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Analyzing Alternative Learning Centers:
Challenges and Opportunities for Maintaining Student Retention

by

Princess Cramer-Drazkowski, BSW, LSW

MSW Clinical Research Paper

Presented to the Faculty of the School of Social Work
St. Catherine University and the University of St. Thomas
St. Paul, Minnesota
In Partial fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Social Work

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The Clinical Research Project is a graduation requirement for MSW students at St. Catherine University/University of St. Thomas School of Social Work in St. Paul, Minnesota and is conducted within a nine-month time frame to demonstrate facility with basic social research methods. Students must independently conceptualize a research problem, formulate a research design that is approved by a research committee and the university Institutional Review Board, implement the project, and publicly present the findings of the study. This project is neither a Master's thesis nor a dissertation.

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine what strategies alternative learning centers utilize for student retention. A case study was used to learn about the ways one public school located in the Upper Midwest provided resources and developed relationships with students in an alternative learning center setting. Students attending alternative learning centers are typically high-risk high-need students who do not have many social supports in their educational settings. The participant in this study is a high-level administrator who has over 30 years of experience in the public school system, including participation in the creation of the modern alternative learning center in their area. The findings imply that positive school environments as well as respectful positive relationships are necessary in the retention and maintenance of students at alternative learning centers. Environmental as well as social factors prohibit the typical alternative learning center student from being successful in school. If these relationships and environmental factors are not met students do not typically stay in school.

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Table of Contents

History/background information..... 1

Review of the Literature 2

 Expectations of high school students in mainstream schools 2

 Causes for leaving traditional school..... 2

 Environmental factors..... 3

 A nurturing school environment; school can be like family 4

 Parent to School Relationship 5

 Student and School Relationship 6

 Family and student connections..... 7

Conceptual Framework..... 9

 Ecological Systems Theory..... 9

 Reflexivity Statement..... 10

Methodology 10

 Research Design 10

 Sample and Recruitment 11

 Protection of Human Subjects 11

 Data Collection 12

 Data Analysis 12

Findings 13

 Preventative Measures 13

 Credit Recovery 15

 Supportive School Environment 16

 Literacy and Mental Illness..... 17

Discussion..... 17

 Preventative Measures 18

 Credit Recovery 19

 Supportive School Environment 19

 Literacy and Mental Illness..... 20

Strengths and Limitations 20

Implications 21

 Social work practice..... 21

ANALYZING ALTERNATIVE LEARNING CENTERS

Policy 22

Future research..... 22

References..... 24

APPENDIX A..... 30

Appendix B..... 32

History/background information

Dropout rates are increasing and according to the National Center for Education Statistics high school dropout rates were up to 20% in Minnesota. With the establishment of alternative learning centers, high school students have alternatives to traditional education. The alternative learning centers have done a great job of addressing at risk students' needs; however, the current rate of students leaving school entirely is alarming. Minnesota is working toward higher graduation rates and there is work to be done to ensure quality education for all adolescents (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012).

In general, alternative learning centers are designed to meet specific needs of at risk students and are on a self-referral or school referral basis. Most alternative learning centers have extended hours so that students can incorporate their own hours into the school day; they also have weekly check in options for students who cannot make it to campus each day of the week. Incoming alternative learning center students' performance levels are assessed upon admission so that the curriculum can be specified to their needs. Electives are offered that provide the students with real life opportunities such as work skills, work experience, parenting classes, and even pre-natal care classes. Traditionally alternative learning centers are housed separately from mainstream schools and have extra support staff to meet the needs of the students. Many programs provide childcare and have more flexible rules concerning behaviors (Lange, 1998).

It is important to understand how and why students end up at alternative learning centers and what keeps them involved in their own education. Alternative learning

centers serve some of the most vulnerable high school students. Students who attend alternative learning centers are at higher risk than their traditionally educated peers are. These risks include drug and alcohol use, sexual promiscuity, higher risk of contracting STI's, and violent behaviors (San Martin & Calabrese, 2011). High risk factors make it essential for social workers to know why students are choosing to attend alternative learning centers compared to traditional high schools so that the delivery of services to students is improved. In this study, alternative high schools will be examined and how the system within the alternative learning centers assists in keeping students in high school.

