2015

A study of high-performing at-risk high school students and their perceptions on academic success and achievement

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Pepperdine University

Graduate School of Education and Psychology

A STUDY OF HIGH-PERFORMING AT-RISK HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS AND THEIR

PERCEPTIONS ON ACADEMIC SUCCESS AND ACHIEVEMENT

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction

of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership, Administration and Policy

by

Charles H. Pak

October, 2015

Linda Purrington, Ed.D. – Dissertation Chairperson

This dissertation, written by

Charles H. Pak

under the guidance of a Faculty Committee and approved by its members, has been submitted to and accepted by the Graduate Faculty in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

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DEDICATION

To my mother who encouraged me to become a teacher and gave me the passion to work in the field of education. She supported me in my graduate studies and allowed me to become the best that I could be. Her ability to keep me accountable allowed me to persevere through the struggles and obstacles I encountered during my journey.

To my lovely wife, who continued to show compassion and care when times were tough. I thank her for being supportive and patient throughout my arduous journey. Lastly, to my newborn baby, Jadon, you are the reason I live and look forward to each and every day.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The arduous journey in completing my dissertation would not have been possible without the support of Cohort 9, who for the past 4 years has been a part of my family. I am blessed to be surrounded with wonderful colleagues who constantly provided encouragement and motivation throughout the process. Dr. Purrington, you truly are an exemplary professor, mentor, and leader amongst your colleagues and students. Your compassion, commitment, and genuine desire to help each and every individual is amazing. I would like to thank you from the bottom of my heart for constantly giving me the support and inspiration to finish my dissertation. Dr. Barner, thank you for always sharing your real life experiences and knowledge to make this subject applicable. Your insights have helped me tackle various conflicts and decisions as a principal. Dr. McCabe, thank you for being so helpful and understating throughout this process. I am truly grateful for your willingness to share your knowledge and time regarding my topic.

The research would not have been possible without the 17 students who volunteered their time to speak to me about their educational experiences. I am truly grateful for your willingness to contribute to my research and for providing me with your knowledge and perceptions.

VITA

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Options for Youth Charter School, San Gabriel, California   2008-2014
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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to explore and describe the

school factors experienced by students at an alternative high school with an independent study

program and a 90% CASHEE passage rate and to identify those factors, if any, that students

perceived as contributing to their improved academic performance. The school factors included:

the nature and quality of the school learning environment, learning experiences, program

interventions, and the independent study program. This study was guided by the following 5

research questions:

1. How do students who have been enrolled at SMHS for at least 1 year and who have

   demonstrated an increase in their academics view the school's learning environment?

2. How do students who have been enrolled at SMHS for at least 1 year and who have

   demonstrated an increase in their academics view the school's learning experience?

3. How do students who have been enrolled at SMHS for at least 1 year and who have

   demonstrated an increase in their academics view the school's program interventions?

4. How do students who have been enrolled at SMHS for at least 1 year and who have

   demonstrated an increase in their academics view the independent study program?

5. How, if at all, have these 4 school factors contributed to improved academic

   performance?

The research study examined 17 high-performing at-risk students' perceptions regarding

academic achievement and success within a charter school environment that utilized an

independent study format. This study's findings led to the conclusion that successful alternative

high school students perceived teachers as the most important school factor influencing their

academic performance. Specifically, teachers influenced student academic performance through

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1:1, caring, supportive relationships. Second, a physically and emotionally safe learning environment was found to be essential for at-risk students to feel comfortable and able to concentrate on their academics. Third, extracurricular activities such as sports and student council helped build student retention and motivation in school. Lastly, providing students with the guidance, opportunity, and support necessary to allow them to take charge of their own education and learning helped them to be more responsible and successful.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Background of the Study

   Declining K-12 student performance in the United States. K-12 student academic

performance has been declining in the United State since the 1970s and is slipping as compared

to other industrialized nations and many developing nations, such as China. Although the United

States invests more in public education than any other developed country, its students, by many

standards, are still poorly prepared compared to other industrialized nations. The International

Student Assessment collects data from 15-year-olds in science, English, and mathematics every 3

years and has recently found that United States students ranked 14th in reading, 25th in

mathematics, and 17th in science when compared to other developed nations (Crotty, 2012).

Moreover, United States ranked 21 out of 26 among developed nations for individuals graduating

from high school (Cardoza, 2012; Coughlan, 2012). Surprisingly, the United States is the only

major country in the world where the new generation might not be better educated than previous

generations (Coughlan, 2012).

   The low ranking can be attributed to an estimated 2,000 high schools in the nation that

have been labeled dropout factories (Tyler & Lofstron, 2009). These schools lack the

interventions and resources needed to help students who struggle with their academics and

cannot perform to the standards in the traditional classroom environment. Many of these students

drop out of school without the education they need to compete in a competitive world, which

will have a significant negative impact on their life (Tyler & Lofstron, 2009).

   Without a legitimate plan to fix the decline in quality of education and K-12 performance

in the United States, there is a serious risk that the United States will no longer be an economic

and military superpower in the future. Moreover, the lack of highly educated and skilled

individuals may endanger national economic security and threaten national competitiveness in the highly contending marketplace of the 21st century global economy. For example, 63% of the aerospace and science companies are currently lacking qualified workers to fill their positions due to educationally unprepared individuals who come from the American school system (Crotty, 2012). These data reveal the dramatic nationwide decrease in skilled workers in the United States due to the lack of academic preparation in K-12 public school systems.

Graduation and dropout rates in United States high schools. It is projected that one-third of high school students in the United States, at least 1 million a year, fail to stay in school, which carries a high cost not only for the individuals but also society as a whole (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2013; Tyler & Lofstron, 2009). Additionally, close to 40% of Hispanic and African American students fail high school, which is higher than the average dropout rate (Crotty, 2012). The most greatly affected cost to the student is in expected lifetime earnings, where individuals who are labeled as dropouts average 70% less in annual income than those who have a diploma. Furthermore, the increase in the dropout rate affects the community through higher crime rates (68% of inmates are dropouts), higher public spending for welfare and healthcare, and lower tax revenues (Tyler & Lofstron, 2009). Students who are unsuccessful in public education are labeled *at-risk* because they in danger of dropping out of school and choosing riskier paths in life (Slavin, Karweit, & Madden, 1989).

California high school academic progress. California has recently made gains by having 78.5% of students successfully graduate high school in 2013. Minority students still lag behind however, with only 65.7% of African Americans graduating and Hispanic students only doing slightly better at 73.2% (California Department of Education [CDE], 2013c). However, despite the increase in graduation rates and a decrease in dropout rates for California, the state

remains below average in the U.S., ranking 29th in the nation (America's Health Rankings, 2013). According to the Science and Engineering Readiness Index, which measures states' performance in math and science, California was ranked 34th, which gives it the rating of below average (Huffington Post, 2011).

Student factors that place students at risk. The most common student factors that indicate students are at risk include poor grades, lack of attendance, behavior problems, lack of skill retention at grade level, lack of basic literacy and numeracy skills, teen parenthood, and low socioeconomic status (Slavin et al., 1989). The at-risk student in today's educational environment is one who is likely to come from dangerous neighborhoods (Hardy, 2007). The word *dangerous* is used to convey areas known to have high levels of criminal activity or that are heavily influenced by gang activities. According to Slavin et al. (1989), at-risk students are often surrounded by the social dangers that are common in low-income communities, where they encounter pressure to provide food, shelter, and a stable income. Equally important, individuals who are on the verge of dropping out of school are often involved in risky behaviors (e.g., sexual promiscuity, gang violence, drug abuse), or suffer from other problems, such as destitution and depression, and do not fit into the mainstream student community. Rumberger and Lim (2008) found that individuals from low-income families who chose or needed to work more than 20 hours a week to provide food for the family were more likely to give up on their education. Rumberger and Lim found that the most important predictors of the dropout and graduation rate were: the students' lack of engagement in their academic work, high absenteeism rates, and lack of participation in social and extracurricular activities.

School factors that may result in students being at-risk. Nelson Reidar (2011), who wrote and published *Education Malpractice*, found key factors in failing schools that caused

students to be indifferent to and apathetic about their education. First, weak school leadership caused by strong teachers unions and tenure was found to be a primary factor in failing schools because the principals lacked the authority to create positive changes within the school culture. Next, a lack of accountability and leadership leads to apathetic teachers who simply *show up* to work, lacking the dedication necessary to help the students succeed in their academics (Chavous, 2012; Koebler, 2011). Finally, the financial constraints on these schools result in a lack of resources to help students who are falling behind. Consequently, public schools have often become merely *dumping grounds* for at-risk students (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009). The main cause of the constraints is high student suspension rates, which average out to $110,000 in lost funds per student (Chavous, 2012; Koebler, 2011). Moreover, high stakes testing and new programs that schools have implemented in recent decades have essentially created more obstacles to completing school in the at-risk population, forcing them to experience failure and adding pressure to give up their education (Carr-Chellman, Beabout, Almeida, & Gursoy, 2009). As a result, the traditional learning environments in public schools have not been a good fit to help students who are struggling academically.

Public schools are struggling to keep pace with the transformation of student populations and have been less than successful in educating students from diverse academic, social, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009; Peterson, 2003; Quinn, Poirier, Faller, Gable, & Tonnelson, 2006). The heterogeneity of the populace is reflected in the K-12 student population, a population that is larger and more diverse than ever before. Currently, non-White students compose more than 50% of the student population in the states of New York, California, Texas, Hawaii and Mississippi, as well as in the District of Columbia, and the population of White students now makes up less than a quarter of the total population in the major

metropolises of the United States (Gollnick & Chinn, 2006). Moreover, as of 2006, one in 10 counties in the United States was found to have minority groups at or above 50% of the county student population (Center for Public Education, 2013).

Serving diverse student populations presents many challenges for educators in that schools serve students who reflect diverse ethnicities, cultures, languages, genders, sexual orientations, religions, abilities, and socioeconomic statuses (Gollnick & Chinn, 2006; Lindsey, Robins, & Terrell, 2009). Not all students can be taught the same way, as their backgrounds, values, and experiences influence the way they respond and learn in the classroom. Current challenges faced by public schools include, but are not restricted to, a need for teachers who are: multilingual, trained to teach English Language Learners, and trained to educate in a culturally responsive manner. Schools are accountable for the academic performance and wellbeing of all student with regard to test scores, graduation rates, and dropout rates, and need to address academic achievement gaps in minority groups that are under-performing that have been traditionally underserved (Center for Public Education, 2013). With regard to addressing achievement gaps and ensuring equity, schools need to consider numerous things including: diverse cultural practices, linguistic differences, religious practices, school discipline, interaction between males and females, and teaching appropriate values (Gollnick & Chinn, 2006).

Roles and relationship between traditional and alternative high schools. Students who do not fit the norm and encounter troubles in life may have difficulty adjusting to the school environment; they often find it difficult to concentrate on their academics (Payne, 2008). The students who enroll in alternative schools share behavior traits are often described as "cynical, suffering academic and behavior adjustment in school, possessing antisocial attitudes and behaviors, and having problematic relationships with both family and peers" (Quinn et al., 2006,

p. 11). In the United States, intervention programs for disadvantaged students have become more important as more at-risk children move through the public school system.

Public high schools in the United States who utilize the direct instruction format where the teacher primarily lectures while the students are expected to come together harmoniously as one unit is not a good fit for all students (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009). Students who do not fit the norm and encounter various troubles in life have a difficult time adjusting to this type of learning environment, which may hinder both their concentration on and the completion of assignments (Slavin et al., 1989). Students who have learning or behavioral disabilities often find this style of learning difficult and they usually need to make individualized adjustments to the curriculum and instruction (Hunt & Marshal, 2006).

Alternative high schools. Due to the growing population of failing students, school districts throughout the United States have established alternative and continuation educational settings as substitutes for the traditional school setting. Often these settings seek to change the student, the learning environment, and the instruction in order to create more effective ways of learning (Quinn et al., 2006). To run a successful alternative school and ensure that students receive enough instructional attention and support, Schargel and Smink (2001) recommended that a total school population not exceed 250 and class size be maintained at 10 students or less. Maintaining a positive school culture with teachers showing compassion, dedication, and high expectations for all students is essential to establishing academic success (Schargel & Smink, 2001). In terms of student learning, the school must provide flexibility in schedules, adapt to individual student learning styles, and provide a clear mission, rules, and regulations. Just like traditional schools, having parental involvement, strong leadership, and strong community involvement is essential to a successful alternative school (Reimer & Cash, 2003).

Great differences exist among public charter alternative high schools in California with regard to the quality of learning, performance outcomes, and academic achievement for all students. Students who are from less advantaged socioeconomic backgrounds, English learners, students who have been retained, and/or students who have diagnosed learning disabilities do significantly better in reading and math in alternative charter high school settings as compared to their counterparts in traditional schools in California (Credo, 2009). What is not known are the students' perceptions about which school factors motivate them to achieve academic success in a high-performing alternative school environment. Discovering these factors will allow teachers and parents in alternative high schools to understand specifically what at-risk students need in order to have them successfully move on to the path of graduation and college readiness.

Problem Statement

San Manuel High School (SMHS; a pseudonym that will be used to protect the confidentiality of the school, its students and its faculty) is a Title I public charter high school situated in the city of San Gabriel located 15 miles east of downtown Los Angeles. SMHS is open to all students who reside in Los Angeles county, a diverse area comprising a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds. The median household income for the county is $55,452 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). SMHS serves 1,200 students who typically reflect at least one or more of the following, at least at the time they begin there: behind in credits, having a sub 2.0 grade point average (GPA), teen parents, on probation, were expelled from their previous school, or need to work part- or full-time to support their families. Hispanic students comprise SMHS's largest ethnic subgroup at 65.3%, followed by White (non-Hispanic) students at 22% and African American students at 5.3%.

SMHS was created to serve students who are labeled dropouts or *at-risk*. SMHS has been relatively successful at ensuring that all students enrolled in their school have the opportunity to complete their missing credits, graduate from high school, and become college bound. Among the plethora of interventions available to them, students at SMHS are required to attend school at least twice a week for 2 hours and to meet individually with their teacher on a one-on-one basis. Additionally, with the blended program at SMHS, students work independently at home, work on courses online, attend small group instruction classes, and have the opportunity to partake in extracurricular activities.

SMHS successfully graduates around 550 students out of approximately 1,200 who matriculate every year from surrounding high schools. Of the remaining 650 students, 97% of them either return to their school of residence or choose to continue their education at SMHS. In addition, the dropout rate for SMHS is extremely low, with only 3% of the students withdrawing from the high school with no intentions of continuing their education. The February 2013 California State High Examination (CAHSEE) showed a 90% passage rate for both English and mathematics, which is comparable to high-performing students at high-performing high schools typically situated in affluent areas.

The school factors that contribute to the positive transformations of student performance and achievement have not been fully explored and identified. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to investigate student perceptions regarding the learning environment, their learning experiences, the quality of the independent study program, and intervention programs, and examine how these factors affected and contributed to their success and motivation, or the lack thereof.

Purpose

The aim of this transcendental phenomenological study was to explore and describe the school factors experienced by students at an alternative high school with an independent study program and a CASHEE passage rate of 90% and to identify those factors, if any, that students perceived as contributing to their improved academic performance. The school factors included: the nature and quality of the school learning environment, learning experiences, program interventions, and the independent study program.

Seventeen students were interviewed regarding their learning experiences. The students selected for interview purposes: had been enrolled in SMHS for at least 1 year, had an internal GPA of at least 2.75 (including only grades received from SMHS), had not received any truancies, and had participated in one or more school interventions.

Importance of the Study

The risk factors that cause students to become *at risk*, apathetic, and indifferent about their education, and ultimately drop out of school, are well known and have been used to predict students' development in school (Slavin et al., 1989). Less is known about factors that help students who are at-risk beat the odds and be successful academically. This study focused on the positive school factors that cause students to advance in their academics and become successful alternative high school students.

Studying student perceptions provides teachers and administrators with a clearer perspective on the school factors that are more or less effective in preventing at-risk students from dropping out. Schools are aware of the effects of risk factors for students; however, providing other teachers with strategies to help students overcome these barriers and be successful will be the primary benefit resulting from this study. The information and insights

gathered from this study may help other high schools, both alternative and traditional, in their efforts to address the achievement gap and graduation rates of under-performing high school students, particularly those from the most at-risk ethnic, racial, and disadvantaged populations.

The outcomes of this study may provide other schools with information that will help them to change their school learning environments, improve instruction, and implement interventions in order to provide the support necessary to engage struggling students who are falling behind an ensure that they are on the path towards graduation. Successful methods to help at-risk students graduate may benefit both individual students and society in general. It is necessary to help all at-risk students who attend an alternative program to enroll in a classroom environment with the appropriate learning and interventions that will fit their needs. In addition, students will benefit from the study and provide a sense of hope to obtain a high school diploma in a non-traditional setting.

Numerous quantitative studies have shown the negative factors that contribute to why disadvantaged students are struggling in school. Additionally, various quantitative studies have identified interventions that have been successful in various degrees, ranging from minimal and moderate to productive (Rossi, Stringfield, & Daugherty, 1997). However, there has been a lack of qualitative research examining what the at-risk student feels, experiences, and perceives in regard to motivation and academic achievement. Having students express their genuine feedback in regard to effective and ineffective tools, strategies, instruction, and interventions will be a great contribution to the professional literature in the field of secondary education.

The study is important at this time because currently in the United States, 22% of high school students are failing to complete their high school education, with graduation rates especially low for individuals coming from low-income families and minorities (Salmon, 2013).

With rising global competition, the future of the country depends on the population keeping up with the times. It is essential for the survival of all academic institutions that teachers create a safe learning environment that enhances the development of students' academic abilities. Numerous challenges and hurdles hinder the academic achievement of disadvantaged students before they even get the chance to concentrate and set their minds on learning. Consequently, it is essential that educators emphasize the significant factors that may influence and encourage at-risk youth to succeed. Public schools are pressured to meet Academic Performance Index (API) and the Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) requirements. However, with the at-risk population not meeting the standards, these students often end up in alternative programs or even dropping out of school (Llanos, 2009).

Operational Definitions

Learning Environment: The physical space, furniture, and design of a classroom situated in a K-12 public school setting.

Learning Experience: Obtaining students' feedback regarding their involvement in the schools relating to school interventions and instructional practices that have motivated them in their academics.

Independent Study: As the nature of independent study dictates, students are not required to attend school every day. Instead, they meet with their teacher for at least 2 hours a week, with a 1-hour appointment on each of 2 days. A typical student-teacher meeting consists of: a review of the student's unit assignments; clarification of the curriculum; answering questions; teaching supplementary material; an analysis of the student's knowledge by a variety of student assessments including, but not limited to, a course paper, unit test, or portfolio presentation; or a combination of these assessment measures.

Interventions: According to Blankstein (2010), "the most effective schools provide a ladder of opportunities for struggling students, ranging from identification of students needing extra support before the school year begins to mandatory enrollment in remedial and/or skill classes" (p. 128). Schools providing students with both interventions and prevention plans help ensure that students do not fail.

Student Motivation: According to Lepper (1988), motivation is the individual's yearning to learn and partake in the educational school setting. Students may all be encouraged and inspired to complete an assignment; however, the source of their motivation may vary. An intrinsically motivated student who partakes in an activity will do this for the pure enjoyment of working and completing the task. Conversely, a student who is extrinsically motivated seeks rewards or incentives or seeks to avoid consequences.

Key Terms

Academic Yearly Progress (API): Each year schools are measured on their performance through the API index, which is based on the results of yearly standardized testing (CDE, 2013d).

Alternative Education: A substitute for traditional schools, catered to those who are at risk of dropping out of high school. Today, these schools help students who are credit deficient catch up on their credits and graduate from high school (Hefner-Packer, 1991).

At-Risk Youths: According to Payne (2008), students who are identified as *at-risk* are on the verge of failing and dropping out of school. The most common characteristics include one or more of the following: low socioeconomic status; single parent households; English learners; students with disabilities; pregnancy; drug addiction; gang affiliation; and poor reading, writing, and numeracy skills.

California High School Exit Examination (CAHSEE): Since 1999, all high school students in California must satisfy the CAHSEE requirement of passing both the English-language arts (ELA) and mathematics tests by showing proficiency. In addition to completing state and local graduation requirements, the student must also pass the CAHSEE in order to receive a high school diploma (CDE, 2013d).

Challenging Goals and Effective Feedback: Teachers communicating high expectations to students and providing timely feedback on academic progress (Marzano, 2003).

Dropout: Any student who leaves schools for any reasons other than death prior to graduation without transferring to another institution or school to continue their education (CDE, 2013d).

Dropout Factories: Public schools who predominantly serve minority and low income students with few resources and inexperienced teachers, which results in low academic performance and high dropout rates (Tyler & Lofstron, 2009).

Guaranteed and Viable Curriculum: Students are taught clear objectives and standards with ample amounts of instructional time necessary to cover all the information in the classroom (Marzano, 2003).

Internal GPA: Grade point average received at the current high school or institution.

Safe and Orderly Environment: To produce an effective learning environment, the school must be safe and enforce consistent rules, guidelines, and consequences (Marzano, 2003).

Student Academic Achievement: According to Blankstein (2010), five different categories of academic achievement can be assessed by looking at the students' unit tests to compare with previous semesters:

- Using the course completion report to analyze student grades;

- Outcome of state tests, compared with the past years' results along with those of similar schools;

- Engagement with student activities, as analyzed by the attendance and participation report of each event;

- Graduation rates gathered from the grad list report; and

- Students' completion rate of rigorous courses and college prep classes.

Teacher Collegiality and Professionalism: How students perceive their teachers at school and how they interact with one another (Marzano, 2003).

Traditional School: A factory style model where all students of the same age sit in a classroom where they are expected to learn as one unit with the teacher strictly delivering the information in a lecture-like format (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009).

Conceptual Framework

The Marzano (2003, 2012) model of factors affecting student achievement provided a framework for this study. More specifically, the school factors component of the Marzano model informed the guiding research questions. The overall model consists of three types of factors that affect student achievement: school, teacher, and student. School factors include: a guaranteed and viable curriculum, challenging goals and effective feedback, parent and community involvement, safe and orderly environment and collegiality, and professionalism. Teacher factors include: instructional strategies, classroom management, and classroom curriculum design. Student factors include: home environment, learned intelligence and background knowledge, and student motivation.

Of the five school factors, four were focused on and utilized to generate guiding research questions. First, the school factor of a safe and orderly environment led to the guiding research

question of wanting to know how students perceived their school learning environment and overall school climate. Second, the learning experience school factor led to the guiding research question that sought students' feedback concerning their involvement with the school curriculum and instruction in an alternative high school setting. Third, the quality of the independent study school factor led to the guiding research question that solicited students' perspectives regarding how the school program assisted students by providing challenging goals and effective feedback. Fourth, the program intervention school factor led to the guiding research question that sought students' perceptions of school resources, instructional practices, and activities that help students with content mastery. Marzano's model of factors affecting student achievement are discussed in more detail in Chapter 2.

Research Questions

Five research questions guided this study:

1. How do students who have been enrolled at SMHS for at least 1 year and who have demonstrated an increase in their academics view the school's learning environment?

2. How do students who have been enrolled at SMHS for at least 1 year and who have demonstrated an increase in their academics view the school's learning experience?

