AN ANALYSIS OF PERFORMANCE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN SELF-DIRECTED AND TEACHER-DIRECTED ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION CAMPUSES IN TEXAS

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Dissertation Prepared for the Degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH TEXAS

May 2010

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This study was conducted to analyze the performance differences between alternative education campuses in Texas that used teacher-directed strategies and those that used self-directed strategies. The study was also conducted to inform educators of the results these two strategies had achieved with at-risk students during the three years of 2006-2008.

The study used the results from the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills test as reported in the AEIS annual reports from the Texas Education Agency. Alternative education schools were grouped according to the strategy used to educate at-risk students.

The results of the statistical tests showed the two strategies had similar performance results and there was no statistical difference between the two.

The results offered several implications concerning the ability of at-risk students to achieve in alternative education schools including possible reasons why students who were previously unsuccessful became successful in alternative settings.

The report also addressed the number of students who continued to be unsuccessful even when placed on an alternative education campus. Possible reasons for this continued inability to succeed are discussed.

Recommendations for further research were listed at the conclusion of the study.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Completing a work of study and research is not an individual effort. Encouragement, guidance, and input all play a part in the process. My attempt to recognize and thank the individuals who played key roles in my life related to this study cannot begin to express how much I appreciate their assistance and influence. Each of them is important and significant in my continued involvement in educational studies.

The professors and staff at the University of North Texas have been wonderful. Dr. Richard Fossey provided ideas on instructional strategies. Dr. Brooks, my mentor, was a constant encourager and supporter. Dr. Huffman, my committee chairperson, provided excellent guidance and counsel. Celia McCall walked me through the statistical testing and Jill Kleister provided invaluable assistance in her editing and input.

Two men, and their organizations, played a huge role in providing counsel and feedback as I worked on this project. My pastor, Beau Hughes, and the men at the Village Church Denton were constant companions. Charles Cook, my Chief Executive Officer, and all the educators at Responsive Education Solutions were models of best practice.

Finally, my family continues to be a source of joy and passion, in my work and in my life. My mom, Mary Jo, and sister, Connie, keep me grounded. My sons, Isaac, Micah, and Aaron; my daughter-in-laws, Dru, Amanda, and Erin; and my beautiful granddaughter Layla, have all been the team I needed during this work. My work is for my grandchildren, now and in the future. Finally, my wife, Bonnie Belle Moore Wimberley, is a consummate teacher and educator. Her ability to keep me focused and inspired has provided me with advice and encouragement to keep moving forward.
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

The ability of educators to meet the needs of students is crucial to the health and progress of a society, as well as the potential for success of individuals later in life. Studies continue to produce evidence of the advantages of a high school education as opposed to an adult life without a diploma. Murrell (1994) maintains that even though a diploma may not always be a guarantee for success, if a person does not possess a high school education, the chances for socioeconomical failure and struggles are greatly increased. The diploma is a prerequisite to career progression, credibility and respect within most communities, and the first step in seeking effective and productive work.

Evidence shows that those with a minimum of a high school education will fare better in our society. The US Department of Labor, in 2003, reported that high school dropouts are 72% more likely to be unemployed compared to high school graduates. In other words, the diploma offers a young adult a 72% better chance of employment in the job market. This disparity affects society in a collective sense. While the inability to successfully find and keep employment is a personal issue for individuals, collectively a community suffers when the contributions and benefits afforded by a workforce of employed citizens are absent. The ability of individuals to be employed and to create a life as an adult characterized by hard work and productive involvement in a community is a benchmark for success. This study compared methodologies used to educate individuals who are seeking diplomas in alternative school settings. The viability of the methodologies used for these students is an important factor in their later success in the job market.

A diploma opens the door to the minimum of possibilities later in adult life. Though the
jobs offered to someone with only a high school diploma may be at the lower end of the economic scale, the opportunities are there nonetheless. Young adults in our society, trying to improve their lives, find it difficult, if not impossible, to do so without the benefit of a high school education.

Researchers studying the individual economic possibilities of graduates versus non-graduates have documented significant differences between the two populations. Not only does the collective issue of growing dropout populations have negative social effects, the personal effect on individuals can be dramatic. Hickman (2008) reports there is a significant difference in lifetime earnings between high school graduates and non-graduates, amounting to almost $400,000 for graduates. The possession of a diploma can be a dividing line between success and non-success. Achieving the minimum of a high school education, and being able to produce evidence of the diploma, offers the foundation for a better life. The most basic duty of the education system must be to prepare future adults to become productive members of the workforce, and the first priority should be to devote the time and effort necessary to create environments for all students to achieve a diploma.

Schneider and Stevenson (1999) called attention to a change in educational focus, reporting that high schools in America have become college preparatory schools for almost all students, particularly in the last 40 years. College-preparatory status has become a goal for most educational institutions. Many believe that this should be the first mission of a high school. The importance of high schools providing vocational tracks as well as college-preparedness tracks has lessened. Yet, while most educational institutions project a college-preparatory mission, the number of students falling behind grows each year. Many students, falling farther behind, choose to drop out of school, thus dropouts continue to increase in number. The drop-out crisis facing
secondary schools can have a devastating effect on our economy and effectiveness as a nation. According to the National Education Association, lowering dropout rates in the United States could recoup billions in economic losses, including over $192 billion in lost tax and income revenue with each successive year of dropouts (Campaign for Education Equity, 2005).

The National Commission on Excellence in Education report, *A Nation at Risk*, which has been in existence for over 25 years, sounded the alarm for true education reform. However, the elements cited in the report as crucial for a better educational system have not been very successfully implemented (Nation at Risk, 1983). In a report card summary on the report, The Strong American Schools Project (2008), a nonpartisan project of the Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors stated:

> Now is not the time for more educational research or reports or commissions. We have enough common-sense ideas, backed by decades of research, to significantly improve American schools. The missing ingredient isn’t even educational at all. It’s political. Too often, state and local leaders have tried to enact reforms of the kind recommended in *A Nation at Risk* only to be stymied by organized special interests and political inertia. (p. 1)

As more high schools move toward a college preparatory mission, the population of students dropping out and not achieving a minimum of a high school diploma creates a significant warning that education may be offering a college-prepared education or nothing at all. While the goal of college-preparedness is admirable and well-meaning, those who struggle with effective progress in their high school studies could become disenfranchised and find themselves with less opportunities. If the options for students continue pushing only toward college preparation, students not aligned with this environment may find increased frustration and begin seriously considering the one option they may have control over - dropping out and not finishing high school altogether. This trend further extends the damaging effects on individuals as documented by Barr and Parrett (2001):
The problem is not simply that some students are doing poorly in school. The problems relate to all youth who are in danger of not just failing and dropping out of school, but of entering adulthood illiterate, dependent upon drugs and alcohol, unemployed or underemployed, as a teenage parent, dependent on public support, or adjudicated by the criminal justice system…The essential knowledge and skills needed to participate adequately in contemporary life have expanded far beyond the grasp of a large number of young Americans. (p. 3)

The lack of a high school diploma can be a predictor of potential adult failure. While many factors can be components of this failure, the absence of a high school education is the most prominent.

