

IS ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION MEETING THE ACADEMIC,  
SOCIAL, AND EMOTIONAL NEEDS  
OF AT-RISK STUDENTS?

A Thesis Presented to the Faculty  
of  
California State University, Stanislaus

In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
of Master of Arts in Education

By  
Ryan Hesse  
May 2017

CERTIFICATION OF APPROVAL

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\_\_\_\_\_  
Dr. John Borba  
Professor of School Administration

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Dr. Susanne Whitehead  
Assistant Professor of Education

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## DEDICATION

This work is dedicated...

To my wife Shelly, I would not have done this without your support and encouragement. Thank you for being a sounding board and an intellectual stimulant. You make life more fun and lovely. Your unconditional love and way of challenging me to be my best self is appreciated more than you can imagine. On to life's next journey, "Here Comes the Sun..."

To the students who I have had the opportunity to meet over the past few years. You have inspired and challenged me to be a student of my students. Thank you.

To the writers, actors, and actresses of the television show *The Office*. Thank you for bringing humor and entertainment when I was exhausted from research and mentally spent!

To my dog who has interrupted me multiples times while typing, so I could graciously feed him...or let him outside.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank Dr. John Borba for his assistance and guidance in the completion of this process as well as encouraging me to listen to more Beatles music. Also, I wish to thank Dr. Suzanne Whitehead for her participation in the completion of my Master's thesis.

To the hard-working individuals who give themselves to the betterment of at-risk students. Your passion and heart to see students become successful is an encouragement to humanity.

Finally, to the inspiring students who participated in this study. I wish you the best in your future endeavors.

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## ABSTRACT

Alternative education schools are meant to meet specific needs of students who are not successful in a traditional comprehensive school environment. The purpose of this study was to determine if alternative education is meeting the emotional, social, and academic needs of at-risk students. Also, this study determined what improvements, if any, need to be made in alternative education to promote student success. The participants in this study were five students from a comprehensive alternative high school who graduated during the 2015-2016 school year. The participants attended at least two or more alternative models within a comprehensive alternative school including court appointed, charter, community day, and independent study. The interviews focused on three overarching research questions. Participants were asked nine interview questions highlighting their experiences at a comprehensive alternative school. The participants noted effectiveness of small class sizes, flexible scheduling, organization of planning for each student's future endeavors, and the strong support of teachers and counselors. The participants suggested strengthening the rigor of the curriculum, larger supplies of textbooks, and more traditional direct instruction courses in advanced subject areas.

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

#### **Background of the Study**

Alternative programs have been an integral part of American education since their inception in the 1950-1960s (Young, 1990). According to Lange and Sletten (2002), there were two broad categories of alternative education in the 1960s. Non-public alternative education included schools that were developed to provide a quality education for minority students. For example, Freedom Schools gave students the freedom from discrimination and freedom to learn (Lange & Sletten, 2002, p.3). Freedom Schools rejected formalized teaching and instead focused on the individualized happiness of each student. “Another overarching contribution of this early part of the movement was the highlighting of educational choice and the notion that not all students learn best in the same educational context” (Lange & Sletten, 2002, p.3). Parents and teachers of Freedom Schools felt that the oppressive nature of the public education system was unacceptable and inspired students to naturally explore their intellect and curiosity (Lange & Sletten, 2002).

The public education system took a different approach to alternative schools. For example, the public education system developed Open Schools as an alternative (Lange & Sletten, 2002). Open Schools involved the student, parent, and teacher in choosing the curriculum and academic pace. Also, they were characterized as schools

without walls to emphasize community, schools within schools to meet specific needs of students, multicultural schools intended to embed ethnicity into the curriculum, and continuation schools to help students avoid dropping out, experiencing failing grades, and/or becoming pregnant (Lange & Sletten, 2002).

By the 1980s, alternative education narrowed its focus by providing support to at-risk students who were functioning at or below academic achievement levels (Lange & Sletten, 2002). During this period, alternative schools became increasingly interested in teaching the basics and decreasing their emphasis on collective decision making, a process that included the teachers and students making educational decisions together (Raywid, 1981). A decade later, alternative education students were identified as poor, disabled, limited English proficient, and minority. At the time, the California Youth Authority noted that minority students represented the majority of student populations in alternative education with 64% in continuation schools, 75% in regional or court schools, and 86% in state detention centers (Guerin & Denti, 1999).

Although alternative education has evolved over the past decades, there are some key characteristics unlike traditional schools that remain constant such as small class sizes, more one on one time for teacher and student interaction, and a flexible learning environment (Lange & Sletten, 2002). Raywid (1993) grouped alternative schools into three categories that included schools of choice based upon themes, “Last chance” schools that offered one last chance for at-risk students, and schools that focused on remedial academic and/or social/emotional behavior. Since the 1950s,

alternative schools and programs have grown significantly to address a variety of needs. A national survey reported that 64% of school districts have at least one alternative school or program for at-risk students (Carver, Lewis, & Tice, 2010).