3. How do students who have been enrolled at SMHS for at least 1 year and who have demonstrated an increase in their academics view the school's program interventions?

4. How do students who have been enrolled at SMHS for at least 1 year and who have demonstrated an increase in their academics view the independent study program?

5. How, if at all, have these four school factors contributed to improved academic performance?

Limitations

One limitation of this study was the selection of a relatively small number of students gathered from a single school during one term in an academic year. The findings may not be generalizable to the student population or to students in similar school settings. Another limitation was the interview process during which misinterpretations of the questions may have occurred. Furthermore, the researcher had little control over participants' comfort level and their ability to provide clear, detailed responses to the questions. Students may have responded in a positive manner when discussing topics pertaining to their teachers and the programs at the school in order to appease the researcher. The participants' experiences, feelings, and responses may have varied due to this reality. However, the researcher did everything possible to encourage students to be authentic, candid, and honest in their responses by assuring them that their identity would be protected.

Delimitations

The delimitation of this study was that only successful high school students from two alternative charter high schools who had an internal GPA of 2.75 or higher and who had not received any truancies were included in this study. The study only looked at students who had been enrolled at the school for a minimum of 1 year, performed well in their academics, and participated in the school interventions. Moreover, out of the seven school sites in the chartering district, two of the schools were used to gather the sample size because these school sites were within the boundaries of Los Angeles county. Also, out of the five categories of Marzano's school levels of effectiveness (Marzano, 2012), four were chosen, with *parental and community involvement* intentionally eliminated because SMHS lacked the parental support, association, and participation within the school.

Assumptions

The researcher assumed that the students would be able to describe the school learning environment, their learning experiences, independent study program, and program interventions to the best of their ability and as accurately as possible. Additionally, the researcher assumed that the students understood the differences between the variables being discussed in the research questions. Because of the safe learning environment and the rapport they had with the staff at the school, the students should have been open, candid, and honest with regard to their descriptions and shared perceptions. Lastly, the researcher assumed that the nontraditional format used by the alternative program had the potential to produce positive results in the student's academics.

Organization of the Study

The research study is presented in five chapters. Chapter 1 of this study focused on introducing the background of the problem and described the central problem in detail as well as the design of this phenomenological study. Chapter 2 presents a review of the literature and provides evidence and resources associated with the problem and the purpose of the study. Chapter 3 describes the research design as well as the methods and data collection procedures. Chapter 4 presents the data analysis and outcomes of the research study. Chapter 5 provides summary and discussion of the entire research study, implications for practice, and recommendations for future research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Increasing numbers of alternative high school programs in the United States successfully retain and graduate underachieving students who matriculate from local high schools each year (Credo, 2009). A need and opportunity exist to study what is working in those schools that have demonstrated success in moving at-risk students toward academic achievement. Researching and identifying practices that have been successful in retaining and graduating underachieving students might provide the opportunity for other traditional and alternative high schools to replicate research-based practices and seek similar outcomes. This study intended to describe school factors through a student's lens. Specifically, this study sought to explore and describe the school factors that students at an alternative high school with an independent study program perceived as contributing to their improved academic performance. The school factors included: the nature and quality of the school learning environment, learning experiences, the independent study program, and program interventions.

This chapter presents a comprehensive review of the literature and is organized into six sections. The first section discusses the theoretical framework for this study, Marzano's (2003) factors that affect student achievement, in more detail. The second section introduces a historical overview of the evolution of public education and alternative charter high schools in the United States. Sections three through six address four school factors that affect student achievement: (a) learning environment, (b) learning experiences, (c) intervention programs, and (d) independent study. Finally, this chapter concludes with a summary.

Conceptual Framework

Factors that affect student achievement. Robert Marzano (2003, 2012) generated a framework that outlined the three categories of factors that are essential to successful student

achievement: teacher, student, and school. Teacher factors include: instructional strategies, classroom management, and classroom curriculum design. Student factors include: home environment, learned intelligence and background knowledge, and student motivation. Of the five school factors, four were explored in this study and utilized to generate guiding research questions: a guaranteed and viable curriculum, challenging goals and effective feedback, safe and orderly environment and collegiality, and professionalism.

School factors. Through his research and experience during the past 30 years, Marzano (2003, 2012) has worked closely with countless schools, teachers, and students throughout the United States in order to develop the framework. Marzano discovered that in order for a school to run effectively, it must follow school guidelines and school-wide decisions. Another of Marzano's discoveries was that schools must continue to monitor their progress and quickly make changes and adjustments when their performance begins to show signs of weakness. When schools begin to address each school factor, they will show positive gains in moving all students toward academic success.

For this research, only four of the five school factors from Marzano's (2003, 2012) framework were used to help inform the study as well as the creation of the research questions. Moreover, the research was used to explore and describe the school factors that students at an alternative high school with an independent study program perceived as contributing to their improved academic performance. The school factors included in this study were: (a) the nature and quality of the school learning environment, (b) learning experiences, (c) program interventions, and (d) the independent study program.

Students at SMHS had experienced all four factors and could provide feedback on the learning environment, their learning experiences, and their perceptions of the independent study

program and its various interventions. However, the *parental and community involvement* factor was not used for the study because SMHS lacked any type of formal parental support, association, and participation within the school. Because of the student population that was being served, many of the parents or guardians were either apathetic, did not have time due to long hours of work, or were uninvolved in their children's education. For this reason, it was anticipated that students would indicate that parents did not participate within the school. Moreover, the school has no partnership with community organizations, and therefore the community involvement piece was not used for the study.

Safe and orderly environment. Marzano (2003) discussed two primary school factors relating to the school climate and environment of the school: physical safety and consistent rules. Marzano stated that the school must create a learning environment that is safe, organized, and orderly, which would give students the psychological vitality to participate in classroom learning. Having a school that is unsafe and is predisposed to violence encourages absenteeism and truancies, therefore resulting in lower student academic performance. Therefore, for this study, the research questions focused on student perceptions of the school physical environment in terms of safety, comfort, and cleanliness. In a productive school climate, there must be clear rules, regulations, and expectations for student behaviors. Furthermore, the school must make sure they establish and enforce consequences to maintain consistency with the guidelines. Because of the importance of following rules, the research questions focused on how school rules and regulations are enforced and keep the students feeling safe and secure in the learning environment.

Teacher collegiality, and professionalism. Another school factor that deals with school climate is how students perceive their teachers at school and how they interact with one another

(Marzano, 2003). Seeing teachers working together, seeking support, and being sociable is essential to getting students to behave. For this reason, the research questions provided students with the opportunity to give feedback on the school climate and their impressions of teachers' behavior and professionalism.

　　　　Guaranteed and viable curriculum. The most effective school factor that impacts student academic achievement, which Robert Marzano (2003) called a guaranteed and viable curriculum focuses primarily on two areas: *time* and *opportunity to learn* (OTL). Students must have the opportunity to learn the standards, content, and information that are expected of them through the school curriculum, which must be *guaranteed*. What this means is that as the state and school district give clear objectives on what specifically needs to be taught to the students at each grade level, teachers must follow through with the guidelines and not ignore or change the content. Due to the length of the textbooks, different teachers often skip different sections, thereby causing confusion for future teachers in knowing what their students have or have not covered. Moreover, having a viable curriculum coincides with time, which is also essential to student achievement. Teachers must have an adequate amount of instructional time to fully cover all the information. However, not all classroom time is used strictly for instruction. Instead, non-instructional activities, various types of disruptions, and breaks that replace some of the classroom time.

　　　　Lastly, the curriculum used in the schools needs to fit nicely within the school day, ensuring that the content being taught is addressed in the amount of time available for all students (Marzano, 2003). For the study, the research questions focused on students' learning experiences, seeking their perceptions of the school curriculum and instructional practices, and their absorption of the material. This was important because many at-risk students lack basic

foundations for their academic work. Therefore, getting the students' feedback on an effective curriculum and coursework that engages and motivates them will be highly beneficial to teachers.

Challenging goals and effective feedback. Finally, the last school factor is the overall quality of the school in terms of how it helps students to achieve content mastery through goals and effective feedback (Marzano, 2012). A successful school is one where teachers communicate high expectations to students and help them meet all requirements to move on to the next grade level. Marzano (2003) concluded that students need to be pressured to achieve challenging goals. Therefore, an effective school provides students with opportunities to work on advance prep curriculum, as well helping students move toward college or vocational school readiness (Marzano, 2012). Students need to be given timely feedback on their progress and coursework. This should also be accompanied by effective monitoring to make certain that students understand the subject matter and complete their assignments with quality. The school should provide flexibility in the pace of the students' learning and education, allowing them to have ample time to complete their assignments, accounting for their needs and backgrounds. In addition, the school needs to provide other resources and instructional styles to fit the students' needs, such as online or technological components to help students do their assignments (Marzano, 2012).

For the study, Marzano's (2012) factor of challenging goals and effective feedback was dissected into two subfactors. The first category of questions focused on students' perceptions of the quality of independent study as it relates to teacher expectations and communication as well as the flexibility of the program. The second category of questions focused on the interventions that Marzano described as other resources and instructional styles (Marzano, 2012). This is

important because the public sees SMHS only as an independent study school that helps students to become independent achievers. However, people do not realize that the school offers a wide variety of interventions. These interventions have only been analyzed for their effectiveness through the use of qualitative data. However, no one has sought the students' qualitative opinions on how they feel about the programs as well as their feedback to improve student engagement in these courses.

Historical Background

The creation of the public school in safeguarding democracy. Thomas Jefferson believed that the United States, which is based on the foundations of freedom and democracy, must have a population that is able to read, write, and debate (Oakes & Lipton, 2003). He wished to eliminate elitism and promote meritocracy, creating an education system for all citizens in order to have an equal chance for everyone to develop the skills necessary to advance through the social hierarchy of the country (Spring, 2004). Therefore, Jefferson maintained that the government should provide at least 3 years of schooling to prepare individuals for citizenship. However, only the most talented of this group would be chosen to further their education (Oakes & Lipton, 2003; Spring, 2004).

Standardizing the public school system. Horace Mann, known as the father of public school education, amplified Jefferson's dream by creating a *one best system* in 1837 to facilitate cultural diversity and individual uniqueness (Public Broadcasting Service [PBS], 2001). He believed that Americans needed to develop a sense of uniformity and patriotism that would help bring students of all backgrounds and social economic status together to obtain an equal education (Oakes & Lipton, 2003). The idea was to create a common school, enabling all

students from all religions, backgrounds, and social classes to have the same education (Spring, 2004).

Experiential education. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, John Dewey's progressive notions of education reminded Americans that the educational system should emphasize creating free and independent thinkers in the U.S.'s democratic society. He believed that teachers should give children guided experiences, real-life tasks, and challenges to foster their capacity to contribute to society. John Dewey believed the most important attitude for students was the desire to learn by taking control of one's own education (Goodman, 1999).

Expanding visions of public schools in the 20th century. As the population of the United States expanded and evolved during the 20th century, there were many changes in public education, reflecting changing needs and values. In the early 20th century, there was a large influx of immigrants from Europe arriving on a daily basis. Consequently, schools during that time emphasized preserving the American culture, which was called *Americanization*. This meant teaching immigrant students the language, habits, and values of Protestant Anglo-Saxons (Oakes & Lipton, 2003).

During the 1920s, the economic boom in the United States shifted the focus of public schools to supporting the American economy by preparing students with the knowledge and skills to enter the workforce. During the 1950s, when Russia launched Sputnik, the first satellite, into space, United States public schools moved to a 12-year education format, focusing on helping students to work on rigorous courses, most importantly in mathematics and science (Oakes & Lipton, 2003).

In the 1960s and 1970s, the nation was dealing with racism, inequity, and poverty. During this time, the country was striving for equal access and equal rights, ensuring that

integration was a part of all public schools (Lindsey et al., 1999). Additionally, public schools worked to solve social issues by teaching traditional values, sex education, how to become a good a citizen, and drug education (Oakes & Lipton, 2003).

During the 1980s the well-known *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) report held public schools accountable for what was perceived as the downfall of the American economy. As a result, schools shifted their focus in boosting international competitiveness by having students take more rigorous courses in math, social science, English, and computer literacy. In 2001, President Bush enacted the *No Child Left Behind Act* to assist in closing the achievement gap by increasing school accountability through student testing (Gollnick & Chinn, 2006).

Formation of alternative school programs. Changes were also occurring in the realm of alternative schools, which were first established when President Johnson established a war on poverty in the United States by enacting the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965*. At this time, a new wave of alternative schools began to be established all over the nation, with the goal of providing equality to all students, specifically the at-risk and minority population. These alternative schools were called *Open Schools*, and were characterized by students having autonomy in their learning, evaluations that were non-competitive, and a student-centered approach (Lange & Sletten, 2002).

Variety of alternative programs. During the 1970s, the Open School approach created the following programs: schools without walls, where the community assisted in teaching the students; schools within a school, where large high schools were converted into smaller learning communities; multicultural schools, which focused on culture and ethnicity in their academics; continuation schools, which created an alternative education setting for those failing high school;

learning centers, which provided students with resources for particular needs; fundamental schools, which emphasized establishing basic skills and rudiments; and magnet schools, which were created to attract students from diverse groups (Young, as cited in Lange & Sletten, 2002).

Today's role of alternative schools. During the 1980s, the definition of *alternative school* began to shift from a school that was progressive and sought change to one that was conservative and remedial (Young, as cited in Lange & Sletten, 2002). The alternative schools at that time were becoming known for serving disruptive students, those who were credit deficient, and thus went to school primarily to focus on the basics. Today, alternative schools are generally categorized as one of the following: school of choice, seeking an alternative setting from traditional schools; last chance schools, a last resort for students who have behavioral issues, and remedial focused schools, to help students who are credit deficient and need additional academic support (Raywid, as cited in Lange & Sletten, 2002).

Many students may not function well in a traditional setting and educational system in public schools. Thus, the development of alternative high schools is essential to keep those individuals from failing. They provide these students with a sense of hope on the road to obtaining a high school diploma in a non-traditional approach. Because of the smaller class sizes in the alternative schools, at-risk students get more attention from their teachers and have more opportunities to connect and be acknowledged as individuals rather than as an outcast (Stits, 2001).

Learning Environment

Today schools are becoming outsized and more diverse than ever before. However, they are also becoming more susceptible to the formation of unsafe environments where students experience teasing, bullying, gangs, violence, and marginalization from peers. Large school sizes

have also been described as impeding students' social abilities and limiting the amount of meaningful conversations and personal contact with one another as well as with teachers. The negative school climates in urban, low-performing schools are encouraging students to become aggressive and creating fear through intimidation and harassment (I. Rose, 2009).

Schools in the United States need to be viewed as safe places for students to experience learning in an environment free of violence and delinquency. In 2011, the National Council for Education Statistics (NCES) published a national survey of secondary schools. NCES found that, in 2010, an estimated 828,000 students in the United States, ranging from the ages of 12-18, experienced victimization and anxiety caused by theft and violent crimes. The NCES reported that during the 2009-2010 school year, 85% of U.S. public schools reported that they had experienced at least one criminal incident, which added up to approximately 1.9 million crimes. Moreover, in the same year, 28% of students experienced bullying either every day or on a weekly basis. Gang activity has also been a concern on campus, with at least 20% of students experiencing this inside the school walls. In the 2007-2008 school year, 39% of secondary teachers believed that misbehaviors and absenteeism affected their teaching. Additionally, 56% of the teachers felt that the rules were being enforced by the faculty, not the administrators, which showed a lack of consistency and stability.

Safe learning environment. Schools situated in urban neighborhoods have a large demographic of students who are low-income and working class, and who experience a different environment than schools located in suburban areas (Gollnick & Chin, 2006). For this reason, school may be the only place for students to go to that is safe from the crime, abuse, and violence they experience when they are out of school. In order to provide a safe learning environment, teachers need to be vigilant at the schools. The faculty needs to work on being present

throughout the campus and making an effort to patrol the hallways in between classes, which will foster a caring and safe environment (Ekland & Gilby, 2009; Parrett & Budge, 2012). One tactic to providing students hope and raising motivation is to accept and welcome them unconditionally, which makes a big difference (Ekland & Gilby, 2009). Personally greeting as many students as possible on a daily basis and developing relationships with each students helps lift the students' spirit (Curwin, 2010). Consequently, students will take pride in their school, and treat others with respect because they see the staff as accessible and approachable rather than as merely a disciplinary force (Ekland & Gilby, 2009).

School safety comes in many forms, and teachers must do all they can to ensure that students do not need to worry about their personal safety while on campus. Likewise, students should also be able to learn in a safe and open learning environment and have the freedom to express their ideas, questions, and opinions in class (Dusenbury, 2012). It may be extra work to create a classroom that is caring and safe. However, the benefits of doing so will help decrease stress and increase the energy available to focus on instruction. When students are situated in a nonthreatening learning environment, they feel safer, are more settled, and are better behaved (Ekland & Gilby, 2009).

School rules and discipline. The common practice for teachers attempting to run an efficient classroom is to confirm that there are clearly set rules, regulations, guidelines, and expectations for students (Hue & Li, 2008). Additionally, thousands of educators have been taught *assertive discipline*, which aims at establishing clear rules in class, with steps leading to consequences when students break them. Many teachers will find that assertive discipline is useful for behavioral management, but the beneficial outcomes are generally short-lived, thus causing more problems within the classroom (Oakes & Lipton, 2003).

The learning environment needs to focus on student behavior in order to ensure that those who are unmotivated and have low self-esteem are provided support and assistance. To make sure students follow the rules, each teacher needs to make an effort to communicate with each student to so that he/she understands the purposes and consequences of violations (Hue & Li, 2008). However, according to the National Research Council (NRC, 2003), consequences such as suspension or expulsion are generally ineffective, especially for those students who are already apathetic and disengaged from school. Schools need to create a climate of trust and take a proactive approach to sustaining order and collaboration.

Emmer, Everston, and Worsham (2003) described William Glaser's therapy model as one that relies on establishing a caring rapport with students and focusing solely on their behaviors. Additionally, the model works in having the student be accountable for his/her actions, working on developing an action plan, getting a commitment to follow the new plan, and then following up with the plan. The authors have found the model is an effective way to deal with disruptions and misbehaviors in the classroom. School needs to be a democratic institution, giving autonomy and voice to the students. It is counterproductive for schools to discipline students who do not follow rules with hard measures (Bulach, Lunenburg, & Potter, 2008).

Having students involved in the creation of the classroom rules is a good way to ensure that everyone has buy-in and also helps to eliminate any irrational consequences (Good & Brophy, 1997). Instead of controlling student behavior, students can take ownership of themselves, feel empowered, and have a feeling of autonomy (Bulach et al., 2008; Emmer et al., 2003). Students will buy into the guidelines when they help establish the rules and are given responsibility for implementing them (Tomlinson, Brimijoin, & Narvaez, 2008). Doing so will

lead to students caring about the school and about each other. With a student-controlled culture, students' behavior as well as student achievement will show improvement.

Nonetheless, many students still have low expectations for academic success and purposely misbehave in order to gain control of the classroom. Instead of giving them detention or suspension, which is counterproductive, schools should give these students more opportunities to be included in school functions, duties, and activities (Curwin, 2010). This can be done by providing meaningful tasks such as tutoring other students, helping to monitor the playground, lunchroom duty, or. having these students work with the lower grade levels to tutor and mentor students during their suspension periods. These kinds of tasks will ultimately foster positive attitudes for these students (Curwin, 2010). Also, teachers need to make sure to reflect and focus on their instructional practices and content, as teachers who make their lessons interesting rarely have to deal with discipline problems in the classroom (Oakes & Lipton, 2003).

Teacher relationship. Teachers need to help change the learning environment through their exemplary actions and positive personalities. Teachers can do this by creating a welcoming environment for all students, emphasizing strong values as a replacement for rewards and punishments, seeking students' feedback for ways to resolve problems, and moving away from the mindset of consequences to one that develops teamwork and collaboration in the school (NRC, 2003). Moreover, students will be intrinsically motivated to learn and be successful in the classroom when the teachers make sure that the students feel secured and valued, regardless of their level of academic ability (Stipek, 1998). In order for students to participate fully in academics, the teacher will first need to make sure that the classroom environment is open, friendly, warm, and supportive. This kind of environment cannot exist if the teacher and the students are not working in harmony. Having trust and rapport is essential to creating a safe

learning environment; without it, neither the students nor the teachers will make the effort to do quality work (Sullo, 2007).

A caring learning environment lessens stress, anxiety, and delinquency levels in school, which results in better mental health and academic performance. There are three main components of having a positive school environment. The first is ensuring that students know that their teachers genuinely care about them and their success in their academics (Tellett-Royce, 2008). This can be done by setting expectations high for all students and giving them the support they need to meet those expectations (Parrett & Budge, 2012). The second component is a culture of encouragement, from not only their teachers but also the entire faculty as a whole, from the cafeteria people to the janitors to the administrators (Parrett & Budge, 2012; Tellett-Royce, 2008). Lastly, the third component is a caring school climate that includes all students, where they can support, help, and cheer each other on (Tellett-Royce, 2008).

The best way for students to own their success in the classroom is to have them first know what is required of them to obtain success and have them know that the only outcome in school is success (Hattie, 2009; Tomlinson et al., 2008). Teachers need to have a mindset that is geared toward seeking interventions and best practices that have positive outcomes on student learning (Hattie, 2009). A teacher with a primary objective of evaluating his/her effects on learning and instruction impacts his/her students learning by more than a year's worth of material in 1 year's time compared to the average classroom teacher (Hattie, 2009). It is critical to provide constant, useful feedback for students in order for them to continually make improvements (Hattie, 2009; Tomlinson et al., 2008). They must be taught how to make wise decisions and choices in order to become successful. By providing the students the skills necessary to become

successful and proving ample support, students will come to appreciate their accomplishments (Tomlinson et al., 2008).

   Physical layout of the learning environment. According to Barrett, Zhang, Moffat, and Kobbacy (2013), the students who learn in the best learning environment compared to those in the poorest classroom environment are expected to perform 25% better in their academics. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2006), 43% of the public schools in the nation have buildings and classrooms that interfere with teacher instruction and student achievement. The general ambience of the classroom should be a place that is safe and pleasant and that makes learning fun and enjoyable.

   Good use of space. The environment of the classroom has proven to affect students' behaviors and sends a message to those who visit the space. It is essential that the classroom space replicate the teacher's values and beliefs (Savage, 1999). Having clutter in the classroom will create distractions because students absorb everything around them and will become distracted during instruction (Anderson, 2010). In addition, having too many students in a classroom will have detrimental effects on learning, comfort, and concentration due to an increase of noise, pollution, heat, and humidity (Braster, Grosvenor, & Pozo, 2012). Seating arrangements must be safe and free from crowding to avoid creating disruptive behaviors (Hue & Li, 2008). They should also allow both teachers and students to have easy access to, interaction with, and communication with each other (Jones, 2000; Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010). The teacher's desk needs to be in a position where he/she can monitor the entire classroom, but it does not need to be facing the students (Hue & Li, 2008). Teachers need to make sure that they can be seen easily by their students for the purposes of managing, monitoring, and observing the classroom to make constant adjustments. If the teacher is unable to see all of the students, it will

be difficult to manage disruptions and also determine which students need support (Emmer et al., 2003).

