Can roses grow from concrete? A case study of parental involvement, teacher morale, school culture, and student achievement in an urban alternative school

Natasha Michelle Woody
Clark Atlanta University

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ABSTRACT

EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

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M.A.T. GEORGIA STATE UNIVERSITY, 2009

CAN ROSES GROW FROM CONCRETE? A CASE STUDY OF PARENTAL
INvolvEMENT, TEACHER MORALE, SCHOOL CULTURE, AND
STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT IN AN URBAN ALTERNATIVE
SCHOOL

Committee Chair: Dr. Barbara Hill
Dissertation dated December 2013

The purpose of this study is to appropriately illustrate the correlation between the
interdependent variables of parental involvement, teacher morale, school culture, and
their impact on the definition and attainment of student achievement as seen in an urban
alternative school. This study is based on the premise that the aforementioned variables
are the most essential components in the success of an urban alternative school, as these
variables impact one another and work in concert to impact the level of success in an
urban alternative school, as seen in the student achievement.

A grounded theory case study approach was used to determine how the urban
alternative school used in this study manifests parental involvement, teacher morale, and
culture of the school, as well as to identify how the parental involvement, teacher morale
and culture of the school affects the academic achievement of the students being served.
The researcher found that although the aforementioned variables are interrelated, they contribute only partially to the definition and attainment of achievement in an urban alternative school. The conclusions from the findings suggest that there must be systematic reform in the way that alternative schools are assessed for achievement, in order to display a true representation of the impact that alternative schools have on the lives and educations of children who are considered at risk.
CAN ROSES GROW FROM CONCRETE? A CASE STUDY OF PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT, TEACHER MORALE, SCHOOL CULTURE, AND STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT IN AN URBAN ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL

A DISSERTATION
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF CLARK ATLANTA UNIVERSITY IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

BY

NATASHA MICHELLE WOODY

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

ATLANTA, GEORGIA

DECEMBER 2013
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Did you hear about the rose that grew from a crack in the concrete? Proving nature's law is wrong. It learned to walk without having feet. Funny it seems, but by keeping its dreams, it learned to breathe fresh air. Long live the rose that grew from concrete, when no one else ever cared. (Shakur, 2009, p. 3)

Urban alternative schools were developed to serve students who may not have experienced success in the traditional school environment (Conley, 2002). These students are typically referred to as at-risk students, as they are at risk of not completing or graduating from high school, and may have one or more of any several purposes, such as challenging behavior, a need for special remedial programs, emotional disabilities, or problems that destabilize the student's personal life, such as homelessness, poverty, and familial difficulties. When alternative schools were initially established in America during the 1970s, they were implemented and designed to provide an alternative to discourage at-risk students from dropping out of school altogether. Now, over 40 years later, the focus has since changed and been transmogrified into something that strengthens and builds up the traditional schools, as opposed to helping the students that these schools consider a risk and eventually toss away.

In the educational climate of today, alternative schools are considered places where troubled students are sent to be "fixed" or "housed" in an attempt to make
traditional schools appear more successful. These students are considered to be "the problem" as it pertains to the achievement of the traditional school, so traditional schools purposefully aim to eradicate "the problem," as opposed to supporting the students who are considered to be the problem and observing the variables that may serve as antecedents in the lack of achievement that the schools experience. Moger (2010) substantiates this statement in his research:

Times have changed as alternative schools are now identified as educating students who have a variety of problems and lack basic human needs. The students are viewed as social outcasts, discipline problems and other negative-labels that are created as society continues to evolve (McGee, 2001). McGee says it best when he states, 'Unfortunately, members of the general public—and many educators, as well—often define the students in alternative schools by the difficulties they face rather than by their ability to overcome these difficulties.'

(para. 1)

As a result of this contemporary view of alternative education, it is imperative to gain an understanding of and highlight variables that directly influence the dependent variable of student achievement as defined and accomplished in urban alternative schools. This understanding and recognition of the aforesaid school related variables will simultaneously enrich the current processes and assist educational leaders in providing and facilitating student achievement in the schools that serve the students who have a need to experience success the most.
Statement of the Problem

The problem identified by the researcher was multi-faceted, as this quandary directly involves parental involvement, teacher morale and school culture as pivotal tenets of student achievement in schools, as well as the manner in which the definition of student achievement is placed upon alternative schools. Constraining alternative schools and forcing them to follow the traditional school definition and methods of student achievement attainment is problematic, as the variables of parental involvement, teacher morale and school culture, which differ in an alternative school, directly affect how student achievement is manifested. If educators are to live by the mantra that all students learn can learn, but must learn differently, there should be an understanding throughout the educational community that alternative methods of delivery, assessment, and support must prevail, regardless of how the particular location of delivery is beheld.

Parental involvement is considered by many as the absolute most essential factor that determines student achievement, be it in an alternative school or traditional school setting (Lightfoot, 2004; Hoover-Dempsey & Sander, 1995; Comer & Haynes, 1991; Epstein, 1995). This involvement is the manifestation of the construct that strong families facilitate strong educational development in students. Joyce Epstein (1995) of Johns Hopkins University has developed a framework for defining six different types of parent involvement, which all aid parents in expediting achievement and fostering community. She asserts that "there are many reasons for developing school, family, and community partnerships. The main reason to create such partnerships is to help all youngsters succeed in school and in later life" (p. 9).
In urban alternative schools, parents are often disenchanted and disillusioned with any and all things associated with the educational arena as a whole, due to repeated student failure, or the constant suffering from many socio-economic difficulties that may render them unable to provide quality involvement. When parents display disentanglement from the educational processes of the students for whom they are responsible, it often leads teachers to ask themselves the question: If the parents are not concerned, why should I be concerned? This attributes to dramatic declines in teacher job satisfaction and morale, as one study found that "teachers in any school setting who receive a great deal of parental support are more satisfied and possess higher morale than teachers who do not" (National Center for Education Statistics, 1997, p. xi).

Morale, as another tenet affecting student achievement in an alternative school, is initially defined as "the feeling a worker has about his job based on how the worker perceives himself in the organization and the extent to which the organization is viewed as meeting the worker's own needs and expectations" (Washington & Watson, 1976, p. 1). A second source intellectualizes morale as "the professional interest and enthusiasm that a person displays towards the achievement of individual and group goals in a given job situation" (Bentley & Rempel, 1980, p. 2). As it pertains to urban alternative schools, it can be hypothesized that teacher morale impacts student achievement more than any other independent variable, second only to parental involvement, as the teacher is on the front line of student achievement and has more to contend with in an urban alternative school where students have displayed academic deficiency, truancy, and behavior deficiencies while in the traditional school. Urban
alternative school teachers often struggle through teaching multiple subjects, lack of childhood literacy, and minimal parent support, which impacts student achievement and the cyclical interaction between student achievement and school culture.

School culture, as seen in an urban alternative school, is unique in that the factors that affect it, such as parental involvement and teacher morale, differ greatly from that of a more traditional school setting. As it relates to the alternative school used in this study, school culture is defined as the implicit and assimilated rituals and routines that determine the success and governance of a school. This consists of, but is not limited to, stakeholder language and interactions, work habits, and daily rituals and routines. An alternative school, being just that, the alternative, should have varying methods and manners in which the vision and mission of the school are carried out. The culture of the school must be a collaborative one of high expectations and drive to success in order to facilitate its definition of student achievement in the unique population of students in the alternative school.

As it relates to the manner in which student achievement is defined and measured, there have been fundamental changes in the way schools are measured academically. Unfortunately, the eradication of Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) has not served to rectify the disproportionality in the manner in which alternative school student achievement is defined and measured. Reimer and Cash (2003) explain, “Just as regular schools are being held more accountable for quantitative performance indicators such as test scores, dropout rates, and attendance rates, so are alternative schools” (p. 25).
Unfortunately, and in opposition to this statement, urban alternative schools function differently from traditional schools in both urban and suburban areas. Subsequently, there is no concrete definition or example of what achievement is as it pertains to student achievement as seen in urban alternative schools. As school reform begins to change directions and the nation's newest educational framework, the Common Core Standards, are ushered in, many states are now rejoicing, now that all participating states are held to the same standards. This perpetuates the disproportionality between traditional and alternative schools, as the same measurement criteria for traditional schools applies to alternative schools across the country more than it had under No Child Left Behind, without thoroughly identifying and researching the variables that truly contribute to the definition and attainment of achievement in America's alternative schools that service students in the more urban areas.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this grounded theory study is to compare appropriately the interdependent nature of parental involvement, teacher morale and school culture, and the subsequent effects of this interdependence on student achievement, as seen in an urban alternative school. The urban alternative school utilized for the purposes of this research differs from the traditional school in that students assigned to the school are placed due to deleterious behavior, including, but not limited to truancy, gang-related behaviors, violence, and drug-related offenses. It is essential to examine this phenomenon, as urban alternative schools vary greatly from their traditional counterparts in the students served, as well as how the aforementioned variables are viewed, analyzed, and defined.
This study serves to examine not only the manner in which the variables of parental involvement, teacher morale, and school culture directly affect student achievement, but also the manner in which student achievement is defined and measured in an urban alternative school. It is a primary hypothesis of this study that these independent variables work to determine levels of student achievement.

As a result of the complicated and interrelated nature of parental involvement, teacher morale and the recognizable effects of the culture of an urban alternative school, the urban alternative school used in this study was observed and studied in order to see how the variables connected to the school’s culture and teacher morale honestly affect the levels of student achievement of the school, as well as how student achievement should be defined. As the correlation between parental involvement, teacher morale, school culture, and student achievement is illustrated and investigated, this study serves to provide educational leaders and educators in both traditional and alternative schools with best practices to improve the culture of their schools and facilitate overall student achievement, regardless of how it is defined.

Research Questions

RQ1: To what extent does parental involvement impact school culture in the urban alternative school?

RQ2: To what extent do school culture and teacher morale impact one another in the urban alternative school?

RQ3: How is teacher morale impacted in the urban alternative school?

RQ4: How is school culture manifested in the urban alternative school?
RQ5: How is student achievement defined in the urban alternative environment?

RQ6: To what extent does parental involvement directly affect student achievement in the urban alternative school?

RQ7: To what extent does teacher morale directly affect student achievement in the urban alternative school?

RQ8: To what extent does school culture directly affect student achievement in the urban alternative school?

RQ9: How is student achievement assessed in the urban alternative school?

**Significance of the Study**

Properly identifying and analyzing the factors that make an alternative school successful is essential to developing strategies that will make America’s schools successful overall. Academic achievement is momentous because it is intensely entangled to the optimistic and constructive results that adults hold near and dear for children, which are good incomes and a successful life once the children enter adulthood. Expectantly, studies often show that adults with high levels of education and academic achievement are more likely to be given the opportunity to pursue gainful employment (National Center for Education Statistics, 2001; United States Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, 1999). Students who strive to achieve and are familiar with high levels of academic success are destined to be given the opportunity have more employment opportunities later in life than those with less education, thus, academic success may be the determining factor between working a job simply because it pays the
rent, which is characteristic of the families of at-risk students and working at a job that one enjoys (Rentner & Kober, 2001).

Examining the educational and non-educational factors that directly impact and influence the success and achievement outcomes of students attending the Metro Atlanta alternative school used in this study is significant for a multiplicity of stakeholders, include students, parents, school-level leaders, and district-level leaders. The findings from this study are of value to others and can be used for school improvement as it relates to increasing the levels of academic achievement and success in students who attend alternative schools, as well as increasing achievement for at-risk students serviced by traditional schools.

Educational leaders at the local, state, and national levels will benefit from the findings of this study, as they can be used to influence policy that effects both the alternative and traditional school environments. This study may serve as a catalyst for change as it pertain to the manner in which students are placed in alternative schools, as well as how traditional schools service the needs of students before they arrive at a juncture where they require the services of the alternative school. Policies will be put in place that hold traditional schools more accountable to the students they are charged with educating and the “warehousing” structure of alternative school placement will be eradicated. This will rebuild the culture of educational as an entire entity, which will cause a metamorphosis in the manner in which the educational system provides services to students in traditional and alternative schools.
Students who attend classes in the alternative school setting will have an opportunity to determine the factors that affect student achievement in their particular alternative school, as the stakeholders' perceptions of the factors which have played a significant role in reaching their goals are important to themselves, as well as other students. A great deal of the time, students who are considered at-risk have shared many similar experiences, such as failing a class or being held back a grade, and these experiences and impediments have negatively impacted their educational experiences. Additionally, many of the students serviced by alternative schools are counted out academically, so achieving levels of success can most definitely be considered an inspiration to other students who are labeled as at-risk.

Summary

Traditional schools do not always meet the needs of all students, especially students who come from urban settings and are considered at-risk. Students are often sent to punitive educational systems, such as alternative school, which focus on behavior modification, in-school suspension programs, out of school suspension programs or other institutions, without the drive or encouragement needed to ensure that they are successful academically. Alternative high schools, such as this one Metro Atlanta alternative school, should focus on academics as well as the emotional or social issues, which lead students to alternative schools. This reform of focus could actually ensure that alternative schools are considered viable options for parents. Giving parents a choice in their students' educational opportunities and outcomes is a move towards making connections
and building parent participation in their child's education, which also breeds success and allows these “roses” to grow through any obstacle of life.

Alternative schools categorically have a role to play in increasing the number of success stories and are making a difference in American education as they are aiding students in achieving success and graduating where traditional schools have not been able to meet their needs. Edwards and Wilson (2001), Gregory (2001), and McGee (2001) all serve to disclose that while alternative schools have made an essential positive impact in education, they still have several obstacles to overcome in order to rid themselves of negative criticism and views from much of the public and the education community as a whole. Providing adequate supports to facilitate the education of students should be of grand import to both school and district level leaders who act as the stewards of the taxpayer. Consequently, it is of grave need to examine, analyze, and measure the factors that affect student achievement in alternative schools in order to ensure that they are truly effective in providing a quality educational environment for at-risk students who enter an alternative high school.
CHAPTER II
REVIEW OF RESEARCH LITERATURE

Organization of the Review

This chapter serves to review the literature based upon the major theoretical constructs from which this study is approached. First, a history of alternative school was reviewed from inception of such schools in the 1960s, to the current time. The construct of culture was also explored from the perspective of how this phenomenon can be defined and studied in the alternative school environment. Thirdly, the paradigm of teacher morale is a pivotal facet in this study, as teacher morale affects classroom instruction and overall student achievement. Emphasis is also placed on the significant role that parental involvement has on the aforementioned teacher morale. Lastly, student achievement and the measurement and definition of the phenomena are reviewed in the literature of this study.

Emergent Themes

Background on the Unique Nature of Alternative Schools

Alternative schools originated in the 1960s and 1970s directed at the enrichment of the whole student (Raywid, 2001). Historically, alternative education has been seen as any instruction that a student receives outside of the traditional public school setting, also known as the student’s home school. Students were transitioned to alternative schools by choice or assignment and alternative education encompassed multiple avenues, such as
home schools, private schools, charter schools, and virtual high schools (Edwards & Wilson, 2001). While the various forms of alternative education have transmogrified throughout time and the number of students enrolled in alternative education programs has fluctuated, the reality is that alternative education programs continue to increase in number and thrive today. During this time, parents and community leaders structured alternative schools resulting from growing dissatisfaction with the traditional schools, as they were considered to have failed the students.

