them are inaccurate. Developing programs that

support building skills with students, and teaching them to be productive citizens that foster community connections will guide a student's future.

Alternative programs set a model for what can work in a mainstream setting, but these pathways are rarely adopted. As Raywid (1994) discussed, there are three types of alternative schools:

Type I is seen as a restructured school from the mainstream high school education. These schools are popular and resemble magnet schools;

Type II is viewed as Last-Chance programs as opposed to expulsion or suspension. *Type II* typically work with behavior modification and in some situations, students work on assignments from the classes in which they were removed;

Type III is for students who are in need of remediation or rehabilitation either academically socially-emotionally or both (Raywid, 1994, p. 27). In some cases, these students will return to the mainstream setting.

There are many types of alternative schools throughout metropolitan and rural communities that resemble these models. The success of these types of models varies. “There is evidence that when adopted as a model, alternative schools can transform school district” (Raywid, 1994, p. 28).

Unfortunately, the stigma that is attached to alternative schools can inhibit credibility for programming. The setting for this present/current capstone has a component of all three types of alternative schools, and students are able to be successful, regardless of the reason they are in need of Alternative Educational Program.

Malcolm Knowles (1950), who is well known for the development of andragogy pointed out, programs are often based on what people think students should be interested in. A program needs to be understanding of what each individual really needs and wants so the learner can achieve what they desire. Alternative programs work to address the needs of each learner and finding approaches that will motivate students using their interests to direct their educational opportunities.

At-Risk Students

The students that attend these alternative educational programs come from diverse backgrounds, as well as diverse socio-economic statuses. The categories that include at-risk students have continued to grow over the decades. However, these students typically are not on track to graduate and have needs that are not being addressed in the mainstream high school setting. As Fuller and Sabatino (1996) discussed, the term “at-risk” is an all-inclusive term to describe a broad range of educational and behavioral problems for junior and senior high school students. As a result of the range of educational and behavioral problems, it can be difficult to work with this population and help them overcome their barriers to success. However, educators can make a difference with this population with the approach the teachers take to high-risk student learning.

High-risk students that attend alternative settings have struggled in mainstream education for many different reasons.

The development and promotion of alternative education programs have grown in recent years as a result of the search for alternative solutions to address student misbehavior, as

well as an attempt to provide environments and a curriculum that meets the needs of at-risk students. (Nichols & Utesch, 1998, p. 272)

These settings provide an important alternative to positively promote at-risk students' achievements. Many of these students are placed in an alternative school program because they have disruptive behaviors that prevent them from academic success. In the past, these students have been suspended or expelled, and these programs are used as an alternative to dropping out (Fuller & Sabatino, 1996). These programs have been successful in helping these students overcome their barriers to academic success.

The high-risk students that attend these programs can have low socioeconomic backgrounds, low achievement, an addiction, attendance issues, disruptive behaviors, mental illness and negative perceptions about school. In addition, these students lack cultural status, and connectedness to school, which plays a role in their achievement. Lack of academic success promotes high-risk students dropping out of school and continue the cycle of high-risk behaviors throughout their lives. The more students are supported in school, they are more likely to overcome these barriers "Removing a student from school decreases the chances that she will graduate or enroll in college. Not graduating from high-school leads to a host of other problems, including an increased likelihood of unemployment, substance abuse, and poverty" (Fedders, 2018, p. 16). Alternative programs can help promote positive educational and future outcomes for the diverse high-risk students that attend these settings. Teaching students real-life skills and engaging them to be lifelong learners will help build their future.

Diversity of schools. Diversity of students in public schools will continue to grow, and as a result, schools are dealing with more diversity in their classrooms than teachers are trained to

effectively embrace. It can be difficult for some teachers to behave in ways that are inconsistent with their own life experiences, socialization patterns, worldviews, and levels of racial identity development (Howard, 2006). Our students come to us from different backgrounds and perspectives, and understanding who they are and what their needs are as students should be at the core of how teachers approach their practice.

Martin Luther King Jr. (1963) said in his famous speech that we should not judge people by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. He reinforced the approach that educators need to take in their classrooms with all students. Educators need to accept each student for who they are: racially, religiously, academically, and how they identify themselves. As Darling-Hammond (2010) discussed, students of color do not make it into higher education as often as their white counterparts. In addition, the article stated that the United States lags behind other industrialized countries in academic achievement as a result of the traditional model high school that is too slow to change. The models of schools need to transform to suit the needs of our students. Teachers have little opportunity to get to know their students, and as a result, students can not relate to adults in school on a personal level. Because students lack connectedness, there are many cracks in which students can fall (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Gandara (2008) stressed the importance to strengthen the identity for low-income students of color within our schools because many of them struggle to succeed in school and do not go on to higher education. However, there are programs that provide low-income students of color with the assistance they need to support their success and make it into college. There are strategies that make these programs effective. Teachers can monitor student success by tracking their grades, setting goals, and get to know them on a personal level to foster their success.

Schools need to expand the focus on diversity and equity to discuss the importance of gender and sexual identity for education (Rubel, 2016). Diversity in schools also needs to support how students identify their gender. There has been progress in this area of supporting our students in school who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Questioning, and others (LGBTQ+) but the progress has been slow in coming. Changing the societal constructs of schools and communities is important in order to accept everyone for who they are and where they come from. Understanding how students identify is important “Like gender, sexual identity is another variable created and developed by a society that typically gets framed as fixed and as binary. Heterosexuality is an essential aspect of conforming to gender roles” (Rubel, 2016, p. 436). The idea of a genderbread person helps to support how people see themselves (identify), how they feel (expression), who they are attracted to (heart) and their sex (organs). This can be used as a teaching tool to foster inclusion for all students (Kellerman, 2017).

Many of these students with diverse backgrounds, as described, also are impacted by bullying within schools. As a result, the negative impact has affected their psychological, social, and societal well-being (Swearer, Espelage, & Napolitano, 2009). There are prevention and interventions to help support students who are impacted by bullying, and it should mirror the components of healthy relationships. Teachers and administrators can help support students through building relationships and can be an important strategy to help curb depression, anxiety, prevent suicidal ideation, promote improved social skills, self-esteem and general well being (Swearer et al., 2009).