 For optimal learning, it is recommended that the classroom environment be lit with natural light with a few windows open and the average temperature ranging from 66-68 degrees (Lederer, 2011). The countertop space by the window is a particularly good place to add plants or an aquarium to help provide a serene and tranquil feel for the students (Emmer et al., 2003; Hue & Li, 2008). Shelves, cupboards, and closet spaces needs to kept clean, organized, and tidy (Hue & Li, 2008). Materials and supplies should be placed where students can reach them easily, rather than in a far location, which may cause disruptions when students walk around (Emmer et al., 2003; Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010).

 Private areas. Teachers should work on having private areas within the classroom to allow students to work independently on their homework assignments. Additionally, having a separate place for students to read and reflect will help students find relief from stress or boredom (Hue & Li, 2008). These private areas should also include individual seats for students who need to make up work, who are having a bad day, who need to stay away from their friends, or who just need a place to think (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010).

 Wall space. Teachers need to understand that wall space is an important factor in the physical environment that can be used to display student work, maps, artwork, and bulletins (Hue & Li, 2008). White walls are not recommended; using soft, soothing, and gentle colors on the walls will help stimulate and encourage learning (Lederer, 2011). If paint is not available, teachers can use colorful paper to help brighten the classroom environment (Emmer et al., 2003). Also, the teacher can designate one wall for important information such as homework assignments, due dates, criteria for success, special events, and reminders, which will help the

students stay updated and on track (Emmer et al., 2003; Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010). Displaying high quality work on the wall that reflects the rubric and guidelines for assignments will help students know the expectations set forth for them by their teacher. Placing posters is a great way to decorate; however these images actually do nothing to promote success among students (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010). To celebrate success in the classroom, teachers should allow students to choose their best work to publish on the bulletin board (Erwin, 2004). However, it is advisable to not to over decorate the classroom, as it can make the room seem smaller and can also be distracting to students' learning (Emmer et al., 2003).

School cleanliness. Over 53 million students in the United States and 6 million teachers attend the country's 120,000 public schools, half of which have been labeled as unclean and unkempt. Many of these buildings have poor air quality and are densely populated, which creates health issues. Air quality problems cause students with asthma to miss approximately 14 million school days a year (Anderson, 2010).

According to Anderson (2010), students and staff perform well when classrooms are clean. Clutter attracts dirt, dust, and pests. Therefore, by eliminating clutter, the air quality in the room will improve. A clean environment improves attendance due to less sickness and improves all students' physiological wellbeing. With classrooms exemplifying cleanliness, students will learn to respect their surroundings. Additionally, clutter clearing lets students be accountable for their own mess and helps them learn to be organized.

Learning Experiences

Instructional practice. Many teachers are used to teaching just one approach: a direct instruction format where the teacher strictly lectures while the students listen attentively. Teachers need to step away from the monotone lecture format and move to one that is highly

stimulating. They should give lessons that are enjoyable and that encourage students to ask questions, which increases their concentration, critical thinking skills, and engagement in the classroom (Hue & Li, 2008).

The most important value and belief that underlies a teacher's approach to teaching is that previous knowledge and skills are used to provide support and scaffolding to the students. Furthermore, students need to overcome their limitations and achieve exellence via an atmosphere of inquiry conducive to learning and student interaction (Resnik, 1999). Moreover, Resnik (1999) stated that teachers need to frequently pose questions to the students to open communication and interactions in the classroom and be able to adapt to pupils' changing needs and limitations. Moreover, teachers need to ensure that there is a constant forum for assessment and feedback about the progress the pupils have achieved. Student must acquire knowledge as a result of understanding and benefiting from their teachers' experiences.

Meier (2000) noted that some teachers fail to understand that there are four different learning styles, referred to as SAVI. These are: (a) somatic, learning by doing; (b) auditory, learning by talking and listening; (c) visual, learning by observing; and lastly, (d) intellectual, learning by thinking. Therefore, when teachers have students work on a particular assignment, giving the students assorted opportunities to show their comprehension will provide a more complete picture of their knowledge and skills. Further, doing so gives the students a chance to demonstrate competency through their desired expressions, whether they do so orally, in writing, or even by drawing (Stipek, 1998). Students appreciate when teachers take time to understand their learning styles, which in turn helps teachers to become more flexible and adjust accordingly. Teachers who stay close to student progress have greater success in their instruction. Actively speaking with students regarding their interests, their learning preferences,

and what is or is not working is a great way to inform instruction. Also, it shows a lot when teachers act on students' suggestions (Tomlinson et al., 2008)*.*

A teacher must ensure that he/she provides differentiated instruction and alternative formats when giving directions to not only the struggling students but all of the students. Each student has a particular learning style, interests, and readiness level, and therefore each one needs proper support (Tomlinson et al., 2008). According to Emmer et al. (2003), there are various ways to instruct students: (a) recitation, or question and answer sessions; (b) discussion, or involving the whole classroom to engage in deep conversation; (c) seatwork, or having students work independently to reflect on what they learned; and lastly (d) cooperative group learning, or having students working together to achieve an objective.

Teachers need to provide students with flexibility in their time, work, space, resources, instructions, and opportunities to work with a variety of groups. A learning environment that focuses on student involvement through activities and cooperative learning must be implemented in order to promote participation for all students (Hue & Li, 2008). Students appreciate a teacher who builds community, models democracy in the classroom, and treats students with respect. With a positive, community-like atmosphere, students will learn to treat one another with respect, learn to help one another, build positive memories, and point out one another's strengths as opposed to weaknesses (Tomlinson et al., 2008). In a successful, engaging classroom, teachers can set up learning objectives, resources, and materials to ensure that all students are able to learn (Hue & Li, 2008).

Instructional practice is also influenced by teacher expectations. Not only does the teacher need to be aware of SAVI, he/she also needs to be aware of his/her own biases. Students who do not belong to the middle class are often viewed as incapable, incompetent, and inept.

Faculty often unconsciously blame students for their lack of ability, even if this is due to their socioeconomic status, and which in many cases represents circumstances that are beyond the students' control . However, students who belong to the upper middle class benefit greatly because teachers perceive these students as individuals who are capable of performing at a high level of academic achievement. Therefore, the teachers need to eliminate these self-fulfilling prophecies and cease making judgments on their students. Equal opportunity has been found to be one of the major factors in allowing disadvantaged youths to achieve academic success (Gollnick & Chinn, 2006).

Motivation in the classroom. Students are motivated and have the desire to learn when their teachers make the lesson interesting by using technology, games, and multimedia, and making real-life connections (Brophy, 1987; Hue & Li, 2008). Using physical games during instruction allows students to develop social skills, become more energetic, and learn to enjoy the class (Erwin, 2004). To make the learning meaningful and engaging, the activities should be based on topics that reflect connections to popular culture and students' own lives and experiences (Karin, 2012). Moreover, creating moderate tension in the class by discussing current events, exploring political perspectives, and inciting healthy debates can create a stimulating environment where students will sustain concentration and engagement (Hue & Li, 2008). However, teachers need to ensure that there are specific learning goals in place during their instruction. Teachers often focus on learning activities but students do not always understand what they are supposed to be learning and what the teachers' goals are (Westerberg, 2009). To create an aspiring classroom, the teacher must present the instructional materials in meaningful and joyful ways (Erwin, 2004).

Students will be motivated intrinsically when they are given the freedom to make decisions in school, such as a choice of assignments, books to read, topics to write, alternative assessments (Erwin, 2004). Moreover, having a combination of both the teacher and the students making choices in the classroom is also beneficial. It is important to have the teacher regularly assign work to students to help them move forward in their academics. Likewise, it is good to empower students to help make choices regarding their education such as projects, activities, and assignments (Tomlinson et al., 2008). Providing choices for students helps to create independent achievers and responsible decision-makers. Furthermore, the freedom will increase learning because students will learn to take risks, be creative, and begin to learn to use their strengths (Erwin, 2004). When teachers set the bar high with all their students, the classroom environment and student learning and behavior are impacted tremendously (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968).

Teachers need to recognize students accomplishments so students can feel positive and continue to be encouraged to learn difficult topics (Resnik, 1999). The teacher can provide external motivation to continually push students to do well in the class (DuFour, Eaker, Karhanek, & DuFour, 2004). According to DuFour et al. (2004), some of the components used in the classroom to impact student learning and interest can be in forms of rewards such as gift certificates, inclusion in the honor roll, food, music and other big ticket items that motivate the students.

Independent autonomy. Autonomy is one of the important foundations when increasing a person's intrinsic motivation (Pink, 2009). Pink (2009) claimed that "autonomous motivation promotes greater conceptual understanding, better grades . . . higher productivity, less burnout and greater levels of psychological well" (p. 89). Similarly, according to Brehm (1966), when a

person's freedom and autonomy are taken away, he/she will likely react by entering a psychological state of reactance and resisting others' influence.

Providing students with autonomy, as opposed to limiting students' freedom at school, can be detrimental, according to Jack Brehm (1966), who believed that people are motivated to rebel when they perceive a threat to their behavioral freedoms. According to Brehm, people enjoy the freedom and autonomy to behave in a certain way to meet their needs and objectives. Brehm explained that free behavior can be "engaged in either at the moment or at some time in the future" (p. 379). When people notice that their free behaviors are being restricted and reduced, they will begin to feel an intense motivational state called *psychological reactance*. Rules and regulations are acceptable as long as they are fair and equitable. However, if people believe there are unfair constraints on their actions, "they will be motivated to attempt to regain the lost or threatened freedoms by whatever methods are available and appropriate" (p. 384).

Both Brehm (1966) and Pink (2009) similarly emphasized that applying consequences and restraints consequently promotes negative actions rather than encouraging favorable behaviors. Pink suggested that punishments eliminate an individual's intrinsic desire to do well. Additionally, when penalties are enforced on a behavior, there will be an act of disobedience, thus likely causing an increase of the undesirable behavior. Likewise, Brehm established that when people are being coerced to follow a set of ideas and behaviors, they will respond negatively by doing the opposite. Brehm affirmed that constraints infringe on a person's freedom of choice. John Wooden (2005) summarized these ideas, noting that punishments invoke a sense of fear in the team, which eliminates a person's self-esteem and confidence to be his/her best at his/her task.

Schools with a culture that places a heavy emphasis on control, with strict rules, a lack of independence, and coercion generally underperform. Students need to enjoy coming to school, learning, and having the freedom to think and express their opinions in class. The teacher still has the power to intervene; however, students are responsible for learning how to help one another and following rules. Students know what undesirable behavior as well as appropriate behavior look like. Further, students should know that they have the power and responsibility to intervene when their peers are misbehaving (Bulach et al., 2008), and they should not be afraid to do so. Having both the teacher and students take responsibility for teaching and learning makes the classroom run more efficiently.

Curriculum. The public school curriculum has been influenced by various political groups, businesses, and organizations that want schools to teach what they desire in order to serve their own particular interests (Spring, 2004). According to Spring (2004), four major curriculum categories are fighting for dominance in the United States. First, the social-efficacy curriculum is the most popular in schools where the purpose is to serve the needs of the economy and prepare students for the workforce. Second, humanists want students to learn the cultural and historical traditions of society. Next, social workers want the school curriculum to improve social welfare and seek ways to solve problems affecting the nation such as drugs, alcohol, and AIDS. Finally, the developmentalism curriculum, which is the most radical, seeks to foster the psychological development of the child.

Generally speaking, student curriculum should not be just about looking for the answer and memorizing facts. It needs to include the following so that students can achieve academic success (Erwin, 2004): (a) learning how to read, write, listen, and speak; (b) learning how to reason by comparing, analyzing and classifying; (c) learning how to problem solve by making

decisions, investigating, and experimenting; (d) learning how to think critically; (e) learning how to think creatively; and lastly (f) learning how to lead and to work in groups.

At-risk students will benefit when the traditional curriculum engages students by reflecting their culture and heritage. Curriculum needs to feature positive references to ethnic diversity and not a focus solely on the dominant group. Disadvantaged students will achieve success when their teachers challenge them to work with rigorous curricula that are aligned with clear standards and benchmarks (Gollnick & Chinn, 2006).

Intervention Programs

Because the United States continues to have a large number of students dropping out of high school and schools are failing to create changes for the wide variety of students (Crotty, 2012), the U.S. Department of Education (2013) has given school districts that are eligible for Title 1, part D, program authorization to provide interventions for students who are delinquent and neglected. These intervention programs, which are created and implemented by each individual school or school district, must help improve the educational services to at-risk youths in order to meet the state academic requirements, provide students with services to transition from school to the workforce, and most importantly prevent students from dropping out.

In order to implement successful programs, states and local districts have utilized the Response to Intervention (RTI) Framework developed by the National Center on Response to Intervention (NCRTI, 2010). Educators who use RTI monitor student progress in the school, which allows them to identify students who are underperforming. Schools will then use evidence-based intervention programs to provide support to the at-risk students and make adjustments regularly depending on changes in the students' behavior (NCRTI, 2010; Sprague,

2006). Likewise, students who show negative behaviors will be evaluated and then provided with evidence-based practices to help diminish the undesirable behaviors (Sprague, 2006).

Targeted interventions. Even with the freedom to create interventions for students, school districts need to realize that the programs they implement do not need to be a one-size-fits-all approach aimed at helping all students succeed; rather, they are part of an evolutionary approach that is cyclical, reoccurring, and focused on those students who are most at-risk (Sonoma County Office of Education, 2006). Because the complexity of the dropout factor in the nation, it is important that school districts follow a unique framework for interventions to support their students.

According to the Sonoma County Office of Education (2006), the intervention cycle must consist of the following:

1. Screening: Identifying the students who are at risk and who need the most assistance through testing.

2. Diagnosis: Diagnosing and assessing students to find out what specific content or skills they lack.

3. Instruction: Using specific instructional strategies, materials, and delivery to help the students understand the content.

4. Monitoring: Monitoring student learning and understanding periodically to see how they are doing.

Similarly, the RTI approach covers four essential components (NCRTI, 2010).

1. Multi-level prevention system: The first step involves clear, meticulous, quality instruction to the students. The second step includes using more evidence-based practices with regular intensity. The last step involves a high level of intensity through

individualized interventions for students who show little to no progress in the second step.

2. Universal screening: Schools will provide assessments to identify students who are at-risk of failing.

3. Progress monitoring: Schools will monitor students' academic progress and responsiveness to the classroom instruction.

4. Data-based decision making: The data driven decision-making process happens at all the levels of the RTI and instruction.

Dynarski, Gleason, Rangarajan, and Wood (1998) argued that selecting the perfect intervention program takes a great deal of time, resources, and investment, which can take a toll on the students, teachers, and school environment. The National High School Center (2013) recommended that the school create a *decision table* to help the school leadership select the correct program based on six practices: data driven leaders, mentors, academic support, behavior interventions, learning environment, and rigorous courses.

Data driven. The school must work to obtain the data and information necessary to understand the dropout problem. This can be done by identify each student's risk of dropping by looking at items such as student attendance, grades, and behavior issues (Dynarski et al., 1998, 2008).

Mentor programs. These types of programs have adult advocates who are trained to work with students in order to create meaningful relationships with students that provide them with the mentoring and support necessary to meet their academic needs (Dynarski et al., 1998). These advocates can also assist with the students' emotional and personal needs (Dynarski et al., 1998, 2008; National High School Center, 2013).

Big Brothers Big Sisters. The Big Brothers Big Sister Program (BBBS) is a non-profit organization, with more than 500 agencies. Its main emphasis is on working with underprivileged students ranging from the ages of 6 to 18, specifically those living in single parent households. The main strategy of the program is to provide students with a stable mentor who works one-on-one with the individual, offering support, guidance, and attention for at least a year (BBBS, 2013; Pearson, 2013; Richardson, 2007).

The mentors are consistently monitored by program supervisors and have been through a highly rigorous screening and training process (Herrera, Grossman, Kauh, Feldman, & McMaken, 2007). These volunteer mentors see the child at least 3-5 hours a week, acting as caring adults who do activities such as walking, playing sports, and working on homework (BBBS, 2013; Promising Practices Network, 2013). Studies have shown that through this program students who had a working relationship with a mentor were 46% less likely to use illegal drugs, 52% less likely to be truant from school, and 33% less likely to start a physical altercation (BBBS, 2013; Promising Practices Network, 2013). The elementary students were found to have developed more confidence in their schooling and to develop better relational skills with their families (BBSS, 2013).

The Promising Practices Network (2013) suggested that individuals who were in the program had a slightly higher GPA than their peers, with an average of 2.71 compared to the control group of 2.64. Overall, a study by Herrera et al. (2007) found that this program works and gave it a "*proven*" rating, indicating that students involved engaged in fewer violent acts, were less likely to do drugs, had better attendance, and performed up to their grade level.

Boys and Girls Club of America. The Boys and Girls Club of America (BGCA, 2014) is an organization that works with youths from the ages of 6 through 18 who come from

households with little to no adult supervision. The purpose of the program is to work with these disadvantaged youths after school and on weekends in order to provide a safe and a fun environment for them with other peers, mentors, and caring adults (Pearson, 2013; Richardson, 2007).

BGCA (2014) offers a wide variety of programs to students that meet each individual needs. The club offers more than 25 programs in the areas of education, leadership, physical fitness, career, life skills, the arts, health, gang prevention, recreation, and the environment. The youth have a plethora of opportunities to help develop a variety of skills, improve their reading, have the opportunity to be leaders and tutor younger students, or just to come to the local BGCA site and use computers and other technology to which they do not have access at home (BGCA, 2014; Healthy Sonoma, 2014).

Students enrolled in the BGCA gang prevention program have been found to be less likely to wear gang colors, less likely to be sent to court, less likely to do drugs, and more likely to improve in school and become more positive and successful in relationship building with others (Healthy San Bernardino County, 2014). Moreover, students enrolled in Project Learn, which is designed to help at-risk youths improve their academic performance, had better overall scores in reading, spelling, history, and science (Healthy Sonoma, 2014). Moreover, they had better attendance and better results than the control group in most areas of school (Healthy Sonoma, 2014).

According to the results by BGCA (2014), the statistics have shown that students involved in the program had a 92% completion rate in their homework assignments, a 90% high school graduation rate, and a higher chance of earning a college degree. Moreover, BGCA has shown that 91% of participating students were better able to resist drugs and alcohol, 62% were

more committed to their education, and 45% have said that the club helped them graduate high school. A survey conducted in the spring of 2013 with 10% of the youths in the program found that 91% indicated that they were at grade level, 78% were engaged in activities within the club, 93% participated in a physical activity, and 88% reported that they were *doing great* (Boys and Girls Club of Virginia Peninsula, 2014).

   Check and Connect program. According to the Coalition for Evidence-Based Policy (2012), the Check and Connect program is designed to help prevent underprivileged youths in grades K-12 from dropping out of school by helping them develop their academic and social skills. The program works with mentors, also known as monitors, who work with a group of students and their families over time in order to assess student learning in school, their grades, and their behaviors, and provide the resources necessary to support their needs. Moreover, the monitors work to ensure that the students stay on track by assessing their academic progress and providing timely feedback and encouragement (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). The monitors meet with the students weekly to talk about various topics that may stand in the way of graduating, such as conflict resolution, problem solving, and making responsible decisions (Coalition for Evidence-Based Policy, 2012; Pearson, 2013; Richardson, 2007).

   A study done by Sinclair, Christenson, Evelo, and Hurley (1998) found that students enrolled in the Check and Connect program after the first year of high school had 91% better retention, 85% had more consistent attendance, and 68% were on track to graduate. Overall, students enrolled in the program had better rates of attendance, better academic standing, fewer truancies, less tardiness, and lower dropout rates (Pearson, 2013; Richardson, 2007; University of Minnesota, 2014).

Academic support programs. The school will need to offer additional support for at-risk students in order to improve their academic performance. This can be completed through means of tutoring, credit recovery, and small group instruction (Dynarski et al., 1998, 2008; National High School Center, 2013).

Class-wide peer tutoring. Class-wide Peer Tutoring (CWPT) is an instructional intervention that assists students in their academics by giving them the opportunity to respond to the group while receiving immediate feedback. Unlike traditional peer tutoring, which is designed to help students obtain answers and also to help clarify questions, CWPT is designed to allow all students in the classroom the opportunity to practice basic study skills at least four times a week (Rathvon, 2008). Each student works as a tutor to other students to make sure they are well prepared for their examinations the upcoming week.

The reason for the program's success is in part due to the nature of incorporating both competitive and collaborative structures. The tutoring pairs are grouped in teams earning points. According to Rathvon (2008), students who were involved in this type of intervention were more likely to engage in their academics and less likely to drop out of school when compared to students who did not participate in CWPT.

Academic Alternative program. The Putnam County School District, located in Florida, initiated the Academic Alternative program with the purpose of fostering credit recovery and providing hope to those students that had fallen behind in school (Pearson, 2013; Richardson, 2007). Students who are a few units behind have the opportunity to surpass the six-unit maximum per year (National Dropout Prevention Center, 2014). Moreover, students who are 16 years old and are still in the seventh, eighth, or ninth grades are allowed to enter a pre-GED exit program (National Dropout Prevention Center, 2014).

Grade Forgiveness program. Lastly, there is an after-school program called Grade Forgiveness that helps students with failing grades to make up their work so they can get their credits. The program has shown promising success in Putman County, Florida, with the graduation rate increasing from 49.51% in 1995 to almost 80% in 2003 (National Dropout Prevention Center, 2014). The dropout rate in this county went from the highest in Florida to just only 1.5%, the lowest in the state (Pearson, 2013; Richardson, 2007).

Early college and middle college programs. Early college and middle college programs are small blended programs where students receive both a high school diploma and 2 years worth of college credit for free. These types of programs prepare students for college by giving them the preparation, experience, and support they need to graduate (Early College Design, 2013). These programs are designed to help students graduate high school, eliminate problems with the transition from high school to college, and help them to overcome any financial barriers they may have in getting into college (Early College Design, 2013; Grulke, 2014). Of the students involved in these programs, 23.3% of them obtained an associate degree, with 77% of the students going on to postsecondary education (Early College Design, 2013).

Doyle (2005) reported that a growing number of students are making the choice to move away from the traditional high school environment to an alternative setting called *middle colleges*. At middle college, students receive their high school diploma as well as their associates degree or vocational certificate after their 13th year, rather than the traditional 12 years of high school (Doyle, 2005; Grulke, 2014). The extra year gives at-risk students more time to make up their high school credits, earn college credits, and develop job skills based on their career interests (Doyle, 2005; Grulke, 2014). According to the Middle College National Consortium (2014), the data have shown that in the 2007 and 2008 academic years, schools using this method

experienced an attendance rate of 95%, a course passage rate of 90%, and an average GPA of 2.71.

Behavior interventions programs. Having programs such as community service, volunteering, and counseling in the school improves student social and classroom behavior. These opportunities can help students learn how to make healthy choices, think critically, and be motivated to pursue their goals (Dynarski et al., 1998, 2008; National High School Center, 2013).

Quantum Opportunity Program. The Quantum Opportunity Program (QOP) is an after-school program that caters to at-risk students by providing them opportunities for advancement through developmental, academic, and community service-oriented activities (Schirm, Stuart, & McKie, 2006). The program provides mentors who serve as role models, tutors, and case managers (Pearson, 2013; Promising Practices, 2013; Richardson, 2007). The students engage in at least 250 hours each year of community service, education, cultural awareness, and other activities as a means of encouraging students to do better in school and reduce risky behaviors (Promising Practices, 2013).