A study conducted by researchers at Rice University and the University of Texas in Austin concluded that 135,000 students are lost in Texas before graduation each year (Austin Business Journal, 2008). Cultural and sociological elements create barriers to learning that can cause a dysfunctional approach to education for the student enrolled in alternative education campuses. Biased assumptions, learned helplessness, and adapted family structures are also factors that play a role in the ability of the student to sustain success in today’s academic environment. These issues must be recognized and attempts must be made to create systems more congruent with the reality of this population. If the American education system is to be more responsive to the dropout crisis, and efforts are made to begin to address this response, data regarding the assessment of the state of the at-risk population within that system will inform the debate.

Purpose of the Study

Much attention has been given to the issue of school effectiveness. Education has undergone a transformation in the past 25 years that is moving resources and efforts into the area of college preparation, creating a default high school agenda that is leaving more students behind
each year. Attempts to address this issue, such as alternative education campuses (AEC), have been implemented to respond to the needs of at-risk students. The Texas Education Agency has developed the Alternative Education Accountability (AEA) system to respond to campuses serving large populations of at-risk students. Performance measures for campuses serving at-risk students were developed in late 1994 and implemented in the 1995-96 school year. In order for a campus to qualify as alternative, it was required to serve one or more of the following student populations: students at-risk of dropping out; recovered dropouts; pregnant or parenting students; adjudicated students; students with severe discipline problems; or expelled students (TEA Accountability Manual, 2008). State legislatures have enacted legislation that creates charter schools to provide alternate choices for students and parents seeking education outside traditional environments (Center for Education Reform, 2008). A major shift has also occurred in instructional strategy. There has been a movement to develop self-directed methodologies that minimize the role of the teacher and maximize the personal motivation of the student in the academic process. Though the research in school effectiveness is extensive, there has been little research to assess the effectiveness of self-directed methodologies as compared to teacher-directed environments.

The purpose of the study was to compare the performance on state-mandated testing in Texas between conventional alternative education campuses utilizing teacher-directed instruction and alternative education campuses utilizing self-directed learning strategies. In order to study the comparison, I examined three major areas. First, I examined the creation of the alternative education accountability system and alternative education campuses as responses to the growing at-risk problem. The history and the purpose for which these were created were studied to develop an understanding of this system.
Second, I studied the environment of alternative education, whether in local school districts or in systems started within the charter school environment. There is a distinction between the independent school system and the charter school system in the state of Texas. Alternative education campuses operated by charter school systems are subject to certain guidelines and restrictions not applied to conventional school systems. I studied and noted these distinctions.

Third, I investigated the development, growth, and utilization of the self-directed approach to instruction and learning. The philosophies behind a teacher-directed system are well-founded and accepted as the traditional process for American schools. The self-directed strategy has gained acceptance among those in alternative education. I examined the growth and continued use of the strategy in alternative education campuses.

Statement of the Problem

Effective alternatives to conventional education have become viable options for student populations not responding to traditional environments. The creation of alternative campuses signified a concerted effort to stem or decrease the number of dropouts. The efforts to turn the dropout crisis around can be costly and have far-reaching effects on education as a whole. Within the environment of alternative education campuses, the development of the self-directed movement has created clear philosophical differences with schools using conventional strategies. Thus, research examined the effectiveness of the accepted teaching strategies in alternative environments to assess the capacity of these environments to meet the needs of at-risk students attending alternative education campuses.
Research Questions

During the process of studying the performance of at-risk populations attending alternative education campuses, and comparing the difference in performance between those in schools utilizing teacher-directed environments and those in self-directed settings, the research was guided by the following research questions:

1. What performance differences existed between secondary students attending alternative education campuses using teacher-directed strategy and campuses using self-directed strategy for each of the three years of the study?

2. What performance differences existed over a three year period between secondary students attending alternative education campuses using teacher-directed strategy and campuses using self-directed strategy?

3. Which strategy showed greater increase in performance results for secondary students over a period of three years?

Theoretical Framework

The foundation for this study is the concept of education reform and how it has been shaped since the mid 1980s. Educational theorists have advocated for change and reform for many years. The advent of public education in the last century, the exponential increase in student populations, and the critical assessments of the mid-century worked together to create an environment that called for changes in how the nation’s schools were preparing children for society. Though change is crucial to responding to student populations, many times change can become nothing more than an issue discussed rather an issue resolved. Fullan and Miles (1992) asserted that understanding and dealing with change is the most fundamental change needed for individuals and organizations. Reform is successful when educators understand the need for change, have a commitment to create the changes necessary for improvement, and work collaboratively to implement the changes.
When one pictures the concept of reform, many times the idea is illustrated as a pendulum that swings to the extreme before swinging back to the other extreme for a period of years. However, the concept may also be pictured as a cycle that responds to the weakest areas of current reality but does not abandon best practice in that response. If reform moves an organization forward, serious consideration must be given to the effects that reform has on a stakeholders. Education reform, in many ways, can be compared to organizational change. All components of an organization are affected by change. When change occurs, some components are strengthened while others may be weakened. This occurs because the environment of education is a system. Peter Senge, Director of the Society for Organizational Learning, studies organizations and systems thoroughly and provides insights into how these entities are affected by change.

According to Senge (1990) all people have the capacity to learn but the structures (whether they be educational, business, or otherwise job-related environments), in which they function are often not conducive to the building blocks of systems theory: reflection and engagement. Furthermore, people may not have the developed skills or understanding it takes to make sense of the situations they face. Organizations that are learning and consistently striving to expand their capacity to create their future must have a fundamental shift of mind among their members. In his work, The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization, Senge (1990) maintains learning gets to the heart of what it is to be human. He believes that individuals can re-create ourselves, not in a physical sense, but in a way that carries belief systems and ethics forward past ourselves. Senge wants to couple adaptive learning (the survival aspect of learning) with generative learning (our ability to create and re-create). Senge proposes that organizations are characterized by disciplines, namely personal mastery, mental models,
building shared vision, and team learning. A learning organization will also apply a fifth
discipline, systems thinking, to its activities. This systems thinking component is the foundation
and framework that allows the other disciplines to function effectively.