Building Strong Relationships

High-risk students have various barriers to learning and achievement that have prevented them from being academically successful. It takes a lot of patience and time to build relationships with high-risk students who have a negative perception of themselves and school. However, these relationships may help improve student outcomes, as several researchers have noted. “Positive youth-adult relationships have been found to have beneficial effects on youth mental health, attitudes, social skills, school attendance, and general achievement of youth” (Weiss, Harder, Bratiotis, & Nguyen, 2019, p. 424). Mentoring students has positive outcomes and will help them build healthy relationships in school with peers and teachers, including family and community (Weiss et al., 2019). When working with youth that is at-risk for failure these caring and trusting relationships promote student achievement. If students do not have the support in their life to overcome situations they encounter, they can become involved in risky behavior, fail to achieve and are predictably drop-out prone (Fuller & Sabatino, 1996). Teacher-student relationships help to support decision-making and personal control.

As Martinez, McMahon, Coker, and Keys (2016) concluded, teachers connecting with students have positive behavioral and academic outcomes that shape students' learning experiences. They also indicate that these favorable student outcomes have a high correlation to teacher practice and modeling behavior. Relationships help our students to develop a healthy outlook and can help the positive development of relationships with others. There are many relationships in a student's life, and teachers and staff have an opportunity to positively affect the development of relationships with others. According to Jenson (2017), creating healthy relationships has the power to change lives. He indicated the following are the best five areas to target relationships in schools:

1. **Teacher to student:** Learning about students and making them your ally with friendship and listening.
2. **Teacher to teacher:** Create a culture in the school that promotes friendship, trust, and collaboration.
3. **Student to student:** Allow student collaboration time. These relationships are important to improve behavior and achievement. Having students work together builds teamwork and helps them to feel included.
4. **Staff to the community:** Get to know the parents of your students by making home visits. It lets them know their child is important.
5. **Teacher to parents:** Connecting parents to schools and the community through regular communication. It shows the teacher's depth of care and connects families to what is going on in the community and resources that might be beneficial to them (Jenson, 2017, p. 33).

In the current capstone, these five areas were taken into consideration while developing strategies to help create healthy relationships and positive role models within the school setting to reinforce desired behaviors and improve academic outcomes.

Teacher practice to support students. It is important for teachers and institutions to have a philosophy in education. Education is an instrument of social development and to produce individuals who are effective members of society in which they belong (Knowles, 1950). Alternative Education Programs seek to build lifelong learners in education and to move away from the traditional expectations of mainstream settings by lecturing students on what they

should know. Teaching grows from our interpretation of what learning is and learning takes place when the thing learned becomes a part of them (Knowles, 1950).

Educators spend a lot of time with their students throughout the year, and they support their students inside and outside their classrooms, especially in an alternative education program. These relationships create positive student outcomes as these students are tempted with destructive behavior. The areas of influence that teacher practice has on high-risk student behaviors that are barriers to their success needs to be considered. “Given teachers’ regular proximity to students in the classroom, a variety of teacher behaviors may be important for shaping student outcomes” (Martinez, McMahon, Coker, Keys, 2016, p. 2). In alternative settings, teachers have more contact with students through several classes, advisory, as well as monthly activities. As Martinez et al. (2016) discussed, educators need to ensure positive outcomes through teacher collaboration, supervision and discipline, and instructional management.

Teacher collaboration is critical in promoting positive student outcomes in an alternative setting. Interdisciplinary practice can help bridge gaps in student understanding in lessons, and make connections. Martinez, et al. (2016) noted that in schools in which teachers reported higher levels of collaboration through co-teaching, the students reported higher levels of school belonging, school satisfaction, and self-efficacy. The positive outcomes that these strategies foster helps students engage, as well as promote achievement.

Franco (2019) exemplifies Malcolm Knowles Andragogy as a learner-centered method and technique for teaching about self-directed learning and teaching students to be lifelong learners. She outlines Malcolm Knowles principles about andragogy:

1. Students need to know why they need to learn something before they will want to learn it.
2. Self-concept will help students from being dependent to being self-directed and motivated.
3. Experience accumulates the reservoir of our learning base, and active learning builds existing knowledge and experiences.
4. Readiness to learn: the learner becomes focused on the development tasks of their social roles.
5. Orientation to Learn: as students mature their perspectives changes from subject-centered to problem-centered.
6. As a person matures the learning becomes internal rather than external. Motivation is internal and should be worthwhile, self-satisfying, enjoyable and learner should have a choice about what is being learned. (Franco, 2019, p. 189)

There are things that educators can do to meet their students' needs within their classroom to foster a learning environment. As Franco (2019) outlined:

1. Arrange the physical environment of the classroom informally, so students feel at ease.
2. Provide a psychological environment of respect, support, and acceptance.
3. Help students understand what characteristics will help them achieve the desired level of performance and help them to diagnose their learning needs.

4. Involve learners in the planning of learning.
5. Make learning a mutual responsibility and balance between teaching and learning.
6. Use methods that take advantage of learners' prior knowledge through discussion, case studies, group work, role-play and simulations.
7. Include learners in problem-solving. According to Knowles, learners respond to problem areas not subject tasks. (Franco, 2019, p. 180)

Supporting student social-emotional well-being. The importance of social-emotional learning (SEL) in educational settings is having an impact on student outcomes:

According to the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL n.d.-b), social-emotional learning (SEL) is the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make reasonable decisions. (Bartlett, 2019, p. 58)

In alternative programming, the opportunities are there to incorporate activities that promote lessons of social awareness, decision-making, personal control as well as interpersonal communication. Educating the whole student, and their specific needs foster positive outcomes that benefit students. The data shows that social-emotional learning is not only linked to better academic outcomes but also plays a role in how students learn and mature (Bartlett, 2019). Educators need to consider how to support students' social-emotional well-being to help them achieve their goals. The whole student needs to be considered “As our understanding of young

brains and student learning grows, it is clear that educators need to make sure their students are educated beyond the specific objectives or state requirements they cover in their lessons” (Bartlett, 2019, p. 58). This is an important aspect when working in alternative education. Most of these at-risk students have struggles that they must cope with like poverty, homelessness, addiction, trauma, as well as mental illness.