Posner and Vandell (1999) conducted a study on QOP and found that students in it had better relations with their peers and were more emotionally fit. When compared to the control group, the students involved in the study for 4 years had higher graduation rates (63% compared to 42%), were more likely to attend a college (42% compared to 16%), and were less likely to withdraw from school (23% compared to 50%).

Teen Outreach Program. The Teen Outreach Program (TOP) is a program that serves 50,000 students nationwide by helping them develop life skills, healthy behaviors, and purpose in life (Advocates for Youth, n.d.). The strategy involves students doing at least 20 hours of

volunteer work. They are guided by a 9-month curriculum that works to help students in the following areas: making healthy choices, goal setting, human development, influences, improving communication skills, and becoming empowered to lead successful lives (Promising Practices, 2013).

The purpose of the program is to help students develop a better image of themselves, to increase their academic success, learn life skills, and create a successful plan for their future (Advocates for Youth, n.d.). According to the Wyman Center (n.d.), students involved in the program were 52% less likely to receive suspension, were 60% less likely to fail in their courses, had a 53% lower risk of becoming pregnant, and lastly, 60% of the students have a lower risk of failing and dropping out of high school.

Valued Youth Program. The Coca-Cola sponsored Valued Youth Program (VYP) program has helped more than 14,000 students nationwide stay in school with the strategy of having secondary at-risk students help elementary at-risk students with their academics (National Center on Secondary Education and Transition [NCSET], 2014; Pearson, 2013; Richardson, 2007). The goal of the program is to diminish dropout rates by empowering at-risk students to mentor other students in order to build their confidence and self-esteem (NCSET, 2014).

The instructional strategies for students to become successful tutors are to enroll them in special tutoring classes, have them partake in tutoring sessions, pair them with mentors, enable them to earn recognition, and have them attend field trips (Intercultural Development Research Association [IDRA], 2014; NCSET, 2014). Once the tutors complete their training, they are then sent to tutor up to three elementary students for at least 4 hours a week (NCSET, 2014). Tutors also partake in Youth Leadership Days where they meet with other tutors from different schools and participate in team building and leadership activities (IDRA, 2014). The benefits for the

students are that they are paid minimum wage and are also recognized at the year's end for their accomplishments in helping others (NCSET, 2014).

The tutors involved in the VYP program are often recognized for their efforts, which leads to an increase in their confidence and pride and in turn helps them become more dedicated to their academics, become less involved in bad behavior, and have higher attendance rates (Coalition for Evidence-Based Policy, 2012; NCSET, 2014). According to IDRA (2014), for the students participating in the 2005-2006 school year, the overall dropout rate was 8%. Students also had higher reading levels and better attitudes about school (Pearson, 2013; Richardson, 2007). Moreover, 98% of the students who became tutors remained in school and did not drop out (NCSET, 2014). Moreover, the students improved their basic study skills and perceptions about themselves and the school (IDRA, 2014).

Project Graduation Really Achieves Dreams. Project Graduation Really Achieves Dreams (Project GRAD) is an organization that works with inner-city schools and caters to low-income and minority students (Pearson, 2013; Project GRAD, 2011; Richardson, 2007). The goal of the organization is to prevent dropouts and increase college enrollment in the schools by fostering college readiness awareness, academic support, and parental involvement. GRAD sends *College Readiness Advisors* to schools; these individuals act like coaches, offering academic counseling and college workshops (Project GRAD, 2011). The program also encourages students to attend college by offering scholarships to students who meet the following criteria: graduate on time, do a set number of math classes, have a minimum GPA, and attend two summer programs sponsored by GRAD (Pearson, 2013; Project GRAD, 2011; Richardson, 2007). The summer programs help students visit colleges, obtain tutoring, and prepare for the PSAT and the SAT exams (Project GRAD, 2011).

In 1993, Davis High School in Houston, Texas, where Project GRAD was founded, had 80% of students on free and reduced lunch programs and the highest dropout rate in the region at 18%. It was called a *dropout factory* by the U.S. Department of Education. It is now considered a national model with a 3.4% dropout out rate (Project GRAD, 2011). Two inner city schools in Knoxville, Tennessee, Austin East and Fulton, had a graduation rate of less than 50% in 2001; however, after the implementation of Project GRAD over a 12-year period, the graduation rate has increased to 83% (Project Grad Knoxville, 2013). The overall consensus in the GRAD research and evidence clearly shows gains in math and reading test scores and college enrollments, and a decrease in the number of behavior issues at school (Pearson, 2013; Richardson, 2007).

Schoolwide interventions to improve the learning environment. Schools need to create an atmosphere where individuals can feel a sense of belonging, where there is a culture of collaboration and support. Schools can use practices such as small learning communities and team-teaching classes to provide encouragement (Dynarski et al., 1998, 2008; National High School Center, 2013).

School Transitional Environment Project. The School Transitional Environment Project (STEP) is designed to help students in large, urban, lower socioeconomic status areas to diminish the amount of stress in their environment by providing the students a calmer and more supportive working place at school (National Dropout Prevention Center, 2013; National Institute of Justice, 2014). STEP strives to create a place where students feel safe, can learn to work together, create accountability for themselves, and understand school rules and regulations (National Dropout Prevention Center, 2013).

The key components of STEP are taught in the student's homeroom each day through interaction with the homeroom teacher. The cohorts of each homeroom will be together throughout the year as well as in their core classes. The homeroom teacher acts not only as an educator but also as a mentor, friend, and counselor who keeps track of student attendance, issues, and problems (Pearson, 2013; Richardson, 2007).

According to the National Dropout Prevention Center (2013), STEP students had better attitudes about school and increased their overall performance in school compared to a control group. Moreover, STEP students had better attendance, better grades, and better control of their behavior, and were less likely to drop out of school. Lastly, students in STEP had lower levels of psychological distress, depression, poor self-esteem, and anxiety (National Dropout Prevention Center, 2013; Pearson, 2013; Richardson, 2007).

Rigorous courses. Students need to have high expectations and be challenged in their studies. These will ultimately help them engage them in their coursework and foster the development of the skills necessary to go to college (Dynarski et al., 1998, 2008; National High School Center, 2013).

Gear Up program. The Gear Up program in California is funded by the U.S. Department of Education through a 6-year grant. It strives to help low income students develop college readiness and awareness by providing them with prep courses that help them meet the admissions expectations of colleges and universities. Gear Up's action plan involves first having the leadership team develop a school culture promoting college readiness. Secondly, the school will provide challenging courses to all students with timely support for struggling students. Lastly, it provides academic, college, and financial aid for all students. Forty-two schools were involved in the program in California from 2005-2011. Statistics show that the number of

students taking advanced courses increased by 10%; additionally, there was a 76% increase in students completing academic counseling, a 79% increase in attendance at college meetings, and a 103% increase in the number of students taking the PSAT (California Gear Up, 2014).

Advancement Via Individual Determination Program (AVID). The Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) program uses a system designed to increase student academic performance and help students obtain the skills necessary to prepare them for college through the use of rigorous college prep courses (Pearson, 2013; Richardson, 2007). Typically, the students chosen to partake in the program are first generation college attendees, coming from low-income or minority families, and are categorized as being in the *middle* (meaning they are B, C, or even D students; Brandywine School District, 2014; CDE, 2013a). Instead of putting students in slow-paced remediation classes, AVID looks to position the students on an accelerated track that will help them meet the requirements for college (Advancement Via Individual Determination [AVID], 2014; Brandywine School District, 2014; CDE, 2013a). The students will do this by taking all college prep courses in addition to an AVID elective class taught by a trained AVID teacher (Brandywine School District, 2014).

Students in the AVID program partake in an AVID elective class in order to provide them with life learning skills such as critical thinking, questioning, and reasoning (AVID, 2014). Moreover, AVID helps students learn to work collaboratively with their peers and lean on each other for guidance (Brandywine School District, 2014). Family engagement occurs in AVID, with the teacher working with counselors to help students and families work on college applications and look for scholarships to pay for school (Dare Country Schools, 2014; Pearson, 2013; Richardson, 2007).

The program uses mentors and tutors who are made widely available to help students succeed. To engage the students, AVID uses classroom speakers as a support. These speakers come to the school to share their stories and insights, which in turn encourages students to pursue their dreams and goals. The AVID program and its teachers work continuously with other teachers to make adjustments and improvements in the curriculum, instruction, the classroom and school environment, and learning methodologies (Dare Country Schools, 2014). AVID strategies include using *active learning*, which is the use of several instructional practices that allow students to take responsibility for their learning by doing various activities (Bonwell & Eison, 1991; Pearson, 2013; Richardson, 2007). Examples of active learning include games, labs, simulations, role-playing, debating, and engaging in case studies (Bonwell & Eison, 1991).

Currently, the AVID program serves an estimated 700,000 students in 4,900 schools nationwide, as well as in 16 other countries (AVID, 2014). According to the CDE (2013a), over 110,000 students in the AVID system in California since 1990 have graduated. Of those students, approximately 89% completed California's A-G requirements for college, with 74% of them being accepted to a 4-year college (CDE, 2013a). The most recent nationwide survey conducted in 2012, with 33,204 seniors responding, found that 98% indicated that they planned on graduating high school and 90% indicated that they would be attending a postsecondary establishment (AVID, 2014). Moreover, the data reported that 73% of AVID students have taken at least one rigorous course, whereas 61% have taken at least one advanced placement (AP) exam (AVID, 2014). The overall research and evidence has shown that most students in AVID increased their overall academic performance, were less likely to drop out, increased their chances of enrollment in college, and increased their participation in AP classes (Pearson, 2013; Richardson, 2007).

High Schools That Work. High Schools That Work (HSTW) is a program that believes all students are able to endure rigorous coursework and classes on career-oriented subjects if the school can create a motivating environment to help students aim for success (Pearson, 2013; Richardson, 2007; Southern Regional Education Board [SREB], 2009b, 2014). The key goals of the program are to allow teachers to set high expectations for students in their instruction as well to provide frequent feedback for continuous student improvement (SREB, 2009b, 2014). Each student in the program is required to take at least one rigorous course to help perpetuate the goal towards going above and beyond their expections (SREB, 2009a, 2014). Within the instruction, the teachers teach more real life problems, scenarios, and content to help prepare students for the workforce (Pearson, 2013; Richardson, 2007). Students engage with one another in order to tackle challenging tasks and obtain extra assistance when needed (SREB, 2009a).

Greeneville High School in Greeneville, Tennessee is noted for using the key practices of HSTW and has implemented the following measures that have increased graduation rates:

1. A credit recovery program, where students met for 2 hours a week after school to make up failing grades (SREB, 2009b).

2. The *Graduation Access Program*, which attempts to provide students a different route to a high diploma (SREB, 2009b).

3. The *Success Academy*, a freshman academy where students work together with those in their grade level to help create a smoother transition to high school (SREB, 2009b).

4. The *Power of I* grading policy, meaning the student gets an incomplete if he/she does not meet the expectations and will be given the opportunity to make up the work by going to tutoring to pass the class (SREB, 2009b).

Dalton High School in Georgia, which had a 56.5% graduation rate in 2003, utilized the HSTW key practices of upgrading the curriculum, adding career courses, and providing extra support in the school. They saw a sharp increase in the graduation rate to 77.4% in 2008. The school achieved this by eliminating remedial, low-level classes and expecting all students to take a college prep-level curriculum. The key practices also allowed teachers to work collaboratively on an ongoing basis to deliver the most effective instruction and create support systems for those students to help them meet high standards and deliver the most effective instruction . Students who did not have sufficient basic skills were placed in special math or English classes so they could get extra support. Lastly, the school created more career-technical classes for students to be more involved in school so they could earn certifications and determine what they wanted to pursue after high school (SREB, 2009a).

Independent study programs. The factory model style classroom that was originally inspired by Horace Mann during the early 19th century effectively taught students in America for many years. However, in 1983 the United States government declared that the nation was at risk of declining due to significant problems in the education system (J. Rose, 2012). As an alternative to traditional schools and educational practices, in 1976 federal legislation created an independent study program to help serve students, such as actors and athletes, who were not being well served by traditional schools (CDE, 2013b). Since then many schools and schools districts throughout the country have implemented a variety of such programs.

Independent study programs have evolved into serving students who have medical issues, are currently working, are teen parents, are gifted, or are credit deficient (CDE, 2013b). They have helped students who feel too disconnected, uninterested, discouraged, or scared about the school environment and the instructional practices to succeed in the traditional classroom

(Nason, 2008). The student in the program works independently with the teacher's guidance and does not go to class every day with other students because he/she generally works at home (CDE, 2013b; Nason, 2008).

Independent study is an alternative instructional model that is flexible regarding the students' needs, interests, and learning styles (CDE, 2013b). For this reason, students must create a checklist of when, where, and how to study. In an independent learning situation, it is important that the student have a calendar with a clear study timetable, exam timetable, and homework timetable. Time management is all about making lists and prioritizing tasks (Burns & Sinfield, 2012). Amanda Morin (2012) stated that having good time management and study skills involves creating a calendar, using a weekly planner, and creating a daily checklist to ensure deadlines are met.

When compared to traditional learning environments and programs, independent learning provides the student more freedom and flexibility in his/her academics (CDE, 2013b). Independent study allows the student to explore other opportunities, projects, and interests that would be much more difficult if he/she was placed in a traditional school setting. According to Nason (2008), although students work independently, they remain eligible to receive the services and benefits that the school district has to offer, such as sports programs, music, counselors, school psychologists, and libraries.

Opportunities for Learning. Opportunities for Learning (OFL, 2013) is a for-profit charter school that has an independent study format where students come to school at least twice a week to meet with their teacher to guide them in their studies, create an individualized plan to graduate, and receive personalized mentorship. Because the majority of the students in OFL had been at risk of dropping out of their previous schools, the teachers work rigorously to develop a

plan of action to remediate the student and provide motivation, encouragement, and a style of instruction that fits his/her needs. Additionally, the independent study model is designed to help the student become responsible in his/her academics, develop time management skills, learn to be an independent achiever, and prepare him/her for postsecondary education. OFL works to create a safe learning environment by eliminating the obstacles and challenges associated with traditional schools that make it difficult for students to succeed. With the students working with a teacher, student advisors, and tutors one-on-one, these support staff help the students to attend school year-round, allowing them to learn continuously at their own pace.

With an at-risk population of 74.1% of the students in free and reduced-fee lunch programs, the Opportunities for Learning Baldwin Park charter school has seen gains in the API year after year, increasing from 615 in 2008 to 726 in 2013 (CDE, 2013d; OFL-Baldwin Park, n.d.). There was a modest gain in math proficiency for the California Standards Tests (CST) from 19.1% in 2009 to 21% in 2013 and an increase in English proficiency from 29.5% in 2009 to 40.6% in 2013 (OFL–Baldwin Park, n.d.).

Fusion Academy. Fusion Academy (2014) is group of private schools in California that utilizes an independent study program. Students meet with a teacher on a one-to-one basis, working with different teachers who are experts in their subject matter. The students work with the teachers at their own pace, benefiting from a personalized style of teaching that ensures they move on to the next section when the they reach proficiency. To obtain extra support, students can have access to tutors on site and are encouraged to complete all homework at school with the supervision of a teacher. Lastly, students have a mentor and a therapeutic professional to ensure that the they are motivated and encouraged throughout their educational experience at Fusion.

The founder, Michelle Gilman, estimated that at least 70% of the students enrolled will attend a 4-year college or university (Boyette, 2012).

   Online instruction. Karin (2012) has stated that in order to have students become intrinsically motivated in school, learning activities need to be relatable to the students' lives, such as using pop culture, new technology, and the students' culture. Stipek (1998) recommended giving students alternative learning activities that will help them to understand the subject matter and demonstrate competency. Students in today's society are very much influenced by technology, smart phones, iPads, YouTube, and computer devices (NRC, 2003).

   Online schools are on the rise, with 70 online charter schools and online district schools serving an estimated 24,383 students in California alone (Keeping Pace With Learning, 2013). There are schools such as the California Virtual Academies (CAVA, 2014), a network of free public *virtual* schools, where students work on their curriculum and interact with their teachers online as opposed to receiving instruction directly from a physical school. Students each have an individualized learning plan in which they work independently at home for 4-6 hours a day with the support of their teachers, counselors, and other staff through the Internet. To help students with socialization, the school offers field trips and other social outings for students on a consistent basis.

   Similarly, other promising computer-based instruction programs that cater to students who are falling behind are offered by Educational Options, Inc. and Novanet, which are organizations that provide schools with internet-based curriculums and assessments (Edoptions, 2012; "Novanet Courseware," 2014). Educational Options has helped more than 250,000 students who previously struggled with work in a classroom to fulfill their credits through online learning, which in turn has helped them graduate from school (Pearson, 2013; Richardson, 2007).

Moreover, Novanet provides supplementary coursework to help students recover lost credits, prepare for state testing, and engage in online learning from home. It has been demonstrated that students in many schools who partake in Novanet have improved test scores, higher self-esteem, and reduced dropout rates ("Novanet Courseware," 2014).

Summary

This chapter introduced the issues that affect student achievement based on Robert Marzano's (2003) model of factors affecting student achievement in order to help provide a theoretical framework for the dissertation. Additionally, the chapter presented a detailed historical background describing the evolution of the American educational system. The chapter then delivered an overview of the literature referred to during this dissertation research. It began with a review of the learning environment, noting that providing students with an environment that is safe, clean, and conducive for learning will create a positive impact on the student. The chapter then explored how having various modes of instruction with rigorous curriculum can provide students with a positive learning experiences. The chapter then concluded with an examination of several intervention and independent study programs considered important for improving at-risk students' motivation and deemed effective at helping them accomplish their learning objectives.

Chapter 3: Research Design

San Manuel High School an alternative charter high school program in Southern California, successfully retains and graduates students who matriculate every year from surrounding high schools. SMHS students are considered at-risk students who were identified as low-performing and underachieving prior to enrolling at SMHS. The progress and successful accomplishments of these students has been carefully monitored and documented at SMHS. However, what has not been fully explored and described are the school factors perceived by students as having made the most significant contributions to the positive transformation of their performance and achievement. The opportunity exists at SMHS to investigate influences that contribute to improved student academic performance and achievement.

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to explore and describe the school factors experienced by students at an alternative high school with an independent study program and CASHEE passing rate of 90% and to identify those factors, if any, that students perceive as contributing to their improved academic performance. The school factors examined were: (a) the nature and quality of the school learning environment, (b) learning experiences, (c) program interventions, and (d) the independent study program.

The following five research questions helped provide focus for the gathering of the information and brought insight to the case study:

1. How do students who have been enrolled at SMHS for at least 1 year and who have demonstrated an increase in their academics view the school's learning environment?

2. How do students who have been enrolled at SMHS for at least 1 year and who have demonstrated an increase in their academics view the school's learning experience?

3. How do students who have been enrolled at SMHS for at least 1 year and who have demonstrated an increase in their academics view the school's program interventions?

4. How do students who have been enrolled at SMHS for at least 1 year and who have demonstrated an increase in their academics view the independent study program?

5. How, if at all, have these four school factors contributed to improved academic performance?

Chapter 3 includes a review of the research methodology of the study, the setting, and the population, the sample, and sampling procedures. In addition, this chapter includes the human subject considerations, instrumentation, and instrument validity. Lastly, the chapter offers an explanation of the data collection procedures, data management, data analysis, and positionality of the research and researcher.

Research Methodology

This study utilized a qualitative transcendental phenomenological research design. John Creswell (2012), the author of *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design*, described the five qualitative approaches used for research as narrative, ground theory, ethnography, phenomenology, and case study. All of these designs are very different from one another, each having its own strengths and weaknesses.

Contrasting from the other research designs, the phenomenological study offers a strong foundation and groundwork in philosophy. Historically speaking, this type of study has been often used in the areas of health sciences and sociology to understand human or *lived* experiences. A key component that makes phenomenological research stand out from the other four approaches is that phenomenology studies "several individuals and their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon" (Creswell, 2012, p. 76).

The researcher's objective in a phenomenological research study is to explore the single idea or concept by asking subjects "what they experienced and how they experienced it" (Creswell, 2012, p. 76). An example of the phenomenological idea can be the psychological concepts of *happiness* and *hope*. Another distinctive characteristic of phenomenological research is the notion of *bracketing* or *epoche*, meaning that the researcher shares his or her personal experiences so that he/she can "partly set them aside so that the research can focus on the experiences of the participants in the study" (Creswell, 2012, p. 78). Unlike narrative research, which focuses on one or two individuals, phenomenological research looks at a relatively small and heterogeneous group of individuals, all of whom have encountered the same experience.

The researcher had the option of implementing two different approaches to phenomenological research: the hermeneutical and the transcendental. The hermeneutical approach attempts to study the interpretation of texts, whereas the transcendental approach looks more at the description of the individual's experiences (Creswell, 2012). For the purpose of this study, the transcendental research approach was used to study the subjects' lived experiences at an alternative high school in order to help describe what factors they perceived as contributing to their improved academic performance.

A challenge one may encounter when implementing the phenomenological approach is that it takes time for the researcher to locate individuals who have experienced the same phenomenon. Another challenge is that data analysis in a phenomenological study may be too structured for some researchers (Creswell, 2012). Lastly, someone who has a hard time grasping philosophical ideas may struggle to find and describe key ideas and concepts.

Setting

The planned research site was San Manuel High School for the 2013-2014 school year. The school used a blended model where students learned their coursework through small group instruction, online classes, and independent study. The small group instruction classes had an average of 10 students where students learned to collaborate and work closely with their peers 4 days a week for 2 hours on each subject matter. The small group instruction typically covered the core classes, namely math, science, and English. Students also took courses online that allowed them the flexibility to read, watch, and learn at home. Lastly, the independent study format allowed the students to meet with their teacher twice a week for 1 hour to ask questions, review homework, and have meaningful conversations. All students who enrolled at SMHS were expected to be on the A-G path, which denotes the high school courses needed to be completed in order to attend a California State University or University of California institution.