School districts are not the only educational entity that offer alternative education programs. Also, county offices provide alternatives for at-risk students. A county office of education, located in the Central Valley of California, has developed an alternative program for at-risk students. This program was established in 1992 to meet the needs of many students in the county who were expelled from their home districts, expelled or refused from other neighboring districts, and had no other educational options (W. Frink, personal communication, October 5, 2016).

Due to social, emotional, as well as academic needs, high truancy rates, and lack of transportation options for students, this comprehensive alternative school developed a small school model approach. Instead of a large alternative school, this comprehensive alternative school has developed multiple small school sites that have between 2-5 teachers and 60-120 students per site. This small school size approach provides closer/easier options for students to get to school as well as a smaller learning environment to promote student academic success. Depending upon the specific needs of the students, each comprehensive alternative school takes on a unique alternative school model: court appointed schools, charter schools, community day schools, and independent study schools. Under these various schools, this

comprehensive alternative school seeks to meet the academic, social, and emotional needs of its students (W. Frink, personal communication, October 5, 2016).

### **Statement of the Problem**

Alternative education schools are meant to meet specific needs of students who are not successful in a comprehensive school environment. The purpose of this study is to determine if alternative education is meeting the emotional, social, and academic needs of at-risk students. Also, this study will determine improvements, if any, that need to be made in alternative education to promote student success. Due to the limited amount of research on this topic it is imperative to delve deeper into the resolution of this problem and determine what factors are making a difference in alternative education.

### **Research Questions**

**R1:** What elements of a comprehensive alternative school contribute to the success of alternative education students?

**R2:** How does a comprehensive alternative school prepare students for life/school after graduation?

**R3:** What improvements should be made to a comprehensive alternative school as per past high school graduates?

### **Significance of the Study**

This study will identify the opinions and perceptions of at-risk students who graduated from a comprehensive alternative school. Consequently, data collected may

reveal to what degree alternative education is meeting the emotional, social, and academic needs of at-risk students. Also, this study may inform educators and policy makers of the effectiveness of alternative education schools in preparing at-risk students for success during program participation and after graduation.

### **Limitations and Delimitations**

#### **Limitations**

This study will be limited to five students who graduated during the 2015-2016 school year from a comprehensive alternative school.

#### **Delimitations**

For the purpose of this study, ethnicity, gender, and socio-economic status of the five participants will not be taken into consideration.

#### **Definition of Terms**

**Alternative Education:** schools and/or programs that provide educational alternatives to traditional comprehensive schools for at-risk students based upon their specific emotional, social, and academic needs.

**At-Risk:** a student who is credit deficient, behind in academic achievement and/or is in danger of not graduating from high school or dropping out completely.

**Comprehensive Alternative School:** an alternative school/program established by a County Office of Education, located in the Central Valley of California. This program offers a variety of alternative school programs including court appointed schools, community schools, daily schools, and independent study schools.

## **Summary**

The purpose of this study is to determine if alternative education is meeting the emotional, social, and academic needs of at-risk students. Chapter I provided a brief history on the evolution of Alternative Education in America and the statement of the problem. Additionally, the significance of this study was addressed as well as the limitations and delimitations, and concluded with the definition of terms. Chapter 2 will present a review of the literature that is pertinent to the topic of this study.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to determine the opinions and perceptions of at-risk students who graduated from a comprehensive alternative school. The review of the literature will examine the evolution of alternative education, highlight specific California alternative education models, and review studies pertinent to the topic of this study.

#### **Evolution of Alternative Education**

In the 1960s, alternative education started with the focus of improving the quality of education for minority students who were marginalized in public school settings (Raywid, 1999). By the 1970s, progressive models in alternative education called magnet schools and open education schools became the standard. Magnet school programs are usually found in urban school districts with a designed focus on specific subject areas such as mathematics/science, the arts, and communication (Cash & Reimer, 2003). Magnet schools are characterized by four key elements: a curricular theme, student/parent choice of school, open access by students outside of district boundaries, and a focus on desegregation (Blank, Rolf, & Messier, 1987). Open education, which is currently the adopted style of many charter schools is a philosophical movement that promotes mutual respect between students and teachers

with an emphasis on flexible/informal learning environments. Students work independently at their own pace in an informal classroom environment. The most significant characteristic of open schools is an emphasis on experimental learning where students develop a positive self-image and are actively engaged in their learning (Dunn, 1998).

Alternative education schools that arose in the 1980s, stress teaching basics while decreasing their emphasis on collective decision-making (Raywid, 1981). By the 1990s, alternative education continued to evolve. The charter school movement began during this era, offering parents and students innovative educational options that were not offered in traditional public schools.

