Holistic Analysis of The Social, Emotional, and Academic Development of at-Risk Students in A Self-Regulated Learning instructional Environment

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ABSTRACT

HOLISTIC ANALYSIS OF THE SOCIAL, EMOTIONAL, AND ACADEMIC DEVELOPMENT OF AT-RISK STUDENTS IN A SELF-REGULATED LEARNING INSTRUCTIONAL ENVIRONMENT

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The testing and accountability system that plagues the current educational atmosphere has done little to improve outcomes for the general population, rather, it has increased harm to our nation’s most vulnerable populations. As districts grapple with accountability mandates and pressures to improve test scores the number of students excluded from traditional schools and sent to alternative programs continues to grow. Research shows that the majority of programs for at-risk youth are little more than graduation factories that do not adequately prepare students for active participation in democratic society.

This study used a mixed methods design to explore an alternative program that uses a social justice orientation to education, implementing a whole child framework and self-regulated learning instructional practices. T-tests were used to assess the changes students experienced in their self-efficacy, behavior, grade point average and credits earned. Students’ rated their beliefs about the self-regulated learning strategies on a survey and the students’ perceptions of the program were discussed during interviews.

Results from this study demonstrate that students experienced significant changes in each of the four learning indicators assessed after only four months of attending the alternative program. The students attribute these changes to the SRL strategies, the programs ability to
flexibly respond to their needs and the relationships they developed with their teachers. The majority of the students agreed that the program promoted authentic learning, increased focus, responsibility, motivation and confidence.

The findings of this study contribute to the existing research on the whole child, confirming that when schools focus on holistic development, efficacy, behavior and achievement improve. Findings also contributes to the body of evidence on the positive effects of self-regulated learning strategies on confidence, behavior, motivation and achievement. As a result of this research it is recommended that schools incorporate a social justice orientation to education by holistically preparing students to be active participants in democratic society before they are excluded and pushed to alternative programs, and extensively when alternative programs are needed.
HOLISTIC ANALYSIS OF THE SOCIAL, EMOTIONAL, AND ACADEMIC
DEVELOPMENT OF AT-RISK STUDENTS IN A SELF-REGULATED
LEARNING INSTRUCTIONAL ENVIRONMENT

BY

JENNIFER MACEK
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A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
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DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

DEPARTMENT OF CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION

Doctoral Director:
Eui-kyung Shin
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Since its onset, public education in America has been hailed as the great social equalizer (Archibald, 2011; Mann, 1872; North, 2006; Williams, Rhodes & Dunson, 2007); however, many educational scholars agree that national educational policies are designed to maintain the status quo and fail to prepare all students for active participation in democratic society (Apple, 2006; Anyon & Green, 2007; Grant & Salinas, 2010). Every year thousands of students drop out of school or leave their educational setting unprepared for democratic participation (Buffum, Mattos, & Weber, 2012; Cohen, 2006; Franklin, Streeter, Kim, & Tripodi, 2007; Freeman & Simonsen, 2015; Glaeser, Ponzetto, & Shliefer, 2007; Lareau, 2011). Students who leave their educational setting unprepared are more likely to live in poverty, be dependent on the welfare system, or become incarcerated (Aron, 2006; Bethea & Robinson, 2007; Blout, 2012; Buffum, Mattos & Webber, 2012; Carver & Lewis, 2010; Nelson, Smith & Dobb, 1999; U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Educational Statistics, 2016). When students leave the educational setting without developing the skills and dispositions need to be productive citizens, the whole community suffers (Blout, 2012; Dewey, 2007; Roffey, 2015).

In an attempt to reduce dropout rates, many districts have developed alternative schools, which have become places for students who are at-risk of academic failure (Aron, 2003; Lehr, Moreau, Lange & Lanners, 2004; Powell, 2003; Washington-Cobb, 2012). The quality of the education provided in alternative schools is often inferior to the district’s corresponding
traditional schools, providing fewer resources, fewer highly qualified teachers, substandard curriculum, and lower graduation requirements (Aron, 2003; 2006; Carver & Lewis, 2010; Franklin, et al, 2007; Lange & Sletten, 1998; Lehr & Lange, 2003; Lehr, et al, 2004; Raywid, 2001). Additionally, alternative schools are regularly criticized for failing to provide students with rich educational experiences (Carver & Lewis, 2010; Freeman & Simonsen, 2105; Kim & Taylor, 2008; Kleiner, Porch, Farris, & Green, 2002). Overrepresentation of minority groups, students with disabilities and the poor characterize alternative schools (Aron, 2003; Carver & Lewis, 2010; Lehr & Lange, 2003); consequently, the inferior education they receive contributes to the continued disenfranchisement of these historically marginalized populations (Farrelly, 2013; Washington –Cobb, 2012).

Students labeled at-risk are sent to alternative schools for a variety of social, emotional and academic reasons; they often fall behind academically for medical reasons or due to adult responsibilities that make attending school difficult and create large gaps in their learning (Aron, 2006; Washington- Cobb, 2012). Other students are labeled at-risk for social reasons such as actively rejecting the curriculum or defying authority (Bethea & Robinson, 2007; Kohl, 1991; Morrissette, 2011; Noguera, 2003). Some have emotional issues that hinder their academic growth (Denny, Fleming, Clark, & Wall, 2004; Lehr & Lange, 2003; Pomeroy, 1999; Wery & Thomson, 2013).

Although many alternative schools have claimed success in developing social skills or strengthening efficacy and resilience (Aron, 2003; 2006; Denny, Fleming, Clark & Wall, 2004; Gilson, 2006; Morrissette, 2011; Pomeroy, 1999), without including intense academic interventions, these students are still leaving their educational setting unprepared (Aron, 2003; 2006; Franklin, et al, 2007; Lehr, et al, 2004). They need an education that is responsive to their
individual needs, and studies have found that at-risk students thrive when alternative schools focus on developing the whole child socially, emotionally, and academically (Aron, 2006; Morrissette, 2011; Powell, 2003; Wery & Thomson, 2013).

A holistic approach is one that prepares students to be active participants in democratic society by developing emotional competencies, morals aligned to prosocial behavior, and academic skills needed to think critically and problem solve effectively (Cohen, 2006; Diamond, 2010; Grant, 2012; Noddings, 2009; Roffey, 2015). Democratic society needs citizens with the emotional competency to act as agents on their own behalf and to advocate for others (Cohen, 2006; Gould, 2015; Hess, 2004). It needs citizens who make good choices, have sound character, are socially conscious, and collaborate to creatively solve the issue that effect everyone (Banks, 2003; Beane, 1997; Noddings, 2009). All students need to believe they belong to greater society and develop the social skills that support democracy (Archibald, 2011; Lovat, 2005; Noguera, 2003; Roffey, 2015). Measures of academic competencies need to go beyond the rote memory and basic application skills that standardized tests assess to ensure that students learn to analyze issues from multiple points of view and evaluate solutions effectively (Banks, 2008; Cohen, 2006; Ravitch, 2010). Democracy is more than a mode of government. In a larger sense, it is a means of associated living (Dewey, 2007). A whole child approach to education exists to help each individual discover his/her unique attributes to contribute to the whole of society.

One instructional strategy that uses the whole child approach with at-risk students involves teaching students to be self-regulated learners. Self-regulated learning (SRL) is “the degree to which students are metacognitively, motivationally, and behaviorally active participants in their own learning process” (Zimmerman, 2008, p. 167). According to Zimmerman (2002, 2008), a leading theorist and researcher on SRL, teaching students how to
self-regulate their learning can help them learn to self-advocate, develop prosocial conduct, think critically, and problem solve effectively. By teaching students how to set goals, select appropriate strategies, monitor their own performance, analyze feedback, and evaluate accomplishments, SRL can foster resilience, promote self-efficacy, enhance moral conduct, and facilitate academic achievement (Zimmerman & Schunk, 1994; 2001).

Alternative schools are needed since not all students flourish in a traditional setting. The public school system needs alternative programs that not only reduce dropout rates but also provide at-risk students with an education responsive to individual needs and prepare them to be active participants in democratic society (Freeman & Simonsen, 2015). This study sought to understand at-risk students’ growth in three areas of learning in the self-regulated learning instructional environment. It examined growth indicators that include social, emotional, and academic components and to explore students’ perceptions of their learning and the instructional practices they believe influenced their learning.

Problem Statement

The number of alternative schools has been steadily increasing as districts across the country search for ways to reduce dropout rates and meet accountability measures (Aron, 2006; Freeman & Simonsen, 2015; Gilson, 2006; Knesting, 2008). Although there are quality alternative schools, the vast majority are characterized as graduation factories designed to push students through school without educating them to the same standards as their peers (Aron, 2006; Carver & Lewis, 2010; Franklin, et al, 2007). Alternative schools are charged with the task of educating students the traditional system has failed and often excluded. To meet the goal of American education, which is to develop democratic citizens, alternative schools need to be able
to reengage students who have been excluded, teach them the skills needed to self-advocate, promote prosocial behavior, and close the gaps in their academic achievements (Aron, 2003; 2006; Farrelly, 2013; Lohmann, 2009; Lehr & Lange, 2003; Powell, 2003).

Research has identified multiple intervention strategies for at-risk students. Alternative schools need to foster resilience and self-efficacy (Aron, 2006; 2003; Lehr, et al, 2004; Wery & Thomson, 2013), respectful behavior and a sense of belonging (Bethea & Robinson, 2007; Denny, et al., 2004; Lapoint, Ellison, & Boykin, 2006; Morrissette, 2011333) and self-regulation (Aron, 2003; Cleary & Zimmerman, 2004; Pomeroy, 1999; Strahan, 2008) as well as focus on academic skills (Aron, 2006; Dupeyrat& Marine, 2005; Franklin et al, 2007; Lehr, et al, 2004, Powell, 2003). Although studies have indicated the importance of alternative schools implementing curriculum and instructional practices that develop the whole child to break the cycle of educational failure and the disenfranchisement that often results, there are few studies that investigate these interventions systematically (Freeman & Simonsen, 2015).

Purpose of the Research and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to explore the effects of SRL instructional practices in an alternative setting regarding at-risk students’ learning. This study examined growth in three areas of learning: self-efficacy, behavior, and grade point average. It also investigated the environment in which the learning occurred from the at-risk students’ perspectives.
Research Question

The following questions guided this study:

1. Is there a change in at-risk students’ generalized self-efficacy, conduct and academic achievement after attending a self-regulated learning program in an alternative setting for one semester?
   a. Is there a significant difference in students’ generalized self-efficacy after a semester in the alternative setting?
   b. Is there a significant difference in the number of conduct referrals they receive from the previous semester to their first semester in the alternative setting? To what extent do the referrals vary?
   c. Is there a significant difference in their academic achievement as measured by their GPA and number of credits earned from the previous semester to their first semester in the alternative setting?

2. How do at-risk students perceive the influence of self-regulated learning instructional practices their learning?
   a. To what extent do students believe self-regulated learning practices affected them emotionally?
   b. To what extent do students believe self-regulated learning practices affected them socially?
   c. To what extent do students believe self-regulated learning practices affected them academically?
The conceptual framework used to guide this study is based on the idea that learning is a social process and should be examined in the context in which it occurs (Bandura, 2001; Dewey, 2007; Reeves, 2002). The instructional environment affects learning and cannot be separated from the learning outcomes. Triadic reciprocal causation, a principle of social cognitive theory and the work of Bandura (1989; 1991; 2001), forms the foundation of the framework for this study by providing a model of learning (see Figure 1). The framework is further established through a social justice orientation to education and provides the purpose for what is being learned. The framework uses the core tenets of a social justice orientation to education and situates them within the triadic reciprocal causation model for learning. This alignment is explained in further detail in Chapter 2. In this section, the basic principles of triadic reciprocal causation are discussed, followed by the core tenets of the social justice orientation to education.

Figure 1. Triadic reciprocal causation
Triadic Reciprocal Causation

Learning does not happen in a vacuum and dependent on an individual’s ability to understand the feedback from the environment and the desire to respond. Triadic reciprocal causation is a whole child approach to learning that emphasizes the impact of the environment on what students learn and whether they participate in their learning (Bandura, 1989; Zimmerman, 2008). It explains learning as the result of the interaction among personal factors, behaviors and the environment (Bandura). The personal factors involved in triadic reciprocal causation include self-efficacy beliefs, moral beliefs and cognitive abilities, all mediated by the capacity to self-regulate. The environment refers to the curriculum and instruction practices in an educational setting, and behavior is the actions needed to demonstrate that learning has occurred.

Bandura (2001) explains that people are purposeful and mindfully act to achieve desired results. They behave in ways that make them feel good about themselves, whether it is to impress others or for their own self-satisfaction. Their behavior is based on personal factors and an accurate understanding of the environment (Bandura). When students’ moral beliefs are aligned with the environment, they feel a sense of belonging and are more likely to respond appropriately. Students’ conduct is seen as prosocial. Self-efficacy beliefs have a similar effect; if students believe they have little control over their outcomes, they are less likely to hold themselves accountable for their actions if they chose to act. Self-efficacy beliefs, or a person’s belief in his or her ability to competently complete a task, is the foundation of personal agency and is a prominent component to motivation (Gould, 2015). In addition, students need to have the knowledge and the skills to perform a task. When they are academically prepared, they are more likely to respond appropriately and effectively. The instructional environment needs to
prepare students by fostering a sense of belonging and upholding the social contract (Noguera, 2003). Curriculum and instruction need to be inclusive and responsive to all diverse learners (Cochran-Smith, Shakman, Barnatt & McQuillan, 2009). Academic performance will improve when students are provided with explicit feedback that attributes success and failure to controllable factors (Hattie & Timberly, 2003).

Failure is an important function of learning (Dweck, 200; 2008). Rarely are skills mastered on the first attempt. People need to learn how to self-regulate their behavior by learning how to interpret the feedback they receive from the environment, monitor their progress, and make necessary adjustments (Bandura, 1991). Zimmerman (2002, 2008) posits that self-regulation is a mitigating factor in learning. He proposes self-regulated learning (SRL), a systematic approach to teaching based on triadic reciprocal causation. SRL proposes that creating an instructional environment focused on teaching students how to self-regulate results in higher self-efficacy, better prosocial behavior and improved academic performance. Zimmerman explains that learning is a cyclical process in that people set goals and plan their course of action, monitor their performance, and evaluate the outcome. Their evaluations determine their next goals and plans for achieving them. As students become better at interpreting the feedback they receive, they can monitor their progress more accurately and make the adjustments necessary to achieve the goals they set. This behavior requires educators to provide students with the opportunities to set goals, monitor progress, and evaluate their outcomes.
Social Justice Orientation to Education

Learning alone is not enough. Learning has served every purpose throughout history, and according to Banks (2003), if it is to serve democracy, it must do so directly. A social justice orientation to education is rooted in the moral and ethical values of democracy. It embodies a strong commitment to improving the life chances of all students by ensuring that all students have rich learning experiences, by challenging the aspects of the system that reinforce inequality, and by preparing all students for participation in democratic society (Cochran-Smith et al, 2009). Advocates for a social justice orientation such as Apple (2006), Anyon (2014), Burch (2014), Giroux (2010), Freire (2000), Ladson-Billings and Tate (2006), and Nussbaum (2010) proclaim that educational policies need to further the evolution of democratic society by creating an environment responsive to all students that develops democratic dispositions and equally prepares all students for active participation in democratic society. Similar to triadic reciprocal causation, a social justice orientation to education emphasizes the importance of the environment on learning and developing the whole child. Whether education is needed to promote well-being (Diamond, 2010), flourishing lives (Grant, 2012), the inner self (Miller, 1996), or happiness (Noddings, 2003), scholars agree that schools need to develop the whole child in an environment that fosters the development of democratic dispositions.

For democracy to reach its fullest potential, there are several things that citizens need to know and be able to do (Parker, 2008). Students need to develop dispositions associated with citizenship in a democratic society. This includes knowing the values and morals associated with democracy, such as respect for diversity and responsibility for advocating for the rights for all people (Lovat, Toomey, Dally & Clement, 2010). Students need to learn that diversity provides
multiple opportunities for creativity and innovation (Banks, 2003; 2008; Cochran-Smith et al, 2009). Although some may argue that diversity creates controversy, Hess (2004) explains that controversy is not an unfortunate byproduct of democracy, but one of its core and vital elements. Instead of trying to program students to think unidirectionally, schools need to make sure they invite dissent, look at problems from multiple points of view, and teach students how to solve their problems productively. Dewey (2004) argues that individualism destroys individuality; the purpose of education is to develop individual talents and interests to serve greater society not individual self-interests. The educational environment needs to promote belonging for all of its diverse learners and foster associated living.

Educational scholars agree that the current environment is designed to maintain the status quo and contributes to cycles of inequity and disenfranchisement (Apple, 1980; 2006; Anyon, 1980; 2014; Giroux & Freire, 2004; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2006). Stopping this cycle not only requires the development of democratic values, it also requires teaching students how to advocate for the rights of all people through the development of personal agency (Gould, 2015) and by teaching critical thinking and problem-solving skills. According to Bandura (2001), personal agency results from having the self-efficacy and self-regulation skills needed to act. The current testing and accountability system that permeates the educational environment focuses on developing academics in isolation, providing a fragmented view of learning, and promoting self-interests. When a school’s progress is based on standardized test score results, it provides only a single measure of student learning at a single point in time; it does not consider the context in which the learning occurs and ignores other important antecedents for learning (Reeves, 2002). Schools often respond by narrowing the curriculum to skill and drill methods designed to improve standardized test scores but fail to respond to students’ individual social,
emotional and academic needs. Instead educational success should measure growth over time and assess multiple factors that contribute to learning.

A social justice orientation to education requires a whole child approach to learning. A whole child approach is one that develops students socially, emotionally, and academically (Cohen, 2006). It understands the complexity of the human brain and the motivational factors that influence learning (Diamond, 2010). Gould (2015) emphasizes the importance of emotional competency by explaining that knowing how to behave democratically can only be put into action when people have the efficacy to act. Advocates agree that students need to learn social skills aligned to the morals and values associated with living in democratic society (Lovat, et al, 2010; Parker, 2008; Roffey, 2015; Rooney, Videto, Birch, 2015). Others also contend that academics should be assessed by looking at growth over time rather than through standardized test scores at one point in time (Hattie, 2003; Reeves, 2002). Academic achievement should include critical thinking and problem solving skills (Banks, 2003; Grant, 2012; Neumann, 2008). Grade point averages are better indicators of post-secondary success than standardized tests (Diamond, 2010), especially when it when the instructional environment is also evaluated (Reeves, 2002).

Significance

As the number of alternative schools for at-risk students continues to grow throughout the nation, it becomes increasingly important to identify practices that prepare students for democratic society. Freeman and Simonsen’s (2015) systematic review of the literature on dropout prevention concludes that there is a gap in the research. Much is known about risk factors for dropping out and the recommended interventions, yet dropout prevention programs
have not been adequately studied. Additionally, dropout prevention alone is not enough. Research on programs that prepare students socially, emotionally and academically is needed (Aron, 2003; Franklin et al, 2007). There is a great deal of research on students at-risk and alternative schools. These studies often focus on emotional development and social behaviors; however, they rarely include academic achievement, leaving many to question whether these students are leaving their educational settings prepared (Aron, 2003; 2006; Freeman & Simonsen, 2015; Kim & Taylor, 2008; Lehr, et al, 2004; Morrissette, 2011). On the other hand, studies regarding excellence in education rarely focus on anything other than academics, dismissing the importance of social and emotional development (Cohen, 2006; Reeves, 2002).

The current study can contribute to the research by examining an intervention and how it affected students socially, emotionally and academically.

Zimmerman (2002) contends that teaching students how to self-regulate reaches the whole child and has the potential for ending cycles of academic failure. There is a plethora of research on SRL. There are studies investigating the effects of SRL practices on students’ behavior, self-efficacy, self-regulation or academic attainment, yet these studies are usually limited to one area of growth. The majority of the studies on SRL are limited to a classroom procedure, one instructional method, a single student or a single classroom. Research that encompasses a school wide SRL program does not exist (Nilsen, 2013). The current study investigated an alternative school that uses self-regulated learning as the framework for instruction school wide. The study examined the changes in three growth indicators after students experienced one semester in a self-regulated learning environment. It also investigated students’ perceptions of self-regulated learning strategies to provide both an overview and an in-depth view of these strategies. This study adds to the literature on self-regulated learning by
investigating a whole school program that uses self-regulated learning as its instructional model. It also provided student voice, giving students at-risk the opportunity to reflect on their learning and contribute to the research on students at-risk and self-regulated learning.