SMHS is situated in the city of San Gabriel, located 15 miles east of downtown Los Angeles. It is a Title I public charter school that is open to students who reside in Los Angeles county. The community of San Manuel resides in Los Angeles county, a diverse area with a wide variety of socioeconomic backgrounds. The median household income for the county is $55,452. The ethnic breakdown of Los Angeles county as compared to SMHS can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1

School and Community Demographics

Ethnicity	County of Los Angeles	San Manuel High School
Caucasian	28.4%	25.7%
Hispanic	48.0%	59.0%
African American	9.3%	6.0%
Asian	13.4%	1.1%
Multiple or No response	0.9%	8.2%

The enrollment for SMHS has been on a continuous decline for the past 2 years due to the high home prices in Los Angeles county, which has caused students to move to more affordable areas in San Bernardino county. At the time of this study, the student population was at 1,200, with the largest population in the 10th and 11th grades (see Figure 1). Hispanic students compose SMHS's largest ethnic subgroup at 65.3%, followed by White (non-Hispanic) students at 22%, and African American students at 5.3% (see Figure 1). The gender demographics have been consistently equal with almost a one-to-one ratio (currently 51% female and 49% male students.
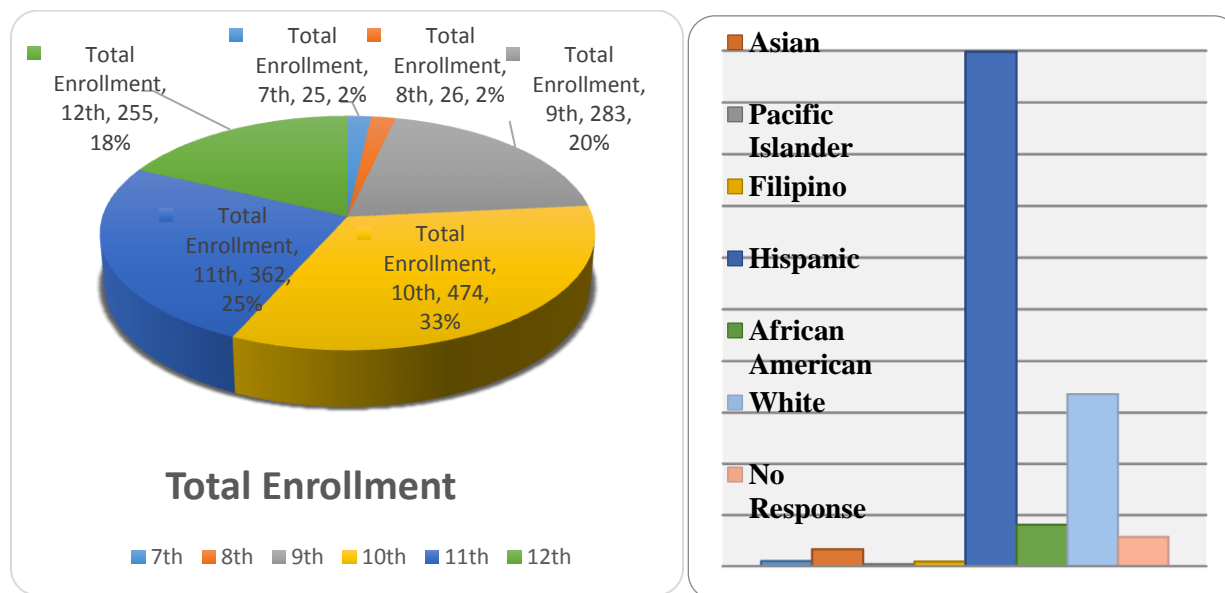
Figure 1. SMHS enrollment breakdown by grade and ethnicity.

Due to the independent study model, the students with special needs meet with the Individualized Education Program team prior to enrolling to determine whether the program is a suitable learning environment. Because the charter school caters to students who are self-directed, a small percent of the students are categorized as special population, with 5% English learners, 1% *504* students, and 3% in special education (see Figure 2). Since the majority of the students who come to SMHS are credit deficient, 70% of the students eventually transfer back to their home district or other alternative school in good standing.
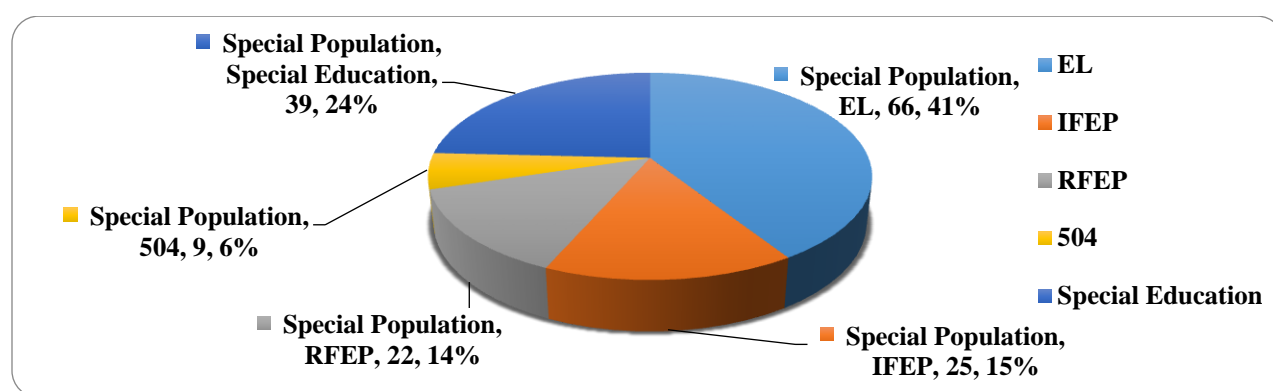
Figure 2. Special populations at SMHS.

SMHS has increased its API score from 649 (2011) to 693 (2012) and most recently to 728 (2013), with a similar school ranking of 9 out of 10. The California Standards Test scores in 2013 show a high percentage of students generally in the categories of Basic and Below Basic. Additionally, the CAHSEE passage rate for English was 89% with a superior math passage rate of 89%.

Within the seven school sites at SMHS, there were 37 credentialed teachers to guide students through their individualized plan to graduate. The combined average of service within the district was 4 years. The administrative team consisted of one principal and three vice principals, with an average of 3 years of administrative service. To assist students in the areas of math and English, an additional 12 small group instructors provided additional support through

direct instruction. Seven registrars provided clerical and administrative support, one for each of the school sites.

The staff ethnicity varied from the student population, with 55% of the teachers being White, 32% being Hispanic, 10% being Asian, and 3% being African American. The gender balance of the staff also varied from that of the student population, with 68% of the teachers being female and only 32% being male. In regard to advanced degrees, 31% of the teaching staff possessed a master's degree or higher.

SMHS predominantly enrolled students from low-income households, with 67% of the students qualifying for participation in the free or reduced lunch program. However, the school did not receive funds for categorical services and therefore did not serve lunch. Only 27% of the students' parents were high school graduates, with only 13% possessing a college degree.

The seven school sites were nontraditional in appearance, usually residing in a business complex or a shopping mall. The environments felt more like office spaces rather than schools. Students scheduled appointments to meet with their teachers and worked quietly and independently. Because of the businesslike atmosphere, students treated the school environment with respect; thus, there were few behavior issues and less misconduct.

Population, Sample and Sampling Procedures

The subjects in this study were students; they were selected to provide the researcher with an in-depth student perspective of the school factors that students have experienced and those factors that they perceived as having contributed to their improved academic achievement. Subjects for this study included 17 students, 11 female and six male, recruited from SMHS. Since the study involved high school students, the researcher looked for participants with ages ranging from 14 to 18 years of age, and grade levels spanning the ninth through 12th grades. To

select the students, purposeful sampling was used in order to carry out in-depth interviews that would provide good insight and data for the research.

The pool of students came from the data provided by the teachers. The researcher communicated with eight teachers at from SMHS in order to obtain a list of students that they perceived had done extremely well in their academics, had demonstrated good citizenship and attendance, and who were top performers in their class. With the list of students provided by each teacher, the researcher examined each student's intake forms, test scores, and transcripts to see if they fit the following criteria:

- Were classified as at-risk, meaning that their knowledge, skills, motivation, and academic ability were considered to be below that of the average student;

- Prior to enrolling at SMHS, were at least a year behind in their credits and had a GPA of 2.0 or lower;

- Came from families with lower socioeconomic status, as determined by their eligibility for free or reduced lunch; and

- Successfully demonstrated high levels of performance in academics in SMHS for at least a year, obtaining at least a 2.75 internal GPA, and were active participants in school activities.

Once the students had been selected based on these criteria, they were provided with an invitation letter from their teacher outlining what the research entailed.

Human Subject Considerations

The researcher had successfully completed investigator training related to research involving human subjects and adhered to Pepperdine's Graduate Professional School Institutional Review Board's (IRB) research policy and practice guidelines. The purpose of the

IRB process was to ensure the safety and protection of the human subjects in the research. Thus, approval from the Pepperdine IRB was required prior to the start of the study.

Before the commencement of the research, the researcher sent formal documentation outlining the purpose and the details of the research to the Assistant Superintendent at San Manual High School in order to gain approval to conduct the study and access the subjects in the school. Additionally, the researcher received permission from teachers who provided the students' names to the Assistant Superintendent.

Students interested in participation met with the researcher ahead of time to help them obtain more information about the research and assurance that they were not obligated to participate. The researcher provided each of the students with an informational handout he/she could review at home, in the hope that this would encourage voluntary participation. Lastly, the voluntary nature of study was emphasized as well as the review of the consent form at the beginning of the interview process.

As an incentive, the participants who volunteered to participate in the in-depth interview process were entered into a drawing to win one of five $25 gift cards. Once all 17 participants had been interviewed, the researcher randomly selected five students' names and mailed them the gift cards. As part of the interview process, the researcher made every effort to minimize risk to participants by using sound and consistent research procedures, which included obtaining and documenting informed consent from parents and assent from students under the age of 18 and obtaining and documenting informed consent from students who were 18 years of age or older. All subjects were reassured that the interview and their responses would be confidential. Participants were informed that they could decline to answer any question from the interview and

that they could withdraw from the study at any time. In addition, parents or guardians had the freedom to withdraw their child from the research at any time.

The identity of the school site and the identities of the subjects were protected and kept confidential in the research study. In order to conceal the identity of the subjects, each participant was identified only by a specific number during the coding and data analysis. Additionally, participants were not named in any manner during the interview process but were instead assigned a pseudonym. Only the investigator knew the true identities of the participants and their specific number identification. All data, including identity codes, were kept in a password-protected file on the researcher's laptop.

The participants in the study experienced minimal risks that were not greater than what they usually experience at their school site as students. Because the interviews were confidential and voluntary, the risk was very minor. During the interview process, the minimal risks that the students experienced included an hour of lost time, boredom, and mental fatigue. To avoid any risks, the students were encouraged to take breaks and enjoy refreshments during the interview process. Any student who felt troubled or uncomfortable during the interview process was allowed to skip the question or cease to continue. The researcher also asked the participants to stop the interview process if it was in his/her best interest. Lastly, the researcher provided the participants with his personal contact information following the data collection section in the event that they wanted further information or felt uneasy about anything.

The benefits of the research outweighed the minimal amount of risk involved in this study, and may potentially benefit students, teachers, and the community by providing useful information about the positive impact that independent study has produced for at-risk students. This study provided a better understanding of the wide variety of contributing factors that enable

at-risk students to excel in an alternative school that utilizes the independent study format. In addition, this study aimed to provide educators with insights on how to retain students and decrease the drop-out rate in their respective schools.

Instrumentation

This transcendental phenomenological study utilized in-depth student interviews for data collection purposes. The interview protocol consisted of 14 questions pertaining to the four categories: learning environment, learning experience, quality of independent study, and school interventions.

Student interviews. The researcher conducted a thorough interview on a one-on-one basis at conference room at the school site during non-school hours. The interviews lasted between 30-60 minutes. A semi-structured interview format was used. Participants answered 14 questions dealing with four main themes concerning student perceptions on school factors relating to their success at SMHS. The categories included general background, extrinsic motivation, feelings about school, non-school influences on motivation, academic content, perceptions of the school learning environment, and the student's experiences in the independent study program (see Appendix A).

Instrument content validity. To ensure that the instrument was valid, two experts reviewed and tested it. Both experts administered the interview to students to gain their perspective on the questions. Additionally, they tested the interviews and provided feedback, thus allowing the researcher to make changes to ensure content validity. The experts first reviewed each question to make sure that they were aligned with the guiding research questions and the school factors. Second, they made sure that the questions were framed correctly and organized in a manner that would flow smoothly during the interview. Next, the experts tested

the interview questions with 18-year-olds who would not be in the study to determine whether

they made sense and were clearly written. Finally, the experts provided feedback to the

researcher so he could make further adjustments and improvements to the instrument.

Table 2 represents the alignment between the study research questions and interview

questions and identifies the literature sources that informed and support the interview questions.

Table 2

Research Questions, Interview Questions, and Sources for Supporting Literature

Research Questions	Interview Questions	Literature Source
Learning Environment		
1. How do students who have been enrolled at SMHS for at least 1 year and who have demonstrated an increase in their academics view the school's learning environment?	1. How would you describe the learning environment at SMHS? How does it affect you in concentrating on your academics? 2. How would you describe the design of your school building? How does it affect you in regards to student motivation and academic success? 3. Where do you learn best at school and why?	Anderson, 2010; Bulach et al, 2008; Curwin, 2010; Dusenbury, 2012; Ekland & Gilby, 2009; Emmer et al., 2003; Erwin, 2004; Gollnick & Chin, 2006; Good & Brophy, 1997; Hue & Li, 2008; Jones, 2000; Ledere, 2011; NRC, 2003; Oakes & Lipton, 2003; Parrett & Budge, 2012; Stipek, 1998; Sullo, 2007; Tellett-Royce, 2008; Tomlinson et al., 2008; Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010
Learning Experience		
2. How do students who have been enrolled at SMHS for at least one 1 year and who have demonstrated an increase in their academics view their learning experiences?	4. Has your level of interest in school changed? If so when did it start? 5. Do you feel involved in school and have you noticed a change in your learning? 6. Has any aspects of SMHS helped motivate yourself to become productive and gained a sense of accomplishment? 7. What attributes, if any, have you developed after attending SMHS?	Brehm, 1966; Brophy, 1987; Bulach et al., 2008; DuFour et al., 2004; Emmer et al., 2003; Erwin, 2004; Gollnick & Chinn, 2006; Hue & Li, 2008; Karin, 2012; Pink, 2009; Spring, 2004; Stipek, 1998; Tomlinson et al, 2008; Westerberg, 2009
School Interventions		
3. How do students who have been enrolled at SMHS for at least 1 year and who have demonstrated an increase in their academics view	8. What resources or interventions if any, helped you to excel in your academic? 9. What interventions, if any, provided you with skills to help you fully demonstrate the content?	AVID, 2014; BBBS, 2013; BGCA, 2014; California Gear Up, 2014; Coalition for Evidence Based Policy, 2012; Dynarski et al., 1998; Early College Design, 2013; Herrera et al., 2007; IDRA, 2014; National

| the school's program interventions? | 10. What do you think is the most important aspect of SMHS that makes the student here so successful in their academic if any? | Dropout Prevention Center, 2014; National High School Center, 2013; NCSET, 2014; Rathvon, 2008; Pearson, 2013; Project GRAD, 2011; Promising Practices Network, 2013; Richardson, 2007; Sonoma County Office of Education, 2006; SREB, 2009; U.S. Department of Education, 2013 |

Research Questions	Interview Questions	Literature Source
	Independent Study Program	
4. How do students who have been enrolled at SMHS for at least 1 year and who have demonstrated an increase in their academics view the independent study program?	11. Has the independent study program helped you find your strengths or skills? If so, what strengths or skills has it helped you find? 12. What other skills did you develop as a student when working independently? 13. How do you feel about SMHS curriculum? Does it differ from you previous school or schools? 14. What do you feel about the methods of teaching as opposed to your previous school?	BSBG, 2013; Boys and Girls Club of America, 2014; Burns, & Sinfield, 2012; CAVA, 2014; CDE, 2013; Edoptions, 2012; Fusion Academy, 2014; Karin, 2014; Morin, 2012; Nason, 2008; OFL, 2013; Pearson, 2013, 2014; Richardson, 2007; J. Rose, 2012; Stipek, 1998

Data Collection Procedures

1. Prior to the study, a letter of permission was sent to the Assistant Superintendent of SMHS to obtain district approval of participation for the interviews.

2. Upon receiving the approval, the teachers at the school site were informed about the study via email from the Assistant Superintendent as well as a phone call from the researcher introducing himself.

3. The teachers created a list of students who fit the criteria for the study and sent it to the Assistant Superintendent for approval.

4. Upon receiving the confirmed list of students from the Assistant Superintendent, the informational packet for the eligible students was sent via email and regular mail to the parents for the purpose of introducing the researcher, briefly discussing the study, and personally inviting them to participate in the study. The packet included the following items: (a) a cover letter outlining the details of the study, (b) a copy of the questions that were to be asked during the interview session, (c) a parent permission slip written in both English and Spanish that abided by the charter school guidelines, (d) an informed parent consent and informed assent form, (e) a flyer inviting them to attend an informational

meeting, and (f) a self-addressed stamped envelope in which to return the signed parent consent or informed assent form.

5. Students were given 2 weeks to return the permission slips to the researcher. The researcher sent a friendly reminder email and phone call to the parents and students regarding the upcoming deadline to ensure that all 17 consent or assent forms were returned.

6. Once all of the signed informed consent and assent forms were obtained, the researcher scheduled the time and date of the interview with each individual student via phone call, which was scheduled after his/her normal classroom appointment time. The finalized schedule was hand-delivered to the student by his/her teacher to serve as a reminder of his/her commitment to participate.

7. The overall interview process spanned from 2 to 5 weeks to ensure that all 17 students were given enough time to participate. The interviews were held in a small, well-lit conference room at the school site, which was traditionally used for parent conferences and could provide uninterrupted time and privacy. There was a table to help create a comfortable space; the student and researcher sat across from one another. The recorder was placed directly between the student and researcher with enough space for the student to feel comfortable while seated throughout the interview

8. All students were engaged in a semi-structured interview format, with all participants being asked the same questions. At the start of the interview, the student was greeted by the researcher and handed his/her informed consent form or assent form (if under 18 years of age) as well as his/her parent's informed consent form, if under 18 years of age. The consent form was read aloud by the researcher, who explained the interview process

and asked if there were any questions. The students were reminded of the purpose of the study and the confidentiality of the information gathered, and informed that they had the option to opt out of the study at any time.

9.8. Each participant was introduced to the study with the following script:

> The purpose of this interview is to help me to obtain your thoughts, opinions and feelings in regards to your experiences at San Manuel Charter School. The interview will last approximately 30-60 minutes. Please respond to each question as best as you can, there is no right or wrong answer. If you come a across a question that you do not wish to answer, you may say the word "skip." Everything that is said today in this room is confidential and no one, not even your family members, will have access to your answers. Do you have any questions before we begin (see Appendix D)?

10.9. During the interview sessions, the researcher made notes on a notepad while recording the audio through a digital recorder for accuracy. The audio recording was transcribed into verbatim text once all of the participants had completed the interview process.

11.10. At the end of the interview, the researcher thanked each participant for their voluntary contribution.

12.11. Once the interviews were completed for all 17 applicants, the researcher transcribed them and then analyzed the transcripts to look for similarities and themes related to each of the research questions. The interview data were also reviewed by two professional colleagues with a background in alternative education in order to eliminate bias and provide credibility to the research.

13.12.　　A follow-up appreciation letter was sent to each participant that summarized the

findings from the interview, which helped the researcher confirm the discoveries.

Data Management

All data collected during the interview process were confidential. The data collected and

organized from the students was handled only by the researcher; confidentiality for

respondents/participants was maintained at all stages of the study. Only the investigator knew the

identities of the participants and the numbers used to refer to them. The handwritten notes from

the interviews, audio recordings, consent forms, assent forms, and any additional records were

stored in a safe, secure lock box at a bank and will be destroyed after a minimum of 3 years and a

maximum of 5 years following completion of the study.

Data Analysis

The interview responses corresponding to each interview question were coded and

analyzed. The researcher used the literature review to categorize the information gathered from

the interviews into significant themes. Two professional colleagues with coding experience

assisted the researcher by independently completing the same coding process, which enhanced

the accuracy of the data, helped ensure validity, and also provided emerging themes that the

researcher may not have noticed. Upon completion of the coding, the team shared their findings,

compared results, and addressed any differences or discrepancies. The researcher reviewed and

recoded the data with the team's suggestions and insights in mind.

Once the researcher reviewed and analyzed the notes and the themes had been

established, the researcher created a detailed manuscript based on the information provided in the

interviews to illustrate each participant in the study. The manuscript helped give all

stakeholders—which included administrators, teachers, and parents—a new perspective on what motivates and drives at-risk youths to excel academically.

Positionality

The researcher of this phenomenology study has been a teacher and is currently an administrator who works in an alternative charter school setting, which is what he has done since he came into the field of education. He has seen how the charter school movement has had a positive impact on struggling students in his community. However, the public seems to have gotten the impression that charter high schools, mainly alternative schools, are places that harbor students who have been expelled from their local high schools due to their involvement with substance abuse and violence. This may be true in some cases, but many people fail to see the positive impact that continuation schools have made with students who have faced tough and unsafe situations.

The research was significant because it helped identify the school factors that may positively affect at-risk students attempting to achieve academic success in an alternative charter school format. It is imperative to seek successful methods to help at-risk students on their path toward graduation. The researcher's goal was to help all at-risk students find an alternative program that will fit their needs.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

      This chapter presents the detailed findings of the research study, provides a summary of findings for each research question, and concludes with an overall summary for the chapter.

Statement of Purpose

      The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to explore and describe the school factors experienced by students at an alternative high school with an independent study program and a CASHEE passage rate of 90%, and to identify those factors, if any, that students perceived as contributing to their improved academic performance. The school factors included: the nature and quality of the school learning environment, learning experiences, program interventions, and the independent study program.

Research Questions

      This study was guided by the following central research questions:

1. How do students who have been enrolled at SMHS for at least 1 year and who have demonstrated an increase in their academics view the school's learning environment?

2. How do students who have been enrolled at SMHS for at least 1 year and who have demonstrated an increase in their academics view the school's learning experience?

3. How do students who have been enrolled at SMHS for at least 1 year and who have demonstrated an increase in their academics view the school's program interventions?

4. How do students who have been enrolled at SMHS for at least 1 year and who have demonstrated an increase in their academics view the independent study program?

5. How, if at all, have these four school factors contributed to improved academic performance?

Research Design Overview

This research study utilized a qualitative transcendental phenomenological research design and involved semi-structured interviews with 17 high school students from SMHS. The students in the research study fit the following criteria:

- Were classified as *at-risk*, meaning that their knowledge, skills, motivation, and academic ability were considered to be below that of the average student;

- Prior to enrolling at SMHS, were at least a year behind in their credits and had a GPA of 2.0 or lower;

- Came from families with lower socioeconomic status, as determined by their eligibility for free or reduced lunch; and

- Successfully demonstrated high levels of performance in academics in SMHS for at least a year, obtaining at least a 2.75 internal GPA, and are active participants in school activities.

The interviews consisted of 14 questions designed to solicit information about each participant's general perceptions on school factors relating to their success at SMHS. The researcher conducted interviews with subject participants on a one-to-one basis in a conference room at the school site during non-school hours.

Findings

Research question 1. The first research question asked, "How do students who have been enrolled at SMHS for at least 1 year and who have demonstrated an increase in their academics view the school's learning environment?" Interview questions 1-3 were asked to provide data for the answer to research question 1.

Interview question 1. Interview question 1 asked the participants, "How would you

describe the learning environment at SMHS? How does it affect you in concentrating on your

academics?" Table 3 depicts the themes that emerged from an analysis of the 17 students'

responses.

Table 3

Learning Environment Relating to Academic Performance

Themes	Number of Coded Responses
Close Relationship with Teachers	13
Safe Learning Environment	11
Feels Like Home	7
Non-Judgmental Atmosphere	6
Ample Space	3

The top theme that emerged from an analysis of responses to interview question 1 was

close relationships with teachers. Students who build a rapport with their teachers create a desire

to go to school and excel in their academics. For example, Sabrina stated, "The teachers make

sure that you are fine, when you come in and when you leave. It's not only my teacher but all the

teachers ask me how I feel. They all know me." Alfred asserted, "The teachers, staff and

leadership takes time to listen to me. The teachers give me a chance and takes time to know us

instead of thinking already that I am bad." Mike stated,

> I feel so at ease and comfortable because it's 100% the teachers. They care about the
>
> school and myself. They don't really know all the questions and stuff like that but they
>
> are really genuine on what they do. They all know my name and who I am.