Despite a multitude of changes over the decades, research shows there are commonalities among successful alternative education programs. These commonalities are viable indicators of success (Dunn, 1998). The first commonality in successful alternative education is careful planning and systematic development. Successful alternative schools carefully meet specific needs (1998). A second commonality is the collaboration of school administration/staff, students, and parents working together towards a common goal (Gregg, 1999). Third, successful alternative schools have developed a model that serves small student populations. Smaller school size can promote community, maintain goals, and focus specific attention to students' special needs (Young, 1990). A final commonality for success is strong leadership, which is required for implementation of a clear school mission and goals. Successful

alternative programs need to maintain their mission to appropriately address the needs of the student population. A strong leader uses the school's mission as a basis for all decisions that are made in the best interests of the students (Young, 1990).

### **Types of Alternative Education Programs**

Alternative schools do not come in a one-size fits all model. Alternative schools provide various educational models that address the specific needs of at-risk students in the community. In California, alternative education can be identified as court appointed, charter, community day, and independent study (Edsource, 2008).

#### **Court Appointed**

The court appointed school model, also know as juvenile justice schools, was first intended to help delinquent students become law-biding productive adults. The original goal of court appointed schools was prevention, mainly to prevent students from burdening society, reducing delinquency, and lessening life-long dependency (Dunn, Sabree & Suitts, 2014). In order for students to become successful outside of the juvenile justice system, court appointed schools made education a top priority in improving the academic skills of students to reduce gaps in their education.

According to recent data, students in the juvenile justice system tend to be academically behind in school, possess learning disabilities, and frequently have social, emotional, and physical disabilities. The system is overseen by at least 5 governmental agencies — juvenile court, local school districts, social service agencies, state education agencies, and departments of juvenile justice. These

multiple factors demonstrate that court appointed schools are not all academically structured in the same manner (Dunn, Sabree & Suitts, 2014).

### **Charter**

The idea of charter schools grew out of the alternative movement in the 1960s and 1970s. Parents having an option to choose from a variety of school models that could specifically meet the needs of their children became a reality in the California school system in the early 1990s (EdSource, 2004). California's Charter Schools Act began with specific goals to improve student learning, increase learning opportunities, encourage innovative teaching, create new professional opportunities, and expand school choice for parents (2004). A charter school can be defined as "a school that is given autonomy to set its own rules and do what is right for students. Educators must attract students, teachers, and parents to their school...and develop their own curriculum" (Northeast and Islands Regional Education Lab, 1999, p.1). Public charter schools are monitored by the state to maintain compliance with federal and state laws. Since 1992, California charter schools have increased from 100 to over 1,000 throughout the state, with 370,000 students enrolled, making up 6% of the student population (California Department of Education, 2015). Charter schools are located in 50 of 58 counties in California and found in rural, suburban, and urban areas. They educate a diverse population of students by meeting a variety of needs that are reflective of the local school districts and areas where they are located (2015).

### **Community Day**

The community day school model serves at-risk students who have been expelled from comprehensive schools or are referred by juvenile justice departments. This school model operates through school districts or county offices of education (California Department of Education, 2015). Data have shown that 17% of students who attend a community day school changed residences in the past year which may contribute to several problems that are barriers to completing a formal education (Edsource, 2008). Community day schools tend to direct their focus toward developing social skills and building self esteem and resiliency. These schools have low student to teacher ratios and provide support services that include counselors, psychologists, and disciplinary personnel (California Department of Education, 2015).

### **Independent Study**

Barra and Berlinder (2009) defined independent study programs as alternative education models that aim to meet the needs, interests, and learning styles of students while ensuring compliance with district guidelines. California currently has 6 million students enrolled in K-12 schools with over 84,000 specifically enrolled in independent study programs. Each student enrolled in an independent study program has an individualized learning plan which guides completion of assignments at any time, pace, or place. An individualized learning plan is a written agreement involving the student, the student's parents/guardians, supervising teacher, and others responsible for providing assistance. The flexibility of an independent study program

allows students with scheduling challenges, such as work or family responsibilities, to complete or accelerate completion of their school work at home. Also, independent study programs provide targeted instruction, allowing students to fill in gaps in their academic learning and make up missing credit requirements. Additionally, the academic rigor of independent study programs requires students to meet the same amount of quality school work and graduation requirements as traditional public schools.

### **Review of Studies on Alternative Education Programs**

Fredrick, Heflin, Jolivette, and Swoszowski (2013) conducted a study on the effects of a support program on the behavior of a foster student in an alternative school setting. The study focused on a program called Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS). PBIS is a three tier program: school-wide, small group, and individual. Typically, students who fail to demonstrate appropriate behavior after tier one instruction, participate in tier two counseling sessions.

This study used the tier two intervention called the Check-In/Check-Out (CICO) support program where a support mentor is partnered with a student to address problem behavior. The participant was a third grade student who was referred due to problem behavior displayed at school and in her foster home. A non experimental A-B design was used to determine the effectiveness of CICO on the student participant who experienced emotional behavior disorder (E/BD). Data

collection included office discipline referrals (ODR), school-wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (SW-PBIS) points, and student grades.

