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Changing Student Perceptions To Increase Success In Alternative Education Settings

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CHANGING STUDENT PERCEPTIONS TO
INCREASE SUCCESS IN ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION SETTINGS

by

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

Hamline University
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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Until February of 1989, I had been a good student, making adequate learning progress and rarely missing time from class or school activities. The following March, I was diagnosed with a chronic illness and had missed nearly a whole month of school, making the thought of school difficult--academically and emotionally. Luckily, I had well-informed teachers who were able to offer supports that assisted me in catching-up and moving forward into junior high school. This experience turned out to be the first of many, in my educational journey, when I could remember the direct impact of school staff on my academic and emotional well-being. I have often wondered, when reflecting on that year, how my teachers were able to take such a difficult situation and turn it around to ensure my success.

My junior high school, freshman, and sophomore years of school were spent at a private school in a class of roughly forty students. At the end of my sophomore year, due to circumstances outside of my control, I was asked to continue my education elsewhere. My chronic condition suddenly became complicated by anxiety when I enrolled in my local public high school, with a class size of roughly four hundred students. The change in my learning environment and increase in anxiety complicated the symptoms of my illness and contributed to my chronic absenteeism. It seemed the only way to avoid the
anxiety of the unfamiliar and overwhelming environment was to avoid it, and I struggled, academically and socially, throughout my junior and senior years of high school.

At-risk of not completing the required credits for graduation, I began taking a course at an alternative, independent-study program in my public school district. I was apprehensive about taking courses in yet another setting and I was not hopeful when it came to finishing the course within the short span of time I had remaining in my senior year. My perceptions were formulated due to the struggles I had faced at my previous and current schools and they were not all too positive. The alternative program, however, offered flexible scheduling and allowed me to meet with my teacher to discuss progress and the coursework in a casual classroom setting. Without this local alternative program and it’s supportive staff, I am positive that my graduation outcome would have been bleak. Since this pivotal year, I have often wondered: *How do teachers in alternative school settings build strong relationships with at-risk students in order to alter their negative perceptions of schooling?*

### A developing passion

As an at-risk youth, I struggled with attending school. Looking back, I have come to realize that the relationships I was able to build with my teachers, in both the traditional high school and alternative program, had a great deal to do with my perceptions of school, my attendance and the likelihood of my success in completing courses. While many of my traditional high school teachers were concerned for my attendance and progress, neither they nor I were ever able to make meaningful connections to increase success. While my alternative program teacher was not
overwhelmingly more successful in increasing my attendance in school, she was able to increase my success by building a positive, supportive relationship. This cooperation and spirit of positivity greatly assisted me in attaining the credit I needed to graduate.

I get emotional when I look back on my senior year of high school, both because I made it and because I had been so close to failing. It is this pivotal year in my life that has allowed me to realize how important non-traditional models are in providing educational opportunities for all students. More than that, however, is the importance of caring adults in changing negative perceptions to increase student success for, no matter which path they take toward graduation.

I entered my teaching program in college to make a difference in the lives of students like myself--students facing illness, anxiety, family instabilities, and those facing life events that I could have never imagined. Though I had some first-hand experience in high school with alternative education, I was unaware of all the situations that may bring a student to an alternative education path. Moreover, this alternative was never discussed in the course of my college teaching program. As a reserve teacher after college, seeking work and a steady income, I spent many days working in programs that focused on alternative students and styles. During my year and a half of reserve teaching, I had taught in shelter care, schools-within-schools, and Alternative/Area Learning Centers (ALCs). Students who enrolled in these programs did not fit the mainstream idea of what makes a successful high school student. I met students who were pregnant or parenting, drug addicted, struggling with mental illness, physical illness, family breakups and even homelessness. Students ran the entire spectrum of at-risk youth, and were primarily
behind in school and at-risk of not graduating on-time for one reason or another. These students were, often times, seen as being in these programs because they were troubled. I soon realized, however, that these students were there because they were not going to give up just because they faced difficulties in their lives that disrupted their education. They were amazingly creative young adults, searching for where they belonged and for someone to see their value. Not only were the students amazing, but I had never seen so much passion among teachers who wanted to make a difference in the lives of young people. The experiences I had working with the students and teachers in these alternative settings led me to search for my own alternative placement—this time as a teacher, ready to make a difference.

An alternative passion

I am passionate about increasing the understanding of educational stakeholders--parents, teachers, administration, and community--in regards to alternative education and the students these programs serve. In order to increase my own understanding, and those of others, I believe it is important to examine the various reasons students choose alternative settings to complete their high school diplomas. It is also important to understand the strategies, utilized by teachers, that students find most valuable in helping them reach their educational goals.

By increasing our understanding of what leads students to choose alternative education settings, we can help to identify the most appropriate educational setting for students before an at-risk youth becomes a high school dropout. Recognizing how student perceptions affect education, will allow all educators to develop strategies that
may serve to reduce the accumulating at-risk factors that lead to high school dropouts and frustrations by all stakeholders.

If personalizing the high school experience through strong relationship building can affect the negative perceptions of at-risk youth toward school, then these relationships should also increase the rate at which the students build more positive perceptions of school. I anticipate the results of my research affecting the way in which I choose to build relationships with students in the future.

Summary

While both a student and an aspiring teacher, I overcame obstacles to success in reaching my goals. As an alternative education teacher, I see my own struggles as an at-risk youth played out again and again in my classroom. My students have faced obstacles that would make any grown adult quit. They are resilient and, despite varying levels of apprehension, seek environments where they feel safe and accepted. By building strong, positive student-teacher relationships, students will be able to change their negative school perceptions and experience success in the classroom and school environment. In the following chapter, I will review the literature surrounding such topics as: the need for and creation of alternative education options, characteristics of at-risk youth, various alternative education models and the importance of relationship building for student success. Subsequent chapters will discuss the methods employed in this research study, the results of the research, as well as the findings and implications of the research.
CHAPTER TWO

Review of Literature

In Chapter Two, I will explore the literature surrounding alternative education, by addressing the history, components of and population served by alternative education schools and programs, as well as the benefits received from effective alternative options. Through the review of literature, I will establish the need for further research related to the question: *How do teachers in alternative school settings build strong relationships with at-risk students in order to alter their negative perceptions of schooling?*

Defining the aspects of alternative education

To begin the conversation focused on the above research question, the term *alternative education* must be defined. Alternative education is defined at the federal level as:

A public elementary/secondary school that addresses 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).

Alternative education schools and programs, at times, may serve students who are academically advanced; however, Lange, Sletten & the National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE) explain that alternative schools and programs,
most often, serve students who are at-risk for failing or marginalized within larger, traditional school models (as cited by Porowski, O’Conner, & Luo, 2014).

**At-risk student characteristics**

In order to assist in understanding the history and issues related to alternative education, the term *at-risk* and its sub-term *school failure* must also be defined. The term *at-risk*, first appeared in education after *A Nation at Risk*, was published by the National Commission on Excellence in Education (NCEE) in 1983 (Placier, 1993). *At-risk* is the probability, whether actual or perceived, of school failure based on a wide range of marginalizing factors such as poverty, race, gender, attendance, disability, parental education, family dysfunction, et al (Donnelly, 1987).

In alternative education, *school failure* refers to an individual student’s failure to earn high school credits at the same rate as his/her cohort group. The student’s cohort group is important to consider because any student that is unable to graduate with their cohort group is recorded, statistically, as a dropout, even though he/she may still graduate with a high school diploma or general education diploma (GED) in an alternative setting (Chapman, Laird & KewalRamani, 2010).

There are various ways in which a student may come to be considered at-risk for school failure or dropping out. Much of the literature on alternative education includes learning disabilities as a contributing factor to a student’s at-risk status; however, the at-risk status is rarely due to the student’s ability to learn academically and more to do with the student’s life circumstances (At-risk, 2014). The most common circumstances, excluding special education needs, culminating in an at-risk status are:
● Physical and mental health issues
● Truancy or chronic absenteeism
● History of incarceration or trouble with law enforcement
● Parental education or income level
● Parental immigration or employment status
● Family welfare or marital status
● Race or ethnicity
● Primary language spoken in the home
● Pregnant or parenting teen
● Drug or alcohol addiction

(Barr & Parrett, 2006; Lagana-Riordan, Aguilar, Franklin, Streeter, Kim, Tripodi & Hopson, 2011; Parr, Richardson & Scott, 2008)

Rimm-Kaufman & Sandilos (n.d.) would also include conflict with teachers as a contributing factor. They state that teacher conflict or negative relationship causes both the teacher and the student stress. This conflict or negative relationship has proven to lower academic achievement and increase behavioral problems. These conflicts and relationships can start as early as kindergarten and have lasting effects.