Coupling Senge’s (1990) theory of systems thinking with Fullan’s (1992) theories of
change and reform can explain in part how education must respond in a cyclic form rather than a
pendulum. The current dropout crisis has characteristics of an extreme push toward college
preparation while leaving behind, or disenfranchising, a growing population of students. While it
is admirable to hold to an idea that all graduates of an educational system should be prepared for
continued educational opportunities provided by universities, the system is also populated by a
large (and growing) population of students who do not, and will not, aspire to these goals.
Senge’s systems theory proposes that the entire body of education is a system that cannot
change, modify or reform one part without affecting the other parts. Acceptance of this
knowledge compels educators advocating reform to understand that any shift to popular ideas or
goals must be made in a cyclic fashion, strengthening the opportunities for students without
abandoning students who have different needs and abilities. To effectively reform education,
educators must first understand the processes involved, accept that all parts of the system must
be served, and be intensely aware and responsive to each part as reform happens.

Sergiovanni (1982) stated that when components of leadership become successful in
practice as well as theory “we come to see leadership as less a behavioral style or management
technique and more as cultural expression” (p. 331). Culture, the transformation of ideas about
change into practices, is created by ideas, belief systems, and practice of humans involved in
leadership. In education, the creation of culture has continually been a search for the defined role
of a school system and how leadership fits within that role. All educators would affirm that they
care about all students. However, when a system becomes institutionalized, creating a cultural environment, attempts to change or reform can be difficult at best. The advance of current school culture toward only college preparation has potential to move equal and effective educational opportunities away from many students. Barr and Parrett (2001) assert:

Even the best of intentions have often created programs that have not only failed to help at-risk youth but have also compounded their problems. One could conclude that many of these programs have been developed not so much to provide significant assistance to at-risk youth but to get these unfortunate youth out of regular classrooms where they make teaching and learning so hard for teachers and the other, better achieving students. (p. 60)

The growing numbers of at-risk students can be served but only if leaders respond effectively to the indifferent components of the systemic culture that leaves the students behind. In his book, *The New Meaning of Educational Change*, Fullan (1991) notes that transformational change must be concerned with the collective good. Educators cannot bring necessary change to a system unless they think beyond their own classrooms, campuses, and districts. It is too easy for educators to approach an educational position in a territorial manner that is only concerned with the improvement of the boundaried area of the position. For education to be truly reformed in a systemic, cyclic way, all educators must see themselves as part of the whole, working to improve the whole. Fullan (1991) began the process of seeing leadership as the focal point for sustainable change to occur.

The development of leadership as a change agent for education was not a primary element for change throughout most of the previous century. However, recent change and developments toward a more personalized approach to instruction and learning has focused attention on the importance of leadership. Fullan (2003) focused attention on the importance of leadership over standards stating that standards cannot fully or adequately achieve true reform. He reminds us that leadership can become the central focus point and theme for reform to accomplish educational goals. As leadership has gained prominence, the purpose of that
leadership has also become more focused. Bolman and Deal (1995) noted, in *Leading with Soul*, that leadership should continually look beyond management issues and seek ways to invest mission and purpose into others, giving them significance and meaning. Education has the capacity to move toward a personalized approach for all students, one that recognizes and strengthens the potential for all students to succeed. In order to accomplish this type of personalized education, educators are encouraged to see their role as leading teachers to focus on all students, working collaboratively to educate all students, and taking responsibility for every student.

Lightfoot (1978) contended that suburban schools respond more effectively to parent and student needs because there is a sense of responsibility felt on the part of educators and a sense of entitlement felt on the part of parents to have their children educated using the best possible resources. For sustainable reform to occur, all students should be served systemically within the reform. Recent developments of alternative and charter schools are attempts to address the population of students outside the *college preparation* emphases of educational change. The growth of personalized instructional environments, such as those proposed by DuFour (2004), have also addressed the need for educators to work to meet the needs of all students. Accountability for all students, not just those who respond to conventional strategies, has become a growing concern in education. DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, and Karhanek, (2004) assert:

> Our goal is to remind educators of the dreams and aspirations of the children who come to school, the parents who send them there, and the teachers and principals who entered the profession to make a difference in the lives of students. None of these constituencies strives for failure. Each yearns for success. (p. 11)

> It is inherent in each individual involved in the process of education - student, parent, and educator - to want to achieve personal success.

> While this study addressed the comparison and assessment of performance on
populations that are mostly at-risk, the theoretical foundation underlying change for these students is embedded in the relationships and interactive work of educators as teachers and learners. Huffman and Hipp (2003) state:

Educational administration programs and other institutions of higher education need to prepare potential school leaders to move beyond issues of management, and provide practical experiences that focus on relationships and learning outcomes. These programs must teach future administrators how to facilitate change centered on student and teacher learning. (pp. 149-150)

Focusing on relationships, taking responsibility and accountability for all students, and personalizing the educational process for students, provides a framework for affecting change within an educational system that can strengthen best practice while meeting the needs of all students within the system.

In this study, comparison of two methodologies in current environments educating students in alternative schools provided data to assess attempts by educators to be innovative and creative in meeting the academic needs of these students. Research included evidence of the performance of students who attend alternative campuses utilizing teacher-directed instruction. The study also showed evidence of the performance of those who attend alternative campuses that have made attempts to individualize, or personalize, the instructional process. The study gave insight into the success of educators to put into practice the theories and ideas of personalization for students.

Definition of Terms

The following definitions provide an understanding of terms consistently used in this study:

* At-risk – Term used to identify students who may be at-risk of dropping out of school.
The Texas Education Agency uses 13 identifiers to qualify a student as at-risk (Texas Education Code, 2008).

* Alternative schools – Schools created to provide choices and options for education. Local school districts typically operate an alternative school as part of the overall education system within the community. Charter schools, many times, are considered alternative schools primarily because they operate most often separate from local school districts.

* Alternative Education Accountability (AEA) – The accountability system used by the Texas Education Agency to determine testing results and ranking.

* Alternative education campuses (AEC) – Schools, whether part of a local independent school district or charter schools, identified by the Texas Education Agency as providing services to large populations of at-risk students.

* Charter schools – Public schools in the state of Texas directly accountable to the Texas Education Agency rather than a local bureaucratic or legislative body. Some charter schools can be created within, and be responsible to, a local school district. However, most charter schools operate separate from local school governance. These schools are under the same testing accountability as local independent school districts (Charter School Policy Institute, 2008).

* Conventional schools – Schools employing the teacher-directed instruction strategy, whether as a charter school or as a campus in a local independent school district.