Reeves (2002) recommends using a mixed methods approach so student growth is aligned with the antecedents associated with that growth. Gilson (2006), Pomeroy (1999), and Washington-Cobb (2012) recommend that student voice should be included in research, especially when working with marginalized groups. The current study explored at-risk students’ growth in three areas aligned to the development of democratic citizenship. It also included student voice to better understand the antecedents associated with their growth. This study examined changes in students’ grade point average, behavior referrals, and self-efficacy after a semester of attendance in an alternative school program. It specifically examined changes in self-efficacy, behavior measured by conduct referrals, attendance, and grade point average. It also investigated students’ perceptions of the instructional practices that influenced these changes and whether the students believed they were being prepared socially, emotionally and academically.

Methodology

The method chosen for this study was a pragmatic explanatory mixed-method design (Creswell, 2015) because of its ability to statistically analyze student growth indicators as well as provide rich details about the environment in which the growth occurred. It was also chosen for its ability to provide a voice to marginalized populations, which is needed to help understand their unique perspectives (Aron, 2006). It is sequential; the quantitative data were analyzed and then a nested sample was selected for qualitative interviews. A pragmatic approach was used to ensure that enough data were collected to thoroughly answer the research questions.
This study used a variety of instruments to embody the pragmatic approach to research. The pragmatic approach is less concerned about the methodology and more concerned with answering the research questions thoroughly and without constraints; it is often used when working with marginalized groups (Mertens, 2014). Quantitative instruments included a records review, specifically conduct referrals and grade point averages, and a self-efficacy scale to examine the changes in conduct, grade point average, and self-efficacy. Behavior was assessed by reviewing the students’ conduct referrals from the previous semester and again after they attended the alternative school for one semester. The analysis included the number of referrals as well as the level of the infraction on the referral. Grade point average included the last semester at the traditional school and the first semester at the alternative school using a four-point scale. Efficacy was assessed using a self-reported efficacy scale. Students completed the scale when they began at the alternative school and again after one semester. A repeat measure t-test was used to assess individual changes as well as overall changes for the population being studied, and the effect size was computed to measure the strength of the intervention (Gravetter & Wallnau, 2011).

A survey was used to gather quantitative and qualitative data concurrently. The survey’s quantitative data were analyzed through descriptive statistics to provide a broad picture of the students’ perspectives of the instructional environment. The qualitative data were analyzed to identify patterns and common themes in the students’ responses. The population included in the quantitative data was limited to the students who had only been in attendance for one semester and who had attended one of the district’s traditional high schools the previous semester. All students new to the program were invited; 38 participated.
The qualitative data explored how individuals interpret the changes identified in the quantitative data and the processes associated with the outcomes (Creswell, 2009). Interviews were conducted with 10 of the students, who were purposefully selected from the quantitative group: five with the greatest changes and five with the fewest changes. They were purposefully selected to identify practices that would yield the highest results and the lowest results and were compared across student characteristics. Interviews were transcribed by the researcher to maximize familiarity with the subjects and to begin the analysis process. Data were analyzed by first grouping the responses and then systematically coding them to identify patterns across and within groups. A full description of the methodology is discussed in Chapter 3.

Delimitations

Several parameters were chosen for this study. It was limited to one alternative school to provide an in-depth analysis of at-risk alternative high school students’ growth and perspectives. It was confined to one alternative school to study the instructional practices of a single environment and how that environment contributed to changes in learning.

A mixed methods approach was chosen to minimize the limits of a single methodology. The quantitative data were limited to students who had attended the alternative school for one semester and had attended their traditional school the previous semester. The population did not include the school’s entire student body. This population was chosen to analyze the effects of the environment by controlling for the amount of time exposed to the alternative environment. The qualitative data included interviews of 10 purposefully selected students for a nested sample of the population included in the quantitative section. These students were selected from those with the greatest changes and those with the fewest changes to identify specific practices that generate
the greatest results as well as to understand the unique characteristics and needs of individual students. The multi-tiered system of analysis, the mixed methods design, and the selection of the school as representative of a typical case were selected to balance the delimitations of a single school study.

This study explored the outcomes associated with whole child development; however, it did not assess all aspects of whole child development nor did it compare students across settings. Whole child development is multifaceted and beyond the personal factors identified in this study. A repeat measure pre and posttest design was selected to assess the effect size of the self-regulated learning program on three student growth indicators, self-efficacy, behavior, and grade point average. These growth factors were selected based on the conceptual framework: triadic reciprocal causation and a social justice orientation to education.

Definitions

**Alternative setting** refers to the schools or programs that serve at-risk students outside of a district’s traditional high schools (Carver & Lewis, 2010).

**At-risk students** are those who are at-risk of educational failure due to lack of progress. By high school, this refers to students who are behind on credits and require interventions to graduate (Franklin, et al, 2007).

**Behavior** is the conduct exhibited by individuals that are predicated by moral beliefs and influenced by a person’s self-efficacy beliefs and environmental expectations (Bandura, 2001).

**Educational environment** is the curriculum and instructional practices along with the policies and procedures that provide the context for learning (Bandura, 1990).
Personal factors in triadic reciprocal causation include self-efficacy beliefs, moral beliefs, self-regulation capabilities, and biological abilities (Bandura, 1989).

Self-efficacy is a person’s belief in his/her ability to interact with their environment (Bandura, 1989).

Self-regulated learning is the ability to actively participate in one’s own learning: metacognitively, motivationally, and behaviorally (Zimmerman, 2008).

Self-regulation is the ability to pay attention to personal factors and the environment and act accordingly; it consists of self-observations, self-judgments, and self-reactions (Bandura, 1991).

Social justice orientation to education is an educational paradigm whose purpose is to facilitate the development of critically reflective democratic citizens (Neumann, 2008).

Triadic reciprocal causation is a social learning theory that explains that learning is the result of the interaction among personal factors, behavior, and the environment (Bandura, 1989).

Organization of the Study

This study includes five chapters. Chapter 1 presents the introduction and rationalization for the study. It also includes a statement of the problem, the research questions, definitions of key terms, and the study’s significance. Chapter 2 provides a review of the literature related to at-risk students, current dilemmas in alternative education, the whole child approach and self-regulated learning. Chapter 3 focuses on the methods, approaches, and mechanics used for this study. Chapter 4 provides the results of the research. Chapter 5 is a discussion and analysis of the findings, possible conclusions, and suggestions for further research.
Alternative programs are not new to education; however, the number of alternative schools and the focus of these programs have drastically changed over the past three decades (Aron, 2006; Carver & Lewis, 2010). Alternative schools have shifted from serving students with special talents and using specialized methods of instruction, to schools serving disadvantaged at-risk and marginalized populations and attempting to prevent students from dropping out (Aron, 2003; Gilson, 2006; Powell, 2003; Washington-Cobb, 2012). Aron (2003) and Gilson (2006) attribute this shift to the publication of *A Nation at Risk* (Gardiner, 1983) and the development of the current testing and accountability system. They argue that the non-college bound and academically challenged students have suffered from reliance on standardized testing to measure success. The students who do not make adequate progress under the current accountability system are often labeled deviant or at-risk instead of giving them an education that is relevant to their individual needs (Apple, 2014; Giroux, 1984; 2003). These students are ushered into alternative schools in attempt to meet accountability criteria (Aron, 2003).

Many educational scholars agree that the current testing and accountability system perpetuates and even worsens inequality, undermining the democratic principles public schools are intended to develop (Anyon, 2014; Banks, 2003; Grant, 2012; Neumann, 2008; Noddings, 2009; Nussbaum, 2010). Evaluating the success and failure of a school based on standardized test scores provides a fragmented view of achievement, fails to consider the context in which the
learning takes place and ignores the importance of social and emotional learning on the
development of good citizens (Cohen, 2006; Grant & Salinas, 2010; Reeves, 2002). It
contributes to an educational culture that values the academic skills necessary to do well on tests,
such as rote memory and basic application (Grant & Salinas, 2010; Ravitch, 2010). Furthermore,
it does little to teach students how to think critically, solve problems creatively, or work together,
and those who are not successful are often excluded (Apple, 2014; Giroux, 2003; 2010; Noguera,
2003). In contrast, educational researchers, psychologists and social justice advocates agree that
students learn best when the whole child is engaged (Bandura, 1989; Diamond & Lee, 2011;
Grant, 2012; Miller, 1996; Noddings, 2009; Zimmerman, 2002).

Research supports that whole child programs that focus on developing democratic values
result in improved prosocial conduct, emotional competence, and academic achievement (Arthur,
Kristjansson, Walker, Sanderse, & Jones, 2015; Cochran- Smith, et al., 2009; Diamond & Lee,
2011; Easton, 1997; Lovat, et al., 2010; Roffey, 2015; Rooney, et al, 2015). Several studies have
found that at-risk students benefit from programs focusing on social and emotional development
(Aron, 2003; 2006; Denny, et al., 2004; Farrelly, 2013; Morrissette, 2011; Pomeroy, 1999;
Powell, 2003). The research on at-risk students is extensive and several interventions have been
identified by experts; however, these studies stop at identifying the interventions. Few empirical
studies have systematically tested whether the interventions are working (Freeman & Simonsen,
2015). Multiple studies by Graham and colleagues (1996; 1998; 2001; 2003; 2005), Strahan and
colleagues (2005; 2006; 2008), and Zimmerman and colleagues (1990; 1992; 1994; 2002; 2004;
2009; 2010) support the use of self-regulated learning to develop at-risk students socially,
emotionally, and academically. However, these studies are often fragmented – limiting evidence
to one characteristic, one methodology or a single classroom or student (Nilson, 2013). There is
limited research that examines multiple components of whole child development using a mixed method design that gives voice to at-risk students and explores the alternative setting in which the learning occurred.

This study sought to understand the needs of at-risk students and the instructional practices that influence the development of the whole child. This literature review established the conceptual framework used to guide and inform this study: triadic reciprocal causation model of learning and a social justice orientation to education. This review also examines the existing research on at-risk students, the whole child approach to education, and self-regulated learning instructional practices. It concludes by synthesizing the findings within the three bodies of research as they align to the conceptual framework.

Conceptual Framework

The purpose of this study was to explore the changes in learning that at-risk students exhibit after attending a self-regulated learning program in an alternative setting. This study examined changes in three learning indicators: conduct, self-efficacy and grade point average. It also investigated students’ perceptions of the instructional environment that influenced their learning outcomes. The framework used to guide this study is based on a social justice orientation to education situated in the triadic reciprocal causation model of learning (see Figure 2). Triadic reciprocal causation describes learning as the result of the interaction between an individual’s personal factors, the environment in which the learning occurs, and behavior (Bandura, 1989). A social justice orientation to education explains that the purpose of education is to develop all students to become active participants in democratic society (Ladson- Billings & Tate, 2006).
By aligning the triadic reciprocal causation model of learning to the core tenets of a social justice orientation to education, three main principles emerged to guide this study. The first is that learning is not solely an academic pursuit. There are several personal factors that work together to determine what and how an individual learns. A whole child approach is needed. Second, learning does not happen in a vacuum. People learn from what they hear, see, do and experience and from what is actively taught and passively transmitted. If the purpose of education is to develop democratic citizens, the instructional environment needs to align to that purpose. Self-regulated learning is a systematic approach to developing the dispositions associated with democratic citizenship. The third principle is that learning is not the same thing as demonstrating learning and cannot be captured by a single test or at a single moment in time. Students demonstrate what they have learned through multiple behaviors. To capture what is learned, growth needs to be measured through multiple modes and analyzed in the context in which it is learned.
The goal of education is to produce citizens who are capable of thinking critically as well as employing strategic and collaborative problem solving, adapting to the constantly changing world, and feeling empathy and compassion for others (Archibald, 2011; Diamond & Lee, 2011; Noddings, 2009; Roffey, 2015). The history of public education policy shows that public schools were created to develop democratic citizens through holistic treatment (Liew, 2012; Noddings, 2009). Brain based research and psychological models of learning agree that efficient and effective learning occurs when the whole child is engaged. When students believe they are capable of learning, when their goals are aligned to their environmental expectations, and when they believe they belong, they will engage in their learning tasks and produce greater academic results (Boniwell, Osin, & Martinez; 2015; Diamond, 2010; Lovat, 2005; Roffey, 2015). A whole child approach supports the social, emotional, and academic development of all students and flexibly responds to individual needs (Archibald, 2011; Grant, 2012; Noddings, 2003; 2009). The personal factors in the triadic reciprocal causation model for learning are aligned to a whole child approach. These factors include the moral beliefs, the foundation for prosocial conduct; self-efficacy, the emotional component to learning; and cognitive abilities, the capacity to self-regulate and achieve academically (Bandura, 1989, 2001).

According to Bandura (2001), prosocial behavior is characterized by cooperativeness, helpfulness, and a vested interest in each other’s well-being. Moral beliefs are the foundation for prosocial behavior; they influence the goals people chose and determine how people behave. If a person’s morals are aligned to those of the environment, they behave accordingly; however, if their morals conflict with the expectations of the environment or they believe they are being
manipulated or disrespected, they may respond apathetically, oppositionally, or hostilely (Noguera, 2003). Morals aligned to democracy need to be directly taught. This includes building a sense of community in which honesty, integrity, justice, respect and responsibility are valued and actively sought (Apple, 2006; Banks, 2003; Giroux, 2010; Grant, 2012; Hackman, 2005; Westheimer & Kahne, 2002).

It is imperative to induce beliefs in personal agency to promote prosocial conduct (Bandura, 2001). Self-efficacy beliefs are the foundation for the personal agency and resilience needed in democracy (Gould, 2015). Self-efficacy beliefs are an individual’s beliefs in her/his ability to “exercise control over their own level of functioning and over events that affect their lives” (Bandura, 1991, p. 257). People do things that bring them satisfaction, pride, and self-worth; they refrain from doing things that make them feel incompetent or are not satisfying. Self-efficacy influences what activities to engage in, how much effort to expend, how long to persevere in the face of obstacles, and whether failures are motivating or demoralizing (Bandura, 2001). People who have high efficacy beliefs tend to be more resilient, have higher career ambitions, exhibit prosocial behaviors, and are able to self-advocate (Bandura, 2001; Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 2001; Caprara, Fida, Vecchione, Del Bove, Vecchio, Barbaranelli, Bandura, 2008; Gould, 2015). A lack of self-efficacy can have detrimental effects on students. Students who lack belief in their ability to overcome environmental factors may suffer from feelings of self-doubt and anxiety, which can result in avoidance behavior, depression, phobias, and even issues with the immune system (Bandura, 2001). Efficacy beliefs differ from self-esteem in that efficacy beliefs vary from task to task and environment to environment.
Behavior is also contingent on the cognitive ability to accurately understand environmental expectations and the capacity to self-regulate accordingly. To self-regulate effectively, students need to be able to make accurate self-observations, make good judgments, and adjust self-reactions (Bandura, 1989; 1991). Self-observations include the ability to set realistic goals and evaluate progress accurately. Good judgments are developed through personal moral beliefs and social comparisons. They include validation of the activity and whether their performance was intrinsically or extrinsically motivated. Self-reaction requires the individual to evaluate the experience and determine whether it was a positive or negative experience and whether the rewards or consequences were worth the effort. Students need to develop the capacity to self-regulate, to think critically, to problem solve, and to construct new knowledge as well as to demonstrate that learning has occurred (Bandura, 2001; Hess, 2004; Zimmerman, 2008).

**Instructional Environment and Self-Regulated Learning**

The current system of accountability relies heavily on standardized tests designed to assess rote memory skills and simple computations, and it fails to measure student growth on holistic terms. Prepackaged curriculum, instructional practices of sit and get, and inequalities that widen the achievement gap result. Instead of focusing on one-dimensional proficiency measures, schools need to be teaching students how to learn, how to adapt to the constant changes in information, and how to contribute to an ever changing world. Educators recognize that students are not passive recipients of information; they need to actively contribute to their learning goals and exercise control over their attainment of these goals by learning how to self-regulate (Hess, 2004; Noddings, 2009; Ravitch, 2010; Zimmerman, 2008). Zimmerman and Schunk (1989)
propose a theory of self-regulated learning (SRL) based on triadic reciprocal causation and designed to enhance motivation, metacognition, and behavior to promote multiple factors that contribute to life-long learning. Self-regulated learning is a systematic approach to instruction and is “the degree to which students are metacognitively, motivationally, and behaviorally active participants in their own learning process” (Zimmerman, 2008, p. 167).

Self-regulated learning divides teaching and learning into three stages: forethought, performance, and evaluation – each affecting the next in a cyclical loop (see Figure 3). In the forethought stage, teachers and students collaborate to set goals and select strategies. It is the teacher’s job to empower the students and help them create a plan for learning. Next, students implement their strategies and monitor their progress in the performance stage. The third stage is the evaluation stage. This stage requires students to evaluate their achievement based on their own standards for success, the feedback they received and the expectations placed on them. This cycle determines whether students will be able to internalize the learning and demonstrate it as required and will influence the next set of goals and strategies selected.

![Figure 3. Self-regulated learning cyclical loop. (Zimmerman, 2008)]
According to Zimmerman (2002, 2008), there are several instructional practices aligned to self-regulated learning. In the forethought stage this includes goal setting and collaborative planning what will be learned and how it will be learned. It promotes prosocial behavior and self-efficacy by providing students with choices and giving them a sense of control over their education. In the performance stage, students monitor their own progress toward their learning. This teaches them to observe and interpret feedback from the environment, while learning is in process so they can make adjustments when necessary. In the evaluation stage students are expected to assess their learning by examining feedback from a variety of sources, including a self-evaluation. Since learning is considered a cyclical process, self-regulated learning requires that students be afforded the opportunity to learn from their mistakes. Research on self-regulated learning indicates that teaching students through self-regulated learning practices leads to improved prosocial conduct, self-efficacy and overall academic achievement. Educators who have implemented self-regulated learning strategies have found them to be effective with at-risk students as well as the general population.

Behavior and Demonstrating Learning

Learning and demonstrating learning are not synonymous (Zimmerman, 2008). It is difficult to accurately assess what students have learned when they are not fully engaged in the processes necessary to demonstrate their learning. It is also difficult to assess learning through a single measure at a single moment in time. The purpose of an accountability system is to ensure that students are learning and that schools are providing students with the skills needed for future success. If schools are going to be evaluated for effective instruction, then the evaluation needs to reflect the purpose of education, include multiple factors of learning, and assess the influence
of the curriculum and instruction on student learning to identify methods that reach all students, collectively and individually.

The current testing and accountability practices for measuring student achievement provide a fragmented view of learning and ignore the context in which learning occurs (Reeves, 2002). Standardized test scores fail to assess growth, providing only a snapshot of what a student has learned at that moment in time (Grant & Salinas, 2010), are less indicative of future success than grade point average (Diamond, 2010), and lack the connection to instruction that growth measures are able to do (Hattie, 2003; 2008; Reeves, 2002). Standardized tests have a limited capacity for measuring students’ critical thinking skills, creativity, or problem solving abilities (Grant & Salinas, 2010; Ravitch, 2010). Furthermore, the current environment promotes a narrow curriculum by valuing tests that only measure basic application skills and rote memory and fails to respond to diverse needs (Apple, 2014; Anyon, 2006; Grant, 2012). This encourages schools to implement prepackaged skill and drill curricula and forces students to learn someone else’s view of the world, undermining belonging (Giroux, 2010; Noguera, 2003; Ravitch, 2010). In addition, it ignores the importance of social and emotional learning on the development of good citizens (Cohen, 2006; Noddings, 2009). Instead student learning should be measured by growth, analyzed in the context in which it occurs, and include indicators that support whole child development (Dewey, 2007; Grant, 2012; Reeves, 2002).