The participant met with a mentor at the beginning of the day to establish a daily point goal. Then the participant took a point chart based on SW-PBIS to class and received a point score (on a point chart based upon her behavior) from her teacher at the end of the school day. After school, the participant met with a mentor to discuss the results and new strategies for the following day. Finally, at the end of the day, the participant received a point score (on a point chart) from her foster guardian at her residential facility. Also, the participant received positive reinforcement by earning a coupon for a drawing to win prizes at the end of the school week.

Before the participant was identified for this study, she received an average of 0.67 ODR per week, received 79.38% of her PBIS points, and had a GPA of 3.25 for the second quarter. The results of this study indicated that after the use of CICO behavior support, the participant experienced a lower number of ODR (0.31 per week), an increase in class PBIS points (obtaining 90.57%), and mixed improvements in GPA (3.1 and 4.0 during the third and fourth quarter).

Gut and McLaughlin (2012) conducted a study on office disciplinary referrals (ODR) prior to and following a partnership between a traditional public school district and an alternative school program provider outside of the school district. The study was conducted in a southeastern state. Eight schools from the school district participated including two middle schools and 6 high schools. The eight schools

consisted of urban and rural student populations and ranged between 717 to 2,756 participants per school.

Students who qualified for the alternative program had accumulated multiple ODR, suspensions, and were possibly up for expulsion. Students that were selected for the alternative education program attended the program until they completed specific requirements. Once the alternative education requirements were completed, students were returned to their school district. The alternative education program provided alternative structures and interventions for students including computer-assisted learning, group projects, service learning, low student-to-teacher ratios, and shortened school days. Also, students had the opportunity for credit-recovery by working at their own pace. The alternative program also incorporated choice theory which is used to help students make effective life choices.

Paired samples t-tests were conducted to determine if there were statistical differences in ODR after the partnership was established between the public school district and the alternative education school. Data were collected and analyzed on the following: threat/intimidation, possession of alcohol, disorderly conduct, possession of drugs, fighting, possession of weapons, and total reportable incidents. The study hypothesized that there would be a significant decrease in ODR as a result of the partnership. Overall, the total ODR per student, from pre program to post program for the eight participating schools was not statistically significant. The findings indicate that the alternative education program reduced some inappropriate behaviors. There

was a significant decrease in the following ODR behavioral categories: threat/intimidation ( $p=.043$ ), weapons (knife) ( $p=.007$ ), and total state reportable incidents ( $p=.036$ ).

Lagana-Riordan, Aguilar, Franklin, Streeter, Kim, Tripodi, and Hopson (2011) conducted a study on at-risk students in an alternative school setting. The purpose of the study was to examine the perspectives of at-risk students on their experiences with an alternative school versus their former traditional schools. This study took place at a solution-focused alternative high school (SFAS).

The authors collected data through personal interviews with solution-focused alternative high school students using a case study approach. Interviews took between 45-60 minutes and consisted of an interview instrument of 36 questions including listed items, scaled questions, and open-ended questions which focused on family background, quality of family and friend relationships, and feelings toward current and previous schools.

The researchers compiled all transcripts and formed initial codes using categorical aggregation. After the research team consulted, final codes were established and the transcripts were individually coded. Students described their experiences in traditional school as unsafe, uncaring, overly rigid, and anti-social. In regard to the SFAS, students described positive teacher/student relationships, an understanding of social issues, improvement in maturity/responsibility, and better peer relationships and support.

Speckhard (1992) conducted a study at an alternative education high school for at-risk students. The purpose of this study was to determine the perceptions and opinions of students regarding program effectiveness.

Data were collected by interviewing 62 participants. The interviews covered the following topics: reasons for attendance, future plans, program assessment, faculty assessment, other student assessment, unique program aspects, and comparison with home schooling.

The researcher organized specific questions to ask participants and coded the responses by using categorical aggregation. Results of the study indicated that students were generally supportive of the program. Individualized instruction was well received by the students and teacher interaction was very positive. Overall, the at-risk students who were in jeopardy of failing at a traditional high school were completing their schooling and were happy with practices implemented at the alternative school.

Gattuso (2016) conducted a study on the effectiveness of Restorative Justice in decreasing suspensions. The study was conducted in an alternative education high school in the Central Valley of California. The study examined the total number of full and partial days of off campus suspensions between students who attended the high school in 2011-2012 without a Restorative Justice program in place and students who attended the high school in 2014-2015 with a Restorative Justice program in place.

The author hypothesized that there would not be a significant reduction in full or partial day off campus suspensions after program implementation. Data were analyzed through the use of t-tests for independent samples. The results indicated that there was a significant difference in the number of full days ( $p < .01$ ) and partial day ( $p < .05$ ) suspensions between students who participated in the Restorative Justice program and those who did not. The study determined that there were significantly less full and partial day suspensions during the time when the Restorative Justice Program was in place.