Many teachers agree that supporting students’ social-emotional learning (SEL) is important, but feel unprepared with how to help these students with their issues, and find it hard to do (Schwartz, 2019). Even though these teachers embrace the idea of social and emotional learning, they have challenges that impede the success of supporting students with their social-emotional development. According to Schwartz (2019), the following six areas are barriers that challenge educators:

1. Focus on academic content leaves too little time.
2. Lack of support from families of students.
3. Inadequate professional development or training.
4. Inadequate social-emotional learning curriculum or programs.
5. Inadequate support from counselors, psychologist, or other mental health professionals.
6. Inadequate support from administration. (p. 13)

Many teachers create their own systems to work with students, and one of the ways they meet student social-emotional needs is to get to know them. Building relationships with students supports the focus of this project, improving high-risk students achievement and well-being through using best practices.

Best Practices to Promote Positive Mindsets

Research indicates that it can be difficult to motivate high-risk high school students and engage them with the curriculum. Teaching and using positive interaction strategies to reinforce desired behaviors is effective in promoting appropriate behavior especially with students who struggle with emotional and behavioral disorders (Sprouls, 2015). In an alternative setting, there are many students that have an Individualized Educational Plan (IEP). IEP's benefit students with learning disabilities (LD), emotional behavioral disabilities (EBD) or other health disorders (OHD). Taking these learning needs into consideration, educators need to apply various strategies by personalizing education to address the individual student learning needs while helping them to tap into their interests and engaging them with the content (Platnick, 2018).

Teaching and modeling positive feedback with how students are progressing help to build student-teacher relationships. We can alter students' lives by helping them to develop positive mindsets that will make a difference. Positive mindsets can be learned and taught and will turn students' negative viewpoints into positive perceptions about themselves, their capabilities and contribute to their success (Jenson, 2017).

Working with students that are high-risk it is important to remain supportive regardless of the barriers they encounter: "Consequently, it is critical that we as educators of at-risk, high-risk, and troubled youth understand the necessity of such programs and the best practices that will maximize our children's educational and therapeutic gains within these distinctive settings" (Olive, 2003, p. 66). Educators promote positive outcomes for at-risk students when they are able to approach their practice and the students with a positive mindset.

Achievement through motivation and empowerment. There are more than just standardized testing data that define a student's academic ability, and there are disparities between privileged and marginalized students. Student empowerment produces positive behavioral and academic outcomes, and it also improves the climate within the school setting (Kirk, Lewis, Brown, Karibo, & Park, 2014). When high-risk marginalized students feel empowered, teachers can focus on individual students' learning needs and students are more likely to be successful. It also helps to create a positive connection between students' self-esteem and motivation.

Creating an environment that supports student motivation can be crucial in fostering student achievement. There are many factors that play a role in a student's success. As Schunk, Pintrich, and Meece (2008) indicated, students' development, achievement and motivation are influenced by peers, families, culture, and communities. In a high school alternative setting, motivation and achievement are low, and strategies are implemented to support how students are influenced in and out of the classroom. Because these settings are a mix of students between the ages of fifteen and twenty years old, peer influence can be crucial for modeling desired behavior for achievement. In an environment that promotes goal setting, like through advisory, students work together to support each other's goals.

As students transition throughout their education, there are many changes that take place in the learning environment "From year to year, there are changes in teachers, classrooms, school and class rules and procedures, performance expectations, difficulty of work and peers" (Schunk, Pintrich, & Meece, 2008, p. 278). These adjustments have an impact on student motivation and achievement. In many students, these changes can create anxiety and create negative perceptions

of school. As Schunk, Pintrich, and Meece (2008) discussed, friendships between students can be crucial for support, as well as motivating each other.

Personalizing education. Creating a classroom that promotes student understanding about the world in which they live is important. “Each of us makes sense of our world by synthesizing new experiences into what we have previously come to understand” (Brooks & Brooks, 2001, p. 4). A constructivist classroom helps to create an environment that supports the learning process and helps educators understand more about who their students are. Building on students’ knowledge educators needs to understand students’ points of view and their perception about the world in which they live. This approach can support student achievement by understanding how students relate to their world. While it is difficult to modify for every student, the more educators know and understand their students, the more they can support each student with how they learn best.

Van der Walt (2019) discusses Malcolm Knowles’ self-directed learning theory as an approach in which the learner takes the center stage and the teacher is in a supportive role. In addition, the process of learning should relate to the experiences of the student so they can take an active role and process meaning of content into their reality. Furthermore, self-directed learning deals with the needs and capacity of the learner where they are an active participant rather than a passive recipient (Van der Walt, 2019, p. 5).

Keene and Duke (2017) examined the research literature regarding the best way to learn. Some examples are through a mix of classroom structures that include: projects that are driven by questions or problems, whole and small group discussion, participation in real-world activities

that make use of targeted learning skills. In addition, they outline three key dimensions of opportunity to learn:

1. Students' preconceptions and prior knowledge are engaged, expanded and refined.
2. Students have a foundation of factual knowledge, they understand the ideas in the framework and they organize their knowledge in ways that foster application.
3. Students take control of their learning by defining their learning goals and monitoring progress toward achieving those goals. (Keene & Duke, 2017, p. 22)

The progress is slow of shifting teacher practice changing to support a student-centered classroom that supports each student's learning needs that build on their knowledge and experience. Students that enroll in Alternative Educational Programs are looking for an alternative to be successful. Many do not think that they will be able to graduate and do not consider higher education a possibility. Changing that perception starts with the teachers' belief that every student is capable of higher learning.

Summary

In Chapter Two, the literature review discussed the importance of building relationships with high-risk students to improve achievement and well-being in alternative education programs, as well as mainstream educational settings. In addition, the literature review discussed at-risk, diverse students that attend Alternative settings and the types of programs that address the diverse needs of these students. These programs support at-risk, diverse students by

individualizing their learning to identify and foster educational goals. The literature supported the connections of building positive relationships and supporting students' social-emotional needs to foster academic success.

Teachers' classroom practice also supports expectations and helps foster positive outcomes for students. In addition, I explored the best practices that support student achievement, motivation, and empowerment, as well as personalizing students' education that supports their individual needs. Based on the information provided in this literature review, I created a professional development session that will be implemented during the professional development day at the alternative learning center. Details of my project are explored in Chapter Three, as I outline my project, the rationale for my project, the setting and audience, a timeline, as well as an assessment to understand the effectiveness for teachers and students. I use Google Slides presentations to identify high-risk students and their barriers to success, the best practices that can be implemented to improve student connectedness and achievement, as well as the impact it may have on students' future outcomes. This project is for all teachers in the district, including teachers from the K-12 mainstream settings.

