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CAREER DECISIONS: GOODNESS-OF-FIT AND ATTRITION OF TEACHERS

IN ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS

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A dissertation

Presented to

The College of Graduate and Professional Studies

Department of Communication Disorders and Counseling,

School, and Educational Psychology

Indiana State University

Terre Haute, Indiana

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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by

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August 2010

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ABSTRACT

Teachers are the most important element in the education system (Stronge, 2002). However, studies of teachers in certain sectors are lacking. The paucity of research on teachers who work in the alternative school environment was a driving force behind this study, which is a case study of the characteristics of alternative schools, perceptions of teacher training, attrition, and goodness-of-fit. Interviews with teachers, administrators, and support staff in an alternative school were used to investigate interactions between teachers and students and between colleagues. Classroom observations of the teachers were used to help explore the classroom climate. Emergent themes such as communication, administrative support, and a holistic view of the student population are explored using the filter of symbolic interaction theory in order to describe the characteristics of effective alternative school teachers, administrators, and staff. Symbolic interaction theory uses the internal shorthand that individuals develop to identify how their actions reflect their thoughts and feelings about the setting in which they find themselves. Implications for future research on the teacher-environment fit in alternative schools are discussed.

PREFACE

Thousands of starfish had been washed up on the shore of a beach. Unable to reach the life-giving ocean, the starfish were drying up and dying. A man came onto the beach and began throwing the starfish back into the water. Another man came along and asked the man what he was doing. "There are too many here for you to make a difference. Why do you bother?"

The first man looked down at the starfish in his hand and said, "It makes a difference to this one" (Eiseley, 1979).

This case study is dedicated to the faculty and staff of the alternative education center. They teach with their hearts and may never know when they have made a difference to "this one."

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Teachers are the most important element in the education system, according to Stronge (2002). There is no single method that can be used to develop an effective teacher, but there are common attributes that characterize effective educators. One of the attributes is goodness-of-fit, which describes how well teachers fit into a particular school environment and how effective they are in their daily interactions with students in order for the students to experience academic success (Stronge, 2002). One outcome of a lack of goodness-of-fit is teacher attrition, which Stronge defined as leaving a current teaching position to transfer to another position in the same teaching category, transfer to another teaching position in a different teaching track (e.g., a special education teacher transfers to a general education position), or leaving the teaching profession altogether. Research in the specific area of teacher attrition and retention has been ongoing for more than 20 years, and research on attrition of special education teachers for more than a decade (Billingsley, 2004). One population that has been ignored in this attrition and retention literature is teachers in alternative schools. Teachers who are responsible for this population of at-risk students have, however, been mentioned in numerous studies (e.g., Dugger & Dugger, 1998; Friesen, Finney, & Krentz, 1999; Horenstein, 1993). Researchers have investigated the attributes that prompt teachers to choose this teaching environment, how well

they fit with the alternative school population, and their level of attrition. No research was found specifically on the teachers' personal experiences in the alternative school environment.

Alternative Education

Alternative education is any education system that is outside the mainstream public school system. For the most part, education in the United States is the responsibility of individual state governments, so alternative education programs are under the authority of state laws. The U.S. has a long history of alternative education, starting with Quaker schools that were formed in the 1680s. The next system-wide push for progressive education came in the late 1960s and early 1970s with the Civil Rights Movement (Conley, 2002). Today, there are many forms of alternative education that include parent co-operatives, home-school resource centers, charter schools, public at-risk alternative schools, public choice schools, magnet schools, Montessori schools, and Waldorf Schools (Mintz, 1994). The emphasis of all of these programs is to provide choices for parents, students, and teachers who find a different kind of setting is more beneficial to academic success than the one to which they are assigned by virtue of where they live.

Advocates of Alternative Education

Alternative schools offer opportunities to students who have not been able to succeed in traditional schools. Advocates of alternative education long ago recognized that all individuals do not learn in the same way, and a one-size-fits-all program of education was not feasible. Education advocate John Dewey created the Laboratory School in Chicago in 1896 as a model for democratic education, based on the concept that children need to be active learners and that the role of experience in education needed to be emphasized (Conley, 2002). Other advocates of alternative education include Joseph Gauld, who opened the Hyde School in 1966 in Bath,

Maine, because he felt that the public schools were missing essential values (Conley, 2002).

John Holt (1969) was an activist for home-schooling who felt that learning should not be kept

isolated from the real life of children that was to be found in their homes and with their parents.

The home-schooling movement has steadily grown in numbers as parents have become more

dissatisfied with the public education system. Home-school resource centers offer parents who

home-school their children support and information several days a week (Mintz, 1994). Another

pioneer, Jonathan Kozol, worked in inner-city Roxbury, Massachusetts, in the mid-1960s, when

most alternative education programs were found only in rural and suburban areas, and found that

the alternative school environment was just as successful for inner-city children as it was for the

students who lived in the suburbs (Conley, 2002). Horenstein (1993) believed that public

schools are only marching in place, teaching students nineteenth century answers to 20th (now

21st) century questions. What these advocates all have in common are the convictions that

education should offer freedom, choice, and child-centered programs (Conley, 2002) and that

any child, given the freedom and the tools, will learn what is most salient and valuable for his or

her own life (Mintz, 1994). A prescribed curriculum is not needed when a child is given the

responsibility and opportunity to learn (Horenstein, 1993).

Theories Used in Alternative Education

Alternative educators have used many different developmental theories and have much to

offer students who do not respond well to the established curriculum in mainstream schools

(Conley, 2002). Theorists such as Jean Piaget and Howard Gardner have influenced the work of

educators who have developed and run successful alternative education programs. In his work as

a developmental psychologist, Piaget (1972) focused on the individual child's development.

Piaget was an observer of children and greatly respected their thought processes. He asked

children questions and analyzed their errors. Piaget also analyzed the errors that children made

on Binet's intelligence test. He was looking for the biological building blocks of knowledge and

considered himself the founder of the field of genetic epistemology (Gardner, 2006). Piaget

believed that each child is an active problem-solver with cognitive powers. He theorized that

once a child has passed through one developmental stage to the next, the child will not remember

how he once understood the world. Piaget and other developmental theorists agree that there is a

major transition between the ages of 2 and 4 years, when the child moves from dealing directly

with the physical world to understanding and communicating through a range of symbolic

vehicles. Although these symbols are culture-specific, such as the alphabet and number systems,

their mastery is always a long and complex process (Piaget, 1972). Piaget's work was used to

help develop the Greenfield Center School in Greenfield, Massachusetts, and its curriculum

(Conley, 2002). This school was started by a small group of public school teachers in 1982 and

is based on a developmental understanding of the child. It has a social curriculum whose goal is

to create a classroom climate that is supportive of learning and teaching children social skills,

attitudes, and habits that they can use throughout life. Mainstream schools do not usually have a

social curriculum and leave classroom climate to the discretion of the individual teacher

(Stronge, 2002).

Gardner (2006) was tutored by Erikson, worked with Bruner, and was greatly influenced

by the work of Piaget. Taking what he had learned from these three developmental

psychologists and researchers, Gardner (1983) challenged the theory that IQ equals intelligence

and identified at least eight different types of human intelligence, each of which has its own

developmental history in a child, its own way of acquiring information, and its own way of

expressing itself and creating products. Gardner (2006) further defined intelligence as the ability

to problem-solve or make products that are valued in one or more cultural settings and believed

that each person has a mix of strengths and weaknesses that make up their intelligence profile.

Although greatly influenced by Piaget, Gardner believed that Piaget was only concerned with

one type of intelligence (logical-mathematical intelligence) and did not address the other forms

of intelligence. He also believed that schools need to develop new approaches that can meet the

needs of a range of learners in the classroom such as art, music, and physical education in an

integrated curriculum that can make use of musical, artistic, kinesthetic, intrapersonal, and

interpersonal intelligences. The purpose of school is to help people develop their individual

intelligences and reach vocational and avocational goals that are most appropriate to their

intelligence profiles. It is more important to teach students how to think than what to think

(Gardner, 1983).

Many schools only pay minimal attention to many of the multiple intelligences.

Mainstream schools offer classes in art and music only as special subjects that can be expendable

if time, budget, or both need to be trimmed and focus on subjects that are necessary in high-

stakes standardized testing (Gardner, 2006). Educators and policy-makers must realize that in

post-modern culture, no one can learn everything there is to know, so teachers need to be able to

teach their subject matter in their preferred style of teaching and any uniform educational

approach is likely to serve only a minority of students (Gardner, 1983).

Gardner (2006) theorized that any organization using the concept of an individual-

centered school would take this theory of a multifaceted view of intelligence seriously. One of

the best examples of a school influenced by Gardner's work is seen in the charter Key

Elementary School in Indianapolis, Indiana. A group of teachers founded this school using

multiple intelligences as its theme (Conley, 2002).

Developmental theorists recognized that although children move through basic stages of

development, recognition of the individualized needs of children is necessary in order for each of

them to learn. Not every child learns in the same way (Gearheart, Weishan, & Gearheart, 1996).

All children can learn and have the right to the same quality of education, but some need a more

flexible curriculum than is offered in traditional schools. Children who cannot or will not

succeed in a mainstream school need more flexible means to gain an education. Adler (1982)

stated that the traditional educational system does not fulfill the democratic principles on which

America was built. He proposed that education should provide students with the necessary

knowledge to be able to earn a living, be a good and capable citizen, and make a good life.

Adler wrote that students should be judged on achievement compared to their capacity to learn,

not to the achievement of other students, and that schools should be judged on how well they

carried out such preparation for students.

One type of alternative school is often referred to as a last-chance school, meaning that

the students in these schools are at risk for failure in the school system (Raywid, 1994). Students

are sent to this type of school as a last chance before they are expelled from, or leave, the school

system. Students may be adjudicated to this type of school or volunteer to attend instead of

being expelled. These schools are often atheoretical, focusing more on the behaviors that

students need to change and academic goals they need to achieve than any one learning theory or

theorist. Strahan, Cope, Hundley, and Faircloth (2005) investigated one school in the mountains

of North Carolina. This school brought together concepts of positive discipline that helped two teachers develop a program to help reach some of the seemingly unreachable students entering eighth grade. Positive discipline is considered an essential dimension of school connectedness and can be defined as creating positive relationships between teachers and students that lead to effective classroom management. Initiated in 2002, the Saoi (Gaelic for learner, wisdom, and scholar) Program was written by teachers Mellie Cope and Sally Hundley (Strahan et al., 2005) to help middle school students focus on making academic connections within the community and forming social bonds with each other and the adults in their lives. These teachers received national recognition in 2004 for promoting positive classroom discipline that features self-discipline, academic learning time, and academic achievement (Strahan et al., 2005). In a report on their three-year study, Strahan et al. described how the teachers in the program taught the students how to process decisions and develop trust in themselves and others.

Characteristics of Last Chance Alternative Schools

Raywid (1994) described a last chance alternative schools as one to which students were sent as a last chance before expulsion. These schools may focus more on behavior modification than academics. Students in these schools may receive individual or group counseling or both, behavior management instruction, or social skills training to help them adjust attitudes that may have kept them from success in traditional school. Students who come to an alternative school on probation are encouraged to learn from their experiences and not repeat mistakes.

Last chance, or at-risk, schools may be the student's only alternative to expulsion, or attendance may be a condition of probation. Many of these schools offer childcare for teen parents, evening and weekend classes for working students, and flexible scheduling for others

who are at risk for dropping out of school (Lange, 1998). These schools may also offer counseling, anger management, and other programs that were not available in the student's mainstream school. Many of these schools are geared to be short-term, with the intent to return the student to his or her home school once the problem has been mediated. However, the home school often does not want the student back or the student does not want to return to a poor fitting environment, and he or she stays in the alternative school for the entire school year (Lange, 1998; McGee, 2001).

Alternative schools, by virtue of being smaller and more flexible, are better able to respond to small improvements by students (Whitaker, 2004). Mainstream classroom teachers are trained to teach to the middle, meaning that once the mid-range and above students understand a concept; it is time to move on. In an alternative classroom, the teacher can pay close attention to exactly how well, or poorly, a student understands a concept and does not move on until he or she does understand. If a student did not understand multiplying by double digits, the teacher could quickly recognize this struggle and go back to multiplying by single digits to find out where the breakdown in understanding happened. This is very hard to do in a classroom of 25-30 students, but is much more easily accomplished in a class of one or two students doing the same lesson (McGee, 2001).

Feedback and formative evaluation can more quickly influence curriculum changes in an alternative school. Small class size and targeted assessment allowed for a better focus on students' individual needs. McGee (2001) noted that in an alternative school, a class may physically hold 8-10 students, but there may be only one or two in that class who are studying the same subject at the same time. The teacher must be aware of what each student is doing at

all times, but a class that contains two or three students can move at those students' paces more easily than a much larger class in which those students would be left behind. A classwide change in curriculum in a traditional classroom would need time-consuming study, meetings, and discussion. An alternative school with four or five teachers can move at the pace set by the students and not the pre-set curriculum mandated by the school board and state guidelines. McGee (2001) describes creative instruction and flexibility to facilitate academic success for students who were struggling in traditional classrooms.

Assessment of a student's developmental stage can greatly influence how the student is taught (Conley, 2002). Assessment is not necessarily done differently in alternative schools than in traditional schools (for example, Curriculum Based Measurement (CBM) is used in both cases to judge student achievement and development), but the information gathered from such measurements can be used differently (Shapiro, 1996). In a mainstream school, the teacher must take the entire class into consideration and teach to the middle (Whitaker, 2004), but an alternative school teacher can use the information to individually tailor students' lesson plans.

Educators in alternative schools have more than the usual challenges of guiding children on their educational journey. They struggle with the public perception that children who attend alternative schools have some deficiency that made them incapable of success in traditional school settings (McGee, 2001). In addition, students who attend alternative schools are often defined by their problems and not by their abilities to challenge and overcome these problems.

The public perception of alternative schools and the variety of students who attend them needs to be adjusted in order for these schools to reach their greatest potential. McGee (2001) speaks of the apprehension of traditional students who came to tour and interview students at an alternative school for the school newspaper. The students from the traditional school were

welcomed and spoke to various students who had succeeded in the alternative school. The visit

changed the perceptions of the traditional school students, and these changes were reflected in

the articles they wrote for their school newspaper. McGee also noted that many community

members were afraid to come into the alternative school building because of a mistaken

perception that the students were criminals. A change in public perception that reduces or

removes the stigma of attending an alternative school will make teachers' and administrators'

jobs much easier.

Alternative schools may be housed within a public school, in a separate building near the

traditional school campus, or in a building located far from the traditional school. The Bi-

County Opportunity Center in Attica, Indiana, has won awards for being one of the best in the

state (Indiana Department of Education, 2004b). The school is housed in a 50-year-old building

that serves three different school corporations and shares space with a sheltered workshop.

Students are brought by bus from each of the three school corporations that it serves. The

teachers work with a small budget and tight space. At first, the school was supported by a grant,

but that has reached its end and the school is now supported by the three school corporations that

enroll students there. McGee (2001) hypothesized that better facilities, supplies, and technology

could be had if some of the stigma of attending an alternative school were reduced or removed.

Teachers and administrators in alternative schools look for different ways to make a

change in children's lives, and most well-designed programs can offer data about how that goal

is accomplished. At the Hamilton Alternative School in South Bend, Indiana, students' ISTEP

scores in language arts increased by an average of 27 points and in math by an average of 28.6

points from September 1998 to March 1999 (McGee, 2001). In Indiana, a five-point increase is

considered significant. When surveyed, 29 out of 40 students indicated that their self-esteem had

improved since attending the alternative school. McGee (2001) believes that this improvement in self-esteem had a direct impact on the students' grades. Although other alternative school programs may not show such dramatic improvement in ISTEP scores, most show improvements in scores across the spectrum of domains that are measured (Indiana Department of Education, 2004b).

Alternative education programs can be found throughout the educational system of the United States and are growing in number. A wide range of programs have been developed, but they all have in common characteristics of smaller teacher-student ratios and more one-on-one attention to students than in traditional public schools (Raywid, 1994). In Indiana, the state Department of Education has done research that describes characteristics that all successful alternative schools share, such as that the maximum teacher-student ratio is 1:15 (Indiana Department of Education, 2004a). Such small ratios allow teachers to really know their students and their strengths and challenges. More one-on-one attention can allow the teacher to know when a student is going through a difficult time in his or her personal life, as well as in his or her academic life.

Characteristics of Students in Last Chance Alternative Schools

The personal and academic characteristics of students found in alternative schools are as varied as each individual student. Students can be classified as nontraditional due to age or family-of-origin configuration (Prohaska, Morrill, Atiles, & Perez, 2000). They may have children of their own or be helping to raise younger siblings, need to work to support their family or contribute to the income of their family-of-origin, feel threatened in their home school due to their race, creed, or sexual orientation, or simply feel disconnected, unaccepted, or disrespected

in their home school (Ruebel, Ruebel, & O'Laughlin, 2001). Academically, they might have been behind their grade level due to feeling helpless, hopeless, or unable to take responsibility for their work. In particular, locus of control is a factor that may affect students attending alternative schools (Miller, Fitch, & Marshall, 2003). Internal locus of control is reflected by an individual's belief that he or she has control over the things that happen in life, while an external locus of control is the belief that things happen beyond one's control. The authors of the above study described how students who have behavior problems sometimes believe that they have no control over things that happen in their lives, and see no way to change things once they are on a negative course of action.

Characteristics of Effective Teachers

Teachers and teaching pervade popular culture as well as school culture. Children often play school and role play being teachers long before they enter pre-school or elementary school (Whitaker, 2004). Teachers are often stereotyped as prim, proper beings who must be perfect role models for the children they teach. They may be perceived by students and parents as not experiencing any of the problems with which other people deal in everyday life, such as marital problems, health or mental disorders, or problems managing their own children's behavior (Weber & Mitchell, 1995). Whitaker (2004) wrote that great teachers are aware that they are the filters through which everything in their classroom happens and that they set the tone and the climate for the classroom, choosing to emphasize the positive or the negative of a given situation. Teachers know that any school's improvement depends on the people in the school and not necessarily on the programs that are implemented.

Strong (2002) described some of the qualities of effective teachers. Effective teachers most often have highly developed verbal skills, know how to recognize and curb negative

behaviors, believe in the power of homework, and acknowledge that students need to experience success. Teachers with good verbal skills are able to ask effective questions, provide clear expectations, and provide feedback and reinforcement that enable students to understand what teachers expect in order for the students to succeed (Cotton, 2000; Emmer, Everton & Anderson, 1980). Teachers who encourage active learning and know how to interpret and respond immediately to student behaviors are better able to head off negative behaviors before they happen (Good & Brophy, 1997). McBer (2000) found that effective teachers must have extensive content knowledge, but that alone does not make them effective. Teachers must also be able to extend that knowledge to their students in ways that enable their students to learn. The above study concluded that flexibility and planning helped teachers develop the most effective ways to relate to students and encourage success in the classroom.

These qualities may be the gold standard for most general education teachers, but what is different about teachers in alternative schools? The factors that influence the level of environment-teacher fit in alternative schools have received little attention in the literature.

Little has been written about what draws teachers and administrators to work in this particular environment. Studies on teacher attrition and retention have focused on the qualities of effective teachers and what can be done to support and encourage them (Stronge, 2002), but this research has been on general education and special education teachers, with little mention of teachers in alternative schools. I believe that teachers in alternative schools share the qualities described above with their general education counterparts, but effective teachers in an alternative school need these qualities and more to meet the challenges of the special students who come to them for a variety of reasons. In addition, alternative school teachers often work with students who are at risk for failure because of behavior or academic problems and so are not succeeding

in traditional public schools. Students attending alternative schools may have significantly different ways of learning that are not compatible with teaching methods in mainstream schools, and teachers in the alternative setting accept this challenge.