### **Summary**

The review of literature examined the evolution of alternative education, highlighted specific California alternative education school models, and reviewed specific studies conducted on alternative education programs. Chapter III will present the methodology that includes the sample population, instrumentation, data collection, and analysis.

CHAPTER III  
METHODOLOGY

**Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to determine the opinions and perceptions of at-risk students who graduated from a comprehensive alternative high school. Chapter III will present the methodology that includes the sample population, instrumentation, data collection, and analysis.

**Sample Population**

The participants in this study were five students from a comprehensive alternative high school who graduated during the 2015-2016 school year. The participants attended at least two or more alternative models within the comprehensive alternative school including court appointed, charter, community day, and independent study. The participants and the types of alternative models they attended are shown in Table 1. The names of these participants, their school, and school districts will remain anonymous throughout this study.

Table 1

*Comprehensive Alternative High School Graduates*

Participant	Court Appointed	Charter	Community Day	Independent Study
Participant 1	X		X	
Participant 2		X		X
Participant 3			X	X
Participant 4		X		X
Participant 5	X	X		

**Data Collection**

Each participant was interviewed separately to prevent answers from being influenced by others. Each student was given a list of interview questions (see Appendix A) and a consent form (see Appendix B) in advance to allow time for the participants to read and sign the documents. The interview questions attempted to shed light on the following research questions:

- 1: What elements of a comprehensive alternative school contribute to the success of alternative education students?
- 2: How does a comprehensive alternative school prepare students for life/school after graduation?
- 3: What improvements should be made to a comprehensive alternative school program?

Each student was interviewed for approximately 30 minutes. Each interview was audiotaped to allow enough time for participants to fully answer each question.

Notes were taken during the interviews and recorded responses were transcribed upon completion.

### **Data Analysis**

Participants received transcripts of the audiotaped responses to verify accuracy and validity. All of the data were analyzed through color coding of transcripts. The researcher looked for responses, commonalities, and/or themes that specifically answered the three guiding research questions. References to each theme were noted by color and notes were made about participant responses that align with each theme. The final results were carefully assembled and reported in the findings of this study.

### **Summary**

Chapter III presented the methodology that includes the sample population, data collection, and analysis. Chapter IV will report the results of the analysis.

## CHAPTER IV

### RESULTS

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to determine the opinions and perceptions of at-risk students who graduated from a comprehensive alternative high school. The researcher interviewed five participants from a comprehensive alternative high school who graduated during the 2015-2016 school year. Chapter IV will present the results of the interviews as they relate to the research questions.

#### **Interviews**

##### **Interview 1**

Participant 1 attended an independent study and community day school model through a comprehensive alternative high school. This participant had attended the independent study school for one full year before dropping out of the comprehensive alternative high school for 3 years. Following those 3 years, the participant re-enrolled in the comprehensive alternative high school at a community day school that allows students up to the age 25 the opportunity to obtain a high school diploma. The participant graduated at the end of the 2015-2016 school year.

**What elements of a comprehensive alternative school contribute to the success of alternative education students (R1)?** Participant 1 noted that she felt as

though school was not really for her so she had poor attendance to the point that she was dropped from the independent study school model of a comprehensive alternative school. After a 3 year gap, she decided to re-enroll in a community day school model of a comprehensive alternative high school. Participant 1 discussed how the teachers and counselors at the community day school gave extra support academically and emotionally. The school staff was able to help her deal with stress so she could focus on her schoolwork. Participant 1 stated “I actually started showing up everyday and had perfect attendance for two years which was shocking enough for myself because I never had that before.” Having extra one on one time with teachers and receiving extra counseling helped Participant 1 become academically and emotionally successful in school.

**How does a comprehensive alternative school prepare students for life/school after graduation (R2)?** Participant 1 discussed how the teachers at her community day school were more than school staff; they treated her as if she was their friend. She felt very supported and comfortable attending this school. As a senior, she had to complete a senior project before graduation. It was a presentation based on her future endeavors and a plan of how to accomplish that goal.

I had to do mine and wanted to pursue behavioral therapy. So I had to put together this slideshow and explain that I’m going to go to college and I have to do all these steps in order to get

there. So that is what prepared me more and I was actually excited when I graduated to go to college.

Participant 1 discussed how she received a lot of support from her counselor who helped her find solidarity with her peers. Participant 1 was required to work in groups with her peers and began to see that most of her classmates had gone through similar difficult experiences growing up. The positive school environment helped her enjoy school and provided a means of support through her high school graduation process.

**What improvements should be made to a comprehensive alternative school program (R3)?** Participant 1 explained that not every school site that she attended had the best support for students but she did find a positive environment with her community day school.

But if more staff are more connected to their students then maybe students will be encouraged to go to school and take a look at their future and what they're doing in life. And maybe they can change what they are doing outside of school in order to obtain a better life during adulthood.