Review of the Literature

Alternative learning centers have been implemented throughout the United States and their phenomenon has been examined in many studies. A review of the literature revealed many components involved in supporting students in the alternative learning center environment. Some themes that emerged and will be discussed in the next section include expectations of students, nurturing environments, and relationships between students, faculty, and families.

Expectations of high school students in mainstream schools

Causes for leaving traditional school. March and Gaffney (2010) have identified that personal factors tend to supersede education and often times ostracize at risk students from their peers. Often causing students to leave school and find relationships and fulfillment elsewhere. Disruptive behaviors are linked to students leaving school and come in many forms for high school students. Violence is the most commonly used form

of disruptive behavior for high school students. Students exposed to violence within their family or community are often asked to leave school due to behavior in the classroom (Runchkin, Martin, & Schwab-Stone, 2008).

Risk factors also negatively influence students in schools. San Martin and Calabrese (2011), studied risk factors for students in alternative learning centers and they discovered that these students are at higher risk for sexually transmitted diseases (STD), violence, suicide, and pregnancy than peers attending traditional high school. The same factors can be seen again in Ochoa, Lopez, and Emler's (2008), research showing that student relationships outside of school are a major factor in student violence while in school; especially if the student is witnessing or subjected to violence in the home and in their community. Muhammad (2010) found that the most common response to students, who are not meeting the traditional values and goals of mainstream education, is to remove them from school. Another study shows those students who stay in mainstream education require a positive relationship between teachers, families, and students (March & Gaffney, 2010).

Environmental factors. Youth who are chronically absent from school or have poor academic achievement have a higher risk of delinquency according to Dembo, Wareham, Poythress, Meyers, Cook, and Schmeidler (2007), chronic truancy means that students are absent more days of school than they attend. According to Ochoa et al. (2011), behaviors such as drug use and truancy can be attributed to violence within the student's home and community. Keeping students active and enrolled in school can be a difficult task for school administrators, staff, and teachers. When students feel safe in their homes and communities they are better able to perform positively in school as well

as deal with difficult or stressful situations in a healthy manner (Ochoa et al, 2008).

According to Rinkel (2011), the closer the relationship between parents and the school system the greater likelihood that students will remain in mainstream education.

Dembo et al. (2007), highlighted several influences which can lead to trouble in and out of school; the greater the number of risk factors, such as home and school problems, the greater the likelihood of serious delinquency. Home life factors can be seen as an inability for parents to set limits, lack of supervision, inconsistent discipline, and harsh discipline (Blondal and Adalbjarnardottir, 2009; Dembo et al., 2007; & Rivers et al., 2012). Families that perceive their neighborhood to be a dangerous place for their adolescent tended to have more delinquency issues with their student. Students who have permissive or disengaged parents had higher rates of delinquency, substance use, and poor school performance issues (Roche et al., 2007).

A nurturing school environment; school can be like family

The literature suggests that school can be nurturing as a family and students' academic success and attendance may rely on this atmosphere. A nurturing school environment can assist students in maintaining their education even through a tough home life and lack of parent involvement. A nurturing school environment can become a safe place and resemble a family like environment for the struggling students. San, Martin, & Calabrese, (2011) found that students want learning to be fun and in a safe environment. The students in that study felt the school setting should be like a family. The idea in which family can be created at school creates a refuge for students to feel like they are part of a group and belong in the school. Students who do not have the support at home concerning their education tend to look to outside sources to fill the missing

relationship and this is where students can find themselves in dangerous or high risk situations. When students do not find at least one person who will be active in their education they may turn to unhealthy behaviors such as unprotected sex, violence, and drug and alcohol use (Weist et al., 2001).