Purpose of This Study

Teachers who choose to work with any at-risk population of students construct a role identity that should be addressed in teacher education. Friesen et al. (1999) examined the images that all teachers have of themselves and how they negotiate a place in teaching. Themes that emerged from this study included teacher-as-advocate and how teachers of at-risk students must accept students where they are and respond to each unique situation. Huebner (1987) wrote a seminal article on teacher identity in which he described the need for teaching to be considered a vocation. A vocation is considered a calling or a need to follow a particular career path, and such a teacher would not consider teaching an 8:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. only type of job (Huebner, 1987). Teachers in some types of alternative schools, such as last-chance schools, are teaching students from an at-risk population. These students have an even greater need than general education students for effective teachers who are willing to help provide them with the stability and continuity that may be lacking in other spheres of their lives. The term "good fit" refers to a feeling of being comfortable and effective in a given situation (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). Teachers who are a good fit in an alternative school are in the best position to help students find their place in such a school and increase their students' chances of academic success. Teachers who are a good fit will also have lower attrition rates and provide these at-risk students with a stable base on which they can depend. The general purpose of this study was to empirically investigate an alternative school environment and gather data on experiences and perspectives of teachers working in the environment and their interactions with their students and colleagues.

I investigated the unique characteristics of teachers at a last-chance alternative school because students in these schools were not usually there by choice or because of some special opportunity offered. Teachers in these schools deal with students who may have behavioral or emotional issues, attitudes that have made mainstream school difficult or impossible, or problems with attendance and motivation (Huebner, 1987; McGee, 2001). Teachers in a last-chance school display a high degree of vocation, as described by Huebner (1987), that may be connected with how well they fit in the alternative school environment and advocate for their students.

I also investigated the experiences that teachers have in making meaning from the interactions between themselves, students, and colleagues while working in an alternative school in the context of the theory of symbolic interactionism. People experience their world through their physical senses and environment. Their actions are often dictated by what they perceive other people want. William James (Reynolds, 2003), was a well-known pragmatic psychologist and philosopher who believed that truth for its own sake did not exist, but truth was whatever was true and practical for each individual. The process of interacting with other people creates the framework by which people make sense of their world (Reynolds, 2003). The daily give-and-take of this interaction makes it possible for individuals to function effectively in a given situation, such as an alternative school setting, when another individual would find such an environment frustrating and aversive. John Dewey, as cited in Reynolds (2003), was the head of the famous Chicago School of Pragmatism. He developed a concept of the mind in which the mind is not a static entity, but a dynamic process. He believed that the mind as a function was able to interact with an environment in a fluid and constantly changing manner (Reynolds, 2003). This theory led to an additional research question that addressed where alternative school

teachers believed they fit into the daily interactions with their students. Teachers gather perceptions of experiences of daily interactions with their students and how these interactions affect the students' education and self-concepts. Reynolds (2003) concluded that perceptions help form meaning for the individual teacher.

This was a qualitative research project designed to investigate how teachers in alternative schools decide to teach there, how the teachers determine their effectiveness with their students, and how their training helped them make the decision to teach a specific population of students that need the extra support they can find in an alternative school. Emphasis was placed on personal and professional attitudes that affect teachers' work in the alternative school, as well as the challenges and rewards that teachers experience when they find that an alternative school environment is a good fit. Quantitative and qualitative studies were discussed in the literature review to build a framework for further investigation of the qualities that make effective alternative school teachers.

Research Questions

The following research questions addressed the major concerns of this study:

1. What are the characteristics and dimensions of alternative schools?

2. What are the characteristics and dimensions/traits of teachers in alternative schools?

3. How do environmental and teacher characteristics interact and what is the influence of this interaction on teacher retention and student outcomes?

4. How do teachers in alternative schools make meaning from their daily interactions with their students and colleagues?

    4a. How do teachers see themselves affecting their students' lives?

Contributions

This study was designed to contribute to the body of knowledge in the field of school psychology that addresses alternative schools and the educators who create an environment for students who attend those schools. The challenges and rewards described in this study will help prospective teachers decide if an alternative school is an environment in which they could find professional and personal fulfillment. The characteristics of effective alternative school teachers described in this study will also help administrators who are seeking to hire new teachers for openings in the alternative school.

Limitations

1. The subjective experiences of the participants, and the meanings and values they attach to these experiences, were assessed at one point in time.

2. The participants may have had difficulty providing accurate information, as some of the questions used in the interview call for a retrospective account of their own childhood and educational experiences.

3. Participants in this study were selected from an alternative school in the Midwest, which may reduce the likelihood that the data obtained may be generalized to other schools.

Assumptions

1. Participants provided honest and accurate accounts of their experiences.

2. The interview protocol developed for this study provided participants an opportunity to reflect on their experiences regarding teaching in an alternative school.

3. The researcher accurately captured and portrayed participants' experiences as the primary instrument for data collection and analysis.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE AND RESEARCH

The research literature reviewed for this study was used to describe aspects of alternative schools, effective teachers, and the ways that teachers determined their degree of effectiveness with their students. A number of researchers have examined the different aspects of alternative schools, their students, and school staff (Dugger & Dugger, 1998; Kratzert & Kratzert, 1991; Lange, 1998; Nichols & Steffy, 1999; Ruebel, et al., 2001; Saunders & Saunders, 2001/2002). In order to explore what personal characteristics make teachers effective in the classroom, I discuss five articles on the various characteristics of teachers who were perceived to be successful in schools (LeMare & Sohbat, 2002; Link & Ratledge, 1979; McIntyre & Battle, 1998; Okpala, Smith, Jones, & Ellis, 2000; Teven & Hanson, 2004). Five articles contain descriptions of the interaction of teachers and their environment which can contribute to teachers' decisions about whether to stay in particular teaching positions, change to other positions, or leave the teaching profession all together (Brouwers & Tomic, 2001; Curtis & Liying, 2001; Hughes, Costner, & Douzenis, 1988; Shann, 1998; Yost, 2002). Finally, I discuss three articles on the use of qualitative research in the field of education, the theory of symbolic interactionism, and how this theory can be used to help describe how teachers created a kind of mental shorthand, or symbols, that helped them make sense of their daily interactions with students and colleagues (Callero, 2003; Osborne, 1994; Van Den Berg, 2002).

Characteristics of Alternative Schools

Many researchers have investigated and described alternative schools. Most researchers focused on the schools themselves, with teachers, administrators, and other school personnel viewed as parts of the whole. Nothing was found that explored how the teachers decided to teach in the alternative school environment.

Lange (1998) examined alternative schools and learning centers in Minnesota, where she surveyed 134 directors on the 1993 list of the Minnesota Alternative Education Programs and 195 randomly chosen teachers from 11 private and 20 public alternative schools. Her surveys included items related to program demographics, admission and exit policies, special education issues, curriculum and student progress procedures, tracking issues, staff demographics, and organization and decision-making issues. Teachers' personal experience, allocation of time, differences between conventional and alternative schools, freedom to design flexible schedules, and job satisfaction were also items of interest. Most of the data were analyzed using frequency counts. Lange also used a repeated measures analysis of variance with teachers' and administrators' opinions as the independent variable and special education issues as the dependent variable. The results of this study showed that the directors and teachers took their programs very seriously and the directors shared high levels of decision-making responsibility with the teachers. The teachers and administrators shared in making many of the policy and curriculum decisions, as well as collaborating on admission and exit policies. Teachers reported that they spent widely varying amounts of time during the school day instructing students. One day a teacher might spend 15 minutes explaining one lesson and 30 minutes explaining a second lesson, while the next day the reverse would be true, with 30 minutes needed on the first subject and only 10 for the second lesson. Schedules were as flexible as possible so that students had

many opportunities to attend class. Teachers really wanted to work in these programs, as shown

by the finding that 64% of those questioned applied for their current positions, with another 26%

invited to teach in the alternative setting. A majority of the teachers surveyed, (96%), described

themselves as general education teachers with students with disabilities in their classes. Using a

Likert scale in which 1 was rated "much less freedom" and 5 was "much more freedom" in the

alternative school as compared to a mainstream school, 89% of teachers reported scores of 4 or

5, indicating that they experienced more or much more freedom in the alternative school. The

same type of scale was used to describe the teachers' job satisfaction in the alternative school as

compared to a mainstream school; 73% of the teachers surveyed reported scores of four or five,

indicating more or much more job satisfaction.

While Lange's (1998) study provided some data about teachers in these alternative

schools, information was not collected regarding what first interested the teachers in joining

these programs. What type of training, if any, was required for them to teach in these schools

was not investigated. Neither were they asked if they had taken their current positions to have a

chance for more freedom and creativity than they had found in the traditional schools.

Focusing their investigation on a more urban population, Nichols and Steffy (1999)

conducted a study in an urban school in the central region of the U.S. They hypothesized that

students in alternative schools had significantly increased self-esteem and motivation from their

involvement and success found in the alternative environment. They measured the positive

effects of the alternative program on student motivation, goal orientation, self-efficacy, and self-

esteem using a 66-item Likert-type questionnaire with 32 participants in a pretest-posttest

procedure. The results of the study showed significant correlations ($p < .01$) between the

following variables: learning goals and intrinsic motivation (pretest: .73, posttest: .84), learning

goals and self-efficacy (pretest: .82, posttest: .86), and self-efficacy and intrinsic motivation

(pretest: .69, posttest: .76). There were also moderately significant correlations ($p < .05$)

between home self-esteem and school self-esteem (.51 and .46 respectively). The students also

showed a significant increase in self-regulation in their increased completion and turning in of

homework as well as by completing assignments in school in a timely manner. Nichols and

Steffy observed that this study provided some support for the alternative program as well as for

their hypotheses on student motivation and self-esteem.

Because Nichols and Steffy (1999) focused on how the alternative school increased

students' academic achievement by increasing their self-esteem, they treated teachers as integral

parts of the school and essential for success, but as interchangeable with other general education

teachers. Thus, these findings spoke more to the environment and not directly to the teacher-

environment fit, which is more closely related to the specific characteristics of a teacher and how

well he or she perceived success in a particular classroom or school.

To extend the investigation of specific characteristics of an alternative school and how

student attitudes and behaviors affect teachers and their perceptions of success, Dugger and

Dugger (1998) sought to measure changes in student attendance, achievement, and self-esteem in

a successful alternative high school in Peoria, Illinois. They used 71 participants from the

alternative school for the treatment group and 44 students from a waiting list who had not yet

gained admission to the alternative high school as a control group. The results from the authors'

observations, interviews, and review of documents were highly positive in all the variables of

interest; attendance was especially high in the treatment group (90%), and the treatment group

showed significant gains in reading, math, and English. In addition, they administered the Self-

Esteem Index (SEI) to measure self-esteem in the participants. The mean for the experimental

group in the spring was significantly higher than the corresponding mean for the experimental group in the fall, using an alpha of .05 significance. The researchers attributed these positive results to reduced class sizes, family atmosphere, small student body, special teacher training, and in-house infant care for students who were parents. Although they described how students' outcomes improved, they did not explain specifically how teachers fit into that success.

One way to compare how successful a program is in improving student outcomes is to study past and current perceptions of students. Saunders and Saunders (2001/2002) focused on the perceptions of past and current school environments of alternative school students in a newly opened alternative high school. The students were from nine mainstream schools and were in grades 7 through 12. The authors designed a Likert scale questionnaire to ask students about several aspects of both past and new schools, including school atmosphere, administrators, teaching staff, and school counselors. The questionnaire was delivered to 93 students in March of the school year to assess perceptions of their past mainstream schools. They administered the same questionnaire to 100 students that May to measure their perceptions of the new alternative school. The slight increase in the number of participants was the result of more students transferring into the school in the month of April and were not all the same students surveyed in March. The students rated the alternative high school as much more positive in all variables of interest and described the alternative school as having a much friendlier and more accepting atmosphere than the old schools. The students rated all of the administrators, teachers, and counselors/caseworkers as significantly more fair, knowledgeable, and caring than the staff in the mainstream schools. When asked about their previous school, 62% of the students described their experiences as "poor." When asked to characterize their experience in the new alternative school, 79% of the students rated it as "excellent" or "good." The researchers contended that

schools such as this alternative high school played an important part in communities helping at-risk students gain academic success.

Saunders and Saunders (2001/2002) offered some clues to how teachers are perceived by students as important to their success, noting that the students considered the alternative school administrators, teachers, and other school personnel as more caring, fair, and knowledgeable than people in those same roles in their traditional schools. But do teachers become more caring and fair merely by walking into an alternative school? Do teachers become more knowledgeable in the subjects they teach by signing a contract to teach in an alternative school? I believe that there are characteristics that draw particular teachers to alternative school teaching environments, whether it is the possibility of more freedom, higher job satisfaction, the possibility of influencing education policy, or more idealistic dreams of working with students whom others have considered lost causes.

In addition to comparing past and current experiences (Saunders & Saunders, 2001/2002), another way to describe success in an alternative school is to examine students' feelings and perceptions of their behavior while attending the alternative school. Kratzert and Kratzert (1991) randomly selected 40 students in an alternative high school to take the Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale and another questionnaire they had developed to measure the participants' perceptions of their behavior. The result of this study showed that 74% of the students attending the alternative school felt that they were different from others and not important as a member of their peer group when they were attending their mainstream schools. The students expressed that they were happy in the alternative school and found it easy to communicate with the staff and their peers there. They felt important in their peer group and planned to continue in school. The participants also expressed that their success in the

alternative school was in large part due to not being pressured for academic achievement. The

students believed that being able to do assignments at their own pace helped ease many of the

frustrations they had experienced in their mainstream school. Kratzert and Kratzert noted an

unexpected finding that being from broken homes did not have as great an influence on student

academic performance as had been previously thought.

Kratzert and Kratzert (1991) examined students' beliefs that the alternative schools, and

by extension the teachers, increased their chances for academic success by increasing their

ability to communicate, increasing their feelings of fitting in to the school community, and

helping them deal with the pressures of finishing school assignments. The researchers included

teachers as a part of the whole alternative school climate, with little noted on specific qualities of

the teachers.

Students' feelings of self-efficacy can be increased while attending an alternative school,

but there may be other factors that affect whether the student continues in school or drops out.

Ruebel et al. (2001) examined the risk factors that can predict dropout rates, focusing on the

factor of engagement, which they defined as the feeling of being accepted, respected, and

included in the classroom. The authors hypothesized that the more engaged students were, the

less likely they would be to drop out of the alternative school. Participants consisted of 79

students attending an alternative school. The participants were asked to complete the self-report

Psychological Sense of School Membership scale (PSSM) in the first month of the school year,

again approximately three months later, and a final time at the end of the school year. The

results of the study revealed an overall 35% dropout rate for the school. The data were analyzed

with a multiple regression to determine possible predictors of dropping out. The predictors used

in the analysis were: self-reported thoughts of dropping out, grade point average,

psychopathology, level of engagement, grade level at entrance to the alternative school, and history of prior dropout. The only factor found to be significant was the history of prior dropout, with 29% of the students in the alternative school reporting at least one prior experience of dropping out of school. The researchers' hypothesis that school engagement would be a significant factor in academic success was not supported, but in looking at the students' records, it was found that the students who dropped out had more than twice as many absences as the students who remained in school.

Ruebel et al. (2001) focused on specific factors that could predict dropout, a serious concern for educators working with students who are at risk for school failure. Teachers were noted as an important part of the school climate, but were not considered a specific factor that could predict whether students would drop out before they could finish their education.

Each of these studies noted several things that alternative schools have in common, but that differ from traditional public schools: small class sizes, different definitions of success for their students while showing them ways to achieve the expected successes, and students' perceptions of caring school staff. While some individual teachers in traditional public schools may also have high expectations for students and possess high levels of caring for their students, traditional mainstream school faculty and staff, as a whole, projected a less nurturing and more impersonal climate than those in most alternative schools (McGee, 2001). These studies seemed to suggest that alternative schools projected a warm, caring sense of family to which many at-risk students responded. Alternative schools provided a positive school climate that students perceived as encouraging them to succeed, which was not the message they got in the traditional school. These six studies assessed the alternative school environment, but did not address the characteristics of teachers in this environment.

Characteristics of Effective Teachers

Many researchers examined teacher training, mentoring, induction, and attrition (LeMare & Sohbat, 2002; Link & Ratledge, 1979; McIntyre & Battle, 1998; Okpala et al., 2000; Teven & Hanson, 2004), but there is a paucity of descriptive studies of teachers in the alternative school environment. The studies described below assessed how teachers were perceived to provide a positive school climate, which was especially important in the alternative school environment because it provided a base from which students improved facets of their lives such as self-esteem. Improved facets of students' lives have been correlated with improved academic outcomes (Lange, 1998; McGee, 2001; Raywid, 1994).

Okpala et al. (2000) investigated the link between school and teacher characteristics, student demographics, and student achievement, hypothesizing that there was a significant relationship between school and teacher characteristics, as well as selected family demographics, and students' reading and mathematics achievement scores. The data for the study were drawn from records of the student population of 4,256 students in fourth grade classes in 42 public elementary schools in a North Carolina county during the 1995-1996 school year. School sizes ranged from 101 to 994 students, with classes ranging in size from 15 to 30 students. Teachers were characterized by the amount of education and experience they possessed, ranging from bachelor's to master's degrees and from 1 year to more than 10 years of teaching experience. Students' socioeconomic status was determined from their qualification for free or reduced lunch and parents' post-high school education. Data for achievement scores were gathered from each school's end-of-grade tests. The variables of school, teacher, and student's family data were extracted from information in each school's North Carolina School Building Improvement Report. The impact and significance of the selected variables were determined by the use of

measures of central tendency and dispersion. Results of this study indicated that the school and class size variables were significant in explaining changes in fourth grade reading scores, but were not significant in mathematics achievement. The percentage of teachers having master's degrees was significant in explaining changes in math scores, but was not significant for reading scores. The teachers' 10 years of teaching experience were positively correlated with changes in reading and math scores.

Okpala et al. (2000) also used family characteristics as correlates of academic success or failure. The scores of the students from families who qualified for free or reduced lunch were negatively correlated for math and reading achievement, while the percentage of parents with post-high school education was positively correlated with the fourth graders' reading and math achievement scores.

Okpala et al. (2000) noted that their findings indicated to policy makers the need for smaller class sizes, experienced and competent teachers, and high quality educational and remediation services, all of which are more beneficial to students in any type of school. However, they did not indicate the role that teachers played in the overall environment to benefit students.

LeMare and Sohbat (2002) investigated students' perceptions of teacher characteristics and how those traits facilitated or hindered students' asking for help. Willingness to ask for help from a particular teacher was noted to lead to strong reactions from the students. The researchers hypothesized that students' perceptions of whether they could ask for assistance could be correlated with personal rejection or acceptance by the teacher and could have had an impact on the students' learning experience. The participants in the study were 115 students in grades 2-7 from six suburban elementary schools. An inductive analysis from a semi-structured interview

identified 10 broad descriptors of teacher characteristics perceived by students when they were looking for help. The students were encouraged to describe daily help-seeking interactions as well as incidents that stood out in their minds. The responses were coded into 10 dichotomous categorical themes: willingness, global personality, reactions to help seeking, expectations, competence, relationships with children, familiarity, mood, predictability, and gender. Each theme in its positive form was perceived to encourage seeking help and in its negative form was perceived to discourage asking for help from a teacher. The inter-rater agreement was 99% based only on mistakes of commission and 80% including errors of omission. Students judged as very important teachers' being willing to listen, helping without hassling, encouraging the children, and not embarrassing the students. The themes of global personality, mood, and predictability were important to students because they felt more able to approach teachers who were considered not too strict and who would not get angry if asked for help. Children also stated that they would not ask a teacher for help if they knew that the teacher would expect them to know the material already and not offer any additional help to figure it out on their own. Teachers who answered questions in such a way that the student could not understand the answer caused students to feel that the teacher either did not understand their question or did not have the ability to answer it. The results of this study indicated that teachers need to encourage students to ask for help and to promote the concept that making mistakes is a normal and valuable part of learning. The authors described an unexpected finding that students' feelings about asking for help were often expressed as a lack of a negative reaction rather than as a positive reaction. The researchers hypothesized that this type of attitude from students resulted from feelings of ambivalence about asking for help, regardless of the expected reaction from the teacher. This study was carried out in general education classrooms, but it demonstrates that

children's perceptions of teachers' attitudes were strongly held and affected how they asked for help; this in turn affected how they learned. The researchers hypothesized that teachers who were perceived as people who could be trusted to help without hassling and embarrassing students seemed to provide the positive climate for change.