* Self-directed education – Strategy utilizing the instructor as a facilitator of the content rather than a teacher. The student is given responsibility to process content primarily through reading and seeking the facilitator’s assistance as needed.

* Teacher-directed instruction – Accepted strategy of most educational institutions and teacher preparation programs focusing on the instructor constructing lesson plans and classroom
activities to teach and guide students in learning content.

Limitations

The focus of the study was on alternative education campuses designed to educate large at-risk populations. The study was limited to two types of strategies: a teacher-directed environment constructed largely around the principles of traditional classrooms and a self-directed environment constructed around the principles of teachers as facilitators and students controlling their own progress and achievement. The study was limited by the performance data from TEA for the years 2006-2008. The data collected was limited to students in ninth grade and above. The ability to generalize findings for other populations or students not at-risk was not possible.

Delimitations

The study had several delimitations. The study was delimited to traditional high schools even if those campuses serve large populations of at-risk students. Only high school student data was collected. The study was also delimited to any data from TEA other than test performance on the state assessments. No additional PEIMS data or state-generated data was considered for the study. The study was delimited to any strategy other than the teacher-directed or self-directed environments.

Finally, the study was delimited to any state other than Texas. While recognizing that other states serve populations such as those studied, Texas has proven to be the state leading others in shaping education policy and procedure such as the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, as well as providing a healthy environment for alternative education and education reform.
Significance of the Study

This research study can impact the capacity of self-directed learning environments to respond to the dropout crisis. Alternative education, charter schools, and self-directed methodologies have been in existence long enough to provide data to compare performance with conventional educational strategy. If differences are significant, educators wanting to address dropout issues can utilize the findings in decision-making. The results of the study can lead researchers and practitioners to develop additional instructional strategies specifically designed for the at-risk populations. The study can address alternative education campus effectiveness as well. It is apparent that education reform has been, and continues to be, one of the major issues for education research. The dropout crisis is increasing in seriousness and effect (Gottlob, 2008) and many educators are making strides in calling attention to, and addressing the needs of, the at-risk student. Some of these attempts are creating strong cultures of individualization for students, and several years of performance data can be used to compare and analyze results. As more educators devote themselves to the needs of at-risk students, it is important to develop the curriculum and practice in the most effective manner in order to keep students in school, help them achieve a positive relationship with the educational process, and assist them as they work toward a high school diploma. Lastly, the study may draw attention to the current status of education in improving performance levels among at-risk populations.

Organization of the Study

This research study is organized according to traditional dissertation standards. Chapter I introduced the need for research in addressing the educational opportunities for all students. Chapter II provides a critical analysis of the literature related to the creation and growth of
alternative education campuses and the defined strategy of self-directed education. Chapter III described the research methodology utilized to measure the comparisons between performance of at-risk students on alternative education campuses employing teacher-directed education and alternative education campuses employing self-directed education. Chapter IV presents the results and analysis of the collected data. In Chapter V, I provide a discussion of results, outlines possible conclusions and generalizations, and makes recommendations for possible future studies.
CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction

Education reform is not a new idea or concept that has suddenly appeared at center-stage (Fullan, 1991). Educators and researchers continually seek ways to improve education, to make it relevant and valid for each generation of students. However, the attempts to clearly define the purpose of American education and how it connects to society have become increased concerns for reformers. Since the emergence of the modern national educational system in the last century, reformers have been active and vocal (DuFour, 2004; Fullan, 2003; Spellings, 2008). The objective of calls for reform has been identified as not only an effort to improve the classroom or campus, but also an effort to improve the present and future American educational community by ensuring its members have the opportunity to be successful (New Study, 2003).

This review of literature includes (1) a structure of historical framework for the context of the problem, (2) research on the major education reform shift that occurred in the mid 1980s, (3) the theoretical and practical understanding of personalized learning environments and needs, (4) the current status at-risk populations as related to educational achievement and (5) current research on alternative education and schools of choice.

Historical Context of the Problem

Dropping out of school and attempting to take on adult responsibilities early is not a new issue. There has always been a population of students choosing to leave school before graduation and this population has been comprised of students from all backgrounds. Yet, the characteristics of dropouts tend to be centered within specific social types and backgrounds. Weis, Farrar, and
Petrie (1989) maintained that placing the blame on students and parents was commonplace during the 1960s and 1970s. The school itself and society in general were prevented from taking blame for a growing dropout rate. Accountability was laid squarely on the shoulders of students who were responsible for their own problems, and on families that could not seem to provide an adequate environment for student success.

Many times, students unable to function effectively at early ages, though their problems may be symptoms of a need to have their unique learning styles recognized and addressed, may be identified and classified as special education candidates. This can begin a process that labels the child, minimizes their potential, and leaves them farther behind. Barr and Parrett (2001) report:

> While research has documented that effective education in the lower elementary grades can dramatically reduce special education referrals, school policy and practice that ignores this promising evidence not only fails to adequately address the needs of at-risk youth, but often contributes to the growing numbers of students leaving school early. (p. 50)

These students develop signs of ineffective educational attainment, low rates of achievement, and a belief system that causes them to consider leaving the system as soon as possible. While special education offers many advantages to the child with true cognitive deficiencies, labeling students early who merely suffer from academic, rather than cognitive, problems can be a precursor to their dropout status in later years.

A 2003 study conducted by the Center for Labor Market Studies at Northeastern University by the Business Roundtable showed that the high school dropout rate may be three times higher than the government first estimated. The study reported that a failure to graduate could lead to a diminished capacity for success in the future. Not only for the individual, but in the country’s best interest, the nation should address the growing problem (New Study, 2003).
The nation’s best interest has always been a common, accepted goal for society. If young adults are to compete in the job market and provide productive contributions to their communities, the minimum of a high school education is essential. While the nation’s statistics are alarming, the numbers for Texas alone have been just as bleak. Becken (2008) reports a dropout increase in Texas of 11.3%, rising to more than 18,000 students in 2004.