Throughout the literature, whether attributing an at-risk status based on health or family income, it is clear that the young adults that populate alternative schools across the country have become marginalized in the one-size-fits-all model of traditional schooling (Raywid, 2001). It is important, then, to briefly examine the history of education in the
United States, in order to understand the role that alternative education plays in serving those who have been marginalized within the traditional system.

The role of alternative education in the United States

The National Dropout Prevention Center (NDPC) and the NASDSE trace the origins of alternative education back to the colonial period and the beginnings of public education in America. During this era, education was offered to children based on various factors including race, status, religion and gender (Lange et al., 2002). As immigration increased in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, public education was seen as a way to assimilate the new immigrant groups to American culture. It is during this time that compulsory education laws were passed, requiring children to attend school at and to varying ages across the country (Munoz, 2004). Throughout the 1950’s and 60’s, as progressive movements grew, more people became disenchanted with the traditional school model. It soon became clear that the compulsory model created by the need to assimilate waves of immigrants, did not suit all learners (Kim & Taylor, 2008; Raywid, 2001; Lange et al., 2002).

The creation of alternative education was intended to give students, who were not being best served in the traditional school environments, opportunities to learn in environments that were different (Kim & Taylor, 2008). Throughout the first decades, public alternatives exploded and served as the primary dropout prevention programs for their districts--serving students who had already dropped out of the traditional school (Lange et al., 2002). However, as districts were forced to make budget cuts in the 1970’s, these programs began to decline. In the 90’s and early 2000’s, the need for educational
alternatives was once again recognized, and enrollment in these programs began to rise (Foley & Pang, 2006). Today, the most common alternative schools and programs serve at-risk students as part of a school district’s comprehensive dropout prevention program (NDPC, 2015).

Composition of alternative education options

Carver & Lewis (2010), working with the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), conducted a comprehensive survey of alternative schools and programs operating in the United States during the 2007-2008 school year. In order to understand how alternative education has transformed through the first decade of the twenty-first century, significant highlights from the NCES survey report are provided here. During the 2007-2008 school year…

- 64 percent of districts reported having at least one alternative school or program for at-risk students that was administered either by the district or by another entity…forty percent of these districts administered their own alternative school or program (Carver & Lewis, 2010, p. 3).

This statistic translates to some 10,300 district-administered programs for at-risk youth, serving roughly 646,500 students during the 2007-2008 school year. (Carver & Lewis, 2010). These numbers are significant because they clearly illustrate the need for alternative options to serve non-traditional students across the country.

Also in the report given by Carver & Lewis (2010), school districts cited several reasons a student might transfer to an alternative school setting, with the reasons often compounding to justify the transfer. Among those reasons were physical attacks or fights;
possession, distribution, or use of alcohol or drugs; disruptive verbal behavior; academic failure; a parent request; and/or at the request of the student. While in some states, a parent or student can request a transfer to an alternative education program, the report from Carver & Lewis (2010) indicated that a majority (75%) of recommendations for alternative placements came from traditional school teachers and staff. These findings become important when examining student perceptions towards school and the adults within a school (Foley & Pang, 2006; Kereka, 2003; Saunders & Saunders, 2001). If teachers are compelled to recommend an alternative setting for a student, this may be a sign or conflict or a negative relationship, like those discussed by Rimm-Kaufman & Sandilos (n.d.).

Alternative education schools and programs have been incubators for school reforms since conception. These school reforms include intervention and remediation strategies, vocational training and community-based learning, as well as the use of thematic and multicultural curriculum (Raywid 1981; Raywid, 1994; Lange et al, 2002). With their constant evolution and individualized approach that is utilized by most alternative education programs, it is difficult to give an exact picture of alternative schools and programs as a group (Raywid, 2001; Lange et al, 2002).

Crucial Relationships

Though there is no exact formula for creating an alternative school for marginalized or unsuccessful students (Raywid, 2001), it does appear that all students perform better in school when they can build close relationships with teachers. In learning environments—whether traditional or alternative—where social and academic development is fostered,
teachers show pleasure in working with students; interact with students in a respectful manner, offer students help; allow and help students reflect on their learning; know students’ backgrounds, interests and strengths; avoid demonstrating irritability; and nurture healthy, respectful relationships among students (Rimm-Kaufman & Sandilos, n.d.). Therefore, improved relationships between teachers and students are essential for supporting learning and social development (Rimm-Kaufman & Sandilos, n.d.).

Combined with the various factors contributing to the term at-risk, it is not difficult to imagine why few alternative programs have absolute success (100% retention and graduation rate); however, there are several characteristics that assist in bolstering student success. The research shows that many alternative schools and programs share characteristics such as flexibility in scheduling and small enrollments. These characteristics are important in supporting individualized instruction and establishing environments that foster the, often times, crucial positive relationships (Foley & Pang; 2006; Lagana-Riordan, et al, 2011; Leone & Drakeford, 1999). The less formal settings of alternative settings also allow these schools to nurture social and behavioral organization through close personal relationships rather than harsh or punitive rules (Raywid, 1981).

In addition to exploring the implications of positive relationship building in alternative programs, it is crucial to examine the most common types of alternative education models and their characteristics.
Existing alternative models and programs

The literature identifies four types of alternatives to standardized, traditional schooling that have become most popular among all of the variations.

*Type I* or *Schools of Choice* offer specialized learning opportunities or thematic emphases. Examples of this type of school include: *schools without walls* which emphasize community-based learning where teachers tend to be community-based experts; *multicultural schools* that focus on specific ethnic groups within a diverse student population where aspects of a particular culture and/or ethnicity are integrated into the curriculum; and *magnet schools* which offer curriculum that is thematic in order to meet the educational needs and interests of students with diverse interests and backgrounds (Raywid, 1994; Lange et al, 2002).

*Type II* or *Last-Chance Schools* provide continuing education programming options for disruptive students before expulsion is considered. These are *not* choice schools. Examples of Type II schools are *schools within a school* which develop smaller communities of learners within larger schools by grouping educational needs or interests; and *detention schools* which offer schooling in a controlled setting during periods of incarceration or retention (Raywid, 1994; Lange et al, 2002).

*Type III* or *Remedial Schools* focus on academic remediation and/or social rehabilitation. An example of a Type III school is *fundamental schools* which focus on providing academic rigor through a focus on basics (Raywid, 1994; Lange et al, 2002).

*Type IV* or *Hybrid Schools* combine all three of the above types into a hybrid model. The Type IV combines choice with remediation in academics and innovations in
opportunities for success, which may provide vocational training and/or some post-secondary education. Two examples of Type IV schools include: *learning centers* which meet students’ needs, such as vocational training, in the school setting in order to build strong basic skills and collaboration opportunities with other students who may have similar interests; and *continuation schools* that provide options for students to continue their education in a more individualized setting that may focus on credit recovery or basic personal and academic skills (Raywid, 1994; Lange et al, 2002).

Though alternative schools vary in their format or operation, it is important to note that these programs have been deemed essential if all children are to be educated (Barr & Parrett, 2001; Lange et al, 2002) because they are able to address and alleviate a wide-variety of deep social and academic concerns (Raywid, 1981). By first analyzing the literature regarding and describing the various types and models of alternative education programs, we can better begin to understand how these programs effectively serve at-risk students’ needs and motivate these students toward success.

**Effective alternative education program characteristics**

The more than 10,000 alternative education schools and programs across America provide services that are individualized and targeted to students who have not been successful in traditional schools due to an array of at-risk characteristics (Leone & Drakeford, 1999).

It is important to recognize that not all alternative programs are effective. What, then, makes an alternative education program effective? Kerka (2003) formulated eight features of effective alternative education programs. These features include:
1. Caring adults within the school who are able to provide significant time and attention to student needs. This care provides an environment in which the youth feel a sense of trust and support;
2. A sense of community and belonging;
3. A focus on assets such as developing civic commitment, conflict resolution, goal setting, building strong character, self-esteem and sense of responsibility;
4. Respect for the talents and intelligence of youth which serves to engage, rather than marginalize;
5. High expectations for academic progress and behavior.
6. A holistic approach to curriculum, learning and assessment. The curriculum is responsive to students’ needs, interests and learning styles that provide opportunities for student success;
7. Authentic connections between school and life/work that encourages engagement;
8. Long-term support of students by providing services over a period of time.