As stakeholders grow more and more dissatisfied with traditional schools, research has leaned toward defining the role and importance of alternative schools. According to Lehr, Tan, and Ysseldyke's (2009) research, "Alternative education is one of the possible solutions that many states and local school districts have embraced to address the issue of students who are not meeting desired educational outcomes and standards in traditional education settings" (p. 1). This qualitative study aims to identify the components that make a school be defined as an alternative school and states that the term alternative school applies to several types of schools. Lehr et al. assert in the study that there is not a comprehensible definition of alternative education accepted by educational stakeholders, but do acknowledge the definition presented by various agencies:

The U.S. Department of Education defines an alternative education school as a public elementary/secondary school that addresses the needs of students which typically cannot be met in a regular school and provides nontraditional education which is not categorized solely as regular education, special education, gifted and talented or magnet school programs. (p. 55)
This definition serves as a foundation for further analysis and illustration of the urban alternative school, as utilized in the current study.

Once alternative schools are given a definitive characterization, McGee’s (2001) research on alternative schools serves the current study by providing groundwork for the purpose and goal of alternative schools from their inception to what they are perceived as in the present time. According to McGee’s study, alternative schools are historically developed for the purpose of encouraging students to work as compatriots with their parents and teachers in the pursuit of achievement. McGee asserts alternative schools initially followed a vision of achievement by identifying student’s individual needs and matching them with an educational plan.

This focus has since converted, as alternative schools have begun to function as “dumping grounds” for students considered undesirable by their home schools, places where disruptive students are sent in order to protect and benefit the students who are considered fit to remain in the traditional schools. McGee uses qualitative methods in order to discuss methods that can and should be used to change the public attitude toward alternative schools, to educate the community about the success of effective alternative school programs, and to promote a positive image for alternative education. Ensuring that all individuals have the opportunity to become successful is not an alternative, he asserts: it is a necessity.

Using a critical theory framework, Kim and Taylor (2008) conducted a qualitative case study to determine the benefits of alternative schools and break the cycle of inequality. Kim and Taylor conducted this framework because “it provides valuable insights for studying the relationship between theory and society” (p. 2). In this study,
the researchers conducted classroom observations, interviews, and analyzed curriculum documents. The participants included students, teachers and administrators. The results were divided into two themes, positive and negative. Kim and Taylor discovered that alternative schools provide a caring environment; however, alternative schools do not offer an equitable education due to the non-rigorous curriculum. This literature aims to provide a more practical view of the benefits of alternative education programs, if implemented properly.

Parental Involvement

Parental involvement is one of the key tenets of student achievement, as it hones in on the concept of it "takes a village to raise a child." In 2007, research conducted by Brown and Becket aimed to look at parental involvement as seen in an alternative elementary and middle school settings for at risk students. This case study contributes to a small but growing canon on alternative schools for at-risk students. The mixed-method study by Brown and Beckett focuses on the efforts of teachers and parents to build and sustain a successful remedial school for elementary and middle school students.

This study serves as an effective foundational text for the current study, as it lends itself directly to parental involvement as seen in alternative schools and contributes to the much larger body of literature on parent involvement in schools. Additionally, the study shows how middle-class white teachers, African-American, and urban Appalachian parents overcame barriers associated with socioeconomic class and ethnicity and became compatriots in building a home-school learning community that helped at-risk students prepare themselves for favorable educational outcomes. The current study aims to
expand this research, as the population changes from rural elementary and middle school students to urban middle and high school students.

In his 2007 meta-analysis, William Jeynes uses 52 studies to ascertain the level of influence that parental involvement on student achievement is seen in urban middle and high schools. Statistical analyses are done to determine the overall impact of parental involvement as well as specific components of parental involvement. Jeynes’ research is effective as a text for review for the current study, as his research includes a broad spectrum analysis of all components of academic achievement, including grades, standardized tests, and other measures that generally included teacher rating scales and indices of academic attitudes and behaviors. Achievement was not limitedly defined by standardized text data alone, which aids in schools being able to define achievement based upon the makeup of their students and needs.

The aforementioned studies serve to illustrate the relationship between parental involvement and student achievement in more traditional schools, as studies are limited that utilize alternative schools serving at risk students as a basis for research. Aeby, Manning, Thayer, and Carpenter-Aeby (1999) serve to take two groups of students entering alternative schools and use them to illustrate how essential parental involvement can be to students in alternative schools. In this mixed-method, comparative study, two groups of students referred to an alternative school for chronically disruptive youth were designated as a standard program (control group) or a standard program with intensive parental involvement (experimental group). Outcomes that the four researchers aimed to measure included self-esteem, locus of student control, depression, academic grades, attendance, and eventual drop-out from school. Both cohorts were similar as it pertains
to demographic origins during pretests, but the experimental cohort displayed significant improvements in locus of control, grade point averages, attendance, and reduced drop-out rate, relative to the control group as a result of the intensive parental involvement. This study serves as a call to action for parents of students in alternative school who are considered at risk.

The essential nature of parental involvement is widely agreed upon, but genuine and active parental involvement is challenging to foster and consistently uphold. As the components that make up schools become more dissimilar, a great challenge facing educators is meeting the needs of all students and their parents. In the research of LaRocque, Kleiman, and Darling (2011), the researchers assert that “closing the achievement gap and increasing student learning requires the collaboration of various interested groups, most notably parents” (p. 4). This study asserts that parental involvement plays an important role in creating a school that meets the needs of students, but many teachers admit they have had little professional development that shows how to collaborate effectively with such a diverse community of parents. This qualitative research based article utilizes numerous strategies aimed at showing educators how to increase parental involvement in order to build and maintain student and school-wide achievement.

Teacher Morale

Teacher morale determines a great deal of how educators function in the quest for student achievement. Consequently, there are various researchable variables that affect teacher morale in America’s schools, including leadership, student discipline and parental
involve involvement. Lumsden (1998) focuses her article, “Teacher Morale” on the various factors that influence student morale, as based upon the research of leading scholars in the field. This purely qualitative study is shaped around the research of Bentley and Rempel (1980), who describe and define teacher morale as “the professional interest and enthusiasm that a person displays toward the achievement of individual and group goals in a given job situation” (p. 2). Lumsden (1998) focuses much of the research of this article on the impact that a healthy school climate and culture play on morale, as well as the cyclical nature of these variables, as it pertains to morale. The study also found that teachers in almost any school setting who receive a great deal of parental support are more satisfied and have higher morale than teachers who do not. The variables seen in this research structures much of the current study’s framework as it pertains to the variables that affect morale and the interrelated nature of the variables used in this study of morale as seen in the urban alternative school.

Rowland’s (2008) research, which is focused on the relationship between leadership and teacher morale, analyzes and discusses in detail the importance of teacher morale on the school environment and culture. This qualitative correlational study, which also heavily cites Bentley and Rempel’s 1980 study of teacher morale, utilized seven urban metropolitan schools, which benefits and relates to the current study, as the environment is of similar cultural and demographical makeup. Schools used in Rowland’s study include schools considered to be high risk by the district that services the students in the particular schools. The use of seven schools deepens the quality of the study group and solidifies validity in his assertions. Rowland’s (2008) research strengthens the current study, as he does an in-depth analysis of the morale seen in
teachers who service students in schools that may be considered “at-risk” and the manner in which that morale is manifested and addressed.

Liu and Meyer’s (2005) research focuses on teacher morale as a singular entity and discusses the variables that directly affect morale. This study, which is a mixed-method, causal comparative study, used various schools, including affluent public, private, and minority public to determine the variables that affect teacher morale, as well as rank the variables. Liu and Meyer list student discipline as the number one factor leading to a low teacher morale and salary as the number two factor. Their study strongly suggested that student discipline problems were a major reason for teachers’ dissatisfaction with their jobs, second only to lower salaries. This study cross-referenced the two aforementioned factors and found that although private school teachers generally came across less student discipline problems, private schools usually offer lower salaries than public schools and these teachers found more satisfaction. Minority teachers were less satisfied with work conditions and encountered far more student discipline problems than that of their nonminority counterparts. As it relates to the current study of teacher morale in schools that service at risk students, it is understood that money is not the direct problem and that discipline problems, which prevail in alternative schools, impact teacher morale as much as, if not more than, any other variable.

Teacher morale, as based upon the aforementioned studies, has an interrelated nature and dependency on student behaviors and teacher satisfaction. This study of morale as seen in an alternative school must also serve to view how morale influences student learning and achievement. The research of Miller (1981) aims to address this void. Miller notes in his qualitative research the following:
Teacher morale can have a positive effect on pupil attitudes and learning. Raising teacher morale level is not only making teaching more pleasant for teachers, but also learning more pleasant for the students. This creates an environment that is more conducive to learning. (p. 2)

By emphasizing this importance, Miller uses his research to not only illustrate the importance of teacher morale on learning, but also provide the implications for leaders as they strive to foster environments that lend themselves to student learning and overall achievement. The current study will add profundity to the research of Miller by providing an example of how his strategies may work in an urban alternative school setting.

Along the same vein as the work of Miller, Ellenburg (1972) uses his research to explain that morale and achievement are related stating, “where morale was high, schools showed an increase in student achievement” (p. 76). Ellenburg studied a dozen secondary public schools in Dearborn, Michigan, and found that in schools where teachers had higher morale, student achievement increased and diminished under teachers with low morale. In addition to his studies, he reviewed the factors affecting morale and developed the following concise conclusions:

1. Student achievement increased under teachers with high morale and decreased under teachers with low morale.

2. Teacher morale assists in establishing “school character” or climate.

3. The more democratic the school administration, the higher the morale.

4. Teacher participation in administrative decision is related to morale.
Ellenburg ended his study with the assertion that administrators’ attitudes, policies, procedures, understanding of teachers, and philosophical approach to problems are major factors in teacher morale. Of all of the schools that were used in Ellensburg’s study, none of them were alternative schools, which allows this current study to stand on its own in the quest to identify components of the factors that affect teacher morale as they are seen in an urban alternative school.

**School Culture**

The concept of school culture initially made the scene of educational composition in the 1940s and truly made waves toward the end of the 20th century. School culture consists of symbolic practices such as ritual practices and ceremonies, as well as the less traditional components, such as language, gossip, and the rituals of everyday life. In the case of culture as seen in a school, these factors of culture are essential to analyze, as these practices can make or break a school, especially as it pertains to language, as communication is essential to the success of a school and plays a profound role in student achievement. Unfortunately, there is limited literature in the canon of study of school culture as it pertains to alternative schools.

Hollinger’s (2010) preliminary research serves to attempt to lend some depth to the construct, as students who attend schools with healthy cultures tend to achieve at rates far higher than their peers in schools with an unhealthy faculty culture. Contained within the article, Hollinger suggests ways that educational leaders can ascertain the staff perceptions and other components that may drive the culture of a school. This includes
surveying the faculty about “perceptions, beliefs, ideas and assumptions that ultimately create the faculty's common perspectives and performance” (p. 2).

Although the aforementioned ideology permeates the present research on school culture, most school achievement improvement efforts do not focus on developing and maintaining a healthy faculty culture. Hollinger (2010) substantiates leader rationale for this gap in practice:

School leaders are often reluctant to systematically assess faculty culture out of fear that the findings may be threatening. Yet, to the contrary, the perspectives of faculty are among the most valuable to a school leader interested in developing strong leadership skills. To create a learning environment in which students excel academically, socially and intellectually schools must be vigilant about assessing and improving faculty culture. (para. 1)

In contrast with many other featured studies, this purely qualitative article aims to illustrate the positives that result from a healthy school culture, which is attributed to teacher morale, as well as the reasons that school leaders are reluctant to research the culture in their buildings and address them.

Deal and Peterson (1999) take a different look at the veritable value of school culture in the achievement and improvement of schools. Although the researchers have compiled twenty years of research in their book Shaping School Culture: The Heart of Leadership, their research joins others in the canon as geared toward traditional schools and the reform of such schools. Deal and Peterson's text uses multiple methods of inquiry to link the cultures of schools to the improvement and reform efforts of schools. The text also works to describe the essential elements of school culture, including the
traditions, norms, and values that guide the practices of the community. This literature also shows how a positive culture makes school reforms more effective. Deal and Peterson also observe and illustrate the harmful characteristics of toxic cultures and suggest remedies to negativity on the part of teachers, students, leaders, and parents. This study is useful as support for the current study, as it provides characteristics of negative and toxic school cultures, which unfortunately permeates the culture of the urban alternative school used in the current study.

**Student Achievement**

Across the country, the last ten years in education have become a high stakes game of determining who can be accountable. Koeze’s (2007) study on differentiation and student achievement as seen in an elementary school brings much of this to light. Koeze begins her mixed-method, grounded theory study with an analysis and discussion of the passing of the No Child Left Behind legislation. According to Koeze, the passing of President George W. Bush’s 2001 No Child Left Behind started a movement to define and eventually acquire achievement. Schools were to now be held accountable for their entire battery of standardized test data as a whole, as well as the data of each subgroup of student served in the school, including those considered disadvantaged, of limited English proficiency and those with special needs.

This type of data disaggregation made many districts realize that certain populations of their students were underperforming. As a component of her two-part research, Koeze (2007) used quantitative data, including student and teacher survey responses and analysis of test scores from the Michigan Education Assessment Program
to guide her decision making as it pertained to the qualitative component of her research. This study does not directly tie in with the theme of student achievement as defined and acquired in alternative schools, but does set the groundwork for the understanding of student achievement as a construct and sought-after procurement.

Student achievement is ultimately the goal of any school, as seen in previously alluded to research, but is more difficult to come by in the case of alternative schools. Scott Moger’s (2010) doctoral research on alternative school achievement serves as a mixed-method comparative analysis used to examine the variables of grade point average, student achievement, attendance rates, and credit earned by at-risk students in three differing school environments. These environments include a traditional school, alternative school of choice, and one of disciplinary placement, similar to the school used in the current study.

The comparative nature of this research makes an effective argument for the effectiveness of achievement measures for at-risk students in both alternative and traditional schools. The validity of much of the data in the research is left for question, as the alternative school of choice used in the study existed in its school district for ten years and had never been evaluated for its actual effect on student achievement in at-risk students. Consequently, there is limited research on student achievement as seen in alternative schools, as the concept appears immeasurable inconsistent or nonexistent in its entirety, which calls for leaders in the field to strive to determine what achievement looks like in alternative schools, as well as how it is accomplished.
Summary

There lies a substantial amount of literature on many of the variables used in this study, with special emphasis placed on the variables of parental involvement, teacher morale and school culture. Research conducted on these three variables provides depth and width to the academic discourse, but does not aim to scratch the surface in the study of the urban alternative school. Urban alternative schools serve a differing type of parent and teacher, so there is an immense need present for this line of inquiry to be undertaken. Discordantly, there was very limited applicable research on the variable of student achievement. This lack of quality research as it pertains to the defining of student achievement and the acquisition of the defined achievement is jarring, as the No Child Left Behind Act ushered in a season of accountability, which made achievement one of the hottest buzzwords in the realm of education.
CHAPTER III
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The researcher examined the manner in which student achievement is defined and measured in an urban alternative school and the manner in which it is affected by levels of parental involvement, teacher morale, school culture, and student achievement.