CHAPTER THREE

Project Description

Introduction

In Chapter Two, I conducted a review of the literature surrounding the importance of building relationships with high-school students in an alternative setting by using best practices to increase achievement and well-being. The literature supported best practices that promote positive outcomes for high-risk students in alternative settings who are able to make connections to their school, teachers, and community. In the research review, there was not a lot of data regarding students' perceptions of the impact of student-teacher relationships to support them. Thus, the research question I am pursuing helps extend existing knowledge in the area of increasing and supporting student achievement in alternative educational settings. Specifically, my research question is: *How to improve high-risk high school students' achievement and well-being through using best practices, particularly in an alternative setting?*

For this project, I have created a professional development session for the teachers in the alternative setting in my district. In addition, this project will be shared with all staff as a break-out session during the district-wide professional development day in February 2020. This project helps educators understand the best practices to support high-risk, marginalized students and the impact teachers can have on student success and well-being. The approaches used in this project can be utilized by teachers in my setting to learn how to connect with students in the alternative setting to improve their attendance, grades, and overall well-being. The literature described in Chapter Two supports the areas of research specific to at-risk students to reinforce the best practices that can foster student achievement. In addition, these strategies will benefit

students because they will learn through modeling and experiencing what positive, healthy relationships look and feel like, and they can apply these learned strategies throughout their lives.

This chapter provides an overview of the project, along with its rationale, setting, and audience. A project timeline is also included, as well as the importance of how building effective relationships will support student success and well-being.

Overview of Project

This project was developed as a result of my guiding question: *How to improve high-risk high school students' achievement and well-being through using best practices, particularly in an alternative setting?* As detailed in Chapter Two, many students that enroll in a high school alternative setting have struggled in the mainstream educational setting. Students are credit deficient, have behavior issues, suffer from social-emotional issues, and are not connected to their school or community. The purpose of this project focuses on building relationships to bridge the barriers to student success, and how this approach can support students' needs in and outside of school.

Through this project, I will implement strategies in my advisory and career exploration class to get to know the new group of 10th grade students that are a part of the Ignite program and will be entering into the alternative setting for their first year. The Ignite Program is designed for 10th grade students that are in need of smaller class sizes, programming to meet their needs, and opportunity to recover required credits. The students selected for this program are from the district's mainstream setting and were identified because of their lack of success after implementation of several interventions. These students are transitioning from the mainstream setting for various reasons: attendance, academic, as well as social-emotional issues. All of these

students in this program are significantly credit deficient. I used the students' transcripts from their ninth-grade year to guide them with setting goals to graduate on time. We will track success and failure by setting goals through advisory for improvement with grades, attendance and mood control from week to week. In addition, our professional learning community (PLC) has set goals for student achievement starting with building relationships with our students. As a result of my project, I am making presentations during our weekly PLC meetings to guide teachers with strategies on building relationships. Each advisor will implement various activities in advisory and other classes they teach. These activities are to support our collaborative learning goals that fosters building relationships to support student success and well-being.

The professional development of this project introduces educators to various activities that support building relationships that include slide shows and team building strategies. In addition, I presented slide shows during professional development that outlined at-risk diverse students and their barriers to success, teacher practice that includes Malcolm Knowles' andragogy theory about the art and science of adult learning to support teacher practice through addressing students' interest and experience, and best practices that foster building relationships with students.

The strategies utilized in this project have been introduced during weekly PLC meetings and support teacher practice by connecting with students, understanding social-emotional learning, and overcoming the barriers that impact student success. This project proposes using methods of building student relationships through teacher collaboration, personalizing education, and promoting positive mindsets to support student success and confidence. Teachers participating in this professional development session will learn various strategies and the importance of

connecting with students to improve student outcomes and support social-emotional learning.

As indicated in Chapter Two Literature Review, Bartlett (2010) described how social-emotional learning supports students so they can effectively apply the skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, establish and maintain positive relationships and make reasonable decisions.

Rationale for the Project and Framework

The making of this project is seeded in my practice as a teacher for twenty years.

Throughout this time I learned the importance of what building relationships can do to help the high-risk marginalized students be successful, regardless of their barriers. Based on the research presented during the literature review if teachers incorporate best practices into their teaching, educators can make a difference for high-risk marginalized students. As Maya Angelou expressed, at the end of the day people won't remember what you said, but they will always remember how you made them feel (2004). Teachers connecting with their students will create a mentoring relationships that will foster students' well-being.

It is important to understand the individual needs of our students, and this is an ongoing process that takes time. When teachers are able to work together and reflect on their practice, they understand changes that can be made and utilize various strategies to address student achievement. In addition, students' improved well-being supports student engagement with the content and encourage learning that will foster life-long learners. The next section discusses the underlying theories of how building relationships with students improves their well-being and success.

This project uses Knowles' andragogical theory as it is focused on working with adult learners; his theory supports the learning approach of alternative education. Students that come to the alternative learning program are fifteen to sixteen years old, and stay in this setting up to twenty-one years old. The approach that is taken in this alternative setting is to treat students as adults and engage them with higher learning to foster lifelong learners. The purpose of this project is to identify best practices that support student success and well-being through building relationships with students transitioning from mainstream education to an alternative setting. However, these strategies could be implemented with students across various settings, as well as students who are younger, because the content applies to teachers and staff at all grade levels. Ideally, this project will help high school teachers understand the needs and issues associated with high-risk marginalized students, and they will modify their practice to connect and support each student.

Malcolm Knowles' presentation model. In creating my presentation for professional development, I used Malcolm Knowles' (1992) principles that outline presentations in large meetings. There are several areas he outlines on the structure of presentations: interaction on the platform, the interaction between the audience and the platform, and interaction among members of the audience. Connecting to the audience and using their needs, interests, problems, and concerns as well as my own experiences to connect with the content allows the participant to connect with the material and be active in the process of inquiry (Knowles, 1992). This platform fits into the PLC and professional development of the alternative setting within my district.

This framework includes providing resources and activities that teachers will be able to bring into their own classrooms, and modify as needed. I will provide strategies that help teachers,

administrators, and staff reach high-risk students in and out of the classroom that support building relationships to foster student success. There are important aspects that support the climate of the classroom, the school and support the learning process for students as indicated in the literature review.