There are three components that need to be considered when evaluating teaching and learning. First, the measures need to align to the purpose. The purpose of public education is to develop good citizens, which includes social, emotional, and academic factors (Cohen, 2006; Diamond & Lee, 2011; Grant, 2012; Noddings, 2009). Second, to accurately assess the impact of the instructional environment on learning, a pre and posttest model is needed (Hattie, 2003).
Third, the instructional environment, including the curriculum and instructional practices needs to investigated to identify the practices that have the most effects on learning (Dewey, 2004; Hattie, 2003; Reeves, 2002). This study assessed multiple factors of learning, investigated the learning environment, and provided students with the opportunity to discuss practices that influenced their learning and their ability to demonstrate their learning.

Alternative Education and At-Risk Students

Although the number of alternative schools for at-risk students is growing, they are often considered inferior to their traditional counterparts (Aron, 2003; Carver & Lewis, 2010; Lehr, et al., 2004). Alternative schools are often underfunded, rarely hold students to the same standards as their general education peers, and do not adequately prepare the teachers (Caver & Lewis, 2010; Franklin et al, 2007; Gilson, 2006; Lehr & Lange, 2003). Seventy-five percent of the school districts in the United States have alternative education opportunities, and one third of these districts report they lack the funding needed to meet the needs of this growing population (Carver & Lewis, 2010). Carver and Lewis found that only 17% of the districts that have alternative opportunities hold students to the same academic standards. Carver and Lewis also report that few districts require additional training for teachers in alternative programs, and fewer than half have specific professional development for at-risk youth, despite findings by Griffith and Gill (2006) and Lehr and Lange (2003) to support the overwhelming need for professional development specific to supporting the needs of at-risk students. One reason to neglect this training, according to Aron (2003), is the financial burden of training staff. Gilson (2006) agrees that alternative programs are often considered a financial burden on districts and are often
charged with simply getting students through school, without adequately preparing them for independent adult living.

Alternative programs have a significantly disproportionate number of minority students and students from poverty; when these students who are historically disenfranchised and currently at-risk of educational failure are sent to substandard programs, they are more likely to continue the cycle of poverty and dependent living (Amos, 2008; Aron, 2006; Blout, 2012; Farrelly, 2013; Washington-Cobb, 2012). When schools fail to respond to students’ individual needs and inadequately prepare them for democratic society, they are more likely to be less healthy, die younger, be dependent on social welfare programs, and/or be incarcerated (Amos, 2010; Chapman, Laird, & Kewal-Ramani, 2010; Franklin & Simonsen, 2015). According to a report by Western and Pettit (2010) the incarceration rate for African-American males who drop out of school was 37% in 2008 and less than 45% were employed. When students leave their educational setting unprepared for democratic society, the entire society suffers (Freire, 2000; Roffey, 2015; Rooney, et al., 2015).

Understanding the population served in alternative education is imperative to understanding their needs and to developing programs that prepare them for democratic society. In a report to the U.S. Department of Education, based on data collected from surveying 1,698 school districts, Carver and Lewis (2010) found that students who attend alternative programs are typically at-risk of educational failure and potentially dropping out of school for a variety of social, emotional, and academic reasons. When adolescent students are confronted with adult responsibilities such as pregnancy, the need to contribute financially to their homes, or dysfunctional home life including transience, single parent families, and living in poverty, they become more likely to drop out of school (Aron, 2006; Blout, 2012; Farrelly, 2013; Gilson,
ADHD, conduct disorders, lacking connectedness, and emotional dysfunction contribute to becoming at-risk (Freeman & Simonsen, 2015; Gilson, 2006; Lange & Sletten, 1998; Powell, 2003). Chronic illness and drug abuse often cause students to fall behind academically (Aron, 2006; 2003; Carver & Lewis, 2010; Gilson, 2006; Powell, 2003). Students who have poor attendance, experience previous failures, or who have cognitive delays that hinder academic achievement are often placed in alternative programs for at-risk students (Lehr & Lange, 2003; Wery & Thomson, 2013; Washington-Cobb, 2012). Students who come from poverty and minority groups are disproportionately represented at alternative schools for at-risk students (Aron, 2003; Franklin, et al, 2007; Freeman & Simonsen, 2015).

There are several practices identified in the research that alternative schools can adapt to help at-risk students find educational success. At-risk students need an environment that responds to individual needs. This includes providing an inclusive environment that fosters belonging and positive relationships, uses a variety of growth goals to flexibly respond to students’ needs, and implements an autonomy supportive approach that puts students at the center of their learning. Belonging is the belief members of a community feel when a group supports them and cares for them (Osterman, 2000). It is affected by environmental factors, which include both the overt and the hidden expectations being transmitted (Bandura, 2001; Noguera, 2003). According to Osterman’s meta-analysis of the research on belonging, belonging affects motivation, participation, and achievement and is a factor in students’ decisions to drop out of school. Belonging begins with the purposeful focused development of positive student/teacher relationships and an environment that responds to individual needs. Research by Farrelly (2013), Morrissette (2011), and Washington-Cobb (2012) support the importance of building relationships to foster belonging and enhance motivation.
Positive relationships have been found to support social, emotional, and academic
development for diverse groups of students. A student’s social and emotional function in terms
of autonomy, confidence, and self-reliance can be directly related to the quality of her/his
relationships with educators (Farrelly, 2014; Morrissette, 2011; Ryan, Stiles, & Lynch, 1994).
Studies by Bethea and Robinson (2007), Chapman, Buckley, Sheehan, and Shochet (2013) and
Washington-Cobb (2012) found that alternative programs that purposefully develop positive
student/teacher relationships can foster resilience in at-risk students and thwart risk factors.
Hattie’s (2009) seminal analysis of expert teaching found that student/teacher relationships have
a larger effect size on academic progress than any other single factor. The characteristics of
student/ teacher relationships that lead to higher academic achievement include high expectations
for learning, a genuine interest in the students’ wellbeing, and the ability to provide meaningful
feedback back (Hattie, 2009). On the contrary, poor student/teacher relationships can have
adverse effects on student achievement. In a study of students who were excluded from the
traditional school, students stated that negative interactions with their teachers caused them to
shut down (Pomeroy, 1999). Kohl (1991) argues that when students believe their teachers do not
have their best interests in mind they may willfully reject learning.

Flexibly responding includes creating a personalized education plan, which requires an
understanding of diverse learning styles and interests (Osterman, 2000), setting instructional
goals collaboratively (Zimmerman, 2002), and developing the whole child. Cooperative learning
and classroom discussions also foster belonging (Galliher, Rostosky, & Hughes, 2004;
Morrissette, 2011). Flexible scheduling allows students to choose the times they go to school
and the pace at which they complete a course (Aron, 2006). It also allows students the
opportunity to continue attending to their adult responsibilities, such as parenthood or working to
financially contribute to the household without having to drop out of school (Aron, 2003; Powell, 2003). This can be provided with little to no additional expenses and removes the main obstacle that keeps students from attending school.

At-risk students benefit when schools develop focused educational programs for diverse populations that have specific educational needs that go beyond academics. For example, a study conducted by the University of Minnesota (Lange & Sletten, 1998) and a survey of Iowa districts (Gilson, 2006) both found that students who are at-risk due to emotional issues benefit from programs that directly teach strategies to build resilience. Studies by Pfiffner, DuPaul, and Barkley (1998) and Harris, Friedlander, Saddler, Frizzell, and Graham (2005) found that students with ADHD require behavioral goals and direct strategy instruction along with academic instruction. Through a series of investigations Hogan (1999) found that students with conduct disorders need to be taught how to self-regulate due to immature executive functioning. Clark (2003) found that students who are at-risk due to social and emotional concerns benefit from highly structured classes that directly teach social and emotional curriculum.

At-risk students benefit socially, emotionally, and academically from programs that use an autonomy-supportive approach (Farrelly, 2013). An autonomy-supportive approach, according to Reeves (2009), is a learner centered approach to instruction that allows for the development of individual student interests, fosters self-regulation, and enhances intrinsic motivation. Wery and Thomson (2013) identified lack of intrinsic motivation as the main concern teachers had with at-risk students and found that increasing relevance and developing curriculum to meet student interests enhanced intrinsic motivation. When students are intrinsically motivated, they are more likely adapt to social norms (Bandura, 2001). Reeve, Jang, Carrell, Jeon, and Barch (2004) provide evidence that motivation, academic performances,
creativity, engagement, efficacy, and many other positive educational outcomes are enhanced when classes are taught by autonomy supportive teachers. Morrisette (2011) found that an autonomy-supportive approach can increase a sense of belonging for at-risk students and foster positive student/teacher relationships.

Autonomy-supportive strategies go beyond preparation of student-centered activities. They also include setting up an environment that is conducive to learning – one that is highly structured but not controlling. Teacher behaviors should include empathic listening and creating opportunities for students to be social, active, and creative as well as acting in an encouraging and supportive way (Marzano & Pickering, 2003). At-risk students need these opportunities to develop resilience in a safe environment (Bethea & Robinson, 2007). Teachers should promote internal locus of control by avoiding external motivators and rewards (Deci, Koestner & Ryan, 2001). A teacher’s goal should be to help students learn how to learn and help students understand how and why they are performing the way they are so they can learn to self-correct, self-monitor, and master the material (Reeve, 2006).

Democracy and Holistic Education

A study by Glaeser, Ponzetto, and Shleifer (2007) on the relationship between democracy and education concluded that education and democracy are highly correlated, yet it is not a causal relationship. Glaeser et al. argued that democratic dispositions need to be directly taught. According to Parker (2008), there are things democratic citizens need to know and things they need to be able to do. They need to know how to apply knowledge to critically analyze the world and creatively problem solve issues of social importance (Banks, 2003; Freire, 2000; Neumann, 2008; Parker, 2008). Citizens need prosocial behaviors; they need to know the morals and
values conducive to democracy and to understand how diversity contributes to progress (Hess, 2004; Parker, 2008). Democratic citizens need to develop the personal agency needed to advocate for themselves and the welfare for others (Freire, 2000; Grant, 2012; Giroux, 2010; Hess, 2004; Nussbaum, 2010). The current educational environment focuses on developing academics in isolation resulting in a narrow curriculum. Instead public schools need to implement a whole child curriculum that prepares students to actively participate in democratic society (Banks, 2003; Giroux, 2010; Hess, 2004; Nussbaum, 2010; Pinar, 2004).

In 2002 No Child Left Behind (NCLB) was introduced when President Bush reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), creating an unprecedented new role for federal government in education (Michelman, 2012). NCLB mandated states to test students in math and reading annually and to provide the results in an annual report card. Public schools are held accountable for showing annual yearly progress (AYP); those that do not show improvement are often punished and those that do are rewarded (Grant & Salinas, 2010). The ethics and reliability of an accountability system based on standardized test scores has been debated since its onset, and many original supporters now agree that it is not achieving its original goals (Michelman, 2012; Ravitch, 2010). Ravitch, once an advocate for testing and accountability under a market paradigm, argues that testing and accountability are having detrimental effects on the public school system. Critics of NCLB argue that focusing on preparing students for competition in a global market falls short of preparing students for active participation in democratic society and perpetuates a system for maintaining the status quo and contributes to the increased labeling of students that often results in exclusion (Anyon, 2006; Apple, 2006; Burch, 2014; Grant, 2012). Scholars argue that reliance on standardized scores to
measure progress results in a narrow curriculum that is counterproductive to both academic growth and the underlying aims of public education to prepare citizens for democratic society.

There are several reasons standardized test scores should not be a measure of academic achievement. First, Diamond (2010) found grades were a better predictor of post-secondary success than standardized test scores. Second, the academic skills needed for democratic society go beyond the rote memory and basic application assessed by standardized tests (Grant & Salinas, 2010). Democratic citizens need to be able to think critically and collaboratively solve problems (Banks, 2003; Parker, 2008; Neumann, 2008). Schools need to focus on improving these skills, and grades should accurately reflect the level of mastery. Third, academic progress in these areas should be measured in terms of growth and reflect the environment in which the learning occurred (Reeves, 2002). Hattie (2003; 2009) explains that to further student learning, educators need to understand how their instructional practices affect student learning. This requires a pre and posttest model that can effectively attribute growth to the instructional practices.

The development of prosocial conduct is an important goal in a democracy and should be valued in education at the same level as academics. As Banks (2003) explains, the problems of the world are not about literacy; they are about humanity. Prosocial conduct refers to one’s ability to adapt her/his behavior to the demands of the environment and to become more adept at social interaction (Gursec & Lytton, 2012). A person’s social conduct is predicated by her/his morals and sense of belonging, which interact with their ability to process causes and effects (Bandura, 1990). Teaching morals and values in modern society is often viewed as the responsibility of the family or the church (Easton, 1997; Lovat, 2005), and many citizens are concerned about indoctrination if taught in the public schools (Carr, 2008; Leming, 2010).
However, educational scholars – such as Anyon (2006); Apple (2014), Arthur et al. (2015), Lovat, et al. (2010), Noddings (2009), and Westheimer and Kahne, (2002) – argue that schools are not neutral institutions; students are learning what is socially acceptable from the feedback they receive from the environment. Morals such as mutual respect, equality, and responsibility to self and others are the foundation for developing good citizens.

In *The Handbook of Moral and Character Education*, Narvaez (2010) provides five essential steps for moral development in schools. First, teachers need to intentionally develop good relationships with their students and foster good relationships among students. Second, the environment must support the idea that what is right for anyone is right for everyone. Third, morals need to be directly taught. Fourth, students need to be responsible for their own actions by fostering self-regulation. Fifth, students need to believe that they belong to the greater society and that individual actions should benefit all. Bandura (2001) explains that when people believe they belong, they learn to self-regulate and behave in a prosocial manner, but when “people believe they are being exploited, coerced, disrespected, or manipulated, they respond apathetically, oppositional, or hostilely” (p. 5).

Several studies have found that morals-based education leads to better classroom conduct and increased academic achievement. A study conducted by the Jubilee Center for Character Education found that teaching morals aligned with democracy can raise student achievement and promote prosocial conduct across a variety of diverse settings (Arthur et al., 2015). Research conducted by Brown University found that morals-based curriculum contributed to the academic achievement in low-income African-American students and reduced the negative conduct observed by the teachers (LaPoint, Ellison, & Boykin, 2006). The Waldorf schools, whose
A synthesis of the Australian government’s research on values education found that teaching values enhanced students’ ability to self-regulate their conduct, increased their self-efficacy, and enhanced academic achievement (Lovat, et al, 2010). Students’ positive peer interactions increased, their attendance improved, and they were better equipped to solve problems in their personal lives. Teachers claimed that conduct issues in their classes decreased, while engagement increased; students were more cooperative, empathetic, and autonomous. Lovat (2005) contends that values education can enhance teachers’ ability to connect the students to the curriculum and promote relevance and relationships, both of which have been linked to increased achievement (Farrelly, 2013; Hattie, 2003; Strahan, 2008; Washington- Cobb, 2012; Wery & Thomas, 2013).

Teaching morals aligned to democracy has a positive effect on the entire community, whereas an education without morals can create a menace to society (Diamond, 2010). Although there is a high correlation between low literacy rates and juvenile delinquency (Buffum, Mattos, & Weber, 2013), there is a direct parallel between poor moral development and delinquency (Nelson, Smith, & Dodd, 1999; Stams, Brugman, Dekovic, van Rosmalen, van deer Laan, & Gibbs, 2006). Nelson et al. found that poor moral development contributed to delinquency more than intelligence or socio-economic status, and the meta-analysis by Stams, et al. concluded that delayed moral development has a greater association with delinquency than gender, age, intelligence and socioeconomics.

Knowing the morals and being able to think critically do not necessarily result in democratic participation. According to Gould (2015), active participation in democracy is
dependent on the development of personal agency. Personal agency is a prosocial orientation characterized by a vested interest in the community’s welfare, ability to adapt to new information, and reduced vulnerability to the negative effects of stress (Bandura, 2001). Bandura (2001) explains personal agency as the ability to act on one’s own behalf, which is developed by promoting a positive self-efficacy and fostering self-regulation. Self-efficacy influences self-regulation and motivation and can determine whether a person will decide to act, persevere in the face of obstacles, and/or perceive their accomplishments and failures. A high self-efficacy leads to higher academic achievement and higher postsecondary aspirations (Bandura, et al, 2001; Caprara, et al, 2007). However, when people have a low efficacy or believe their influence or control over their environment is minimal, which is prevalent in at-risk students, they are not as likely to act in the interest of the community or to take responsibility for their actions (Cochas & Clark, 2002; Malminvuori, 2006).

Self-Regulated Learning

Self-regulated learning has been identified through extensive research as an effective approach to developing the whole child (Nilson, 2013). By teaching students how to read and respond to their environment, teachers are able to affectively improve prosocial conduct, self-efficacy, and academic achievement. SRL improves self-efficacy by attributing success to controllable factors. It also enhances academic performance by teaching students how to select appropriate learning goals and affective strategies for achieving those goals. Although fewer studies have specifically assessed the effects of self-regulated learning on prosocial conduct, there is evidence to suggest that teaching students how to self-regulate leads to prosocial behavior by teaching students how to appropriately respond to feedback from the environments.
Self-regulated learning practices contribute to enhanced self-efficacy beliefs. Graham, Harris, and Mason (2005) and Butler, Beckingham, and Lauscher (2005) found that teaching students self-regulation strategies improved task-specific self-efficacy. Students choose to work toward a goal to appear competent, to avoid appearing incompetent, or to learn. Efficacy affects whether they put effort toward a goal (Nota, Soresi, & Zimmerman, 2004; Smith, Sinclair, & Chapman, 2002) and mediates their achievement toward the goal (Vollmeyer & Rheinberg, 2006; Yusuf, 2011). Lee, Lee, and Bong (2014) found that improving self-regulation improved self-efficacy and achievement. Feedback students receive also affects their self-efficacy. When feedback is given in terms of self-regulation, students attribute success to controllable factors and improving efficacy (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Salter, 2012).

Multiple studies provide evidence of a strong relationship between self-efficacy beliefs, achievement, and future aspirations. Kitsantas (2002) found that self-efficacy beliefs can predict performance. Others agree that self-efficacy contributes to academic achievement (Bandura & Locke, 2003; Caprara, Vecchione, Alessandri, Gerbino, & Barbaranelli, 2010; Carroll, Houghton, Wood, Unsworth, Hattie, Gordon, & Bower, 2009; Chemers, Hu, & García, 2001; Gore, 2006; Hampton & Mason, 2003; Zuffiano, Alessandri, Gerbino, Kanacri, Giunta, Milioni, & Caprara; 2013). These studies found that students with higher self-efficacy set higher goals and those with lower self-efficacy were easily frustrated by obstacles and lacked perseverance. Multiple studies by Zimmerman and colleagues conclude that realistically improving self-efficacy can improve self-regulation strategies and overall achievement (Kitsantas & Zimmerman, 2009; Zimmerman & Bandura, 1994; Zimmerman, Bandura, & Martinez-Pons, 1992; Zimmerman & Martinez-Pons, 1990). Caprara, Fida, Vecchione, Del Bove, Vecchio, Barbaranelli, and Bandura’s (2008) longitudinal study concluded that higher self-efficacy
contributed to higher grades and high school completion. They found that self-efficacy beliefs generally declined from junior high to high school and contributed to future career goals.

Hadwin and Winne (1996) concluded through a meta-analysis of study skills that self-regulation is central to effective learning. SRL has been found to improve academic achievement in many areas. Math achievement significantly improves when math instruction is integrated with self-regulated learning strategies (Butler, Beckingham, & Lauscher, 2005; Kramarski & Mizrachi, 2006; Perels, Dignath & Schmitz, 2009). Writing skills also improve (Graham & Harris, 2001; Graham, Harris, & Mason, 2005). Problem solving skills improve when students are taught to monitor their own learning (Bielaczyz, Pirolli & Brown, 1995; Cleary & Zimmerman, 2004; Sungur & Tekkaya, 2006). Perry, Hutchinson and Thauberger (2007) found that teachers can help develop literacy skills in young children by teaching them to self-regulate. Several studies have found that self-regulated learning is a vital component for successful online learning (Artino, 2006; Kramarski & Gutman, 2006; Loughlin & Lee, 2010; Puzziferro, 2008; Yukselturk & Bulut, 2009)

Although delinquency and academic achievement have been found to be highly correlated, a causal relationship has not been established (Katsiyannis, Ryan, Zhang & Spann, 2008). A study of 935 students age 11 to 18 found that self-efficacy was a mediating factor for delinquent behavior that includes stealing, vandalism, physical aggression and hard drug use (Carroll et al., 2009). Carroll et al. found that poor self-regulation has a negative correlation with engagement and can predict transgressive behavior over time; students with low efficacy and poor self-regulation are more likely to participate in delinquent behavior as they grow older. On the other hand, a high self-efficacy can have positive effects on behavior. Bandura and colleagues have conducted several studies on self-efficacy and its effects on achievement and
behavior. They have found that students with a higher self-efficacy tend to behave in a more prosocial manner than those with a low self-efficacy (Bandura et al., 2001; Caprara et al., 2008; Caprara et al., 2011). Prosocial behaviors include the ability to develop and sustain relationships, cooperate, be helpful, and sharing.