While Kerka (2003) offered characteristics that effective alternative schools and programs demonstrate, Rogers and Freiberg identified eight characteristics that students desired in their schools and teachers. These desired characteristics included trust and respect; being part of a family; teachers as helpers; opportunities to be responsible; freedom rather than control; a place where people care, teachers who help them succeed; and choices (as cited by Kim & Taylor, 2008).

Rimm-Kaufman & Sandilos (n.d.) emphasize the need for positive relationship building between teachers and students for, both, social and academic development.
Positive relationships can contribute to growth in multiple areas including social skills, resiliency, academic performance, and school adjustment. The growth reported in these areas has been linked to increased school attendance, greater problem-solving abilities and self-directedness, as well as cooperation and engagement in learning (Rimm-Kaufman & Sandilos, n.d.).

Through investigation into the components shared by effective teachers and alternative education programs, as well as the identification of what at-risk youth desire in their schools and teachers, it is clear that alternative education programs have been responsive in their structures and functions to meet the needs of diverse populations of at-risk students. It is important, then, to recognize the benefits of this responsiveness for students, schools, and communities.

Benefits of alternative education options

By examining the research involving the characteristics of effective alternative schools and programs, it is clear to see the promise of educating all children can be fulfilled through alternative education (Sagor, 1999). The at-risk students in these programs have been underserved and marginalized in the traditional school setting. The failing grades, lack of attendance and acting out of at-risk students give clear signals that these students are not fitting in and provide red flags that we cannot ignore (Sagor, 1999).

By offering choice, strengthening personal responsibility, building decision-making skills and fostering respect among community members, alternative education programs are preparing students to make responsible decisions and stand on their own for the remainder of their lives (Sagor, 1999)—allowing them to become better global
citizens (Monson, 2012). Monson (2012) states that when a student is engaged in authentic learning tasks they are better prepared to be competitive in an increasingly technological world. With a holistic approach to learning, alternative schools and programs are better able to equip students with the knowledge and skills to be successful beyond the arena of schooling (Monson, 2012). Knutson (1995) credits alternative schools when complimenting the communities formed:

The learning communities formed in [successful alternative high] schools is key. Common-bond learning communities can be the central idea around which can be developed the complex balance of environment and forces needed to really meet the needs of today’s and tomorrow’s emerging generations (p.124).

From the research, we can extrapolate the idea that education with a holistic and authentic approach to learning in small, supportive environments can be seen as education that is good for all. The type of holistic education found in alternative schools and programs is beneficial, not just to the students, but also the global community. It is important that school districts understand the necessity of these programs which will maximize learning for the children they serve (Olive, 2003).

Summary

In Chapter Two I have reviewed the literature surrounding the history of alternative education, as well as described the various models of alternative schools and programs. I also identified the most common characteristics of at-risk students and the characteristics that effective alternative settings employ in order to help these students become successful.
Since the literature gave so much credit to connections to school and building positive relationships between students and teachers, I wondered why building such positive relationships was not addressed from the student perspective, other than to provide a brief list of what students wished to see in schools and teachers—without providing why it is effective. The literature deeply lacked the voice of the students, concerning their stories of struggle and successes, in changing their perceptions of school. What I wish to explore in my research are the strategies and actions teachers employ, from the student perspective, in order to answer the question: How do teachers in alternative school settings build strong relationships with at-risk students in order to alter their negative perceptions of schooling?
CHAPTER THREE
Research Methods

In Chapter Two, I conducted a review of the literature surrounding the history of alternative education; the characteristics of students deemed at-risk; various alternative education models, and the importance of relationship building in these settings. Though the literature was thorough regarding the formation of alternative options, students who attend them, and the effectiveness of such programs, information was sparse in addressing my original research question: How do teachers in alternative school settings build strong relationships with at-risk students in order to alter their negative perceptions of schooling?

Due to the lack of information provided on the actions taken by teachers in alternative settings to help at-risk students, I found it necessary to conduct research on the basis of student perceptions toward school and to monitor any change in perceptions linked to teacher action. In order to assist in understanding the extent and process of my research, I have explained the rationale for and outlined the processes for research in this chapter.

Research setting and subjects

The focus of my research was on alternative students and their perceptions of schooling. For this reason, I chose to conduct research in a Midwestern alternative high school. This high school has been effective in helping students who were not successful
in the traditional learning environments of their traditional high schools—where teachers tend to lecture while students move through the materials together. The program, as an alternative to the traditional high schools, offers a super block (two and a half hour) schedule that allows students to focus on two courses per day, rather than the seven to eight that they may be enrolled in at their home/boundary high schools. This serves the student in two significant ways: 1) the two-and-a-half-hour block allows the student time to delve into the tasks for the day without much interruption from changing classrooms; and 2) allows the student to build a more comfortable relationship with the classroom teacher as they move through their assigned courses at their own pace.

In classes, students visit with their teachers to discuss potential obstacles and set weekly assignment goals in order to finish courses in an adequate timeframe (one semester credit every twenty-eight days). The students are also required to meet with their assigned advisor to discuss course progress, attendance, volunteer and scholarship opportunities, progress toward graduation and other concerns which may include housing, family relationships, work schedules, and more.

My research subjects were alternative high school students, enrolling in this particular alternative high school for the first time. Participants were asked to take part in the research based on their attendance at the alternative high school’s orientation and anticipated start date. Eight students attended orientation and were expected to begin within the research time period. These eight students were given informed consent forms. Two of the eight were unable to participate due to lack of a signed consent form
by a parent or guardian. Six of the forms were returned with either the parent’s or adult student’s signature.

Rationale and relevance

Based on the research presented during the literature review, much has been written on the history and effectiveness of various alternative education programs. These sources credit alternative education programs’ effectiveness to school environments that feel different (Kim & Taylor, 2008; Raywid, 1981). These settings are also effective at connecting students to the school climate, while building caring relationships with teachers. While reviewing the literature related to this subject, I found that the voices of the students, and what they perceived as being effective was, often, missing.

The purpose of this action research plan was to identify some of the strategies utilized by teachers to change perceptions of students, transitioning from traditional education settings to alternative education settings, or from one alternative setting to another. Only students enrolling in this particular alternative high school for the first time, were asked to participate in the action research, through surveys and interviews. The first survey and interviews focused primarily on students’ traditional home/boundary high school experience, while the second focused on the participants’ experience while enrolled in the alternative high school.

Research design and methods

For the research conducted, I chose to work within a mixed methods approach. The mixed methods approach utilizes, both, quantitative and qualitative research to collect and analyze data. Quantitative methods utilize objective measurements, such as
surveys, polls, and questionnaires to collect and analyze data in a mathematical way. While quantitative research methods and data analysis provide an objective view of the research, it is, often times, imperative to include a qualitative, or explanatory, element to the research and its analysis.

While quantitative data gave me a baseline for identifying growth and outliers, qualitative research made it possible to provide a more robust picture of the overall topic by providing subjects with opportunities to share their underlying thoughts and opinions. Utilizing the sequential explanatory model outlined by Creswell (2009), I was able to collect and analyze data through the intake survey, with subsequent interviews for greater depth in the first phase. After being enrolled in the alternative high school for roughly twenty-eight days, students completed an exit survey in order to measure changes in perceptions. Students were then interviewed to collect more in-depth understandings regarding what may, or may not, have changed the students’ perceptions.

The intake survey asked students for information regarding each student’s current academic status, previous school setting, perceptions of school and teachers, and the likelihood to continue in an alternative program. Appendix A, *Intake Survey Items and Questions*, shows each intake survey item, how the students were asked to mark or rank those items, and the rationale for each item in the intake survey. Six intake surveys, based on the items and questions in Appendix A, *Intake Survey Items and Questions*, were completed and returned. Data from survey responses was examined and follow-up interview questions were formulated based on each student’s individual responses.
Interviews were conducted within two days of the survey’s completion and notes were compiled for each interview conducted.

The six signed consent forms were kept to indicate which students would need to complete an exit survey at the end of the specified twenty-eight-day period for each student. The exit survey was given to each participating student in the classroom. Five students completed the exit survey at the end of the twenty-eight-day period. One student was unable to complete the exit survey due to a long absence at the end of the school year. The exit survey asked students for information regarding their current academic progress toward graduation, perceptions of the alternative high school and teachers, the likelihood to continue in an alternative program, as well as whether their experiences in the alternative school lived up to their original reason for attending. Appendix B, *Exit Survey Items and Questions*, outlines each exit survey item, how the students were asked to mark or rank those items, and the rationale for each item on the exit survey. Five exit surveys, based on the items in Appendix B, *Exit Survey Items and Questions*, were completed and returned. Data from survey responses was examined and follow-up interview questions were formulated based on each student’s individual responses.