Building on the research on students' perceptions of teachers, Teven and Hanson (2004) determined that in order for learning to be meaningful, students must believe that teachers are competent, trustworthy and credible. They examined students' perceptions of teachers' credibility based on teacher caring, which they defined as verbal encouragement, and immediacy, which they defined as nonverbal behaviors that indicated positive interactions such as eye contact, relaxed body language, smiling, movement, and proximity. They hypothesized that teachers who displayed more verbal caring and nonverbal immediacy behaviors would be perceived to be more credible by their students and that the two factors of caring and immediacy interacted to influence perceptions of credibility. In the first part of the study, Teven and Hanson used a 2 x 2 factorial design in which 275 undergraduate participants were presented with four written scenarios that manipulated the teacher variables of caring (high/low) and immediacy (high/low). After reading the scenarios, the participants were asked to complete scales that measured their perceptions of teacher credibility. In the second part of the study, the authors used the same 2 x 2 factorial design, but in this part the 289 undergraduate participants watched videotaped lectures that illustrated the four scenarios that participants in the first study had only read. Data from both studies were coded by graduate students who were given definitions of the variables and taught to reliably recognize the behaviors under investigation.

Teven and Hanson (2004) analyzed the data using a two-way multivariate analysis of variance, then examined with two-way analyses of variance. Post-hoc cell comparisons were

used where justified by significant main and interaction effects. The Tukey *b* statistic was used

for unequal cell sizes within the experiment, and the .05 alpha was used for all tests of statistical

significance. Results from both parts of the study supported the hypotheses with significant

main and interaction effects of the variables of caring and immediacy, with students' perceptions

more positive for teacher behavior in the high caring and high immediacy conditions. The

hypothesis that the two variables would interact was also supported as there were significant

interaction effects found in both parts of the study. The students who rated teachers high on

caring and immediacy gave credibility scores that were higher than would be expected based on

the main effect results. Teven and Hanson performed a final univariate analysis on the data to

determine the validity of the manipulation of the teacher immediacy variable. This test was done

to measure the mean differences in student perceptions of teacher immediacy or non-immediacy

between the subject groups. There was a significant main effect showing that students who rated

a teacher as high in immediacy and verbal caring also rated that teacher significantly higher in

nonverbal immediacy than in the other three conditions. This seemed to indicate that the two

variables of interest in these studies were independent and not isomorphic constructs. These

results indicated that teachers who were perceived as more caring and immediate were perceived

as more credible by their students. This credibility was another tool that teachers could use to

achieve greater learning outcomes for their students. The researchers carried out this study in a

traditional public school, but it described traits of caring and immediacy that were mentioned in

other studies (Lange, 1998; Nichols & Steffy, 1999) as traits that alternative school teachers

displayed regularly.

McIntyre and Battle (1998) found that students were more likely to attend classes with

teachers that they like, admire, and respect. They investigated the perceptions of what makes a

good teacher of students who have emotional or behavioral disorders. Drawing from 11 programs in the New York City public school system, the researchers gave 31-item Likert scale questionnaires to 307 student volunteers. They analyzed data from 209 valid questionnaires, or 68% of the original participants. On the survey, participants were asked to rate teacher characteristics into four categories as either "not important," "it helps make a good teacher," "it is important to do," and "the teacher must do this to be a good teacher." From these traits McIntyre and Battle constructed four trait configurations: Personality Traits, Respectful Treatment of Students, Behavior Management Practices, and Instructional Skills. The independent variables in the analysis were race/culture, gender, and age. The data were analyzed by constructing the composite variables and performing a multiple regression analysis using two dummy coded variables and one continuous variable. If a participant's data were missing at least one variable it was not included in the analysis. The final sample included 188 African American and White, male and female students ranging in age from 5 to 20 years.

McIntyre and Battle (1998) found that African Americans scored significantly higher than Whites in the Personality Traits and Respectful Treatment of Students configurations, and girls scored significantly higher than boys in respectful treatment of students. There were no statistically significant scores for African American or White students on the Behavior Management Practices or Instructional Skills configurations, but females did score higher than their male peers on both variables. As students got older, none of the four variables were as statistically significant. One weakness of the investigation was that the traits presented to the students were done so only as positives, which could have explained some of the decreased variance in the results. More neutral traits or a wider range of possible responses might give clearer results in future experiments. The researchers described teacher traits as perceived by

students in a traditional public school. It seems logical that respect for students and caring personality traits would also be found as part of the supportive school climate that alternative schools try to foster.

The ultimate measure of a teacher's effectiveness is student achievement (Link & Ratledge, 1979). These researchers analyzed determinants of reading achievement and the possible connection between student IQ and achievement, student motivation, and individual teacher characteristics. Teacher characteristics included age, race, experience, and educational level. Student characteristics were gathered from a questionnaire given at the beginning of the school year which included 122 items on perception and preference as well as demographic data on the students' fathers. One of the main variables for this study was the indication of the student's perceptions of the teacher's expectations of the student's potential. The students' questionnaires included items used to indicate what they perceived to be their parents' and teachers' opinions of the students and their potential to achieve. Teachers were given a questionnaire to measure their expectations at the same time the reading posttest was given to the students. The participants for this study were 500 fourth graders in Wilmington, Delaware, who were given a basic skills test (the California Test Bureau of Comprehensive Tests of Basic Skills) at the beginning and end of the school year. An IQ test (the California Test of Mental Maturity) was administered in October of the school year. Student data were matched with individual teacher data in order to determine impact of teachers on achievement. Data were analyzed with a multiple regression model.

These authors found that none of the expected measures of school and teacher quality, such as class size or teacher experience, were significant at the .05 alpha level. The variable that showed the highest statistical significance was the student's perception that the teacher possessed

a positive attitude about the student's worth and potential to succeed. This positive attitude was reflected in increased reading scores on standardized tests. For every unit of increase in a teacher's expectation score, there was a .506-year increase in reading level. There was also a positive correlation, although not as high, for students' perceptions that their parents possessed a positive attitude about their potential and achievement scores. For every unit of increase of parental expectation score, there was a .227-year increase in reading level. The authors noted that the more traditional expectations of teacher education, teacher experience, and class size were relatively less important to the reading achievement scores of the test population than variables such as students' perceptions of adult expectations of students' success.

Link and Ratledge (1979) investigated the strength of students' perceptions of teacher expectations and how it affected their academic achievement in a traditional public school. They found a strong indication that students' beliefs about their teachers' support increased academic scores. I believe that the perception of teacher support would also apply in alternative schools, where teachers act as catalysts to help students increase their self-esteem as well as their academic scores. Students' perceptions of teacher support would greatly enhance the chances of success. Teachers who perceived that they were effective with their students and fit well in their working environment were able to reach their students. Teachers who believed that they can make a difference in the policies and curriculum of their school were positively invested in the school climate. The teacher-environment fit would therefore greatly affect teachers' abilities to project the level of positive expectations illustrated in Link and Ratledge's study.

The studies described above illustrated how students' perceptions of their teachers, as well as what they believe their teachers expected of them, greatly impacted students' beliefs about their abilities to succeed. Although the researchers focused on traditional public schools, I

hypothesized that these same concepts would apply in alternative schools, perhaps to an even greater degree. Most teachers in alternative schools might identify themselves as general education teachers (Lange, 1998), but I believe that they play a more holistic role for students than general education teachers in a traditional public school.

The Interaction of Environmental Characteristics and Teacher Characteristics

The following studies illustrated how teachers viewed themselves and how they fit in the school environment in which they practice. I examined teacher characteristics such as flexibility, job satisfaction, and feelings of self-efficacy in order to show that one school environment might be an excellent fit for one person, an uncomfortable fit for a second person, and a totally unacceptable fit for a third person. I was most interested in understanding the characteristics of an optimal teacher-environment fit that will help teachers in their job search and alternative school administrators find the best teacher-environment fit when hiring new teachers. Teachers may be new to teaching or have many years of experience, but there are fundamental characteristics that predict the best teacher-environment fit in schools (Stronge, 2002). This teacher-environment level of fit is important because it can affect teacher retention; a person who is unhappy will not perform well in a job or not stay in that position for long. The teacher-environment fit also affects student outcomes because students have strong reactions when they perceive that teachers are interested in them and expected them to do well in school (LeMare & Sohbat, 2002; Teven & Hanson, 2004). I hypothesized that teachers who were a poor fit in an alternative school environment were likely to have trouble projecting the positive and supportive atmosphere needed to be effective educators in alternative schools.

Teachers in alternative schools were expected to be flexible and handle change on a daily basis (Curtis & Liying, 2001). The research team examined teachers' self-ratings of their ability,

knowledge, and personality characteristics that allow them to be successful in managing change. The participants in this study were 35 experienced teachers of English in Hong Kong who were given a questionnaire to complete as they waited for a workshop on educational change to begin. The questionnaire was adapted from an instrument designed by Everard and Morris (1990) to measure appropriate and relevant knowledge, perceptions of skill, knowledge, and personality traits that enabled the teacher to handle change. The researchers also used the questionnaire to gather details about the participants' career backgrounds and schools where they currently teach. Some of the English idioms were changed to ensure that the test participants would understand what was being asked of them. The teachers ranged in age from 20 to 39 years old and teaching experience ranged from 1 to 20 years. The results of this study indicated that teachers assessed themselves as being very knowledgeable about educational change, with strengths noted as abilities to implement change, talk and listen to colleagues, and pool their experiential knowledge of change. The teachers assessed their skills as being high in goal-setting and planning, training and teaching, and empathy. The self-evaluations were lower for skills in political behavior and conflict management. The personality characteristics that the teachers rated themselves highly on included a strong sense of personal ethics that helped ensure consistent behavior, a strong ability to listen, and a high degree of self-awareness. The items that were rated the lowest included tolerance of ambiguity and complexity and willingness to take risks and live with the consequences without undue stress. Curtis and Liying concluded from these results that teachers could and should be included in questions of policy change because they possessed insights that might otherwise be overlooked. It was also noted that while teachers needed support in times of change, the support should be directed toward specific areas that were identified by the teachers themselves.

Curtis and Liying (2001) investigated how teachers perceived their strengths and challenges, especially in times of change. These teachers taught English in a variety of schools in Hong Kong, but none in what would be considered alternative schools in the U.S. However, their findings illustrated that teachers, like alternative school students, have individualized needs, and these needs must be addressed in order to maximize performance. Teachers who are considering teaching in an alternative school environment need to be able to recognize and articulate their strengths and needs in order to achieve an effective and satisfying fit with that school environment.

One way to recognize and articulate strengths and needs is to study teachers' self-efficacy beliefs. Brouwers and Tomic (2001) examined factorial validity scores on the Teacher Interpersonal Self-Efficacy Scale in order to investigate possible links of self-efficacy beliefs to specific activities of teachers, one of the elements of self-efficacy theory. The scale was designed to measure the teacher's perceived self-efficacy in managing student behavior and gaining support from colleagues and school principals. Participants for this study were 832 teachers from 32 secondary schools in the Netherlands. Principals from the schools randomly distributed the questionnaires to teachers who completed and returned them anonymously to the researchers. One-half of the questionnaires were analyzed as the calibration sample and the other half as the validation sample. A confirmatory factor analysis was done on the calibration sample with the fit of the three factorial models tested against a null model using a chi-square likelihood ratio. Modification was done to relax the original parameters and a cutoff of .40 was established to identify items that contributed significantly to each factor. Cross-validation analysis was done using data from the validation sample to test for invariance of the factor structures across both samples. Results of this study indicated that there was a poor absolute fit,

likely due to the large sample size. The subscales were all determined to be internally consistent, with all coefficient alphas above 0.90. Brouwers and Tomic concluded that teachers' self-efficacy beliefs should be assessed with regard to specific activities. Like Curtis and Liying (2001), Brouwers and Tomic sought to study how teachers' perceptions of themselves influenced their environmental fit. Their findings illustrated that a general feeling of self-efficacy is not predictive of success or failure; rather, teachers needed a more individualized way to assess their environmental fit and job satisfaction.

Beyond self-efficacy beliefs, researchers believed that teachers may have personality traits that led them to pursue a training program to become educators. Hughes et al., (1988) conducted a study that described personality traits that were noted among students who were in a teacher training program at Memphis State University. The investigation was designed to compare students enrolled in an alternative fifth year of study and clinical work as opposed to the traditional four-year program. Participants in the study were 60 students enrolled in the university as education majors. Twenty-four of the participants were enrolled in the Center of Excellence Program, the alternative teacher training program. The 36 participants enrolled in traditional graduate programs served as a comparison group. An additional group of 10 university faculty members who had been selected to receive Outstanding Teacher Awards was also used for comparison. The two comparison groups were deemed successful teachers by the researchers, who sought to compare personality traits of the comparison groups with the undergraduate treatment group. All of the participants were given the Sixteen Personality Factor Test (16 PF), the Pupil Control Ideology Form, the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), and Tennessee Self-Concept Scale. One of the hypotheses of the study was that personality features from the above instruments would predict scores for the test participants on the Miller Analogies

Test. Data were analyzed in step-wise regression with some significant results. Results of the study showed that the students in the alternative program scored consistently high on the Concept Mastery Test, part of the Sixteen Personality Factor Test, indicating strong academic preparedness. This measure also indicated that the alternatively trained students were more imaginative and inventive than participants in the comparison groups. Significant difference was not shown between any of the three groups on factors measured by the Motivation Analysis Test. In seeking to measure personality traits that differed between the groups, the only factor that reached significance was factor M on the Sixteen Personal Factor Test. This factor measured practical versus imaginative personality traits. There were no significant differences on the MBTI that could be used to predict motivation. In using the MBTI to describe psychological type, the only significant difference among the groups was that the alternative training group typed for Intuition, while the graduate student comparison group typed for Sensing. This finding indicated that the alternative training group was more interested in possibilities and relationships, while the graduate group was more interested in known facts. Both groups showed that they were conscientious, outgoing, and aware of other people's feelings. Hughes et al. noted that the alternative training students would be more comfortable with independence and the graduate group would probably need more encouragement and praise. The best predictor of scores on the Miller Analogies Test for the treatment group was Factor B on the 16 PF, which measured Concrete versus Abstract Concepts. The authors noted that scores on this measure could act as a signal for recruiters and administrators when hiring teachers in a learning situation where there is emphasis on complex and abstract issues. These results offered clues that could be used to hire teachers for alternative schools. Individuals who are comfortable with freedom and creativity may find a better environmental fit in an alternative school that encourages its teachers to have a

greater say in curriculum and policy decisions than they would find in a more traditional public school. Teachers who are more comfortable in a traditional school might find the added freedom and responsibility of an alternative school too discomfiting to have much job satisfaction.

In terms of student outcomes, it has been shown that factors such as teachers' personality traits and self-efficacy beliefs can have an effect on student achievement (Link & Ratledge, 1979). In order to support teachers and prevent burnout, principals and administrators can employ specific factors that will empower teachers to feel important and energized and to give their students the best they have to offer. Most schools have induction programs to help orient new teachers. Some schools also have mentor programs that have been shown to greatly benefit teachers during their first year of teaching (Stronge, 2002). Research has shown that mentoring programs can also have benefits for the mentor teacher. Yost (2002) conducted a naturalistic study in which mentoring was investigated as an instrument for change at a small Midwestern university in which both mentors and mentees were enrolled in mentoring classes. The four mentor teachers were chosen by their school districts based on their teaching records, interest in helping newcomers, and interest in working toward a master's degree. Mentor teachers had experience ranging from 8 to 17 years and taught grades 1, 3, or 5. The mentee teachers were all fully certified first-year teachers. The mentor teachers were excused from teaching duties for the school year and the mentee teachers took over their classrooms. Yost conducted one extended interview and three focused interviews with scripted questions for each mentor and observed them while they worked with their mentee teachers. The mentor teachers also kept journals during the school year in order to provide long-term data. Results of the study showed the mentors spent about half of their time mentoring and the other half of their time working on district projects. During the year, the mentors gained insights into competencies and abilities

they had not realized they possessed. They also noted an increased interest in innovation and an awareness of the dynamics of the classroom setting. One mentor wrote that he had not realized that he could have influence on others before. This mentor teacher also acted as a consultant at three other schools during the school year. Opportunities such as consulting and other district projects were unexpected positives for the mentors and they welcomed the challenge, even though they also noted that it was a year of hard work that was different from what they had experienced in the classroom. Yost noted that the mentor teachers benefited as much, or more, from the mentoring experience as the first-year teachers who received the benefits of having a mentor. The program described in the study allowed the teachers to examine their fit within their present school environment. The shift in the environment provided by the year of mentoring helped them imagine themselves in different roles within that same environment. Most mentoring programs were discussed from the perspective of the mentee, but Yost examined this program from the perspective of the mentor.

Job satisfaction is a complex construct that is important to attrition and retention of teachers (Stronge, 2002). Shann (1998) investigated job satisfaction in an urban middle school district by examining teachers' perceptions of the importance of various aspects of their jobs and how job satisfaction was correlated to those perceptions. He also looked at the question of whether job satisfaction and perceived importance of aspects of their jobs differed depending on whether they were in more or less effective schools. The participants in this study were 58 teachers from four different urban middle schools. The schools were rank ordered in terms of academic achievement from data gathered from Metropolitan Achievement Test (MAT) scores in reading, MAT scores in mathematics, the school system's Criterion Referenced Test in Mathematics, and a measure of problem solving emphasizing critical thinking and scientific

reasoning. The results of the study showed that School 1 scored highest on all tests of achievement, School 2 was most often in the second place on the achievement test scores, School 3 was in the bottom half of the achievement scores except for eighth grade math scores, and School 4 was consistently at the bottom on all achievement test measures. School 3 also scored lowest on measures of prosocial behavior and highest on measures of antisocial behavior. All of the teachers surveyed had bachelor's degrees and either held master's degrees or were working on master's degrees. The teachers all had 5-20 years of teaching experience. The results showed a great difference in teacher satisfaction among the four traditional schools, although they did have many similarities. Almost all respondents agreed that the best thing about their jobs was the kids and that they were least satisfied with parent-teacher relationships, which they considered to be very important. The lack of participation in decision making when it came to policies and programs for their schools was also a source of dissatisfaction for teachers in the study. Shann (1998) noted that these data can be used by principals and administrators to build programs that offer teachers support and that a sense of ownership and empowerment by sharing in decision-making that will greatly increase job satisfaction, leading to higher teacher retention, commitment, and school effectiveness .

Qualitative research has long been used to investigate issues in the educational setting because of five features that make it efficacious; it is naturalistic, produces descriptive data, is concerned with process, is inductive, and helps the researcher to make meaning from the data (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). The natural setting within the school, with the researcher as the primary research instrument, provided the participants with confidentiality and the opportunity to provide rich descriptive data. In this study, I was concerned with the process that teachers use to develop an identity that allows them to be effective teachers of students who are at-risk of school

failure. I used inductive reasoning to describe the teachers' worldview, using the data gathered from interviews and classroom observations to build a comprehensive description of effective teachers and how they fit in their environment. Finally, I was concerned with how teachers make meaning of this aspect of their professional and personal lives. Symbolic interactionism is one theory used in qualitative research that supported these five features and proved most efficacious for the current study.

Symbolic Interaction Theory and Relevant Literature: How Teachers Make Meaning from Their Daily Interactions with Their Students and Colleagues

Teachers enter the teaching profession for various reasons and by numerous routes. Did the boy turn to thoughts of a teaching career when his fourth grade teacher provided a strong positive role model that deeply impressed him? Did the young woman turn to teaching when she was nearing the end of her college career and her advisor pointed out that she only needed a few more classes to qualify for a teaching credential? There are as many reasons for becoming a teacher as there are teachers.