**Self-Regulated Learning Instructional Practices**

“The hallmark of successful individuals is that they love learning, they seek challenges, they value effort, and they persist in the face of obstacles” (Dweck, 2000, p. 1). Self-regulated learning is a continuous cycle of developing motivational and cognitive strategies aimed at teaching students how to learn and increase their motivation to learn and be successful. When teachers use instructional strategies that provide autonomy support and actively seek to develop self-regulation, students’ academic achievement increases their self-efficacy elevates and their conduct reflects prosocial morals (Reeves, 2009; Zimmerman, 2008). SRL strategies are imperative for developing lifelong learning skills that follow students into adulthood and help them become contributing members of democratic society. These strategies include student-centered instruction, goal setting, progress monitoring, and constant evaluation.

A student centered approach is responsive to individual students’ needs and places students at the center of their learning (Marzano & Pickering, 2003). It includes specific teacher behaviors as well as instructional design. According to Marzano and Pickering, teacher behavior that supports self-regulation includes empathic listening, is autonomy supportive, and actively develops an environment that allows students to be social, active, and creative. SRL instructional practices include differentiation or individualized instruction (Butler, 2002), direct strategy instruction (Butler et al, 2005; Graham, Harris, & Mason, 2005; Kistner, Roakoczy, Otto,
Dignath-van Ewijk, Buttner & Klieme, 2010), problem-based learning and inquiry (Eilam & Aharon, 2003; Loyens, Magda, & Rikers, 2008; Paris & Paris, 2001; Schmidt, Rotgans & Yew, 2011; Sierens, Vansteenkiste, Goossens, Soenens, & Dochy, 2009; Sungur & Tekkaya, 2006), and explicit feedback (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Teachers need to avoid teacher-centered instruction that does not allow for independence or discovery. They need to help students understand why they are performing the way they are so they can self-correct, self-monitor and master the learning material (Dweck, 2015; Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Reeves, 2006).

Teachers can differentiate instruction and create individualized plans by working with students to set instructional goals. Butler (2002) explains that programs that allow students to be part of the planning process promote self-regulation and problem solving skills as they select strategies and even create new strategies for completing a task. Allowing students to help select their own goals promotes task relevance determines their motivation and affects their goal orientation, self-efficacy (Dweck, 2008; Wolters, Shirley, & Pintrich, 1996), and achievement (Jain, Bruce, Stellern, & Srivastava, 2007; Soric & Paleskeie, 2009). Teachers can increase sustained interest and raise achievement by helping students set goals that connect to their interests (Hulleman, Hendricks, & Harackiewicz; 2010; Metallidou & Vlachou, 2010), and when students connect their learning to controllable factors their self-efficacy improves (Bandura, 2001; Zimmerman, 2008). Kitsantas, Reiser and Doster (2004) found that students who are given process goals perform better than students who are given outcome goals. In addition, when students believe their goals are unattainable or are too simple, their ability to appropriately apply self-regulation strategies diminishes (Dahl, Bals, & Turi, 2005), and their achievement and self-efficacy suffer (Wolters, et al, 1996; Dweck, 2008). Strategies that include students in the
curriculum design process align to the needs of at-risk students (Aron, 2006; Farrelly, 2013; Lohmann, 2009; Lange & Lehr, 2004; Pomeroy, 1999; Powell, 2003).

Instructional strategies refer to the cognitive processes and behaviors needed for students to complete their instructional tasks. This includes two main types of strategies: cognitive strategies and self-regulation strategies. Cognitive strategies include rehearsal, elaboration, and organization. Rehearsal strategies are rudimentary and used for surface learning, whereas elaboration and organization require higher order thinking such as comprehension, connecting ideas, understanding the main idea, making inferences, and developing concept maps and graphic organizers; self-regulation strategies include planning, monitoring, regulating, and resource management (Cleary & Zimmerman, 2004). Researchers have established that teaching both strategies simultaneously improves academic achievement, self-efficacy, and achievement.

Three models for teaching self-regulated learning in conjunction with cognitive strategies have been developed and found to enhance performance. Graham, Harris, and colleagues developed the self-regulated strategy develop (SRSD) model, which focuses on cognitive strategies for writing with self-regulatory strategies for monitoring progress and attention (Graham & Harris, 2001; Graham, Harris, & Mason, 2003; Harris & Graham, 1996; Harris, Graham, & Mason, 2005; Sexton, Harris, & Graham, 1998). They found that integrating both strategies improves self-efficacy for at-risk students, attention for ADHD students, and achievement across multiple disciplines. Butler, Beckingham, and Lauscher (2005) used a similar integration of strategies in a model they called Strategic Content Learning (SCL) for math instruction and for individuals with learning disabilities (see also Butler, 1998; 2002; Butler, Elaschuk, & Poole, 2000). Research has also found it to be effective with college students who have poor self-regulation skills when entering college (Heller & Marchant, 2015).
The Self-regulation Empowerment Program (SREP) developed by Cleary and Zimmerman (2004) focuses on teaching students how to monitor their progress toward their goals so they can effectively attribute their success to controllable factors such as effort, time, environment and quality of daily work. Special education teachers found the results of this type of charting to be more beneficial to developing individualized education plans than the traditional achievement and ability testing usually conducted for special education programs.

Problem-based learning (PBL) focuses on building self-regulation skills through an autonomy-supportive approach, providing students with multiple opportunities to self-regulate. Sungur and Tekkaya (2006) found that PBL promoted critical thinking and self-regulation more than traditional teaching methods. Loyens, Magda, and Rikers’s (2008) analysis of PBL empirical studies concludes that PBL promotes SRL as a natural element of instruction. Paris and Paris (2001) agree, stating that PBL “places the responsibility on the student to find information, coordinate actions and people to reach goals, and monitor understanding” (p. 94). It also allows students the opportunity to select their own learning goals based on their interests and abilities (Eilam & Aharon, 2003; Schmidt, Rotgans & Yew, 2011; Sierens, Vansteenkiste, Goossens, Soenens, & Dochy, 2009). When students are allowed to organize and plan their learning in their own way, they are able to connect prior learning to new knowledge and develop a deeper understanding (Soric & Palekeie, 2009).

Learning requires evaluation of the environment, task, strategies used, efficacy judgments, causal attributes, and a final assessment of whether goals were successfully met. With this information, students determine what contributed to their success or failure and influence what future goals students select (Chung & Yung, 2011; Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Labuhn, Zimmerman, & Hasselhorn, 2010; Nicol & Macfarlan-Dick, 2006). The feedback
teachers give can has a significant influence over students’ sense of control and their self-efficacy (Martin & Dowson, 2009). Hattie’s (2009) meta-analysis on instructional practices found that teacher feedback had the highest correlation with student achievement over several other factors, including class size, teaching style, and student transience. Hattie and Timperley analyzed the different forms of feedback given to students. They found that feedback specific to self-regulation has the most positive impact on student achievement. Feedback needs to focus on effort and strategy use, including elaboration, organization, self-monitoring, effort, and resource management. When feedback is given in terms of ability or judgments, it may undermine achievement and decrease motivation (Dweck, 2008). Constructive feedback enhances students’ ability to self-reflect and is imperative to the cyclical nature of self-regulated learning.

Feedback has the most significant effects on student learning when it comes from multiple trusted sources (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). A meta-analysis of motivational theories by Martin and Dowson (2009) concluded that positive relationships are central to self-regulation. Students report that they are much more likely to engage in an activity and take academic risks that promote new learning when it is at the request of a teacher they trust (Stahan, 2008). This leads to increased achievement, higher efficacy, and a greater sense of belonging (Cooper, Horn, & Strahan, 2005; Strahan, 2008; Strahan, Cope, Hundley, & Faircloth, 2005; Strahan & Layell, 2006; Summey & Stahan, 1997). They are more likely to accept advice, prompting, and critique when mutual respect is exhibited (Pomeroy, 1999). In addition, students who are allowed to self-evaluate are more likely to learn how to self-regulate and adapt mastery orientations to learning (Dweck, 2008), and when students are involved in cooperative learning activities and peer monitoring, their ability to self-regulate increases (Zimmerman & Kitsantas, 2002).
CHAPTER 3
METHODOLOGY

This study intended to increase our understanding of the educational needs of at-risk students. It was designed to examine areas of significant improvement in social, emotional and academic achievement as well as to identify instructional practices that at-risk students perceive as influencing their learning after one semester of attendance in a self-regulated learning program in an alternative setting. This study examined changes in four components to learning: self-efficacy, social behavior, and grade point average and credits earned. It investigated students’ perceptions of the instructional environment and the self-regulated learning strategies that influenced their learning outcomes. Examining at-risk students using a mixed methods approach allowed for analysis of the multiple dimensions of student development in the context in which the development occurred (Reeves, 2002). Using a variety of data allowed for a deeper level of analysis on students’ growth, gave voice to traditionally marginalized students, and provided insights that can help align at-risk students’ needs and the goals of the alternative program.

Research Questions

The following questions guided this study:
1. Is there a change in at-risk students ‘generalized self-efficacy, conduct and academic achievement after attending a self-regulated learning program in an alternative setting for one semester?
   a. Is there a significant difference in students’ generalized self-efficacy after a semester in the alternative setting?
   b. Is there a significant difference in the number of discipline referrals students receive from the previous semester to their first semester in the alternative setting? To what extent do the referrals vary?
   c. Is there a significant difference in students’ academic achievement as measured by their GPA and number of credits earned from the previous semester to their first semester in the alternative setting?

2. How do at-risk students perceive the influence of self-regulated learning instructional practices their learning?
   a. To what extent do students believe self-regulated learning practices affected them emotionally?
   b. To what extent do students believe self-regulated learning practices affected them socially?
   c. To what extend do students believe self-regulated learning practices affected them academically?

Research Design

This study was designed to increase understanding of the educational needs of at-risk students and to identify strategies that foster self-efficacy, prosocial behavior, and academic
achievement. A pragmatic, explanatory mixed methods design was chosen for this study because of its unique ability to address the complex issues that exist in educational research (Creswell, 2015). The pragmatic paradigm is used to guide the data collection and analysis methods to make multiple points of connection between student outcomes and individual interpretations of their own development as well as provide statistical evidence to support these views (Creswell, 2009; Mertens, 2014). This mixed methods design is developed for multiple levels of analysis (Creswell, 2009), which is appropriate for the pragmatic paradigm (Mertens, 2014), as well as generalize findings and provide a deeper understanding (Creswell, 2015) of how at-risk students learn.

In this explanatory mixed methods design both quantitative and qualitative methods were collected. It began with quantitative data collected from the larger population of students new to the program who had attended a traditional school the previous semester. Then qualitative data were collected from a nested sample to help explain the results from the quantitative data (Creswell, 2015). The quantitative data provided a general overview of the growth in three areas of learning for all students new to the alternative program, and the qualitative data provided the narrative, gave a deeper understanding of the students’ perceptions of the instructional strategies that contributed to their growth, and gave marginalized students an active voice in their own circumstances (Mertens, 2014). The qualitative data were used “to enrich the description of the sample participants,” (Creswell, 2009, p. 214), and the quantitative data provided the statistical evidence qualitative research is often criticized for lacking (Charmaz, 2014; Creswell, 2009; Weiss, 1994).
Setting

The setting for this study was an alternative school in an urban district located in one of the largest communities in Illinois. This urban community has a large population of students in alternative schools. Its population has a high level of poverty, high unemployment, and is ethnically diverse, which are all consistent with the national trends in alternative education (Aron, 2006; 2003; Carver & Lewis, 2010). The city has a 25% poverty rate, 13% unemployment rate, (BLS, City, 2017) and the highest crime rate in the state for cities over 40,000 (USA Crime Index, City, 2017). The ethnic make-up of the city is 56.3% white, 20.3% black, and 17.4% Hispanic (Illinois-demographics.com, 2017). The community has been significantly impacted by a desegregation lawsuit, in which the school district was found guilty of racial inequality (Batson, 2010). The alternative school began as a court-mandated remedy. The history of educational inequality within this community contributes to the rationale for using a social justice orientation to education to guide this study.

School District

The school district has a turbulent past that includes two desegregation lawsuits for which remedies span four decades (Batson, 2010). Batson explains that the lawsuit and the court-mandated remedies prompted a change in the demographics of the schools, and the school district has had difficulty recovering from community dissatisfaction. However, recently the community and the school district have created a new partnership that provides the schools with additional resources (District, 2016). This partnership plays an integral role in the district’s redesign of the high schools based on the Academy Model for College and Career Readiness.
This educational model is designed to promote relevance and interests by providing students with post-secondary experiences supported by community partners (School District, 2012), yet it is often criticized for catering to the self-interests of the business community and failing to focus on the greater aims of education (Kemple, 2004; Maxwell & Rubin, 2000).

The district is comprised of 46 schools with over 28,000 students. It is ethnically diverse: 33.1% white, 29.6% black, 26.5% Hispanic, 6.4% biracial and 4.1% Asian (ISBE, District, 2017). Each of the high schools average over 1,900 students and serve an average of 75% low income students (ISBE, District, 2017). The achievement gap in the high schools has an average 30% difference between black students and white students in math, reading, and science (IIRC, 2017). The discrepancy between the community demographics and the district demographics can be attributed to the high enrollment of affluent white students in the city’s private schools (usaschoolinfo.com, 2015). The 2016 graduation rate was 67%, up from only 64% in 2011 (ISBE, District, 2011; 2016).

The district now has two alternative programs that serve four high schools. One alternative school is for students who have been removed from the general population in lieu of expulsion or are required to attend due to lack of progress. It is operated by a private company. The other is a credit recovery program operated by the school district for students who are at-risk of dropping out for a variety of reasons. The credit recovery program is based on adult learning and self-regulated learning theories and provides students with the district’s curriculum. The district-run credit recovery program was chosen for this study.
Alternative School

The alternative school for credit recovery was selected for this study for two reasons: it is a typical case for alternative schools based on its demographics, and it is a critical case in its unique design based on self-regulated learning (School Handbook, 2016). This alternative school has an overrepresented minority enrollment and overrepresentation of the poor compared to the rest of the district, which is typical of alternative schools (Aron, 2006; Carver & Lewis, 2010; Freeman & Simonsen, 2015), making this school a typical-case sample (Mertens, 2014).

According to the school enrollment data (2017), the school’s credit recovery program has 408 students, with a poverty rate of 87% and ethnic composition of 42% black, 25% Hispanic, 24% white, 8% biracial, and less than 1% Asian and Native American. The city and the district have a different demographic composition. As Figure 4 demonstrates, as the percentage of white and affluent students decreases from the general population of the city to the district and then the alternative program, the percentage of minorities and students from low income families goes up from the city to the district to the alternative program, which demonstrates how this school represents a typical case of overrepresentation of poor and minority students.

The school handbook (2016) states, “To develop lifelong learners and support the needs of adult learners, the [School X Model] focuses on teaching students how to self-regulate their learning through autonomy supportive policies and procedures” (p. 2). The framework for the school’s policies and procedures as well as the instructional practices and curriculum is self-regulated learning theory. Students earn credits at their own pace based on the open entry/open exit policy; students are not restricted to the traditional time frame of the semester system. Credits are awarded based on mastery of the standards aligned to each course. Students receive
learning guides when they enter a new course and are expected to set their own goals and chart their own progress. Progress monitoring is an important component of SRL (Butler & Winne, 1995; Cleary & Zimmerman, 2004; Kitsantas & Zimmerman, 2009; Zimmerman & Kitsantas, 2002). Curriculum and instruction are individualized and centered on the students’ interests and abilities to promote efficacy, relevance, and other motivational factors (Cochas & Clark, 2002; Neimiec & Ryan, 2009; Reeves, 2006; 2009). Students set their goals for the course, monitor their progress and self-evaluate their progress. Students are expected to master the learning tasks by correcting their mistakes, and feedback is given regarding their learning and their strategy use to promote the cyclical nature of learning (Cleary & Zimmerman, 2004; Labuhn, Zimmerman, & Hasselhorn, 2010; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Zimmerman, 2008).

Figure 4: Typical case – City, district, and school demographic percentages
Participants

This study used quantitative methods to examine three areas of learning for all students who had completed four months of attendance at the alternative school. There were 76 seats open to new students when this study began. All new students were invited to participate for the quantitative data collection. A total of 38 students participated in this study, and all 38 completed the pre and post data collection, a 100% participation rate. Each of these students also completed the survey on his/her beliefs about the SRL strategies, a 100% participation rate.

The 10 participants for the interviews were purposively selected using a nested sample from those included in the quantitative portion of the study (Mertens, 2014). Creswell (2009) refers to this as multilevel sampling, which is completed to create a big picture and detailed accounts. The students selected for qualitative data were interviewed using the semi-structured interview protocol. They were selected to represent students with the gains in all three areas of learning tested.

The participant population represented the school’s overall population, with 47% black, 24% white, 24% Hispanic, and 5% Asian. Students’ ages were 17 or 18 at the beginning of the study. Both consent and assent for participation were obtained prior to data gathering, at which time the students were informed about the purpose of the study as well as the confidentiality of their identity. Students were told they might be selected to participate in interviews and were purposively selected from those who gave consent/assent to be interviewed.
Researcher Role

The researcher for this study had been the assistant principal at the school being studied the year prior to the conducting the study. This experience provided an in-depth understanding of the program, including the curriculum and instruction practices and the policies and procedures in the program’s handbook. The students in this study were new to the program and the researcher did not have interactions with the students prior to the study.

Data Collection

The data for this mixed methods study was collected through a variety of instruments and spanned over a 16 week time period. Data gathering methods for this study included repeat measure t-tests for the self-efficacy scale and a records review of student discipline referrals, credits earned, and grade point average – measuring these indicators when they entered the program and again after attending the program for one semester. Data collection included a survey for all participants and interviews for a specific nested sample of participants. The data were analyzed and triangulated to explore the changes in three areas of student learning and to investigate the context in which the learning occurred from the students’ perspectives.

Quantitative Data Collection

Quantitative data collection included the Generalized Self-Efficacy (GSE) scale, a review of behavior referrals, a review of students’ transcripts for their grade point averages and credits earned, and a Likert scale survey. The self-efficacy scales and record reviews were used to measure the difference in three specific components of whole child development: emotional
wellbeing, pro-social behavior, and academic achievement after attending the alternative program based on self-regulated learning for four months. The survey assessed the implementation and utility of the instruction practices as perceived by the students.

Table 1
Alignment of Research Questions with Data Collection Instruments/Strategies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Self-efficacy scale</th>
<th>Records Reviews</th>
<th>Survey</th>
<th>Interviews</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. How does attending a self-regulated learning program at an alternative setting affect at-risk students’ self-efficacy, behavior and grade point average after one semester of attendance?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Is there a significant difference in the behavior referrals they receive from the previous semester to their first semester in the alternative setting? To what extent do the referrals vary?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Is there a significant difference in their self-efficacy from pre to post? What is the effect size?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Is there a significant difference in their academic achievement as measured by their GPA from the previous semester to their first semester in the alternative setting? What is the effect size?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. What self-regulated learning instructional practices do at-risk students believe affected their learning?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. To what extent do students believe self-regulated learning practices affected them emotionally?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. To what extent do students believe self-regulated learning practices affected them socially?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. To what extent do students believe self-regulated learning practices affected them academically?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Self-Efficacy Scale

The Generalized Self-Efficacy (GSE) scale chosen for this study has been used for over three decades and is available in 33 languages (Jerusalem, Matthias, & Schwarzer, 1992; Scholz, Gutierrez, Sud, & Schwarzer, 2002; see Appendix A). It has been used to measure a general sense of self-efficacy and resilience to stressful life events (Lippke, Wiedemann, Ziegelmann, Reuter & Schwarzer, 2009; Schwarzer & Luszczynska, 2008). Perceived self-efficacy has been found to facilitate goal setting, effort investment, resilience, and self-advocacy (Schwarzer, 2014; Schwarzer & Jerusalem, 1995). This self-efficacy scale is a self-reporting instrument. It is a valid and reliable measure for assessing emotional health.