Interviews were conducted upon the survey’s completion, with notes being compiled for each interview.

**Data collection and analysis**

In order to conduct, both, quantitative and qualitative research, I obtained written consent from each adult student, or his or her guardian, within one week of the student’s start date. This allowed me to survey each student in the first few days following his or
her enrollment so that results regarding incoming school perceptions had not been significantly affected by attendance in the alternative high school setting. All in-take surveys were administered via paper between April 5 and April 28 of the 2015-2016 school year, depending on each student’s week of enrollment. Surveys were administered to students, a second time, at the end of each student’s twenty-eight-day time period, to calculate any change regarding school perceptions. This allowed the student to gain experiences with classroom content, teachers and the overall school environment, before providing new perception data.

During the initial data analysis, I explored the *outliers* of the in-take survey, as suggested by Creswell (2009). By exploring these outliers, I was able to identify individual participants for whom I was then able to tailor interview questions. Interviews sought to have students expand on survey answers more thoroughly. When analyzing the data collected from the surveys, I employed a process that examined the data at, both, aggregate and disaggregate levels, analyzing quantitative data in aggregate form for the group and disaggregate form for individuals. I then utilized interviews to collect qualitative data to explore individual experiences and perceptions (Creswell, 2009).

**Data management and security**

With the abundance of survey and interview data collected, I found inputting each set of responses to the intake and exit surveys into Google Forms, valuable in providing security and confidentiality. All responses during the designated time period were stored in the, respective, survey’s online spreadsheet, ensuring I would have access to results.
from anywhere, and at any time. Utilizing Google Forms, made the storage and organization of the research highly manageable.

**Summary**

In this Chapter, I have explained my methods approach to the research that was conducted based on my research question: *How do teachers in alternative school settings build strong relationships with at-risk students in order to alter their negative perceptions of schooling?* I was better able to answer this question by employing both quantitative and qualitative research methods, in a mixed methods approach utilizing the sequential explanatory model.

The data process for the mixed methods approach can be overwhelming because the researcher is focusing on collecting and analyzing both quantitative and qualitative data. However, I think my research question was better answered and validated through participation in both methods. By utilizing the sequential explanatory model, I was able to examine survey data on multiple levels (aggregate and disaggregate) and provide a more thorough examination of individual experiences as they pertain to, both, traditional and alternative education settings.

Chapter Four reports the results of the action research and provides the basis for analyzing the research question: *How do teachers in alternative school settings build strong relationships with at-risk students in order to alter their negative perceptions of schooling?*
CHAPTER FOUR

Results

During the month of April, in the 2015-2016 school year, eight students attended orientation and enrolled in an alternative high school, where research was to be conducted. Out of the eight students that enrolled, two students were unable to participate due to lack of consent from a parent or guardian. The remaining six were new to the district or had never learned in an alternative high school setting. All six were asked to take part in surveys and interviews, to be conducted throughout the months of April and May. Each was given an information letter and consent form to participate. Of the six students that qualified for the study, two were of age to sign their own consent form. The remaining four returned their consent forms with signatures from a parent or guardian. Reported in this chapter, is the data collected from the student surveys and interviews in an attempt to answer the research question: How do teachers in alternative school settings build strong relationships with at-risk students in order to alter their negative perceptions of schooling?

Demographic data

Within the first week of attendance in the alternative high school, students participated in an intake survey. The survey collected information based on their personal experiences in school and assisted in creating a picture of each learner and their perceptions. The first two items on the survey asked participants to measure their
progress toward graduation, based on two separate indicators (cohort class and credit). The results below, help to define the demographics of the student group by grade, both cohort and credit-wise.

**Intake Item 1:** I am a (by date of cohort graduation)...

**Intake Item 2:** Number of credits remaining toward graduation (out of 24):

During the intake survey, fifty percent of the students taking part identified themselves as a cohort Seniors by class title and anticipated graduating during the current school year. When credit totals were evaluated, these “Seniors” were found to be significantly credit deficient and behind their cohort group. The remaining fifty percent
of the group was within their respective cohort group’s credit range, with only one student (Jayden) being at-risk of falling more than one year behind his cohort peers.

Interview questions were tailored to each student based on their responses to the requested information, as to provide greater clarification and explanation. Interview questions for this set of data, primarily focused on the why, what and how? of the participants’ credit deficiencies.

**Interview Question:** Why do you think you were unable to obtain credit in the regular high school setting?

**Follow up to interview questions** included: What, specific, events or situations proved to be obstacles to receiving credit? How did this affect your ability to work in a regular high school setting?

Students who were significantly behind their cohort peers in credit, overwhelmingly attributed their lack of credit attainment to their attendance at their traditional, boundary high school. Jayden, Andrew, and Wyatt all described situations when they were ill or facing family turmoil that affected attendance in the classroom. These disruptions to their education made it very difficult to catch-up or stay on-track with coursework. All three students stated that they were too far behind to complete a sufficient amount of work, which led to failure in classes over one or more semesters. Andrew had been in this situation several times, resulting in him dropping out of school for a full year. Another student, Connor, described classes that were boring or too easy, and simply didn’t care to do the work. He soon began to skip classes to pursue his own interests outside of the formal learning environment of his boundary high school. By the end of the first semester during his Freshman year, Connor found himself wanting to stay home, more than go to school.
**Exit Item 1:** Number of credits remaining toward graduation (out of 24, after the specified time period):

Table 4.3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Credits Remaining (out of 24)</th>
<th>Class (by Cohort)</th>
<th>Class (by Credit)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Andrew</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connor</td>
<td>18.5</td>
<td>Freshman</td>
<td>Freshman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gregory</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Junior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jayden**</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rachael</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wyatt</td>
<td>10.1</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>Junior</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Jayden was absent for an extended period of time and was unable to complete the exit survey or interview.**

During the specified research time period, students were expected to complete two semester courses, totaling one credit (as expected of all students in the alternative program in order to stay on-track for a high school diploma). When credit completion was examined at the end of the one-month time-period, fifty percent of the students had earned credit, but did not reach the expectation for the amount of credit for the time period. Therefore, each of the students remained behind their cohort graduation peers—one hundred percent of the participants fell further behind their respective cohort group in credit.

When follow-up interviews to exit surveys were conducted in an effort to explain why, several students reported that the attainment of any credit was good news and hoped to carry the momentum through to their summer courses, or into the next school year. Gregory, Rachael, and Andrew all completed, at least, one half credit (one semester course) within the specified one-month time period. Andrew and Rachael were excited about this because they had both been much less productive in their past schools. Wyatt and Connor, while not completing any credit, explained that the same issues that had
plagued them in past schools continued. Both felt optimistic about the amount of work they were able to complete during the time period and had discussed finishing the year with incompletes in their courses. Both, Wyatt and Connor reported that they had made arrangements with their teachers to complete the courses during the following fall semester.

During follow-up interviews with participants, both at intake and exit, chronic absenteeism appeared to be a major theme in becoming, and remaining, credit deficient. While absenteeism was the word used to explain why the participants had become credit deficient, there were several underlying issues that appeared to have contributed to being able to focus within the traditional high school environment.

The examination of the learning environment is of utmost importance in understanding how students fail or succeed. These environments assist in creating the elements of how students perceive school and how it relates to their academic, social and emotional well-being. The data collected from study participants on their previous schools, their exit from those schools and their enrollment in an alternative high school, was essential to understanding how teachers could build relationships and change perceptions to increase success in the new learning environment.

Exiting the traditional high school setting

During the intake survey, participating students were asked about the last school they attended and list the reasons for, both, why they were leaving their last school and why they had chosen to attend high school in an alternative setting. Students were given
options to chose from, as well as “other.” The results of the survey items are listed below.

**Intake Item 3: The last school I attended was a...**

**Table 4.4**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Location</th>
<th>Student Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High school or middle school within this school district</td>
<td>3 (50%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school or middle school in the state, but outside of this school district</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school or middle school in another state</td>
<td>2 (33%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have not attended school during the current academic school year</td>
<td>1 (17%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fifty percent of the students surveyed had attended a traditional high school within the same school district where they were now enrolling in an alternative high school. This meant that these students were transferring from one of three high schools in the district, enrolling roughly 900-1200 students each. One of the remaining three participants (17%), Andrew, had not attended school in the current school year, citing that he had not been able to handle life at a traditional high school. He felt that there were too many students and not enough meaningful contact between students and staff. These pressures, along with absenteeism and course failures, led him to drop out of the traditional high school. The remaining two students (33%), Rachael and Wyatt, had been
enrolled in traditional high schools in the past, but were enrolling in the alternative high
school from an alternative setting in another state.