Setting and Audience for the Project

My project will be utilized in a midwestern metropolitan district's alternative setting. There is a diverse population: racially, religiously, academically, as well as how students identify themselves. This alternative school has been an important intervention for students who are not successful in the mainstream high school setting. Within this district the alternative education program has been successful with at-risk students by addressing each student's individual learning needs. Modifications of assessments and lessons, the smaller setting for students, and the ability to make connections with staff help students avoid drop-out and achieve graduation.

The school year is set up by trimesters, and students can earn nineteen-and-a-half credits in a year. The students have six classes a day, including an advisory class where students work on goal setting and life skills that address attendance, academics, and behavioral struggles. The advisory teacher tracks student success and goal setting needs. Students have an opportunity to meet with their teachers during advisory time to address missing assignments, issues they may be having and receive one-on-one assistance. Students can earn additional credits in the alternative setting through online courses, as well as work experience credits if they have a job. Project classes are provided for upper-level students that enable them to earn more than one credit in a trimester through individualized learning. Some students need additional time to complete the requirements for graduation. In some cases, it can take up to six years to complete

the graduation requirements. However, the school does not receive funding for students who are twenty-one, so they must be able to graduate by their twenty-first birthday. In some cases, students will transition from an alternative setting into the GED program if the approaches provided in the alternative setting are not successful.

The students that will be the focus of this project were selected from the mainstream educational setting to be a part of the Ignite program in the alternative setting. They are all in 10th grade and are new to the alternative education program. These students were identified in 9th grade as failure to succeed after several interventions were implemented, with limited success.. The alternative learning program is the last opportunity for many of these students to continue in a direct instruction educational setting. If they are unsuccessful in this setting, students transition to an online program, GED, or drop out of school.

There is a community component to this school that encourages student connectedness and consciousness within our students. Each month throughout the year students participate in activities that allow them to do community service, team building, as well as authentic learning through local art, history and environmental activities that foster engagement, citizenship, and life- long learning.

Timeline for the Project

The timeline for developing my capstone project began September through November of 2019. Through the making of this project, I have discussed with my colleagues, principal, and curriculum director of my intentions to build a professional development for teachers in the alternative learning program to understand best practices to build relationships, and how teachers can have an impact on student success and well-being. Through my Professional Learning

Community (PLC) I am introducing activities and strategies for teachers to build connections with their students in content classes, as well as advisory time. Through professional development time in October 2019 with the teachers in the alternative educational setting I will present the diversity of our students, strategies teachers can incorporate into their practice to increase student success. The presentation will be for six teachers and includes Powerpoint and relationship-building activities to foster connectedness with students. This project addresses how teachers can have an impact on student academic success, as well as social-emotional well-being. I will continue to grow and learn through the presentation of professional development through the PLC, including professional development time in the alternative setting, by using my colleagues for feedback on what they have learned and the success or difficulties of the strategies they have implemented. I will present this project again during all district Professional Development day that will take place in February of 2020 and it will be a culmination of the eight weeks of professional development implemented in the districts alternative education program.

Assessment of Project

This project will be assessed by students, teachers, and administrators throughout several stages of the project. Through our Professional Learning Community (PLC) teachers will report the success of these strategies: what is working and what is not, and report on overall student improvement and well-being. Our Professional Learning Community (PLC) has set goals to foster student achievement. The first goal that we are implementing is building relationships with our students. If we can successfully do this with students, the other goals we have set in our PLC focused on student achievement will be more successful. As a result, we all will monitor

the effectiveness of building relationships in our advisory, and track the improvement of grades, attendance, and mood each week. We will address student success through weekly advisory grade checks, that includes attendance monitoring, and weekly meetings advisors have with each student to address improvement, barriers to success and overall well-being. In addition, I will utilize staff feedback on the content of the presentations, what was useful and what could be modified. Advisors will share the success of their advisory through our PLC time of what best practices work to support student success.

Summary

The goal of professional development is important to help teachers grow in their practice. Students have many factors that impact their learning and it is important for educators to understand how they can connect with their students to improve achievement. Building relationships with students takes time and is important to support high-risk marginalized students.

In this chapter, I have introduced my project description and included the rationale, audience, timeline, and assessment for the purpose of professional development. The research question behind this project is *how to improve high-risk high school students' achievement and well-being through building relationships and using best practices, particularly in an alternative setting?*

In Chapter Four, I reflect on the project learnings and the overall impact that this work will have on the professional community at the alternative learning program in my school district. I examine the limitations that might impact student success, as well as explore additional practices that will support student success. I also include student perceptions of how these relationships

have impacted their success. I consider further areas of study connected to this topic that will support student well-being and achievement.

CHAPTER FOUR

Reflection

Introduction

In Chapter One, I shared my personal and professional connection with my research question, *How to improve high-risk high school student achievement and well-being through using best practices, particularly in an alternative setting?* In Chapter Two, I provided a literature review that supports my research, as well as the subtopics that are associated with supporting high-risk students, the diversity of schools, types of alternative programs, and best practices to support students. In Chapter Three, I explained the project description, the rationale, the audience, and provided a timeline for completion. The audience is the educators and administrators in the Alternative Setting in which I teach. Furthermore, the audience will eventually include all educators in the district during professional development in February of 2020.

While this project is designed to support teachers in an alternative setting, the strategies and approaches can be utilized by teachers and administrators in mainstream settings from K-12. In addition, community members and parents can utilize various activities and strategies provided in this project to build relationships and get to know our students on a more personal level. The growth of our students takes place inside and outside the classroom, so it is important for all people involved in a student's life, to understand what motivates them. Involving everyone in a student's life by using best practices will reinforce the strategies implemented in the classroom.

In Chapter Four, I reflect upon the project learning that has been beneficial not only to my personal and professional growth but also the growth of my colleagues practice at the alternative center in my district. Throughout this project, and the implementation of strategies through my

Professional Learning Community (PLC) and professional development, we have grown as educators to modify our practice to support our student's needs. I also discuss the potential for the expansion of this project which would include other topics that could be explored to support high-risk marginalized students. I examine the limitations of this project and the impact that this project has had on the 10th grade Ignite Program students that are new to the alternative setting. Lastly, I reflect on the project and what the next steps will be for my personal and professional journey.