This scale was administered when students entered the alternative program and again after four months of attending the program. It was administered to the same population to assess the changes in self-efficacy as a possible result of the self-regulated learning program for at-risk students in an alternative setting. Although there are several measures available to assess self-efficacy for a variety of purposes, this measure was chosen for its ability to relate to personal agency as well as the magnitude of research utilizing this scale. The only adaptation of the scale for this study was to change it from a four point scale to a six point scale. The responses include never (1), not usually (2), sometimes (3), often (4), usually (5) and always (6), which were modified from 1 = Not at all true 2 = Hardly true 3 = Moderately true, and 4 = Exactly true. This was done to assess the significance of any possible changes in a short period of time (Gravetter & Wallnau, 2011).
Discipline Referrals

A review of discipline referrals was completed to provide information regarding students’ school behavior for the semester prior to attending the alternative program and for their first semester of attendance in the alternative program. Students’ discipline referrals contain several components, including the behavior category, the level of the infraction, a description of the behavior, the consequences assigned and an option for witness statements, including the students’ account of the incident. The level is determined through the district’s code of conduct and administrative interpretation of the behavior as it is described on the referral. There are six levels for behavior referrals. Minor infractions with no numeric value are classroom incidents not requiring administrative intervention. Levels one through four require administrative action, and level five, or zero tolerance, requires mandatory expulsion hearings before the Board of Education (District Code of Conduct, 2016). The quantitative data collected included the number of referrals each student received as well as the levels of their referrals and the category, or main infraction, listed. The other components of the referrals are discussed in the behavior referral section of the qualitative data.

Grade Point Average

Grade point average has been found to be a greater predictor of post-secondary success than standardized test scores (Diamond & Lee, 2011) and is a valid measure of academic achievement (Reeves, 2002). This study reviewed students’ grade point average from the semester prior to attending the alternative program and the first semester of attending the alternative program. The number of credits students earned at their traditional school was also compared to the number of credits they earned at the alternative program. These data provided
the information necessary to compare student achievement after four months of attending a self-regulated learning program. These records were also used in conjunction with interviews.

Survey

The survey used for this study was developed by the researcher based on the self-regulated learning instructional practices identified in empirical studies as influencing student learning and are listed in the school’s curriculum and instruction handbook as the practices that all of the school’s teachers employ (see Appendix B). The questioning structure for the survey included five closed-ended questions using a Likert scale followed by an open-ended question for each instructional practice. It was developed to provide both quantitative and qualitative data concurrently, providing students with the opportunity to explain their ratings of each instructional practice (Creswell, 2015). It first inquired about the frequency of the instructional practices implemented at the alternative setting. Then it asked students to evaluate the effectiveness of the practice on their emotional, social, and academic progress. The quantitative section of the survey uses a six-point Likert scale, ranging from never to always, the same as the self-efficacy scale. Altogether the survey asked about seven instructional practices and included a total of 35 closed-ended questions and five open-ended questions.

Qualitative Data Collection

The qualitative data collection included three instruments: the behavior referral records, the open-ended survey questions, and the interviews. The qualitative data collection was designed to provide in-depth details that enriched and explained the quantitative findings (Creswell, 2009; see Table 2).
Discipline Referrals

The description of the incidents included on the discipline referrals were reviewed, as were the consequences. The type of referral and the nature of the behavior was collected for all students included in the qualitative data collection. The review of these records added rich context to the overall quality of the study and provided the details of the behavior lacking in the quantitative view of behavior (Charmaz, 2014); however, Bogdan and Bilken (2007) recommend using interviews in conjunction with students’ records ensure the information obtained from the records is not one sided. The interviews are described in a separate section.

Survey

The survey provided students with an open-ended question to explain their rating of the SRL strategies following each section of closed-ended questions. These data were collected to provide details of students’ experiences and insight into the students’ perceptions of the self-regulated learning practices. The questions were designed to provide the students’ perspectives of the environment in which the learning occurred.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sequence</th>
<th>What Data</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| As students enter the self-regulated learning program | First treatment condition for repeat measure study for larger population of students:  
  - Records review of behavior referrals- number of referrals and the level of each referral  
  - Records review- grade point average for the previous semester  
  - Self-efficacy scale | • Determine average behavior of students entering the program- including the frequency and intensity of the behavior  
• Determine the average academic achievement for students entering the program – including the number of credits earned and the grade point average  
• Determine the average self-efficacy of students entering the program |
| After one quarter of attendance | Survey of self-regulated learning instructional practices as perceived by the larger population. | • Determine average implementation of self-regulated learning instructional practices  
• Determine the average level of influence of each instructional practice on emotional, social, and academic development from the students’ perspectives  
• Obtain additional information regarding students’ perspectives of each instructional practice measured. |
| At the end of one semester of attendance | Second treatment condition for repeat measure study for larger population of students:  
  - Records review of behavior referrals- number of referrals and the level of each referral  
  - Records review- grade point average for the previous semester  
  - Self-efficacy scale | Determine the systematic difference between the first treatment condition (prior to attending the SRL program) and the second treatment condition (after attending the SRL program for one semester) on:  
  - The number of behavior referrals and the levels  
  - The grade point averages  
  - Self-efficacy |
| At the end of the first semester of attendance | Interviews of a nested sample of ten at-risk students after one semester of attendance | • To further explain the quantitative data and provide in-depth information about at-risk students’ perceptions of self-regulated learning instructional practices as it relates to their emotional, social and academic learning.  
• To provide voice to marginalized students. |
Interviews

To gather in-depth information and provide ample voice to participants, a semi-structured interview strategy was employed (see Appendix C). Charmaz (2014) explains that interviews should be “a gently guided, one-sided conversation that explores research participants’ perspective on their personal experience within the research topic” (p. 56). Key characteristics involved in semi-structured interviews include open-ended questions with the purpose of obtaining detailed responses, while actively seeking to understand the participants’ perspective. Weiss (1994) reminds the researcher that although the interview is collaborative, it is about the respondent and the information he/she has to offer on the topic; interviews should focus on the respondents’ stories and the interviewer should practice techniques that encourage this partnership.

Open-ended semi-structured interviews were conducted. Each of the 10 participants in the nested sample were individually interviewed to fully describe their experiences and share their views. The interviews took place at the end of their first semester in the program after preliminary quantitative data had been collected and analyzed and to give students enough time and sufficient experience learning in their new instructional environment. These interviews provided in-depth information regarding at-risk students’ educational experience to which others in similar situations may be able to relate (Weiss, 1994). Each interview was transcribed by the researcher and memoed immediately following the interviews. No further interviews were conducted.
Data Analysis

A pragmatic explanatory mixed methods design was chosen for this study to provide quantitative data to test the effects of an intervention, followed by qualitative data to explain the results from at-risk students’ perspectives. Therefore, data analysis consisted of blending multiple data sets. Each data set was analyzed using its own set of techniques, the final analysis was done by triangulating the data and identifying emergent themes (Creswell, 2015). The following sections first describe the analysis of each quantitative data set, then the qualitative data sets, and finally the blending of the data sets.

Quantitative Data Analysis

Quantitative data analysis included repeat measure t-tests using an alternative hypothesis and descriptive statistics for each of the indicators of whole child development. The validity threats of other variables were controlled by the use of repeat measures for the same population and by triangulating the data with multiple data sources. Graphpad and Excel were used to conduct t-tests and calculate descriptive statistics.
This study explored the possible effects of self-regulated learning instructional practices on at-risk students’ self-efficacy. The initial self-efficacy scale scores were analyzed using descriptive statistics to simplify and summarize the average for the population and establish a rating for each student as they enter the self-regulated learning program (Gravetter & Wallnau, 2011). The same students were given a second self-efficacy scale at the end of the semester. These scores were also analyzed using descriptive statistics to simplify and summarize the average for the population and for each individual student. These data were compared to the average GSE score for adolescents determined by Schwarzer (1993). Next the average of the first scale scores (pre-assessment) and the second scale scores (post-assessment) were used to conduct a repeat measure t-test to determine the significance of the relationship between the two sets of scores. Using a repeat measure increases the validity of the findings by reducing the influence of individual differences (Gravetter & Wallnau).

The individual questions on the GSE were examined to identify specific areas of improvement. Each of the questions was analyzed for average responses in the pre assessment and repeated for the post assessment. The averages were then tested for significant changes. This provided another layer of analysis and the opportunity to identify patterns in the students’ responses within the efficacy scale. The scale used a six-point rating system; students’ responses were grouped into two categories: scores of three and less were considered areas of uncertainty or vulnerability and scores of four or more were considered strengths.
Discipline Referrals

Discipline referrals were analyzed in three ways. First, the average number of discipline referrals from the previous semester at the students’ traditional school were compared to the average number of discipline referrals from their first semester at the alternative program using a repeat measure t-test. The data were analyzed for statistical significance in the changes the students experienced. Second, the referrals were sorted into categories, and the number of referrals for each category was compared from the last semester at the traditional high school to the first semester in the alternative program. These data were reviewed to identify patterns in the type of referrals students received. Third, the consequences for the referrals at the traditional school were compared to the consequences for the referrals in the alternative program. Numeric differences were used to identify patterns in the consequences the students received.

Grade Point Average and Credits Earned

The effectiveness of the self-regulated learning program on academic achievement was assessed following a method similar to that used in self-efficacy and behavior. The number of credits each student earned were counted, and her/his grade point average was calculated for the semester prior to attending the self-regulated learning program and an average for the population was determined. These measures were repeated at the end of their first semester in the alternative program. Two repeat measure t-tests were conducted to determine the significance of the changes the students experienced in credits earned and GPA. These data were also compared to each other to identify trends in students’ academic achievement.
Survey

The survey consisted of 35 Likert scale questions, using a six-point rating system. These questions were analyzed using descriptive statistics. The average for each question was determined; scores averaging more than four were considered to be helpful from students’ perspectives. The percentage of students who rated each strategy as helpful (four or higher) was also calculated. The average across the strategies was calculated and the results were ranked. Strategies above the average with more than 80% of the students in agreement were considered preferred.

Qualitative Data Analysis

The qualitative data consist of the descriptions on the discipline referrals, the open-ended survey questions, and the student interviews. Each of the data sets was analyzed independently and then triangulated for emergent themes.

Discipline Referrals

The discipline referrals included a description of the incidents that led to being referred. These descriptions were gathered for the nested sample students who participated in the interviews. Patterns of behavior were identified to provide an overview of the students’ behavior as a collective group prior to attending the self-regulated learning program as compared to the overview of their behavior during their first semester of attendance in the program. The descriptions on the referrals were summarized for each student in the nested sample and descriptions were shared with students during their interviews.
Survey – Open Ended

The survey inquired about seven self-regulated learning instructional practices. Students were given an open-ended question for each practice. These responses were coded and sorted into categories to explain the survey results and the results of the t-tests based on which learning component their answers supported. The patterns that emerged were identified.

Interviews

All nested sample interviews were analyzed using a multi-step approach. Weiss (1994) recommends using an issues-centered approach of categorizing prior to data gathering. This study began with three broad categories using the multi-level approach to mixed methods design (Creswell, 2009): the population of student new to the school and individual students.

Transcription was done by the researcher to “interact with the data in an intensive and intimate way” (Mertens, 2014, p. 438). Memoing during the transcription process facilitated the next step in analysis (Charmaz, 2014).

Once transcription was completed, the data were categorized first by question and then within each question for emotional wellbeing, social behavior and academic achievement. Once the data were grouped by category, they were coded and sorted again for emergent themes (Charmaz, 2014).

Integration of Data Sets

After all data were collected and analyzed, findings were synthesized and compared. Each aspect of student growth was discussed: emotional wellbeing, social behavior and academic
achievement. Each whole child component was analyzed beginning with the quantitative findings, which included changes in self-efficacy, discipline referrals, credits earned and grade point average. These data findings were followed by the themes that emerged from the surveys and interviews. This provided the general view of the larger population through instruments that are generalizable, followed by the students’ perspectives of the program gained through the survey and the interviews. The interviews provided detailed accounts of the instructional practices the students believed affected their growth as well as their overall perspectives of the program.

Summary

To understand the educational needs of at-risk students, this study used multiple strategies to gather and analyze data regarding their educational experiences and how they were affected. A pragmatic approach was the guiding principle of this study, as it requires working with and reworking data to find viable solutions to an important social issue; equal educational opportunities for the poor and traditionally marginalized populations who are often overrepresented in alternative schools. The need to create educational programs that provide at-risk students opportunities to foster resilience, promote whole student growth, and become contributing members of society is vital to nature of our democracy. By using a mixed methods design, this research was able to give voice to at-risk students as well as provide concrete evidence today’s educational scholarship demands. By providing a balanced analysis of the methods used in a program framed through SRL instructional practices, this research attempted to identify practical educational solutions for at-risk students.
CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the effects of self-regulated learning (SRL) instructional practices on the whole child development of at-risk students in an alternative setting. This study examined growth in three areas of learning: emotional, social, and academic. The environment in which the learning occurred from the at-risk students’ perspectives was also investigated. A pragmatic explanatory mixed-method design was chosen for this study to provide a statistical analysis of the whole child indicators followed by an explanation of the changes by the students who experienced them (Creswell, 2009; Mertens, 2014).

Research Question 1

Research question 1 asked, “Is there a change in at-risk students’ generalized self-efficacy, conduct, and academic achievement after attending a self-regulated learning program in an alternative setting for one semester?” This question was divided into three sub questions to address the changes in each of these areas of whole child development. Four indicators were selected: a self-efficacy scale, behavior referrals, credits earned and grade point average, and t-tests were performed to measure the changes students experienced. The research demonstrates that students experienced significant changes across all four indicators assessed.
Changes in Self-Efficacy

To answer research question 1a. “Is there a significant difference in students’ generalized self-efficacy after a semester in the alternative setting,” the Generalized Self-Efficacy (GSE) scale was administered at the beginning of the students’ first semester in the SRL program and again after four months of attendance. A t-test was conducted to assess the changes in students’ self-efficacy after students’ first semester in the SRL program.

Among the students who attended the alternative program for one semester (n=38), there was a statistically significant difference (MD=2.26) between their initial mean score on the GSE self-assessment (M1 = 45.4, SD = 8.23) and their mean score on their GSE self-assessment after one semester of attendance in the alternative program (M2 = 47.63, SD = 7.22); t = 2.754, p < 0.05 (see Table 3). Initial scores ranged from 28 to 60; post assessment scores ranged from 33 to 60. Changes ranged from a reduction by five points to an increase by seventeen points.

Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>N</th>
<th>M1</th>
<th>M2</th>
<th>MD</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self-Efficacy</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>45.37</td>
<td>47.63</td>
<td>2.26</td>
<td>2.754</td>
<td>0.0091</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Significance level (p < .05).

The GSE scores reflect the strength of a person’s perceived self-efficacy; the higher the score the greater the person’s self-efficacy. A high perceived self-efficacy score is related to a person’s confidence in his or her ability to accomplish goals and handle stressful situations, whereas a low general self-efficacy score is related to anxiety, self-doubt, and depression (Jerusalem & Mittag, 1995). After four months in the SRL program, the overall changes in self-
efficacy were significant. GSE has been regarded as a universal construct with an average score of 29.28 in high school age students on a four-point scale (Schwarzer, 1993), and subsequent research across studies found a score of 29 to be a universal average (Scholtz, et al, 2002). For comparison purposes, a score of 29.28 on a four-point scale was translated to 43.92 on a six-point scale. The majority of the participants in this study entered the program with an average self-efficacy of 45.4, and they improved by an average of two points to 47.63.

Looking at the individual questions on the GSE shows that each question resulted in a positive change on average, but only two questions changed significantly (p< 0.05). Students’ perceived ability to solve difficult problems improved from their initial average rating (M1= 4.50) to their average rating after four months in the alternative program (M2= 5.0); t= 3.14, p < 0.05, and their perceived confidence in dealing efficiently with unexpected events increased from their initial average rating (M1 = 4.50) to their average rating after four months in the alternative program (M2 = 4.82); t = 2.41, p < 0.05 (see Table 4).

Although students felt confident and believed they had the ability to problem solve effectively, they needed to feel supported. Their ratings were highest in areas in which they were relying on their effort and were lowest when they faced opposition and difficulties.
Table 4
GSE Individual Questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Pre-Scale M1</th>
<th>Post-Scale M2</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I can always manage to solve difficult problems if I try hard enough.</td>
<td>4.50</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>3.14</td>
<td>0.0033</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. If someone opposes me, I can find the means and ways to get what I want.</td>
<td>4.24</td>
<td>4.50</td>
<td>1.33</td>
<td>0.1929</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. It is easy for me to stick to my aims and accomplish my goals.</td>
<td>4.50</td>
<td>4.71</td>
<td>0.98</td>
<td>0.3313</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. I am confident that I could deal efficiently with unexpected events.</td>
<td>4.50</td>
<td>4.82</td>
<td>2.41</td>
<td>0.0212</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Thanks to my resourcefulness, I know how to handle unforeseen situations.</td>
<td>4.45</td>
<td>4.53</td>
<td>0.44</td>
<td>0.6607</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. I can solve most problems if I invest the necessary effort.</td>
<td>4.84</td>
<td>5.08</td>
<td>1.78</td>
<td>0.0831</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. I can remain calm when facing difficulties because I can rely on my coping abilities.</td>
<td>4.37</td>
<td>4.58</td>
<td>0.85</td>
<td>0.4010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. When I am confronted with a problem, I can usually find several solutions.</td>
<td>4.58</td>
<td>4.74</td>
<td>1.23</td>
<td>0.2253</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. If I am in trouble, I can usually think of a solution.</td>
<td>4.68</td>
<td>4.82</td>
<td>0.72</td>
<td>0.4732</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. I can usually handle whatever comes my way.</td>
<td>4.74</td>
<td>4.87</td>
<td>0.82</td>
<td>0.4184</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Changes in Behavior

To answer research question 1b: “Is there a significant difference in the number of conduct referrals students received from the previous semester to their first semester in the alternative setting? To what extent do the referrals vary?” discipline records were reviewed. The number of discipline referrals each student received from their last semester at their home high school was compared to the number of discipline referrals they received at the alternative program. To provide additional information about the changes in their behavior, each referral
was categorized into type of referral and the level of infraction assigned, and the school’s policies and procedures were reviewed.

A t-test was conducted to determine how students performed in the SRL program compared to their traditional high schools. Among the students who began in the SRL program second semester (n=38), there was a statistically significant difference (MD = 2.68) between the number of conduct referrals they received in the last semester they attended their home high school (M1 = 3.05, SD = 2.11) and the number of conduct referrals they received their first semester at the alternative school (M2 = 0.37, SD = 0.85); t = 4.4214, p < 0.05 (see Table 5).