Research Design

Due to the complex nature of this study, as well as the number of variables and proposed participants, this study takes the form of a qualitative grounded theory case study. Qualitative methods are used to study human behavior and behavior changes, as complex behavior is not well captured through the use of quantitative techniques alone. Consequently, the study of behavior in the urban school setting cannot be effectively accomplished by simply “crunching numbers.” Parental involvement, teacher morale, and school culture can only truly be examined and researched using a qualitative approach and actually speaking with and observing those that take part in the culture of the urban nontraditional education environment in concert with a use of surveys and review of assessment documents. The exploratory nature of this study lends itself to careful analysis, and without the thoughts, assertions, and ideas of the educators who contribute to the culture of the school used in this study, research and inquiry of this sort would be almost impossible.
As a participant in the research environment, it provides the most direct access to participants, which is a tenet of qualitative research. The research of Hoepfl (1997) shows that use of qualitative methods, as opposed to quantitative alone, when there is a necessity to establish predetermined variables, such as parental involvement, teacher morale, and school culture, proves beneficial to the research process. This is especially true in descriptive case study, where a behavior is researched and leaves groundwork for further research to thrive.

As a result of the social science nature of this study, action research also frames the research design (Herr & Anderson, 2005). Through the utility of the action research framework, the researcher had more access to individuals and concrete data, and had the opportunity to address the issue of the definition and attainment of student achievement. As it pertains to this study, the researcher was an active participant in the environment being studied and served as an entity focused on initiating a change process that addressed problems in the independent variables that affect the dependent variable of student achievement. This branch of the qualitative lens of this study also aimed to examine the phenomena of the obscure nature of achievement, as seen in the urban alternative used in this study, as well as the independent variables to impact the delineation and fulfillment of student achievement.

The use of qualitative methods for the sake of this study provides a rich amount of authentic data that can be used to further determine how to define and obtain school achievement in urban alternative schools. This methodology effectively illustrates the impact that the independent variables of parental involvement, teacher morale, and school
culture have on the definition and attainment of student achievement in the urban alternative school.

A study of this nature necessitated triangulation of collected data. More explicitly, the foundation of this study rested upon surveys, interviews, a focus group, and observations, as well as document analysis. The instruments and materials used to collect data included surveys, interview protocols, and analysis of interviews, focus group, and achievement reports. By triangulating the data, maintenance for sources of error was controlled. Using varying methods of inquiry provided a certain level of control for validity and reliability.

Theory of Variables

When reviewing the literature, the previous variables of an alternative school continuously emerged as themes that necessitated further review and analysis. It was determined that these themes were actually the variables that directly affect and influence the definition and attainment of academic achievement of students served by the school, and analysis of these variables was essential to not only educators and leaders in the alternative school, but all stakeholders. There were numerous factors affecting alternative school students that many school and district-level leaders consider out of their control. Some of these, such as socioeconomic status, community and familial attitudes about education, and levels of ability and readiness or variables inside the academic arena can and should be manipulated. These above-mentioned factors such as parental involvement, teacher morale, and school culture are controlled by the school and district level administrators. These factors are known as educational factors.
There are several theories in the canon of educational leadership that may loosely apply to the construct of this study. Motivation theory, however, most closely frames the variables of this study, as motivation is “a critical determinant of performance in organizations” (Lunenburg & Ornstein, 2004, p. 79). Motivation is defined by Miner (2006) as “those processes within an individual that stimulate behavior and channel it in ways that should benefit the organization as a whole” (p. 191). This theory directly correlates with the nature of this study, as individuals and the behaviors they display within an organization serve as the primary focus of this study. Motivation theory also correlates with this study as Middlemist’s (2000) definition of motivation is “the willful direction of one’s efforts toward the achievement of specific goals” which in the case of this study, is the definition and attainment of student achievement (p. 145).

Specifically, process theories of motivation applied directly to this study, as process theories explain how motivation occurs. By determining how the motivation of school stakeholders (instructional staff, support staff, administrators, and parents) is manifested in the urban alternative school, this study aimed to identify how the variables of parental involvement, teacher morale, and school culture directly impact the definition and attainment of student achievement.

Equity theory is a motivational process theory that lends itself directly to the foundation of this study. In equity theory, employees hold a series of beliefs about what they input into their work environments and the outcomes of these inputs. As it pertains to the independent variables of teacher morale, outcomes such as student achievement, are the end result of what employees believe they put into their organizations.
Goal-setting theory is also a motivational process theory that undergirds this study, as “nearly every modern school organization has some form of goal setting in operation” (Lunenburg & Ornstein, 2004, p. 95). In the urban alternative school used in this study, goal setting took the form of continuous school improvement plans and short-term action plans. Research by Locke and Latham (1995) suggest that specific goals lead to higher performance and goal commitment. The aforementioned research also postulates that achievement, which is a byproduct of parental involvement, teacher morale and school culture, results from goal commitment. This study determined levels of goal commitment in the urban alternative school and how it effects the attainment of the goal of student achievement.

The independent variables of parental involvement, teacher morale, and school culture all serve to work within one another to impact the dependent variable of student achievement. Neither of these variables works independent of the others, as they all impact one another. Parents may not aim to be involved in a school where the teachers have low morale and work in a school with a toxic culture. Conversely, school cultures become toxic where there is limited to no parental involvement and where teachers suffer from low morale and teacher morale plummets where there is toxic culture and low parental involvement. Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual framework of this study.
As much as each of these interconnected variables impact one another, they all work in concert to directly affect the definition and attainment of student achievement as it is seen in an urban alternative school. Figure 2 illustrates the theoretical framework of this study.
Definition of Variables and Other Terms

Alternative schools are defined for the purposes of this study, as schools where students are serviced as a result of their behavioral and/or educational challenges in the traditional school environment. These students receive a placement of 45 or 90 days, based upon their special education status or infraction.

At-risk students consist of those students who have had difficulty in their educational pasts. This includes, but may not be limited to, students who have been academically unsuccessful in their careers, suspended from, expelled from, or dropped out of their community school, abused, neglected, runaway and homeless youth, migrant youth, victims of crimes, offenders, and those who abuse drug and alcohol (Kochhar-Bryant, 2005).

Parent involvement as described in Epstein’s (1984) Framework of Six Types of Involvement is the practice of parents communicating with educators about the students’ educational experiences whether positive or negative.

Teacher Morale is a feeling, a state of mind, a mental attitude, and an emotional attitude shared between teachers in a school setting (Mendel, 1987). When a healthy school environment exists and teacher morale is high, "teachers feel good about each other and, at the same time, feel a sense of accomplishment from their jobs" (Hoy & Miskel, 1987, p. 241).

Instructional staff pertains to stakeholders and individuals in a school who work most directly with students in the classroom setting. This includes teachers and paraprofessionals who hold a certificate that allows them to work closely with students. Certification held by these individuals may include teaching certification in the
educator's field of practice or a paraprofessional certificate that allows paraprofessionals to work alongside a certificated teacher to provide instructional and logistical support.

Support staff for the purposes of this study pertains to staff members that do not work in the classroom setting, but contribute to the culture and climate of the school. This includes graduation coaches and school counselors, as well as clerical, custodial, and nutritional staff.

School culture, as defined by Deal and Peterson (1999), is "the set of norms, values, beliefs, rituals and ceremonies, symbols, and stories that make up the 'persona' of the school" (p. 10). School culture is made up of the unwritten rules, values, and expectations that are important to the success of a particular school. Johnson and Kardos (2007) described an "integrated school culture" as one that (a) has interaction between veteran teachers and novice teachers, (b) acknowledges the needs of beginning teachers, and (c) fosters a sense of shared responsibility for the school and its students. As it relates to the alternative school used in this study, school culture is defined as the implicit and assimilated rituals and routines that determine the success and governance of a school. In this unique environment, school culture is imperative as a factor, as it determines teacher morale more than any other factor used in this study.

Student Achievement is defined very concretely by the United States Department of Education (2010):

For tested grades and subjects: (1) a student's score on the State's assessments under section 1111(b)(3) of the ESEA; and, as appropriate, (2) other measures of student learning, such as those described in paragraph (b) of this definition, provided they are rigorous and comparable across classrooms; and
For non-tested grades and subjects: alternative measures of student learning and performance such as student scores on pre-tests and end-of-course tests; student performance on English language proficiency assessments; and other measures of student achievement that are rigorous and comparable across classrooms. (p. 6)

The above mentioned definition is problematic as it pertains to urban alternative schools as result of the unique mature of urban alternative schools. Consequently, it is the goal of this research to identify ways to develop a more appropriate definition of student achievement as seen in this unique type of school.

**Relationship among Variables**

Figure 3 illustrates the interdependent relationship of variables of the study.

*Figure 3. Interdependent Relationship of Variables*
Limitations of the Study

This study possesses limitations that may give license to another researcher to carry on and build upon. The limitations to this study include limited theories that can be used to frame the research. A secondary limitation is also that there is only one alternative school used in this research, which limits the depth that can be added to the study. Finally, a preliminary limitation is the fact that the researcher works at that site that is being used in the study.

As a result of the varying, but interconnected independent variables previously discussed and the manner in which they affect the definition and attainment of student achievement in an alternative school, there are a limited amount of theories that can be utilized to effectively explain the actual problematic components of this study. As complex as this study is and due to the limited amount of in-depth research aimed at facilitating the improvement of alternative schools as a model for traditional and alternative schools, this study must be viewed and governed through a new and independent lens. Components of these theories served to determine and identify why student achievement in alternative schools is affected in the way that it is, as well as the strategies that may be utilized in order to breed a culture of achievement based on the particular needs of students served by alternative schools.

Summary

This study serves to develop a new theory in order to determine how the factors relative to student achievement in alternative school actually impact the definition and acquisition of achievement. Through the use of surveys, observations, interviews, review
of student achievement data, and focus group methods of data collection, the theories referenced in this study provide background and build a frame of analysis in order to determine methods to better serve and aid in the achievement of alternative school students.

In the case of the alternative school being studied, the educational leaders within the school must be aware of the environments that their students come from, as well as the factors that may or may not contribute to their achievement (Ladson-Billings, 1995). By being aware of these factors, educators are more apt to serve the student in their entirety, by being made more aware of the total needs of the student. If a student’s individual needs are not met, his/her chance of academic success and matriculation outside of the alternative school may be rendered almost unattainable. These needs may range from more food for breakfast to academic support in mathematics, and it is incumbent upon the school to know where a student’s needs fall.

In concert with the individual needs of the student are the factors that become a part of this study, such as parental involvement, teacher morale, school culture, and manner of assessment, serve to impact the academic success of the student. By addressing these factors, school leaders are made more able to address the needs of the student and the school and community at large. Through the use of surveys, observations, interviews, review of student achievement data, and focus group methods of data collection, this qualitative grounded theory study serves to address the tools needed to attend to student needs, as well as steps that must be taken to ensure that students in alternative education environments can strive to thrive academically and socially.
CHAPTER IV
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

Due to the complex nature of this study, as well as the number of variables and proposed participants, this study takes the form of a qualitative grounded theory study. Qualitative methods are used to study human behavior and behavior changes, as complex behavior is not well captured through the use of quantitative techniques alone. Consequently, the study of behavior in the urban school setting cannot be effectively accomplished by simply “crunching numbers.” Parental involvement, teacher morale and school culture can only truly be examined and researched using a qualitative approach and actually speaking with and observing those that take part in the culture of the urban nontraditional education environment in concert with a use of surveys and review of assessment documents. The exploratory nature of this study lends itself to careful analysis, and without the thoughts, assertions, and ideas of the educators who contribute to the culture of the school used in this study, research and inquiry of this sort would be almost impossible.

The research of Hoepfl (1997) shows that use of qualitative methods, as opposed to quantitative alone, when there is a necessity to establish predetermined variables, such as parental involvement, teacher morale, and school culture, proves beneficial to the research process. The process is richened and data is given more depth and validity.
This is especially true in descriptive case study, where a behavior is researched and leaves groundwork for further research to thrive.

The use of qualitative research allows for the use of Likert-scale surveys, as well as analysis of numerical student achievement documentation for the purposes of rich analysis and description. As quantitative research refers to the systematic empirical investigation of social phenomena via statistical, mathematical or computational techniques (Givens, 2008), the aforesaid practice of surveys and achievement analysis will deepen the study of parental involvement, teacher morale, school culture, and their effects on the definition and attainment of student achievement. This branch of the qualitative lens of this study aims to examine the phenomena of the obscure nature of achievement, as seen in the urban alternative used in this study, as well as the independent variables to impact the delineation and fulfillment of student achievement.

The use of qualitative research in this study provides a rich amount of authentic data that can be used to further determine how to define and obtain school achievement in urban alternative schools. Utility of qualitative methods effectively illustrate the impact that the independent variables of parental involvement, teacher morale, and school culture have on the definition and attainment of student achievement in the urban alternative school.

A study of this nature necessitates triangulation of collected data. More explicitly, the foundation of this study rests upon surveys, interviews, focus group and observations, as well as document analysis. The instruments and materials used to collect data include surveys, interview protocols, and analysis of interviews, focus group, and achievement reports. By triangulating the data, maintenance for sources of error is
controlled. Using varying methods of inquiry provides a certain level of control for validity and reliability.

**Description of the Setting**

The setting of this case study is an urban alternative school in a large metropolitan school district located in the southeastern sector of the U.S. This school services an average of 400 students in grades 6-11 from the entire school district, which encompasses over 50 school sites. This number varies throughout the academic year due to the transient nature of enrollment and student assignments are on-going due to various behavior and attendance infractions.

Students serviced at this site are enrolled as a result of disciplinary and attendance violations, ranging from class cutting and truancy to terroristic threats and assault on students and faculty members. This school receives Title I funds and 94% of the students participate in the Federal Free and Reduced Lunch program. Historically, students who enter this school are given 90-day placements, unless they are special education students who receive 45-day placements. Many students at the school often stay longer than their assigned placement as a result of failure to meet transition requirements or return to their traditional school sites and return to the alternative school at a later time.

Educators in the school are considered “highly-qualified,” as 90% of the classroom teachers hold certification in their classroom instructional area and 70% of the educators (both teacher and paraprofessional) hold advanced degrees, or are working toward advanced degrees. There is a shared leadership structure within the school
consisting of a principal, 2 assistant principals, 6 implementation specialists, and 11 content lead teachers.

Sampling Procedures

This is a case study aimed at the study of human behavior within a nontraditional urban school; therefore, there should be a very purposeful selection of the participants. Creswell's (2008) text states the concept of purposeful sampling is used in qualitative research. This type of sampling means that the inquirer selects individuals and sites for the study because they can purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study. With the independent variables of this study consisting of parental involvement, teacher morale and school culture, participants were purposefully chosen from every avenue of the school, including parents, administrators, teachers, paraprofessionals, and support staff.

Individuals chosen for the purposes for this study fit into any of or a combination of the following categories:

- experienced educator (3 or more years in alternative school)
- novice educator (first year in alternative school)
- leadership role in the school (committee chair, content team lead, etc.)
- active on one or more school committees (attendance, continuous school improvement, professional development, etc.)
- experienced support staff (3 or more years at the alternative school)
- parent of student with extended placement (90 days or longer)
- administrator with experience in both traditional and alternative schools
• experienced administrator (3 or more years at the alternative school)

By choosing participants appropriate to the above-mentioned categories, there is more opportunity present to gather data on all stakeholder groups that attribute to the culture and morale of the school.