Another example of the way school can simulate family comes in the form of nonacademic classes and events that students can excel in when they are not successful academically. According to Parcel, Dufur, and Zito (2010), the amount of money a school spends on more teachers for smaller classroom sizes, sports, music, and arts, the more connected students stay to the schools. Smaller classroom sizes allow the teachers to connect on an individual level with students with music, sports, and arts allowing students to master something other than academics.

Parent to School Relationship

In a study by Crosnoe (2009), high school students were more successful when the middle school, high school, and parent network were working closely and communicating regularly during the transition from middle school to high school. Students were even more successful when the middle school bridged the gap with high school through communication concerning the students learning styles and needs.

Public schools typically operate in a bureaucratic nature and when parents get involved, it can become more of a democracy according to Bauch and Goldring (1995). They also state that parents are education consumers as well as their students, and should request a more user-friendly approach from the administrators. However, teachers may have to take a less direct approach to requesting a more user-friendly system; due to the

nature of being employed by the school system, they wish to change. Bauch and Goldring (1995), found that school administrators and parents would like to see the parent to school relationship strengthened and that when the parent to school relationship is strengthened students fair better in school. However, Muhammad (2012) found that while schools and parents would like cohesive relationships some parents of students have mistrusting and even confrontational relationships with the schools. This can appear in the form of not acknowledging school notes or documents that are sent home, mistrusting behavior reports concerning their student, and lack of identification with teachers and staff persons. Teachers may also view parents as abrasive and purposefully undermining; this often times parallels with the relationship students have with their schools and teachers creating a negative school environment for the students (Muhammad, 2010).

Student and School Relationship

Although, family dynamics play a large role in the way students' respond to their education, deteriorating family may play a role in the failure of students' education. However, Masselam (1990) noted that school administrators play a key role in the failure of students in the mainstream education system as well. According to March and Gaffney (2010), students who feel their teachers are disconnected or impersonal toward them concerning their personal lives as well as in their academic life are less likely to stay connected to school than students who feel the educators around them are interested and invested.

Delgado- Gaitain (1988) found that teachers viewed conformity as a primary value concerning their students. With conformity being a valuable asset this meant that

conformity in students including school appropriate behavior and the families' ability to conform to the teachers' expectations of the student. This typically leaves students to conform to administrators and teachers expectations or leave traditional high school.

Family and student connections

In Masselam's (1990) study concerning family functioning and alternative learning centers students, he suggests that the deteriorating family has an effect on the alternative learning center students' failures in traditional school and the students failing academics resulted in failing family functioning. Dysfunctional families are not as likely to provide support and a stable environment for their student. Alternative learning center students were more likely to come from families that were unable to adapt to an issue or respond in a healthy way (Messelam, 1990). According to Randazzo, Litrownik, Newton, Davis, & Villodas (2011) family and home permanence has a great impact on students maintaining a positive path toward education and lower their risk factors. This does not have to come in the form of a biological parent and the research shows that the permanence of family can mean a positive permanent caretaker of the student. When students become separated from their parents, family functioning can be negatively affected. This separation can be in the form of divorce, frequently occurring residential moves, removal from the home, or death, and can be predictors of academic achievement or failure (Somers, Chiodo, Ratner, Barton, and Delaney-Black, 2011).

Gregory and Weinstein (2004) found that students who felt a sense of closeness to their parents also felt as if they were being monitored by them. Students from higher income families made greater achievements in school than those from lower income families; with these achievement gaps widening throughout the four years of high school.

Students who felt that they had relationship resources such as parents, teachers, or other school officials, achieved higher academically (Gregory & Weinstein 2004).

According to Gregory and Weinstein (2004), high school students scored higher in math when they felt regulated by parents and teachers. According to Gonzalez, Holbein, and Quilter, (2002) students whose parents tended to explain rules and encourage autonomy had better outcomes in mastering skills in school environments. It is important to note that conflict within families during students' adolescence is quite common and in fact can be a positive time for students (Kuhlberg, Pena, & Zayas, 2010). According to Kuhlberg, et al. (2010), students should be moving toward autonomy and individualization from their parents during adolescence.