### Table 5

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Changes in Discipline Referrals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Referrals</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Students received a total of 116 referrals in their last semester of attendance at their home high school and a total of 14 discipline referrals their first semester in the SRL program. The total number was reduced by 102 referrals. The average number of referrals was 3.05 at the traditional high school, dropping to an average of 0.37 in the alternative program. Of the 38 students in this study, a majority experienced a decrease in referrals. Twenty-four students reduced the number of discipline referrals they received, ranging from one to thirteen fewer referrals. Eleven students experienced no change and three students increased the number of referrals they received by one or two.
The type of discipline referrals was broken down based on their leading code and level of infraction. Some referrals had multiple disciple infraction codes attached to them to provide additional details about one incident. According to the student code of conduct, the lead infraction determined the level of severity and determined the assigned consequences. For the purposes of this study, only the leading infraction and its corresponding level were evaluated. The breakdown of the total number of referrals for each type and the corresponding level is reported in Table 6.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Infraction name and level</th>
<th>1st semester</th>
<th>2nd semester</th>
<th>difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Minor – physical contact (level 1)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>-1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tardy (level 1)</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>-32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disruption to learning environment (level 1)</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>-4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disobedience (level 1)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>-4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disrespect (level 1)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electronics violation (level 1)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>-1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skipping school (level 2)</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>-58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Failure to attend assigned discipline (level 2)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>+3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leaving without permission (level 2)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>-2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbal abuse (level 2)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>-1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reckless behavior (level 2)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fireworks/Incendiary device (level 3)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>-1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interference with staff (level 3)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>-1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bullying (level 3)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>-102</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The changes varied across infractions. The biggest changes occurred in two attendance violation categories: tardy and skipping. The number of tardy referrals dropped from 37 to five and the number of referrals for skipping school dropped from 58 to zero. Disruption to the
learning environment and disobedience each saw a decrease by four referrals, leaving without permission decreased by two, from two to zero, and electronics violations, verbal abuse, fireworks/incendiary devices and interference with staff all decreased by one. Disrespect, reckless behavior, and bullying saw no changes, each having one referral at the traditional high school and one in the SRL program.

The changes in referrals decreased at all levels. The level of the referral was an important indicator for assessing the severity of the discipline infraction and directly impacts the consequences students receive. Level one referrals decreased from 51 to 9. Level two decreased from 62 to 3, and level three decreased from three to two. Both the number of referrals and the severity of referrals decreased.

Some changes were accounted for by considering the alternative program’s policies and procedures compared to their traditional school. Although both schools followed the same student code of conduct, there were several practices that differed. The home high school offered a traditional seven period day, with the limited flexibility generally reserved for seniors who are ahead in credits needed toward graduation. The alternative program allowed for flexible scheduling. Students and counselors worked together to identify a schedule that met the students’ needs. Students took from one to thirteen classes at a time, with seven class options available during the regularly scheduled day and up to six options available in the evening. This allowed students the opportunity to attend when it best suited their needs, minimizing the conflicts that resulted in being late for school or not attending altogether. However, students could not miss more than three days without a medical excuse.

Failure to attend was the only type of referral to increase while attending the alternative program. This was also attributed to the procedures for the alternative program. Failure to attend
was the assigned infraction when students were given a consequence for a discipline infraction and they failed to attend. One of the philosophical principles discussed in the SRL handbook was to minimize exclusionary discipline and provide additional time for students at school to account for time missed or to reflect on inappropriate behavior. One of the students who saw an increase in the number of referrals he received was given his second referral for failing to attend a detention he was assigned.

The consequences assigned at the alternative program included parent outreach 37.5% of the time, and additional time at school such as lunch detention, after school detention, or Saturday school was assigned in 94% of the incidents. The student who received a referral for bullying was suspended from school. This was the only suspension assigned. Whereas the consequences at the traditional school were inconsistent and often exclusionary. Rarely did the consequence include parent outreach (only 4.3% of the 116 incidents), occasionally students were assigned to detention and often they were excluded through overnight suspension, in school suspension, or out of school suspension.

**Changes in Academic Achievement**

To answer research question 1c: “Is there a significant difference in their academic achievement as measured by their GPA and number of credits earned from the previous semester to their first semester in the alternative setting?” student records were reviewed. T-tests were conducted to compare their grade point average (GPA) and number of credits earned from their last semester at their traditional high school and their first semester in the alternative program.

Among the students who began in the alternative program second semester (n=38), there was a statistically significant difference (MD = 1.95) between the grade point average they
earned in their last semester at their home high schools (M1 = 1.121, SD = 0.792) and the grade point average they earned their first semester in the alternative school (M2 = 3.071, SD = 0.861); t (37) = 11.325, p < 0.05 (see Table 7).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>N</th>
<th>M1</th>
<th>M2</th>
<th>MD</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grade Point Average</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>1.121</td>
<td>3.071</td>
<td>1.950</td>
<td>11.325</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This study used a four-point scale to assess students’ GPA: 0 points for “F”, 1 point for “D”, 2 points for “C”, three points for “B” and 4 points for “A”. The average GPA students earned in their traditional schools the semester prior to attending the alternative program was 1.121, a D average. The average GPA their first semester in the alternative program was 3.071, a B average.

Students’ individual changes were also analyzed. Of the 38 students in the study only one student’s GPA decreased, one remained the same, and the other 36 saw an improvement. Mary’s GPA went from 0.86 to 0.0. Ricky saw no change; he did not pass a class at either his home high school or in the alternative program. For the remaining 36 students, the improvements in GPA ranged from more than half a letter grade, 0.6 to four full grades, 4.0. Three students improved their GPA between zero and one point. Fifteen students improved between one and two points. Thirteen students improved between two and three points, and five students improved by more than three points.
Although grades were an important indicator for learning, credits were needed to graduate. The students in this study were required to earn 48 credits in order to graduate. Students earned credits when a course was completed with a passing grade. To further investigate students’ changes in achievement, the number of credits earned in their last semester at their home high school was compared to the number of credits earned in their first semester at the alternative program.

Among the students who participated in this study (n=38) there was a statistically significant difference (MD = 2.05) in the number of credits earned at their home high school (M1 = 3.34; SD = 2.11) and the alternative program (M2 = 5.39, SD = 4.10), t (37) = 2.869, p < 0.05 (see Table 8).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>N</th>
<th>M1</th>
<th>M2</th>
<th>MD</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Credits earned</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>3.34</td>
<td>5.39</td>
<td>2.05</td>
<td>2.869</td>
<td>0.0068</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Students completed an average of more than two additional classes in the alternative program than they did at their traditional high school, moving from an average of 3.34 courses to an average of 5.39 courses. Although more than 63% of the students earned more credits in the alternative program, individual results varied. Individual students’ changes ranged from a decrease by five credits to an increase of thirteen credits. Ten students earned fewer credits in the alternative program than they earned at their traditional high schools. These changes ranged
from one to five fewer credits, with two students earning five fewer, four earning three fewer, one earning two fewer, and three earning one fewer. Of these 10 students, nine saw improvements in their GPAs. The four students who earned the same number of credits in both programs ranged from zero to five credits. Of these four students, three experienced an increase in their GPA. Only the student who did not earn any credits in either school, neither improved his GPA nor the number of credits earned. Twenty-four students earned more credits in their first semester in the alternative program than they did their last semester in their traditional high schools, and all of them increased their GPA as well.

The majority of the students in the study attended school seven periods a day at their traditional schools and only three periods a day at the alternative program. Students’ changes occurred while attending school less than half the time they had attended in their traditional schools.

Summary of Research Question 1

The students in this study experienced significant improvements in all four indicators. The greatest results were in their improved GPA, with 95% of the students achieving a higher GPA. The majority, 63%, also earned more credits at the alternative school, even though the time they spent at school was greatly reduced. Only three students increased the number of referrals they received at the alternative school, the remaining 35 students either remained the same or reduced the number of referrals they received. The most notable changes were the decreases in referrals for being tardy and for skipping school. The majority of the students improved their self-efficacy. The greatest areas of improvement were in their confidence to solve problems and deal with unexpected events.
Research Question 2

Research question 2 asked, “How do at-risk students perceive the influence of self-regulated learning instructional practices their learning?” To answer this question, all of the students in this study were surveyed and a nested sample of 10 students were interviewed. The themes that emerged were that students believed that SRL strategies contributed to their improvements and the alternative program provided the autonomy-supportive approach that at-risk students desire.

Students’ Perceptions of their Self-Efficacy

Research question 2a. asked, “To what extent do students believe self-regulated learning practices affected them emotionally?” To investigate their perceptions of positive change in self-efficacy, data were gathered using the survey and student interviews. The survey was used to investigate students’ perceptions of the SRL strategies regarding their confidence. The term confidence was used instead of self-efficacy so students were not confused by not understanding the term self-efficacy. The interviews explored students’ beliefs about the programs’ effects on self-efficacy. Overall, the students believed that the SRL strategies helped build their confidence and motivation, and the students perceived the alternative school as supportive.

Confident and Motivated

Using a Likert type scale students rated the impact of seven SRL strategies on their confidence from 1 – never to 6 – always. Overall, students believed that the SRL strategies
effectively contributed to their confidence. The frequencies of students’ responses, as shown in table 9, show that more than 75% of the students found all seven strategies to be effective. The average rating across strategies was $M = 4.74$ (see Table 9).

Table 9

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Self-regulated learning component</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>M</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Goal Setting</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>4.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choices for demonstrating learning</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>4.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choices in topics/content</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Progress monitoring</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>4.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-evaluation</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explicit feedback form teachers</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>4.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunity to correct mistakes</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>4.76</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Although the majority of the students rated all seven strategies as effectively helping improve their confidence, not all students had the same experiences or viewed the strategies the same way. There were four strategies that students consistently viewed as helping them become more confident and motivated learners: teacher feedback, correcting mistakes, choices for demonstrating learning, and choices in what content to learn. These four strategies all yielded higher than average responses and students’ responses in the open-ended section of the survey were all positive. Three strategies had discrepancies in students’ beliefs: goal setting, progress monitoring, and self-evaluation. These strategies had more students rate them as ineffective in comparison to the other strategies, and the open-ended responses on the survey included a variety of positive and negative responses.
Teacher feedback and opportunities to correct mistakes provided students with the support they needed to feel confident. Having choices in how to demonstrate learning and choices in what content to learn gave them the independence they needed to keep them motivated and interested. Teacher feedback had the highest rating, with an average response of 4.95 and 89% of the students indicating that it was always, usually, or often effective in helping them feel confident. In the open-ended section of the survey, students explained that teacher feedback makes them “try harder,” “stay interested,” and “be more confident.” As Sarah explained during her interview, “They tell you when I’m doing good, a good job, and when I’m doing something wrong, they help me.” Teacher feedback was more powerful when students were able to use that feedback to correct their mistakes. As Morgan explained, “You always get to go back and correct your mistakes. You never really fail here unless you just don’t try.”

Students reported that having choices encouraged them to “try harder” and helped them “be more confident.” They explained in the open-ended responses that having choices “can keep me motivated by breaking up monotony and working toward my strengths.” They also reported that having choices allowed them to select “the [assignment] that I feel comfortable with,” and when they are able to select a topic they were interested in, “it doesn’t turn your brain to mush.”

During the interviews student repeatedly attributed their increased confidence to being able to work at their own pace. Ironically, working at an individual pace was accomplished through goal setting, self-evaluation and progress monitoring, which had several inconsistencies in student responses. Progress monitoring had an above average rating, 4.78, but had mixed results in the open-ended section of the survey. Students reported that it “gives me confidence” and “can help me feel accomplished” but also it “can be overwhelming” and “will inevitably lead me to become a puddle of anxiety and horror.” Self-evaluation had a below average rating of
Goal setting had the lowest overall rating, averaging 4.51 and 21% of the students reporting that it was not effective in helping them feel confident. However, 50% of the students reported that goal setting always helps them feel confident. Students reported that it is “keeps you motivated” and “it pushes you and gives you something to work towards and the after feeling is good.” Others reported that it “imparts a sort of stress because I am a teenager with sub-par management skills.” This dichotomy was well explained in the open-ended response, “It is valuable in giving students independence and a feeling of control over their education, but it can sometimes leave students overwhelmed.”

All ten students who were interviewed explained that they believed the alternative program had a positive impact on their self-efficacy even though they did not all have a positive increase in their self-efficacy. Eight of the ten students interviewed showed improvements and attributed their improvements to their experiences in the program. Morgan, who experienced a 15 point increase in his GSE score, explained during his interview, “When I was looking at those questions I didn’t want to be cocky, but I really felt confident in those areas where I gave myself a six. So I would say, yeah, especially doing your own thing, knowing that you’re doing it, you’re problem solving. That’s what this school really teaches you.” Six students experienced a decrease. Two of the six students were interviewed and said they believed their efficacy improved, but their improvements were not reflected on their GSE because, as Larry explained, “I actually read the questions this time . . . the first time I was reading it, but I was skimming” and David said, “I was rushing through it” the first time.

Supportive Environment
An autonomy-supportive approach is one that balances independence and support based on the individual needs of the student (Reeves, 2009). As seen in the responses to the self-regulated learning strategies, too much independence can lead to increased anxiety and stress when students are not ready for it. A supportive environment was needed. The students in this study attributed their increased confidence and motivation to the independence they felt coupled with the support they received.

Having choices, not only in what is learned as previously described but also in their school schedule and the rate at which they could earn credits, contributed to the improvements in the students’ emotional wellbeing. Several students explained that only having a half schedule (three classes a day) helped them feel confident. They explained they were more motivated to complete their classes knowing that they could go at their own pace and were less frustrated knowing that they had the freedom to select assignments they were interested in and in the order in which they felt was manageable. Oscar said during his interview that his confidence increased because “you’re not trying to keep up with everyone else and you don’t get frustrated.” Morgan explained that the independence he received helped improve his efficacy. When asked how his self-efficacy improved by 15 points, he said, “You have a lot more freedom here. You have to manage your own work and you have to know what you’re doing. . . you have freedom. You’re treated like an adult in a way.”

Although the students appreciated the independence, they also appreciated the support. The students were given their course syllabus with the standards they needed to master, and it was up to them to work with their teachers and determine when and how to complete each assignment. This placed teachers in a naturally supportive position. As Oscar explained, “It’s like you’re teaching yourself and if you need help you ask the teacher instead of just listening to
somebody talk the whole time.” Tiki explained, “I’m independent so I don’t like to ask questions. I like to figure it out myself. . . it seems like they come over when they know I’m struggling a little bit, so I don’t have to ask.”

When the students entered the program their self-efficacy as a group was higher than average; they had confidence they would do well with the right amount of effort. The area they struggled with the most was when they felt opposition. Students perceived their teachers as supportive at the alternative program but did not feel that way at their traditional schools. Joshua explained that the teachers at the alternative program expected more and there was more work to do, but the teachers’ support gave him the confidence and encouragement he needs. He credited the support to one teacher in particular, saying, “Every time I go to see her and say that I’ve earned a credit, she’s got a big smile on her face and says good job and that motivates me.” Jonathan captured this view when asked about his increased GSE score. He explained, “When you feel like somebody believed in you, like expects more of you, you perform better. That’s what [the alternative program] has done for me.”

**Students’ Perceptions of their Behavior**

Research question 2b. asks, “To what extent do students believe self-regulated learning practices affected them socially?” Data analysis for research question 2b found that students significantly reduced the number of referrals they received in the alternative program as compared to the number of referrals they received at their traditional school. Due to the change in environment, several factors could have contributed to the changes the students experienced.

This study investigated students’ perceptions of their changes as they experienced them at the alternative program and effectiveness of the SRL strategies on behavior from the students’
perspectives. Data were gathered from the survey and the student interviews. Students’ perceptions of their changes in behavior fell into two themes: SRL strategies helped students be focused and responsible, and the alternative program provided a supportive environment that minimized conflicts.

**Focused and Responsible**

The survey and interview results demonstrated that students believed the alternative program helped improve their behavior. Using a Likert type scale students rated the impact of seven SRL strategies on their behavior from 1 – never to 6 – always. The survey showed that all seven strategies were viewed by more than 75% of the students as having a positive effect on their behavior. In general students rated the impact of the SRL strategies on their behavior lower than their confidence and their grades, yet the average rating was positive, $M = 4.62$. Students associated the SRL strategies more with their academic achievement and emotional development than their behavior; however, students reported that the SRL strategies improved their behavior by helping them remain focused and responsible.

Table 10 includes the frequencies of the ratings for all of the students’ responses, demonstrating that most students believe the strategies were helpful. There are four strategies that students consistently rated as having a positive effect on their behavior, specifically in focus and responsibility. These strategies are choices for demonstrating learning, choice in what content is learned, teacher feedback, and correcting mistakes.

**Table 10**

Students’ Perceptions of the Effects of SRL Strategies on their Behavior

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Self-regulated learning component</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>M</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>


Having choices in what you learn and how you demonstrate what you have learned provided students with the ability to select topics of interest and areas of strength, which in turn helped them remain focused and be responsible. Students believed that teacher feedback and correcting mistakes helped improve their behavior. Both strategies received an average rating of 4.78; 82% of the students found correcting mistakes was helpful, and 87% rated teacher feedback as a helpful strategy for improving their behavior. One student stated that having the opportunity to correct mistakes “gives me the opportunity to help others.”

The remaining three strategies, progress monitoring, goal setting, and self-evaluation had mixed results. Although the majority of the students found these strategies were helpful, nearly one quarter of the students reported that goal setting, progress monitoring, and self-evaluation were not effective in helping them with their behavior. Those who found these strategies helpful reported in the open-ended section of the survey that they helped them “stay focused,” “makes you more responsible,” and “gives a great organization plan.” Larry discussed his appreciation for goal setting during his interview, stating that it “makes me focus more and they [the teachers] actually bring it back up to you the following week and it helps you get it done.” There were not any comments in the open-ended section or in the interviews to explain why they rated these strategies as not effective.

Supportive Environment
Students perceived the alternative program as helpful in developing pro-social behaviors. The three contributing factors identified were the smaller setting, flexible schedule, and teacher support. Jonathan, Tiki and David all experienced a reduction in the number of tardy referrals they received. They agreed that having a smaller setting with fewer students made it easier to get to class on time. David said, “There are less people here to worry about. You can do all of your work without distractions,” and Tiki said that she likes the smaller setting; it helps her get to class early and stay focused. The flexible schedule proactively helped students avoid attendance issues. Lauren who broke her foot and had difficulty getting to school on time created a schedule that was able to meet her needs, and Starr and David who liked to leave for lunch but had difficulty returning on time reduced their schedule and left for the day at lunch.

Students consistently identified that having supportive teachers was an important aspect for improving their behavior and reducing their behavior referrals. Sarah, who did receive a referral for skipping class, said, “The reason I would skip over there is that sometimes I didn’t like the class or the teachers wouldn’t help at all, so I thought what’s the point of going? Sometimes I would go and try to do work, but it wasn’t helping me. I haven’t been skipping her because I’ve seen that I can do better, and teachers are helpful and I want to keep going.” Starr had an experience similar to Sarah’s. She was not motivated to go to class and would often leave for lunch and not come back. She explained that her teachers at her traditional school were not supportive and often put students down. She said that affected her behavior, “I used to try to show off and they try to show off for you.” Morgan, who did not receive any referrals either semester, compared his behavior at the alternative program to how he behaved at his traditional school. He explained, “The difference between that school and this school is my home school focused on the most random things like tardies and students talking in class. You don’t have to
deal with that here. Like you never have teachers having to calm down students. That’s a big thing.” He also said that if he was late to school, he would just skip class because he would get a detention for being late but there were never received any repercussions for skipping unless you got caught.

One of the two students who experienced an increase in referrals was interviewed. This student believed that his behavior improved as a result of attending the program. He attributed this to a positive relationship with his teachers. He said that the referral he received was dismissed, explaining that “it wasn’t a real referral because we were finding something for the teacher.” He was assigned a detention, but he never went. That generated a second referral for failure to attend.

Students’ Perceptions of their Academic Achievement

Research question 2c. asks, “To what extent do students believe self-regulated learning practices affected them academically?” The number of credits students earned and their GPAs improved while attending the alternative program. Their perceptions of these changes were investigated through the survey and interviews. Two themes emerged from these data to explain the students’ viewpoints. The students believed that the SRL strategies improved their grades and authentic learning. They believed the alternative school provided the supportive environment they needed to be effective and efficient learners.

Authentic Learning

Using a Likert type scale students rated the impact of seven SRL strategies on their grades, from 1 – never to 6 – always. The survey results demonstrate that the vast majority, more
than 75%, of the students found the SRL strategies to be helpful for improving their grades.

Table 11 shows the frequency in which students rated each of the questions on the survey. The average rating across all seven strategies was $M = 4.80$, higher than their perceptions of the help of SRL strategies on their confidence and their behavior. The students believed the SRL strategies improved their grades, their depth of understanding, and the rate at which they learned.