With such a broad range of participants, there is little doubt that there may be varying views on the level of parental involvement and morale of teachers in the building, as well as the nature of the school’s culture and achievement. When choosing research participants, not only is it the aim to select individuals from various facets of the school, but also individuals who appear to have a whole-listic view of the overall culture of the school. As a result, certain assumptions can be made that from these individuals, the researcher would be privileged to more rich and detailed information and specific points of view on how the independent variables determine achievement as defined and accomplished.

Working with Human Subjects

The site used in this study was selected by the researcher for the most personal of reasons. The researcher was a student in an urban alternative school where achievement was considered low and went on to became a teacher in the same alternative school program. Consequently, the researcher may be provided with more in-depth and transparent data. This school was also selected due to the accessibility of the information and data. Permission to conduct the study was granted. In order to obtain formal permission from the school and school district, the research prospectus and IRB approval
had to be submitted to the school principal, in lieu of the school district, as the researcher is an employee of the school used in the study.

As a member of the environment being researched, it was essential to consider all the ethical issues that may become present from conducting the research. The five principles of ethically conducting research— informs and voluntary consent, confidentiality of information shared, anonymity of research participants, no harm to participants and reciprocity —were all essential in the facility of this qualitative research (Halai, 2006). To address informed and voluntary consent, research subjects were given a copy of the description of the study, in order to obtain a thorough knowledge of the conclusion of the research. Each participant completed and signed a consent sheet, which detailed how their responses would be used and coded. Confidentiality was explicitly addressed when the participants were informed verbally and in writing that no one would know that they participated in the study and that their identities would not be discovered, nor would anything that may incriminate them at a later time, which run hand in hand with the ethical issue of confidentiality.

In order to effectively address confidentiality, a unique code was created for each participant. This code, which was developed by the researcher and shared with the individual participants, ensured that no participant’s identity was shared and no risk of retribution present. This served as an important ethical consideration due to the researcher’s employment within the environment being researched, as well as a safeguard, as research participants were most apt to trust the research as a result. Trust from the research participants was essential, which made the fourth ethical consideration, no harm to participants, almost a given.
Being a colleague of the researcher in the environment used in the study, the research participants possessed no reason to distrust the integrity of the research being conducted, and as it pertained to the researcher, there was no benefit, nor desire to do harm to the participants during the research, nor after. Lastly, reciprocity was addressed in the most simple of ways by providing the participants a catered lunch. None of the intended research participants indicated any desire for compensation as a result of their collaborative relationship with the researcher, but a catered lunch as a show of gratitude for their support and involvement in the surveys, interviews, and focus group of the qualitative research study.

**Instrumentation**

The researcher utilized surveys, interviews, focus group, notes from observations, and achievement documents in the collection of data that were used to determine the extent to which the independent variables of parental involvement, teacher morale, school culture affect the definition and attainment of achievement in the urban alternative school. Surveys provided to the faculty, staff, and parents of the urban alternative school used in this study were utilized to gather information on the variables of parental involvement, teacher morale, and school culture. This included different surveys based on the four stakeholder categories of parent, instructional staff, support staff, and administration. The surveys aimed to determine the participant’s perceptions on the variables, as well as the factors that impacted the independent variables. The survey consisted of 20 Likert scale questions that shaped the level and frame of questioning that
occurred in the interviews and focus group, as well as the focus of observations and the analysis of achievement data.

Interview questions were derived from data collected from surveys results. The interviews contained a total of nineteen questions that were tailored to the data that was collected from the participant surveys, which were created by stakeholder group. Each interview was conducted and uniquely coded to ensure anonymity of participants, as well as provide ease of analysis. The two rounds of interviews were intersected by a focus group with various survey participants engaging in dialogue that was reviewed and reflected upon in preparation for analysis. In addition to the interviews, observations and review of meetings, classroom instruction, and achievement data were used to add depth to the study, as well as definitive information on the way student achievement is defined and managed in the urban alternative school from school level leaders.

Participants/Location of Research

The participants of this qualitative study included three administrators, a graduation coach, 2 special education teachers, 11 classroom teachers, a registrar, a school secretary, and 2 parents. Each participant interview occurred in the participant’s worksite, with the exception of the parent interviews, which occurred at the school in the researcher’s work area. As it pertains to the focus group, the participants met in a school conference room, where a private conducive environment exists, on an afternoon intersecting the two rounds of interviews.
Data Collection Procedures

In this study, surveys completed by teachers and paraprofessionals were used to determine the levels of morale and school culture prevalent in the alternative school environment. The focus group was then utilized to determine the subjects' perception of presumed variables by the researcher on student achievement as seen in the urban alternative school. The data collected from the focus group and interviews aimed to support and challenge the researcher's postulated factors. Qualitative data were collected and also analyzed through the use of faculty and staff interviews, classroom and meeting observations, student achievement, and attendance and discipline documents.

The perceived factors that impacted student achievement of students enrolled in the alternative school were also reviewed using an analysis of data collected from surveys conducted by teachers, school support staff, and members of the school leadership team.

Secondary data were then collected in the form of teacher and student attendance data, as well as the school's four year academic trend as it pertains to student achievement on the Criterion-Referenced Competency Test, End of Course Tests, Georgia High School Graduation Tests, Georgia High School Writing Assessment, and Georgia Eighth Grade Writing Assessment. Additional elements reviewed in this study included parental involvement, school climate, leader expectations, and teacher methodology.

The timeline for data collection consisted of three weeks of interviews, which were intermediately benchmarked by a focus group. The interviews and focus group data collection was conducted through recording of all interviews and focus group, as well as written notes. All interview and focus group participants signed a release form at least a
day prior to the beginning of their scheduled interviews. Each participant also received a personal identification code that was used for note taking of responses and physical countenance of the participant.

Individual interviews averaged between 15 and 25 minutes each and addressed questions that served to provide an accurate feel of the attitudes these individuals have developed toward parental involvement, teacher morale and school culture, as well as the perceptions of the culture and resulting achievement, as seen by many of the actively engaged members of the school community. Interview questions also aimed to preliminarily answer the research questions of the study. The interviews were intentionally structured as a semicasual conversation, which solicited and facilitated the most open and honest responses from the participants.

When conducting the focus group, the researcher served primarily as the facilitator and asked questions and provided prompts to participants that led them to become involved in dialogue about parental involvement, teacher morale, school culture and the effects these variables have on the definition and attainment of student achievement in the urban alternative school. The goal of the initial dialogue was to seek additional discourse leading to clarifications and expanded information. The participants in the focus group were able take away a broader view of the variables of the school that impact achievement and the researcher took away a data base for this study that grew by leaps and bounds.

Protocols that were used in correlation to the interviews and focus group served to gain background information on the interview subjects, such as their age, race, current position and years of experience in education. The use of these protocols proved
essential in the process of coding information obtained from the interviews and focus group. By using the protocol on such a diverse group of stakeholders; young, old, experienced, novice, African-American and Caucasian, the data obtained from these interactions demonstrated how members of the school environment interpret the notion of parental involvement and teacher morale, as well as how they define school culture and relate the three variables to the definition and attainment of student achievement.

Observation of classroom instruction, as well as meetings, were extensively notated and reviewed in order to determine emerging themes and how the themes related to the research questions of this study. Achievement data documents were also reviewed from school years of 2008-2009 to 2012-2013 based on the research questions previously proposed in this study. Each independent variable was then cross-referenced with themes that emerged from the observations and analysis.

Description of Data Analysis Methods

Initially, each interview subject was coded and analyzed individually to determine the themes that developed from the interviews, as well as those that developed in the focus group, once coded. During the process of facilitating the interviews and focus group, all statements were transcribed and coded, and the interview and focus group subjects were observed in their interactions with each other and other school stakeholders. This was used to determine if many of the themes in the interviews and focus group would be substantiated in the routine interactions of the participants. Once the coding occurred, the process of verification ensued.
Verification, which consisted of searching for the reliability and validity of data, was ultimately achieved through the use of three varying methods. The first method, prolonged engagement, consisted of spending extended amount of time with respondents in their everyday environment in order to gain a better understanding of behavior, values, and social relationships in a social context (Lundy, 2008). This method of verification proved to be extremely feasible, as the environment being researched was the day to day environment of the researcher. On a daily basis, there were experiences present that supported and corroborated the data that were received through the use of the surveys, interviews and focus group. This prolonged contact made it practical to contextualize the data received, as well as the connection between the interrelated independent variables of parental involvement, teacher morale and school culture.

Triangulation served as the second method of verification, as there were surveys and interviews done in conjunction with a focus group and observation of the environment and the staff members in the environment. In particular, this method of verification refers to the application and combination of several research methodologies in the study of the same phenomenon, in this case, the vague definition and feeble attainment of student achievement in the urban alternative school (Bogden & Biklen, 2006). Consequently, triangulation of this manner served to show a consistency in the themes that repeatedly appeared in each data collection activity.

Lastly, thick description refers to “the detailed account of various experiences in which the researcher makes unequivocal the configurations of cultural and social relationships and puts them in context” (Holloway, 1997, p. 154). This method of verification served as the third and final method of verification, due to the qualitative
nature of the study. The researcher's observation notes have served as a detailed account of experiences within the school consisting of interview and focus group observations and observations of classroom instruction and school meetings. Comprehensive description has been made possible as a byproduct of the relationship between the researcher and the environment being researched.

Summary

Qualitative research is effective when viewing phenomena in the social sciences. While qualitative data analysis consists of a greater focus being placed on language and meaning, it is also used in qualitative research to facilitate a more holistic and contextual study and is used primarily for investigation or for explaining puzzling quantitative results. Along the same vein, data analysis methods were used to test the hypothesis that the variables of parental involvement, teacher morale, and school culture work interdependently, as well as have a profound effect on student achievement as defined and attained by the alternative school. Qualitative methods served to make the coding of data and observation of documented themes a necessity. This method of research analysis required the researcher to look for the how, why, who, and when of research and also determine next steps to the completion of the research, which was based upon the researcher's findings.
CHAPTER V
ANALYSIS OF THE DATA

Introduction

This chapter aims to present the results of the study, analyzing the effects that the interrelated variables of parental involvement, teacher morale, and school culture have on the definition and attainment of student achievement in the urban alternative school. Consequently, nine purposefully chosen research questions have been used to guide and provide focus to the study in order to determine not only if and how the aforementioned variables affect the definition and attainment of student achievement, but also steps that this school can take in order to define and facilitate student achievement in alternative schools. These purposeful research questions are as follows:

RQ1: To what extent does parental involvement impact school culture in the urban alternative school?

RQ2: To what extent do school culture and teacher morale impact one another in the urban alternative school?

RQ3: How is teacher morale impacted in the urban alternative school?

RQ4: How is school culture manifested in the urban alternative school?

RQ5: How is student achievement defined in the urban alternative environment?

RQ6: To what extent does parental involvement directly affect student achievement in the urban alternative school?
RQ7: To what extent does teacher morale directly affect student achievement in the urban alternative school?

RQ8: To what extent does school culture directly affect student achievement in the urban alternative school?

RQ9: How is student achievement assessed in the urban alternative school?

**Characteristics of Sample**

All of the 21 research participants are representative of all stakeholder groups present in the urban alternative school used in this qualitative study. This urban alternative school served middle and high school students from grades 6 through 11 in an urban school district. Surveys from the 21 stakeholders, interviews with 17 stakeholders, and a focus group consisting of 16 stakeholders were used to complete the qualitative study. Categorizing and synthesizing qualitative data provided through the research interactions shaped the findings and implications of this study.

The study participant population consisted of 21 individuals of various age groups and years of experience, broken into the following categories:

- Seven experienced educators (classroom teachers or paraprofessionals with 3 or more years of experience in alternative education)
- One novice educator (first year in alternative education)
- Two educators who have leadership role in the school (committee chair, content team lead, etc.)
- Two educators who are active on one or more school committees (attendance, continuous school improvement, professional development, discipline, etc.)
• Four experienced support staff members (3 or more years in alternative education)
• Two parents of students with extended placement (90 days or longer)
• One administrator with dual experience (experience in both traditional and alternative education)
• Two experienced administrators (3 or more years in alternative education)

Figures 4-7 provide demographic information of study participants.

Figure 4. Participant Representation by Stakeholder Group

Figure 5. Participant Representation in Comparison to Total Staff
Methods of Data Collection

In order to properly analyze the data provided through surveys, interviews, observation notes, and the focus group, there had to be careful observation and review of the data. By using triangulation in this study, the researcher was afforded the opportunity to use multiple data sources to address the research questions and validate the results.

Triangulation defined by Patten (2009) is described as using multiple sources for
obtaining data on a research topic. Survey data were charted and disaggregated by stakeholder group to determine what themes may develop from the surveys, based upon the particular stakeholder group responding to the survey. Once the surveys were completed and charted, the interview protocols were developed based upon the preliminary themes viewed.

Interviews were then conducted in the environments of the participants and the emergent themes were reviewed and revisited for the sake of providing validity to the process. After all of the initial interviews was complete, the researcher then used the emergent themes and interview responses to narrow the focus of the data analysis before beginning the process of conducting classroom and culture-related school observations, such as committee and curriculum planning meetings. Meetings that were observed included three content team meetings, two school improvement leadership meetings, a meeting with the accreditation agency, two professional development sessions, and a meeting with a school improvement specialist from the state department of education. All of the data collection culminated with a focus group where previous interview responses were revisited and substantiated in combination with new questions. During this time in the process, stakeholders were given the opportunity to allow the perceptions of one another to interact with their own in order to facilitate a more collaborative interaction.

**Data in Response to Research Questions**

Careful observation of the school and the participants involved in the study afforded the researcher with the opportunity to utilize very concise methods in which to address the research questions of the study. Being qualitative in nature, the study relied
heavily on the articulated perceptions and thoughts of the participants and was heavily supported by such.

RQ1: To what extent does parental involvement impact school culture in the urban alternative school?

In the surveys collected by the stakeholders, 100% of the four stakeholder groups agreed that parental involvement has a profound impact on the culture of schools as a whole. In both surveys, the parents agreed that parental involvement plays a role in the culture of a school, but both parents minimized the role that parental involvement plays in the culture of this particular school. This perception shifted when interviewed, as both of the parents lessened the impact of their involvement on the culture of the alternative school where their children currently attend. One parent even stated:

I’m on the outside of the school. I go when they call me and everything, but I don’t think that has nothing to do with the culture inside the school. That’s the teacher’s jobs and the principals and folks who work here. (Parent SED1, personal communication, May 23, 2013)

By placing the preponderance of the accountability and obligation back on the in-building stakeholders of the alternative school, it can be deduced that this particular parent has resigned to diminish the responsibility he/she has as a stakeholder in the alternative school environment.

The urban alternative school’s internal stakeholder groups differed in their perceptions of the importance of parental involvement to the urban alternative school environment. Seventy-five percent of the four support staff in the school perceived that parental involvement impacted the school, but 100% of the 12 teachers and 66.6% of the
3 administrators felt parent involvement played a more significant role in school culture in traditional schools than the alternative school. One teacher participant stated:

If the parents don’t show up and don’t participate, it makes us have to work way harder in what we have to do for our kids from day to day. A culture that works hard when it’s someone else’s responsibility will more than likely be a negative or toxic culture, which is where we end up as a school from time to time. (Teacher SDTS13, personal communication, May 17, 2013)

Table 1 provides teacher responses to survey statement 11. Responses were scaled as 1 = strongly agree, 2 = agree, 3 = neutral, 4 = disagree, and 5 = strongly disagree.