Heards (2007) study about parental transitions he found that students', whose mothers transitioned in and out of their life greatly affected their success. These transitions were not necessarily physical and included emotional unavailability and no school involvement. Meanwhile Johnson (2010) discovered that students who were more aligned with their fathers were less anxious, less withdrawn, had higher grades, and overall more successful academic career when they entered ninth grade. Furthermore, Somers et al. (2011) states that paternal involvement in the lives of high school students was a significant indicator if the child would stay involved academically in school. Rinkle (2011) provides another example of the importance of parental involvement by showing a poor parent to school relationship. This can have a very negative effect on the student continuing their education, however, does not mean that a student will never excel academically. Hogan, Shandra, and Msall (2007) point out that a lack of parental

involvement in their students' academic life at times is attributed to the life issues of the parent such as disabilities or drug use.

Conceptual Framework

The purpose of this study is to examine how alternative learning centers retain and keep kids in school. An ecological systems theory perspective will be used throughout this research. The ecological systems theory lens will allow this researcher to examine the system in which students attend school and how the geophysical factors as well as interpersonal factors, influence students staying in school.

Ecological Systems Theory

The ecological systems theory lens will be used to investigate the way in which students maintain their education at alternative learning centers. The eco-systems theoretical perspective asserts that persons are not separate entities from their environment but that they co-exist and are constantly being influenced by the geophysical and interpersonal relationships (Forte, 2007). "Social Workers might also enhance human behavior and practice theory by beginning to study the interface between client and planet Earth." (Forte, 2007)

Eco-systems theory maintains that people work within their environment and examines human habitats that include school, work, and the home. These habitats provide their human components with several niches, which are where a person feels that they fit in, feel comfortable, and belong (Forte, 2007). In order to engage appropriately in environmental changes people must maintain constant cooperation. An alternative school is a niche within the community where students need to feel safe, secure, and feel

as if they belong. Eco-systems theory allows for examination of the influencing factors in and out of the alternative learning center students environment and allows insight to how to retain students.

Reflexivity Statement

Practicing reflexivity is an important method being implemented throughout this research. According to Valandra (2012) research and study design are influenced by one's own beliefs, values, perceptions, life experiences, and environment. Due to poor choices interfering with this author's education, she left high school prior to graduation. After being enrolled in an alternative learning center this writer still did not connect with school rules or gain a sense of belonging in school and her personal life and niche was a larger influence than school. It is important to understand what keeps students in school so that education for students can be maintained. This author understands the depths and hardships of leaving high school prior to graduation and what that means for higher learning. It is important to recognize that students in alternative learning centers have many niches in which they belong. However, education is an important and necessary part of adolescence and due to environmental factors influencing students; schools must work to be one of the more important and influencing environments.

Methodology

Research Design

This is a qualitative case study where one participant was asked to partake in a semi-structured 30-minute interview. The participant was a professional administrator currently working within a school district with an alternative learning center. The

alternative learning center provides a high school experience to students who have not been able to maintain their education in a mainstream school. The respondent was asked ten questions (see Appendix C) concerning the relationship between the student and the school examining the schools ability to keep students in school and how they connect with students. A qualitative case study design with a face-to-face semi-structured interview was used because the interview process provided data rich in detail, emotion, and the interview added a human element. Berg (2009) states that a certain element of symbolism and meaning typically is provided when considering an individual's own perceptions and apprehensions. The importance of this research containing the human element and individual ideas may assist schools in the future with student retention at alternative learning centers.

Sample and Recruitment

The participant in this research was an administrator from an upper mid-western public school system. Social workers, teachers, administrators, counselors, and support staff, who assisted in the planning and implementation of alternative learning centers, were also invited to participate but declined. This research study used non-probability, snowball sampling, which includes contacting a professional who will then provide a referral to another professional who will, then do the same (Berg, 2009). The interview took place in a closed office and was recorded using an audio recording device, the participant gave verbal and written consent before the interview began (see Appendix B).