**Intake Item 4: Reason for leaving my last school...**

Students were given a list of options to choose from based on the most common
known reasons for students dropping out of their traditional high schools (Barr & Parrett,
2006; Lagana-Riordan, et. al., 2011; Parr, et. al. 2008). Students were asked to select
from one of these reasons or “other” on the survey. The results of the survey are listed
below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason for Leaving Last School</th>
<th>Fraction of Students (out of 6)</th>
<th># of Student Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attendance</td>
<td>1/3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recent Move</td>
<td>1/3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suspension</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Referral</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Credit Deficiency</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1/3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data from this survey item initially showed thirty-three percent of students
indicating that the reason they were leaving their previous high school was due to 1.)
attendance 2.) a recent move, or 3.) another reason not listed. Interview questions were
tailored to clarify their reasons based on the survey.
Interview Question (Attendance): What do you attribute your absenteeism to?

Gregory and Jayden attributed their chronic absenteeism to family issues and a feeling of being uncomfortable among the large populations at their traditional high schools. Greg stated that he was an average student but when the family had an illness crisis, it was too difficult to catch-up with his peers and he began skipping school to avoid criticism or consequence. Jayden did not enjoy the atmosphere at the traditional high school. He felt it was too large and instead made the choice to stay home where he felt more comfortable pursuing his own interests.

Interview Question (Recent Move): Why did you enroll in an alternative school rather than continue at a regular high school?

Rachael and Wyatt were both Seniors by cohort group, enrolling in the district after recent moves from other states. Rachael was significantly behind in credit (more than two years). Wyatt was more than one year being his cohort group in credit. Both students arrived in the district in April of their Senior years. Both, Rachael and Wyatt, explained that they were told that it would be too late into the semester to enroll and still earn credit in their traditional, boundary high schools. Both students were told that they would be better able to earn credit, in what was left of the year, in an alternative setting. Wyatt and Rachael both reported feeling relief since they had attended alternative schools in the past and were somewhat familiar with the settings of these types of schools.

Interview Question (Other): Explain your choice of “other” for attending an alternative school?

The explanations given for choosing “other” were a combination of items already listed on the survey. The two participants, Connor and Andrew, explained that they were
going to mark “attendance” but that there was more to their decision than just poor attendance. Connor was anxious about failing classes due to his attendance and felt that he could still complete the classes by the end of the year, if he enrolled in the alternative high school. He also stated that the school was overwhelming for him at times. He felt teachers had too little time to spend helping students because of the number of students they had in their classes. Andrew explained that he was often bored in class. He felt that the material was not relevant enough to his life and so chose to spend his time learning on his own. He was going through difficulties that created obstacles to focusing in school and when he reached a long stretch of failures, he decided to take nearly a year-long break from school.

Based on the narratives provided by the research participants, information examined during the literature review pertaining to the most common circumstances culminating in an at-risk status, proved to ring true. Absenteeism, physical and mental health issues, and family circumstances, all lead to an exit from traditional high school settings for these six students. While many at-risk students drop out and never return to complete their high school diplomas, these six were choosing to, instead, enroll in an alternative high school setting. The reasons they chose to attend school in this setting are important to understanding how and if they will succeed in it. Therefore, the next section of the intake survey focused on each participant’s choice to continue their education in an alternative high school.
Enrolling in the alternative high school setting

**Intake Item 5: Reason for choosing to attend school in an alternative education setting.**

This open-ended question led to various responses; however, after reviewing the responses and interviewing each of the participants for greater clarity, I was able identify some themes within the responses. Those themes are outline below.

- **Desire to graduate**

  Nearly all of the students surveyed indicated at some point in their survey, or during their interview, that they wished to graduate with their high school diploma.

- **Comfort**

  Rachael, Jayden and Connor all explained that they did not like the size of their traditional boundary high school. They all felt that the traditional high schools that they had previously attended were much too large and did not suit their learning needs.

- **Independence/Flexibility**

  After being told about the alternative high school, by counselors and during orientation at the alternative high school, Gregory and Wyatt, both, felt confident in their abilities to complete the course-work. If they missed a day (flexibility) they would be allowed to pick up where they had left off, this allowed them to continue on at their own pace without being at risk of failing the course. They were also told that the policies at the school among teachers were much more relaxed and gave more responsibility to the students.
Students were asked during the exit survey, to evaluate whether the alternative setting lived up to their expectations and reasons for choosing to enroll.

**Exit Question 2:** Did your experience live up to the reason you chose an alternative education setting?

One hundred percent of the students surveyed indicated their experience in the alternative high school did live up to the reasons they chose to enroll. During the follow-up interviews, Andrew and Connor cited the smaller population of the school. Andrew also added that there was caring staff and that he had more relevant discussions during class. Gregory cited that he was able to finish a semester’s worth of work in a one-month time period. While Wyatt cited the flexibility to work while attending school or while he spent time with his family.

**Perceptions of school and staff**

A large portion of, both, the intake and exit surveys focused on students’ perceptions of school, as well as teacher characteristics, in general. A student’s perceptions can either help the him or her be successful within the learning environment or hinder his or her ability to progress. It is important them to examine the general attitude each participant holds towards school and classroom teachers.

**Intake Item 6: I enjoy school (for the most part).**

Two (33.33%) of the students surveyed, indicated that they enjoyed school (for the most part), while four (66.67%) indicated that they did not enjoy school.
During follow-up interviews, students were asked to clarify their answer to this item by providing reasons for either enjoying or not enjoying school. All students responded with answers related to the school environment or a feeling of inevitable failure due to circumstances that were often out of their immediate control (family issues such as divorce, death, a move, finances, etc.). Rachael and Wyatt, both indicating that they did enjoy school, were transferring to this local alternative high school from an alternative program in another district. Both Rachael and Wyatt thought that they had achieved, at least, some success in the previous alternative program due to the small sizes and flexible natures of these programs. Connor, one of the students who indicated that he did not enjoy school, attributed this to never having a teacher who helped him.

**Exit Item 3: I enjoy school (for the most part).**

Three (60%) students surveyed indicated that they enjoyed school for the most part. Two (40%) of the student indicated that they did not enjoy school. When survey results were disaggregated, the survey responses
remained the same as those taken during the intake survey, except for one student, Connor.

A follow-up interview was conducted with Connor to gain greater insight into his new level of enjoyment with school. Connor was excited to report that he felt much more comfortable in the alternative high school setting, in the learning environment and addressing teachers for help. Class sizes were smaller and he was given the flexibility from teachers to learn the material in the way he felt suitable to his style. He was also given more flexibility in showing that he understood the materials.

Researching student perceptions regarding teachers, in general, is important in understanding how teachers in alternative settings can go about building strong relationships to alter students’ negative perceptions. By altering these negative perceptions, teachers and students can build relationships that are better able to foster positive academics, as well as social and emotional well-being.

**Intake Item 7: (rank from strongly agree to strongly disagree) In general, teachers, from my perspective are...**

Student responses were first analyzed in aggregate form to paint a general portrait of teachers in previous settings. Data was then disaggregated and analyzed for follow-up interviews. During those interviews, students were asked to label each characteristic option as either one they wished to see in a teacher (positive) or did not wish to see (negative). The characteristics have been placed in categories here, based on group consensus.
The aggregate intake data suggested that students thought that teachers, in general, held characteristics that they deemed to be positive in nature. One hundred percent of the participants surveyed found that teachers, in general, were knowledgeable and friendly. One-third of the students surveyed did not agree that teachers, in general, were: aware/with-it, kind, compassionate, caring, and/or useful.

Follow-up interviews with all of the participants focused on why results may vary among characteristics that seemed to be related. Some students explained that teachers were seen as bring fake, often times appearing to be friendly, but lacking the characteristics that would make students think that these teachers were being truly kind, compassionate, or caring. Others offered explanations as to why a teacher might be thought of as knowledgeable without being useful—explaining that teachers would know the subject area well, but lack the qualities necessary to teach or reach their students.
Exit Item 4: (rank from strongly agree to strongly disagree): Alternative teachers, from my perspective are... 

Aggregate Exit Results** for Teacher (alternative) Characteristics Ranked POSITIVE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Agree/Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Unsure</th>
<th>Disagree/Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aware/With-It</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respectful</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledgable</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kind</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compassionate</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supportive</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encouraging</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friendly</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caring</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Useful</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 4.8

The aggregate exit data suggested that students thought teachers, in the alternative setting, were much more positive in nature than their perceptions of teachers in the traditional high school. One hundred percent of the students surveyed found that their alternative education teachers were: respectful, knowledgeable, kind, positive, supportive, and useful. Twenty percent of the students thought that their alternative education teachers lacked the characteristics of being aware/with-it and encouraging. Some students completing the exit survey were unsure about the characteristics of compassion, friendliness, and caring, as they applied to their alternative school teachers.