Choosing any career field reflects a certain symbolic self-concept. In a world in which people are bombarded with millions of bits of information every day, the symbol provides an individual with a type of shorthand that evokes images of interactions in a particular setting. The concept of self, the social fit into an environment, and decisions that lead down certain career paths may or may not be conscious, but are nonetheless real. The following articles examined how symbolic interactionism explains individuals' realities and how they use the symbols of interaction to make sense of their world and their place in that world.

Callero (2003) examined a new approach to investigating the self that emphasized power, reflexivity, and social construction. The concept of reflexivity was especially relevant to Mead's

work (cited in Charon, 1979) on symbolic interactionism (SI) and was used to provide a practical basis for examining the principles of agency and political action. Although he was a prolific journal writer, Mead never wrote a book on his concepts of the theory of symbolic interactionism; his students and colleagues made his ideas known posthumously (Charon, 1979). According to Mead, symbolic interactionism is most concerned with mind, self, and society. Language (as cited in Charon, 1979) is filled with symbols, and people in each culture agree to use the symbols of language in specific ways. The ways in which an individual perceives the self and how it fits into society are dynamic, and the actor can change to become anything.

In an analysis of symbolic interactionism, Callero (2003) pointed out that the theory is focused on language and pragmatism. When compared to postmodern theory, it seemed that SI has cornered the market, so to speak, and that postmodernism had little new to offer. Callero compared SI to Foucault's (1994) concept of the self as a direct consequence of power. Foucault pointed out that language used in diverse institutional settings such as prisons, schools, and hospitals became a mechanism of domination. The self, when framed in powerful language, became more powerful than when outside that framework.

Callero (2003) continued with his analysis of the sociology of the self by examining the self as a reflexive process. Mead and Dewey (as cited in Reynolds, 2003), focused on the mind as a dynamic process rather than a static entity. Callero (2003) pointed out that this meant that the self of symbolic interactionists was primarily a reflexive process of social interaction. Through this process, the researcher described that humans are unique in that they have the ability to become both subject and object, or part of the social experience. Humans are capable of taking the role of the "other," putting self in the place of another person and taking that

perspective. Humans embody this complex ability in such a way that they are capable of creative action.

Callero (2003) completed his analysis by investigating the self as a social construct. He pointed out that it is common to see the self as both a social product and a social force. In this way, humans were seen in many capacities, such as the public self opposed to the private self. The many roles that humans played were the products of this principle. Callero stated that the media has increased cultural awareness and can play havoc with people who are vulnerable in an unstable social environment. Self-construction can be fragile when a person struggling to build a sense of identity is confronted with a global culture that seems to promise a wider set of meanings. These concerns are real and affect the development of self-esteem. The feelings can lead to the person's taking on a parallel life, such as Internet users who become involved in playing online role-playing games, or participating in television talk shows that encourage participants to tell shocking stories in order to feel empowered and increase their feelings of self-worth.

Callero (2003) pointed out important aspects of the self and the ways in which people experienced their worlds. There is little argument that humans are complex beings. Students who are at risk for failing in school often come to alternative schools with damaged or stunted feelings of self-esteem.

Qualitative Research in Education

The roots of qualitative research are in sociology and anthropology, but it has been used in the field of education since the 1930s, first seen when Waller conducted interviews with students and teachers (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). Qualitative research provides rich detail and context that cannot be captured in quantitative research because it takes place in a natural setting

and describes the context of the research being studied. The descriptive data that qualitative research provides gives words or pictures rather than numbers. It is more concerned with a process rather than outcomes. As the qualitative researcher investigates how people make choices and meaning from their particular situations in life, he or she comes to understand others' perspectives from the dialogue between researchers and their subjects (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). Within qualitative research, there are different approaches, such as phenomenology, symbolic interactionism, and case study, providing layers of understanding to particular situations.

In his analysis of the similarities and differences among methods of qualitative research, Osborne (1994) investigated how symbolic interactionism was responsible for assigning meaning to a person's life. He pointed out that symbolic interactionism is a type of social constructionism which focused on a self that was derived from society and that this self mediated the individual's action and interaction with the environment. He described the dynamic qualities of the theory and how symbolic interactionism stressed the dynamic nature of the process of how humans made sense of their personal experiences. Osborne described how the Chicago School of symbolic interactionism was most influential as it stressed both the subjective world of the individual and the public world. In this way, symbolic interactionism was very much like phenomenology in its emphasis on the person and the way the person perceived the world.

In the phenomenological approach, personal descriptions of experience were used as primary data (Osborne, 1994). The type of sampling used in phenomenology and ethnographic research was usually purposive; the researcher looked for those who had experienced the phenomenon to be studied. Participant observation was part of phenomenological research in that the researcher went into the field and lived part of the experience that was being studied.

This type of participation can be essential in qualitative research as it is deemed impossible to assess a true account of the phenomenon being studied from an outside perspective. Osborne (1994) compared grounded theory with phenomenology and stated that grounded theory could be called the "natural science wing" (p. 178) of symbolic interactionism. Grounded theory was thought to include a focus on description, theory, and process. As an exploratory method, grounded theory can offer theoretical explanations of relationships among categories of data. Methods such as phenomenology and symbolic interactionism provide researchers with opportunities to use personal communication to explore aspects of the human experience in ways that are not possible with more concrete scientific or quantitative methods of research.

The descriptions of students, teachers, and their interactions in alternative schools are best addressed by qualitative research. The complex human experience of how teachers fit into the puzzle that emerges into a complete picture of a successful student could not be adequately captured in the statistical analysis of a quantitative research study. The part that teachers play in the complex equation of effectively providing opportunities for students to succeed can be difficult to assess. Choosing to enter the teaching profession can be a complicated choice, and years of experience are needed before a teacher can be considered an effective and efficient educator. According to Stronge (2002), it takes from five to eight years to master the skills needed to be an effective teacher. However, many teachers leave the profession within the first five years (McKenzie & Santiago, 2005).

Van Den Berg (2002) presented a meta-analysis of studies on how teachers experienced implementation of innovations, their school organization as an emotional arena, and the intensification of the teaching profession itself. This author found that the attributes of teachers can be predictive of the phenomenon of how well teachers fit into various teaching

environments. An analysis of teachers' feelings of concern and uncertainty as well as their professional development was also described in the meta-analysis. Van Den Berg (2002) provided clear delineation of the points in his meta-analysis. He divided it into three parts: (a) existential phenomenology and symbolic interactionism, (b) intensification of the teaching profession and impact on professional identities, and (c) recent research on differences in teachers' meanings of their experiences in teaching.

The above author first described studies that utilized phenomenology and symbolic interactionism to examine the subjective meanings teachers make in a given situation. Symbolic interactionism can be particularly useful for those who realize that each school is unique because each school is organized by unique people and their shared patterns of interaction that are developed over time. He found that ambiguity can develop when there were inaccurate estimates of certain actions at certain points in time. Van Den Berg (2002) went on to describe studies in which teachers' reactions to school policies that affect their daily practice of teaching depend on personal meanings, which in turn, affected their attitudes about themselves and their profession. Van Den Berg's overarching conclusions for this section of his meta-analysis included: (a) teachers' experiences in their first professional years greatly determined the course of their careers, (b) teachers were strongly motivated by the contact they had with their students, and (c) teacher motivation was strongly influenced by the way that their school challenged them such as variation in their work or the opportunity to share in policy decision-making.

In the second part of his meta-analysis, Van Den Berg (2002) described studies of increased pressure on teachers from issues such as varied working conditions and the increasing difficulty teachers had in motivating students. Teachers' stress from these types of issues was reflected in a 1993 survey of teachers by the U.S. Department of Education (as cited in Van Den

Berg, 2002). In this study, some 50% of American teachers reported that they were strongly

dissatisfied with their workload, available resources, support received from school

administrators, and work evaluation procedures. Half of the teachers surveyed reported that they

were dissatisfied with their inability to influence school policies, and 75% were considerably less

than satisfied with the way that the public viewed their work. The results of a National

Education Association survey conducted in 1992 were similarly disturbing (as cited in Van Den

Berg, 2002): the number of teachers who would again choose a teaching career if given a choice

decreased from 74% to 59% between 1971 and 1991. These findings serve to highlight the

importance of attention to the optimal functioning of teachers.

In the final part of his meta-analysis, Van Den Berg (2002) focused on current research

into the meanings of teachers' experiences in teaching. The articles he described were about

teachers' perceptions of their professional development, competence in teaching, and tolerance

of uncertainty. The findings in these studies indicated that the way teachers responded to

stressors was a product of their experiences, expectations, and demands made on them on a

personal and professional basis.

In conclusion, Van Den Berg (2002) pointed out that teachers do not function in a

vacuum, but rather as part of the dynamic interaction of a school environment. The meanings

that teachers assigned to their professional and personal lives needed to be taken into account

when considering school policies. Van Den Berg (2002) discussed additional research that is

needed to explore teachers' personal beliefs, attitudes, and emotions when faced with changes

and increased intensification of the teaching profession. He suggested that future researchers

should also address such issues as the relation of teacher efficacy, teaching concerns, and other

teacher characteristics to perceptions of teacher effectiveness with their students.

Van Den Berg (2002) made several important points for teachers, but like so many others, he did not mention teachers in the alternative school setting. If teachers in mainstream schools experienced feelings of ambiguity and a low tolerance for uncertainty, these types of stressors are increased exponentially for educators in alternative schools. While in no way underestimating the stressors experienced by teachers in mainstream schools, teachers in alternative schools experienced their interactions with their students as continuously flexible and creative (Dugger & Dugger, 1998). The number of students can greatly fluctuate over the course of the academic year, which can greatly affect the dynamics of any classroom. Lesson plans that can be meticulously followed in a mainstream classroom may need to be altered, cut short, or totally abandoned when faced with the needs of at-risk students. Teachers who experienced classrooms as safe, secure, and consistent environments may be greatly stressed to experience an alternative school classroom as a more fluid and dynamic learning environment that was outside their comfort zone (Friesen et al., 1999).

Discussion of Relevant Literature

The studies described above were only a small sample of the work being done to examine the efficacy of alternative schools and teacher attrition. Each school is as unique as the people who inhabit it, and the educational plan for each student is unique to the individual. The studies on teacher characteristics tended to show that teachers in all schools were more alike than different. As with most groups, there were greater differences within the groups than between them. The factors examined in the above studies were common elements in all schools that work under the umbrella term "alternative school." The schools tended to be small in size or were made to feel small by the building arrangement. They focused on the students' abilities and strengths and built on those qualities. Most of the schools had teachers and administrators who

believed in their programs and the work they were doing with students who were at risk of not

finishing school. Building students' self-esteem and feelings of self-efficacy and encouraging a

shift from an external locus of control to a more internal locus of control were all factors that

could lead to greater success in the academic arena.

Studies whose findings did not support the authors' working hypotheses, such as the one

by Ruebel et al. (2001), provided just as much valuable information about the successful

workings of an alternative school and teacher attrition. These authors found that engagement

was not necessarily an essential factor for the students to succeed in that alternative school. This

information could be used in determining the focus of the teachers' efforts. These results could

also apply to students in traditional public schools who are at risk for dropping out.

Hughes et al. (1988) provided some clues to which personality factors should be assessed

in recruiting efforts for alternative school teachers, but much more research is needed to

investigate and describe the optimal fit of teacher to environment. Teachers in alternative

schools were often called upon to be flexible, inventive, and imaginative in order to work with a

variety of students. Some individuals might feel intimidated by the level of freedom and

responsibility given to them in such environments, especially early in their teaching careers.

Curtis and Liying (2001) described teachers' perceptions of their abilities and strengths related to

change. Alternative school teachers should be able to express some of these same strengths in

order to work in this particular school environment.

The findings of the meta-analysis (Billingsley, 2004) of the research on special education

teacher attrition showed that special education teachers were more likely to leave early in their

careers, if they are not certified, or had high test scores on qualifying examinations such as the

National Teacher Exam. Personal circumstances could also affect attrition, such as a family

move or a desire to stay home with young children. These types of issues had been found to be factors in general education teachers' attrition, and there was no reason to believe that they would not apply to teachers in alternative schools as well. Stronge (2002) stated that the most effective teachers were those with more than three years of teaching experience. He also noted that new teachers were most at risk for leaving the profession within the first five years. However, mentoring programs have been shown to have a great impact on teacher induction and commitment, providing positive relationships and encouragement to novice teachers (Yost, 2002).

The findings of the literature described in this review have several implications for future research. Issues of low salary, poor work climate, lack of support from administration and colleagues, being overwhelmed with paperwork, and the teacher's role in the school environment are all elements that affect teacher attrition and retention. The lack of empirical research on these and other issues that face alternative school teachers should be addressed by qualitative and quantitative studies in order to investigate the factors that affect teacher attrition, commitment, and overall school effectiveness.

Qualitative research, specifically symbolic interactionism, is supported as an effective research design for this research project. Teachers in alternative schools make meanings from their professional participation in a school atmosphere that is very different from the experiences of teachers in mainstream schools. The U.S. Department of Education study (cited in Van Den Berg, 2002) on the dissatisfaction of teachers said nothing about the stigma that teachers and students faced from the community about being part of the alternative education system. Feelings of being negatively perceived by other educators and the community at large can greatly impact the way that teachers feel about themselves, their students, and the work they do in their

schools (McGee, 2001). The teachers described in the McGee article may feel more protective of their students or they may buy into the community feeling that there is something intrinsically broken about these students that can never be addressed by any type of education.

I am convinced that the paucity of literature on the subject of teachers in alternative schools is not from the lack of interest in the subject, but rather the lack of realization that these teachers may have different characteristics and personality traits from either general education or special education teachers in traditional public schools. Researchers who have investigated alternative schools (Dugger & Dugger, 1998; Kratzert & Kratzert, 1991; Lange, 1998; Nichols & Steffy, 1999) mentioned the importance of teachers and their relationships with students as part of the alternative school culture and students' success, but none have focused on the teachers and how their education, experience, and preparation enable them to be effective members of alternative school communities. Currently, alternative school teachers receive no special training to work in that environment. Educators of at-risk students deserve research that delineates specific factors that make them effective in alternative school settings. The Indiana Department of Education (2004b) website described three exemplary alternative school programs that are child-centered and focus on the strengths of the students. A wealth of valuable information can be gathered from the teachers and administrators in alternative schools that will help future teachers decide if the alternative school environment would be the optimal fit for their talents and the practice of the teaching profession (Indiana Department of Education, 2004a).

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

I used a case study design in this study. This type of research design was supported in recent literature on schools, teachers, and administrators. Rayle (1998), Dressman (1999), and Quach (2005) all used case studies to provide rich descriptions of schools and the people who worked within their walls. Rayle's case study of an alternative school in North Carolina provided a snapshot of a school struggling to provide a quality education for students who were not successful in the mainstream schools. Dressman's case study gave rich details of the work of a third grade teacher who was very effective in using some innovative practices with her students. Quach used a case study design that described the ethic of care that a charter school provided for students with profound physical and mental disabilities. I hope that my study will add to the knowledge in the field of educational psychology.

In order to better describe the details of the emergent themes, data from the case study was analyzed using the symbolic interaction theory. This theory works on the premise that human experience is understood by the interpretation put on it by the people who are living the experience (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). The interpretation is essential because it is the conceptual paradigm that guides human behavior based on the meaning assigned to prior experience in similar situations. For example, a woman working on the factory floor during World War II who

can visualize herself as a soldier on the front lines is more likely to give an extra effort in her work than someone who only sees the day-to-day drudgery.

My personal shorthand while working on this case study was the symbol of a sponge. While listening to answers to interview questions and doing classroom observations, I strove to be quiet and unobtrusive like a sponge while soaking up the views expressed and the interactions witnessed. The concept of researcher-as-instrument suggested that soaking up the details like a sponge, and then giving back the story of the school was an appropriate symbol of my experience. Teachers' perceptions of classroom management techniques came from experiencing the differences between the contexts of a mainstream classroom and a classroom in an alternative school.

Preliminary Work

In preparation for this study, I conducted a small pilot study to examine the efficacy of this method. A semi-structured interview protocol was developed (see Appendix A) and one participant was interviewed in order to investigate an alternative school teacher's attitudes and experiences in working in an alternative school environment. The interview took two hours, using the participant's free time or planning period. A classroom observation was conducted in order to observe the teacher's techniques for dealing with interpersonal and intrapersonal conflicts. The classroom observations lasted four hours across two different school days.

From the broad themes described in the literature review, I hypothesized that teachers in an alternative school have carefully considered methods for dealing with conflicts and possibly delicate situations in teacher-teacher, teacher-student, and student-student interactions. It was also hypothesized that teachers in alternative schools strive to create a classroom climate that encourages and supports student learning and that may be more flexible and creative than

classrooms in mainstream schools. The information gathered in the pilot study lent evidence to support these hypotheses, as well as suggesting other issues to examine in the course of the study.

For this pilot study, the alternative school was housed in a small building approximately half-way between the two home schools that it served. Classes were conducted in three classrooms, each equipped with computers and a telephone as well as the traditional chairs, desks, bookcases, and chalkboards. The classes were small; there were a total of 19 students attending this school. There was a separate lunchroom and lunch was a casual affair, with lunch either shipped from one of the home schools or brought from home. The two teachers and one aide who made up the school's instructional staff (there is a school secretary and director in the administration office) ate with the students and maintained the informal calm and quiet that was part of the school climate.

Classrooms were quiet, but with a buzz of conversation as students worked on assignments, asked questions, and discussed plans with teachers and peers. For the pilot study, the teacher who volunteered to be observed and interviewed perceived herself to be more of a facilitator than an expert purveyor of knowledge, but her students were always aware of who was in charge of the classroom. After interviewing her, I was most impressed that she would much rather discuss her students (e.g., "These guys are great!") than her own experiences and credentials. When asked what happened if one of the students got upset, she replied that the staff strove to give the students what they needed, whether it is privacy to get back into control, a place to blow off steam, or the chance to work through a dilemma on their own.

A main theme that emerged from the pilot study was that this teacher came to teach at this particular school through a series of serendipitous circumstances. She had not consciously

sought out her present position, but she was majoring in health and psychology in college and when it was nearing time to graduate, her advisor pointed out that she could have a teaching credential with just a few more classes. This was what she did and found that she "fell in love with teaching" while teaching sophomore math in a mainstream school. She was encouraged to apply at the alternative school the following year and found the niche where she stated she felt most effective in helping children, teaching math and English to middle and high school students.

Another theme that emerged from the pilot study was that children came to this school because of one, or all, of this educator's "big three A's:" attendance, academics, and attitude. Students may have had trouble with attendance for a variety of reasons, such as medical problems, poor parental supervision, or avoiding academics that they find aversive. If the problem was academics, they may have fallen behind their peers and could not seem to catch up, or they may have been better served by alternative methods of learning that were not available in a mainstream classroom. A poor attitude may have been the result of poor attendance, poor academic performance, or a perception of being bullied at the mainstream school so that coming to the alternative school was one way to find safety while learning. Attitude may also have been affected by poor social skills, poor coping skills, emotional problems, negative school experiences, family or cultural rejection of authority, and viewing education as having little value.

This school focused on the students and their success, but success was defined somewhat differently than it was in the mainstream school. Success may have been measured by increased attendance, remembering to bring an English assignment, or learning to write a good cover letter

for a job application. Social skills were incorporated into all classes, with examples drawn from real life whenever possible.

Teachers who had come and gone in this school seemed to have one thing in common: they were not a good fit for the alternative school environment and they did not stay long. The students are "quick to spot a phony," as noted by the pilot study participant, and these teachers did not last in this environment. When asked what she felt was a symbol of her daily interaction with her students, this teacher replied, "We care about the students and they come to care about us." She went on to describe the day she had to send a student back to the home school because of disruptive behavior and how the other students were concerned that she (the teacher) was upset by the episode. The small class sizes allowed for each teacher to develop a personal relationship with each student and this relationship was a symbol of their daily interactions.

Classroom observation was an important part of the study design because it illustrated the importance of the interactions that came to symbolize the stability the alternative school students found in their environment. In this case, the classroom observation illustrated the teacher's relationships with the students as well as her stated focus that she would not let them fail. The teacher showed a great deal of flexibility in explaining different assignments to different students, while all the time monitoring what other students in the room were doing.