Table 1

*Teacher Responses to Survey Statement 11*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher Code</th>
<th>Survey Statement 11: It is absolutely essential for parents to visit the alternative school to address behavior concerns.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TB21</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>KSR11</td>
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<td>AASZ20</td>
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<td>PFL10</td>
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</tr>
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<td>SMA11</td>
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<td>MAKQ08</td>
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<td>VGT09</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TLTMS09</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Of the teachers surveyed, 82.4% agreed that parental involvement is essential in the urban alternative school used in this study, but also agreed that the parents played an inactive role in the growth of the students, which was a manifestation of parent apathy and affected the culture of the school.

Table 2 provides teacher responses to survey statement 12. Responses were scaled as 1 = strongly agree, 2 = agree, 3 = neutral, 4 = disagree, and 5 = strongly disagree.

Table 2

**Teacher Responses to Survey Statement 12**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher Code</th>
<th>Survey Statement 12: Parents play an active role in the growth of their student(s) who are enrolled at the alternative school.</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>TLTMS09</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Administrative staff research participants primarily agreed with the teachers and appeared to empathize with the day to day ability of the teachers in the school to function
without the parental involvement component, as only one of the three administrators slightly differed in his/her response to survey questions on parental involvement. One administrative participant stated, “I really feel for our teachers, because some of them try so hard to get our parents involved and most of the time, it just will not happen, no matter how hard they try” (Administrative Participant DBCJ13, personal communication, May 21, 2013)

Table 3 provides administrative staff responses to survey statements 11 and 12. Responses were scaled as 1 = strongly agree, 2 = agree, 3 = neutral, 4 = disagree, and 5 = strongly disagree.

Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Administrator Code</th>
<th>Statement 11: It is absolutely essential for parents to visit the alternative school to address behavior concerns</th>
<th>Statement 12: Parents play an active role in the growth of their student(s) who are enrolled at the alternative school</th>
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</thead>
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<tr>
<td>GHTD09</td>
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<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RBSK12</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

RQ2: To what extent do school culture and teacher morale impact one another in the urban alternative school?

It appeared to be a common belief among the administrative and instructional staff stakeholders that teachers with high levels of morale were more likely to work more
effectively to develop a positive school culture, as 100% of the 3 administrators and 83.4% of the 12 teachers agreed that happy teachers unequivocally improved school culture and the culture bred more job satisfaction among teachers.

When I am happy about the work that I do and I feel appreciated, I am a more positive and happy person. My gripes are minimal for real. On the flip side, when I am pissed and I feel like the administration or parents or other teachers or whoever don’t appreciate the work that I do, I am heated. I am angry and it is evident in everything that I do. I do every single task begrudgingly. (Teacher AASZ20, personal communication, May 17, 2013)

Sentiments similar to this were echoed throughout the interviews with the instructional staff of the urban alternative school used in this study, as correlated in the interviews and teacher morale and school culture questions on the surveys of 10 out of the 12 instructional staff participants. Only one participant appeared to disagree with this declaration, as this participant stated in the focus group: “I refuse to let external forces affect the work that I do. I know overall that morale and culture do go hand in hand, but I can’t let the culture affect me and my work” (Teacher HSR09, personal communication, May 17, 2013)

RQ3: How is teacher morale impacted in the urban alternative school?

When interviewed independently, 66.6% of the three school administrators appeared to be unsure about the particular variables that specifically impact teacher morale in the school. It was evident that the administrators were knowledgeable about the research on morale and the individual factors that impact it across the board, but there was little knowledge on the specifics in the building in which they serve. One
administrator suggested that, “sometimes, student behavior impacts teacher morale. They are tired and frustrated with the behaviors that they see in their classrooms and it is manifested in their levels of morale” (Administrator RBSK12, personal communications, May 21, 2013) Most interesting to note is that the instructional staff in the focus group only partially agreed with this administrative assessment. 83.4% of the 12 teachers actually shared a common belief that the behaviors displayed in the classroom do not play as great a role in their morale as inconsistent administrative practices exhibited in the school. Figure 8 shows the average response to Interview Question 10: If you could rate the levels of teacher morale in the building on a scale from 1-10, with 1 being the absolute lowest and 10 being the best, what score would you rate it and why?

Figure 8. Average Response to Interview Question 10

When the interview question was revisited in the focus group, the group was given rationale to substantiate their previous responses, based on themes that developed from the individual interview results. The results are charted in Figure 9.
RQ4: How is school culture manifested in the urban alternative school?

Of the 19 internal school stakeholders, 73.6% agreed that the culture of the school was manifested in the interactions that they shared with one another; 75% of the 12 teachers and 100% of the 3 administrators admitted that there were some cliques in the building, but those who work diligently to achieve the goals of the school are not actively involved in the process of “cliquing.” A seasoned administrator stated, “When I arrived at the school, there were a lot of cliques. I am glad that we are on our way to changing that part of our culture and our school” (Administrator GHTD09, personal communication, May 20, 2013). The sole administrator who possessed administrative experience in both traditional and alternative schools, communicated a different view from that of the other administrators. This administrator perceived the culture of the alternative school as less unique and more negative in the interactions of the staff members. When asked to describe the culture, she stated that it was “not as positive as it should be” (Administrator DBCJ13, personal communication, May 21, 2013).
RQ5: How is student achievement defined in the urban alternative environment?

All of the 12 educators and 3 administrators used in the study agreed that student achievement is defined by assessment data collected from and distributed by the state department of education, but agreed that it should be defined by more than standardized tests developed by the state and the score scales that correlate to the exams. Although both parents were initially unaware of how student achievement was defined, they became influenced during the focus group and agreed with the administrator and teacher assertions in the focus group. One teacher stated:

"Our students are more than a number. If they came in reading on a 300 lexile level and went all the way to 900, but failed a standardized test, are we supposed to tell that child that he had no achievement?" (Teacher SDTS13, personal communication, May 17, 2013)

Many teachers and administrators agreed that student achievement in the alternative school should be defined partially by the school’s ability to encourage student academic growth, with some measure of accountability to the expectations for the state board of education.

RQ6: To what extent does parental involvement directly affect student achievement in the urban alternative school?

Both of the two parents interviewed asserted that if they visited the alternative school more often, the chances of their students achieving academically would increase, but they also placed the brunt of the responsibility of student achievement on teachers. All of the four support staff members agreed with the parents. In contrast, 91.6% of the 12 teachers and all of the 3 administrators in the alternative school participating in this
study agreed that parental involvement is the initial factor that affects student achievement. One administrator stated that, “Parents are the first teachers. If the parents don’t hold education in a high regard, the students may not do so either” (Administrator RBSK12 personal communications, May 21, 2013). This is followed up in the focus group by a teacher who asserts that, “There are some students who use their parents’ lack of support and concern as the anti-example, which shows you exactly how big a role (parental) involvement plays” (Teacher HSR09, personal communication, May 17, 2013).

RQ7: To what extent does teacher morale directly affect student achievement in the urban alternative school?

“If the teacher’s not happy, they’re not gonna do anything for the kids. The end. It’s gonna be minimal and enough to keep them quiet and not on your nerves” (Teacher AASZ20, personal communication, May 17, 2013). One hundred percent of participants in all of the four stakeholder groups agreed that teachers play the greatest role in the achievement of students in an urban alternative school. When teachers in the school feel good about the work that they do on a daily basis, they tend to work harder, based on the classroom observations, interviews, and focus groups. One teacher stated:

I love coming to work every day. I know it sounds corny. I love coming to work every day because I love what I do. So I don’t think it’s the building itself, but the fact that I can come in and teach kids and see light bulbs go off. When I come in the building, I am happy to see the people that I work with. (Teacher AASZ20, personal communication, May 17, 2013)
The aforementioned teacher stated later in the focus group that, "I am proud to be a happy teacher. If I am not right, my kids are not right and I am sure that shows in their achievement and mastery" (Teacher AASZ20, personal communication, June 6, 2013).

Of the teachers in the room, 83.4% nodded their heads in agreement with the teacher's statement. As a result, the researcher asked the participants the following supporting question: After the time that you have spent in education, how much do you still love and value what you do? Participants used a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being the least and 10 being the most? (see Table 4)

Table 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Code</th>
<th>Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<td>TWD13</td>
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</table>

(continued)
Table 4 (continued)

**Question 15:** After the time that you have spent in education, how much do you still love and value what you do, using a scale of 1 to 10 with 1 being the least and 10 being the most?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<tr>
<td>RBSK12</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

RQ8: To what extent does school culture directly affect student achievement in the urban alternative school?

Of the participants in the four participant groups, 100% of them, both in the interviews and focus group, agreed that a toxic culture can completely stifle the growth of a school and its potential achievement. Both parents in the interviews and focus group initially seemed unsure about the concept of school culture and the role that they played in the development of that culture, but began to participate more openly in the focus group discussion as they became influenced by the other participants, agreeing that more parental involvement would make teachers work harder and feel more accountable for the work they do every day in the classroom.

The focus group also lent itself to the idea that there is definitely a need for more collaboration, as parents are also a large component of the culture of the school. One parent humbly stated, “I know I need to do more in the school, but when you think of alternative school, you know your kid ain’t gon’ be here long, so you don’t get too
attached with what they got going on” (Parent SAD1 personal communication, May 16, 2013). The other parent in the room nodded in agreement, which indicated that this may be a common thought of parents when their students are assigned to the urban alternative school.

**RQ9: How is student achievement assessed in the urban alternative school?**

One hundred percent of the participants in the three internal stakeholder groups interviewed agreed that student achievement is primarily assessed and measured in the urban alternative school by standardized tests administered at the school and mandated by the state department of education. One hundred percent of all stakeholders also agreed that this method is not the most effective in the case of the urban alternative school. One educator shared that although Adequate Yearly Progress is no longer an indicator for the school’s measure of achievement, test scores are “still used to provide the department of educator with an idea of what students are mastering in the school” (Administrator RBSK12, personal communication, May 21, 2013).

Through observation of the three year trend achievement data, it is evident that there is growth occurring in the school. Many of the school’s content areas, including literacy, mathematics, and the sciences are seeing steady growth over the years. This growth may not be as drastic as some would like, but it is apparent in the data, as each year, the school’s sixth, seventh, and eighth grade students have shown consistent growth in their levels of mastery.

Each year, sixth grade student mastery has grown tremendously, as students have grown from 40% meeting and exceeding standards in Reading in 2009 to 70% in the following year. The same can be said in English Language Arts and Mathematics, as
mastery grew from 50% in 2009 to 75% percent in the following year and 7% in 2009 to 30%, respectively. The teachers in these contents have remained the same, which is a testament to the growth of not only the students, but the staff as well (see Figure 10).

As it pertains to seventh grade students, less drastic growth is evident, as students in the 2008-2009 academic year showed 46% meeting and exceeding state standards in reading, with 58% percent meeting and exceeding standards in the 2009-2010 academic year, and 62% meeting and exceeding standards in the 2010-2011 academic year (see Figure 11).

Figure 10. Sixth Grade Georgia Criterion-Referenced Competency Tests (CRCT):
Percentage of Students at Each Performance Level: Comparison for All Students

Figure 11. Seventh Grade Georgia Criterion-Referenced Competency Tests (CRCT):
Percentage of Students at Each Performance Level: Comparison for All Students
As with sixth graders, the same can be said in English Language Arts, as mastery grew in the three academic years from 43% in 2009 to 71% in 2010 and 82% in 2011. In mathematics, mastery grew from 23% in 2009 to 33% in 2010 and 38% in 2011.

The school’s eighth grade achievement data shows a less drastic measure of school-wide growth, as eighth grade students grew in mastery in the 2008-2009 and 2009-2010 academic years and decreased in mastery in the 2010-2011 academic year in all aforementioned content areas. In the 2008-2009 academic year, eighth graders in reading showed 72% mastery and grew to 81% mastery in the 2009-2010 and decreased to 77% mastery in the 2010-2011 academic year. In concert with the trend of increase and decrease among eighth grade students in the school, students assessed in English Language Arts in the 2008-2009 academic year showed 59% meeting and exceeding standards, followed by 75% and 60% meeting and exceeding standards in the following two academic years. Mathematics also had a similar trend as the academic years of 2008-2009, 2009-2010, and 2010-2011 showed students meeting and exceeding standards at 18%, 34%, and 23%, respectively (see Figures 12 and 13).

Figure 12. Eighth Grade Georgia Criterion-Referenced Competency Tests (CRCT): Percentage of Students at Each Performance Level: Comparison for All Students
Parents in the focus group seemed unsure on the manner in which assessment takes place in the alternative school, which may be considered a testament to the residual effects of the present levels of parental involvement in the school. Every single teacher in their interviews and focus group agreed that although the school is to be held accountable by an unbiased party, the measure of student achievement in an alternative school should be measured by additional factors, including student growth.

All of the in-school stakeholders agreed that although achievement, as measured by standardized tests, showed growth over the years, it would appear to an external individual that achievement is not as prevalent in the school as it should be. One support staff member substantiated this sentiment.

Although my students have to take state tests, there are so many other things that can be used to show what my kids know. For example, if a kid comes in with...
difficulty in addition and leaves with a mastery in fractions and multiplication, isn’t that a great achievement for that student? That’s achievement. Our population is so transient that there is no real way for an external party to determine our success. That’s something that we know because we are here. (Support Staff GAL09, personal communication, May 24, 2013)

Emergent Themes

During the process of data collection and analysis, the following major themes were identified:

- a need for consistency
- staff desire for more effective communication
- the importance of parental attitudes toward the educational process
- lack of adequate educational foundation
- alternative culture
- frustration and hopelessness
- needs unique to alternative schools
- overall teacher desire for student success

These themes developed almost immediately in the surveys and interviews, as the study participants appeared eager to share their perceptions on the factors of parental involvement, teacher morale, school culture, and student achievement as seen in their urban alternative school (see Figure 14).
The most common emergent themes from the surveys, interviews, focus group, and field noted from observations are:

- Every classroom educator interviewed noted that there was a lack of consistency in the school. This lack of consistency ranged from consistency in practice and communication. It was noted that this lack of consistency is a direct result of perpetual change in the leadership structure of the school. In the past four years, there have been three different principals and four different assistant principals, which directly contributed to a constant change in school goals, values, and expectations. This constant change placed the
school in a perpetual state of “ebbing and flowing,” which was not conducive to student achievement in the alternative school.

- Stakeholders who participated in this study also aided in the recurrence of the theme of communication. The two parents participating in this study asserted that the school does not effectively communicate with parents, which causes a breach in communication between the two entities. In concert with this argument from parents, teachers express that there is limited parent involvement until they call home for discipline infractions and parents are required to report to the school in order for students to reenter after suspension.