Students still attending school, yet considered being in danger of dropping out, are considered at risk. They disengage from school concerns. Coupled with this disengagement are family and social difficulties that further lead to a diminished potential to achieve a diploma. While the numbers of students becoming non-students is growing, there are many still within the system who have not actually left but are exhibiting the signs typical of dropout status. By definition, at-risk students must meet one of the following criteria in Texas, outlined in the School Policy Institute (2008):

1. Fail to advance to the next grade level for one or more years
2. In Grades 7-12, achieve less than 70 (out of 100) in two or more foundation subjects in the current or preceding year or semester
3. Not meeting satisfactory performance on state tests (TAKS)
4. In grades Pre-K through third grade, not meeting satisfactory levels in readiness testing
5. Pregnant or parent status
6. Expelled in the current or preceding year
7. On parole, probation, deferred prosecution, or conditional release
8. Placed in alternative education programs in the current or preceding year
9. Previously dropping out of school
10. Limited English proficiency
11. Placed in or referred to the Department of Protective or Regulatory Services
12. Homeless

13. Previously, or currently, in a residential treatment facility. (Charter School Policy Institute, 2008, Fact 9)

Many students in today’s high schools find it difficult to navigate conventional methodologies and the day-to-day routine of an educational system. Though the majority of student populations can acclimate themselves to the system and respond adequately in order to succeed, others become disillusioned and frustrated with the process. Disengagement from the learning process shows that even for those students still attending school, the numbers who could become potential dropouts are increasing as well.

Some schools even create systems that exacerbate the problem. Wolk (2004) reports in a study conducted by the Center for Social Organizations at St. Johns Hopkins University, that a large number of high schools, mostly located in urban areas, lose 40% of their students each year, and nearly half of the nation's African American students and 40% of Latinos attend the nation’s worst schools. Margaret Spellings, Secretary of Education, twice used the term dropout factories during her 2008 speech at the National Summit on America’s Silent Epidemic while referring to the nation’s worst cases of dropout populations.

The issue of dropouts is not a new problem but it is a problem that is increasingly being referred to as a crisis. Simpson (2004) suggests:

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, a research arm of the U.S. Department of Education, annual dropout rates for the 100 largest school districts in America are grossly under-calculated. Some errors or miscalculations are due to non-counting of a population that is non-enrolled and without an outreach program. Other errors include those who move in and do not report to school, annual rates that distort and provide no clue of the actual cumulative state. (p. 36)

The need for young adults in our immediate future to possess a minimum of a high school education is critical. Just as important is the need to address the learning needs of students still in the school system. With additional information and strategies, educators can acknowledge the
needs of these at-risk students and implement the practices necessary to avert their dropout potential.

**Major Education Reform Shift in the 1980s**

In the mid-80s, calls for education reform escalated and several organizations documented impressions of the current state of education and what should be done. Two major documents were created on a national level that brought these diverse reports into a cohesive summary and attempted to provide direction for reform.

One study, sponsored by the National Institute of Education, and authored by Passow in 1984 entitled *A Review of the Major Current Reports on Secondary Education* was created to outline 15 major reports addressing education and recommended changes (Passow, 1984). The author analyzed each report. The 15 reports included the following:

1. *A Nation at Risk: the Imperative for Education Reform* by the National Commission on Excellence in Education
2. *High School* by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching
3. *A Study of Schooling* by Dr. John Goodlad
4. *The Paideia Proposal* by the Paideia Group
5. *Making the Grade* by the Twentieth Century Fund Task Force
6. *Academic Preparation for College* by the College Board Educational Equality Project
7. Education Commission of the States
8. *Educating Americans for the 21st Century* by the National Science Board Commission on Precollege Education in Mathematics, Science, and Technology
9. *A Study of High Schools (Horace's Compromise)*
10. *The Need for Quality*
11. *Education, Character, and American Schools*
12. An Education of Value

13. Wisconsin Program for the Renewal and Improvement of Secondary Education

14. Redefining General Education in the American High School

15. The Scarsdale Conference (p. 5)

While the summary report provides details on each study, a review of each particular study provides a greater understanding of the thinking of educational reformers at that time.

Stedman (1985) suggested:

The quality of education in our schools, particularly our high schools, and appropriate Federal actions to improve educational quality have become a major political issue. A number of reports on education with recommendations for change have been issued, among them A Nation At-risk by the National Commission on Excellence in Education. These reports are critical of how our schools are functioning and call for improvement in areas such as teaching, curriculum, and standards for student performance and behavior. Some issues raised by these reports are whether these changes are needed, how these changes might be implemented, and what might be the roles of different levels of government in this process. (p. 3)

The above-quoted material is an introduction to a Congressional Research Service document entitled Education in America: Reports on Its Condition, Recommendations for Change published in 1985, the second noted study conducted to summarize major reform studies of the time period. While several of the reports were identical in their findings, the volume of research contained in each pointed out the need for reform. The study gives details on ten major reports created in the preceding years on the status of education in our nation. These reports included:

1. A Nation at Risk: the Imperative for Education Reform by the National Commission on Excellence in Education

2. Making the Grade by the Twentieth Century Fund Task Force

3. Action for Excellence by the National Task Force on Education for Economic Growth

4. High School by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching

5. A Study of High Schools (Horace's Compromise)
During the preceding years, it seems more students were availing themselves of a high school education and even attempting college entrance than in previous years (Stedman, 1983). Schools were tracking students into vocational, general, and academic programs. The prevailing agreement among all the reports was that education was not doing a good job, however, and should be reformed to meet the challenges faced by a changing world. Stedman asserted that reform had become a political issue rather than simply an educational concept. In his report, he stressed that society placed three major pressures on schools: economic, international, and technological.

Though both reports provided summaries of the major reform documents of the day, the recommendations offered by each document were varied and widely diverse. *A Nation at-risk* accused the educational system as being threatened by mediocrity and called for more rigorous standards and curriculum (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). This document, widely accepted as the most notable of the reports and gaining the most exposure became a platform for change. However, the remaining reports were significant in the effects they also had on the educational system.

Sizer (1984) suggested that schools were more concerned with standardization than standards. He accused teachers of giving information to students but never teaching students how
to use the information. Most notably, Sizer argued that high school attendance should be voluntary.

Three of the reports, written independently by Goodlad in 1983, Lazerson in 1983, and Adler in 1982 focused their studies (and findings) on the inability of schools to teach children how to think. Each of these reports called for a more intellectual approach to education and called for schools to take learning to a higher level. These reports, conducted by individuals rather than being created by a specific group, encouraged educators to begin teaching children how to think critically and to use the information they received in school. Each author felt that the school was the setting for young citizens to begin to develop intellectual skills and knowledge.

Four of the reports, including the National Science Board in 1983, the Southern Regional Education Board in 1981, the College Board in 1983 and an individual report by Olsen in 1982 targeted core academics, more time in school, raising minimum standards, and the strengthening of math and science disciplines. These reports stressed a need to develop single tracks of academics focused primarily on basic curriculum and preparing students for college attendance after high school.

Two of the reports, the 1983 National Task Force Study and the Carnegie Foundation written by Boyer in 1983, detailed an idea of schooling as being a civic responsibility and a national priority. Each called for a broader task in education linking schools with business partnerships, civic opportunities, and mission-oriented approaches.