During the interview, the pilot study participant stated that she did not worry about professional development because the teachers at the alternative school had the opportunity to attend all in-services provided by the home schools. She stated that there was a problem finding a substitute in order to attend conferences or meetings on regular school days. Finding someone with the same level of flexibility and commitment to the students is a difficult task. Providing

the students with people who can give them a sense of stability, purpose, and motivation was important to the alternative school educator.

I modified some of the questions on the interview questionnaire based on information gathered in this pilot study. I added a question regarding professional development, and the request for symbols of daily teacher-student interaction was reworded to be more specific.

Data Collection

Participants

I used a purposive sample for this case study of volunteer participants drawn from teachers, administrators, and support staff in an alternative high school in a mid-sized Midwestern city. The inclusion criteria for this study were that the participants were currently working in an alternative school and had some experience in working in a mainstream school. The school administrator was contacted in order to create the pool of possible volunteers, and 20 participants were interviewed from the identified group. Twelve teachers were observed in their individual classrooms, and observations were made during school-wide activities such as Career Day and Field Day. A school administrator, the school outreach worker, the media specialist, the school counselor, two teaching assistants, and a member of the school support staff were interviewed. A description of the study was discussed with prospective participants and informed consent (see Appendices D and E) was obtained prior to beginning the study. No identifying information was used in order to provide the participants with privacy and confidentiality; a numeric code was used for each participant. A separate numeric code was used for each participant's interview protocol, interview diary, and classroom observation guideline sheets and field notes. This code was used to remove any data that might pertain to a participant who chose to withdraw once the study was under way. During the classroom observations, the

research assistants and I maintained a strictly passive stance in order to obtain accurate data and reduce any reactivity to our presence in the classroom.

I obtained data for this study from audio-taped interviews and field notes of observations carried out in the alternative school environment. These interactions took place over a three-week timeframe for each participant and at each school staff member's discretion. Prior to beginning the classroom observations, I provided each class with time to become accustomed to my and the research assistant's presence to help reduce reactivity.

Instruments

Interviews. Interviews were conducted in private with each participant using the semi-structured interview protocol that was developed from the pilot study (see Appendix A for teachers and administrators and Appendix B for school support staff). Each interview lasted approximately one hour. The interviews covered the broad themes of the teacher's teaching philosophy, classroom management, and professional development.

The school administrator was asked the same questions from the interview protocol in order to assess the overall school climate, which was guided by the administrator's perceptions and belief system. The school's outreach worker and school counselor were also interviewed using the teacher interview protocol to investigate similar themes and motivations held by these education professionals. After the pilot study, another semi-structured interview protocol was developed to interview school support staff. The school media specialist, two teaching assistants, and a volunteer from the school support staff were interviewed using the interview protocol in Appendix B in order to assess the support staff's role in the school climate and how staff members saw themselves in that environment.

The questions on the interview protocol were designed to elicit answers to the research questions. The teacher participants were asked to look back on how they decided to enter the teaching profession, think about whether their training influenced them to take their present position, and discuss how they see themselves impacting students' lives and academic successes. The interviews with the school administrator, outreach worker, and school counselor helped answer the research questions regarding how effective the teachers were perceived to be in facilitating students' success and how those successes were defined.

The semi-structured interview format allowed the participants to express their perceptions and the meanings and symbols they assigned those perceptions, including how effective they perceived that they were with their students and how well they fit into the alternative school environment. Symbolic interaction was reflected in the symbol or symbols that each participant chose to represent how they view their place in the school environment and their students' lives. The question regarding professional development was used to elicit information about how the teachers and administrators see their expectations of the future. A copy of the interview protocol was left with each participant so that it could be used as a diary for any thoughts, opinions, or symbols that occurred to the staff member after the initial interview. This diary was to be collected two weeks after the initial interview and used as additional information for the study.

Observations. Observations were done in each classroom. The focus of the observations was on the interactions between teachers, between teachers and administrators, and between teachers and students using the observation guidelines described in Appendix C. In particular, the manner in which the teacher resolved interpersonal conflicts helped answer the research questions. In addition, by observing teachers' daily interactions with students and colleagues, I theorized that common themes would be seen that illustrate teachers' perceptions of

how they symbolized their places in their students' lives. I hypothesized that observing

conversations with students and colleagues would illustrate the teachers' attitudes of how well

they fit in the alternative school environment. I also theorized that the students would react

positively to the school climate created by the alternative school staff and that these positive

reactions would be demonstrated by students' being motivated to learn and co-operating with the

school rules.

Observations were conducted in each teacher participant's classroom for two- to four-

hour blocks of time. At least five observations were done over a two-week period at each

participants' convenience. Although the adults in the classroom were the main focus of the

observations, the students' public classroom behaviors were also observed. During the

classroom observations, I used additional observations by a research assistant in order to enhance

the objectivity and accuracy of the field notes we recorded. We maintained a strictly passive role

during the classroom observations and did not participate in any class activities. We made each

initial classroom observation together, and thereafter, the research assistant made independent

observations that did not necessarily coincide with my scheduled observations.

One research assistant was trained to transcribe the taped interviews. This assistant and I

coded the interview transcriptions, diary entries of the participants, and the field notes from the

classroom observations in order to describe emergent themes found in the research data. The

coding was done by me and two research assistants in anticipation of achieving a high degree of

inter-rater agreement. Random sets of data were chosen for each individual to code. Acceptable

inter-rater agreement was to be reached if 80% of the data was coded with similar themes. The

inter-rater agreement of the coded data was 82%. The research assistants were trained to do the

coding using the field notes from the pilot study as a training tool. Three research assistants also

read the finished results in order to compare their reactions to the finished assessment of the results.

All tapes and other research materials are stored for three years in a locked file cabinet within a locked office, in accordance with the guidelines set down by the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB). Once that time period has passed, all research materials will be destroyed by shredding, as instructed by the IRB.

Researcher-as-instrument. A qualitative case study provided dense data with rich detail in answer to the research questions. The topic of this study was first brought to my attention when I was working on an internship for a counseling psychology master's degree. I had three clients in two different alternative schools. Each client responded to the alternative school environment in individual ways, but I noticed that the faculty and staff of each school created a supportive and stable environment that was different from the school climate I had witnessed while working in mainstream schools.

In qualitative research, the researcher is the main tool of the research. Researcher assumptions and biases are inherent in this type of research. In order to manage expectations of excellence and subjectivity, I used a self-reflective journal, discussed details with a research team, and consultation with my dissertation committee.

Research rigor was addressed by obtaining in-depth data from many participants. Trustworthiness was endorsed by using the data and coding system to describe emergent themes. Dependability was drawn from the dense data obtained over a continuous time period; the classroom observations were done immediately following the faculty and staff interviews. Research assistants also carried out some of the classroom observations in order to increase

triangulation of the observations of the interactions between teachers and students. Research assistants assisted with the coding of the data, as well as reading and giving feedback on the finished product. These data reflected a continuous attendance within the school and my immersion in the environment, which will lend credibility to the results.

The results of this study can only be applied to other alternative schools, but replication of this study should confirm the results. The data gathered for this study were obtained from one alternative high school that served a population of students that is highly transient as students transfer from their home schools and back again. A case study of this type will only generalize to schools that serve similar student populations.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

Results of this study are presented through the filter of the symbols used by the teachers and interpreted using symbolic interaction theory. This dynamic theory uses the symbols as a shorthand way of identifying connections with others. The ways the faculty fit in their students' lives are described in the interviews and observations as the study participants live the experience.

Data Analysis

Data were collected and stored using the QSR-N-6 software system. This software was used to facilitate the systematic analysis of the information gathered by helping to label and sort the data. Using Wolcott's (1994) framework of description, analysis, and interpretation, I will strive to answer the research questions as well as provide an accurate picture of the alternative school and the people in it. The purpose of the study is to increase knowledge and allow readers to make connections that are meaningful by creating a picture of the place, the people, and their experiences.

Data were analyzed using the symbolic interaction theory. This theory works on the premise that human experience is understood by the interpretation put on it by the people who are living the experience (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). The interpretation is essential because it is

the conceptual paradigm that guides human behavior based on the meaning assigned to prior experience in similar situations. For example, perceptions of classroom management techniques can come from experiencing the differences between the contexts of a mainstream classroom and a classroom in an alternative school.

Data collected in the course of this study included field notes and interview transcripts. Diaries were not returned to the researcher as planned, and I was told that the participants either had no more thoughts to share, no time to fill out the forms, or simply forgot the forms once the researcher had left. Data were analyzed by coding the field notes from classroom observations and interview transcripts to obtain themes that describe and illustrate answers to the research questions. A continuous coding method was used to create themes, including codes that overlapped and gave the study a stable framework.

I anticipated that the themes that emerged from the data would illustrate meanings assigned to the symbolic interactions of teachers as they move through their environment in the alternative school and work with students and colleagues. This appeared to be true; each school staff member, 100% of those interviewed used a symbol or mental shorthand that allowed them to perceive how effective they were with their students and how the students responded to the school in general and to each teacher individually. The school-wide symbol of a lighthouse was used by the principal not only as a cohesive, team-building symbol, but as a way for teachers to signal him if he was getting off topic during a meeting and to bring him back to focus on the task at hand. The ways in which teachers identified their effectiveness, such as where they fit in the process of their students' education, are described in the analysis. Reasons for attrition, whether it is to move to another school environment or to leave the teaching profession for another vocation, are also described.

Data Interpretation

Interpretation occurs when the researcher "transcends factual data and cautious analysis and begins to probe into what is to be made of them" (Wolcott, 1994, p. 36). This sounds somewhat mystical, and while it may sound good in the pages of a journal article or textbook, it has proven to be the most difficult part of the entire study. I struggled with how to reconcile going beyond factual data into cautious analysis with the validity and reliability necessary for a solid scientific study. I reached the conclusion that self-reflection, honest discussion with research assistants, and assistance of the dissertation committee were some of the best ways to ensure an honest, valid study that will allow readers to connect with the people described in these pages.

Research Questions Provide a Starting Point

All studies begin with an idea and questions that acts as a road map by which to move through the study. My idea came from a fascination with two alternative schools in which I worked in order to accrue internship hours. The staff and faculty at these schools seemed to have a philosophy toward their students and teaching in general that was different from the attitudes of teachers I had observed in mainstream schools. My research questions were developed from the literature review and the pilot study conducted prior to beginning this case study. Qualitative researchers look at phenomena in a natural setting. Doing this led to the formulation of my first research question: "What are the characteristics and dimensions of alternative schools?" From my observation of the way staff and faculty interacted with students in the alternative schools I worked in for my internship, I developed my second research question: "What are the characteristics and dimensions/traits of teachers in alternative schools?" Questions that arose from the data found in the review of literature on students in alternative schools brought about

the third research question: "How do environmental and teacher characteristics interact and what is the influence of this interaction on teacher retention and student outcomes?" For example, Ruebel et al. (2001) examined one aspect, student engagement that could affect drop-out rates. Using qualitative inquiry, I examined different aspects of teacher-student interaction than could be addressed in a quantitative study. The final research question is: "How do teachers in alternative schools make meaning from daily interactions with students and colleagues, and how do teachers see themselves affecting students' lives?" This question grew out of the pilot study, in which the respondent had difficulty answering questions about her but kept bringing the conversation back to the students and their lives. I had expected information on teacher attrition to flow smoothly from the answers to this question, but this was not where the data led. Furthermore, one of the initial research questions ("How does working in an alternative school affect your professional development?") was dropped from the study when the answers from the pilot study made it clear that teachers in alternative schools are offered the same opportunities for professional development as teachers working in mainstream schools.

Emergent Themes

The themes that emerged from the data of this study were not exactly as I had anticipated. The emergent theme I anticipated would be most important was individualized teacher perceptions of their relationships with their students and the way a teacher felt he or she fit into the alternative school environment. While this theme was important, it was not more important than overall school climate and communication. I found a more holistic view of teaching and the school itself, rather than the expected individualized views. In following the data, themes such as school climate and administrative support emerged as much more important and filled with more detail than I had expected. The teachers did perceive themselves to have important

relationships with their students, but their contribution to the overall school environment and its future was also important to them.

Emergent themes are presented in the format of the symbol, the data, and the interpretation. Each emergent theme is assigned one or more symbols that describe individuals' perceptions of their experience. As described in symbolic interaction theory, the symbol is a type of shorthand by which people can visualize their goodness-of-fit in a given environment. The symbols are taken directly from teacher and staff interviews. The data presented are perceptions and observations gathered from faculty and staff interviews as well as direct observations by the researcher and research assistants. In this way, description and detail can best be used to tell the story. Interpretation of the data as described by Wolcott (1994) is only the beginning of a probe into the "factual data and cautious analysis" (p. 36).

This case study is a description of the school as the case, as opposed to any individual. The emergent themes are introduced in a top-down manner, beginning with overall themes that affect the school as whole down to individual perceptions and individual plans for the future. The overall themes are: physical description of the school, school climate, administrative support, communication, school-wide challenges and future plans. Themes that reflect more individual perceptions include: teacher and staff perceptions and individuals' plans for the future. I expected the theme of teacher attrition to be important, but it was in fact very minor, as only two teachers have left in the school's 13-year history.

Themes that Describe the Whole School

Physical description of the alternative school. The school building housed the alternative school and the offices of the school district's nurses and health care providers.

The symbol. The school had its own informal symbol of a lighthouse. Each staff member had a small lighthouse figurine or picture. This symbol was introduced by the principal at the beginning of the school year to symbolize offering a safe place and bringing the light of education to students.

The data. The school building is a three-story brick structure set back from the city street. There are beautiful mature oak trees in the front lawn and a small parking lot for staff and some of the older students to one side and the rear of the building. Now in its 13th year, it was originally called a learning center in order to give it a more positive connotation than the label "alternative school" often carries. The year after the observations and interviews its name was changed to a high school, but even with a slightly different name, the school will still had the same mission statement: to provide a positive atmosphere for learning. The building has a long history of serving the school community. Built early in the last century, it was originally a middle school. It later housed the school corporation offices until a new building was found downtown for the administration. In 1997, the building was opened as the alternative learning center that it is today. The bottom floor houses the gym, student restrooms, and lunch room. The gym is a typical school gym, with hardwood floors and a set of basketball hoops.

The entrance is manned by officers from the local police force. There is a sign-in book for visitors, but there were no metal detectors and the police officers maintain a positive relationship with the students and staff. They greet staff, students, and visitors as they enter the building. Visitors are asked to sign in a log book at the front door and given directions to the school office on the second floor.

The second floor of the building contained classrooms, the main office, teacher's lounge, and offices for the support staff, principal, outreach worker, school counselor, and school health

specialist. The third floor was occupied by more classrooms, the library, computer lab, art room, and a large double room that houses the Nova Net lab. The Nova Net lab was a computer lab designed for students to do self-paced lessons in order to catch up on credits that they have missed in their home schools. This floor also had restrooms, but they were kept locked and students asked teachers to open the door if they needed to use them. In this way, the teachers closely monitored students' use of their time outside of the classrooms. The third floor also housed two classrooms of middle school students who spend half-days at the school. One teacher had a self-contained class of middle school students in the morning and went to the city's other alternative school for afternoon classes. The other teacher helped high school students with specific subject remediation during the morning and taught a self-contained classroom of different middle school students in the afternoon. Two classes of middle-school-age students were thus offered the benefits of the alternative school environment without having to socialize with students who are older and who may or may not be considered appropriate role models.

The rooms and hallways were spacious, with high ceilings and stairwells located at each end of the halls. The classrooms were large, with high windows that let in plenty of light without being distracting to the classes. Most of the windows had large windowsills that hold a variety of items, including green plants. Fidgety students could be given the tasks of watering and caring for the plants as a way of working off some energy once their class work is completed.

There was no bell system in the building, so teachers were responsible for dismissing classes in time for students to get to their next class. Teachers also stood outside their classroom doors during passing periods. One teacher was known to bellow, "Time for class! Get where you are supposed to be!" which drew laughter and compliance. The principal also had a whistle that he had used as a signal for class to start, but it was very shrill and it was generally agreed among

the staff and students that it was not a good way to signal the beginning and ending of classes through the day.

Passing periods were noisy, busy times, with the talking and laughter that are typical of most high schools. Teachers used the time to observe which students might be having a hard day but not necessarily showing signs in the classroom itself and to watch interactions between students. Students seemed happy to see favorite teachers and spoke and joked with them even if they were not coming to that teacher's class. Students waited for class to start, as the first five to ten minutes of class were used for paperwork that might otherwise have been done during the passing period. Students themselves were often late to class, bringing in tardy slips or passes from other teachers or the office. They were welcomed into the room with no comments made on their tardiness.

As in most schools, the hallways were decorated with posters and plaques. One bulletin board drew my attention. It was full of cut-out stars with students' first names and overall grade point averages on them from the previous grading period. Perfect scores of 4.0 and scores above the 3.5 mark were noted.

Inspirational posters with slogans such as "Never settle for less than your best" and "Believe that life is worth living and your belief will help create that faith" were hung at various points throughout the school building. One poster on the wall near the Nova Net lab noted qualities that employers find important, such as coming to work on time and dressing appropriately for the job. This information may have been particularly relevant for older students who were working in the Nova Net lab to finish their high school credits and move out into the workforce. The walls of the main office were covered with certificates and awards for school excellence. One large board was devoted to positive newspaper articles about the school.

The school principal was very cognizant that a positive reputation is important for the school and worked to bring the school's achievements to the community's attention whenever possible.

   The interpretation. This school could have been housed in any type of building; it was the people on this school's faculty and staff that provided the real structure for the students. Administrators, faculty, and staff provided a stable adult foundation that many students had not found in mainstream schools or at home. One teacher indicated that students knew they could come to her for a loan to get a soda out of the machine. Another reported that kids in her classes knew they can use the phone in her room to make sure they have a ride home without having to go down to the office to use that phone. Teachers' habit of standing outside the classroom door during passing periods was not only intended to discourage noise, but also gave teachers a time to connect with students outside of instructional time. Observing student interactions during the time between classes enabled teachers to foresee possible moods and conflicts that might have been brought into the classroom. One teacher shared that this observation time enabled her to decide ahead of time whether to ignore a behavior or deal with a conflict before it escalated. This increased classroom instruction time and provided structure for students who knew that the adults in this school could be counted on for different kinds of support.

   The students were surrounded with positive messages from the time they arrived until they left. However, inspirational posters would not mean much if the teachers and staff did not also treat the students with respect and a positive manner. Expectations were high in this school, and the results were displayed for all to see: 4.0 grade averages, graduation ceremonies just like those in the mainstream high schools, and events like a Job Fair and a school-wide Earth Day celebration. The principal's main philosophy is to be "firm but fair." This was reflected in how students were treated in this school environment. There may have been speed bumps on the road

to achieving academic success, but the staff helped the students to get up and keep going when they were down. This help may have come in the form of 50¢ for a soda or a listening ear when it is time to move home from a group home. Awareness of each student's background went a long way to helping make small successes happen. More than one teacher indicated that knowledge of a student's home life can give teachers a way to connect with the student. Using this knowledge, the teacher could let the student know that the adults in their lives would be there no matter what went on outside of school. These small successes were expected to lead to larger positive experiences.

The lighthouse was an effective tool used to symbolize the goals of the school as a whole. In offering a safe and positive environment for at-risk students, the school became a beacon of light in an otherwise dark educational landscape. Teachers used the lighthouse symbol to identify as part of a school-wide atmosphere and embraced that ideal. The symbol also had the practical use of signaling the principal to get back on-task during faculty meetings if he somehow went off on a tangent. During one meeting, I observed a teacher at the back of the room raised her lighthouse figurine, the principal noticed her gesture, and went on with the next item on the meeting agenda.

School climate. In this emergent theme, school climate refers to the feel of the school atmosphere. A school's climate may feel warm and welcoming or cold and sterile. The climate can greatly affect how the people within that setting feel about being there and interacting with others in the environment.