- In-house stakeholders also helped build the theme of gravity of parental apathy and its eventual impact on morale and achievement. One teacher stated that:

  If the parent allows disorderly behavior that contributes to delinquency, why should they listen to us as educators? If the parent doesn’t think it’s a problem and they are the first source of authority, a child doesn’t understand where the problem lies, which is frustrating to the morale. You’re fighting an uphill battle. (Teacher PFL10, personal communication, June 6, 2013)

The theme is also supported as many teacher interviews agreed that most times, when the parent shows no interest in the achievement of the student, the student sees no value in it. Another teacher participant provided an example that when students arrive at school and they become bored and want to come
home, the parent will allow the student to come home "as if school has no value" (Teacher MAKQ08 personal communication, May 24, 2013)

• The theme of foundational understandings occurred and developed in many of the teacher and administrator interviews. The students who enter the alternative school have weaker educational foundations than many other students, which makes achievement difficult. One teacher stated that "a building built on a shaky foundation will not stand for long" (Teacher VGT09, personal communication, May 24, 2013).

• This idea was substantiated by another educator who followed up by saying "we can pour into our children all day long, but it will be erased in a few hours once they leave us, because the foundation at home isn’t consistent with what we are trying to do" (Teacher PFL10, personal communication, May 20, 2013). One parent agreed that it is hard to give students a solid foundation when there are so many other issues to contend with in the home and community.

• All stakeholders agreed in the focus group that the culture of the school is extremely unique in that it ebbs and flows. Many teachers agreed that this may be due to the transient nature of both students and leadership. This theme became tied with that of consistency, as many of the research participants agreed that there has to be a stronger, more solid sense of culture in the school. Culture should be an apparent part of the day to day life of the school, but two experienced educators new to the school shared that it is hard to
determine the culture of the school, as the expectations are not always consistent and the physical makeup of the school makes it difficult to build a sense of community with those outside of the actual learning community where one may work.

- Two interwoven themes from the initial interviews are those of frustration and hopelessness. Parents are frustrated with the decisions made by their children and the lengths that they have to go to get students to a place where they can work as partners in their own education. School staff members show frustration in the lack of consistency and lack of support that is needed to ensure student achievement. One teacher stated, “They want us to make a dollar out of fifteen cents, but if they gave us what we really need, we could make two dollars out of it” (Teacher SDTS13, personal communication, May 17, 2013).

- The aforementioned theme of frustration and hopelessness gave way to the theme of the urban alternative school possessing more unique needs that that of the traditional school. Students who attend alternative schools have needs that vary from those of students who thrive in the traditional school. As one teacher put it, “If they had everything that they needed at their home school, we wouldn’t be here” (Teacher VGT09, personal communication, May 24, 2013).

- The final theme observed in the interviews and focus group is the dedication of the teaching staff. When interviewing the teachers, as well as moderating
the focus group, it appeared that even with the difficulties that "come with the
territory," the teachers in the school agreed overall that it is the goal of the
alternative school to meet the academic, behavioral, and emotion needs of the
students. This theme itself was considered among many of the stakeholders to
be the major positive component of the school culture. These teachers shared
that maximizing student achievement is a consensual goal among the staff,
regardless of the complications that they face.

In addition to the emergent themes, there were also patterns that were also observed
throughout the discussions:

- Most often (but not always) participants provided many examples of things
  they are unhappy with about their current job and things they would change if
  they had the power. However, when asked at the end of the session about
  their overall job satisfaction, most participants reported high levels of
  satisfaction (see Figure 15).

- All teachers interviewed felt that the work that they do makes a difference and
  they exhibit pride in their work as the educators of the students who are
  considered the most difficult to teach.

![Figure 15. Number of Times Participants Reported High Morale/Satisfaction by Stakeholder Group](image-url)
Parents interviewed were not entirely sure of the culture in the school and had limited views on the staff in the school, which showed a direct correlation between what they knew about the school and the lack of involvement, although both parents agreed that it is essential to visit the alternative school to address behavior concerns and also showed similar preliminary views on the preliminary surveys (see Table 5).

Table 5

Parent Survey Comparison

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School staff agreed that it is difficult to make students truly successful without the help of parents, but agree that it is still worth the immense effort that they put forth every day. Ninety-one percent of these educators agreed that although in the afternoon, they leave the school fatigued, they do return renewed and ready to try again day after day to ensure that students that they serve have the opportunity to be successful.

Summary

The rationale behind this particular process of qualitative study was to ascertain the manner in which the aforementioned interrelated variables of parental involvement, teacher morale, school culture, and student achievement interacted with one another and
were manifested in the urban alternative school. This manifestation was then used to
determine how these variables all worked together to help define achievement and attain
achievement in the urban alternative school. By engaging the research participants in an
open form of dialogue, they were able to provide quality qualitative data on the variables
of parental involvement, teacher morale, and school culture and determine how these
interrelated variables manifest before the various stakeholder groups in the urban
alternative school.
CHAPTER VI

FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

Students who enter alternative schools do so with a multiplicity of needs and deficiencies that must be addressed in order to ensure that they experience the academic success that may have alluded them in their previous educational experiences. That measure of success, whether it occurs through student academic growth or a numerical score on a state-mandated test, should ultimately be determined by those who service the students: the adult stakeholders known as parents, teachers, support staff, and school administrators. These stakeholders should function under the common goal of urban alternative schools, which is to serve students who may not have experienced success in the traditional school (Conley, 2002). With this singular purpose, this study has determined that there must be holistic reform in the realm of urban alternative schools. There must be reform in the manner in which alternative schools define and measure achievement, as well as reform in the school’s practices that impact achievement.

Findings

In the preliminary stages of this study, it had been the perception of the researcher that the variables of parental involvement, teacher morale, and school culture were equally interrelated and all directly impact the measure and definition of student achievement in the urban alternative school. This has been only partially substantiated by
the data collection and analysis process of the study. It was observed by the researcher that the outcomes of this focused research were greatly influenced as the participants interacted with one another in the later stages of the study, including the focus group. Also, the variables of parental involvement, teacher morale, and student culture are determined to be interrelated, but not the sole achievement-determinant variables as there are many other external variables that affect the manner in which student achievement is defined and attained in the urban alternative school.

Findings: Parental Involvement

Parental involvement, as analyzed as a variable of this research, is an area of need observed in the research environment. Research of this variable revealed the following:

- Parental involvement decreased as students grow older.
- There were limited school practices in place to facilitate parental involvement.
- Parent participants in the urban alternative school were unsure of many of the practices in the school.
- Parents did not take ownership into the academic outcomes of their children, but placed that responsibility on classroom teachers.

Discussion with the two parent participants in this study uncovered the finding that although neither parent was very active in the educational process of their child as a secondary student, they were far more active in their students' primary years. One parent stated, "When my boy was up the street at the elementary school, I was always there. I wanted him to get a good start to stuff. I figure when he got older, he can fend for himself" (Parent SED1, personal communications, May 21, 2013). Another parent
agreed with this statement. Both parents willingly admitted to having put less emphasis on the import of their roles in the secondary school development of their students.

The parent claims were supported by review of the literature, as Epstein's (1984) research discussed the decline of parent involvement as a result of modified parent attitudes, it related to secondary education. Although there are explicitly documented benefits of parent involvement for students' achievement and attitudes toward school, parent involvement of all types declined progressively during the elementary school years. One parent who participated in this study shared, "A major reason we fall of as parents is because we get so frustrated with schools by the time our kids are old. All these years my daughter been in school, I get more mad at the schools" (Parent SAD1, personal communications, June 6, 2013). By the entry of a child into secondary education, the home-school connection has been significantly reduced, and in some cases is nonexistent, sometimes due to parent attitudes about education.

Although research by Epstein (1984) illustrated that schools have an important role to play in the facility of parental involvement, this school lacks a systematic parental involvement program. Contact with parents happens in pockets, as many staff members contact parents solely in an attempt to address behavioral and academic concerns. There is no one charged with ensuring that parents stay connected with the school, even though there are resources for such a position. The school possesses the funding for a parent liaison and has had this funding for three years, as shared in the focus group, but has not filled this position, causing the funds to roll over each year and the parents to become further detached from the school.
Findings: Teacher Morale

Data collection and analysis have shown that teacher morale, as analyzed in this study, was shown to be a contributive factor to student achievement. Analysis of the variable of teacher morale has resulted in the following findings:

- Teacher morale at the research site exceeded expectations of the researcher.
- High morale contributed to positive school culture.
- Teacher morale was impacted negatively by the presence of inconsistent leadership practices.

It was theorized by the researcher that levels of morale in the urban alternative school would be low, due to student behavior and teacher morale. This has not proven to be the case, as the morale of the school’s instructional staff tends to be very high. One teacher stated, “I enjoy coming to work. Would work for free if my bills were paid, because I like to be the person to give the kids the love and success some of them never got a chance to experience” (Teacher TB21, personal communications, May 22, 2013).

As it pertains to the theory that high morale contributed to positive school culture, the hypothesis has been substantiated. Many of the staff members who were interviewed and participated in the focus group agreed that high levels of morale among instructional staff contribute to the culture of the school. One administrator stated the following:

I could only imagine what the culture would look like around here if all of the teachers had attitudes and didn’t want to be here. It would rub off on the students and make them act crazy. Their behavior would then drive the administrative
team crazy and the cycle would continue. It would be chaotic, at best.

(Administrator RBSK12 personal communications, June 6, 2013

Findings: School Culture

Prior to the analysis of data related to the variable of school culture, the researcher postulated that the culture of the school hindered the school's student achievement. In opposition of the theory, data analysis uncovered the following findings:

- Teachers are aware of the levels of culture present in the school.
- Cliques most prominently impact the culture of the school.
- The culture of the school was not directly impacted by student achievement and parental involvement.

Through analysis of interviews and focus group discussion, 82.4% of the teachers who participated in this study agreed that although they faced various routine challenges, such as parental apathy and challenging student behavior, they were certain of the culture that was present in the school. This particular culture, as observed by the participants, was positive and balanced. The teachers asserted that they were proud of their work and it showed in what they observed as positive school culture.

The researcher initially hypothesized that relatively low student achievement and parental involvement directly impacted the culture in the school. Based on the data analysis of interviews and the focus group with participants of this study, neither is the case. Many of the staff members who participated in the interviews and focus group acknowledged that the presence of cliques, and isolated pockets of negativity were the solitary challenges to the culture. One administrator shared, “If it weren’t for the cliques,
the culture here would be almost perfect. There are always going to be a few bad apples, though” Administrator DBCJ13, personal communication, June 6, 2013). A second administrator stated:

We know what we are dealing with. We knew what we were dealing with when we agreed to work at an alternative school. It’s not the kids or their parents or test scores that create the more negative instances of school culture. It’s the frustration of a few and the subsequent behavior of those who choose to fall into cliques and negativity. It’s the grown folks who work here all day. That’s not everyone who works here. (Administrator GHTD09, personal communication, June 6, 2013)

The abovementioned statement served as a testament to the awareness of cultural challenges in the school.

Finally, the data analysis of this study has uncovered that the culture of the school was not directly impacted by student achievement and parental involvement. Teachers asserted that they were aware of what they are dealing with when it comes to student behaviors and parental involvement. Staff members were certain that teacher morale was the major culture-determinant factor in the urban alternative school.

Findings: Student Achievement

Initially the researcher theorized that the school had no school-based definition of student achievement and the measure of such, as provided by the governing body was low. Upon researching this theory, there were two outstanding findings:

- Achievement was defined by data obtained from state-determined assessments.
• School staff members do not consider the traditional measure of student achievement effective.

Discussion with school staff during the focus group uncovered that the dependence on standardized tests as the sole method of student achievement was not the manner in which they, as the stakeholders, measured student achievement. Parents in the focus group also shared that although they are not aware of exactly how their students’ achievement is measured by the governing body, they agreed that is much more than a score on a test. One parent asserted:

My daughter doing well in school is more than what she did one day on a test. What if she was really smart, but had a bad day on the test day? There's got to be more to it than that. (Parent SAD1, personal communication, June 6, 2013)

It was made certain that school stakeholders placed achievement merit on more than the tests that are given by the state every year.

Conclusions

The primary factors that have been shown to most directly impact student achievement in the urban alternative school were its operational practices, processes, and school structural organization. This consists of the manner in which leadership communicates information to stakeholder groups, such as parents, teachers, and support staff, as well as the consistency of the leadership that is in place at the school. It has been determined that some processes that affect the variables of parental involvement, teacher morale, and school culture are impacted by the aforementioned emergent themes of
leadership consistency and dissemination of communication and information. It is these variables that serve as the antecedents to the interdependent variables of this study and impact the definition and attainment of student achievement as seen in the urban alternative school.

Conclusions: Parental Involvement

During the course of the study, the Researcher arrived at an interpretation of the findings and reached several conclusions that relate to the variable of parental involvement, including the following:

- Parental involvement must begin at the beginning of a student’s educational career and continue consistently throughout a child’s matriculation.
- Parents possess different attitudes about education that directly influence a student’s success.
- Institutions, such as schools, must implement practices that nurture consistent parental involvement.

These conclusions all contributed to the recommended improvement of parental involvement practices in the research environment, which may ultimately improve levels of student achievement in the school, as manifested in student achievement data.

The researcher found that although parental involvement was a large part of student achievement, it must begin well before a student’s foray into secondary education. From the primary grades and on through secondary education, it is incumbent upon parents to show students the importance of their educations by functioning as active participants in the educational process. This includes, but is not limited to, attending
open houses, volunteering at the school in the media center, and serving as classroom parents. When parents engage in this manner of parental involvement, it becomes a common practice for both the parent and the student, resulting in consistency of the reciprocal relationship between the school and home. Parental involvement must be consistent throughout a student’s educational career, not just while attending the alternative school, in order to make it a part of parent attitudes and the student consciousness.

It has also been concluded through analysis of the data and review of the aforementioned research questions that staff in the school feel that the emergent theme of parental attitudes may weigh on the practices and success for students in the urban alternative school, as evident in the focus group and interviews. If the parents are to believe in the success of their student(s) enrolled in the urban alternative school, the school has to gain the confidence of the parents through effective communication and consistency. As alluded to in the focus study, parental beliefs and attitudes are paramount to student achievement and academic success. It is determined from literature review and the participant focus groups that parents who have an intrinsic belief that education is a priority and communicates this belief to the students in their homes in both verbal and non-verbal communication serve to facilitate more quality achievement in the student’s educational activity than a parent who only physically present at the school at times in which they are mandated to be present. Parents who manifest their involvement in visiting the school with the solitary goal of addressing behavior concerns is not an accurate depiction of the quality parental involvement needed to push the students serviced by the alternative school to a level of authentic achievement.
Lastly, it is a conclusion of the researcher that the school's lack of a comprehensive parental involvement plan, impacts the levels of parental involvement in the building. The school and home connection appears nonexistent, which should be the goal of the school to improve upon using a comprehensive parental involvement plan. Consequently, there is no point of contact focused on engaging the parents of the students served by the urban alternative school.

Conclusions: Teacher Morale

Teacher morale, as a variable of the study, has resulted in conclusions contrary to the perceived assertions of the researcher. These conclusions are as follows:

- Teacher morale in the school was fairly high, despite student behavior.
- Teachers with high levels of morale contributed to the beneficial environment of school culture that facilitates achievement.