She felt that the experience was just right and the school was very helpful academically. She explained that her time at a community day school was very positive and had no other additional improvements to add.

## **Interview 2**

Participant 2 attended a community day and charter school model through a comprehensive alternative high school. He began attending a community day school his first year as part of a comprehensive alternative high school. In his last two years of attendance, the school was revamped as a charter school with a visual performing arts theme. The participant graduated at the end of the 2015-2016 school year.

**What elements of a comprehensive alternative high school contribute to the success of alternative education students (R1)?** Participant 2 emphasized that continuous support by his teachers, counselor, and director influenced his academic success. “Oh yeah, they definitely helped me out. The teachers would pull me aside one on one.” Participant 2 had struggled in mathematics prior to his time at a comprehensive alternative high school. He shared that his teachers helped him develop his basic mathematics skills which help him in his current job as a part-time carpenter.

**How does a comprehensive alternative school prepare students for life/school after graduation (R2)?** Participant 2 shared that he struggled greatly connecting with people on a social level before coming to a comprehensive alternative high school. Participant 2 barely talked because he did not feel comfortable interacting with people. At school, he expressed that the counselor worked with him to open up more and to be more communicative with others. “They gave me a flexible schedule and worked with me big time. So they helped build me

up and gave me the courage to finish.” Participant 2 considered dropping out of high school but the friendliness of the school staff and flexible schedule really helped him become successful.

**What improvements should be made to a comprehensive alternative school program (R3)?** Participant 2 expressed that he might not have graduated from high school if it was not for his experience with the school staff and the flexible school environment. Because of the extra help/support that Participant 2 received from a comprehensive alternative high school, he would not make any improvements or changes.

### **Interview 3**

Participant 3 attended a community day and court school site model through a comprehensive alternative high school. The court school model that he attended for a year and a half was at a juvenile detention center located in the Central Valley of California. He also attended a community day school for two and a half years. The school was composed of one teacher and 15-20 students. The participant graduated at the end of the 2015-2016 school year.

**What elements of a comprehensive alternative school contribute to the success of alternative education students (R1)?** Participant 3 discussed his academic struggles in high school. His most difficult subjects were in mathematics and geography. Participant 3 talked about how the comprehensive alternative high school teachers gave him support in his academic classes. “The teachers explained

those difficult subjects in a way that I could understand it.” Participant 3 also discussed how the counselor at his community day site helped him deal with his personal problems. He learned how to prioritize academic goals above social goals which he failed to do in the past and consequently got himself in trouble.

**How does a comprehensive alternative school prepare students for life/school after graduation (R2)?** Participant 3 discussed work related opportunities that the comprehensive alternative high school provided for him during his time at the community day school. The school had teamed up with a county operated work program that assists high school students who face significant barriers to success in the labor market. The program provides job related resources and support to overcome barriers and become self-sufficient adults. Participant 3 explained that his school and county work program helped him develop job related skills and find a job with Goodwill.

**What improvements should be made to a comprehensive alternative school program (R3)?** Participant 3 emphasized that the flexible work environment was very beneficial to him because it took 4 and a half years to earn his high school diploma. As for improvements to a comprehensive alternative high school, participant 3 felt that he did too much individual work and wished that more group work assignments and collaboration opportunities had been available.

#### **Interview 4**

Participant 4 attended a community day and charter school site. She began attending a community day school her first year as part of a comprehensive alternative high school. In her last two years of attendance, the school was revamped as a charter school with a visual performing arts theme. The participant graduated at the end of the 2015-2016 school year.

**What elements of a comprehensive alternative school contribute to the success of alternative education students (R1)?** Participant 4 stated that her grandfather had a lot of health problems and she had to watch him while her mother worked on a daily basis. Due to home responsibilities, she was expelled for extreme poor attendance. When Participant 4 began attending a comprehensive alternative high school, she noticed a lot of support from the school staff.

I feel throughout all the years that I had been at the my school I had developed personal relationships with all the staff. They have helped me with personal issues and have helped me understand courses that I needed help in.

Participant 4 expressed that the small environment, flexible schedule, and the extra one on one support with teachers really contributed to her academic success.

**How does a comprehensive alternative school prepare students for life/school after graduation (R2)?** Participant 4 discussed how the small school environment aided her in achieving academic success. She claimed that the teachers

gave her extra support in difficult subjects. Due to this extra support, she graduated 6 months early from high school. She decided to take 7 months off for work. Participant 4 then realized that she wanted to do more and she decided to apply for junior college admission. Although Participant 4 wanted to apply for college admission, she needed help and her family did not have experience with collegiate applications. So, Participant 4 decided to contact one of her former teachers where she graduated and was able to receive guidance.

I actually took a break for 7 months and then realized that I really needed to go to college. I actually texted one of my old teachers and asked her “can you help me with applying to college?” And she was really supportive with that process.