The remaining reports focused on less academic concerns and pointed out the need for schools to develop in other areas. Building community and climate culture (Fogel, 1980), increasing the defined scope of effectiveness in schools (Grant, 1982), and developing individual
planning programs for students (Klausmeier, Serlin & Zindler, 1983), were reported in these less-critical documents as being essential for improvement.

Though the reports were diverse in their recommendations, the entire body of documents agreed on some issues, such as the need to increase standards, the importance of college preparation, and the failings by the nation as a whole to adequately prepare students for success. As a result, the reports did much to change the academic environment. Multi-track programs for students began decreasing, college preparation became paramount, and more rigorous studies were implemented in schools nationwide.

One passage from Stedman’s 1985 report on a federal level, specifically addressing the issue of eliminating vocational tracks in favor of college-preparedness, is evidence of the thinking of the time and the direction education would take in the following years.

The adaptation of these curricular changes, it has been argued, might require a redirection of a substantial portion of the school curriculum, primarily away from general and vocational education programs. Critics argue that the academic role of schooling would be enhanced at the expense of other important roles -- job training among them. Given the heterogeneity of our school population, it is asserted, such a redirection in curriculum denies educational equity to many students; ignores the fact that all students do not learn the same subjects in the same way. (p.14)

By the start of the 1990s, schools had adopted a college-preparedness stance and focus was being placed on standards and rigorous academics. Students were forced onto one track, academically generated and implemented to prepare all students for college entrance. It had become an accepted idea that the future job market would not sustain someone with only a high school diploma and, therefore, everyone should be provided the opportunity to attend college. The economic value placed on high school diplomas was greatly decreased in the 1990s. (Schneider & Stevenson, 1999).

Meanwhile, the number of dropouts was increasing across the board. From 1983 to 1998,
a period of fifteen years when education reform was supposedly making great strides in meeting student needs, six million students dropped out of American high schools before receiving a diploma (Leiding, 2008). The Harvard Civil Rights Project (2005) stated that California was losing 29% of students to dropout status, with only 50.2% of minority students receiving a diploma. In Texas, during the 20 year span from 1986 to 2006, there were 2,533,169 students lost in the dropout crisis (Cortez, 2007). Total costs to the state for these losses will accumulate to $730.1 billion within the 40 year working life span of these individuals (Johnson, 2006). In 2005, Gottlob (2008) reported the dropout rate in Texas as 67%. The education of tomorrow’s adults, and the need to increase their potential for success, calls for a focus on the individual within the classroom.

**Personalization of Learning**

Wang and Wahlberg (1985) contend that learners are first and foremost human. Rather than merely learning cognitively, humans can be affected by external variables such as status, social ranking, gender issues, and more that will affect the cognitive assimilation of information and overall development of the individual. While the education reform created by the shift in the mid 80s changed the direction of schooling in our nation, the impetus for this change was largely political (Stedman, 1983). The major shift in education was administrative in nature and focused on changing overall outcomes and program direction. The individual student was not a major concern during the shift.

However, in the 1990s, some educators began a serious push toward personalizing the educational process. These educators called for a focus on individualization and for campuses to begin taking personal accountability for all students.

Dunn (1996) maintains, “When legislative groups, state education departments, boards of
education, communities, and the media criticize the level of student literacy in the United States and demand increased accountability for standardized achievement test scores, we cannot continue to blame low achievement on everything except on how we teach” (p. 5). Dr. Rita Dunn, professor at St. John’s University in New York, has been involved in leading educators for years to personalize learning in a curricular fashion that would reform the classroom. In the mid 90s, her calls for this teacher-to-student personalized environment, focusing on diagnosing and addressing each student’s learning style in a classroom, began garnering attention among many educators. She suggests, “Learning style, then, is the way in which each learner begins to concentrate on, process, and retain new and difficult information…We must not look only at the apparent symptoms; we need to examine the whole of each person’s inclinations toward learning” (p. 2).

Personalization, the ability to acknowledge the student’s uniqueness and create learning environments based on that knowledge has, in many ways, overtaken the standards-based reform. There is an immediate need to recognize the student as an individual. Keefe (2008) states:

Contemporary schools must acknowledge the validity of the personalization premise. They must accept the biological truth that no two organisms are alike, and that includes learners. Every learner has a unique experiential background and a unique set of innate talents and personal interests. No two learners exhibit the same behavioral patterns or possess the same goals or levels of aspiration. No two learners solve problems in the same way or are motivated by the same incentives. No two learners are ready to learn at the same time or to the same degree. Learning for each individual is, at least to some extent, unique. (pp. 217-223)

The goal of personalization is to focus on each student as a unique person with different styles, needs, and strengths. Within this environment, there is a need to differentiate instruction for all learners. This calls for teachers to be able to provide instruction in a way that can meet students where they are in content. Nunley (2006) believes that there is a major misconception concerning differentiated instruction. Rather than being a chaotic environment, classrooms
focusing on personalization can be controlled and organized. However, the approach in
differentiated instruction will look much different than the traditional classroom.

In a differentiated classroom, the role of the teacher becomes much more concerned with the personal element of teaching. Teachers in these environments are encouraged to be open and understanding in their interactions. Klem and Connell (2004) explain:

Professionals and parents readily understand the need for high standards and quality curriculum and pedagogy in school. Similarly, the concept of teachers working together as professionals to ensure student success is not an issue. But the urgency to provide a personalized learning environment for students -- especially with schools struggling to provide textbooks to all students, hot meals, security, and janitorial services -- is not as great in many quarters. While parents would prefer their children experience a caring school environment, does such an environment influence student academic performance? Research suggests it does. (pp. 262-273)

While the personalized approach to education is rising, there are some who argue that educational systems focused on anything but personalization, even strong standards-based schools, are at fault for lower-achieving student populations. O’Neil and Tell (1999) report:

The content standards begin, ‘All students will be able to…’ so that even before you look at the expectations, you notice that the standards are uniform. The message here seems to be that individual differences either don’t exist or are illegitimate and should be ignored. This wording willfully disregards the fact that not all kids learn at the same pace or should be expected to do so. (pp. 18-19)

Though the reform movement created by the shift in the mid 80s had emphasized a return to the basics of education, some reformers in the current decade blame education’s problems on the fact that schools have never changed, though the appearance of change was implemented during the reform shift. Once again, O’Neill and Tell (1999) state, “If students aren’t achieving the way we’d like, it may be precisely because schools continue to be so traditional…Our kids are at a comparative disadvantage because the ‘back to basics’ folks have won” (pp. 18-22).