Follow-up interviews with all of the participants focused on why students would overwhelmingly agree on so many of the characteristics. Students described classroom and hallway experiences when they witnessed a teacher utilizing these positive
characteristics, such as stopping a student to casually talk about mutual interests or progress in school or work. Other instances included a teacher calling to check up on a student whenever that student was absent from class. Andrew described a time when his morning teacher called when he was absent, not to check on his work, but rather to inquire if he was well and when she might see him in class next. When asked why some students might be “unsure” regarding friendliness, students explained situations when teachers did not appear friendly toward someone other than a student, but had not personally experienced unfriendly treatment.

Disaggregate Intake and Exit Survey Results for Teacher Characteristics (in general and alternative) Ranked Positive can be found in Appendix A

Intake Item 7: (rank from strongly agree to strongly disagree) In general, teachers, from my perspective are...

![Figure 4.9](image)

The aggregate intake data was a mixed review of negative characteristics possessed by participants’ previous teachers. One hundred percent of survey participants
viewed teachers, in general, as *demanding*. At least twenty percent of students agreed that past teachers had possessed the remaining negative characteristics, those being: *annoying, negative, disciplinarian, inflexible, or distracting*. Students mostly disagreed that teachers were negative, annoying, and distracting.

Follow-up interviews to participant responses regarding negative characteristics of teachers, in general, sought to clarify why or how students saw these characteristics in teachers. While *disciplinarian* and *demanding* were categorized as negative characteristics, the majority of students did not necessarily see these characteristics as altogether bad. In some cases, these characteristics helped to motivate the student, but in most they created anxiety and a desire to avoid such situations.

**Exit Item 4:** *(rank from strongly agree to strongly disagree): Alternative teachers, from my perspective are...*

![Aggregate Exit Results** for Teacher (alternative) Characteristics Ranked NEGATIVE](image)

**Figure 4.10**

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Eighty percent of students surveyed agreed that their alternative high school teachers were *demanding*. Eighty percent disagreed that their alternative high school
teachers were *distracting*. Sixty percent agreed that teachers in the alternative setting were *disciplinarian*. While majorities disagreed that their alternative teachers were *annoying, negative, or inflexible*.

Each of the six characteristics had, at least, one mark of “unsure” and so follow-up interviews focused on explaining what the student(s) were “unsure” about. Students marking unsure on the survey for *demanding, inflexible, and disciplinarian*, had done so because they were not comfortable marking that they agreed or disagree. These students that that instead of “unsure,” a “somewhat agree” or “somewhat disagree” options might have been helpful. This being the explanation, one hundred percent of students disagreed that their alternative high school teachers were *distracting* and one hundred percent of students agreed that their alternative high school teachers were *demanding*. Eighty percent of students disagreed that their alternative high school teachers were *annoying or inflexible*.

New information from student interviews, used to clarify survey information, paint a favorable portrait of alternative high school teachers. Alternative teachers, as seen by these students, were *demanding* (hold students to expectations) without being overly *negative, inflexible or annoying*. Alternative high school teachers were also described as *disciplinarian*, in that they followed school policy when students did not meet the expectations set by the school. Rachael described her afternoon teacher in such a way. When she missed long periods of time from school (week long periods) handling family issues, the teacher quietly and privately discussed what was expected of Rachael to complete in the class. The teacher expected Rachael to call when she would be absent
and keep lines of communication open through phone or email so that the teacher could get what Rachael needed to make progress while she was out. Rachael received some detention hours, but credited this consequence for helping her to complete what was expected.

Disaggregate Intake and Exit Survey Results for Teacher Characteristics (in general and alternative) Ranked Negative can be found in Appendix B.

Students were asked at the finality of the intake and exit surveys to determine whether they thought they would return to the alternative education setting in the following school year.

Intake Question 8: Do you plan to stay in this alternative school setting for the following school year?

Four (67%) survey participants indicated that they were planning to return to the alternative high school during the 2016-2017 school year. Two (33%) indicated that they were undecided.

During follow-up interviews, the participants that had indicated that they would return to the alternative setting, stated that they felt more confident in being able to earn their diplomas in this environment. The two participants that indicated that they were, yet, undecided, stated that their experiences during the remainder of the school year would help them to decide whether they would return for the 2016-2017 school year.

![Figure 4.11](image-url)
Exit Question 5: Do you plan to stay in this alternative school setting for the following school year?

Out of five students surveyed,** eighty percent of students responded that they were planning to return to the alternative high school during the following school year. Twenty percent responded that they would not be returning.

During follow-up interviews, students were asked why they had decided to either return to the alternative setting, or not. Students that indicated that they would return agreed one hundred percent that their experiences at the alternative high school were very positive. Rachael and Andrew were excited about the credit that they had earned. Wyatt and Connor were excited about the work that they had completed and the opportunity to finish their courses in the following school year. Gregory had indicated that he would not be returning due to his family moving out of state.

Summary

Research conducted through, both, surveys and interviews with student participants measured progress as well as perceptions to assist in answering the research question: *How do teachers in alternative school settings build strong relationships with at-risk students in order to alter their negative perceptions of schooling?* Responses
from both intake and exit surveys provided baseline data from which I was able to tailor interview questions and delve into the deeper meanings of student responses. Interviews with each student participant at, both, intake and exit provided descriptions and explanations that served to back students responses and understand each experience.

In Chapter Five I will provide an analysis of the findings of my research and examine the implications and limitations of such research. I will also provide justification for conducting future research into the area of relationship building in alternative education.
CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion

Rimm-Kaufman & Sandilos (n.d.) cite positive relationship building between teachers and students as essential to promoting the desire to learn and helping with social development (n.d.). Due to factors, both, inside and outside of schools and classrooms, many students are entering high school with neither the desire, nor the skills to learn within these environments. Students who encounter failure, due to these factors, often hold negative perceptions of schooling (teachers, peers, climate, etc.) and become at-risk of dropping out before earning their high school diplomas. For those students who choose an alternative setting to complete their education, it is important to nurture more positive perceptions of school and learning. For these reasons, I chose to address the research question: How do teachers in alternative school settings build strong relationships with at-risk students in order to alter their negative perceptions of schooling?

In the review of literature, I examined and provided greater understanding into the nature and purpose of alternative education settings, the populations of students they serve and the importance of relationship building among staff and students in these settings. By surveying and interviewing students attending school in an alternative setting, I was able to collect data as to how students perceived school prior to, and after, attending an alternative high school. Both the literature review and the action research
have enhanced my understanding of the circumstances that bring students to alternative
education and how alternative education can increase more positive experiences in school
for at-risk students.

Research findings

Alternative school models support and foster learning through strong relationships
between students and adults within the school setting. While teachers in larger high
schools are saddled with hundreds of students during the school day, teachers in
alternative education settings are able to establish the more meaningful relationships,
outlined by Rimm-Kaufman & Sandilos (n.d.), that support the learning success of each
student.

The results of my research indicated that at-risk students hold fairly negative
perceptions of traditional education settings. During the intake survey, students indicated
that they held negative perceptions due to a wide variety of circumstances including:
family or personal issues that led to absences and/or failures, unwelcoming school
climates, or direct contact with school personnel. At the time of intake into the
alternative high school, the majority of students indicated that they did not enjoy school
and had chosen to un-enroll from the traditional setting. Through word-of-mouth or
orientation attendance, students determined that it would be best for them to pursue their
high school diplomas in an alternative setting, where class sizes are small, students have
frequent contact with multiple staff members each day, progress is closely monitored and
teachers are able reach out at any sign of trouble.
For these reasons, alternative schools meet the needs of at-risk students. Teachers in alternative settings are allowed the time to know their students—both struggles and successes. Rimm-Kaufman & Sandilos (n.d.) indicated that conflict between students and teachers as a reason why students may experience behavioral problems and less academic. On multiple occasions during my research study, students cited instances when teachers in the alternative setting reached out to communicate, not only with parents but also, with the student. Students described these reach-outs as caring and purposeful, rather than punitive, which helped to build a sense of close cooperation in the learning process. These close relationships were cited among research subjects as the basis for multiple achievements, including improved attendance, greater classroom productivity, increased responsibility for learning and a desire to be part of the school community. All of which are supported by Rimm-Kaufman & Sandilos (n.d.) as outcomes of relationship building.