Now I’m at the junior college as a full-time student.

Participant 4 is very complimentary towards the support and guidance that she received. Participant 4 feels as though she would not be in college if it was not for the former teacher believing in her.

**What improvements should be made to a comprehensive alternative school program (R3)?** Participant 4 discussed a few necessary improvements to a comprehensive alternative school. She first indicated that the school did not have enough books to let the students take them home to use. She noted that students could take paper for homework but not books due to the low supply. Another area of improvement that Participant 4 suggested was for the school to hire teachers who

teach more advanced subject matter. She indicated that the current teaching staff at the school teach basic core classes but do not teach advanced subjects such as economics or American government. Participant 4 noted that the more advanced classes were only offered through an online curriculum program.

### **Interview 5**

Participant 5 attended a court appointed and community day school site model through a comprehensive alternative high school. He attended a community day school for his first two years of high school. During the last two years, he bounced back and forth between his community day school and a court appointed school that was at a juvenile detention center located in the Central Valley of California. The participant graduated at the end of the 2015-2016 school year.

**What elements of a comprehensive alternative school contribute to the success of alternative education students (R1)?** Participant 5 discussed that he was a very shy student and struggled with speaking in the front of the classroom. He indicated that the teachers saw his weaknesses and tried to help him improve. “The teachers got me comfortable in speaking in front of the class. They had me practice different techniques when I was presenting to get better.” Participant 5 claimed that the small classroom population helped him focus more and allowed teachers to give more one on one time in class.

**How does a comprehensive alternative school prepare students for life/school after graduation (R2)?** Participant 5 felt as though he was prepared for life

after graduation. He feels prepared for a job because his teachers placed other students and himself in work related scenarios. “They put you in a lot of different work situations to help you prepare for it.” Participant 5 currently has a part-time job and gives credit to his former school for helping him develop communication skills.

**What improvements should be made to a comprehensive alternative school program (R3)?** Participant 5 discussed a few improvements to a comprehensive alternative high school. First, he suggested more variety in school subject material. He noted that the school tends to teach the same type of curriculum from year to year with minor changes. He claimed there were assignments similar to work completed the year before. Secondly, Participant 5 suggested that more advanced classes such as economics and American government, should be taught. At his community day school site, the more advanced classes were offered through a computerized curriculum software program. Participant 5 exclaimed that he preferred teachers teach advanced classes through traditional instructional delivery systems as opposed to online methods.

### **Summary**

Chapter IV presented the results of the interviews as they relate to the research questions. Chapter V will present the summary of the findings.

## CHAPTER V

### SUMMARY, THEMES, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to determine the opinions and perceptions of at-risk students who graduated from a comprehensive alternative high school. The researcher interviewed five participants from a comprehensive alternative high school who graduated during the 2015-2016 school year. Chapter V will present the summary, themes, implications, and recommendations.

#### **Summary**

The researcher prepared three research questions: (1) What elements of a comprehensive alternative school contribute to the success of alternative education students; (2) How does a comprehensive alternative school prepare students for life/school after graduation; and (3) What improvements should be made to a comprehensive alternative school program? The following summarizes the findings from the interviews that were constructed from the research questions.

**What elements of a comprehensive alternative school contribute to the success of alternative education students (R1)?**

The five participants agreed that when attending a comprehensive alternative high school they received extra academic support from their teachers. The main elements of academic support that were noted by the participants were small class sizes and extra one on one time with the teacher. These contributing elements were unique to a comprehensive alternative school and each participant noted that these elements were very beneficial to their academic success.

Two of the participants noted that they also received extra emotional support from their counselor. The two participants discussed how they met with their counselor on a weekly basis to talk about personal issues and daily stressors. The participants noted that the counselor helped them reduce their stress levels so they could focus on academics. One participant explained that the counselor addressed his high stress levels by helping him prioritize academic goals.

**How does a comprehensive alternative school prepare students for life/school after graduation (R2)?**

All five participants agreed that a comprehensive alternative high school helped prepare them for life/school after graduation; however each participant described a unique way in which school aided in that process. One participant discussed how the required senior project helped her plan for college and/or career

after she graduated from high school. The project required her to research different colleges, careers, and the logistics in order to make more informed decisions. Another participant noted that his school teamed up with a county work program which helped him develop work related skills and find a job.

One participant talked about how his teachers developed lessons for the class that focused on work based scenarios. He stated that this process helped prepare him for the work field after graduating. One other participant discussed wanting to apply for college but not knowing how to start the process. This participant's teacher guided her through the college application process. The participant is now a full-time student at a local junior college. Many of these at-risk students personally lack the support and resources outside of their school environment and a comprehensive alternative high school helped prepare them for life/school after graduation in a variety of unique ways.