In opposition to reviewed research and the perceived ideas of the researcher, the teachers in the urban alternative school have a fairly high sense of morale. Teachers felt that their work was valued and respected by the students that they serve on a day to day basis, despite the challenging behaviors that are sometimes displayed by the students. Many of the educators who participated in this study agreed that there are several components of their school's purpose and practices that could be modified, but assert their belief in the value and quality of their work, as evidenced in the following statement: "It's what I do that makes me have decent morale. Nobody can tell me anything about what I do for my kids that will make me feel bad about the ministry of work that I'm doing with these kids" (Teacher AASZ20, personal communication, June 6, 2013). Educators at this
research site appeared steadfast and faithful in the work that they do at this urban alternative school and displayed positive morale that leads to positive student achievement outcomes, despite student behaviors.

Research by Yost (2002) stated that teachers who possess high levels of morale are more prone to provide the most advantageous and effective learning atmosphere for the achievement of his or her students. The development of an educator’s sense of teacher morale certainly pays off tremendously in schools for all stakeholders (Yost, 2002). Such advantageous learning environments move schools forward in their efforts to engage students in quality achievement in every classroom, but are supported and influenced by effective and consistent practices and effective communication. By making statements such as the previous statement, and adhering to their beliefs about their work with at-risk students serviced by the school, the teachers in this urban alternative school are shown to possess levels of morale that can be considered relatively high.

**Conclusions: School Culture**

School culture in relation to the alternative school, consisted of implicit and assimilated rituals and routines that determine the success and governance of a school. Conclusions in relation to this variable are as follows:

- Despite challenges, such as student behavior and parental apathy, the culture of the school was balanced.

- Lack of consistent leadership was the initial hindrance to the school’s culture.

- The culture of the school was most greatly impacted by teacher morale.
The culture of this alternative school may benefit greatly by changing much of the way it functions.

One teacher stated, "I know for a fact that my kids love me. I also know that they know that love them. They have to know. If they didn’t know this, the culture of the school would be different" (Teacher SMA11, personal communication, June 6, 2013).

Assertions such as this serve as a testament that student behaviors don’t directly affect the balanced school culture. The sense of community that is developed between the staff and students served at the urban alternative school contributes to a positive and balanced culture.

The school’s lack of consistency, as a process of governance referenced by many of the educators used in this study, is the antecedent of the minimal problematic components of the school’s culture. Negative components of the school culture that may hinder the success and governance of the school are found in isolated clusters, which the participants often referred to as cliques and these entities form due to what one participant referred to as frustration with all the back and forth inconsistency. This aspect of the culture is agreed upon by many of the research participants as a direct result of inconsistent practices and policies set forth by school leadership.

School culture is most primarily impacted by teacher morale. Staff members interviewed shared that they take pride in their students and the growth that the students have shown and that this pride is what makes the culture of such a hectic environment positive and beneficial to the process of student achievement. One instructional staff member stated, "If the teachers were all down and despondent and had low morale, the culture of our school would be crazy. Everyone would be cranky and not get along,
which would definitely impact student achievement” (Instructional Staff Member MAKQ08, personal communication, June 6, 2013). It is assertions such as this that cause the researcher to conclude that the culture of the school is determined greatly by the levels of teacher morale.

Conclusions: Student Achievement

School staff respect the growth of their students, which resorted in the following conclusion:

- Staff members individually defined their student’s achievement by academic growth, as opposed to standardized test scores.

Achievement as identified by the individuals who work in the urban alternative school is student growth. The participants assert that in recent years, there have been many inconsistent measures of achievement, and although state-mandated test scores are the principal measure of achievement and are not always as high as those of other schools in their district, students are learning and succeeding and each year and the educators see growth in their instructional practice and their students. A support staff member substantiated this conclusion:

We get so many students who have missed weeks and sometimes months and years of consistent formal education. Some come from jail and others have high cases of truancy. Some only attend school in the traditional setting 40% of the time, but come here and attend 75% of the time. Our students are achieving. They are growing. We pour into them and they get full. (Support Staff Member GALP09, personal communication, May 23, 2013)
This testament alludes to the consensus displayed in the focus group that student growth should be the measure of achievement for students in the urban alternative school. The stakeholders who participated in this study consistently alluded to a need for reform in the way that the alternative school's achievement is assessed.

The theory that the variables of parental involvement, teacher morale, and school culture are equally interrelated and directly responsible for the definition and attainments of student achievement in urban alternative schools has only been partially accepted, as there are various other factors that play a crucial part in the levels of success experienced by these schools. Governing bodies that are slated to serve institutions, such as the school used in this study, are being asked to play a more invested role in the success of this school and others like it by providing them with more autonomy. Similar to the manner in which educators differentiate to address student needs, governing bodies, such as state departments of education and school districts are being asked to be more flexible in addressing needs in urban alternative schools, as they are unique in their levels of parental involvement, teacher morale, and school culture.

The answers to the research questions used in this study show that the variables of parental involvement, teacher morale, and school culture work interdependently to impact how achievement is manifested in the urban alternative school used in this qualitative study. Although the answers show this, they also show that there are many other components of the school's policies and practices that impact the unique manner in which student achievement should be defined in the school. Consequently, there is a need for reform in the aforementioned practices, in order to modify and improve upon the
interdependent variables of parental involvement, teacher morale, and school culture, as seen in this qualitative study.

**Implications**

Although there are other factors that may affect student achievement other than those studied here, it can be inferred by the findings of this study that this alternative school may benefit greatly by changing much of the way it functions. In order to produce the type of “lifelong leaders and learners” that the school aims for in their purpose statement, there must be comprehensive reform at the district level in the way that the district’s alternative schools are supported and held accountable for achievement that results from that support. Urban alternative schools cannot be held accountable for the same achievement standards as traditional schools, as the students who inhabit alternative schools are often the students that did not receive the necessary supports from the traditional school, which has a profound effect on the parental attitudes and achievement patterns of the student.

This study has also allowed the researcher to make inferences about the unknown components of the research environment. As the purpose of this research was to identify and analyze appropriately the interdependent nature of parental involvement, teacher morale and school culture, and the subsequent effects of this interdependence on student achievement, as defined and attained in an urban alternative school, the researcher has to imply that this study only partially fulfilled its purpose. This study is only foundational, as there must be future research on the variables that aid in the definition and attainment of student achievement in an urban alternative school.
Limitations of the Study

There were four major limitations of this study, listed as follows:

- Introduction of a new principal
- Limited parent participation
- Time period of study
- The researcher was employed at the site used in this study

A pivotal limitation is the introduction of a new principal to the alternative school environment. At the conclusion of the study, the principal had been in the school for four weeks, which in itself shifted the culture of the school, as one administrator said in the focus group:

Everyone wants to be really positive and on their best behavior when you have a new boss. The dog and pony show won’t last long and the culture will return to the way it was when folks become more comfortable. (Administrator RBSK12, personal communication, June 6, 2013)

Due to the introduction of the new principal to the research environment, the school was thrust into a confusing state of flux, which caused availability of the research participants to fluctuate, as many were actively involved in the new principal’s transition process.

Secondly, in a school that services an average of 500 students per semester, there were only two parent participants. This resulted in disproportionality in data collection for this particular stakeholder group. If there were more parent participants, the researcher would have been afforded the opportunity to obtain richer data pertaining to
parent perceptions and factors pertaining to parent involvement in the urban alternative school.

The time period in which data were collected served as a limitation, as stakeholder groups used in this study all had various matters at work in the work environment, which made the time spent with the researcher more limited than it would have been. The school completed the Advanced Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) accreditation process a week before this study began, which may have swayed or modified the perceptions viewed in this study. Many of the school-based stakeholders were on a very positive cloud, due to their achievement of SACS/Advanced accreditation, which may have impacted their responses on the surveys, interviews, and focus group. The end of the school year served as a difficult time to conduct the study, as many of the participants involved in the study participants were intensely engrossed in the process of summarizing end of year practices, such as finalizing reports, and preparing final exam grades, as well as standardized test make-ups for students who failed the first administration. This also caused many of the participants to double their workloads in order to accomplish end of year goals, which limited the amount of time that the participants had to contribute to the study.

Lastly, a key limitation was presented, as the researcher was an employee at the alternative school. This caused the Researcher to have many preconceived theories and ideologies that may have proved to complicate the nature of the study. The researcher was not able to obtain as objective a view of the alternative school, due to four years of employment in the building.
Recommendations

As a result of this urban alternative school acquiring a new principal, many of the recommendations of this study are practices that are currently being anticipated by the school-wide leadership team. These recommendations of improvement consist of the following:

- Educational leaders in schools should ensure that morale is assessed annually and data should be used to foster a better learning climate for students and teachers.

- Alternative school principals should review and update local school plans to ensure that they will implement a cohesive communication system to all internal and external stakeholders.

- The local school principal should work with community stakeholders to reform the parental involvement policy to be inclusive of additional strategies to engage parents in utilizing more technical tools to support positive student achievement outcomes.

- There should be a comprehensive reform at the school system level in the way that the district's alternative schools are supported and held accountable for student achievement outcomes.

- Leaders at the school system level should conduct additional research on the variables that aid in the definition and attainment of student achievement in an urban alternative school.
• Leadership team in the alternative setting must be stabilized and this should be a priority at the school system office level.

• University leadership programs must ensure that aspiring leaders in the P-12 environment receive specialized training focused on alternative education.

As a result of this urban alternative school acquiring a new principal, many of the recommendations of this study are practices that are currently being anticipated by the school-wide leadership team. One of the administrators discussed during the focus group that the constantly shifting culture of the school and concerns of many of the stakeholders, such as consistency, lack of communication, and more effective parental involvement programs are in the process of being addressed by the new principal. She stated:

There is so much change happening here, especially with a new principal. It’s funny that much of what is being expressed as a concern by teachers was expressed by the administrative team and we are definitely in a process of having these issues addressed and eventually rectified. (Administrator GHTD09, personal communication, June 6, 2013)

The introduction of more effective and consistent practices is needed in this urban alternative school, which begins with ensuring that levels of teacher morale are observed and assessed on a consistent basis. It is incumbent upon the school leader to determine and assess levels of teacher morale on a consistent basis. This includes determining the factors to contribute to the reviewed levels of morale. This formative assessment of morale will provide the principal with data that can be used to guide his/her leadership practices within the building.
Along with the previously mentioned recommendations, the urban alternative school must develop a more cohesive communication system, which could be facilitated through the implementation of a more stable leadership team. Flow of communication plays a large role in the culture of the school and the instructional staff stakeholders, as well as the two parents used in this study repeated many times that there has to be better communication from the leadership of the school. This communication fosters transparency and a true sense of collaboration among all stakeholder groups. Teachers and support staff must receive consistent communication from leadership in order to ensure that the work that is done by these two stakeholder groups is done with fidelity. The parents also agreed that there must be communication with them on more positive cases, instead of calling and insisting they report to the school to deal with disciplinary infractions. It is implied through the interaction with the parent participants that this type of communication would result in more reciprocal communication between external and internal stakeholder groups.

Once the school has determined more effective systems for consistent communication, there must be plans put in place to reform the process of soliciting parental involvement. Parental involvement should be more holistic and less punitive, as parents must be communicated with by the school stakeholders for more than disciplinary conferences. Parents should be made to feel that there is a sense of reciprocity in the school-home relationship and that they are helping the school and the school is in turn providing supports as well. They should be made to feel a part of the school and be made aware of the other, more beneficial ways that they can be involved in the school and the success of the students enrolled at the school.
As this school is a Title I school, it is even more essential for the school to garner more consistent and effective parent support. The importance of parental involvement is mentioned a great deal many components of the No Child Left Behind Act (2002), specifically in Section 1118, Title I, which focuses solely on parent involvement. More specifically, this section requires that schools and their governing bodies that benefit from federal Title I dollars have a comprehensive parent involvement program in writing and must be developed collaborative with internal and external stakeholder groups. This is definitely an area that this particular urban alternative school must build upon.

The school must implement a parental involvement process which consists of seven essential elements, such as written policies, administrative support, training, partnership, two-way communication, networking, and evaluation (Williams & Chavkin, 1989). Successful implementation of a parental involvement program of this nature must involve all stakeholder groups, be tailored to the needs of the school, and be consistently evaluated in order to maintain the program’s effectiveness. By implementing a parental involvement program that is aligned with these seven elements, the leadership team and staff of the school can aim to ensure that they have made proper attempts at reaching parents where they are.

Within this type of parental involvement program, there should be numerous methods of parental involvement that have proven to be advantageous to the process of student achievement. In many of these activities, such as home learning activities that support the educational program in the school, homework assistance to solidify student mastery, and conversations with students about their educational experiences, the parent should not need to enter the school building. These types of activities serve as
manifestation of the parent attitudes about achievement and academics. This type of well-rounded program will make students and parents more involved parties in the development of the school and eventual academic achievement (see Figure 16).

**Parent Academic Involvement**  
**Activities that were Useful in Student's Educational Development**

- Parent-teacher conferences  
- Open House events  
- Parent helping with homework  
- PTA meetings  
- Home learning activities

*Figure 16: Parental Involvement Activities Based on Joyce Epstein’s 2008 Research*

In order to address this recommendation, the school should employ a parent liaison that is charged with the task of soliciting parent support and providing the parents of the alternative school with information that they truly desire in order to keep them informed with everything that goes on within the alternative school. This could include weekly calling post messages notifying the parents of upcoming school programs, instructional support activities, and training classes that they can attend in order to better support the students, as well as monthly newsletters to the parents. By employing a
parent liaison, the bridge is made between home and school, making the connection more solid for both sides.

Support staff and instructional staff also reported lack of effective communication as an area of concern that affects their ability to work in the most effective manner. Rushed and ineffective communication breeds frustration and negativity in the alternative school environment and must be reformed in order to improve upon cultural processes within the school. In order to alleviate this concern, the school must develop a cohesive in-house communication plan. This may consist of a weekly newsletter from the principal, bi-weekly faculty meetings and bi-weekly small community meetings. This practice will strengthen the communication processes within the school, ensuring that all stakeholders are on the same page.

It is also a recommendation that the school system provide the urban alternative school with the autonomy and additional support that will provide the school with the necessary ability to change and grow when needed, which is to be expected by urban alternative schools that grow and change so much within a school year as a result of the transient population. This may consist of allowing alternative schools a different method of assessing student achievement or providing alternative schools with additional funding toward instructional support. Support, which may include evening classes, remediation courses during the day, or Saturday school, would serve as an additional tool to aid students in achieving the goals set forth by the governing body. By facilitating this type of autonomy and support for the alternative school, the frustration and other negative components that hinder student achievement in the urban alternative school will
eventually eradicate themselves and give way to a culture that is conducive to student success as manifested by student academic growth.

The school system should also engage in more research on the standards that govern alternative schools, as well as the origins of such schools, in order to determine assessment standards for the alternative schools used in this urban school system. Some at-risk students are experiencing high levels of success in the smaller alternative school environment that attempts to integrate learning and meaningful work. Most importantly, alternative schools focus on developing and transforming the whole person by demonstrating the importance of respect for individual intelligence and the ability to contribute to the community. As this is the goals of alternative education, school systems must determine engage in thorough research of alternative schools and determine alternative methods of assessing alternative schools.

In order to directly address the abovementioned "ebbing and flowing," it is a recommendation of this study to stabilize the leadership team, beginning with the principal, so that the school will possess a more structured and consistent set of goals and expectations for all stakeholders. As mentioned in the emergent themes of the study, the teachers interviewed and the focus group participants assert that the school possesses a lack of consistency attributed to multiple changes in leadership. In the four years that this urban alternative school has been in existence, there have been three principals and three different high school assistant principals, a statistic which has served as the antecedent of the school’s inconsistency.