Table 11

Students’ Perceptions of the Effects of SRL Strategies on their Grades

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Self-regulated learning component</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>M</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Goal Setting</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>4.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choices for demonstrating learning</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>4.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choices in topics/content</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>4.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Progress monitoring</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>4.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-evaluation</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explicit feedback form teachers</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>5.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunity to correct mistakes</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>4.95</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The strategies for improving grades the students perceived as helpful are similar to the findings for behavior and self-efficacy. The students found teacher feedback, opportunities to correct mistakes, choices for demonstrating learning, and choices in what content to learn to be most helpful for improving grades and promoting a deeper understanding. Goal setting, progress monitoring and self-evaluation were not rated as highly, yet they were still seen as helpful to the majority of students.

Explicit feedback from teachers as a strategy for improving grades received the highest rating in the study, with an average score of 5.0 and 95% of the students reporting that it often,
usually or always helps. They said in the open-ended section of the survey that teacher feedback “helps me see my stronger and weaker places to only better myself,” “helps me learn the subject quicker,” “helps me learn from my mistakes,” and “helps a lot on later assignments.” Results for opportunities to correct mistakes were similar, receiving an average rating of 4.95 and 89% of the students reporting that it was a helpful strategy. These two strategies need to go together, as Morgan explained, “I messed up, so the teacher gave me examples and she just let me redo it again after the examples. It was really cool. You always get the chance to go back and re-correct. You never really fail here unless you just don’t try.” The students reported on the survey that having the chance to correct mistakes “helps me learn from my mistakes” and “helps me accomplish more than I knew I was capable of.”

Having choices helped students deepen their understanding and made learning seem easier. The average rating for having choices in content was 4.89, with 89% of the students rating it as helpful, and choices for demonstrating learning had an average rating of 4.84, with 89% positive responses. They said that having choices made it easier to understand, helped increase their understanding, and “helps you actually learn something.” Lauren explained the process, stating that classes have a standard program to follow, but students can also choose from alternative assignments that meet the same standards. She said that having choices helped her complete her work faster. Larry said during his interview that getting to choose what topic to write about makes it easier to learn. David said that he usually does the work as it is written but that teachers would give him choices if he asked.

Goal setting, self-evaluation, and progress monitoring received lower ratings from the students; however, the majority, over 75%, reported that the strategies were helpful. There were not any negative comments pertaining to grades, achievement, or learning, and some students
reported that goal setting helped them achieve more or be more successful and that self-evaluation increased understanding. Jonathan said he thought that being able to work at his own pace meant that he could “mess around or whatever, but I’m learning how to balance my time.”

**Efficient and Effective Learning**

The students in this study attributed much of their academic achievement to the independence they were given and the support they received from their teachers. In addition to having choices in what they learned and how they demonstrated their learning, they consistently reported that having a choice in their schedule and their pace for earning credits promoted efficient and effective learning. The support they received from their teachers, beyond the explicit feedback and opportunities to correct mistakes prepared them for future learning.

The student-centered individualized approach that the SRL strategies provided put teachers in a position to be seen as supportive and made the work seem easier. Lauren and Jonathan explained the difference in the instructional approach between their traditional schools and the alternative program. Lauren said, “At [her traditional school] they teach in front, like notes, copy off the board stuff, and worksheets, and you have to do it when they tell you to do it. But here it’s different. They don’t teach because everyone is doing a different thing. They don’t teach. . . they just help you along the way.” Jonathan explained what helping along the way looked like. He said,

They give you work. It’s like self-pacing so that if you don’t understand anything, they are always willing to help you out so that you can understand. At my home high school, you pull out our papers, like your previous work and turn in your homework. Then they lecture you and give you more homework. . . and if you don’t get anything, they bypass it and you just keep falling behind. . . Here they give you work but it’s like if you don’t understand it, they won’t like send you to a website. . . Here they actually sit down and explain it and give you an actual life perspective.
When students were given the work to complete, the teachers were able to spend the period working individually with students to ensure understanding. Starr appreciated this practice, saying that “they actually talk to you. . . they actually come and try to explain things to you again or in a different way that makes it easier. . . they listen more and don’t fuss at you for being wrong.” Morgan agreed. He explained that “teachers at my home school, if you asked too many questions, they put you down in a way. Here it’s not like that: teachers are excited to see you get your credits and move on.”

The students thrived when they were able to make their own decisions about their learning. Oscar said that being able to work at his own pace made graduation realistic, and Starr explained that having a half schedule made school seem easier and more manageable. Morgan explained that students are more purposeful knowing they can earn credits quickly. He explained, “One thing that really surprised me about this school is the idea of going to college. . . I never knew what I wanted to do in college, career, life, but here I found it.” He said he is planning on going to college now, something he never believed possible before. He said, “I don’t have money for college and didn’t have the best grades, so college was gonna be hard, but here it made me realize that I wanted to do it.” His GPA is currently 3.6, making college a real possibility. He is planning to study psychology or possibly journalism.

Summary of Research Question 2

The students in this study believed that the SRL strategies helped them feel confident, helped support positive behaviors, and helped improve their grades. There were four strategies that were consistently viewed as helpful: 1) teacher feedback, 2) correcting mistakes, 3) choices for demonstrating learning, and 4) choices in content. Students reported that these strategies
helped them feel confident, motivated, focused, and responsible and improved their authentic understanding of their assignments. These strategies, along with the flexible scheduling policy, gave students the autonomy they needed to take control of their own learning and helped them view their teachers as supportive.

The remaining three strategies: goal setting, progress monitoring and self-evaluation, although seen as helpful by the majority of the students, varied in results. Students who did not find these strategies as helpful reported they felt overwhelmed and anxious. The level of independence needed to set goals, monitor progress, and self-evaluate needed to be balanced with an equal level of support.

Summary of Chapter

After four months of attendance in the alternative program the students in this study experienced a significant improvement in efficacy, behavior, grade point average, and credits earned. Every student improved in two or more indicators and 22 of the 38 students improved or remained the same in all four indicators. The majority of the students reported that the SRL strategies helped them feel confident, supported better behavior, and improved their grades. Students identified teacher feedback, correcting mistakes, and having choices in content and for demonstrating learning to be effective strategies for promoting confidence, motivation, focus, responsibility, understanding and preparedness. They attributed their improvement to the supportive environment and encouraging teachers.
CHAPTER 5
DISCUSSION

Introduction

Chapter 5 is a discussion of the research results and themes that emerged from the data. The first section of this chapter is the researcher’s reflections on the findings and how they compare to existing research and theory. Each of the three emergent themes are discussed. The next section addresses the implications of the findings for practitioners to consider. The chapter concludes with the recommendations for future research based on the findings of this study.

Review of the Purpose

As the number of alternative programs for at-risk youth continues to grow, it has become increasingly important to understand what these students need to be successful and become contributing members of democratic society. The purpose of this study was to explore the effects of self-regulated learning instructional practices in an alternative setting on at-risk students. This study examined the changes students experienced after four months in the alternative program in three areas of whole child development: emotional wellbeing, social behavior, and academic achievement. It also investigated the environment in which the learning occurred from the at-risk students’ perspectives. It explored students’ beliefs about the SRL strategies and how their experiences differed at the alternative school from their experiences at their traditional schools.
Discussion of the Findings

This study used a variety of instruments to measure the changes students experienced while attending an alternative school that implements self-regulated learning strategies as the foundation for its curriculum and instruction design. Pre and post assessments, which included students’ records and a self-efficacy scale, were used to measure the growth the students experienced, a survey was conducted to ascertain the students’ perspectives of the self-regulated learning strategies, and interviews were conducted to provide detailed information about the program from the students’ perspectives.

Three themes emerged, and each is discussed. First, students experienced significant changes in multiple areas of whole child development. Second, the students believed that the SRL strategies helped support positive changes. Third, at-risk students thrived in an autonomy-supportive environment.

Whole Child Development

The first theme was that the students experienced positive changes after only four months of attendance in the alternative program. Social justice advocates argue that schools need to socially, emotionally, and academically prepare students to be active participants in democratic society (Banks, 2003; Freire & Giroux, 2004; Hess, 2004; Noddings, 2009). Research demonstrates that schools that neglect social and emotional learning contribute to the high number of high school dropouts (Amos, 2015; Anyon, 2006; Apple, 2014; Cohen, 2006) and low academic performance (Freeman & Simonsen, 2015; Noguera, 2003). The findings from this study confirm that when schools focus on developing the whole child, their self-efficacy, social
behavior and academic achievement improve (Lapoint, et al, 2006; Lovat, et al, 2006). This study supports the research on the importance of developing the whole child using a social justice orientation to education.

Self-Efficacy

This study used self-efficacy as a measure of resilience and wellbeing. Research by Schwarzer and colleagues on generalized self-efficacy established the connection between generalized self-efficacy and emotional wellbeing as a universal construct that effectively predicts a person’s ability to cope with stress factors and overall mental health and the GSE has been used to measure resilience in a variety of studies (Jerusalem, Matthias, & Schwarzer, 1992; Scholz, Gutierrez, Su, & Schwarzer, 2002; Schwarzer, 2014; Schwarzer & Luszczynska, 2008; Schwarzer & Jerusalem, 1995). Schwarzer (2014) argues that efficacy acts in two main ways, providing individuals with the internal coping skills needed to deal with stress or the behavioral coping strategies needed to change their environment to overcome obstacles. The students in this study had more success coping with their stress through putting forth more effort and problem solving. This study also supports findings from studies on the GSE that show improvements in GSE scores help individuals feel more confident tackling novel situations and persevering in the face of adversity (Jerusalem & Schwarzer, 1995; Lippke, Wiedeman, Zielglmann, Ruieter & Schwarzer, 2009; Scholz, Guitierrez, Sud & Scharzer, 2002; Schwarzer & Luszczyńska, 2005).

According to Bandura (2001) having a higher self-efficacy leads to the confidence and motivation needed to accomplish goals and persevere in the face of adversity. The students in this study experienced a significant improvement in their self-efficacy and believed that their attendance in the alternative program helped them feel more confident and motivated. The
students expressed a renewed dedication to graduation and confidence to see it through. One student, whose efficacy score increased by 15 points, even said that he sees himself going to college now; he never believed it was possible at his traditional school. This supports previous research that increased efficacy leads to higher goals (Caprara, et al, 2008; Cleary & Zimmerman, 2004; Kitsantas & Zimmerman, 2009; Zimmerman, Bandura, & Martinez-Pons, 1992) and research that shows higher levels of self-efficacy increase the likelihood individuals will act on their intentions (Lippke, Wiedeman, Ziegelmann, Rueter, & Schwarzer, 2009).

Although the scores increased in all areas of the GSE, the results demonstrate that students were not as confident they could influence their environment when faced with adversity as they were when relying on their own internal capacity.

Behavior

Students also improved their behavior as a result of attending the alternative program. Gursec and Lytton (2012) define pro-social behavior as appropriately responding to the demands of the environment. Bandura (2001) explains that people respond negatively when they feel they are being exploited, coerced, or ignored, and Noguera (2003) argues that negative student behaviors result from a lack of perceived belonging. The students in this study experienced a decrease in the number of discipline referrals they received at the alternative program compared to their traditional high school. Students attributed their positive changes to having choices and being able to learn from their mistakes from teachers who cared about them. When they described their traditional schools, they said that their teachers did not care about them and they did not get the help they needed. They explained that some teachers at their traditional schools put students down and engaged in power struggles with their students.
This was completely different from the teachers in the alternative program, where the students described the teachers as helpful, caring, and willing to go above and beyond. Their experiences confirm theory and research that demonstrates how providing students with voice and choice (Morrison, 2006; Noguera, 2003; Wery & Thomson, 2013) and supportive teachers (Lovat, 2005; Pomeroy, 1999; Strahan, 2008) contribute to improved behavior and focus. Having choices and supportive teachers helped the students become engaged in their learning. In this study, the students explained that having choices motivated them, removed the issue of competing for their time, helped them feel focused and responsible, and gave them an environment that produced a sense of belonging.

Academic Achievement

The supportive environment also contributed to their improved grade point average and higher credit acquisition. Although the majority of the students in this study reduced the amount of time they spent at school, they increased the number of credits they earned and dramatically improved their GPA. Students reported that having a shortened schedule helped them achieve more because they did not have to split their time and focus. They also reported that being able to work at their own pace helped them accomplish more than they thought possible. Students appreciated the individual attention teachers were able to give them and having the ability to choose topics of interest and how to demonstrate their learning led to a deeper understanding and sustained interest, which support the findings of Amos (2008); Aron (2003; 2006), and Chapman, Laird, and Kewal-Ramain (2010).

Hattie (2003; 2009) provides evidence that teachers’ instructional practices are the highest contributing factor to students’ achievement. Students in this study reported that the
amount of work they received and completed was greater at the alternative program than it was at their traditional schools and that it was more rigorous work as well. They explained that it seemed easier because the teachers were actively seeking to help them and made them feel as if someone believed in them and was encouraging them to succeed. The social and emotional factors the students attributed to their higher academic success contributes to the body of research on self-efficacy and achievement (Bandura & Locke, 2003; Caprara, et al, 2011; Carroll, et al, 2009; Kitsantas, 2002; Zuffiano, et al, 2013), behavior and achievement (Lovat, et al, 2010; Washington –Cobb, 2012), and behavior and self-efficacy (Bandura, et al, 2001; Cochas & Clark, 2002; Jerusalem & Schwarzer, 1995).

**Self-Regulated Learning**

The students believe that the self-regulated learning strategies helped them be more confident, motivated, focused and responsible learners who were capable of deeper understanding. This study supports Zimmerman’s (2002, 2008) theory on the use of SRL to develop the whole child and produce the skills needed for lifelong learning. Zimmerman proposes SRL as a framework for a variety of instructional practices that can be separated into three stages of learning. These stages are repeated in a cyclical loop designed to improve students’ efficacy, behavior, and academic achievement. The findings are discussed in each of these stages: planning, performing and evaluation.

**Planning**

The planning stage is designed to help students understand their own strengths and areas of needed improvement so they can connect learning to controllable elements. The planning
stage in SRL is meant to be a collaborative process in which students and teachers set goals
together, allowing students reasonable control over what they will learn and how they will
demonstrate their learning (Zimmerman, 2002, 2008). The students confirmed that their teachers
at the alternative program were using these strategies regularly and more often than they
experienced at their traditional high schools.

Marzano and Pickering (2003) define a student-centered approach as instruction that is
responsive to students’ individual needs. When using this definition, the students described the
SRL strategies as a student-centered approach. They reported that these strategies were helpful
for improving their confidence, behavior, and grades. The students explained that they are
regularly allowed to select their own goals and have choices in what they learn and how they
demonstrate their learning. The teachers at the alternative school develop a unit of study with
the students and then give them the freedom to complete the unit at their own pace. This allows
the teachers to move around the room and help students as needed instead of using a teacher-
center approach of lectures, note taking, and worksheets.

Soric and Palekeie (2009) posit that when students are able to organize and plan their
learning, they are able to connect prior knowledge to new understanding, and Jain et al. (2007)
found that collaborative goal setting improves academics. The students in this study agreed that
being part of the planning process helped improve their grades and authentic understanding of
the content. The students also confirmed research by Graham and colleagues (2005) and Butler
and colleagues (2002, 2005), who found that being part of the planning process increases
efficacy, focus, and attention (Graham, et al.) and helps them be creative problem solvers
(Butler, 2002; Butler, Beckingham & Lauscher, 2005). This study further supports Dweck’s
(2008); Wolters, Shirley and Pintrich’s (1996); and Nota, Soresi and Zimmerman’s (2004)
claims that collaborative planning improves motivation and self-efficacy, and Hulleman, Godes, Hendrick, and Harackiewicz’s (2010) and Simth, Sinclair and Chapman’s (2015) findings that it helps students sustain interest.

Studies on at-risk students argue that at-risk students need to have a voice and options for what they learn and how they learn (Aron, 2006; Farrelly, 2013; Pomeroy, 1999; Powell, 2003). This study demonstrates that having voice and choice in learning provides at-risk students with the freedom they need. However, this research also demonstrates the importance of responding to individual students’ needs and abilities to plan their own learning. Without providing support as needed along the way students can feel overwhelmed and goal setting can create additional stress for students who are not ready. The balance of independence and support is discussed further in the next section.

Performance

The second stage of learning in the SRL framework is the performance stage. During the performance stage students demonstrate their learning and monitor their progress. As discussed in the planning stage, having choices in how to demonstrate learning increases engagement, focus, and sustained interest. Although the students did not rate progress monitoring as highly as demonstrating learning, the majority found the strategy helpful in keeping them focused, organized, and responsible, confirming findings from Zimmerman and colleagues that organization skills develop through progress monitoring (Cleary & Zimmerman, 2004; Zimmerman, 2002, 2008; Zimmerman & Kitsantas, 1997; Zimmerman & Paulsen, 1995) and Graham and colleagues that it improves focus and being responsible (Graham & Harris, 2001; Harris, Graham & Mason, 2003). The students in this study reported their problem-solving skills
improved, which researchers claim is a result of teaching students to progress monitor
(Bielaczyz, Pirolli & Brown, 1995; Sungur & Kekkaya, 2006). Like findings regarding the
planning process, students need to feel supported throughout the progress monitoring process or
it can lead to feelings of being overwhelmed and increasingly stressed.

Evaluation

Bandura (2001) explains that learning requires evaluation of the environmental feedback
from a variety of sources. The students in this study rated two forms of feedback: self-evaluation
and explicit feedback from their teacher. They consistently rated teacher feedback as helpful –
higher than any other strategy or any other category. Their reports on self-evaluation varied.

Hattie’s (2009) meta-analysis on instructional strategies found that teacher feedback is
the number one factor in determining student success. Students in this study agreed. The
average rating for teacher feedback was 5.0, with only two students reporting that it only
sometimes helps. Martin and Dawson (2009) postulate that feedback influences students’ sense
of control over the environment and their self. Students reported that teacher feedback improved
their learning and their grades and helped them become more aware of their “stronger and
weaker places to only better myself.” Hattie and Timperley (2007) and Dweck (2008) argue that
feedback to students needs to be explicit and geared toward making improvement and correcting
learning.

The students reported that the majority of the teachers do give explicit feedback that is
meant for them to make corrections. They stated that learning from your mistakes is an integral
part of the program in that you never fail unless you stop trying. The students stated that
teachers show them that mistakes are learning opportunities that keep them from making the
same mistake on their next assignment and help them do better the next time around, supporting Zimmerman’s (2002, 2008) theory on cyclical learning and the importance of feedback with the express purpose of making corrections.

At-Risk Student and Autonomy Supportive Environments

The third theme is that at-risk students thrive in an autonomy-supportive environment. An autonomy-supportive environment is one that balances individual needs and places students at the center of their learning (Marzano & Pickering, 2003). It provided students with the opportunity to make choices about when, where, and how they learned within their developmental parameters and individual needs. It also recognized that students are learning to be independent thinkers but still need guidance and support when learning new material and strategies. The autonomy-supportive approach limits the amount of time teachers spend delivering content and requires students to be active in the learning process (Morrison, 2008). This study found that at-risk students preferred an autonomy-supportive approach and identified strategies the students believes to be helpful and supportive.

At-Risk Students

The students who participated in this study exemplify the profile of a typical student in the literature on at-risk students in alternative programs. A disproportionate number of minority students and students from poverty attend alternative programs (Amos, 2008; Aron, 2006; Carver & Lewis, 2010) for a variety of academic and personal reasons (Aron, 2003; 2006; Buffum, Mattos, & Webber, 2012). These students reported that they came to the alternative program after falling behind on their credits. Some reported they fell behind because they moved
frequently. Others reported they did not get the support they needed at their traditional schools, either from their teachers or due to the rigid schedule and policies. Two students reported they fell behind after experiencing community violence. One student reported that he fell behind after being shot and missing school as a result, and another explained that his sister and nephews were murdered the previous semester, making it difficult to focus or even care about school. They found the traditional environment unresponsive to their personal needs and extenuating circumstances. Kohl (1991) argues that students willfully reject learning when they do not believe their teachers have their best interests at heart, which some of the students admitted when they discussed why they skipped school or did not do well academically.

This alternative program is quite different from the alternative programs in the literature. Carver and Lewis (2010) and Aron (2003) identified several trends in alternative programs. They found that the majority of alternative programs do not have qualified staff and teach a curriculum that holds students to subpar standards. This study found the opposite to be true. The school’s handbook explains that the district curriculum is used, guided by Common Core and state standards. The students reported they were learning more and were held to higher standards at the alternative program. They were expected to master material before they moved on, which they found helpful in promoting authentic deeper learning that prepared them for their next challenge.