From Passion to Project

When I decided to return to school for my Masters, I was encouraged by a colleagues, friends and school district. For so many years, I talked myself out of going to school for my master's degree because I was ignorant of the growth it could offer me as an educator. After being in the classroom for twenty years, I realized my journey for my Master's degree paralleled the non-traditional path I took toward continuing my education out of high-school. Learning should not stop at any age, and because I encourage my students to be life-long learners, I needed to practice this myself to be a role-model and use my passion to guide them with higher education.

The framework that Hamline University School of Education fosters my passion and growth as an educator. Through this program, I have learned more about promoting equity in education, how building a community of teachers and learners helps to engage and construct knowledge based on students' interests, and reflecting on my practice that has helped me grow as an educator. There are classes in this program that helped to inspire me on many aspects of education that I did not originally understand. The coursework also inspired me to continue to support our marginalized students who do not have equity in education. The coursework has

been challenging, but it transformed my teaching practice by reinforcing what best practices helps students to learn and grow.

The Master's program challenged me to find meaning and connection with my capstone project. My project changed significantly from my beginning plan to where I ended up. In the beginning was going to address student engagement through game based learning. However, upon further reflection of the classes that had an impact on me and a colleague suggesting that I should address building relationships, because it is something that I do well. My new project focus would require me to share my own personal experiences, and as a result I had some trepidation to share my own story. This reservation led me to want to learn more about helping high-risk marginalized students, because I was one myself. It was difficult to open myself up for judgment to others by sharing personal experiences that were painful. The more I connected my story with what I wanted to learn more about, the more it strengthened my research and project. By allowing myself to be vulnerable by sharing my experiences, the more I understood why I went into education. Through this process, I have learned more about how to help students get through their barriers to be successful in education, regardless of how long it takes.

Revisiting the Literature

In the literature review, I have several themes to support the work of my project: Alternative Educational Programs (AEP), At-Risk Students, Building Strong Relationships, and Best Practices to improve student achievement. Throughout these themes, there were several sub-topics that stood out and have helped support my project. In addition, these ideas have supported the goals that my colleagues and I have set for our Professional Learning Community (PLC), as well as my district's initiatives to build relationships with our students to foster

success. As a result, several areas of my literature review have stood out to support the goals of my PLC goals, as well as the initiatives of my district.

The research on building relationships with our students to support success and well-being is astounding. Teachers who understand the importance of building relationships in their classroom know how it can transform students' lives. "Positive youth-adult relationships have been found to have beneficial effects on youth mental health, attitudes, social skills, school attendance, and general achievement of youth" (Weiss, Harder, Bratiotis, & Nguyn, 2019, p. 424). Teachers who embrace building relationships in their classroom understand the needs of their students. While building relationships seems like something simple, it is not easy. It takes time, and can involve many trials and tribulations in the process.

Understanding the diversity of our students has been an integral part of my project. Providing additional learning to teachers has helped them understand the complexity of high-risk marginalized students and the role that their background plays on their perspectives on learning. It can be difficult for teachers to behave in ways that are inconsistent with their own life experiences, socialization patterns, worldviews, and levels of racial identity development (Howard 2006). Teachers work with students who are very different from themselves, and it is important to understand how our biases can impact our students with diverse backgrounds. The more knowledge teachers gain about their students, the more they are able to help them be successful.

Understanding who our students are helps build relationships, trust, and support. As Matinez, McMahon, Coker and Keys (2016) concluded, teachers connecting with students have positive behavioral and academic outcomes that shape students' learning experiences. The relationships

we build with our students takes time, but it is an important aspect to student achievement. Many students in an AEP setting lack positive relationships in their lives, and I have witnessed miraculous transformations in students when they make connections with their teachers. The relationships that students build with teachers and staff model what healthy relationships should be. These relationships foster student achievement, well-being, and will encourage the development of healthy relationships with others.

Teacher practice to support students by working together has had beneficial outcomes in many students in an Alternative setting. In my setting, teachers have a similar philosophy in education. Education is an instrument of social development and exists to produce individuals who are effective members of society in which they belong (Knowles, 1950). Teacher philosophy about education is an integral piece to bridge gaps in student understanding and build connections between teacher and students. Creating a learner-centered classroom promotes students to be self-directed learners and have some control over their education. Creating lessons that help students make connections to various disciplines and teachers to work together helps motivate students to learn.

There are many challenges supporting high-risk students' social-emotional learning (SEL) in the educational setting. Teachers agree that it is important to support students' social-emotional learning, but feel unprepared with how to help these students with their issues (Schwartz, 2019). It can be taxing to support student well-being, and these challenges have an impact on teachers. As a result of our PLC goals, SEL has been addressed on how we can help our students who are struggling as a result of barriers or trauma in their lives. SEL is something that impacts educators daily, especially in the Alternative Educational Program in my district. Unfortunately,

many schools have inadequate support from counselors or mental health professionals. Because of the lack of resources in our setting, we have created a support system in which we work together to support our students' social-emotional needs.

It is important to understand the learning needs of students to motivate them and foster achievement. Taking these learning needs into consideration, educators need to apply various strategies by personalizing education to address the individual student's learning needs while helping them to tap into their interests and engaging them with the content (Platnick, 2018). It can be challenging to individualize learning for each student. However, building relationships helps teachers understand the complexity of how a student learns. Malcolm Knowles' (1973/1978), self directed learning theory in which the learner takes the center stage and the teacher is in a supportive role that engages in the inquiry process. This allows the students to take an active role, and they can relate to learning through their experiences (Van der Walt, 2019). Creating an environment that helps students understand the world in which they live will encourage them to take control of their learning, and promote life-long learners that educators hope to achieve.

Project Impact

Building relationships with our students is crucial to their development and well-being throughout the educational process. When I first embarked on this project, I was focused in a different direction. My project was going to focus on student engagement through game-based learning. At a summer workshop, I was sharing with a colleague about my masters project. As I started to share my research question, she jumped in and finished what she thought my project should be, based on what she knew about me personally as a friend, and professionally because

of the work I have done in the district. Her idea for my project was not the direction I was intending to go, and instead of telling her what my plans were, I reaffirmed what she had said. After I reflected on what she said to me, I knew that she was right, and she helped me to identify what I was really passionate about. After discussing my project with colleagues at the Alternative Learning Center that I work at, they helped to inspire and guide me with ideas and difficulties they have had in working with high-risk students. My colleagues, friends, and district have played an important role in the development of my project.