The symbol. The climate of the school was described using the symbol of a garden where the faculty planted seeds that may or may not grow. The teacher who supplied this symbol compared students' minds to fertile soil that could produce future productive citizens of

society. As one teacher commented, "I am planting seeds in these students that may or may not come to fruition."

The data. Planting seeds can be exciting. Will the seeds grow? What will the plants look like? Do we have the water, sun, and plant food needed for healthy plants? The faculty at this alternative school planted seeds of knowledge and creativity in the students that produced many expected and unexpected results.

The art teacher described planting seeds that had brought results when she spoke of a student who initially took home the mask he had made in her class when he left the school. One day she found the mask hanging on her classroom doorknob when she arrived at school. She was proud to display it outside her room because she took that action to mean that her class had meant something to that student. Another seed flowered when a student made a beautiful wooden bench on which she used decoupage to decorate it with family pictures. When her mother saw the bench she broke down crying because it reminded her of happier days in their family.

Other seeds were growing when students who may have difficulties getting to school took the initiative to arrange transportation. As bus service was not always available, they needed to use public transportation or ride with friends or family members to get to school. The school administrative assistant stated that there were "always" kids coming into the office to call family members to remind them to pick up the students after school. Likewise, teachers were likely to let students use a few minutes of class time to go to the office or use the teacher's phone to make sure they had a ride. When asked, one of the teachers explained that if the students had that issue settled they were more likely to pay attention in class, and attention in class was

sometimes a hard-won commodity. Ability to understand students' needs and priorities provided necessary warmth and support for the seeds (students) to grow.

Seeds were also nurtured in a remediation class where high school students met in small groups each morning class period to get extra help with high-priority skills such as reading comprehension. The same teacher provided remediation instruction for middle school students during the afternoon class periods. By addressing these needs, the school faculty was able to respond to student challenges.

The lunch room provided students with hot meals for breakfast and lunch. The middle school teacher used breakfast time to assess her students' attitudes for the day as they gathered as a group before going up to their classroom. Her students were usually sent to the alternative school for severe behavior problems. She felt that one of her main goals was to show the students what they need to do in order to be successful in their home schools, such as how to be a successful student and how to learn. She was able to use lunch time as a means of giving informal instruction on social skills. I observed that she was able to model table manners and conversation, such as asking one student about his favorite food on his breakfast tray. She asked one student what he had watched on television the night before and brought the conversation around to one of their class lessons.

The gym was used for the Job Fair, with tables set up for 15 booths of various local organizations to use to attract and inform high school students about possibilities for their futures. Opportunities ranged from various branches of the military to the local cosmetology school. Teachers escorted their classes to the Job Fair and stayed to help ensure the young adults attended to the information available to them. The school climate of support and planting seeds

to grow was addressed by the importance given to the Job Fair and how it could impact students' futures. Opportunities and possibilities available to students once they finish high school was an important seed to plant so that students could imagine that there are other ways to live than their current realities.

The school held a Field Day at a nearby park the week before I began my interviews and observations for this case study. It was used as a field trip for the students and a team building day for the staff. Everyone attended, literally: the faculty, staff, maintenance engineers, and the lunch room ladies went to this picnic and sport day. The only person left at the school was the administrative assistant, who had to answer the phones. The principal noted that it was "a good day" and that everyone participated. He indicated that building rapport with students was considered as important as content knowledge and noted that the faculty and staff took advantage of the day in the park to interact with students in an informal setting and show them that the adults are human and like some of the same things the kids like. Commenting that "we use everything as a teaching moment," the principal shared that the faculty continually focuses on teaching the whole child and not just the student. The principal wanted to prepare the student population for life, not just graduation.

Earth Day was another school-wide event that included everyone. Teachers divided up the students into teams and everyone had a designated task. Some groups went out into nearby neighborhood streets to pick up trash while others were assigned to weed, mulch, and plant new flower beds on the school grounds. Teachers provided positive role models for the students with gentle encouragement and modeling activities such as how to weed a flower bed. Each teacher's personality appeared to dictate how they encouraged the students in the activities. One teacher

was on her knees with a trowel showing her group of students how to plant flowers. Another

teacher showed his group of students how to effectively use a shovel to move a large mound of

manure onto another flower bed. Other teachers led their assigned groups of students into the

neighboring streets to pick up trash. Leading, modeling, and encouraging were the methods

observed to motivate the students to participate. The principal and school outreach worker

moved from group to group taking pictures and offering comments and encouragement to

various groups. Lunch was a picnic with grilled hot dogs and hamburgers, typical picnic side

dishes, and sodas for the student body. The afternoon was a reward for work well done, as

students were allowed free time for chosen, and closely monitored, activities such as movies,

games, and computer time.

The interpretation. The climate of this school was one of positive acceptance. The

faculty and staff combined to create an atmosphere where students were respected as individuals

and strengths were magnified while challenges were honestly met with tolerance, fairness, and

assistance. As one teacher observed, on a day-to-day basis "it is our job to motivate them and

remind them that they can be productive people." She went on to discuss the fact that the faculty

rarely gets to meet with parents, but the kids "can share feelings if they trust you." Another

teacher remarked that the school has "a fantastic staff that gets along very well. Mr. S. [the

principal] can de-escalate a kid and calm him in minutes." This teacher also said that even

though the school may seem to run smoothly, her perception is that the climate is not actually

"…easy-going. All the time you have to be on your toes, listening and watching." When asked

about his teaching philosophy, the principal replied that it is "our responsibility to teach the

whole child as a preparation for life, not just school." He said that teaching in the alternative

school differed in that the staff members deal with difficult situations by "defusing the situation and talking, instead of going straight for suspension." He commented that they could have over 600 suspensions if they stuck to the "old strict rules." Another teacher indicated that her job was "teaching not just school work, but life skills." She went on to say, "We try to teach them [the students] that respect is important, but they don't really understand it. They are very quick to point out adult mistakes."

One teacher compared working in this school to working in a mainstream school, saying, it is "more like family. I feel connected to the staff and students. I was recently in the hospital, and three students brought balloons. That blew me away and brought tears to my eyes." He commented that working here changed on a day-to-day basis. The kids will do group work, but only if the teacher picks the groups. The teacher also noted that the ability to be flexible, but give the kids structure can be a difficult balance to achieve.

The symbol of the garden highlighted the aim to plant seeds of knowledge that may or may not take root; it symbolized the faculty's awareness that every interaction with a student may be a teaching moment when a remark may mean a turning point in a young person's life. However, this is not to imply that typical high school acting-out behaviors were tolerated. Fights and drug use on campus were quickly and quietly dealt with and natural consequences were given as much as possible. As an observer, my experience of immersion in the culture was one of comfort and acceptance. In doing the interviews and observations, I was at the school every day for three weeks. I looked forward to going each day just to see what would happen next.

Administrative support. This theme described how staff and faculty interacted with supervisors and policy makers. Strong support was considered essential in the pilot study and by 100% of those interviewed for this case study.

The symbols. The symbols cited by the faculty and staff to describe administrative support included smooth, polished stones symbolizing the smooth running of the school and a group of faces symbolizing that their work is all about the people. The faculty member who suggested the smooth, polished stones used them in the context of water running over smooth stones in a stream. The staff member who described the group of faces as a way of symbolizing the school administration described the interaction of the faculty and staff working together as a cohesive unit.

The data. As noted by one of the teachers, "No one here hollers. Kids who are having a crisis are given time and space to get themselves together without negative consequences." The current principal was the second one in the school's history and he gave credit to the first principal who occupied his chair for the first five years of the school's life. The first principal began with a small faculty that he thought could function well in an alternative school environment, hand-selecting and inviting people he knew in the mainstream school community, including the school's current administrative assistant. Two of teachers have been here nine and ten years respectively and this was the only school in which they had taught, except for their student teaching.

The current principal had added to and refined the school's faculty and staff. He was the school's staunchest supporter, noting that "teaching the whole child is essential in order to give that child a good start in life." Having worked in mainstream schools, he was an advocate for the alternative school as a valuable place for an at-risk population of students who could not be adequately served in the mainstream school system. Once he understood the purpose of my study, he was very enthusiastic and I am sure responsible for the number and variety of participants I was able to interview. I was hoping for 6-8 participants, but ended up with 20.

Eighteen of the faculty and staff members (90%) made comments about how the principal had positively affected their lives and teaching careers. For example, he offered a job to one staff member even though she did not have all the credentials called for in the job description, expecting her to gain the other credential needed. This task was accomplished as soon as possible.

Time spent with the principal was very positive, and it was easy to see that he was passionate about kids, education, and his school. He encouraged me to write a letter to the editor of the local newspaper about my experiences in the school, which I was happy to do as it did not in any way compromise my study. The principal was open and accessible to his faculty, his students, and the public. His years of experience in life and in various roles in schools had stood him in good stead when it came to choosing and encouraging staff. In 90% of the interviews, I was told "Mr. S. asked me to join the faculty" and "Mr. S. knew I was struggling and he told me XYZ, and it really helped."

It was very apparent that this principal was able to choose capable staff and let them develop their own styles of problem-solving. One teacher told the story of his job interview. He had spoken to the principal about the position but was still undecided as to whether he could be an effective teacher in an alternative setting. The principal asked him to sit in on the interview of another job candidate. This job-seeker answered "no" when asked if all children could be saved. He also expressed other views that appeared to be neither tolerant nor understanding of the at-risk student population. The teacher went on to say that this person's attitude made the "hair stand up on the back of my neck. I took the job because [this] school needed me more than it needed him." Sitting in on that interview helped this teacher decide that he could indeed fit into the alternative school environment, without the principal's saying another word.

The principal's careful selection of faculty and staff had enabled him to trust that each faculty member was an intelligent person who was fully capable of handling situations that may not occur in mainstream schools. He shared that this year has been the first since he took over that he had really been able to allow faculty more flexibility in handling problems as they arise. He reported that he "finally" had the school where he feels it needs to be, so that he is able to be "firm but fair" with students and faculty. He continues to support his staff and the students in his care. When a teacher could not convince a student that he needed to call home to go to the doctor for a swollen wrist, she did not hesitate to ask the principal to come into the classroom to look at the boy's arm. The principal was able to convince the student that it was a serious injury and needed attention. This is one example of how the principal worked seamlessly with his staff to provide the best care for the students. He also made suggestions, such as using a free-standing chalkboard as a classroom divider to alleviate difficulties in one of the middle school classrooms where one group of students distracted another student and prevented him from concentrating on his class work.

Other examples included offering suggestions for classroom management and moving through the student population during passing periods. The principal offered suggestions that empowered teachers to find and develop classroom management skills that worked for them. Moving through the hallways during passing periods lets the faculty and students know that the principal was aware of interactions between students and between student and teachers as well as the general atmosphere of the school.

The interpretation. The administration of the school was aware of what was going on in the school at all times without seeming to micromanage any of the faculty and staff. Frequent faculty meetings offered opportunities for administration-faculty interaction. These faculty

meetings might have been called strictly to pass on information, but they were always an open

forum in which teachers could ask questions. The principal maintained an open-door policy and

was always available to his faculty and staff. He also commanded respect and compliance from

his staff that was amazing to observe, but it was not something that he acknowledged or of which

he even seemed aware. Before beginning my study I attended a faculty meeting where I was

introduced, my case study described, and volunteers were requested. He asked for people to

volunteer to do interviews and allowed me to observe in their classrooms and the majority of

people complied.

I was fortunate to be able to witness Teacher Appreciation Week while in the school

culture. The principal and administrative team often used informal support for the faculty and

staff, and seemed to know when an individual needed an encouraging word or was in need of

advice.

The outreach worker and the school counselor also had open-door policies that provided

various avenues of support for faculty and staff, as well as creative ways of dealing with

discipline problems. The administration supported the teachers without getting in the way of

their individuality. The symbol of the group of faces of the people of this school represented the

very real personal experience of how the faculty connected with the administration and the

students.

School-wide challenges. School-wide challenges were situations seen across several

settings within the school. These challenges were not unique to one teacher, classroom, or grade

level, and the school faculty and staff had to meet them on a daily basis.

The symbols. One faculty member indicated that a symbol of fire meant a sense of

urgency to work with the students for as long as they are at the school. Another faculty member

used the symbol of slaves in shackles to show that the students were fighting to break free from the circumstances that may hold them down.

   The data. There were many challenges in the daily business of this school. Students were highly transient and may or may not choose to return to home schools once they experience success in the alternative school. I overheard one student telling another that he had attended every school in the county, but kept coming back here [the alternative school] because he had only found success in this school.

   Attendance was a huge issue at this school. One teacher described the "three-day-a-week plan" for students who consistent missed Mondays and Wednesdays or Mondays and Fridays and may or may not consistently attend school the other days of the week. Another teacher had a theory that some students came in the middle of the week because that was when life at home or out on the streets was boring because all of their friends were in school and there was no one with whom to socialize. The school's administrative assistant stated that attendance is a problem because not everyone is on the same class schedule; some students were only required to come to school half-days, while others were supposed to be there every day all day, and it became very complicated to keep track of everyone. For this reason, the school counselor did school-wide announcements at lunch time to reach the majority of the students. She made the typical school announcements but referred to the school as a family. One announcement made during the observation period had to do with free summer school sessions. The counselor announced that the time was running out to sign up for summer school for everyone in the "School Family." She stated that some people might not like the family reference, but she felt that the school atmosphere gave the students structure that they often did not get from their families. She stated that school may be the only place where students had people who care enough to tell them "no"

and taught them acceptable replacements for outrageous behaviors. For example, she was quite clear that students could not use foul language at school even if parents allowed it at home.

The interpretation. The symbol of fire effectively described the sense of urgency to be as productive as possible with the students for the short time the teachers may have them. It is a very real concern for the faculty in this alternative setting that many of the students are approaching the age when they can drop out of school entirely. The symbol of breaking free of chains holding them down illustrated that a majority of students had a chaotic family life. The symbol of chains could also symbolize that sending students back to their home school may be counter-productive, as the students were allowed to slide back into bad habits and interact with peers who were bad influences. In addition, these students did not receive the same level of support in a mainstream school. Both the outreach worker and the school counselor spoke about the difficulty some students found once they went back to their home schools. Classes were much larger and there was not enough staff to give students individual attention like they can find in the alternative school setting. One teacher's use of the fire symbol reflected that individual's feelings of urgency in teaching these students "when you have them in the classroom," as there was no time to waste. Making time with the students count was how this educator saw himself fitting into his students' lives.

School-wide obstacles. The alternative school held a unique place in the community and the county school system. Teaching an at-risk population of students came with its own set of obstacles not dealt with in mainstream schools.

The symbol. The lighthouse symbolized hope as well as the presence of obstacles and danger. The faculty and staff of the school were aware that public perception and misconception were huge obstacles to operating a successful school.

The data. One of the largest obstacles faced by the faculty and staff of the alternative

school was the negative community attitude toward the school and its students. Teaching

colleagues as well as people outside the education community seemed to feel that teaching in the

alternative school was one step above trying to teach hardened criminals. When asked about the

most common reaction when she told people where she worked, the school's counselor replied

 that people automatically assumed that "we work with bad kids, even though the students are

here for many different reasons." One teacher commented that people "cringe" when they

learned where he worked. More than one teacher reported that after telling people where they

worked, they were met with either questions about violence in the school or expressions of

sympathy that they "had" to teach this student population. As noted in the literature, people

without a good sense of the goals of an alternative school misunderstood and were often

frightened by the student population. Working to correct that perception was one of the goals of

the school faculty and staff. The principal was very aware that any positive publicity can only

help his school and the students. Events like Earth Day were used to go into the community and

help raise awareness of the school population.

Student enrollment and inconsistent attendance were continuing challenges for the

school. As one staff member commented, "There are only four weeks left of school and we are

still registering students." The perception was that the home schools continue to send students

with behavior problems to the alternative school in order to have them off their attendance rolls

and become "someone else's problem." Students who were having problems in their home

schools often tried to avoid their problems with inconsistent school attendance, and this habit

came with them to the alternative school. The consequences of these absences included

difficulty completing their work and earning the credits that were necessary for them to graduate.

Some challenges common in mainstream schools were treated with the same zero tolerance at the alternative school. Possession of weapons or drugs met with immediate and severe consequences of suspension or expulsion. During my observations, these occasions were viewed in a matter-of-fact manner and the class moved on. When a teacher asked a class where one student was and if he had been seen that day, the students replied that he had been suspended for some infraction and the matter was dropped with no further discussion.

Teachers spoke of classroom management and the difficulty of setting the rules and then enforcing them when circumstances call for a "bending" of the rules that had to be weighed against the possibility of showing favoritism. Long-term goals included helping the students return to their home schools if that was what they wanted, and teachers focused on behaviors that needed to be changed for the students to be successful in the home school. Cursing and acting-out behaviors were addressed as they occurred, and even if the student was sent to the office, he or she was given the opportunity to understand exactly what was unacceptable about the behavior and a chance to apologize. Cursing was often a behavior that caused a student to get into trouble, as a student would get involved in a discussion, get excited about a topic, and use offensive language without seeming to realize it was inappropriate in the school environment.

Teachers reported that one of the hardest things to accept was student drug use. One teacher shared, "When a child is on drugs, you are not teaching the same person." Teachers expressed feelings of frustration and inadequacy as they watched and waited for students to quit their drug use and again become the student that the teachers recognized and can teach. Other self-destructive behaviors, such as unprotected sex, were painful for teachers to be aware of, and unable to do anything to change.

Other obstacles and challenges for faculty and staff included overwhelming amounts of

paperwork and sometimes feeling that there was little time and lots of work. The school

counselor indicated that practicing self-care and coming to terms with the fact that the paperwork

will be there the next day were concepts that were hard for teachers to accept.

The teachers in charge of the Nova Net computer lab spoke of frustrations in having

students come in at the end of the school year with little time to complete work toward missing

credits. It was also frustrating when the younger students were assigned to the self-paced

computer lab and did not have the self-discipline needed to work through the lessons with little

or no supervision.

Materials and extra-curricular activities were in short supply at the school. Textbooks

had to stay in each classroom, as there were not enough for each student to take home, especially

considering the fact that a textbook could go home with a student who may or may not return to

school in the near future. The faculty also wanted to see more programs for students such as

music and sports that might encourage students to come to school more regularly.

The interpretation. Much like the mind-set that helped teachers see the strengths and

possibilities in their students, the faculty and staff of this school saw obstacles as opportunities,

and challenges as chances to make changes for the better in the lives of their students. Teachers

spoke about talking to teaching colleagues about successful lesson plans, and the principal

worked to present positive stories for the local newspaper. These were only some of the ways

that public perceptions of the alternative school can be changed. In viewing the school as a

single entity, it became easy to see that the success of one child increases the chance of success

for all. The lighthouse symbol illuminated the obstacles so that they could successfully be

navigated. The lighthouse sheds light on the danger so that it could be not only avoided, but overcome.

Communication. Communication was a large theme that emerged from the data. The days of the teacher being isolated in his or her classroom are gone. Collaboration and cooperation guide the mind-set of the alternative school setting. Sharing of ideas and experience led one participant to describe working here as working with "the best of the best."

The symbol. The symbol used was of a group that can pull together, work together, and all get along as cohesive unit. Eight individuals (40%) supplied symbols that described the cohesion necessary for an alternative school to be effective in guiding students to academic success.

The data. Communication is considered crucial in the school. Clear and concise communication between faculty and staff and between teachers and students was one of the hallmarks of the school climate. Students were shown that there were no "magic formulas" to become a successful student, but that persistence and the ability to ask for help when needed could make a huge difference in academic and social success. The two middle school teachers were especially attuned to the goals of teaching their students how to be successful students and orienting them to a school atmosphere. The students came to this school at different academic levels, and when absenteeism was such an issue, it became difficult to keep even a small class of 10-12 students on a consistent learning schedule. To complicate matters, students often came to this school with a defensive attitude that made it hard for them to admit that they needed help.