**What improvements should be made to a comprehensive alternative school program (R3)?**

Two of the five participants discussed that their schools did not provide enough classroom materials. It was noted that one or more of the schools did not have enough books for students to take home and study. Also, one of the schools repeated the curriculum from year to year with minor changes in the lesson plans. Also, participants addressed the need/desire for advanced subject matter to be taught and

expressed disappointment that advanced courses were only provided through online methods.

One participant claimed that he did too much individual work at his school and desired to have more collaboration/group work. Two other participants shared that they were overall very happy with their experiences at a comprehensive alternative high school and would not make any changes to a comprehensive alternative program.

### **Themes**

#### **What elements of a comprehensive alternative school contribute to the success of alternative education students (R1)?**

The participants of this study expressed that they received extra academic and emotional support from a comprehensive alternative high school. The learning environment was conducive to their specific needs by providing small class sizes for more one on one time with the teacher. Also, flexible scheduling provided extra time and support, allowing participants to graduate.

#### **How does a comprehensive alternative high school prepare students for life/school after graduation (R2)?**

All participants agreed that a comprehensive alternative high school prepared them for life/school after graduation. Although, each participant's experience was different from school to school, the focus of preparation for life/school after

graduation was the same. Despite each unique school model, there was an overarching focus of organization and planning for each student's future endeavors.

**What improvements should be made to a comprehensive alternative school program (R3)?**

Two of the five participants believed that no improvements were needed. Although, the majority of the participants agreed that a comprehensive alternative high school could improve the rigor and variety of current curriculum, provide enough textbooks for all students to take home, and establish traditional direct instruction courses in advanced subject areas.

**Implications**

**What elements of a comprehensive alternative school contribute to the success of alternative education students (R1)?**

This study validated a comprehensive alternative school's successful efforts of providing extra academic and emotional support to students through small class sizes, additional counseling, more one on one time, and flexible scheduling.

**How does a comprehensive alternative high school prepare students for life/school after graduation (R2)?**

This study validated a comprehensive alternative school's successful efforts to prepare students for life/school after graduation through a multitude of organizational and planning efforts.

**What improvements should be made to a comprehensive alternative school program (R3)?**

This researcher suggests that comprehensive alternative schools should develop plans for providing enough textbook resources for students and include more direct teaching of advanced high school courses.

**Recommendations**

1. Conduct a quantitative study to compare success between specific alternative education school models: charter, community day, independent study, and court appointed.
2. Conduct a quantitative study to determine the effects of student career attainment based upon the working relationship between a county work program and comprehensive high school.
3. Conduct a quantitative study to compare post-secondary enrollment and career attainment between students who graduated from a traditional comprehensive high school and those who graduated from comprehensive alternative high school.

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## APPENDICES

APPENDIX A  
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Interview Questions	R1	R2	R3
1. How has your education at a comprehensive alternative high school been useful to you since you graduated?		X	
2. When you were enrolled as a student in a comprehensive alternative high school, what were your strengths and weaknesses? How did a comprehensive alternative high school help you overcome your weaknesses?	X		
3. What subjects gave you the most difficulty in high school and how did a comprehensive alternative high school help you succeed in those courses?	X		
4. Did your teachers/counselors/directors provide enough support for you to succeed in difficult courses? Explain.	X		
5. Did you feel prepared for life/college/work after attending a comprehensive alternative high school? Explain.		X	
6. Was going to college an option for you after graduation from a comprehensive alternative high school? Explain. Did your family support the idea of you attending college?	X		
7. Describe elements that were unique to a comprehensive alternative high school that supported your future goals. Why were they helpful to you?		X	
8. What part of your experience in a comprehensive alternative high school would you change? Explain.			X
9. What kinds of improvements should be made to the comprehensive alternative high school? Elaborate.			X

APPENDIX B  
INFORMED CONSENT LETTER  
PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

I am asking for your volunteer participation in a study that I am conducting as part of the fulfillment of my Master's degree at California State University, Stanislaus. The purpose of this study is to determine if alternative education is meeting the emotional, social, and academic needs of at-risk students. As part of the data collection, I will ask questions regarding your experience at a comprehensive alternative high school established by a County Office of Education, located in the Central Valley of California. The interview will take 30 minutes of your time and you may withdraw or refuse to answer any question at anytime without consequences. The interview will be audiotaped and transcribed for analytical purposes. There are no known foreseeable risks to participating in this project. The information you provide will be protected from all inappropriate disclosure under the law. Your name and all other forms of identifiable information will not appear in this study. The information that is gained will be used for educational purposes. Only this researcher will have access to the information collected and will destroy it three years after the completion of this study.

If you agree to participate in this study, please sign the document below. If you have any questions about this research, please feel free to contact me, Ryan Hesse at (209) 573-1043 or my supervising professor Dr. John Borba at (209) 667-3260. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the CSU Stanislaus Institutional Review Board Office at (209) 667-3493 and/or the Compliance Office at (209) 667-3351. By signing below, you agree that you have read the information described above and agree to participate in this study.

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Name of Participant

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Signature

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Date