Strategies employed by teachers that benefit students are well documented, from school administration and personnel perspectives and observations. My research focused on the alternative education students’ perspectives. Themes emerged in survey responses and interviews that cannot be ignored when examining strategies that assist at-risk students in achieving their goals. Clear expectations, goal setting and monitoring, daily communication and cooperation rather than punishment all emerged as themes in student responses. Students reported greater comfort with teachers in classrooms where they were aware of the teachers’ expectations for both behavior and academic progress. Students felt that they were able to formulate attainable goals and self-monitor their
progress towards their goals when teacher expectations were clear. *Goal setting* was also important to ensuring that the students experienced success in a course, rather than failure. *Daily communication* with classroom teachers, then, became an imperative. Students agreed that having the time and space to touch base with their teachers was important to monitoring their progress and expressing any difficulties with, or new connections to, the course materials. Some students reported that, at times, they were not making adequate progress in their course(s) due to outside circumstances (family issues, housing, work, etc.), but credited the teacher reaching out in the spirit of *cooperation* rather than in a punitive manner as the reason they were able to continue to make progress in the alternative setting.

It is evident in my research that students, attending the alternative high school, credited the strategies and actions of the teachers with building relationships that led to greater comfort in, and enjoyment of, school. These findings became abundantly clear when examining Connor’s story.

**Connor’s story**

Connor attended orientation at the alternative high school in early April of 2016. Connor indicated that he was choosing to transfer enrollment from his local, boundary high school to the alternative school due to attendance and credit deficiencies.

Through the initial intake survey, it was clear that Connor has some very negative perceptions regarding school, in general, as well as past teachers. His responses to, both, the negative and positive characteristics of teachers, were quite striking and fell well-outside the perceptions of the other five participants (see Figures 5.1 and 5.2).
I was intrigued and eager to interview Connor in order to obtain a greater understanding of how he came to form these perceptions. When interviewed, Connor had expressed that he had often felt like an outsider in school—elementary, middle, and now high school. He indicated that the sheer size of his boundary high school was too overwhelming. Connor believed his teachers were knowledgeable when it came to their curriculum, but often felt like his teachers did not have time to address student concerns, when they came up. Combined with an ailing parent at home, Connor became chronically absent from school. When he began to fail classes due to his attendance and inability to catch-up in class, he chose to look into the alternative high school.
After a twenty-eight-day period in the alternative high school, Connor completed the exit survey. From my observations, Connor appeared to not being doing well. He had many absences due to his ill parent, but appeared to be handling the course materials well, at his own pace. I was eager to compare his experiences in the alternative high school with those of his past schooling experiences.

To, somewhat, of my surprise, Connor’s responses were now remarkably different from those collect at the time of his initial enrollment (see Figure 5.2).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positive Characteristic</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Somewhat</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Useful</td>
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<tr>
<td>Caring</td>
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<td>Friendly</td>
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<td>Encouraging</td>
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<tr>
<td>Supportive</td>
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<td>Compassionate</td>
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<td>Positive</td>
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<td>Kind</td>
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<td>Knowledgeable</td>
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<td>Respectful</td>
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<tr>
<td>Aware/With-it</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Figure 5.3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Negative Characteristics</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Somewhat</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Distracting</td>
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<tr>
<td>Inflexible</td>
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<tr>
<td>Disciplinarian</td>
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<td>Annoying</td>
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<tr>
<td>Negative</td>
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<tr>
<td>Demanding</td>
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</table>

Figure 5.4

At first, when examining his responses, I thought maybe Connor had rushed through the survey in an effort to be done and so I was eager to interview Connor regarding his responses, once again. During the exit interview, Connor expressed
excitement about the school year. He stated that his attendance had improved and that he was comfortable in knowing that his teachers would make time to speak to him and address any concerns he may have—regarding anything, not just school work. Connor was excited to report that he received praise for his work from his teachers and, when needed, a push—which came off to Connor as demanding, at times). Connor was pleasantly surprised to have completed so much of a semester long course in just twenty-eight days and was making plans with his teachers to complete the remainder of the course during the next school year. He left the interview with a hopeful glow and said, “See you next year!”

The research findings, as well as Connor’s (success) story, have implications for students that must decide in what kind of environment to learn and develop. Furthermore, these finding have implications for training teachers that understand the demands placed on today’s most marginalized youth in order to become more responsive to the needs of those at-risk for dropping out.

Implications

Interviewing students concerning their past and current experiences with schooling amplified the importance of connections for me as an alternative educator and compel me to become a better teacher. For one reason or another, the subject of my research had formulated negative perceptions about their school surroundings and/or the people that filled them. Most importantly, however, is that they had grown negative about the purposes of school and what education could do for their futures.
When I chose teaching as a profession, I knew I wanted to connect with students who had lost the connections to adult teaching professionals that are essential to their academic and social development (Rimm-Kaufman & Salinas, n.d.). I wanted my career to be centered around a more holistic approach to education, not just subject area strategies and content. I was not trained to be an alternative education teacher—I wasn’t even aware of alternative education beyond my brief experience as a high school senior.

On a personal, professional level, I will become more diligent about formulating strategies to help students build connections in the alternative high school setting. While student exit survey responses painted more positive pictures of their alternative education teachers, many still saw their teachers as disciplinarian. Though I think it is important to follow policies and procedures set out by the school and district, I wish for my at-risk students to see me more as a cooperating partner in their positive educational experience—assisting them on remaining on the path to graduation while addressing the obstacles in the path. I will continue to set out clear expectations for student performance, require students to set and monitor goals, build communication between myself and the student, and utilize the student as a cooperating partner in their own educational experiences.

At the whole-school and district level, I will encourage my colleagues to build procedures and environments where students can be partners in their own successes. I think that Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) can serve to examine the experiences of at-risk students. These collaborative communities of education professionals can assist in building strategies and procedures, when implemented with
fidelity, could greatly impact the perceptions, and achievements, of the students they serve. My research has shown me that raising the awareness of colleagues, regarding the impact of student-held perceptions on school, is extremely important to understanding how vital relationship building is to student success—not just in alternative education settings, but also in traditional school environments.

Limitations

According to several sources (Barr & Parrett, 2006; Lagana-Riordan, Aguilar, Franklin, Streeter, Kim, Tripodi & Hopson, 2011; Parr, Richardson & Scott, 2008), one or more circumstances or traits may culminate in an at-risk status for students, including: physical and mental health issues; truancy or chronic absenteeism; history of incarceration or trouble with law enforcement; parental education or income level; parental immigration or employment status; family welfare or marital status; race or ethnicity; primary language spoken in the home; pregnant or parenting teen; and/or drug or alcohol addiction. While one-hundred percent of my research subjects qualified for an at-risk status, most of them did not experience many of the above circumstances or possess some of the traits that would give them the at-risk status.

During my research, I did not survey students based individual at-risk categories, but rather on their enrollment as a student in an at-risk setting. These students did prove to meet the qualifications of at-risk, based on truancy or chronic absenteeism. However, when researching strategies from student perspectives, perhaps it would have been helpful to know what other categories the student would be speaking from, in order to more fully understand why the strategy may or may not have worked. The students were
at-risk simply due to attendance concerns, it may have also been helpful to track student attendance to verify the exposure to daily strategies utilized by their teachers.

Another limitation was the setting of the research and the number of participating subjects. Typically, the number of students attending orientation would have been much greater—with eight to ten newly enrolling students per orientation session (twenty-eight to forty during the specified one-month period). For reasons that are unknown, the number of new enrollments was dramatically decreased and the number of students, qualified to participate, was much lower than expected. One design aspect that would have helped this issue, would have been to conduct the research in more than one alternative high school. Though the demographics varied by race, age, and gender, I do not think that the sample size can allow me to draw too many generalizations and tie them to these demographic specifics (i.e. female students see their alternative education teachers more positively than their male peers).

While limitations kept me from making more at-risk group generalizations, it also made me realize that at-risk youth is so varied by experience and circumstance that it is important not to make too many generalizations. While it is important to see each student individually, the limitations did highlight areas where research could be conducted in the future settings.

Future Research

Due to the above limitations, I think that future research with alternative schools in other districts, would be appropriate. Students perceptions of schools in a wide-variety of alternative settings would give a large enough sample size, more closely resembling
the student enrollment in alternative settings from across the nation. This would then yield a more accurate and plentiful tool box of strategies that have proven to work with students at-risk in multiple categories.