In the beginning of this year, all the teachers in my district were introduced to the Innocent Classroom by Alex Pate (2018). My district will continue to support this through four professional development days throughout the 2019-2020 school year. This program is about creating teacher/student relationships as a way to approach a diverse classroom. This philosophy and method supports understanding our students' needs by creating an environment that will influence them socially and academically. The district's encouragement of getting to know our students has helped to further the development and support of my project. Ironically, the passion that led me to the development of this project is the direction my district encourages all teachers to take.

In addition to my districts professional development, my Professional Learning Community (PLC) has supported the development of my project by allowing me to present strategies and activities to help build relationships. They have also supported my professional development project by expressing what additional needs they have. The administration in my setting, and my PLC, has also encouraged the continued growth of my project by introducing a book for us to read as a part of our weekly PLC and Learning Meetings by creating a book club. The book is

Fostering Resilient Learners Strategies for creating a Trauma-Sensitive Classroom and reinforces the ideas in my project; it has led me to want to develop additional subsections of my literature. “No one said relationship is easy. In fact, creating and sustaining a relationship with someone is one of the hardest things we can do. It takes effort, patience, and, most important, grace” (Souers, & Hall, 2016, p. 93). This quote sums the goals and objectives that my project seeks to promote: that teachers will become invested in who each individual student is, and what their students need to be successful.

Limitations

A significant limitation in this project was data surrounding feedback from students. There is a lack of information on student perception on how relationships with teachers and staff promote their achievement. The lack of feedback of students' perception on relationship building made me realize there is still work to be done surrounding the impact of relationship building. The data that we collect through our advisory classes supports the strategies and approaches of relationship building that foster improvement, achievement, and well-being. Through twenty years in the classroom, and over a half a century of experience, I can attest to the impact of relationships. However, there is not enough information on student perspective about their connections with teachers, school and community. There needs to be additional research on students' view of how important these relationships are to support their success. My hope is that through this project, and the implementation of strategies in advisory and in classrooms, we can survey the students on how important student/teacher relationships have impacted their achievement and well-being. Additional research that could include qualitative and quantitative data would help support the work and ideas behind this project.

Time is one limitation that is difficult to control, because it can take a long time to build relationships and trust with students. With some students it can happen in a few weeks, but for many it can take months or even years. In an alternative setting there is more of an opportunity to build these relationships. The structure of the setting fosters team building, community service activities, advisory class, and the opportunity for teachers to have students several hours a day in various classes. In mainstream education this is difficult to do. Many students who join our alternative setting express feeling disconnected from teachers and classes in the mainstream setting, and that very few teachers have the time to show care and concern in a classroom of forty students. This is not only challenging for the students, but for the educators who try to connect with over 150 students throughout the day.

Next Steps

As a result of my district-continued staff development for the past six weeks, I have wanted to include additional research in my literature review, surrounding Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) and how trauma has impacted many, if not most, of our students. The information around the philosophy of Innocent Classroom, by Alex Pate (2018), supports the growth and work of this project and how teachers can foster achievement within diverse classrooms. I hope to continue to evolve my professional development project by including feedback and suggestions from my colleagues throughout the presentations that I make in the 2019-2020 school year. My district has fostered and supported my project by providing additional and relevant learning through professional development for teachers surrounding building relationships with our students. In addition, my PLC goals will continue to grow and build on the work we are doing

by building a foundation on how to support students who have failed out of mainstream education.

Summary

Throughout this project, my goal was to answer the question *How to improve high-risk high-school student achievements and well-being through using best practices, particularly in an alternative setting?* This chapter sought to summarize and reflect on what I learned surrounding this topic, and the importance of building relationships with students to understand their learning needs and promote achievement. I reviewed literature that supports helping our diverse, marginalized students take center stage in their learning process and approaches for teachers that will promote the students' achievement. I discussed the limitations in the research surrounding student feedback on the impact of student/teacher relationships. I also review the continued encouragement and learning opportunities provided by my district surrounding the importance of getting to know one's students. Building relationships is an approach that can make a difference to improve student success.

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APPENDIX A

Getting To Know You

Week One on Building Relationships

First Day/Getting to Know You

When getting to know students personally, on the first day I will hand out a sheet with several questions, including an opportunity to ask me any questions they might have. Having the students write out the answers the first day encourages them to participate because many students are more reserved within the first couple of days. This approach opens up a dialogue that fosters getting to know each other on a more personal level, and you can allow students to feel comfortable to share what they feel comfortable with. Questions can be adapted for various student groups and needs.

[Getting to Know You Day One](#)

Day Two/Digging Deeper

Preparation

When trying to build relationships, it is important to organize the physical space of the classroom where everyone is sitting together in a circle. Moving the desks to accommodate everyone being able to see and hear each other is ideal. Do this activity by the end of the first week.

Introduction

Because we are working on goals for improvement, students will share some personal information about their educational experiences: successes and areas for improvement. Before we get to this students create rules for the class, including confidentiality considering the personal information that is being shared.

Activity

Before going through the slides, ask for any risk-takers who are willing to go first. If students are not willing to go first, you can draw numbers out of a basket or have students guess a number in your head and the student closest can go first. Many high-risk students are eager to talk, and students will volunteer to go first. Go through each round and guide and redirect students as

needed. Reinforce that only one person talks at a time while others listen. Sometimes I have a talking piece that helps to reinforce who is talking and who is listening.

[Getting to Know you Welcome Slides](#)

APPENDIX B

Affirmations

Affirmation Assignment

Goals: Helping students to practice being positive and spreading positive vibes throughout the school to help change the climate of the environment.

Time: This lesson can last several days depending on how many affirmations you have the students make. The first day review the slides and practice ideas within the classroom. Day two and three, if you want to have them take it a step further you can have them create affirmations for students in the school, as well as family members.

Materials: Review the slide show provided and have the students practice the ideas with their class. The assignment is on the last slide. I provide scissors, colored paper, stencils, stamps, color pencils, and glitter. Anything that can help the students be creative.