Consistent leadership is a pivotal component that the students in this school need tremendously in order to facilitate academic excellence and there must be concrete and
consistent expectations put in place to ensure that educational leaders and the stakeholder
groups that they serve have all the needed supports in place to safeguard the achievement
of students in the urban alternative school. When there is a strong leadership team and
consistent expectations in place in the school, focus can be placed on facilitation of
reform and success in a school that has many of the right ingredients to grow the students
into the "lifelong leaders and learners" that it aims for in its school purpose statement.

University preparation programs have a responsibility in the success of alternative
schools by providing training and courses in leadership programs that are tailored to
leading alternative schools. Alternative schools have unique needs and components that
must be researched and studied by all educational leaders, as every leader has some role
to play in the process. This could consist of being the principal sending a student to
alternative school, the principal in the alternative school, or the principal receiving
students from the alternative school. School level leaders who are knowledgeable of the
processes and procedures that are unique to alternative schools are more knowledgeable
of leadership processes overall.

The state department of education must also work more collaboratively with the
local school system and urban alternative school to develop a proper and effective plan of
assessment for urban alternative schools that serve the students of their constituency.
This plan must include supports that are unique to the alternative school, as it has more
unique needs than that of the traditional school and varying manifestations of student
achievement. These genres of achievement, which may be both behavioral and
academic, must be tailored to the urban alternative school in order to get an accurate
measure of the quality of the work done in the school.
Summary

The qualitative study of the effect of the variables of parental involvement, teacher morale, and school culture on the definition and attainment of student achievement in an urban alternative school has probed the researcher to push for further research on the factors that affect urban alternative schools. This study has served as a catalyst, as opposed to the termination in the canon of academic literature on urban alternative schools. It has been determined by the researcher that there are various other components that contribute to the definition and attainment of student achievement in alternative schools, and as a result, more questions have developed as a result of the study, including the following:

- What causes parents to become disengaged from the educational process of students?
- What antecedents exist that make students abstain from the academic process?
- What steps can urban alternative schools make to reengage parents in a positive manner?
- What steps, if any, can be made to allow for more autonomy in urban alternative schools?
- What is the alternative that urban alternative schools offer, if they are held to the same criteria as that of traditional schools, where at-risk students have already shown difficulty?
- What specialized training, if any, should be available for educational leaders who lead urban alternative schools?
Further, more consistent study of urban alternative schools must occur in order to truly obtain a more wide-ranging view of the variables that attribute to achievement in these schools. Facility of such comprehensive studies will safeguard the quality educational process that is entitled to every student, as well as ensure that all of our students can have the opportunity and support needed to grow and bloom, regardless of when, where, and how they are planted.
APPENDIX A
Focus Group Root Questions and Script

Good afternoon. Thank you all again for agreeing to be a part of my study on parental involvement, teacher morale, and school culture. This focus group is going to be very casual. I will ask you various questions in order to initiate a conversation between you all and you will answer them as honestly as you can. These are simply root questions, as it is my hope that you will treat this like a simple conversation.

1. What do parents do that tell you they are involved in their children’s education?
2. What do teachers do to promote high levels of parent involvement in their children’s education?
3. What do administrators do to promote high levels of parent involvement in their children’s education?
4. What challenges do parents face as they try to become involved in their children’s education?
5. What challenges does the alternative school face in attempting to increase parent involvement in their children’s education?
6. What would be reasonable indicators for you and your school community, to measure any increase in parent involvement in your school?
7. What contributions, if any, do teachers with high morale make to the school culture?
8. How aware are parents in the school of the school’s desire to have them play a more active role in the culture?
Appendix A (continued)

9. If you could physically describe the culture of the school, how would you describe it?

10. To what extent does school culture directly affect student achievement in the urban alternative school?

11. How effective is the assessment process?

12. What process does the school use to communicate student achievement information to parents?

13. What should achievement look like in an urban alternative school like this one?

14. After the time that you have spent in education, how much do you still love and value what you do, using a scale of 1 to 10 with 1 being the least and 10 being the most?

Notes:

Additional Supporting Questions:
APPENDIX B

Research Approval Letter

Principal: ___________________

I am currently completing doctoral study at Clark Atlanta University, and I am preparing to begin data collection and analysis on my action research dissertation. This project is a requirement of the doctorate in Educational Leadership, and it is designed to help improve my practice as an educational leader, particularly in the alternative education environment. My research topic is a study of parental involvement, teacher morale, school culture and their interrelated impact on student achievement in an urban alternative school.

Since the research I'm proposing will involve surveys, interviews, a focus group, and document and classroom observations, I am seeking your approval to carry out this action research project.

In this study, surveys completed by teachers and paraprofessionals will be used to determine the levels of morale and school culture prevalent in the alternative school environment. The focus group will be utilized to determine the subjects' perception of presumed variables by the researcher on student achievement as seen in the alternative school. The data to be collected from the focus group and interviews will aim support and challenge the researcher's postulated factors. Qualitative data will be collected and also analyzed through the use of faculty and staff interviews, classroom and meeting observations, student achievement, and attendance and discipline documents.

I will include some quotes from the research in my written and oral research reports, which I will present to the to my dissertation committee and Educational Leadership faculty in September, 2013.

I will keep all the data I collect completely confidential, and I will not use our school’s name nor any participant’s names in any research reports. Any information that I present will not be linked to any personal information that could be used to identify individual participants. I am confident that I have taken the necessary steps to ensure that my research will be conducted in ways that meet ethical standards. I have included my proposal presentation, as well as a copy of my proposal and the consent letters that I wish to give to the participants.

Please sign below and return a copy of this letter to me indicating whether or not you give me permission to conduct this action research project.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

RESEARCHER NAME: NaTasha Michelle Woody

☐ I give permission to you to conduct the doctoral action research project described above.

☐ I do not give permission to you to conduct the doctoral action research project described above.

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<th>Typed name of Principal</th>
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<th>Signature of Principal</th>
<th>Date</th>
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APPENDIX C

Consent Form

Can Roses Grow From Concrete: A Case Study of Parental Involvement, Teacher Morale, School Culture, and Student Achievement in an Urban Alternative School

You are invited to participate in a research study of parental involvement, teacher morale, school culture and student achievement as seen in an urban alternative school. You were selected as a possible participant as a result of your affiliation as an active stakeholder in the alternative school environment.

I ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by: NaTasha M. Woody- Department of Educational Leadership, Clark Atlanta University.

Background Information:

The purpose of this study is to explain the relationship between parental involvement, teacher morale, and school culture, as well as how this relationship affects student achievement in an urban alternative school.

Procedures:

If you agree to be in this study, we would ask you to do the following things:

- Complete an initial survey
- Conduct two interviews
- Agree to be observed by the researcher a maximum of three times
- Engage in a focus group

Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:

The study has no risks. You will not be identified in any part of the study and all identifiable information will be destroyed upon completion of the study.
Appendix C (continued)

The benefits to participation are providing the field of education with a diverse and new view on the variables of parental involvement, teacher morale, and school culture.

Confidentiality:

The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report we might publish, we will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a participant. Research records will be kept in a locked file; only the researcher will have access to the records. All audio recording will be password locked with no one having access to the password outside of the researcher. Once the study is completed, the audio will be permanently erased.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with the researcher, or Clark Atlanta University. You, as a participant, have the freedom to withdraw at any time without affecting the relationships previously identified.

Contacts and Questions:

The researcher conducting this study is NaTasha M. Woody.

You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later about the research, you may contact the researcher at (404) 590-2496 or the advisor, Dr. Barbara Hill, as (404) 880-6128.

If you have any questions now, or later, related to the integrity of the research, (the rights of research subjects or research-related injuries, where applicable), you are encouraged to contact Dr. Georgianna Bolden at the Office of Sponsored Programs (404 880-6979) or Dr. Paul I. Musey, (404) 880-6829 at Clark Atlanta University.

You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.

Statement of Consent:

I have read the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

Signature ___________________________________ Date: _____________________________

Signature of Investigator _______________________________ Date: ___________________________
APPENDIX D

Woody Teacher Survey

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<th>Norm/Value</th>
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<td>The school community is driven by a commitment to make a positive difference in the lives of students and their community.</td>
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<td>The educators in the school have high expectations for the students.</td>
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<td>The role I play in the school is valued and appreciated.</td>
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<td>The role I play at the school makes me feel rewarded.</td>
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<td>The work that I do at the school increases my level of self-worth.</td>
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<td>There is a shared commitment in the school to examining practice with a focus on improving student achievement.</td>
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<td>The school has a culture that is conducive to the growth of my student(s).</td>
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<td>There is a culture present that facilitates student achievement.</td>
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<td>All staff in the school actively participate in the achievement and growth of all student(s).</td>
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<td>The culture of the school makes me want to be more involved in the academic and social program.</td>
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<td>It is absolutely essential for parents to visit the alternative school to address behavior concerns.</td>
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Appendix D (continued)

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<td>Parents play an active role in the growth of their student(s) who are enrolled at the alternative school.</td>
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<td>The school has a record of student achievement.</td>
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<td>The components that make up achievement in the school are apparent.</td>
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<td>Present levels of parental involvement facilitate achievement in the school</td>
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## APPENDIX E

### Teacher Survey Chart

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## Woody Support Staff Survey

1 = Strongly Agree  
4 = Disagree  
2 = Agree  
5 = Strongly Disagree  
3 = Neither Agree Nor Disagree

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<td>The school community is driven by a commitment to make a positive difference in the lives of students and their community.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>The educators in the school have high expectations for the students.</td>
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<tr>
<td>The role I play in the school is valued and appreciated.</td>
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<tr>
<td>The role I play at the school makes me feel rewarded.</td>
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<tr>
<td>The work that I do at the school increases my level of self-worth.</td>
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<td>There is a shared commitment in the school to examining practice with a focus on improving student achievement.</td>
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<td>The parents actively support the goals of the school.</td>
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<td>There is a culture present that facilitates student achievement.</td>
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<td>Staff in the school actively participate in the achievement and growth of my student(s).</td>
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<td>The culture of the school makes me want to be more involved in the academic and social program.</td>
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<td>It is absolutely essential for parents to visit the alternative school to address behavior concerns.</td>
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<td>Parents play an active role in the growth of their student(s) who are enrolled at the alternative school.</td>
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4 = Disagree  
5 = Strongly Disagree

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<td>The school has a record of student achievement.</td>
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<tr>
<td>The components that make up achievement in the school are apparent.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Present levels of parental involvement facilitate achievement in the school.</td>
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APPENDIX G

Support Staff Survey Chart

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APPENDIX H

Woody Parent Survey

1 = Strongly Agree  2 = Agree  3 = Neither Agree Nor Disagree
4 = Disagree      5 = Strongly Disagree

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<tr>
<td>The school community is driven by a commitment to make a positive difference in the lives of students and their community.</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>The educators in the school have high expectations for the students.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>The school makes me confident that my child(ren) is/are growing as a result of his/her/their enrollment at the school.</td>
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<tr>
<td>The staff makes me feel welcome at the school at all times.</td>
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<tr>
<td>The school makes me feel like a partner in the education of my child(ren).</td>
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<tr>
<td>I am totally involved in the education of my child(ren).</td>
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<tr>
<td>The school has a culture that is conducive to the growth of my child(ren).</td>
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<tr>
<td>The teachers in the school feel good about educating my child(ren).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Staff in the school actively participate in the education and growth of my child(ren).</td>
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<tr>
<td>The school makes me want to be more involved in the academic and social program.</td>
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<tr>
<td>It is absolutely essential to visit the alternative school to address behavior concerns.</td>
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<td>It is absolutely essential to visit the alternative school to assist in the educational program on a regular basis.</td>
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<tr>
<td>The school has a record of student achievement.</td>
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<tr>
<td>The components that make up achievement in the school are apparent.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Parental involvement facilitates achievement in the school.</td>
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APPENDIX I

Parent Survey Chart

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APPENDIX J

Woody Administrative Staff Survey

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</table>

1 = Strongly Agree  2 = Agree  3 = Neither Agree Nor Disagree  4 = Disagree  5 = Strongly Disagree

The school community is driven by a commitment to make a positive difference in the lives of students and their community.

The administrative team in the school have high expectations for the staff.

The role I play in the school is valued and appreciated.

The role I play at the school makes staff feel rewarded.

The administrative team in the school have high expectations for the students.

There is a shared commitment in the school to examining practice with a focus on improving student achievement.

The school has a culture that is conducive to the growth of the students.

There is a culture present that facilitates student achievement.

Staff in the school actively participate in the achievement and growth of the students.

Teachers feel valued and respected for their work.

It is absolutely essential for parents to visit the alternative school to address behavior concerns.

Parents play an active role in the growth of their student(s) who are enrolled at the alternative school.
Appendix J (continued)

1 = Strongly Agree  
4 = Disagree

2 = Agree  
5 = Strongly Disagree

3 = Neither Agree Nor Disagree

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The school has a record of student achievement.

The components that make up achievement in the school are apparent.

Present levels of parental involvement facilitate achievement in the school.
## APPENDIX K

**Administrator Survey Chart**

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APPENDIX L

Interview Protocol

Thank you for taking the time to speak with me today on the topic of parental involvement, teacher morale, school culture, and student achievement. This interview will probably take about 15-20 minutes to complete. As I mentioned previously, I am doing this interview to ascertain your perceptions on parental involvement, school culture and teacher morale as well as student achievement in the urban alternative school. The information from the interviews and focus group will be used in my doctoral dissertation. This interview will be used for academic purposes only and will be confidential, as I will not identify you by name in the dissertation, my professional development or in any conversations with others.

Name: 

Interviewer: 

Date: 

1. What is your profession/job title?

2. How many years and months have you performed in you present position?

_____years _____months
Appendix L (continued)

3. How many years of experience do you have with your school district?
   ________ years _______ months

4. What is an alternative school?

5. What does your school provide that makes it different from a traditional school?

6. What are the purposes and goals for your particular school and do you feel those goals are met? Why or why not?

7. How do you define parental involvement?

8. How is parental involvement manifested in your school?

9. In what manner does the perceived involvement affect the morale of instructional staff in the building?

10. If you could rate the levels of teacher morale in the building on a scale from 1-10, what score would you rate it and why?

11. How is morale manifested in your building?

12. How do you think teacher morale impacts student achievement in your alternative school environment?

13. Describe how well the staff works together and reasons why.

14. Describe how you feel when you walk into the building.

15. Describe how you feel when you walk out of the building.

16. Describe the culture in your building.

17. What factors contribute to the culture of your school and how?

18. What is your perception of the level of student achievement in your building?

19. What factors contribute to the aforementioned level of student achievement and how?

20. How is student achievement measured in your school?
Appendix L (continued)

21. Does your school define achievement for itself, or is it defined by an outside entity and do you perceive this to be an accurate reflection of student achievement in your school?

22. Describe what achievement looks like in your school.

23. What role do you think present levels of parental involvement in your school affect present levels of student achievement?

24. Describe whether or not your current school culture is conducive to higher levels of student achievement and how could it be.

25. What do you think student achievement should look like in your school?
APPENDIX M

Observation Note Sheet

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125
REFERENCES