Another major shift that gained attention was the growth of the idea that schools should serve as professional learning communities. Dr. Shirley Hord serves as Scholar Laureate of the
National Staff Development Council, providing content expertise through consulting, writing, and presentations. Hord (1997) outlined strategies for professional learning communities and began asserting the concept of school staff members developing as professional leaders to coordinate their efforts to focus on student learning and school improvement. Professional learning communities have taken center stage today as an important goal for education. The movement incorporates several basic dimensions into a cohesive campus-based process for collaborative efforts to support student achievement.

Huffman and Hipp (2000) further explain the PLC process by defining the five dimensions. The first of these five dimensions is supportive and shared leadership where school leaders and classroom teachers share decision-making and leadership. Another dimension is shared values and vision focused on student learning. A third dimension is collective learning and application which creates an environment of collaboration and information-sharing among all staff. The fourth dimension, shared personal practice, involves staff in professional interactions with each other to improve the competencies of all. Finally, the fifth dimension is supportive conditions emphasizing a campus culture designed to build trust, respect, and positive interactions. Though the concept may seem to be an administrative change, all efforts of professional learning communities are directed to focus on the learning process of students. There is an intentional focus on results. Huffman and Hipp (2000) contend that taking responsibility for decision-making and leadership of a campus are primary components of success communities of learning and improved results for students.

The goal of professional learning communities is to involve all staff members in the process to improve the learning experiences for all children. Dufour (2007) maintains that an educational institution must become a place of learning rather than a place of teaching. He
contends that educators must work together to build systems of collaboration that hold all educators accountable for student success and encourage sharing of information, responsibility, and leadership.

One approach to a self-directed strategy is found in the Montessori method. The practice eliminates any direct instruction, relegating instructors to a role of observers, though it is the teacher who decides if a student has mastered content sufficiently. Created by Maria Montessori, an Italian educator, this method is primarily used with preschool and elementary students. Based on the principles that all children can be self-directed in learning, children learn primarily through discovery rather than a sequenced series of information dictated by a teacher, and learning is most efficient when the child works alone, the Montessori Method has gained popularity since its development in the early part of the last century (Lillard, 2005).

While the Montessori method focuses primarily on younger children, the element of individualizing instruction has also become a trademark for many secondary schools, particularly in alternative environments. This process utilizes the teacher more in the role of a facilitator to assist students. Self-directed strategies place the emphasis for progress and achievement primarily in the hands of the student. While receiving assistance and guidance from an instructor, the student is largely responsible for daily progress that ensures effective and timely completion of studies. The student is encouraged to become independent in these areas and receive instructional assignments only when work has been accomplished successfully.

In most self-directed schools, the student is diagnosed through testing in content areas and assessed as to the current status of ability in subjects such as literacy and mathematics. These results, as well as transcripts, are used to develop an individual education plan for the student.
The student receives this plan and is counseled concerning the strategies needed for successful completion of grade level studies.

The student typically completes a daily goal chart, detailing defined action tasks each day. The curriculum is used to assist the student in knowing how much material can be covered that day. The student then outlines this daily progress chart for each subject.

The teacher counsels the student concerning the necessary curriculum assignments each day. Monitoring student progress, checking for understanding of curriculum covered, and reviewing student work fall within the responsibility of the teacher in a self-directed classroom.

As the student moves through the curriculum independently, the delivery of content may be in the form of computer or internet-based material, paper-based textual material, or project-based student collaboration. This delivery minimizes the lecture-driven environment. The focus is to consistently require the student to be directly involved in the process of delivery content and progress.

As students complete assignments, the curriculum requires testing over current content. The teacher facilitates this process. If the content testing is successful. The student is allowed to move to the next level of the curriculum. If the testing is not successful, the student must repeat the material.

In this manner, students can progress through curriculum materials at a pace that is not dependent on other students or educators. While having an overall view of a diploma plan, students can break down the material into segments that can be manageable.

Many of the ideas within the self-directed environment can be aligned with the new taxonomy defined by Marzano. This new approach to cognitive development, based largely on an independent strategy to learning is made up of three systems and a knowledge domain. These
three systems, the self system, the metacognitive system, and the cognitive system, define the process learners face when introduced to new material. The self system is a decision-making process used by the learner to commit to new content. The metacognitive system plans the learning, sets goals for the learning, and self-monitors progress. The cognitive system processes new information, converting it into learned content. The knowledge domain is the content and delivery of content process (Marzano, 2000).

Marzano (2000) also delineates the elements of Importance, Efficacy, and Emotions as applied to independent learning. By becoming more aware of one’s focus on these elements, learning can be achieved by modification, improvement, and development in these areas.

This process takes the personalization idea to another level. Everything within the learning process has been modified, changed, or eliminated to provide an self-directed approach. Jeter (1980) reports that often benefits of individualization are confined strictly to performance measures. However, many benefits can be derived from a personalized approach that far outweigh mere performance. This strategy is the central focus of a self-directed instructional process.

Personalizing the instructional process and learning environment is becoming a shift within the standards-based environment that can bring education closer to Senge’s theory of systems thinking (Senge, 1990). It is possible for a school to become a community of learners or, in Senge’s words, a learning organization. The reform movement begun in the mid 1980s, shifting high schools into a college-preparedness mode that ignored and disenfranchised a growing population of students who were at-risk or had already exited school early, could be changed by the personalization movement. Educators sensitive to the needs of students having difficulty navigating high school education began calling attention to a movement that would
focus on all students. Personalizing the challenges and learning experiences for every child, taking responsibility for the entire school population, and taking action to ensure opportunities for everyone would become characteristics of the efforts to personalize education. The key to success would be in providing quality education for all learners while leaving none outside the swing of the pendulum.

Alternative Education and Schools

Schooling in America, until the early 1800s, had relied mostly on the home, private and religious schools, and apprenticeships (Leiding, 2008). The civilization of the country started a concerted effort to organize schools and the federal government began involving itself in education. By the turn of the century, the traditional system of education, in structure and framework, was in place. The progressive education movement, during the industrialization of America in the early 1900s, characterized by the principles of John Dewey, conducted an eight year study, designed to study competency-based education. This study showed that alternatives to the traditional, conventional approach to education were effective in bringing students to a higher level of competency.

Alternative education today is carried out in several venues. Private schools, public magnet schools, home schools, charter schools, distance learning schools, alternative curricula, and alternative management campuses are some alternatives to the traditional public school. In categorizing alternative education, schools can be grouped into three areas (Tribble, 1997):

1. Schools that are challenging and fulfilling. Schools of ‘choice’ fit in this category. These schools are created to provide ‘more’ for the student, though the definition of ‘more’ may vary from one school to the next.