[Affirmations Slides and Assignment](#)

APPENDIX C

Social-Emotional Learning Articles with Save the Last Word For Me

Professional Learning Community (PLC) Social-Emotional Learning Group Discussion using Save the Last Word for Me

Date: October 8, 2019

Time/Duration: 45 minutes

Members Present for Discussion: Six PLC members, three administrators, and two state workers from the Regional Center of Excellence (RCE)-Minnesota

Topic: How to help students who are struggling with social-emotional issues

Learning Outcomes: Strategies on how to incorporate SEL into the content curriculum, resources, what barriers prevent students' success, and how to support student well-being

The following links provide a platform and protocol to assist with guiding learning discussions. These can be helpful guidelines to ensure that all members participate, as well as give an opportunity for members to agree and disagree with the content.

Link to National School Reform Faculty protocol for Save the Last Word For Me & The Final Word:

[Save the Last Word For Me](#)

[The Last Word](#)

Article Readings on Social-Emotional Learning:

- ***Social-emotional Learning, Health Education Best Practices, and Skill-based Health***

“the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships and make reasonable decisions” (Bartlett, 2019, p. 58).

- How a student learns and matures
- NHS: National Health Education Standards/Connections of SEL to seven skill-based standards
- Incorporating SEL into teaching practice
- CASEL: The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning
- ***Teacher Support Social-Emotional Learning, But Say students in Distress Strain Their Skill***

Social-emotional competencies are linked to higher academic performance and better outcomes outside of school, and teachers believe it is important to teach these skills. However, they do not feel equipped to help students (Schwartz, 2019).

- Trauma on the brain
- How do we view social-emotional learning
- SEL to improve school safety
- What is our biggest challenge in supporting students' social-emotional development?

Resources

Bartlett, J. (2019). Social-emotional learning, health education best practices, and skill-based health: Editor: Sara Benes. *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation & Dance*, 90(2), 58-60.

Schwartz, S. (2019). Teachers support social-emotional learning but say students in distress strain their skills. *Education week*, 38-(37), 1, 1-13.

APPENDIX D

Building Relationships Activity/Discussion Starters

Building Relationships Activity/Discussion Starters

Preparation & How to Play:

- Arrange chairs so everyone is facing each other in a circle and can see and hear each other.
- I put discussion questions on cards for students to draw out of a basket.
- When one student pulls out a question, go around the circle giving the other students an opportunity to answer.
- If students are unwilling to answer that question, you can give them an opportunity to pass, or draw a question of their own to answer.

Variations:

- The oldest or youngest can go first. Or some other means to get the discussions started.
- I have a bucket filled with snack motivators to reinforce participation.
- Including an activity like a bottle flip challenge can make discussion questions activity more interesting. Put the students into pairs, and allow them to flip the bottle. If the bottle lands upright, that the students get points. Then the next pair can go. If the bottle does not land upright, they have to draw and respond to a random question drawn out of the basket.

Time:

- The Discussion Starters can be used as a bell ringer activity and take only 10-15 minutes depending on participation.
- The discussions can take up to a whole class period depending on ensuring the inclusion of all students to participate, and if you do additional activities while incorporating other activities along with the discussion questions.

Discussion Starters for Building Relationships

1. What makes you happy?
2. What are you most proud of?
3. What are you really good at?
4. Whom would you take on your dream vacation? Why?
5. Whom do you admire most?
6. What is it like to be you today?
7. List three things you believe in
8. What is something you wish you could do better?
9. What is your favorite thing to do after school?
10. If you were an animal, what animal would you be? why?
11. If you could trade places with anyone for a day, who would you trade with and why?
12. What do you want to do when you grow up?
13. What makes you feel angry?
14. If you could have any superpower what would it be? Why?
15. If you could have dessert for breakfast, what would you eat?
16. Would you like to travel to space? Why or Why not?
17. Tell about a time when you got hurt.
18. If you had three wishes, what would you wish for?
19. What is your favorite birthday memory?
20. What is your favorite thing about school?
21. What is your least favorite thing about school?
22. Would you be willing to spend the night at a haunted house? Why?
23. Tell about a time when you did something kind for someone.
24. Tell about a time when someone cheered you up.
25. If you could play any instrument, what would you play?
26. What is your favorite food?
27. What is your favorite movie? Why?
28. What makes a good teacher?
29. If you were the teacher, what would you want to teach your students?
30. What kind of consequence should there be if you break a rule?
31. Tell about a time you were embarrassed.
32. What would you say to someone who is sad?
33. What is your favorite subject in school?
34. Why is it important to try your best?
35. Share something you learned yesterday.
36. What rules do you think are the most important? Why?
37. When is your birthday?

38. If you were the President, what would you do?
39. Tell about a time when you helped someone.
40. What is your favorite song? Why?
41. Tell about a time when something was difficult
42. What are three things you do well?
43. Who do you look up to? Why?
44. Tell about a time you had a difficult day. What did you do to make it better?
45. What is something you are thankful for?
46. Would you want to be famous? Why or why not?
47. Describe a perfect day.
48. What do you do to help at home?
49. What makes someone a good friend?
50. Name three people or things you love most in the world.
51. Is it okay to make mistakes? Why or why not?
52. What is your favorite thing to have for dinner?
53. If you could change your name, what would you name yourself?
54. If you could go anywhere on vacation, where would you go? Why?
55. What would be a good thing to do to take a brain break?
56. Tell about a time when you were kind to someone.
57. Where is someplace you have always dreamed of traveling to?
58. What is something you're scared of?
59. What is your favorite sport? Why?
60. How do you help at school?
61. What is something you could teach someone else?
62. If you won a million dollars what would you do with it?
63. What is the most interesting thing about yourself?
64. What is your favorite day of the week?
65. What makes you feel loved?
66. What is the worst thing you ever ate?
67. Tell about a time when you made a mistake.
68. What is the funniest thing that ever happened to you?
69. If you found \$50 dollars in a store, what would you do?
70. What is your favorite season?
71. Who is someone you love? Why?
72. What is the best part of being in _____ grade?
73. Have you ever been to another country?
74. Do you have any siblings?
75. Do you like to play any video games? If so, how much time of your day do you play?
76. What do you look for in a friend?

APPENDIX E

Professional Development Slide Show

Follow this link to access the Professional Development slide show and activities

[Professional Development Supporting High-Risk Marginalized Students](#)