Protection of Human Subjects

To protect human participants, an informed consent was reviewed and signed by the case study participant. To ensure that the participant understood his/her rights, as a

research subject the informed consent form was reviewed with the researcher. Risks and/or benefits, if any, are named in the informed consent form (see Appendix B).

Confidentiality was maintained through the use of password protected files and a lock box for the written and audio recorded data. The researcher was the only person with access to the information and the only persons who viewed the data were the researcher, a research assistant, and the chair of the research committee. The confidential information will be destroyed on July 1, 2013. This research paper will contain no names or identifying information concerning the case study participant.

Data Collection

The data was collected through one semi-structured case study interview. The case study participant was asked to provide 30 minutes of his/her time and asked ten, open-ended questions (see Appendix C). According to Berg (2009), researchers who focus on a single individual or institution aim to uncover significant characteristics of that individual or institution thus capturing various patterns or elements. The participant in this study was an administrator who oversees an alternative learning center located in Minnesota. The interview was conducted face-to-face and recorded using a small audio-recording device, of which the participant was aware and provided verbal consent before the interview began. No incentives were offered for participation in this case study and the participant was informed of no direct benefits or risks in participating in this research.

Data Analysis

Audio recording was transcribed after the case study interview. Data was reduced through the process of audio recording, to transcription, to coded data. Data reduction is a key tool in the process of research as it allows the researcher to simplify, focus, and

reduce the amount of data (Berg, 2009). The researcher, to make an informed evaluation about the study, coded data. The evaluation was verified by carefully examining the path in which the researchers' analytical conclusion was made (Berg, 2009). A colleague completed additional verification of codes, which were compared with the researchers' codes in order to identify accurate codes.

Findings

After the data was analyzed, several themes emerged from the coded data; these themes were crosschecked by a colleague and then formulated into four main themes: *preventative measures, credit recovery, supportive school environment, literacy and mental illness.*

Preventative Measures

The data in this study describes how contemporary alternative learning centers are different from the original model. The original model of alternative learning center was to get students who dropped out of high school off the streets.

the reason we started the program and that was to bring students who had dropped out of school back into school so they could complete their education.

That is one thing, bringing or having an opportunity for dropouts to go to school, come back to school, and be able to work at their own pace toward high school graduation.

The alternative learning center of today is much different because it is made up of many programs to prevent students from ever leaving school hence the preventative measures. These preventative programs such as on-site childcare and prenatal care

classes offer students much more support. Students are able to obtain practical knowledge from courses such as work skills and parenting classes. The participant notes this in his/her statement:

We help teen moms, dropouts, and we provide, well we started on the premise of this, and we provide work experience credit for those kids that have to have a job. It is almost a 1 for 1 credit. They can take classes for work skills, parenting classes, for those that have delivered, we offer pre-natal classes for before they deliver, and we have become over the years, almost a preventative measure for kids to keep them from dropping out.

The less restrictive setting allows students to maintain their education while using progressive curriculum. This type of curriculum is used so that a student who may not show up for a week can come back to the classroom and pick up where they left off. The student does not lose valuable time for schoolwork and they are able to continue with school and potentially graduate.

In the findings, it becomes clear that there are counter measures to the preventative measures. Meaning that the reality of alternative learning centers is that they cannot save every student and some students do not make it to graduation.

Well that really happens and some of those kids we lose. Some of those kids will leave and not come back, some of those kids drop further into the depths of alcohol or drugs and some get caught up in things that are not legal and get put in jail and sent away. Yes, there are kids that we lose and not always good things happen to those kids.

Credit Recovery

When examining why the typical alternative learning center student is attending an alternative school rather than a traditional high school, *credit recovery* emerged as a theme throughout the data. The participant gives an example of this in his/her statement below:

Well the typical student is behind in a credit, which is the biggest thing, they are behind in credits and they are going there to catch up. Kind of a credit recovery if you will but there is a variety of reasons as to why that kid is behind.

Students who are attending alternative learning centers are youth who are at high risk for certain behaviors. This becomes clear when the participant comments on why students are in need of credit recovery.