Autonomy Supportive Environment

Freeman and Simonsen (2015) explain that students often become at-risk or drop out of school when they lack positive connections and support at school. Pomeroy (1999) argues that at-risk students do not feel they belong and do not trust the adults in the educational system. The
students in this study confirmed that their traditional high schools did not provide positive connections with their teachers and they felt unwanted and unsuported. Osterman (2000) and Strahan (2008) argue that students need to believe their school community cares for them and supports them when they are struggling. This SRL alternative program provided the environment that students needed to thrive by responding to and balancing students’ individual needs for autonomy and support.

This alternative program provided students with autonomy in several ways. It allowed them to choose their schedule, work at their own pace, set their own goals, and make choices about what to learn and how to demonstrate what they learned. The students explained that having the freedom to make these decisions helped them become better problem solvers, manage time better, stay focused and on track, set higher goals for themselves, and achieve more. Bandura (2001) explains that people need to be able to take risks and grapple with environmental factors so they learn how to self-regulate. Giving students the opportunity to determine their own learning path provides them independence. Findings from this study support the literature that states at-risk students need to be given opportunities to enhance their ability to self-regulate (Aron, 2006; Clark, 2003; Gilson, 2006; Wery & Thomson, 2013). This study also confirms the findings from Reeve, Jang, Carrell, Jeon, and Barch (2004) in that when students are afforded choices and given a degree of independence, they are more motivated, engaged, creative, and successful.

Farrelly (2013) and Morrisette (2011) found that an autonomy-supportive approach fosters belonging and positive relationships between at-risk students and their teachers. This study confirms research on the positive effects of an autonomy supportive approach on good teacher/student relationships and students’ sense of belonging. When alternative schools focus on
developing positive relationships, students become more resilient and academically successful (Bethea & Robinson, 2007; Chapman, et al, 2013). The students reported that the teachers were willing to go above and beyond to help them, that they were always supportive and encouraging, and that they were nonjudgmental. Brendtro, Larry, and Brokenleg (2009) posit that helping students believe they belong at school is fundamental to retaining them through graduation. Students in this study found a renewed commitment to graduation and attributed the support of their teachers to having the confidence and motivation to do so.

Limitations

The complexity involved in studying people, especially vulnerable populations, creates natural limitations. This study used a quasi-experimental design in a natural setting. The ability to control variables that may have contributed to the changes students experienced was limited. This study investigated changes specific to the school environment and did not address students’ personal lives and histories. Students were purposefully selected to participate in interviews to minimize this limitation, allowing them to share their perspectives on the changes they experience. However, this lead to two additional limitations specific to this study: the population included and the differences between the settings.

The population studied only included students who chose to attend the alternative program and did not include all the student who were excluded from their traditional high schools. Although this student found positive results for the 39 students who participated, this is a small number for a district with approximately 28,000 students and an average graduation rate of 67%. The students in the study entered the program with a higher than average self-efficacy. Would this have been the case if all of the students referred would have been included? How do
we reach the students who chose to drop out or go to the GED program instead of enrolling at the alternative program? What roles does self-efficacy play in making that decision?

This study focused on students’ perspectives. It did not investigate teachers’ perspectives or their level of implementation of the SRL strategies. A program is only as effective as those who are implementing it. Including teachers’ perspectives and observations of the classroom instruction would contribute to the greater understanding of the different views students had on the SRL strategies. It would also provide insights on the teacher-student relationships that students found to be supportive and motivational.

The framework used to guide this study, triadic reciprocal causation, identifies the environment as a critical component for influencing behavior and personal affect. This study limited the investigation of the environment to the SRL strategies and did not go in depth on the policy differences between the alternative program and the traditional high schools. The policies students referred to during the interviews affected the environment. Although several of these policies are discussed in the findings it is important to address the limited scope of analysis of the policies in this study. The mastery policy requires students to complete their assignments with a minimum accuracy of 70%, ensure that grades are a “C” or higher. The flexible scheduling policy removes many of the conflicts that contribute to being tardy or missing school, which reduces the need to write referrals for such infractions. The open entry/open exit policy allows students to earn credits at their own pace; when they master all of the content in a course they move to another course without being time bound by semesters. Would a change in policy at the traditional school yield similar results as the change in schools did in this study?
Implications and Application

This study found that students become disengaged from school when they lack a sense of belonging and when schools are unresponsive to their individual circumstances. At-risk students can reengage when they have supportive teachers who maintain high standards. Based on the information gained through this research, it is recommended that educators and educational leaders create learning environments based on prevention, early identification, and intervention and build alternative programs that are responsive to individual students’ needs.

Prevention

When considering the extensive list of characteristics that make up the indicators for students to be classified as at-risk, it is clear there is no easy way to prevent students from becoming at-risk. A common theme across the literature and throughout this study is the need for children to have positive relationships with their teachers in an environment that respects the individual needs and interests of all students. Personalization is needed for students to feel they belong. Noguera’s (2003) explanation of the social contract as it exists in most traditional high schools leads to exclusionary policies and systematically undermines students’ sense of belonging. As a result of this study, there are two methods recommended for promoting positive teacher student relationships as a preventative measure: self-regulated learning and whole child development.

Self-regulated learning strategies place students at the center of learning. The students describe the process as supportive and helpful, explaining that when they have choices, it gives them confidence, sustains their interests, and motivates them to try harder. The teacher is not
delivering knowledge to students as receptacles; instead the students are given the work to grapple with and the teachers are there for guidance and support. They actively ask students if they need help rather than viewing questions or the need for additional support and explanations as distracting from the lesson. Through this process, the teachers were able to give explicit feedback in a timely manner, and the students were expected to take this information to make corrections and learn from their mistakes. The students perceived this as caring, supportive, and helpful.

Findings on goal setting, progress monitoring, and self-evaluation provide additional insights into the need for positive and supportive relationships between students and their teachers. These strategies are encouraged as is an emphasis on scaffolding the level of autonomy students have when implementing each of these strategies. Although research suggests these strategies are designed to help students attribute learning to controllable elements, without proper guidance, it can lead to increased stress, a false sense of efficacy, and repeated cycles of failure. As Schwarzer, Dunkel-Schetter, Wiener, and Woo (2014) explain, positive social support buffers stress. When students are failing and they do not have an adult they trust enough to go to for support or express their vulnerabilities, they fall further and further behind.

Although the students in this study were labeled at-risk when they fell behind in their credits, they reported that they fell behind for reasons that were not due to ability or academics. This is consistent with research on at-risk students. Another prevention strategy is to proactively and intentionally develop the whole child from the day they begin school. The ability to learn is dependent on students’ confidence, motivation, focus, and ability to respond effectively to receive feedback from the environment. Incorporating social and emotional learning into the curriculum is needed to build these skills and prepare students to problem solve, interact with
diverse populations, self-advocate, and adapt to a variety of environmental expectations. These supports gave the students the confidence and resilience needed to thwart risk factors.

**Early Identification and Intervention**

Research has identified several characteristics of at-risk students. The students in this study represent typical examples of how students land in alternative programs. Transience, instability in the home, and community violence, along with power struggles with teachers and lack of support were the most common reasons that students identified. However, even armed with this information, our schools and teachers are not adequately prepared to provide the supports needed to help students. Along with the strategies needed for prevention, schools need to develop systems to identify when students are struggling and appropriate strategies for intervening.

Studies show that teachers are not adequately prepared to teach social and emotional skills, let alone provide interventions when deficits are identified (Cochran-Smith, et al., 2009). Schwarzer (2014) argue that people with good coping skills are more likely to receive support. Those without good coping skills are seen as disruptive and non-compliant and are given labels and diagnosed with disabilities (Giroux, 2003; Noguera, 2003). Research on social justice in education demonstrates that this is more likely to happen to minority students and students from poverty. A growing body of research on trauma informed care shows that when educators are trained to understand the impact of traumatic experiences and chronic stress on students’ behavior and learning, they are more likely to take a proactive approach to social and emotional growth and to see negative behaviors as an opportunity to problem solve with the student, reducing the need to label or exclude students. It is recommended that teachers receive proper
training on trauma informed care and problem-solving processes so they do not take negative behaviors personally and can turn negative behaviors into opportunities to teach new skills and coping strategies. This will help teachers avoid power struggles with students and encourage them to include the student in the problem-solving process. When students are included in the process, they are more likely to select strategies that they feel competent to implement.

**Responsive Programs**

Even with excellent prevention strategies (early identification and intervention), there are going to be students whose needs will not be met. The education system of testing and accountability and zero tolerance policies must be reconsidered. Policies that need to be reviewed when creating responsive programs include graduation requirements, mandatory attendance hours, and exclusionary discipline. Graduation in four years needs to be a guideline, not a requirement. Students with a variety of adult responsibilities that are more essential to their wellbeing than school should not have to choose between the two. They are not competing entities. Schools need to be able to flexibly serve students so they can balance their education with their adult responsibilities. This does not mean students should not be held to the same academic standards and level of rigor; it simply means that some students may require more time or more flexible time. The graduation requirements could also incorporate work experience and other experiences that prepare students for adult living in democratic society.

Discipline policies should not be exclusionary or based on control theory. Students who are excluded from school for disciplinary reasons are more likely to continue to be excluded and willfully reject school altogether. Restorative practices that include opportunities for students to learn from their mistakes by righting their wrongs promote belonging, reduce the likelihood of
repeating the infraction and improve social skills (Smith, Fisher, & Frey, 2015). It is recommended that schools stop using zero tolerance policies and minimize exclusionary discipline.

Recommendations for Future Studies

There is an intricate blend of art and science to teaching. Educators need to have a strong base of scientific understanding of how students learn yet need to have the artistic ability to see the bigger picture and creatively adapt to individual students’ needs. Research provides the opportunity to continue to develop a deeper understanding of how students learn and furthers the knowledge that everyone has different learning styles and needs. Although there are countless numbers of subjects to consider for further research, the following suggestions result from the findings in this study. It is recommended to continue to examine whole child development and to investigate the environment in which learning occurs

Whole Child Development

This study was designed to examine the whole child development of at-risk student in an alternative setting. One of the themes was that students experienced positive changes after four months of attendance. Whole child development is multifaceted and can include a variety of indicators. This study was limited to the emotional, social, and academic development, looking only at self-efficacy, discipline referrals, grades, and credits earned as separate indicators. It is recommended to conduct further research on the relationship among the indicators and to investigate the whole child by incorporating physical wellbeing and the impact of trauma.
The findings from this study support the research on whole child development that informs educators about the importance of social and emotional development. Although every student improved in two or more of the indicators and the majority of the students improved across all of the indicators, no relationship was established. Exploring the relationship between indicators would provide additional insights into the needs of at-risk students and give educators additional information to support the development of whole child.

There is a growing body of evidence to support the relationship between trauma and chronic stress on social and emotional wellbeing, physical wellness, brain development, learning and behavior. Breakthrough research conducted over 30 years ago in the medical field, the Averse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) study (Felliti et al., 1998), established the connection between traumatic experience and physical wellness. Since then a plethora of research has identified the profound effects that trauma and chronic stress have on the whole child (Sippel, Pietrzak, Charney, Mayes & Southwick, 2015; Van der Kolk, 2015). The students in this study, as well as throughout the literature on at-risk students, identified traumatic experiences and/or chronic stressors, as indicated by the risk factors on the ACEs assessment, as reasons for falling behind at school and attending the alternative program as a consequence. Additional research in this vein is recommended to help early identification and intervention for students at-risk.

Learning Environment

This study explored the alternative program from the students’ perspectives and how it compared to their previous experiences. The themes that resulted include the students’ beliefs that SRL strategies contributed to their growth and they perceived their new environment as more supportive than their traditional environment. Additional research examining the
difference between the environments may help educators identify ways to support at-risk students without having to exclude them.

This study was limited to the students’ perceptions. Although research on at-risk students calls for exploring students’ points of view on their own experiences, educators and policy makers would benefit from understanding the teachers’ perspectives. Research indicates that teachers are reluctant to implement strategies when they lack the efficacy and knowledge to do so (Schwarzer & Hallum, 2008; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2007) and that teacher prep programs do not adequately prepare educators to teach social and emotional learning (Cohen, 2006; Cochran-Smith, et al, 2009; Darling-Hammond, 2006). Developing the whole child is not addressed in every teacher prep program and is limited, at best, in current national educational policy. Understanding teachers’ perceptions would provide the opportunity to support their development so they can support their students.

Nilson’s (2013) investigation of SRL strategies in different classes calls for research on SRL strategies implemented school wide. The current study was able to answer that call for students who have already been labeled at-risk and excluded from traditional school. Finding and exploring a traditional school that uses SRL strategies universally would provide educators with additional insights into the value of using SRL strategies. This along with methods for implementing the strategies in a traditional classroom would help build the efficacy teachers need to enact changes.

This study found that SRL strategies place teachers in a position to be viewed as supportive by their students, and the students in this study attribute their success to the supportive environment. In addition to the SRL strategies, the students identified the flexible schedule and being able to work at their own pace as practices that contributed to their success.
A study examining the feasibility and costs for implementing these strategies at traditional schools would provide educators with additional methods for supporting students with extenuating circumstances.

Conclusion

This study provided insights into the educational experiences of at-risk students from their perspectives by investigating the changes they experienced in an alternative program. As a result, several SRL strategies were identified that students believed to be helpful in building their confidence, improving their behavior, and helping them get better grades. This study identified school policies and instructional practices that helped students feel supported and motivated and contributed to authentic learning. Students reported that the positive relationships they formed with their teachers increased their motivation, focus, and achievement. By providing at-risk students with the opportunities to make decisions about their learning and providing they needed, the alternative program was successful in developing the whole child.

The insights gained through this study support the call for making the school environment more responsive to individual needs and to develop the whole child. The students in this study supported the findings across the research on at-risk students that traditional schools do not respond well to extenuating needs. Students who are at-risk are at-risk for a variety of reasons. Schools cannot continue to focus solely on developing academic skills or they will continue to fail, leaving students unprepared for active participation in democratic society. This study demonstrates that SRL instructional strategies provides the framework for developing the whole child and gives students the active voice that they need to become lifelong learners.
The district in which this study was conducted has had an average graduation rate of 67% over the last five years. The city has been identified by the FBI as one of the most dangerous cities in the nation and the number of people living in poverty has steadily increased. The community suffers. It is our duty as educators to implement a whole child approach and our responsibility as citizens to advocate for the reforms needed to enact policies and create environments that disrupt the traditional paradigm that clearly is not working. If students can experience the level of changes this study demonstrates after only four months, we must consider the impact this model could have on our community as a whole. Research indicates that when at-risk students are not given the support they need and when the traditional curriculum fails to develop the whole child, graduation rates decline, the school to prison pipeline increases, and the cycles of poverty, dependence and disenfranchisement continue. Our communities suffer as a result. We can no longer ignore the adverse effects that the testing and accountability paradigm has on our most vulnerable populations and our society as a whole. A social justice orientation to education is long overdue.
REFERENCES


*Handbook of research in social studies education*, 219.


APPENDIX A

MODIFIED GENERALIZED SELF-EFFICACY SCALE
(Schwarzer & Jerusalem, 1995)
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>I can always manage to solve difficult problems if I try hard enough.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>If someone opposes me, I can find the means and ways to get what I want.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>It is easy for me to stick to my aims and accomplish my goals.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>I am confident that I could deal efficiently with unexpected events.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Thanks to my resourcefulness, I know how to handle unforeseen situations.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6</td>
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<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>I can solve most problems if I invest the necessary effort.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6</td>
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<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>I can remain calm when facing difficulties because I can rely on my coping abilities.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6</td>
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<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>When I am confronted with a problem, I can usually find several solutions.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6</td>
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<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>If I am in trouble, I can usually think of a solution.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6</td>
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<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>I can usually handle whatever comes my way.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6</td>
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</table>

**Total**
APPENDIX B

SURVEY – SELF-REGULATED LEARNING INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICES
Answer the questions in the table by using the following scale:

1 = Never  2 = Not usually  3 = Sometimes  4 = Often  5 = Usually  6 = Always

Circle the number that best describes what you believe.

Answer the question that follows by giving your opinion of whether or not you think this strategy is useful to you as a student. Give examples when possible.

**Goal Setting**

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>My teachers require me to set goals for each unit of study</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>I am expected to set goals more often here than at my previous school</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Setting goals helps me feel confident as a student</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Setting goals helps improve my behavior</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Setting goals helps me improve my grades</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
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6. I believe that goal setting ____________________________________________________________

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______________________________________________________________________________

**Collaborative Planning**

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>My teachers let me decide on what strategies to use to demonstrate my learning</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>I am given choices on what strategies I use to demonstrate my learning more often here than at my previous school</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
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<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Providing me with choices on how I learn helps me feel confident as a student</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Providing me with choices on how I learn helps improve my behavior</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Providing me with choices on how I learn helps me improve my grades</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
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</table>
12. I believe that allowing me to choose my strategies for demonstrating my learning ______________________
____________________________________________________________________________________

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>My teachers give me choices on what topics to learn</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>I am given choices on what topics to learn more often here than at my previous school</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Providing me with choices on what I’m learning helps me feel confident as a student</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Providing me with choices on what I’m learning helps improve my behavior</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Providing me with choices on what I’m learning helps me improve my grades</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
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18. I believe that providing me with choices on what I’m learning _____________________________
____________________________________________________________________________________

Monitoring Progress

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>My teachers expect me to track my own progress</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>I am expected to track my own progress more often here than at my previous school</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Tracking my own progress helps me feel confident as a student</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Tracking my own progress helps improve my behavior</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Tracking my own progress helps me improve my grades</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
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24. I believe that tracking my own progress ________________________________________________
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Feedback

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>I am expected to evaluate my own work/ learning</td>
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<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>I am expected to evaluate my learning more often here than at my previous school</td>
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<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>Evaluating my learning helps me feel confident as a student</td>
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<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>Evaluating my learning helps improve my behavior</td>
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<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>Evaluating my learning helps me improve my grades</td>
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30. I believe that providing me with choices ____________________________

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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>31</td>
<td>My teachers provide me with detailed feedback on all of my assignments so that I know what I need to improve</td>
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<tr>
<td>32</td>
<td>I am given detailed feedback more often here than at my previous school</td>
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<tr>
<td>33</td>
<td>Providing me with detailed feedback helps me feel confident as a student</td>
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<td>34</td>
<td>Providing me with detailed feedback helps improve my behavior</td>
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<tr>
<td>35</td>
<td>Providing me with detailed feedback helps me improve my grades</td>
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36. I believe that providing me with detailed feedback ____________________________

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______________________________________________________________________________
Learning from my mistakes

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>37</td>
<td>My teachers provide me with the opportunity to learn from my mistakes</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>38</td>
<td>I am given the opportunity to learning from my mistakes more often here than at my previous school</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>39</td>
<td>Providing me with the opportunity to learn from my mistakes helps me feel confident as a student</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6</td>
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<tr>
<td>40</td>
<td>Providing me with the opportunity to learn from my mistakes helps improve my behavior</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6</td>
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<tr>
<td>41</td>
<td>Providing me with the opportunity to learn from my mistakes helps me improve my grades</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6</td>
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42. I believe that providing me with the opportunity to learn from my mistakes ___________

______________________________________________________________________________

______________________________________________________________________________
APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL
1. Why are you attending School X?

2. How does your overall experience here compare to your experience at your home high school?

3. How does classroom instruction at school X compare to your home high school?

4. What do you like/dislike about the classroom instruction here?

5. Last semester you had ___ referrals. This semester you have ____. Here is a description of your behavior based on your referrals from last semester, and one from this semester. What instructional practices do you believe contributed to your reduction in conduct referrals and social growth?

6. Your self-efficacy scores changes from ___ to ___ after one semester here. What instructional practices do you think contribute to your improved self-efficacy and emotional growth?

7. Last semester your GPA was _____ and you earned ______ credits. This semester your GPA was ______ and you earned _____ credits. What instructional practices do you believe contributed to your improved GPA and overall academic growth?

8. What else would you like to share about your experiences as a student, either here or previously, that you feel has influenced your learning?