The second theme that emerged was safe learning environment. Eleven participants

identified with *safety* as an important factor in a learning environment. For example, Alfred

responded, "I feel really safe because it's the teachers. The teachers are aware of the

surroundings and the issues outside." Similarly, Brian responded, "I feel safe, I feel calm. I like it when I come here. I see everyone I know and the teachers." Alexis stated,

> I came to this school because I want to get away from the negative vibe and the drama which interferes with my school work. I feel it's a much more positive and safe environment here, you can see kids here wanting to work and you can actually talk to your teachers here.

The third theme was *feels like home*. Seven participants identified that the school *feels like home*: a warm and welcoming environment. For example Alexis responded, "I feel safer and more comfortable because it's more of a family environment like being at home."

Additionally, a nonjudgmental environment, ample space, and positive learning environment were three themes that emerged from an analysis of the data related to interview question 1. These three themes received six, three, and three coded responses, respectively.

Interview question 2. The second interview question asked the participants, "How would you describe the design of your school building? How does it affect you in regards to student motivation and academic success?" Table 4 provides the themes that emerged.

Table 4

Design of School Building Relating to Academic Performance

Themes	Number of Coded Responses
Clean and Tidy	7
Small and Cozy	7
Teacher Visibility	6
Colorful Walls	5
Office Like Atmosphere	4
Ample Space	3

In reviewing the themes from question 2, *clean and tidy* was one of the most common responses. This is how seven participants described the design of the school and how it related to

their learning. Desirae responded, "The school is clean which makes it comfortable to learn." Similarly, Audrey asserted, "It's clean, not distracting and easy for me to concentrate on my work." George stated,

> It's not like my high school where there are lots of huge white buildings; feels like a hospital and feels cold. At SMHS the school looks colorful, very organized and very clean. I feel like going to a college or going to an office. It's more of a professional feel; not like my other school which feels really dirty and unfriendly.

The second theme that emerged was *small and cozy*. Seven participants identified with *small and cozy* as an important factor in a learning environment. For example, Audrey responded, "It's a lot smaller and it feels a lot intimate and cozy like a library and home." Similarly, Josephine responded, "It's small and cozy. The smaller place makes the place feel like more one on one with the teachers." Kayla stated,

> I love the school. It's much smaller and feel more comfortable to ask questions. I love coming here because of the atmosphere, the help from teachers and just the way it feels, like my home. A small setting with not many students helps us to talk to the teacher and get to know them better.

The third theme was *teacher visibility*. Six participants identified with *teacher visibility* as a significant aspect to a learning environment. For example one participant shared, "Whatever I need I get help in because teachers are at every corner of the room. My other school is really big and space didn't matter because they have to help me."

 Additionally, colorful walls, office feeling, and ample space were three themes that emerged from an analysis of the data related to interview question 2. These three themes received five, four, and three coded responses, respectively.

Interview question 3. Interview question 3 asked the participants, "Where do you learn best at school and why?" Table 5 depicts the themes that emerged from an analysis of the 17 students' responses.

Table 5

Best Place to Study at School

Themes	Number of Coded Responses
Working Next to Teacher	7
Small Group Instruction Classes	6
Tutoring Area	4

In reviewing the themes from question 3, *working next to teacher* emerged as the top response. This is how seven participants identified the best place to study in school and how it related to their learning environment. Alexis responded, "I like working next to the teachers by their desk so I can feel like someone is always there who will help me. If I am by myself I tend to get bored and doze off." Similarly, Desirae responded, "I learn best when I am near a teacher. The teachers are actually at every part of the room so I can go to them of one of them are busy." Alexis stated, "I love to work next to any teacher; it doesn't matter where I go because I know I can get help from anyone at the school."

The second theme that emerged was *small group instruction*. Seven participants identified *small group instruction* as an important factor in a learning environment. For example, Audrey responded, "I love working in the small group instruction room because I like working together in a small setting and getting help from friends." Similarly, Kayla stated, "I feel I learn better in the small group classroom because I can work with my teacher and students together." Alex asserted,

I really like the small group instruction environment because the teachers work really closely with us as a team and make it really fun. The rooms are smaller with less students

and everyone in the class is like a family and friendly so we all want to learn and help each other out.

The third theme was *tutoring area*. Four participants mentioned *tutoring area* as an effective learning environment. Mike shared, "Whatever, so I rather work with the tutor to give me help whenever I need it." Enrique responded, "The tutoring area is nice because you always have help. The teacher is also there to help even when she is on break."

Summary of themes for research question 1. Research question 1 asked, "How do students who have been enrolled at SMHS for at least 1 year and who have demonstrated an increase in their academics view the school's learning environment?" Table 6 displays the 13 themes that resulted from the responses to the three interview questions. The two themes that received the most responses were *close relationship with teachers* and *safe learning environment*. Eleven additional themes reported by participants were: *working next to teacher, clean and tidy, small and cozy, feels like home, colorful walls, teacher visibility, non-judgmental atmosphere, small group instruction classes, ample space, office like atmosphere,* and *tutoring area.*

Table 6

Summary of Themes for Research Question 1: Learning Environment

Themes	Number of Coded Responses
Close Relationship with Teachers	13
Safe Learning Environment	11
Working Next to Teachers	7
Clean and Tidy	7
Small and Cozy	7
Feels like Home	7
Colorful Walls	6
Teacher Visibility	6
Non-Judgmental Atmosphere	6
Small Group Instruction Classes	6
Ample Space	6
Office Like Atmosphere	4
Tutoring Area	4

Research question 2. The second research question asked, "How do students who have been enrolled at SMHS for at least 1 year and who have demonstrated an increase in their academics view their learning experiences?" Interview questions 4-6 were asked to provide data to answer question 2.

Interview question 4. Interview question 4 asked the participants, "Has your level of interest in school changed? If so when did it start?" Table 7 illustrates the frequency in themes that emerged from an analysis of the participants' responses.

Table 7

Level of Interest in School

Themes	Number of Coded Responses
Teachers' Motivation	9
Relationship with Teachers	7
Teachers Show they Care	7
Working at Own Pace	4
College Readiness	3

The top theme that emerged from an analysis of responses to interview question 4 was *teacher motivation*. This is how nine participants' level of interest in school started with respect to the learning environment. Alex stated, "My teachers pushes me really hard every day and makes sure I do my work, they constantly push me and get me to do things." Josephine asserted, "It's good to get pushed every day because my other school just tells me what to do and that's it, there is no other contact about why we should do the work and they don't care if we failed." George stated,

Here the teachers are always calling me, calling my mom and finding out why I don't have work or how to get me to do more work. They bother me a lot but I think in a good way because they want me to do better.

The second theme that emerged was *relationship with teacher*. Seven participants identified that their interest in school began due to the *relationship with teacher.* For example, Bianca responded, "Having conversations with my teacher help start to give me good experience there. It gave me more confidence and to do better in school." Brian stated, "I love my teacher because she is the only teacher I understand." George stated,

> I started to love school here when I got to know my teacher. It's really different here compared to my previous high school because over there I really didn't know my teachers and they didn't really know me so I didn't try as hard.

The third theme was *teachers show they care*. Seven participants identified with *teachers show they care* as an important factor in their learning experience. For example, Mike responded, "They are always there for me and care for me." Similarly, Josephine responded, "It's actually the teachers because they care, if something happens they will take care of you." George stated, "Because I know my teachers care, I started to take my school seriously and started to enjoy it more."

Additionally, *working at own pace* and *college readiness* were two themes that emerged from an analysis of the data related to interview question 4. These two themes received three and three coded responses, respectively.

Interview question 5. The fifth interview question asked the participants, "Do you feel involved in school and have you noticed a change in your learning?" Table 8 presents the emerging themes from the participants.

Table 8

Change in Learning

Themes	Number of Coded Responses
Peer Support and Accountability	7
Teacher Motivation	6
Independent Achiever	6
Time Management Skills	5
Taking Responsibility	3

In reviewing the themes from question 2, *peer support and accountability* was one of the most common responses. Having peers in the learning environment eager to provide support will create a positive change in one's learning. For example, Alice responded, "I am involved more because we help each other out." Similarly, Audrey responded, "We all keep each other accountable." They made me into a responsible student." Alfred stated,

> I am more involved with my peers because they push me to do better in school so that I can participate in the activities. It's kind of like sports; we are a team and we need to keep each other in check. My peers and friends are what motivate me to do even better.

The second theme that emerged was *teacher motivation*. Six participants also identified with *teacher motivation* as an important factor in their learning experience. For example, George responded, "My teacher pushes me to talk with other students every time I come to school. This has helped me to ask more questions and be livelier." Similarly, Cindy responded, "If you need help they will come and give you help unlike my other school who just wants to go home." Brian stated,

> I notice I like school more and noticed that I can do the work; I just need the teachers to make me want to learn. I feel they get me involved and keep me motivated by following up with me.

The third theme was *independent achiever.* Six participants identified with *independent achiever* as a significant aspect to their learning experience. For instance, one participant shared, "I learned to be independent, making sure to get my work done and attending my classes." Additionally, time management skills and taking responsibility were two themes that emerged from an analysis of the data related to interview question 5. These two themes received five and three coded responses, respectively.

Interview question 6. Interview question 6 asked the participants, "Has any aspects of SMHS helped motivate yourself to become productive and gained a sense of accomplishment?" Table 9 presents the emerging themes gathered from an analysis of the responses of 17 students.

Table 9

Gaining a Sense of Accomplishment

Themes	Number of Coded Responses
Teacher Motivation	10
Passing Tests	7
Grade Improvement	6
On Track to Graduate	4
Independent Achiever	4
College Readiness	3

The top theme that emerged from an analysis of responses to interview question 6 was *teacher motivation*. Alexis responded, "At my other school they said I would drop out and not graduate but at this school the teachers here proved them wrong and help me do well and motivate me to do better." Similarly, Desirae stated, "I like learning so much now with the help of teachers who are always there to motivate me to do better." Alfred stated,

I get more of push from my teachers here than my other school. It's a good push where

they motivate me to do better. They tell me I need to do more units and always asking me

if I can do it.

The second theme that emerged was *passing tests.* Seven participants also identified with

passing tests as an important factor in their learning experience as it relates to gaining a sense of

accomplishment. For example, Sara responded, "Every time I pass my test and finish my work I

feel a sense of accomplishment." Similarly, George responded, "Passing my test makes me feel

accomplished. I usually got Ds or Fs at my other school and feel really dumb." Cindy stated,

I seen myself grow and pay attention to the classes that are given to me. I feel that I have

done so much with passing all my tests and love learning that I go home every day and

tell my parents what I have learned.

The third theme that emerged was *grade improvement*. Six participants identified with

grade improvement as a significant aspect of their learning experience. For example, one

participant shared, "I am now getting As and Bs and before I only got Ds and Fs. I feel very

smart when I come to this school." Additionally, four participants mentioned being on track to

graduate, four participants mentioned *independent achiever*, and three mentioned *college*

readiness.

Interview question 7. Interview question 7 asked the participants, "What attributes if any,

have you developed after attending SMHS?" Table 10 presents the emerging themes gathered

from the 17 students' responses.

Table 10

Developed Attributes

Themes	Number of Coded Responses
Confidence	10

Taking Responsibility	8
Independent Achiever	7
Becoming a Hard Worker	6
Maturity	5

In reviewing the themes from question 7, *confidence* was mentioned by 10 participants. For example, Josephine responded, "I feel confident about myself because I know I can do my work and get good grades through hard work." Similarly, Desirae stated, "I learn to become more confident and learn to ask questions." Sara stated,

> I feel confident because I know I did things on my work through hard work. At my other school it was easy to copy and get the answers and I did things the easy way. I had to make partners with the nerdy person to get the answers.

The second theme that emerged was *taking responsibility.* Eight participants also identified with *taking responsibility* as an important factor in their learning experience as it relates to the attributes they developed. For example, Kristine responded, "I feel I am responsible and can make sure I get all my work done." Similarly, Bianca responded, "You are going to learn responsibility because the teachers treat this like a job and you are like an employee." Audrey stated,

> I feel I can plan my schedule and know how to study. I think this school will help me do better in college because I have to do everything on my own, make sure I turn in work and make sure to pass the test. I think the one word would be responsible person.

The third theme that emerged was independent. Six participants identified with *independent* as a significant aspect of their learning experience. For example, one participant shared, "I feel I can plan my schedule and know how to study. I think this school will help me do better in college because I have to do everything on my own, make sure I turn in work and make sure to pass the test."

Additionally, *working hard* and *maturity* were two themes that emerged from an analysis of the data related to interview question 7. These two themes received six and five coded responses, respectively.

     Summary of themes for research question 2. Research question 2 asked, "How do students who have been enrolled at SMHS for at least 1 year and who have demonstrated an increase in their academics view the school's learning experience?" Table 11 displays the 15 themes that resulted from the responses to the three interview questions. The two themes that received the most responses were *teacher motivation* and *independent achiever;* both themes emerged in three out of the four questions. Thirteen additional themes reported by participants were: *confidence*, *taking responsibility, teacher show they care, peer support and accountability, passing tests, grade improvement, becoming a hard worker, college readiness, relationship with teachers, time management skills, maturity, work at own pace,* and *on track to graduate.*

Table 11

Summary of Themes for Research Question 2: Learning Experience

Themes	Number of Coded Responses
Teacher Motivation	25
Independent Achiever	17
Taking Responsibility	11
Confidence	10
Teacher Show they Care	7
Peer Support and Accountability	7
Passing Tests	7
Grade Improvement	6
Becoming a Hard Worker	6
College Readiness	6
Relationship with Teachers	6
Time Management Skills	5
Maturity	5
Work at Own Pace	4
On Track to Graduate	4

     Research question 3. The third research question asked, "How do students who have been enrolled at SMHS for at least 1 year and who have demonstrated an increase in their

academics view the school's program interventions?" Interview questions 8-10 were asked to provide data for the answer to question 3.

     Interview question 8. Interview question 8 asked the participants, "What resources or extracurricular activities if any, helped you to excel in your academic?" Table 12 shows the frequency in themes that emerged from an analysis of the responses of 17 students.

Table 12

Extracurricular Activities that Help Students Excel

Themes	Number of Coded Responses
Sports Program	10
ASB Program	8
Pathways Camps	4
Flexibility	3
Field Trips	3
Teacher Support	3

The top theme that emerged from an analysis of responses to interview question 8 was *sports program.* For example, Enrique stated, "Sports help me do well because of the five unit minimum per month. I need to have my work completed if I have to play. My teammates are on you if you don't do your work." Alfred asserted, "The sports program helps me because my peers push me to do more units so I can be eligible to play and participate." Alexis stated,

> I love the sports program because anyone can join and you don't have to be great. Also, this is where I made all my friends and because I don't want to let them down I have to do my homework before coming to the game. We are required to complete five packets and if I don't we can't play the sports so everyone on the team helps each other out by making sure we do our work. We pressure each other, we question each other and say, "Do you really?"

The second theme that emerged was *Associated Student Body Progra* (ASB). Eight participants identified with the *ASB program* as an important resources and intervention to their learning. For example, Alex responded, "Actually ASB helped me make me learn math and organization skill. ASB helped me to learn to help give back more and helps me become caring and selfless." Josephine stated, "I think both activities helped me become more social and help

me to do well because in order to stay in those clubs you need to complete all your academic

work."

Additionally, *pathways camp, flexibility, field trips,* and *teacher support* were four

themes that emerged from an analysis of the data related to question 8. These four themes

received, four, three, three, and three coded responses, respectively.

Interview question 9. The ninth interview question asked the participants, "What

interventions, if any, provided you with the skills to help you fully demonstrate the content?"

Table 13 provides the emerging themes from the participants.

Table 13

Interventions That Help Demonstrate the Content

Themes	Number of Coded Responses
Teacher Support	13
Learn to take Responsibility	3
Learn to be Confident	2
Time Management	2

The top theme that emerged from question 9 was *teacher support.* Thirteen students

attributed their success in school mainly to the determined support of their teachers. For

example, Alice stated, "I like working with my teacher. They are so willing to help me but also

make me learn to be responsible with my work, time and appointments." Audrey asserted, "The

thing I can think of is the teachers, the fact that they don't want to give up on you." Cindy stated,

> It will be the teachers; they are the ones who care and wanting to help us learn. At regular
>
> school the teachers will say I am here to teach, if you want to learn then learn if you don't
>
> then it's on you. But here the teachers give you a push and tell you that you need do you
>
> work by telling you how do it. My teacher tells me stories about themselves about their

past and makes me not want to be like that and also tell me positive stories that want me

to do better.

Additionally, *learn to take responsibility*, *learn to be confident*, and *time management*

were three themes that emerged from an analysis of the data related to interview question 9.

These three themes received three, two, and two coded responses, respectively.

Interview question 10. Interview question 10 asked the participants, "What do you think

is the most important aspect of SMHS that makes the student here so successful in their

academic if any?" Table 14 presents the emerging themes that emerged from an analysis of the

17 participants' responses.

Table 14

What Makes Students so Successful

Themes	Number of Coded Responses
Teacher Support	17
Independent Study Curriculum	3
Tutors	2

The top theme that emerged from an analysis of responses to interview question 10 was

teacher support. Seventeen students felt that the teachers were the fundamental reason that

helped them become successful in school. For example, Desirae simply stated, "It's all about the

teachers, not the other stuff." Kayla asserted, "I just think it's the teachers. They work one on

one with you and help you make sure you do your work. The teachers here are way better than

other teachers at any school because they care." Enrique stated,

The teachers are the best school intervention, the curriculum is good, but I can ask the

teachers for help and they are always on me. They seem really upset if I don't do well.

It's not about the sports or other things; it's about the teachers making me do better.

Additionally, *learn to take responsibility*, *learn to be confident*, and *time management* were themes that emerged from an analysis of the data related to question 10. These three themes received three, two, and two coded responses, respectively.

   Summary of themes for research question 3. Research question 3 asked, "How do students who have been enrolled at SMHS for at least 1 year and who have demonstrated an increase in their academics view the school's program interventions?" Table 15 displays the ten themes that resulted from the responses to the three interview questions. The most overwhelming responses for all three questions were teacher support followed by *sports program.* Eight additional themes reported by participants were: *ASB, pathways camps, independent study curriculum, learn to take responsibility, flexibility, time management,* and *learn to be confident.*

Table 15

Summary of Themes for Research Question 3: School Interventions

Themes	Number of Coded Responses
Teacher Support	32
Sports Program	10
ASB Program	8
Pathways Camps	4
Independent Study Curriculum	3
Learn to take Responsibility	3
Flexibility	3
Field Trips	3
Time Management	2
Learn to be Confident	2

   Research question 4. The fourth research question asked, "How do students who have been enrolled at SMHS for at least 1 year and who have demonstrated an increase in their academics view the independent study program?" Interview questions 11-14 were asked to provide data for the answer to question 4.

Interview question 11. Interview question 11 asked the participants, "Has the independent study program helped you find your strengths? If so, what strengths has it helped you find?" Table 16 shows the frequency in themes from the participants.

Table 16

Strengths Developed from Independent Study

Themes	Number of Coded Responses
Study Skills	10
Diligence	6
Independence	5
Time Management	4
Asking Questions	3

The top theme that emerged from an analysis of responses to interview question 11 was *study skills.* For example, Sara stated, "It helped me to learn how to find the answers on my own and read the textbook. Before this school I did not learn how to study because I relied on friends to give me the answers." George asserted, "I have to learn to do things on my own, learn to review my homework, and used tools in the packets which helped me to study smarter, because at my other school I learned to cheat or get notes from my friends." Josephine stated,

> The packets help me learn on my own and help me become smarter. It helped me to learn and use big words. It helped me to learn how to study on my own because I need to turn in the packet. At my school all we did was random worksheets and pop quiz which made me not want to learn.

The second theme that emerged was *diligence.* Six participants identified with *diligence* as an important strength they developed in the independent study program. For example, Enrique responded, "There is no way to cheat the system here because you need to work hard and finish." Similarly, Audrey responded, "I think it has helped me not be lazy and I learn to finish what I started and don't give up because I don't want to let my parents and teachers down."

The third theme that emerged was *independence.* Five participant identified *independence* as one of their strengths. One participant stated, "The teachers are not going to give you the answers here, I learned to do things on my own."

Additionally, *time management* and *asking questions* were two themes that emerged from an analysis of the data related to question 11. These two themes received four and three coded responses, respectively.

Interview question 12. Interview question 12 asked the participants, "What other skills did you develop as a student when working independently?" Table 17 presents the emerging themes gathered from the responses.

Table 17

Skills Developed as a Student

Themes	Number of Coded Responses
Time Management	15
Study Skills	4
Meeting Deadlines	4

The common theme that emerged from question 2 was *time management.* For example, Desirae stated, "I learn to make a schedule and follow the planners we got from school to plan my day so I can study at my own time and take breaks." Enrique asserted, "I used to procrastinate a lot, so I learned to manage my time because we have deadlines to do work." Alfred stated,

I learned to manage my schedule so that I can have more time to study, more time to work and not worry about anything else. I learned to have a calendar and schedule my fun time and study time. This helps me organize my things in life and become more useful and productive and less lazy.

The second theme was *study skills.* Eight participants identified *study skills* as something important they developed in the independent study program. For example, Brian responded, "I learn the studying skills from the teachers, mostly I didn't know how to study until I came here and tutoring for math and English and they helped out." Similarly, Mike responded, "It taught me how to use a textbook, it taught me how to study, I can ready to use a book and analyze things and figure things out." Additionally, *meeting deadlines* was listed by at least four participant of one of the skills they developed due to the independent study program.

Interview question 13. Interview question 13 asked the participants, "How do you feel about SMHS curriculum? Does it differ from you previous school or schools?" Table 18 presents the emerging themes gathered from the responses.

Table 18

Students View on Independent Study Curriculum

Themes	Number of Coded Responses
Knowing what to Study for	9
Organized in Detail	7
Easy to Understand	7
Prepares Students for Exams	4
Rigorous	3
Allows for Flexibility	3

The top theme that emerged from an analysis of responses to interview question 13 was *knowing what to study for.* For example, Alfred stated, "It helps me become more organized than my previous school because I know what I need to study because at my other school the worksheets don't make sense." Similarly, Kayla stated, "The packets are so well made because in know what in need to study." Kristine stated, "I really like the packets because they have everything you need and it's not all busy work. Its things you need to learn and what you need to learn for the test."

The second theme that emerged was *easy to understand*. Seven participants described the curriculum as *easy to understand*. For example, Alice responded, "I like the packets because it's easier to understand and to do and helps me want to do the homework." Similarly, Sara responded, "It's very easily for me to understand and helps me know what I need to know to test." Additionally, *prepare students for exam, rigorous,* and *flexibility* were three themes that emerged from an analysis of the data related to interview question 13. These three themes received four, three, and three coded responses, respectively.