They have drug habits, alcohol habits; they have a home life that is very bad. They might have some mental health problems that have gotten in the way of learning. Those are some of the big things, some just have chaotic homes and they can't be at school. So that is kind of the typical kid. For the most part, they are behind in credits as to why they are behind in credits, which runs a whole gambit of reasons.

The results of this study show that students who attend alternative learning centers are in need of credit recovery. The credit recovery needs are typically associated with high-risk behaviors and family troubles. Students are given allowances at alternative learning centers for behaviors that may, in a mainstream school, get them removed from class or kicked out of school all together.

Supportive School Environment

The third major theme that emerged from the data is that students want and need a supportive learning environment in order to maintain their education. Students attending alternative learning centers may not have adults in their lives who are genuinely interested in them; this is an important role for schoolteachers and staff persons.

Over the years of my work with them [students] the greatest need is to feel like someone cares about what they are doing. To develop a relationship with them that is meaningful and there is depth to it. Not just a shallow relationship and they know you care and are genuine with them. They know that you are interested in them and that you care about them being in school and doing as well as they can. Having an interest in those kids is so important and having a genuine interest.

This statement in response to the greatest needs of students who attend alternative learning centers clearly demonstrates that positive respectful relationships are important and critical for students.

It is like any kid, if they feel like school is a good place, they are going to be there. They will show up maybe on days they don't want to be there and I think that if you've created some kind of relationship and they feel that there are respectful adults there it is a safe place. I think those kids will not only be more apt to not only attend school but they will attend to the task at hand and do their school work and then be more likely to graduate too.

Literacy and Mental Illness

The fourth and final theme that emerged was literacy and mental illness. These factors suggest that high-risk behaviors and interpersonal relationships were not the only reasons for students attending alternative learning centers. Alternative learning centers are also seeing issues with literacy and the affects later in education.

Some of these kids have reading difficulties that cause these kids to be poorer students. Then when they don't understand the kid withdraws and doesn't do anything. Other kids will cover it and over react and get in trouble get thrown out of class, then they don't do their homework and they get even further behind.

The data shows that mental health issues can become prevalent enough that students attending traditional high school can no longer attend, making the alternative learning center an important part of their education.

The second thing is a greater number of kids that have mental health issues; we aren't doing a great job at meeting those needs for the kids that have these mental health issues. The mental health issues lead to drug problems, alcohol problems, abusive relationships and abusive home life situations. They lead to not being able to hold a job, being over reactive to someone who is critical or correcting you at school.

The current data also identifies the importance of mental health concerning students' high-risk behaviors.

Discussion

This case study examines how alternative learning centers retain students. Four main themes resulted from the data, these themes have been used to explain and examine

issues within the students' lives as well as how the school assists them in maintaining their education. *Credit recovery and literacy and mental illness* examine how students end up attending alternative learning centers and *preventative measures and supportive school environment* examine how alternative learning centers keep these same students in school. This case study adds to the current body of knowledge and has implications for social work practice, policy and procedural issues, and future research.

Preventative Measures

Preventative measures are used to retain students at alternative learning centers. These preventative measures include work skills courses, so that students can receive credit for their current employment, parenting classes and daycare for teen parents, modified behavioral interventions for students who will not follow traditional or mainstream school rules. In the literature Runchkin et. al., (2008), found that students who are exposed to difficulties at home were often asked to leave the traditional classroom because they could not follow the behavioral guidelines expected of each student. The literature also goes on to state that students who attend alternative learning centers are less likely to be removed due to behavior because the alternative setting gives students allowances on behavioral issues.

The literature and current case study identify that one of the ways in which alternative learning centers retain students is that the school is more flexible with rules and regulations concerning student behaviors and academic performance. Alternative learning centers are able to assist students in maintaining their education because they have the ability to provide the students with an alternative setting.