Roughly twenty to thirty-three percent of the students surveyed during my research, had attended schools in alternative settings, previous to their enrollment in the setting where my research was conducted. Without examining the entire spectrum of what affects at-risk students’ perceptions towards schools, and alternative settings in particular, a whole picture cannot be displayed. Therefore, I think it is also important to examine how the policies of different alternative settings, such as attendance and progress expectations, affect the perceptions of the students in these alternative settings.

**Final thoughts**

High school is an important time in the lives of youth. Unfortunately, though it seems to go so slow at time, it is a short period of time to develop in—socially academically, and emotionally. These years are spent forming life-long bonds, trust, cooperation, and skills for the future. Some students excel while others fail. The opportunity for schools to grow, and exceed, occurs in the time it takes a young adult to decide that dropping out is better than facing failure. It is in this period of opportunity where positive, strong, caring, and meaningful relationships make the difference. My research has allowed me to see where I can make the most positive impact in the lives of young people—not only affecting their perceptions of current experiences with school, but also on their future perceptions and interactions.
APPENDIX A

Intake Survey Items and Questions
## Intake Survey Items and Questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Item/Question</th>
<th>Response Type</th>
<th>Rationale</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1. *I am a (by date of cohort graduation)*... | Multiple Choice:  
- Freshman;  
- Sophomore;  
- Junior;  
- Senior;  
- Senior + | This item will establish how many years of high school experience the student should have had before enrolling in the alternative high school. The item will also provide a baseline for information in subsequent questions to be analyzed. |
| 2. *Number of credits remaining toward graduation (out of 24)*: | Open Response | The item will help to evaluate if, and how far, the enrolling student is behind their cohort peers. This item will also help to identify if the student has faced obstacles to attaining credit. |
| 3. *The last school I attended was a*... | Multiple Choice:  
- High school or middle school within this school district;  
- High school or middle school in the state, but outside of this school district;  
- High school or middle school in another state; | This item will provide a basis for understanding the schools for which students have experience with or if there has been a gap in their education. |
<p>| | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>4. Reason for leaving my last school...</strong></td>
<td>● Have not attended school during the current academic school year; or ● Other</td>
<td>Multiple Choice: ● Attendance; ● Recent move; ● Suspension; ● Referral; ● Credit deficiency; or ● Other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>5. Reason for choosing to attend school in an alternative education setting.</strong></td>
<td>Open Response</td>
<td>This item will establish the reason for seeking enrollment in an alternative high school at this time. The item may also uncover possible misunderstandings regarding the operations and policies of the alternative high school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>6. I enjoy school (for the most part)...</strong></td>
<td>Multiple Choice: Yes; No</td>
<td>This item will help to establish an overall picture of the student’s perceptions toward school before attending in an alternative education setting.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>7. In general, teachers, from my perspective are...</strong></td>
<td>Rank each characteristic from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Characteristics include: Useful;</td>
<td>These items will help to establish how each student, as well as the group of participants, sees teachers, in general.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive Adjectives</td>
<td>Negative Adjectives</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caring; Friendly; Encouraging; Supportive; Compassionate; Positive; Kind; Knowledgeable; Respectful; Aware/With-It; Demanding; Negative; Inflexible; Disciplinarian; Annoying; and Distracting</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

8. *Do you plan to stay in this alternative school setting for the following school year?*

   - Multiple Choice: Yes; No; Undecided

   This question will establish whether the student is open to the experiences that the alternative setting has to offer, that may be different from their traditional/boundary high school.
APPENDIX B

Exit Survey Items and Questions
## Exit Survey Items and Questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Item/Question</th>
<th>Response Type</th>
<th>Rationale</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1. Number of credits remaining toward graduation (out of 24):</strong></td>
<td>Open Response</td>
<td>This item will help to evaluate if, and how far, the student is behind their cohort peers. This item will help to identify if the student has made any significant progress in credit while attending the alternative high school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2. Did your experience live up to the reason you chose an alternative education setting?</strong></td>
<td>Multiple Choice: Yes; No; or Other</td>
<td>This question will provide data on the student’s satisfaction with the alternative setting based on their original reason for enrolling.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>3. I enjoy school (for the most part)…</strong></td>
<td>Multiple Choice: Yes; No</td>
<td>This item will help to establish an overall picture of the student’s perceptions toward school after attending in an alternative education setting.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>4. Alternative teachers, from my perspective are…</strong></td>
<td>Rank each characteristic from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Characteristics include: Useful; Caring; Friendly; Encouraging;</td>
<td>These items will help to establish how each student, as well as the group of participants, sees their alternative education teachers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supportive; Compassionate; Positive; Kind; Knowledgeable; Respectful; Aware/With-It; Demanding; Negative; Inflexible; Disciplinarian; Annoying; and Distracting</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. <em>Do you plan to stay in this alternative school setting for the following school year?</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple Choice: Yes; No; Undecided</td>
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<tr>
<td>This question will establish whether the student’s experiences in the alternative setting have made enough of an impact on their perceptions of school to return.</td>
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</table>
APPENDIX C

Disaggregate Intake and Exit Survey Results for Teacher Characteristics
(in general and alternative) Ranked Positive
**Intake Responses**

**Student Responses: Andrew**

- Aware/With-It: Agree
- Respectful: Strongly Agree
- Knowledgable: Agree
- Kind: Strongly Agree
- Positive: Agree
- Compassionate: Agree
- Supportive: Agree
- Encouraging: Agree
- Friendly: Agree
- Caring: Agree
- Useful: Agree

**Student Response: Connor**

- Aware/With-It: Disagree
- Respectful: Agree
- Knowledgable: Strongly Agree
- Kind: Strongly Agree
- Positive: Strongly Agree
- Compassionate: Strongly Agree
- Supportive: Strongly Agree
- Encouraging: Strongly Agree
- Friendly: Strongly Agree
- Caring: Strongly Agree
- Useful: Strongly Agree

**Student Response: Gregory, Rachael and Wyatt**

- Aware/With-It: Strongly Disagree
- Respectful: Agree
- Knowledgable: Strongly Agree
- Kind: Strongly Agree
- Positive: Strongly Agree
- Compassionate: Strongly Agree
- Supportive: Strongly Agree
- Encouraging: Strongly Agree
- Friendly: Strongly Agree
- Caring: Strongly Agree
- Useful: Strongly Agree

*Responses have been reported together because survey answers were identical.*
Exit Responses

**Jayden was absent for an extended period of time and was unable to complete the exit survey or interview.**

**Student Response: Andrew**

**Student Response: Connor**
APPENDIX D

Disaggregate Intake and Exit Survey Results for Teacher Characteristics
(in general and alternative) Ranked Negative
**Intake Responses**

**Student Response: Andrew**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Trait</th>
<th>Response</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Demanding</td>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annoying</td>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disciplinarian</td>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inflexible/Rigid</td>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distracting</td>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
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**Student Response: Connor**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Demanding</td>
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<td>Negative</td>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annoying</td>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
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<td>Disciplinarian</td>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
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<tr>
<td>Inflexible/Rigid</td>
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**Student Response: Gregory**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Trait</th>
<th>Response</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Demanding</td>
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<tr>
<td>Negative</td>
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<td>Annoying</td>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disciplinarian</td>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inflexible/Rigid</td>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distracting</td>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Student Response: **Jayden**

- Demanding
- Negative
- Annoying
- Disciplinarian
- Inflexible/Rigid
- Distracting

Student Response: **Rachael**

- Demanding
- Negative
- Annoying
- Disciplinarian
- Inflexible/Rigid
- Distracting

Student Response: **Wyatt**

- Demanding
- Negative
- Annoying
- Disciplinarian
- Inflexible/Rigid
- Distracting
Exit Responses

**Jayden was absent for an extended period of time and was unable to complete the exit survey or interview.

Student Response: Andrew

- Demanding
- Annoying
- Negative
- Disciplinarian
- Inflexible
- Distracting

Student Response: Connor

- Demanding
- Annoying
- Negative
- Disciplinarian
- Inflexible
- Distracting

Student Response: Gregory

- Demanding
- Annoying
- Negative
- Disciplinarian
- Inflexible
- Distracting
Student Response: Rachael

- Demanding: Strongly Disagree
- Annoying: Disagree
- Negative: Somewhat Agree
- Disciplinarian: Agree
- Inflexible: Strongly Agree
- Distracting: Agree

Student Response: Wyatt

- Demanding: Strongly Agree
- Annoying: Disagree
- Negative: Somewhat Agree
- Disciplinarian: Agree
- Inflexible: Strongly Agree
- Distracting: Agree
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Raywid, M. A. (April, 2001). What to do with students who are not succeeding. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 82(8), 582-584.