Interview question 14. Interview question 14 asked the participants, "What do you feel about the methods of teaching at SMHS as opposed to your previous school?" Table 19 presents the emerging themes gathered from an analysis of the 17 participants' responses.

Table 19

Students View on Methods of Teaching

Themes	Number of Coded Responses
One-on-One Support	17
Relationship with Teachers	11
Teacher Motivation	9
Teacher Makes Learning Fun	3
Parental Involvement	3

One-on-one support was the top theme that emerged from an analysis of responses to interview question 14. Desirae responded, "There is more one on one help and I know they are there when I need them." Similarly, George responded, "I love the one on one time I have with my teachers every week. I feel it is important and I feel they are there for me." Alfred stated,

> The other school is just pure lecturing but at this school it's more one on one help. If you ask a teacher for help they always want to give me help and it's anytime. Whenever I come in I can always ask and they will make time. At my other school they don't offer help or even after school because they have too many students.

The second theme that emerged was *relationship with teachers*. Eleven participants stated

that *relationship with teachers* is as an important factor in the independent study program. For

example, Alexis responded, "I feel they really care, not like my other school who don't care. My

teacher talks about my future, take time to talk to me, give me suggestion for classes to reach that

goal." Similarly, Cindy responded, "At my other school it feels like the teachers don't care and

just there because they have to, they always talk about stuff not relating to the topic. Here, the

school, the teachers want to teach and want to help us." Kayla stated,

> The teachers are so great and always checks up on us every single time we come to
>
> school. They teach not only my work but also my life. They give life lessons as well. All
>
> teachers actually talk to me and want to make sure I stay on track because they know my
>
> story and struggles. I feel like here they really relate to you and really know what kids
>
> know think of and talk and they put in our perspective so that kids can understand.

The third theme that emerged was *teacher motivation*. Nine participants identified with

teacher motivation as a method of teaching at SMHS compared to their other school. For

example one participant shared, "They make sure to work with you closely every day and pushes

you till you finish your work." Additionally, the other themes that emerged that were mentioned

by three participants included *teacher makes learning fun* and *parental involvement*.

Summary of themes for research question 4. Research question 4 asked, "How do

students who have been enrolled at SMHS for at least 1 year and who have demonstrated an

increase in their academics view the school's program interventions?" Table 20 displays the 15

themes that resulted from the responses to the three interview questions. The most overwhelming

responses for all three questions were *study skills* followed by *time management* and *one-on-one*

support. Fourteen additional themes reported by participants were: *relationship with teachers,*

teacher motivation, knowing what to study for, organized in detail, easy to understand, diligence, independence, meeting deadlines, prepares students for exams, teacher makes learning fun, asking questions, allows for flexibility, parental involvement, and *rigorous.*

Table 20

Summary of Themes for Research Question 4: Independent Study

Themes	Number of Coded Responses
Time Management	19
One-on-One Support	17
Study Skills	14
Relationship with Teachers	11
Teacher Motivation	9
Knowing what to Study for	9
Organized in Detail	7
Easy to Understand	7
Diligence	6
Independence	5
Meeting Deadlines	4
Prepares Students for Exams	4
Teacher Makes Learning Fun	3
Asking Questions	3
Allows for Flexibility	3
Parental Involvement	3
Rigorous	3

Summary of Key Findings

Research question 1 asked, "How do students who have been enrolled at SMHS for at least 1 year and who have demonstrated an increase in their academics view the school's learning environment?" Table 6 displays the 13 themes that resulted from the responses to three interview questions. The three themes that received the most responses were *close relationship with teachers, safe learning environment,* and *working next to teacher*. Ten additional themes reported by participants were: *clean and tidy, small and cozy, feels like home, colorful walls, teacher visibility, non-judgmental atmosphere, small group instruction classes, ample space, office like atmosphere,* and *tutoring area.*

Research question 2 asked, "How do students who have been enrolled at SMHS for at least 1 year and who have demonstrated an increase in their academics view their learning experiences?" Table 11 displays the 14 themes that resulted from the responses to four interview questions. The three themes that received the most responses were *teacher motivation, confidence, safe,* and *independent achiever.* Twelve additional themes reported by participants were: *taking responsibility, teacher show they care, peer support and accountability, passing tests, grade improvement, becoming a hard worker, college readiness, relationship with teachers, time management skills, mature, work at own pace,* and *on track to graduate.*

Research question 3 asked, "How do students who have been enrolled at SMHS for at least 1 year and who have demonstrated an increase in their academics view the school's program interventions?" Table 15 displays the 10 themes that resulted from the responses to three interview questions. The most overwhelming responses for all three questions *were teacher support* followed by *sports program* and *ASB.* Seven additional themes reported by participants were: *pathways camps, independent study curriculum, learn to take responsibility, flexibility, time management,* and *learn to be confident.*

Research question 4 asked, "How do students who have been enrolled at SMHS for at least 1 year and who have demonstrated an increase in their academics view the independent study program?" Table 20 displays the 17 themes that resulted from the responses to four interview questions. The top three themes reported by the participants were *study skills*, *time management,* and *one-on-one support.* Fourteen additional themes reported by participants were: *relationship with teachers, teacher motivation, knowing what to study for, organized in detail, easy to understand, diligence, independence, meeting deadlines, prepares students for exams,*

teacher makes learning fun, asking questions, allows for flexibility, parental involvement, and *rigorous.*

Chapter Summary

Research question 1 asked, "How do students who have been enrolled at SMHS for at least 1 year and who have demonstrated an increase in their academics view the school's learning environment?" Related interview questions asked participants about the learning environment, design of the school, and best place to study. Thirteen themes emerged from a synthesis of coded responses. The top two were *close relationship with teachers* and *safe learning environment.* Eleven additional themes reported by participants were: *working next to teacher*, *clean and tidy, small and cozy, feels like home, colorful walls, teacher visibility, non-judgmental atmosphere, small group instruction classes, ample space, office like atmosphere,* and *tutoring area.*

Research question 2 asked, "How do students who have been enrolled at SMHS for at least 1 year and who have demonstrated an increase in their academics view their learning experiences?" Related interview questions asked participants about the level of interest in school, change in learning, gaining a sense of accomplishment, and developed attributes. Fifteen themes emerged from a synthesis of coded responses. The top two were *teacher motivation* and *safe independent.* Thirteen additional themes reported by participants were: *confidence, taking responsibility, teacher show they care, peer support and accountability, passing tests, grade improvement, becoming a hard worker, college readiness, relationship with teachers, time management skills, mature, work at own pace,* and *on track to graduate.*

Research question 3 asked, "How do students who have been enrolled at SMHS for at least 1 year and who have demonstrated an increase in their academics view the school's

program interventions?" Related interview questions asked participants about extracurricular activities, interventions, and what makes them successful. Ten themes emerged from a synthesis of coded responses. The top two were *teacher support* and *sports program.* Eight additional themes reported by participants were: *ASB, pathways camps, independent study curriculum, learn to take responsibility, flexibility, time management,* and *learn to be confident.*

Research question 4 asked, "How do students who have been enrolled at SMHS for at least 1 year and who have demonstrated an increase in their academics view the independent study program?" Related interview questions asked participants about their strengths, developed skills, views on curriculum and views on methods of teaching. Sixteen themes emerged from a synthesis of coded responses. The top two were *time management* and *one-on-one support.* Fourteen additional themes reported by participants were: *relationship with teachers, teacher motivation, knowing what to study for, organized in detail, easy to understand, diligence, independence, meeting deadlines, prepares students for exams, teacher makes learning fun, asking questions, allows for flexibility, parental involvement,* and *rigorous.*

A discussion of the top themes for each question will occur in the following chapter.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Problem Statement

San Manuel High School, an alternative charter high school program in Southern California, successfully retains and graduates students who matriculate every year from surrounding high schools. SMHS students are considered at-risk students who were identified as low performing and underachieving prior to enrolling at SMHS. The progress and successful accomplishments of these students were carefully monitored and documented at SMHS. However, what has not been fully explored and described are the school factors perceived by students as having made the most significant contributions to the positive transformation of their performance and achievement. The opportunity exists at SMHS to investigate influences that contribute to improved student academic performance and achievement.

Purpose

The aim of this transcendental phenomenological study was to explore and describe the school factors experienced by students at an alternative high school with an independent study program and a CASHEE passage rate of 90% and to identify those factors, if any, that students perceived as contributing to their improved academic performance. The school factors included: the nature and quality of the school learning environment, learning experiences, program interventions, and the independent study program.

Seventeen students were interviewed regarding their learning experiences. The students selected for interview purposes had: been enrolled in SMHS for at least 1 year, an internal GPA of at least 2.75 (including only grades received from SMHS), not received any truancies, and participated in one or more school interventions.

The aim of the study was to explore and describe the school factors experienced by students at an alternative high school with an independent study program and a CASHEE passage rate of 90%, and to identify those factors, if any, that students perceived as contributing to their improved academic performance. The school factors examined were: (a) the nature and quality of the school learning environment, (b) learning experiences, (c) program interventions, and (d) the independent study program.

Research Questions

This study was guided by the following five research questions:

1. How do students who have been enrolled at SMHS for at least 1 year and who have demonstrated an increase in their academics view the school's learning environment?

2. How do students who have been enrolled at SMHS for at least 1 year and who have demonstrated an increase in their academics view the school's learning experience?

3. How do students who have been enrolled at SMHS for at least 1 year and who have demonstrated an increase in their academics view the school's program interventions?

4. How do students who have been enrolled at SMHS for at least 1 year and who have demonstrated an increase in their academics view the independent study program?

5. How, if at all, have these four school factors contributed to improved academic performance?

Study Design

This research study utilized a transcendental phenomenological design and involved 17 high school students from SMHS who fit the following criteria: were classified as at-risk, meaning that their knowledge, skills, motivation, and academic ability were considered below that of the average student; prior to enrolling at SMHS; were at least a year behind in their

credits and had a GPA of 2.0 or lower; came from families with lower socioeconomic status, as determined by their eligibility for free or reduced lunch; successfully demonstrated high levels of performance in academics in SMHS for at least a year, obtaining at least a 2.75 internal GPA; and were active participants in school activities.

The interviews consisted of 14 questions designed to solicit information about each participant's academic experience and to identify the school factors, if any, that contributed to their improved academic performance. The researcher conducted thorough one-on-one interviews in a conference room at the school site during non-school hours. The interviews lasted 30-60 minutes. A semi-structured interview format was used. Participants answered 14 questions dealing with four main themes concerning student perceptions on school factors relating to their success at SMHS

Discussion of Key Findings

The discussion of findings is organized by research question and will focus on the top two themes that received the most coded responses related to each research question.

Research question 1. Thirteen themes resulted from participant responses to three interview questions associated with research question 1. The two themes that received the most responses were *close relationship with teachers* and *safe learning environment*. Eleven additional themes reported by participants were: *working next to teacher, clean and tidy, small and cozy, feels like home, colorful walls, teacher visibility, non-judgmental atmosphere, small group instruction classes, ample space, office like atmosphere*, and *tutoring area*.

Close relationship with teachers. The top theme that emerged for research question 1 was the need for students to sustain a close relationship with their teachers in regard to having a positive learning environment to enhance academic performance. During the interview process,

this theme was mentioned 13 times by the participants. The participants believed that the

teachers helped foster a safe and supportive learning environment by maintaining rapport with

each of their student. The concern was noted by Sullo (2007), who believed that in order for

students to participate fully in their academics, the teacher will first need to make sure that the

classroom environment is open, friendly, warm, and supportive. Personally greeting as many

students as possible on a daily basis and making and effort to build rapport helps lift the

students' spirits (Curwin, 2010; NRC, 2003). The participants also aligned with Sullo's belief

that having trust and rapport was essential to creating a safe learning environment. By knowing

the concerns, issues, and background of each student, each teacher is able to closely monitor

his/her students and provide the necessary resources to help them thrive in the classroom. A

caring learning environment lessens stress, anxiety, and delinquency levels in school, which

results in better mental health and academic performance. For this reason, students who know

that their teachers genuinely care about them can succeed in their academics (Tellett-Royce,

2008). The close bond can be developed by setting expectations high for all students and giving

them the support they need to meet those expectations (Parrett & Budge, 2012). According to the

participants, teacher relationship was one of the most important factors that they want in a

learning environment.

   Safe learning environment. The second theme that emerged for research question 1 was

the need to have a safe learning environment. During the interview process, the participants

mentioned this theme 11 times. The majority of students who enrolled in SMHS withdrew from

their previous school to find a place where they would feel safe from peer pressure, judgment,

and various other mistreatments that may occur in school so they could be free from distractions.

The participants' notion of a safe learning environment aligns with the writing of Ekland and

Gailby (2009), who described that a school may be the only place for students to go to that is safe from the crime, abuse, and violence they experience when they are out of school. In order to provide a safe learning environment, teachers need to be vigilant in securing and monitoring areas such as the bathrooms and hallways. Teachers need to model good behavior and citizenship while keeping the students accountable for their actions (Parrett & Budge, 2012).

One of the main approaches to ensuring a safe learning environment for the students is for teachers to be present throughout the campus and make an effort to patrol the hallways in between classes. Consequently, students will take pride in their school and treat others with respect because they see the staff as being accessible and approachable rather than as merely a disciplinary force (Ekland & Gilby, 2009). Dusenbury (2012) addressed the similar belief of the participants, stating that when placed in a nonthreatening learning environment, students are better able to ask questions and share their ideas.

Additional themes. Eleven additional themes reported by participants were: *working next to teacher, clean and tidy, small and cozy, feels like home, colorful walls, teacher visibility, non-judgmental atmosphere, small group instruction classes, ample space, office like atmosphere,* and *tutoring area*. The results of the 11 themes can be related to how students who had been enrolled at SMHS for at least 1 year and who had demonstrated an increase in their academics viewed the school's learning environment and its contributions to their improved academic performance.

Research question 2. The findings to research question 2 are shown in Table 12, which lists 15 themes that emerged from the responses to three interview questions. The two themes that received the most responses were *teacher motivation* and *independent achiever*; both emerged in three out of the four questions. Twelve additional themes reported by participants

were: *taking responsibility, teacher show they care, peer support and accountability, passing tests, grade improvement, becoming a hard worker, college readiness, relationship with teachers, time management skills, mature, work at own pace,* and *on track to graduate*.

  Teacher motivation. The top theme that emerged for the research question was *teacher motivation*. During the interview process, the participants mentioned this theme 25 times. Participants believed that their learning was enhanced when teachers made an effort to utilize resources, such as technology, and combine them with real life experiences and connections to motivate them to excel in their learning. In order provide effective teacher motivation, the teachers must know how to present the instructional materials in a meaningful and entertaining way that grabs the students' attention. The literature asserts that having a wide variety of instructional strategies that tap into students' lives can help motivate students in their academics (Brophy, 1987; Erwin, 2004; Hue & Li, 2008; Karin, 2012).

  Participants believed that an effective learning environment was one where teachers are constantly pushing students to do better, motivating them to go above and beyond, and making sure they do not end up on a path to failure. The participants' notions of teacher motivation environment aligns with those of DuFour et al. (2004), who noted that the teacher can implement various external motivators to increase student participation, enthusiasm, and motivation.

  Independent achiever. The second theme that emerged for research question 2 was being an independent achiever. During the interview process, the participants mentioned this theme 17 times. The literature asserts the need to promote independence and autonomy in order to motivate and enlighten individuals to excel (Brehm, 1966; Bulach et al., 2008; Pink, 2009). The participants believed that giving them the opportunity to take charge of their education positively impacted their desire to succeed academically.

The participants indicated that they were able to mature as students because they took charge of their own education by taking responsibility for their learning. The students developed the autonomy to plan their schedules, practice time management and meet deadlines, and ensure that they were on track to graduate. The participants' concept of an independent achiever aligned with that of Daniel Pink (2009), who believed that autonomy is one of the most important foundations for increasing a person's intrinsic motivation. Furthermore, teaching students independence may help students develop better comprehension in their schoolwork, better grades, and enhanced productivity.

Additional themes. Thirteen additional themes reported by participants were: *confidence, taking responsibility, teacher show they care, peer support and accountability, passing tests, grade improvement, becoming a hard worker, college readiness, relationship with teachers, time management skills, mature, work at own pace,* and *on track to graduate*. These 13 themes can be related to how students who had been enrolled at SMHS for at least 1 year and who had demonstrated an increase in their academics viewed the school's learning experience and the contributions it made to their improved academic performance.

Research question 3. The findings to research question 3 are shown in Table 16, which lists 10 themes that emerged from the responses to three interview questions. The two themes that received the most responses were *teacher support* and *the sports program*. Eight additional themes reported by participants were: *ASB, pathways camps, independent study curriculum, learn to take responsibility, flexibility, time management,* and *learn to be confident*.

Teacher support. The top theme that emerged for the research question was teacher support in regard to successful interventions for students. During the interview process, the participants mentioned this theme 32 times. The participants believed that having teachers who

acted as coaches, mentors, parents, and friends made a positive impact on how well they can do their work. Having mentors who are trained to work with students in order to create meaningful relationships and provide support to meet their academic goals increases positive behaviors (BBBS, 2013; Promising Practices Network, 2013). These advocates can also assist with students' emotional and personal needs. Additionally, researchers have asserted the need for additional support for at-risk students in order to improve their academic performance through means of tutoring, credit recovery, and small group instruction (Dynarski et al., 1998, 2008; National High School Center, 2013).

Sports program. This study found that one of the most common themes reported by the students in response to research question 3 was having *extracurricular activities* such as sports to retain students in schools. This theme was mentioned by 10 participants during the interview process. The theme aligned with the literature review findings in that having programs such as community service, volunteering, and extracurricular activities in the school improved students' social and classroom behavior. This can help students learn how to make healthy choices, think critically, and be motivated to pursue their goals (Dynarski et al., 1998, 2008; National High School Center, 2013).

Additional themes. Eight additional themes reported by participants were: *ASB, pathways camps, independent study curriculum, learn to take responsibility, flexibility, time management,* and *learn to be confident*. The results of the eight themes can be related to how students who have been enrolled at SMHS for at least 1 year and who had demonstrated an increase in their academics viewed the school's intervention program and the contributions it made to their improved academic performance.

Research question 4. The findings to research question 4 are shown in Table 20, which lists 10 themes that emerged from the responses to three interview questions. The two themes that received the most responses were *time management* and *one-on-one support*. The 15 additional themes reported by participants were: *study skills, relationship with teachers, teacher motivation, knowing what to study for, organized in detail, easy to understand, diligence, independence, meeting deadlines, prepares students for exams, teacher makes learning fun, asking questions, allows for flexibility, parental involvement,* and *rigorous*.

Time management. The top theme that emerged for research question 4 was time management in relation to the independent study model. During the interview process, the participants mentioned this theme 19 times. Participants believed that the main skill they developed in the independent study model was learning how to effectively manage their time throughout the day, schedule their appointments, and make sure to meet their deadlines. This theme is supported by the CDE (2013), which indicated that the independent study model provides flexibility regarding students' needs, interests, and learning styles. Because of the program's flexibility and the fact that students are working independently at home, students should create a checklist of when, where, and how to study. It is important that the student have a calendar that includes a study, exam, and homework timetable. Time management is all about making lists and prioritizing the tasks (Burns & Sinfield, 2012). With the ample time students have in this type of learning model, it is essential that they have effective time management skills. Amanda Morin (2012) stated that having good time management and study skills involves creating a calendar, a weekly planner, and a daily check-list to ensure deadlines are met.

One-on-one support. One of the most common themes reported by the SMHS students in response to research question 4 was the *one-on-one support from a teacher*, which was

considered an important factor in the independent study model. Participants felt that the greatest benefit of the independent study program was having access to a teacher working with them side-by-side to help assist with any questions and concerns relating to their assignments. The literature review asserted that teachers and staff in independent study programs should make sure to have private one-on-one communication with their students to ensure that their individualized learning plans are up-to-date, that they are making progress, and that they reach proficiency (Fusion Academy, 2014; OFL, 2013). Additionally, mentor programs that provide a one-on-one relationship such as Big Brothers Big Sisters (2013) and Boys and Girls Club of America (2014) have been shown to enhance and increase student confidence and academic achievement.

Additional themes. Fifteen additional themes reported by participants were: *study skills, relationship with teachers, teacher motivation, knowing what to study for, organized in detail, easy to understand, diligence, independence, meeting deadlines, prepares students for exams, teacher makes learning fun, asking questions, allows for flexibility, parental involvement,* and *rigorous.* The results of the 15 themes can be related to how students who have been enrolled at SMHS for at least 1 year and who have demonstrated an increase in their academics viewed the school's independent study program and its contributions to their improved academic performance.

Conclusions

The data collected and analyzed from the participants' responses to the interview questions resulted in four conclusions. First, alternative high school students perceived teachers as the most important school factor influencing their academic performance. More specifically, teachers influenced student academic performance through caring, supportive, one-on-one relationships.

Having a relationship and rapport with teachers ignited students' aspirations and ambitions to excel in their academics. For the participants in this study, having a teacher who acted as a mentor, offering compassion, comfort, and counsel was invaluable. The interview responses of 13 students indicated that having close relationships with their teachers positively affected their concentration in their academics. Additionally, all of the participants felt that having a teacher working with them on a one-on-one basis provided the support necessary to excel in their academics. According to the research, mentoring programs are successful when protégés they have advocates who are trained to work with students in order to create meaningful relationships and provide them with the mentoring and support necessary to meet their academic, emotional, and personal needs (Dynarski et al., 1998, 2008; National High School Center, 2013). Having a teacher who is there every day and involved in meeting students' academic and emotional needs is essential to their development. Students need to know that their teachers genuinely care about them and their academic success (Tellett-Royce, 2008). This can be assured by setting expectations high for all students and giving them the support and guidance they need to meet those expectations (Parrett & Budge, 2012).

Students are more productive in their academics when they have teachers who consistently motivate and positively push them. Ten participants believed that the consistent encouragement and reinforcement from teachers helped motivate them to become productive and gain a sense of accomplishment. Furthermore, all of the participants in the study acknowledged that the one factor that made them so successful in school was having support and guidance from their teachers. Teachers need to empower their students to make choices regarding their education such as projects, activities, and assignments (Tomlinson et al., 2008). Providing choices for students helps to create independent achievers who become responsible decision-

makers when they leave school. The ability to feel invested will increase the desire to learn because students will learn to take risks, be creative, and begin to learn to use their strengths (Erwin, 2004). When teachers set high expectations with their students, the classroom environment is immensely impacted in terms of student learning and behavior (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968). Moreover, recognition of accomplishment needs to be present in the classroom so that students can continue to be encouraged to study (Resnik, 1999). The teacher can provide external motivation such as gift certificates, honor roll selection, food, music, and other *big ticket* items to continually push students to do well in class (DuFour et al., 2004).