Credit Recovery

The question of why and how students end up at alternative learning centers arose consistently throughout this case study and the literature. This question is examined and answered in a seemingly simple way that students are behind in credits. However; this answer has a very in depth explanation as to why students are behind in school credits. The participant in this study explains that students are behind in credits for many reasons but the main reason is high-risk behavior. Students attending alternative learning centers are considered high-risk youth. The literature provides examples and statistics on these high-risk behaviors; San Martin and Calabrese (2011) describe such students to be at higher risk for sexually transmitted diseases, violence, suicide, and pregnancy. These factors also include higher instances of alcohol and drug abuse. In conclusion, credit recovery is how students end up at alternative learning centers however, the reason students are behind is a many faceted issue.

Supportive School Environment

The third theme in the data emerged and held significant weight with the participant interviewed. While a supportive school environment means many things, the number one support for the students according to the coded data was positive relationships in the school environment. If relationships are cultivated and maintained students stay in school and are able to graduate according to San, Martin, & Calabrese, (2011). The data also suggested that students who attended alternative learning centers were able to support one another in a way that students attending traditional high schools are not. Students at alternative learning centers are typically living through the same home environments, high-risk behaviors, and socio economic issues. These students are

able to provide each other with relationships that form a support network for them. The results of this study match the current literature.

Literacy and Mental Illness

The final themes that emerged from the data were literacy and mental illness. These themes were merged due to their significance and lack of literature found on the subjects. There was little research on how mental illness and literacy influenced students' ability to maintain their education in alternative learning center settings. However, data suggests that students who are unable to maintain the status quo of education and follow the school rules are removed from school (Runchkin, et. al., 2008).

The current case study explores mental illness and literacy factors that influence students. These students may be asked to leave traditional high school because their behavior is not typical of the traditional high school student. These students are then moved to an alternative learning center where their needs are more likely to be met. However, the data also suggests that some students with mental illness or literacy issues do not get their needs met and the result is that these students do not maintain their education. Although, high school dropout rates have dropped significantly over the years, according to the National Center for Education Statistics (2008) this continues to be of significance. Students with mental health issues and literacy issues needs are not being met and there is a lack of current literature on such issues.

Strengths and Limitations

The qualitative case study research design provides an in depth perspective on how alternative learning center's maintain connections with high-risk students; this study

has a rich anthropological element due to the face-to-face interview (Berg, 2009). Social workers will be able to examine this study and understand elements of student retention at alternative learning centers. Another strength is the ecological lens that was used in the research process. Ecological perspective looks at the person in environment on micro, mezzo, and macro scales. It does not exclude any part of a person's environment or the people in that environment (Forte, 2007). This study provides an insider perspective of the school system's approach to keeping students enrolled in alternative learning centers.

Limitations in this research are that a qualitative case study was used and according to Berg (2009) case study as a method, can be criticized for being a weaker form of research. A second limitation is that this case study examines one perspective of one institution. Without looking at multiple participants from multiple institutions this research is limited by the participant's bio-psycho-social background. The duration of this study (one 30-minute interview) is also a limitation, the profound intricacy of internal and external factors influencing student retention in alternative learning centers require extensive years to study to understand.

Implications

Social work practice

Throughout this study, research examines how social work practice can support alternative learning center students and assist them in maintaining their education. It is implied that alternative learning center students do not have support for their education outside of the school. With this implication, it is important for social workers working

with students at alternative learning centers, to provide students with support networks outside of school. Meaning that social workers may use this research to reach out to the parents and families of the alternative learning center students and involve them in the education process. These networks can be built with after school activities and employment for students. Social workers have the tools and access to assist the students in building educational support networks.

Policy

The research suggests that it is important for students to have one on one or face time with teachers and staff persons at alternative learning centers. This one on one time gives students a chance to accept recognition by their teachers or adults in the school. The safer and more wanted a student feels by the adults in the school, the more time they will spend at school and the potential for graduation rises. The implications in these findings are that schools have enough resources to provide teachers and staff person's time to create, maintain, and cultivate relationships with students. These resources can come in the form of money for more teachers and staff.