One teacher described how students, both male and female, often started at the school with an attitude of trying to show how tough they are, when they were "actually scared little kids." The teacher went on to say that when kids started at the alternative school "it can be

amazing to watch. They get defensive on the first day to save face, but then calm down." The school outreach worker attributed the need to recognize and fit into the school's "pecking order" as a way of recognizing that everyone is in the "same boat" when it came to attending the alternative school. The students may have been told often that they are stupid and cannot learn, or they may demonstrate apathy when they were actually feeling defeated. The teachers have become very adept at understanding both the verbal and non-verbal communication of their students, often learning more from the non-verbal body language than from anything the student shared verbally. Observations showed that teachers paid close attention to students' posture and facial expressions as they entered a classroom. Teachers might not know the particulars of specific student conversations, but they were aware of the tone of voice and any gestures students were using as they came into a room. One teacher indicated that by being aware of the individual students' moods as well as the class' overall climate, she could tell whether she could start right in with her lesson plan or if she needed to "take a slight detour" before getting started. She reported that experience had shown her that she was often able to defuse an argument before it escalated to the point that someone had to be sent out of the classroom. As another teacher observed, "Prevention is much easier to deal with and ultimately saves the class time, than stopping instruction to deal with a fight."

Teachers actively listened to their students and understood that discussion was important and that open discussion with little direct intervention from adults was likely to lead students to that "AHA!" moment. Teachers strove to make positive interactions with students outnumber negative interactions, providing positive feedback whenever possible. They also understood that handling situations immediately and not letting misperceptions linger was the best way to teach students who may not be in class the next day. One teacher reported that it seemed important to

teach these students life skills and that it was all right if the students "don't know it all." It was also important to let the students know that teachers do not always know it all either, but are willing to learn. Teachers used Socratic questioning to increase students' feelings of efficacy, leading them to the answers so that they don't feel that teachers were there to pour knowledge into their minds, "telling them what to do."

Students who exhibited negative behaviors were dealt with in a matter-of-fact manner, told that if they did not want to do the work or continued with acting-out behavior they were welcome to go to the office, where they could meet with the school's outreach worker. The outreach worker served as the school's point of contact for community connections, and also served as the school's disciplinarian, administering suspensions and other disciplinary measures. During observation, the teacher's matter-of-fact statement that the student could change the behavior or leave the classroom was often enough to let the student know that he had the teacher's attention and changed the challenging behavior. In three weeks of observations, students were observed to take their negative behaviors to the next level by leaving the classroom three times. In two of the three instances, the student was allowed to come back to class once he or she had calmed down.

The interpretation. Positive and student-centered teaching philosophies were advocated and supported by the school's administrative team. Putting students first was always the main goal of any student interaction, whether it was instructional or disciplinary. Students were encouraged to take responsibility for their actions and to accept the consequences of those actions. They were taught not only to apologize for disrespectful remarks to a teacher, but also why it is important to apologize and show respect for authority figures. Teaching such life skill lessons reflected the holistic approach by which the alternative school excelled. Furthermore,

frequent staff meetings and announcements in staff mailboxes kept the faculty and staff up-to-date on professional development opportunities and other happenings in the school district. The principal also brought in professional development workshops on important issues about which all of the staff needed training, such as child abuse reporting guidelines. Guest speakers for students, as well as faculty and staff, were an important part of the curriculum.

Themes that Describe Individual Perceptions

Teacher perceptions of goodness-of-fit. Individuals perceived how comfortable they feel, how they fit in any given situation or environment. The level of individual effectiveness is determined by how well individuals think they fit. Perceptions of how well teachers believe they can connect with an at-risk population of students will affect how well they can teach those children. Educators who are not prepared to teach with flexibility may not feel comfortable in an alternative school setting.

The symbols. The symbols of hope, heart, love, and a fountain were used to illustrate the faculty and staff members' great expectations for a positive future for their students. The symbol of jewels represented that both the students and the school itself were rare and valuable.

The data. The faculty and staff considered working in this school to be one of the hardest things they had ever done. The majority (80%) spoke of the easy-going, laid back, respectful environment encouraged by the principal and administrative team that translated to supporting the students without getting upset about mistakes they made. The faculty reported working at the school as a learning experience that involved an "incredible staff" who were the "best of the best" that made working as a team a great job. They acknowledged that even if they had reservations about coming to work with this particular student population, they soon discovered that this alternative learning center is one of a kind and a "hidden gem."

The majority of the staff (90%) stated that although this job came with high expectations and high commitment, they had learned to cope with humor and took a more holistic view of the students than they felt was prevalent in mainstream schools. A holistic viewpoint referred to the concept of teaching the whole person, not just subject content. Students were explicitly instructed in social skills, conflict resolution, and the skills needed to get and keep a job. Faculty and staff of the alternative school felt that because teachers in mainstream schools did not deal so much with an at-risk population of students, they could afford to concentrate on teaching their subject areas.

Teachers and staff in the alternative school had found that important skills included being able to actively listen to a student, to understand the student's nonverbal communication, and to redirect negative behaviors before they get out of hand. They have learned the importance of being able to "choose your battles," or ignore a behavior in order to gain compliance on a more important issue, is paramount in classroom management. They spoke of small class size that allowed them to be able to really get to know their students in order to empower them for success. One of the middle school teachers was able to use the gym as a reward for getting work done and to take a break from class time when her students were having a difficult day. This flexibility was not available in a mainstream school.

Empathizing with students without enabling destructive behaviors was often a difficult line to walk. The school counselor spoke of the necessity of providing not only students but faculty and staff with a safe place in which to vent frustrations. While noting that too much "venting can be toxic," she reported that moving the person on to the problem-solving paradigm was easier once they have been able to talk out the problem. Faculty noted that being able to teach "what you love" with patience and creativity was true flexibility.

While having to deal with paperwork and meetings may be frustrating, the faculty in this school were also able to be creative. The geography and government teacher created a wonderful way for students to understand the court system. He staged a mock trial and all of the students in the class participated in the roles of the judge, jurors, attorneys, and defendant. The school's security officer was invited to bring along his handcuffs to cuff and "take away" the guilty party. The mock trial was recorded on video and attended by all of the students, as well as some students from the classroom next door. The teacher shared that he brought in his graduation gown for the judge's robe, took some photos for the "evidence," and coached the professionals who played the roles of the lawyers and judge. This mock trial provided not only a creative activity for learning, but also impetus for increased attendance. This teacher made it clear that students who wanted to participate had to attend class in order to be ready for the trial. The teacher had such great success with this activity the students asked for, and were given, a chance to participate in another mock trial.

Another teacher encouraged community service projects for her class. They were assigned "reading buddies" and met with elementary school students once a week to read together. They planned and carried out an ice cream party with the younger students as an end-of-school celebration. This class also had a campaign to collect stuffed animals to give to the local social services agency for hurt and abused children. The teacher stated that this activity helped her students see that other kids also have tough life situations and that they can help. She shared that both programs were ways to encourage her students to have consistent school attendance, as she told them that if they miss school, their reading buddy would be disappointed.

The interpretation. The faculty viewed the students as having capabilities that not many other adults had seen. The faculty of this school knew how to "be in the moment" to make

learning relevant and make classroom activities real learning experiences. Role play of a court case or reading to a small child brought learning about life into the classroom. Being "in the moment" might involve the flexibility and awareness to throw out a lesson plan on the spot and come up with something else that the students can relate to, or using a discussion that the students are having to create a lesson.

The faculty and staff of this school taught with their hearts and hoped to share their knowledge of life, not just content area, with their students every day. Like a fountain, they tried to show the students that hard work, the machinery of the fountain, could result in beautiful results. Like a jewel, the school was a bright spot in the middle of this mid-sized city and the students were viewed as valuable.

Teacher perceptions of how they fit in students' lives. Teacher perceptions of how they fit into their students' lives can greatly affect their feelings of comfort of fit in the school, the effectiveness of their teaching, and their frustration from being unable to connect with a student. Teachers who labored under the idea that they must connect with every student were bound to feel frustrated. Teachers who have learned that they can connect with John and Bill even if they cannot connect with Sam were better able to handle frustration. In addition, teachers who realized that they are in the school not to be friends with their students but to offer a stable adult influence appeared to be better able to accept the students as individuals.

The symbol. The symbol of fireworks illustrated a beautiful explosion of knowledge. Like the colorful displays on the Fourth of July, these fireworks can come with loud noise and may not always follow the plan.

The data. When asked what they felt were the main reasons the students respond to learning in the alternative school, teachers spoke of being personable in order to keep students'

attention and loving the moment when they knew the student "got it," often referred to as the "AHA! moment." One teacher, who had come to the school after being an instructor at the local university, explained that his goal in the classroom was to go from being "the sage on the stage to the guide on the side." In this way, he knew that his students have moved from teacher-directed instruction to more self-directed learning, which bodes well for their futures.

Personal attributes described by the teachers included excitement to share knowledge, the need to be genuine, and knowing that they were important to these kids. The abilities to respect students and provide positive role models were counted among the most important attributes for teachers in the alternative school. They also spoke of the importance of having the self-knowledge to know that teaching in this type of school was not for every teacher. Not every teacher was going to be comfortable with the flexibility needed to go from one plan to another with little down time to prepare. The realization that they cannot necessarily connect with every student was also important to these teachers. Pointing out that not everyone's personality was a good fit; one teacher noted that "even if I can't reach a certain student, I trust that Mr. A or Mrs. B will make that connection." Another teacher stated that if an adult gets wrapped up in trying to be liked by every student, they lose their credibility with the kids: "They are quick to spot a phony." It was deemed more important to be one's true self and trust that one can help when and how one was able to help. Understanding that there were some students who did not connect with any adult in the school can be a difficult for these dedicated educators, but they had learned to celebrate their successes and quietly mourn the "ones who got away."

The interpretation. The old adage "those who can't, teach" may at first glance seem true, but my contention was that while everyone can be a teacher, not everyone is a good, effective teacher. The level of self-knowledge for the teachers in this school was very high. Far

from being perfect, these educators were acutely aware of their strengths and short-comings.

One of their main strengths was in realizing that no one person could do it all. Knowing their

strengths and using them to the best of their abilities went a long way to helping create an

atmosphere that provided students with help and support without sinking into a quagmire of

feeling sorry for the tough breaks the students experienced outside the school. The

administration provided a respectful team approach in which the faculty and staff felt supported

and that their opinions mattered, which easily transferred to individual teachers' classroom

management. Teachers felt respected and so were able to respect their students. The fireworks

of the "AHA! moment", as noted by one teacher, was cherished by each and every one.

An experienced teacher's perception of a new setting. Going to the circus can be

exciting, frightening, exhilarating, distracting, and downright fun. A teacher with over 20 years

of experience used the symbol of a circus tent as her shorthand way of describing working in an

alternative school. She compared the circus tent to her classroom and to the school as a whole.

It was a whole new take on an environment where she had lived and worked all of her adult life.

The symbol. The symbol of a circus tent illustrated that there may be a lot going on, but

"you have to take time to laugh." A sense of humor was essential to successfully connecting

with an at-risk population of students. Humor was an important tool in teaching the students not

to take themselves too seriously and that we all make mistakes. A concept that was hard for

most of the students to learn was that everyone can learn from mistakes and move on with life.

A small mistake the first hour of the day did not have to mean that the rest of the day is a wreck.

The data. One teacher described her personal experience of putting in her retirement

papers, but was reconsidering that decision because this year had "recharged my batteries." She

stated that working in a mainstream high school for over 25 years had been rewarding, but she no longer felt challenged. She was offered a position at this school by the principal and this was her first year here. She admitted that it had been one of the toughest years of her career since her first year of teaching. Her students had really challenged her classroom management skills, but about the time she was ready to give up (about three months into the first semester), the students decided to accept her and there were no longer problems with classroom management. She stated that when she had told the class that she was considering leaving because she was so discouraged by their behavior, the students seemed genuinely surprised. She had had no problems in her classes in the mainstream school because she had established a reputation as a tough but fair teacher in the school and no one challenged that perception. In this school, she was starting over from scratch and the students had unconsciously pushed the limits with her to see how far they could go. She stated that once that hurdle was crossed, it truly became "the toughest job I have ever loved."

The interpretation. This teacher expressed a joy and connection with her students that was difficult to achieve and more appreciated because of that struggle. She looked forward to coming to work, a feeling that had been lacking for some time when she was teaching in the mainstream school. She viewed this new setting as a busy place with new challenges every day and indicated that her sense of humor was an essential tool in her work educating her students.

Teacher attrition. Teacher attrition refers to educators leaving a particular department, school, or the teaching profession altogether for another profession. This theme was expected to be significant in this case study, but the data did not support that assumption.

The symbol. The lighthouse was a symbol for showing teachers whether an alternative school setting was the place for them to feel a goodness-of-fit in a demanding profession. The light can show them whether they should stay or move on to other opportunities.

The data. Teacher attrition at this school was very low, and not one of the major emergent themes as anticipated. In the 13 years of the school's history, one teacher left because her husband got a new job in another state. Another teacher left because his master's degree was in audio-visual technology and he had the opportunity to get a job in his chosen field.

In a profession more than 25% of teachers leave in the first three years (McKenzie & Santiago, 2005), this is an impressive record. In this school, teachers were invited by the principal and given the tools they needed to fill the opening they were hired to fill. One teacher had a math certification, but not the science certification needed for the job. She was given the opportunity to earn that certification while teaching in the school. Another teacher stated that she "knew she had to teach here" and argued with her student-teaching supervisor until she was allowed to come to the school. She stated that her experiences during adolescence had helped her empathize with her students. The school's principal was quite candid in speaking about the formation of his school staff. He spoke of being very aware of what was going on with his staff and working to make it a cohesive team of which he was proud. When interviewing new teachers, he was very careful to check for attitudes of candidates and how they viewed the alternative school student population. One prospective candidate told him he would come into the classroom and anticipate being able to "fix these kids." Another candidate was offered the job.

The interpretation. A lighthouse cast its light on everyone in its immediate vicinity, whether they were aware that they need its help or not. Faculty in an alternative school must

recognize and use the flexibility and creativity available to them in that setting. This same flexibility translated into the careful screening and hiring practices of the administration. These administrators had created an effective educational team that worked as one entity. A strong sense of self-awareness was evident in interviews with the faculty. Three different teachers (17%) commented on the need to be aware that even if he or she cannot form a relationship with a student, some other faculty member may be able to. Awareness of personal strengths and weaknesses formed a strong foundation that discouraged attrition in this alternative school. The ability to know what can motivate the students was especially essential. In particular, the knowledge that tangible rewards such as candy and chips were as motivating for these students as for younger children was valuable for the teachers.

The future. The future emerged as a theme as the data was collected and analyzed. Like all schools, the alternative school was a dynamic entity that can use new ideas and technology to move into the twenty-first century.

The symbol. The symbol of evolution illustrated that the more things changed, the more they stayed the same. The school as a whole and the faculty as individuals were cognizant that as they prepared their students for the future, it was essential to also plan for their own futures.

The data. The principal was supportive of his staff's future plans. One of the teachers had completed coursework for her administrative license and was the principal designate when the principal had to be away from the building. Another teacher was just completing his internship for his administrative license and was actively using lessons he had learned from working under his principal in his classroom and in planning for the future.

This support easily translated to faculty support of the students. Two of the teachers spoke of the need to be cautious with praise; it could become very easy to give out grades and

privileges because teachers felt sorry for the students' home situations, not because they were earned. More than one teacher commented that some students had a hard time accepting earned praise for accomplishments but would expect things they had not earned, such as free time or tangible rewards of candy or chips.

Teachers spoke of developing a reward system that is dependent on students' school attendance as a way of getting them to come to school on a regular basis. The longer the students had unbroken attendance, the bigger the prize, such as chips or candy bars for three days' attendance, moving up to fast food value meals or pizza parties for multiple weeks of attendance. One teacher shared her plan for writing grants to help cover the cost of such rewards for next year, as it became quite expensive to pay for these treats out of her own pocket. Teachers reported that these things can become expensive but were worth it as they tried to find creative ways in which students can be set up for success. This seemed especially important to these teachers because they knew that so often these students were set up for failure in other schools, lost in huge classes where they were not well known by the faculty and afraid to ask for help for various reasons.

Like any living entity, the faculty and staff of the alternative school moved toward the future with plans and desires they wanted to see come to fruition. As noted, two members of the staff had earned administrative licensure with the idea of having their own schools someday. One of the teacher aides was working toward her teaching degree and hoped to work in the alternative school when she was ready. One of the teachers was working past retirement age, stating that the work she had done in this school had given her "a second wind."

Teachers also looked for creative ways to bring learning to their students. One teacher wanted a 220-volt electric line run into her room so that she could bring in a donated stove to

teach her students to use fractions in recipes. The art teacher was considering going back to school to get a master's degree in art therapy. She stated that the students in her classes show her so many emotions through their art that she wanted to be better able to help them express themselves as one way to grow and mature.

The school counselor would like to get some assistance with all of her paperwork, "I hate the state's high-stakes test!" so that she could do some group therapy and better address some of the students' mental health issues, such as anger management and effective coping strategies. One of the teachers planned to write a book of creative classroom interventions. Another teacher looked forward to offering an introductory Spanish class next year, as teaching the language was one of her passions.

The school's administration also had plans for the future, including funding for better transportation for students and developing a music program and an intramural sports program. The principal also shared that he planned to have a common planning period for teachers next year in order to further increase teamwork and cohesion. He stated that the first half hour of the day would be a good time for it, so that younger teachers could benefit from the wisdom of teachers who had more experience in handling challenging classroom situations. Teachers' years of experience ran the spectrum of finishing their first year to 28 years of teaching, so time together to share experience was considered a valuable resource for the school.

The common denominator in all of these plans was that they were aimed at helping students. Writing a book may be a way to make money, but it was also focused on "sharing the wealth" by letting teachers in other settings know what can work with challenging classes and how to keep students' attention long enough to teach them something. Using a stove to teach fractions was a practical way of teaching students math concepts and also a way of showing

students that what they learned in school can apply to everyday life. Some of the students lived

independently or took care of themselves because of inadequate parenting in their homes.

Teaching them to cook was a way to teach fractions and measurement and also show them other,

possibly more healthy, options for eating other than fast food.

The interpretation. This faculty understood that it was important to stay flexible and

motivated. The student population required teachers who can engage them and will not allow

stagnation. It was imperative that the school evolved in order to continue to effectively serve the

alternative student population. As noted in other emergent themes, the teachers in the alternative

school were flexible and creative in order to teach the at-risk population. They were encouraged

to develop ideas that engaged the students in a holistic manner. As the principal noted, the

school as a whole had the mission to educate the whole person and prepare students for life after

their school career is completed.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

Not everyone should be a teacher, and not every teacher can teach such a challenging student population. What keeps this faculty and staff coming back day after day to students who may or may not appreciate what they are trying to do? Teachers in the alternative school were patient and kind without giving unearned rewards. The school faculty and staff strove to give students the tools they need in life rather than just rote answers to academic questions. One teacher used the symbol of gardening to describe how she saw herself fitting into her students' lives and making a difference, stating that she was "planting seeds" that may or may not mature. In that way, she could make sense of the fact that she might not get through to each and every student who comes through her class. Teachers in the alternative school are regular people with human frailties, but they also have a high degree of self-knowledge and an understanding that respect for individual students was more important than trying to spoon-feed them knowledge. The school's mission statement included the premise that the school staff will "model and teach the value of respecting individual differences and diversity in the community." The school's mission was to provide students with the chance to make choices in their academic careers and in life. The belief of the administrators, faculty, and staff that everyone can learn fuels this mission to make students successful and productive citizens.

Culture Is Symbolic

In a recent presentation to educators in Jefferson Parish, Louisiana, on cultural diversity and sensitivity, Cheng (2010) described culture as symbolic and dynamic, defining it as "behaviors that are shared by a group of individuals" (p. 14). Cheng further stated that people "live in a world of symbols. Members of a given culture share those symbols, which may have a profound impact on behavior" (p.14). Symbols that are important to one group may not be meaningful and obvious for other groups.