Second, a physically and emotionally safe learning environment was found to be essential for at-risk students, as it allowed them to concentrate comfortably on their academics. The at-risk students who typically do not fit in the traditional high school model have to worry about violence, abuse, and being judged by their peers. Merely attending a school that is small in size, surrounded by many teachers, and in one large open space can help eliminate those fears and bring a sense of calm and ease. The existence of this type of setting at SMHS was evident from 11 students' responses to the interview questions, indicating that in order for them to concentrate in school, they must be in a learning environment that feels safe. Further, Braster et al. (2012) stated that having too many students in a classroom has detrimental effects on learning, comfort, and concentration due to an increase of noise, pollution, heat, and humidity. Moreover, one of the main aspects that causes students to feel safe and secure is knowing that their teachers genuinely care about their wellbeing (Curwin, 2010). Additionally, having all staff making a conscious effort to be vigilant, present, and approachable throughout the school as well as welcoming and greeting students helps create a safe environment (Ekland & Gilby, 2009). This

sense of security is developed through the trust that is built through the relationship between the student and the teacher.

Third, extracurricular activities such as sports and student council help build student retention and motivation in school. Ten students believed that the top resource and intervention that helped them stay in school was participating in an extracurricular activity, more specifically the sports program. The most important predictors of the dropout and graduation rate are: the students' lack of engagement in their academic work, high absenteeism, and lack of participation in social and extracurricular activities (Rumberger & Lim, 2008). Therefore, placing at-risk students in mentoring and educational programs that provide extracurricular activities such as community service, volunteering, and sports enhances students' desire to do well in school and develop relational skills. (BBBS, 2013; Promising Practices Network, 2013). Additionally, activities can help students make healthy choices, think critically, and be motivated to pursue their goals (Dynarski et al., 1998, 2008; National High School Center, 2013)

Finally, the researcher concluded that providing students with the guidance, opportunity, and support to take charge of their education and learning helps individual learners to be more responsible. Being independent allows students to become accountable for their attendance, completion of assignments, and meeting deadlines. As evident from the participants' responses to the interview questions pertaining to how they develop and learn as a student, a total of 13 students responded that they are learning to be independent achievers. The literature emphasizes the need to encourage individuality, independence, and autonomy in order to motivate individuals to excel (Brehm, 1966; Pink, 2009). In contrast, if the school has a heavy emphasis on coercion, control, strict rules, and regulations, the students will generally underachieve because of the lack of independence (Bulach et al., 2008). Students need to be given the

opportunity to express their own opinions, ideas, and creativity, which will not only make them want to learn but also promote better grades and higher productivity (Bulach et al., 2008; Pink, 2009).

Recommendations for Policies and Practices

Four policy and practice recommendations were devised from the analysis and interpretations of this study's findings. First, it is recommended that, in order to develop and improve relationship building skills in the classroom, continuation schools, alternative schools, and independent study programs should provide human relations trainings for not only teachers but also all staff. Similar to the hospitality industry, teachers must learn how to provide the best customer service to students while giving them the resources they need to be successful. Teachers must cultivate a mindset of seeing their students as customers coming into their classroom seeking a service to learn. Furthermore, teachers need to know each of their students on a personal level by engaging in the following practices: (a) honest teacher-student communication, (b) showing interest and care for the student, (c) building connections, (d) forming trust, and (e) establishing accountability.

Second, it is recommended that teachers become mentors to each individual student in their classrooms. Mentoring can start with providing ample time to support the student emotionally and academically. Teachers can work on helping students obtain reachable goals, keeping them accountable with their actions, and making sure they know the rules of the game in order to become successful. Similarly, each student will become a mentor to an individual in order to provide guidance and support through the arduous journey in high school. Doing so will help students feel safe at school knowing that they have people who can count on for support.

Third, it is recommended that alternative schools give students autonomy and flexibility in the classroom in order to motivate them to excel in their academics. At-risk students need an alternate way to be engaged in their schoolwork and also need to be involved in activities that ignite their interests. For this reason, teachers need to incorporate project-based learning that aligns with student interest and curiosity. Doing so will allow students the opportunity to work together in teams, tackling problems, finding solutions, and giving them the freedom to be creative with their work. Additionally, teachers should provide students with choices of assignments and projects that are equal in rigor and most importantly consistent with the curriculum's learning objectives. Students will learn to be responsible for their learning through self-monitoring and tracking their progress.

Lastly, it is recommended that schools provide various types of extracurricular activities to help reinforce topics learned in the classroom and for students to apply their skills to real life scenarios. To implement this suggestion effectively, teachers must work together with all stakeholders to emphasize the importance of being involved in something and encourage students to explore activities that match their interests, such as athletics. Additionally, schools should give students the opportunity to express their opinion on the type of field trips, clubs, and activities that interest them. Lastly, schools must need to provide each of the activities with an equal amount of attention, organizational support, and the resources necessary to make them function successfully.

Recommendations for Future Research

The researcher has several recommendations for future research in regard to the four school factors and their influence on academic achievement. Future studies could provide more substantial evidence to support the effect of the four school factors pertaining to learning

environment, learning experience, school interventions, and independent study. The following recommendations are proposed for future study:

- The population in this study was categorized as at-risk students who had done extremely well in their academics, had demonstrated good citizenship, and attendance, and who were top performers in their class. A study of struggling at-risk students who are on the verge of withdrawing from school would help answer questions on how to motivate students who are underperforming. The information gathered from these type of participants, with a specific emphasis on the four school factors, would provide evidence as to why these students were not successful.

- The study would benefit from having a quantitative approach to bring a deeper understanding in evaluating factors that affect academic achievement. The interviews helped provide information through personal interactions with the participants, but having a quantitative survey could also provide relevant information that some participants may feel more comfortable expressing in writing as opposed to discussing in person.

- Having additional information from students who withdrew from or dropped out of the school could help provide further evidence on the factors that negatively impact student motivation and achievement.

- Having a follow-up study for students who entered postsecondary education 4 years later would help to determine if the positive effects of their experiences at SMHS have led them to become successful in college and/or enabled them to secure employment.

- Future research could study a group of students who enroll in high school for 4 years and study their lived experiences at the end of every grade level.

- Since study was conducted at a charter school with an independent study model, it is recommended that the study be replicated in other alternative models.

- Future research should address whether the public perceptions of the school they attend affects the way students perceive themselves as students.

- Future research could investigate students who were severely bullied on campus and find out how schools could do a better job in making sure students feel safe.

Summary

This study looked at the school factors experienced by students at an alternative high school and their perceptions regarding influences that have contributed to their improved academic performance. The school factors included: the nature and quality of the school learning environment, learning experiences, program interventions, and the independent study program.

The American people have lot of work to do in regard to addressing the achievement gap and graduation rates of under-performing high school students, especially those from the disadvantaged populations. Moreover, school leadership must now leverage the new Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP) as a means to address improvements and also reference the importance of involving diverse student perspectives. The pressure is substantial for educators and administrators to make sure that all students achieve academic success and proficiency in their subject matter. Effective strategies must be implemented to help at-risk students overcome these barriers and be successful. Successful methods to help at-risk students excel in their academics and graduate may benefit both individual students and society in general.

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APPENDIX A

CITI Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative Completion Report

Graduate & Professional School Social & Behavioral Research -

Basic/Refresher Curriculum Completion Report

Printed on 12/15/2012

Learner: Charles Pak (username: xxxxx)

Institution: Pepperdine University

Contact Information   Department: Graduate school of education

xxx xxxx   **Email:** xxxxxxxx

Social & Behavioral Research - Basic/Refresher: Choose this group to satisfy CITI training requirements for Investigators and staff involved primarily in Social/Behavioral Research with human subjects.

Stage 1. Basic Course Passed on 12/15/12 (Ref # 9329905)

Required Modules	Date Completed	Score
Belmont Report and CITI Course Introduction	12/14/12	2/3 (67%)
Students in Research	12/14/12	8/10 (80%)
History and Ethical Principles - SBR	12/14/12	3/5 (60%)
Defining Research with Human Subjects - SBR	12/14/12	3/5 (60%)
The Regulations and The Social and Behavioral Sciences - SBR	12/14/12	4/5 (80%)

Assessing Risk in Social and Behavioral Sciences - SBR	12/14/12	4/5 (80%)
Informed Consent - SBR	12/14/12	5/5 (100%)
Privacy and Confidentiality - SBR	12/14/12	3/5 (60%)
Research with Prisoners - SBR	12/15/12	4/4 (100%)
Research with Children - SBR	12/14/12	3/4 (75%)
Research in Public Elementary and Secondary Schools - SBR	12/14/12	4/4 (100%)
International Research - SBR	12/14/12	3/3 (100%)
Internet Research - SBR	12/14/12	5/5 (100%)
Research and HIPAA Privacy Protections	12/14/12	2/5 (40%)
Vulnerable Subjects - Research Involving Workers/Employees	12/14/12	4/4 (100%)
Conflicts of Interest in Research Involving Human Subjects	12/15/12	5/5 (100%)

For this Completion Report to be valid, the learner listed above must be affiliated with a CITI participating institution. Falsified information and unauthorized use of the CITI course site is unethical, and may be considered scientific misconduct by your institution.

Paul Professor, University of Miami
Director Office of Research Education
CITI Course Coordinator

APPENDIX B

IRB Approval Letter E0714D03

PEPPERDINE UNIVERSITY

Graduate & Professional Schools Institutional Review Board

November 26, 2014

Charles Pak

Protocol #: E0714D03
Project Title: A Study of High Performing At-Risk High School Students and Their Perceptions on Academic Success and Achievement

Dear Mr. Pak:

Thank you for submitting your application, *A Study of High Performing At-Risk High School Students and Their Perceptions on Academic Success and Achievement*, for expedited review to Pepperdine University's Graduate and Professional Schools Institutional Review Board (GPS IRB). The IRB appreciates the work you and your advisor, Dr. Purrington completed on the proposal. The IRB has reviewed your submitted IRB application and all ancillary materials. As the nature of the research met the requirements for expedited review under provision Title 45 CFR 46.110 (Research Category 7) of the federal Protection of Human Subjects Act, the IRB conducted a formal, but expedited, review of your application materials.

I am pleased to inform you that your application for your study was granted **Full Approval**. The IRB approval begins today, **November 26, 2014**, and terminates on **November 26, 2015**.

Your final consent form has been stamped by the IRB to indicate the expiration date of study approval. One copy of the consent form is enclosed with this letter and one copy will be retained for our records. **You can only use copies of the consent that have been stamped with the GPS IRB expiration date to obtain consent from your participants.**

Please note that your research must be conducted according to the proposal that was submitted to the GPS IRB. If changes to the approved protocol occur, a revised protocol must be reviewed and approved by the IRB before implementation. For **any** proposed changes in your research protocol, please submit a Request for Modification form to the GPS IRB. Please be aware that changes to your protocol may prevent the research from qualifying for expedited review and require submission of a new IRB application or other materials to the GPS IRB. If contact with subjects will extend beyond **November 26, 2015** a Continuation or Completion of Review Form must be submitted at least one month prior to the expiration date of study approval to avoid a lapse in approval.

A goal of the IRB is to prevent negative occurrences during any research study. However, despite our best intent, unforeseen circumstances or events may arise during the research. If an unexpected situation or adverse event happens during your investigation, please notify the GPS IRB as soon as possible. We will ask for a complete explanation of the event and your response. Other actions also may be required depending on the nature of the event. Details regarding the timeframe in which adverse events must be reported to the GPS IRB and the appropriate form to be used to report this information can be found in the *Pepperdine University Protection of Human Participants in Research: Policies and Procedures Manual* (see link to "policy material" at http://www.pepperdine.edu/irb/graduate/).

Please refer to the protocol number denoted above in all further communication or correspondence related to this approval. Should you have additional questions, please contact me. On behalf of the GPS IRB, I wish you success in this scholarly pursuit.

6100 Center Drive, Los Angeles, California 90045 • 310-568-5600

Sincerely,

Thema Bryant-Davis, Ph.D.
Chair, Graduate and Professional Schools IRB
Pepperdine University

cc: Dr. Lee Kats, Vice Provost for Research and Strategic Initiatives
        Mr. Brett Leach, Compliance Attorney
        Dr. Linda Purrington, Faculty Advisor

APPENDIX C

Recruitment Letter

Dear_____,

My name is Charles Pak. I am a doctoral candidate at Pepperdine University. My doctoral

research will explore the lived experiences of high-performing at-risk students entrepreneurs in

an alternative high school.

My dissertation is titled, "A Study of High-Performing At-Risk High School Students

and Their Perceptions on Academic Success and Achievement." My dissertation is being

supervised by Dr. Linda Purrington, Ed.D, at Pepperdine University.

The purpose of this research project is to explore and describe the school factors

experienced by students at an alternative high school and to identify those factors, if any, that

students perceive as contributing to their improved academic performance.The information

generated and data collected may be used for academic research or publication. All information

obtained will be treated confidentially.

You are invited to participate in a qualitative research study conducted as part of the

requirements for a Doctorate in Educational Leadership, Administration and Policy in the

Graduate School of Education and Psychology at Pepperdine University. For this project, I will

interview high school student in San Manuel High School to explore examine high-performing

at-risk students' perception on academic achievement and success within a charter school

environment that utilized an independent study format.

To collect data for this research, I will interview several students like you in a well-lit

multipurpose room at school. During the one-on-one interviews, you will be asked to answer a

series of questions. The entire interview should take approximately 30 minutes to one hour and

will be conducted in person by me. I will take written notes or thoughts I may have during the interview. I will tape record the interview for accuracy, but at any point, you may ask me to turn off the tape or refuse to answer a question. After the tape has been transcribed, the tape will be erased, and your identity will remain anonymous. A pseudonym will be assigned to your name. Through this data, I endeavor to learn more about the lived experienced of high performing sat-risk students their perception on academic success through the following school factors: (a) the nature and quality of the school learning environment, (b) learning experiences, (c) program interventions, and (d) the independent study program.

You are free to withdraw your participation at any time should you decide to do so. If you have any questions or concerns, feel free to contact me at xxxxxxxx@pepperdine.edu. I hope you will enjoy this opportunity to share your experience in the hope that future educators will be provided with the awareness and tools necessary to prepare underachieving students' to excel in their academics and graduate from highs school. You may also contact the researcher's chair, Dr. Linda Purrington, at at xxx.xxxxx@pepperdine.edu or xxx-xxx-xxxx.

Sincerely,

Charles Pak

 xxx.xxxxx@pepperdine.edu

 xxx-xxx-xxxx

Pepperdine University Doctoral Student

APPENDIX D

Interview Protocol

Research Area:		
Researcher:		
Location:		
Date:	Start:	End:

Introduction

The interviewer introduces himself to the student, empathizes that the interview is

voluntary and describes what the interview sought to achieve: The purpose of this interview is to

help me to obtain your thoughts, opinions and feelings in regards to your experiences at San

Manuel Charter School. The interview will last approximately 30-60 minutes. Please respond to

each question as best as you can, there is no right or wrong answer. If you come a across a

question that you do not wish to answer, you may say the word "skip." Everything that is said

today in this room is confidential and no one, not even your family members will have access to

your answers. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Learning Environment
1) How would you describe the learning environment at SMHS? How does it affect you in concentrating in your academics
2) How would you describe the design of your school building? How does it affect you in regards to student motivation and academic success?
3) Where do you learn best at school and why?

Learning Experience
4) Has your level of interest in school changed? If so when did it start?
5) Do you feel involved in school and have you noticed a change in your learning? Are you more involved with your peers?

6) Has any aspects of SMHS helped motivate yourself to become productive and gained a sense of accomplishment?

7) What attributes, if any, have you developed in the alternative school?

School Interventions

8) What resources or interventions if any, helped you to excel in your academic?

9) What interventions, if any, provided you with the skills to help you fully demonstrate the content?

10) What do you think is the most important aspect of SMHS that makes the student here so successful in their academic if any?

Independent Study Program

11) Has independent study program helped you find your strengths? If so, what strengths has it helped you find?

12) What other skills did you develop as a student when working independentally?

13) How do you feel about SMHS curriculum? Does it differ from you previous school or schools?

14) What do you feel about the methods of teaching as opposed to your previous school?

Conclusion

This concludes the interview process. Thank you very much for allowing me to obtain your responses.

APPENDIX E

Parent Consent for Son/Daughter's Participation in Research Activities

Participant: _____

Principal Investigator: Charles Pak

Title of Project: A Study of High Performing At-Risk High School Students and Their
Perceptions on Academic Success and Achievement

1. I _____, give my permission for my son/daughter
    to participate in the dissertation research study conducted by doctoral student, Charles
    Pak, from the Educational Leadership, Policy and Administrative Program at Pepperdine
    University. I understand that I may contact Charles' Pak Faculty Supervisor Dr. Linda
    Purrington at ████████████ if I have any questions or concerns regarding this study.

The overall purpose of this research is to explore and describe the school factors experienced by
students at an alternative high school with an independent study program and CASHEE passing
rate of 90% and to identify those factors, if any, students perceive as contributing to their
improved academic performance. The school factors examined will be: (a) the nature and quality
of the school learning environment, (b) learning experiences, (c) program interventions, and (d)
the independent study program.
My son/daughter has been asked to participate in this study because my son/daughter is a high
performing at-risk high school student who has been enrolled at the charter high school for at
least 1 year. I understand that my son/daughter's participation will respond to up to twelve
questions during a face-to-face individual interview that will take 30 to 60 minutes.

My son/daughter's participation in the study will take place after school hours at a well-lit
conference room at the school site. I understand that my son/daughter's participation in this
study will remain confidential and any data collected will be confidential.

I understand that the interview will be recorded using a digital audio recorder, and will be
transcribed by the researcher for review and analysis. The data collected from the interview
questions will be used to explore high performing at-risk high school student's perception on
academic success and achievement.

I understand that the possible benefits to myself or society from this study will assist educators,
teachers, and researchers in providing a better understanding of the wide variety of contributing
factors that enhance "at-risk" students to excel in an alternative school that utilizes the
independent study format. In addition, this study aims to provide educators with insights on how
to retain students and decrease the drop-out rate in their respective schools

2. I understand that the researcher will work with my son/daughter to ensure that there is minimal risk, discomfort, inconvenience, and possible distress based on recalling negative experiences. Examples of these risks might be fatigue, boredom, and apathy.

3. I believe the risks of this study are minimized and are reasonable in relation to the anticipated benefits of the study. I understand that my son/daughter has the right to refuse to answer any questions, and to discontinue participation at any time.

4. I understand that my son/daughter's participation is voluntary and that he/she may refuse to participate and/or withdraw and discontinue participation in the project or any activity at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which we are otherwise entitled. I also understand that the researcher may find it necessary to end my participation in the study.

5. I understand that the investigator will take all reasonable measures to protect confidentiality of my son/daughter's records and their identity will not be revealed in any publication that may result from this project. The confidentiality of my son/daughter's records will be maintained in accordance with applicable state and federal laws. Under California law, there are exceptions to confidentiality, including suspicion that a child, elder, or dependent adult is being abused, or if an individual discloses an intent to harm him/herself or others.

6. If the findings of the study are published or presented to a professional audience, no personally identifying information will be released. The data that is collected will be maintained in a secure manner for three years at which time the data will be destroyed.

7. If I have any questions concerning this research, I understand that I may contact the Researcher (Charles Pak at xxx-xxx-xxxx personal phone or ████████████████) or his Faculty Supervisor (Dr. Linda Purrington at xxx-xxx-xxxx or ████████████████████████). If I have questions about my rights as a research participant, I understand that I may contact Dr. Thema Bryant-Davis, Chairperson of the Pepperdine University Graduate and Professional Schools IRB, at ████████████████████████████████

8. I will be informed of any significant new findings developed during the course of my son/daughter's participation in this research which may have a bearing on my willingness to continue in the study.

9. I understand that my son/daughter will be entered into a drawing to receive a $25 gift card as a compensation for their participation in this study.

10. I understand to my satisfaction the information regarding participation in the research project. All my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I have received a copy of this informed consent form which I have read and understand.

11. I understand that my son/daughter does not have to participate if they do not want to, even if I give them permission.

I hereby consent to have my son/daughter participate in the research described above.

_____
Student's Name

_____
Signature of Parent/Guardian

_____
Date

_____
Principal Investigator

_____
Date

APPENDIX F

Informed Assent for Student Participation in Research Activities

Participant: _____

Title of Project: A Study of High Performing At-Risk High School Students and Their Perceptions on Academic Success and Achievement

1. I _____, give my permission for my son/daughter to participate in the dissertation research study conducted by doctoral student, Charles Pak, from the Educational Leadership, Policy and Administrative Program at Pepperdine University. I understand that I may contact Charles' Pak Faculty Supervisor Dr. Linda Purrington at ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮ if I have any questions or concerns regarding this study.

The overall purpose of this research is to explore and describe the school factors experienced by students at an alternative high school with an independent study program and CASHEE passing rate of 90% and to identify those factors, if any, students perceive as contributing to their improved academic performance.

I am a high performing at-risk high school student who is enrolled at Options for Youth High School. I understand that my participation will require me to respond up to twelve questions during an individual interview that will take 30 to 60 minutes.

My participation in the study will take place after school hours at a well-lit conference room at the school site. I understand that my participation in this study will remain confidential and any data collected will be confidential

I understand that the interview will be recorded using a digital audio recorder, and will be transcribed by the researcher for review and analysis. The data collected from the interview questions will be used to explore high performing at-risk high school student's perception on academic success and achievement.

I understand that the possible benefits to myself or society from this study will assist educators, teachers, and researchers in providing a better understanding of the wide variety of contributing factors that enhance "at-risk" students to excel in an alternative school that utilizes the independent study format. In addition, this study aims to provide educators with insights on how to retain students and decrease the drop-out rate in their respective schools

1. While there are no anticipated risks, it is possible that you may feel fatigue, boredom, and apathetic throughout this study.

2. I understand that I have the right to refuse to answer any questions, and to discontinue participation at any time.

3. I also understand that the researcher may find it necessary to end my participation in this study.

4. I understand that the investigator will take all reasonable measures to protect confidentiality of my records and my identity will not be revealed in any publication that may result from this project. The confidentiality of my records will be maintained in accordance with applicable state and federal laws. Under California law, there are exceptions to confidentiality, including suspicion that a child, elder, or dependent adult is being abused, or if an individual discloses an intent to harm him/herself or others.

5. If the findings of the study are published or presented to a professional audience, no personally identifying information will be released. The data that is collected will be maintained in a secure manner for three years at which time the data will be destroyed.

6. If I have any questions concerning this research, I understand that I may contact the Researcher (Charles Pak at xxx-xxx-xxxx personal phone or ⬛⬛⬛⬛⬛⬛⬛⬛⬛) or his Faculty Supervisor (Dr. Linda Purrington at xxx-xxx-xxxx or ⬛⬛⬛⬛⬛⬛⬛⬛⬛⬛⬛⬛⬛). If I have questions about my rights as a research participant, I understand that I may contact Dr. Thema Bryant-Davis, Chairperson of the Pepperdine University Graduate and Professional Schools IRB, at ⬛⬛⬛⬛⬛⬛⬛⬛⬛⬛ or ⬛⬛⬛⬛⬛.

7. I understand that I will not receive any compensation, financial or otherwise, for participating in this study.

8. I understand to my satisfaction the information regarding participation in the research project. All my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I have received a copy of this informed assent form which I have read and understand.

9. I understand that I do not have to participate in this study, even if my parents provide informed consent, giving me permission to participate.

I hereby agree to participate in the research described above.

_____
Participant's Printed Name

_____
Participant's Signature

_____
Date

I have explained and defined in detail the research procedure for which the subject agreed to participate in this research study. Having explained this and answered any questions, I am co-signing this form and accepting this person's consent.

_____
Principal Investigator

_____
Date