Future research

Future research can look at examining the student to home and home to school life. By researching these relationships, the researcher may be able to provide the public with data rich in personal detail about meeting the needs of high-risk, high-need students. Future research can specifically focus on interviews with the students themselves and their families. The limitations of not having data from the students or families are that the research is from one side of this triangulated relationship. While current research examines the students perspective on how schools can support them it is not clear how

ANALYZING ALTERNATIVE LEARNING CENTERS

the families of alternative learning center students feel about the support they may or may not be receiving. In conclusion, it is clear that future research is necessary to understand the intricacies of student retention at alternative learning centers. A positive learning environment and relationships are imperative to students staying in school and maintaining their education until graduation.

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APPENDIX A

Analyzing Alternative Learning Centers: Challenges and Opportunities for Maintaining Student Retention

RESEARCH INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM

Introduction:

You are invited to participate in a research study investigating how alternative learning centers retain students. This study is being conducted by Princess Cramer-Drazkowski, a graduate student at St. Catherine University under the supervision of Dr. Valandra, a faculty member in the Graduate School of Social Work. You were selected as a possible participant in this research because you have worked at or are currently working at an alternative learning center. Please read this form and ask questions before you agree to be in the study.

Background Information:

The purpose of this study is to assist social workers in identifying how to better work with alternative learning center students. Approximately eight to ten people are expected to participate in this research.

Procedures:

If you decide to participate, you will be asked to participate in a one time, 30 minute, face to face, interview that will be audio-recorded and then transcribed verbatim. The transcriptions will then be voided of all identifying information and will be included in the research. Confidential data will be kept in a lock box and in password-protected files. This study will take approximately 30 minutes/0 hours over 1 session.

Risks and Benefits of being in the study:

There are no risks in participating in this study.

There are no direct benefits to participating in this study.

Confidentiality:

Any information obtained in connection with this research study that can be identified with you will be disclosed only with your permission; your results will be kept confidential. In any written reports or publications, no one will be identified or identifiable and only group data will be presented. The school in which you work or have worked will not be identified, however it will be stated that the school is located in a Midwestern city.

I will keep the research results in a locked file cabinet in my home and only I, Princess Cramer-Drazkowski, my research assistant, and my advisor, Dr. Valandra will have access to the records while I work on this project. I will finish analyzing the data by July 1, 2013. I will then destroy all original reports and identifying information that can be linked back to you.

Voluntary nature of the study:

Participation in this research study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your future relations with University of St. Thomas and St. Catherine University in any way. If you decide to participate, you are free to stop at any time without affecting these relationships.

Contacts and questions:

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me, 507-458-6288. You may ask questions now, or if you have any additional questions later, the faculty advisor, Valandra vala0251@stthomas.edu, will be happy to answer them. If you have other questions or concerns regarding the study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, you may also contact Dr. John Schmitt, Chair of the St. Catherine University Institutional Review Board, at (651) 690-7739.

You may keep a copy of this form for your records.

Statement of Consent:

You are making a decision whether or not to participate. Your signature indicates that you have read this information and your questions have been answered. Even after signing this form, please know that you may withdraw from the study at any time.

I consent to participate in the study and agree to be audio-recorded.

Signature of Participant

Date

Signature of Researcher

Date

Appendix B
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Research Question: What are the challenges and opportunities facing ALCs in retaining students?

- 1) What are the benefits to having an alternative high school for students?
- 2) How would you define an at-risk alternative learning center (ALC) student?
- 3) What are your experiences working with ALC students?
 - a. What are students' greatest needs?
 - b. Do these needs have an effect on student attendance/graduation?
- 4) How does the school/professionals meet the student's needs?
- 5) What is your role in assisting students' to maintain their education?
- 6) What happens to students whose needs are unmet by the ALC?
- 7) How do you foster relationships with ALC students?
- 8) How does the family influence the students' attendance at the ALC?
- 9) Are there socio-economic differences between ALC students and mainstream high school students?
 - a. If so how does this affect student attendance at ALC's?
- 10) What other concerns regarding ALC students do you believe deserve attention?