The symbols that were used in this case study served as shorthand descriptions of the behaviors of the faculty, staff, and students in the alternative school. It was not a coincidence that the principal and administrators used the symbol of a lighthouse as part of their team-building effort. This symbol illustrated a way of thinking that the faculty and staff shared and described a unified philosophy of reaching out with hope and light to children who had not before experienced such support. Using this symbol as a school-wide icon, the faculty and staff created their own culture, and the symbol had meaning for them that might not be meaningful to individuals outside the group (Cheng, 2010).

The main principle of symbolic interaction theory is that symbols describe human beings' immersion and goodness-of-fit in their environment. The human experience of the alternative school environment provided the details that formed this case study, a snapshot of life in a school that strives to reach an at-risk population of students. The symbols in this case study shared the characteristics of being positive, supportive, and easily called to mind. Near the end of each interview, the participants were asked to describe a symbol that illustrated their perception of their life in the alternative school. At this point in the interview, the participant had some level of comfort with the interviewer, an idea of what the case study was about, and familiarity with

the types of questions being asked; no one had difficulty supplying a symbol that described how he or she fit in the alternative school environment. According to Cheng (2010), these symbols might not be meaningful to people outside the alternative school. That premise may help explain the negative connotations that alternative schools bring to mind in the general public. People who have had no personal interaction with students in alternative schools would probably have difficulty mentally placing themselves in that environment, and the symbols would not have the same meaning to them.

Emergent Themes Lead to Questions Answered

Themes Describing the School as a Whole

Physical description of the school. The road map of my research questions, combined with the theory of symbolic interactionism, has brought me to a destination that was not totally unexpected, but had some surprises along the way. The first theme, "physical description of the alternative school," used the symbol of the lighthouse to illustrate that the building was a place of safety and light that had been adapted to the needs of an at-risk student population. Space is utilized for maximum effect with great flexibility. The lighthouse symbol helped pull the faculty and staff together into an entity that could best serve students who were failing in mainstream schools.

School climate. The second emergent theme, "school climate," was somewhat unexpected, but came out in deep, rich detail through the perceptions of individual teachers, staff, and administrators. The symbol of a garden illustrated this theme. The teacher who supplied the symbol pictured herself as a gardener who was planting seeds of knowledge in the fertile soil of her students' minds. The teacher was able to verbalize that in that way, she was able to trust that even if she didn't see immediate results in her teaching, she knew it was

important to be a good role model "because you never know who is watching." School-wide events such as Field Day and Earth Day were considered "time spent here [that] may be beneficial in the future."

Administrative support. The third emergent theme, "administrative support," was examined when faculty used the symbol of smooth polished stones to illustrate the smooth running of the school and the symbol of a group of faces represented the concept that it is "all about the people." The variety of subjects who were willing to participate was unexpected; interviews were gathered from administrators, student aides studying to be teachers, teachers with 9-10 years of experience, and even one teacher who had 25 years of experience, but was in her first year in the alternative school setting.

School-wide challenges and obstacles. The next emergent theme, "school-wide challenges and obstacles," was addressed in both the perceptions faculty and staff described in their interviews and the symbols they gave described how they saw the school and their place in it. The symbols were much more dynamic than anticipated given the information gathered from the small pilot study. The symbol of fire created a connotation of urgency because the faculty had little time to teach the students in their care. The school seemed to become a living, breathing entity when described by the symbols of the staff and faculty. As Cheng (2010) implied, the symbol made perfect sense in the context of the alternative school, but might mean nothing to educators in a mainstream school.

The lighthouse symbol was also used in discussing school-wide obstacles. The symbol represented the concept that even if there were dangers (failure) threatening the students' education, the light provided by the alternative school could help the teachers steer the students to safety and success.

Communication. The themes of administrative support and communication were much more important to the overall school climate than anticipated. Rather than struggling in individual classrooms, teachers and staff were encouraged to ask for help when needed and to share information and resources with colleagues to create a holistic way of viewing the education of an at-risk population of students.

Some of the future plans for the school included establishing a common planning period so that teachers could better share information, experience, and strategies to help students learn how to succeed in school and in life. Teachers were encouraged to develop ideas and plans. The symbol of a group of people who can pull together and work together smoothly described the individuals' experience. The experience of a feeling of family was noted in two different interviews in which the participants described the support that the faculty feels in the school and how it translated to their support of students. Communication was also reflected in the lighthouse symbol, as the help and safety offered to the students was also extended to staff and faculty. The teachers did not hesitate to ask for help if needed and were encouraged to earn further certifications. For example, a teacher's aide was studying to be a teacher herself, the art teacher spoke of getting a master's degree in art therapy, and two of the teachers were finishing their administrator qualifications.

Themes Describing Individual Perceptions

Perceptions of teachers and staff. The symbol of fireworks, if taken out of context, would seem a strange way to visualize the goodness-of-fit for teachers in an alternative school. In this culture, it was understood that it is of ultimate importance to teach a child while he or she was in the classroom, as the student might not be there tomorrow. The importance of engaging the students when they are present provided a perceptual framework in which the school is

interested in more than good scores in the state's high-stakes testing. The holistic approach the teachers embraced helped them visualize the student in the future and determined whether he or she was equipped to become a productive member of society. The fireworks-like explosion of knowledge that the teachers wanted for their students could carry over into their return to their home schools and into life.

The experienced teacher who was completing her first year in the alternative school used the symbol of a circus tent. She expressed her experience there as something like going to the circus: a lot is going on all the time, so you have to pay attention to what is important. She used her imagination to provide tangible rewards for students to improve their attendance at school, developing a system that awarded snacks and lunch for increased attendance; the longer the stretch of unbroken attendance, the more food could be earned. She commented, "These kids will work for candy just like little ones." Like little kids going to the circus, it was important to the teacher to keep the students engaged for the entire time she had them in class so that they wanted to return the next school day.

Teacher attrition. The lighthouse symbol was used in the faculty and staff interviews when they spoke of teacher attrition. Few teachers had left the school in its 13-year history, and none of the ones who had left did so because they felt they could no longer reach the alternative school students.

This theme did not emerge from the data as important as expected. I hypothesized that so few had left because of the principal's careful screening, interviewing, and intuition in hiring faculty and staff. Both the original principal and the current principal used what they knew of each individual in advance of inviting them to teach in the school. For example, the prospective teacher who said that he could "fix these kids" was not accepted for a position in the school

because the principal knew that this was not an appropriate attitude to work with this population of students.

The future. The future was a theme that emerged from the data. It touched on both individual and school-wide perceptions and plans. The symbol of evolution represented the changes that occur in any environment. A dynamic outlook was necessary for moving forward in engaging students in the learning process. When asked how long he intended to teach in the alternative school, one teacher replied, "Until I am no longer effective."

Teachers in the alternative school expected to evolve in order to gain skills, explore strategies to connect with students, and develop their own ideas. The symbol of evolution was a good way to describe the culture of the school; the common perception that the adults offered more than a stable adult influence in students' lives. They offered the students a chance to evolve as students, to learn to be successful.

Symbols

Symbols suggested by the faculty and staff of the school were as varied as the people in it. The school-wide symbol of a lighthouse was often referred to in interviews, but everyone also had personal symbols that came to mind when asked what symbolized life in the school and being a part of their students' lives. The common factor for the symbols was that they were all positive; hope, heart, and love were all mentioned as symbols for the way faculty and staff felt they fit in the school. Other symbols were more dynamic, such as fire, fireworks, fountain, and a circus tent. The tent symbolized the fact that "there is always something going on, and you have to stop and laugh." One person stated that she could symbolize her experiences as a picture of slaves in shackles. This seemed a depressing image until she went on to explain that her experience was more about helping students break out of the chains that were tying them down

and keeping them from fulfilling their potential. Other symbols mentioned were of pulling together, working together, and getting along, illustrating that people see themselves as part of a team that made the school a safe place for kids to learn. Jewels symbolized the students for one individual, as some may be "diamonds in the rough," but it was easy for her to see their value. As discussed in symbolic interaction theory, the mental shorthand of these symbols creates a culture that makes it easy for participants to share their experience with an outside observer. The symbols were easily called to mind during the interviews, indicating that the participants may have thought about their life at school in a symbolic context at an earlier time while they were living the experience.

What do you get when you put together a published poet, a musician, a computer "geek," an individual who flunked out of high school three times, and an administrator with over 30 years of experience? You get the effective faculty for an alternative school. As with any successful organization, strong leadership and the ability to gather and encourage a dynamic and dedicated staff go a long way toward creating an alternative school that can "get the job done."

The ability to see the whole child and teach that child skills that will be needed when they finish school are reflected in letters and visits from former students who report that in looking back they know that they got a good start in life at the alternative school that they never could have gotten in a mainstream school.

Teaching in an alternative school is more than a job or career. It is a vocation, a calling for the faculty and staff of the school. One teacher worked with juvenile offenders in the legal system before she became a teacher, but decided she could be more effective if she worked with kids before they got into the judicial system than after they were already in trouble. All members of the faculty had a lifetime love affair with learning and wanted to share that with their students.

Eight of the teachers interviewed (67%) remembered playing school, teaching dolls, stuffed animals, and younger siblings before they ever started formal schooling. Six teachers (50%) had family members who were teachers or in other helping professions such as speech therapy and grew up knowing they wanted to carry on the family tradition of educating others.

The school's principal is given the freedom to choose his faculty and staff. His talent for putting together an eclectic and effective staff is reflected in the staff's feeling that they are working with "an incredible staff" and "the best of the best" with none of the tensions they found working in mainstream schools.

Success Redefined

Success in this school had been redefined. It did not come in the form of shiny sports trophies, 4.0 grade-point averages, or 20-page term papers, but in the form of getting students to come to school on a consistent schedule and complete enough credits to graduate, some with a 4.0 grade average. Students here earned their achievements; they were not given rewards because someone felt sorry for them. The difference in this school is in how they learned and the way they earned their accomplishments. Faculty who had the freedom and flexibility to show the students how to learn in ways that best suit their needs were effective educators. The faculty and staff of this school were able to look beneath the surface that the students presented to the rest of the world. The people who were able to connect with the students were the ones who saw the possibility in each student, not the defensive and scared child who first came to the school. As the school counselor noted, "I may never get rich doing this job, but the kids are my jewels."

If a banner were flying from the school's lighthouse symbol, it would read "Firm but Fair." The faculty and staff of the alternative school had adopted the principal's motto as a holistic worldview of teaching an at-risk population of students. To dissect the motto, one would

acknowledge that being firm with the students provided a structure and a stable environment that many of the students were missing in their lives, whether they knew it or not. Being fair does not necessarily mean that everyone is treated exactly the same; rather, every individual gets what he or she needs. The school was small enough that students were treated as valuable individuals who got what they needed when they needed it. Success to one student did not have to be defined the same way as it was defined for another student. Faculty and staff functioned as one entity and trusted that what one individual could not accomplish with a student could be done by someone else.

Future Research

Future researchers should further explore the types of training needed to teach in an alternative school environment. Individual stories of how teachers came to teach at this school did not point to any common attribute or personality trait that led them to pursue a teaching career with an at-risk student population. There was also no agreement on how their education coursework in college had led them to their current positions. Two teachers felt they had not had enough classes in classroom management, while six thought that only on-the-job training could truly show them techniques they knew were effective. The one common perception shared by all of the faculty and staff was hope; the reason they came to school day after day was the hope that they were making a difference in students' lives.

Personality types that are drawn to teaching and teaching in specific settings, such as alternative schools or special education, deserve further study. Teacher training programs should offer more courses in psychology, with an emphasis on positive psychology. In addition, research is needed on how to teach higher-order thinking skills such as problem-solving and self-monitoring. This case study has indicated that many students who are at risk for failure are

impulsive and lack the skills to break down overwhelming problems into more manageable sections. Furthermore, college students who are interested in becoming teachers should be given more exposure to different types of teaching experiences. As one teacher noted, "There is no classroom that can truly prepare you for your own first classroom."

The ways in which we look at things and give them labels (symbols) "are not just descriptions of reality; they contribute toward shaping reality" (Sternberg, 1996, p. 23). Teachers in training need opportunities to examine and label many different types of teaching environments. Future teachers need help to identify which kinds of teaching positions will best fit their strengths. The faculty and staff of the alternative school embrace the chance to shape the reality of their students.

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APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR TEACHERS AND ADMINISTRATOR(S)

1. How did you decide to become a teacher?

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_____

2. What is your teaching philosophy?

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3. How did you come to teach in this school?

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4. What have you found to be effective in teaching the students in this school?

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5. How is teaching here different from teaching in a mainstream school?

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6. What have you found most rewarding about teaching here?

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7. What have you found most challenging about teaching here?

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8. What do you know now that you wish you had known when you were starting your teaching
career?

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9. How has working in this school affected your professional development?

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10. How would you characterize your daily interactions with your students and their parents?

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11. What would symbolize your daily interactions with students for you?

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12. How would you characterize your daily interactions with teachers, administrators, and other adults in this school?

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13. What would symbolize your daily interactions with administration for you?

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14. What would symbolize your daily interactions with teaching staff for you?

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15. What else you would like to share about teaching to help me understand this setting?

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APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR SUPPORT STAFF

1. How did you come to have this job at this school?

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2. How do your experiences working here compare to other jobs you have held?

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3. How would you characterize your daily interactions with the teachers, administrators, and

other adults at this school?

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4. How would you characterize your daily interactions with the students and their parents at this

school?

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5. How would you describe the climate of this school?

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6. When you think about your daily interactions with others here, what would symbolize your

interactions?

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7. What would symbolize the daily interactions you have seen between teachers and students?

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8. What would symbolize the daily interactions you have seen between teachers and their

colleagues, such as other teachers and administrators?

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9. What else you would like to share about working in this school to help me understand this

setting?

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APPENDIX C: CLASSROOM OBSERVATION PROTOCOL

Classroom Observation Topics

1. Interactions between teachers.

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2. Interactions between teachers and students.

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3. Interactions between teachers and administrators.

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4. Interactions between teachers and parents (if applicable).

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5. Classroom climate, including physical environment, any motivating decorations.

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APPENDIX D: INFORMED CONSENT FOR ADMINISTRATORS AND SUPPORT STAFF

You are being asked to participate in a research study conducted by Deidre Coulter and Eric Hampton, Ph.D., from the Department of Communication Disorders, Counseling, Educational, and School Psychology at Indiana State University. This study is being conducted as a qualitative research study that will partially fulfill the requirements toward an advanced degree for the student researcher. Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Please read the information below and ask questions about anything you do not understand before deciding whether or not to participate.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to examine and describe the attitudes and actions of educators and staff in a typical alternative high school that make them effective in connecting and teaching alternative high school students who are at risk for academic failure.

PROCEDURES

If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to do the following things:

You will be asked to participate in an interview conducted by the student researcher. The interview should take between one and two hours, at your discretion. The interview will be audio taped to help ensure accuracy. The researcher will also be taking notes during and following the interview.

The researcher will provide you with a form to record any additional thoughts or ideas that you would like to include with your interview information that was not recorded at the time of the interview. The researcher will collect this form two weeks after the interview.

POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS

There are no known risks to you as a result of your participation.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO SUBJECTS AND/OR SOCIETY

The potential benefit of this research is to better inform prospective alternative school teachers and administrators who strive to hire effective alternative school teachers.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can identify you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. Confidentiality will be maintained by the means that you will not be identified by name or description, only with a numeric code. The school will only be identified as an alternative high school in a Midwestern city. The researcher is a doctoral candidate and will be writing a dissertation from information gained in the interview. This dissertation will be used to partially fulfill degree requirements. The dissertation will be published and general themes may be discussed publicly. Upon completion, any records, including interview materials and observation records, will be stored in a locked file cabinet in a locked office for a period of three years, and then destroyed.

PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL

You can choose whether or not to be in this study. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You may also refuse to answer any questions you do not want to answer. There is no penalty if you withdraw from the study and you will not lose any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

IDENTIFICATION OF INVESTIGATORS

If you have questions or concerns about this research please contact Deidre Coulter at (504) 392-0949 or by e-mail at: coulter_deidre@hotmail.com. You may also contact the doctoral candidate's committee chair, Eric Hampton, Ph.D. at (812) 237-2890 or by e-mail at: Eric.Hampton@indstate.edu if you have questions about participation.

RIGHTS OF RESEARCH SUBJECTS

If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, you may contact the Indiana State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) by mail at Indiana State University, Office of Sponsored Programs, Terre Haute, IN 47809, by phone at (812) 237-8217, or e-mail the IRB at: irb@indstate.edu. You will be given the opportunity to discuss any questions about your rights as a research subject with a member of the IRB. The IRB is an independent committee composed of members of the University community, as well as lay members of the community not connected with ISU. The IRB has reviewed and approved this study.

I understand the procedures described above. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I agree to participate in this study. I have been given a copy of this form.

_____

Printed Name of Subject

_____   _____

Signature of Subject   Date

APPENDIX E: INFORMED CONSENT FOR TEACHERS

You are being asked to participate in a research study conducted by Deidre Coulter and Eric Hampton, Ph.D. from the Department of Communication Disorders, Counseling, Educational, and School Psychology at Indiana State University. This study is being conducted as a qualitative research study that will partially fulfill the requirements toward an advanced degree for the student researcher. Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Please read the information below and ask questions about anything you do not understand before deciding whether or not to participate.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to examine and describe the attitudes and actions of educators and staff in a typical alternative high school that make them effective in connecting and teaching alternative high school students who are at risk for academic failure.

PROCEDURES

If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to do the following things:

You will be asked to participate in an interview conducted by the student researcher. The interview should take between one and two hours, at your discretion. The interview will be audio taped to help ensure accuracy. The researcher will also be taking notes during and following the interview.

The researcher will provide you with a form to record any additional thoughts or ideas that you would like to include with your interview information that was not recorded at the time of the interview. The researcher will collect this form two weeks after the interview.

You will be asked to allow passive observations in your classroom. Classroom observations will be done in approximately two to four hour blocks of time with a minimum of five (5) observations over a two-week timeframe. The observations will be recorded using guidelines for topics to be observed and fieldnotes by the principal researcher and a research assistant to help ensure accuracy. The researcher and the research assistant will make the initial observation together. Thereafter, the observations will be done on a random basis until the minimum number has been reached.
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POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS

There are no known risks to you as a result of your participation.
POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO SUBJECTS AND/OR SOCIETY

The potential benefit of this research is to better inform prospective alternative school teachers and administrators who strive to hire effective alternative school teachers

CONFIDENTIALITY

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can identify you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. Confidentiality will be maintained by the means that you will not be identified by name or description, only by a numeric code number. The school will only be identified as an alternative high school in a Midwestern city. The researcher is a doctoral candidate and will be writing a dissertation from information gained in the interview. This dissertation will be used to partially fulfill degree requirements. The dissertation will be published and general themes may be discussed publicly. Upon completion, any records, including interview materials and observation records, will be stored in a locked file cabinet in a locked office for a period of three years, and then destroyed.

PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL

You can choose whether or not to be in this study. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You may also refuse to answer any questions you do not want to answer. There is no penalty if you withdraw from the study and you will not lose any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

IDENTIFICATION OF INVESTIGATORS

If you have questions or concerns about this research please contact Deidre Coulter at (504) 392-0949 or by e-mail at: coulter_deidre@hotmail.com. You may also contact the doctoral candidate's committee chair, Eric Hampton, Ph.D. at (812) 237-2890 or by e-mail at: Eric.Hampton@indstate.edu if you have questions about participation.

RIGHTS OF RESEARCH SUBJECTS

If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, you may contact the Indiana State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) by mail at Indiana State University, Office of Sponsored Programs, Terre Haute, IN 47809, by phone at (812) 237-8217, or e-mail the IRB at: irb@instate.edu. You will be given the opportunity to discuss any questions about your rights as a research subject with a member of the IRB. The IRB is an independent committee composed of members of the University community, as well as lay members of the community not connected with ISU. The IRB has reviewed and approved this study.

I understand the procedures described above. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I agree to participate in this study. I have been given a copy of this form.

_____

Printed Name of Subject

_____   _____

Signature of Subject   Date