2. Schools where students are mandated or required to attend. These can be public or private schools. Most students are ordered to attend these schools because of behavioral or severe academic reasons.
3. Schools designed to provide remedial work for students. These schools are considered to be short-term solutions for students that provide alternative methods until the student catches up. (pp. 17-18)

Several educators, serving traditional systems, view alternative education as a poor choice for education. Williams (2008) states:

(However) the term alternative education is most often used to describe programs serving vulnerable, at-risk youth who no longer attend the traditional schools. Ironically, because alternative education is often associated with students who were unsuccessful in the past, many alternative schools were considered to be of much poorer quality than the traditional schools. However, because alternative school educators are challenged to motivate and educate disengaged students, many alternative education programs have been highly valued for their innovation and creativity. (p. 39)

Many in alternative education view themselves as providing opportunities that traditional education cannot provide. Educators committed to the alternative education position argue that traditional education does not provide any opportunity to focus on individual children and that the system must be changed dramatically.

Goodman (1999) reports that often those in alternative education are accused of dumbing down a curriculum to ensure student success. Those who accuse alternative education of being a second-rate option fail to understand the multicultural, socioeconomical, and academic needs of the growing population of at-risk learners. Educators on the traditional side of the fence see alternative choices as being inadequate to provide effective educational opportunities for students. Accusations that alternative choices can siphon off the best students and needed funding for public education are common among traditional educators (Wilson, 2006).

Some educators in traditional circles voice doubts about the effectiveness of alternative methods and schools. While the debate continues, there is one certainty: alternative education has existed for many years and continues to thrive in American education. For the purpose of this study, I focused on two major alternative options in the current public education system of
Texas. The first is the alternative campus created within the public school district or statewide system. The second is charter schools created as public schools independent of local district governance.

Alternative education is necessary as long as traditional education remains traditional and there are students who will not respond to that approach. Many districts, particularly those in urban areas, create alternative schools within their own boundaries, and under their own governance, to meet the needs of students who do not function well on the regular campus. Tribble (1997) contends that alternative schools are a quality-based, viable option for a greater number of students and are able to help reduce the number of dropouts while providing effective courses of achievement for at-risk students.

One major characteristic in district alternative schools is that they are formed many times as behaviorally alternative campuses. This tends to brand the campus as a place for kids in trouble. Rather than being a school of choice, the student is typically mandated or forced to attend the school. Many of the students are at-risk of dropping out of school. Barr and Parrett (2001) report:

Alternative schools that are specially designed to help teenage students who are doing poorly, failing or have dropped out of schools may be the single best approach to preventing violence...High schools in the United States appear to be the most entrenched, intransigent institution in the country. The emerging reform agenda for United States high schools focuses on downsizing, providing choices, personalizing programs, blending opportunities with post-secondary education, enhancing relevance, providing for student needs, scheduling enhancements, the demonstration of competency at graduation, successful transitions, opportunities to accelerate, and the promotion of social and emotional growth. (pp. 234-235)

Barr and Parrett (2001) go further to define a self-directed approach to learning. Teachers serve more as facilitators of process rather than offering direct instruction to students. The student is responsible for progressing through content at an effective pace. The campus culture is
based on focusing on learning styles of students, specific and unique student needs, and providing incentives for success. In this environment, many students are offered the ability to accelerate their learning or catch up on content in which they may have fallen behind. Along with this process, schools are given the task to assess a student’s current status at the initial onset of enrollment, place the student appropriately at grade and content level, and monitor progress to ensure the student is achieving success.

The second type of alternative education for this study is the charter school. Legislation creating schools that could be chartered by individuals, companies, or other entities was introduced in the 1990s. Since that time, the charter school movement has quickly grown and continues to thrive today. Morris and McGann (2007) report that charter schools are sponsored by parent groups, non-profit organizations, and even public school districts.

Rather than being under the governance of a local school district, charters have a direct relationship and accountability to the state. In Texas, charter schools are accountable to the Texas Education Agency. Charter schools can be created for different specific purposes. Many charter schools were formed to address the dropout crisis and provide parents with a choice outside traditional options. Leiding (2008) explains:

Charter schools introduce a line of thinking that is foreign to many in education. The basic premise is that, given the opportunity to choose a different school for their children, many parents will choose to leave the traditional public school in favor of a charter school that offers unique philosophy, culture, curriculum, or organizational style better suited to meet the educational needs of their children. (p.59)

While charter schools are public schools, the funding structure for charters puts them in direct competition with traditional districts. Many in education feel this makes the educational landscape better for everyone, with parents having choices, innovative schools providing options
for students, and traditional districts feeling a need to improve in order to compete (Conley, 2002).

Charter schools offer an opportunity to be innovative and responsive to the needs of students while ensuring accountability for performance. Leiding (2008) maintains that charters can provide a distinct alternative to traditional public schools while providing a more personalized opportunity for parents and students.

The Texas Education Agency recognizes both of these types of schools as Alternative Education Campuses (AEC) (TEA, 2008). Barr and Parrett (2001) report:

It was once considered sufficient for schools for at-risk youth to serve almost as rescue missions- to get students off the streets and back into school, to provide them with a stabilized learning environment, to provide them with a basic skill training, and then to assist them in completing a graduate equivalency diploma. Today, such minimal education expectations are simply not enough. State legislators, state boards of education, and local school boards are now establishing high educational standards for all students and expect even the most at-risk students to achieve these standards. (p. 82)

In 2003, the TEA developed and implemented the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) to measure student performance (TEA, 2005). Each year the tests are administered in each public school and these results are reported to all stakeholders. Calculating acceptable school ratings differs on alternative education campuses as opposed to standard accountability campuses. TEA provides an Alternative Education Accountability (AEA) rating that differs from the standard accountability rating for the majority of campuses statewide. Data for this study was taken from the 2006-08 TAKS performance for students attending AEA campuses, both from designated AECs operating as campuses within a school district and charter schools identified as AECs in the state.
Summary

This chapter presented a review of the research and theory in the areas of education reform since the mid 1980s, the dropout crisis, the state of at-risk and dropout populations, alternative schooling, and the personalized/self-directed approach to instruction. This research forms a foundation for the study of alternative methodologies and how effective they can be in addressing the dropout crisis in our country. Though the research is extensive in studying the plight of disenfranchised youth in America, there is a need to study how their needs are being met and the effectiveness of those efforts. If increased funding, student success, and educational resources are to be focused on best practice, there is a need to assess the methodologies being utilized.

The primary issue at stake is the delivery system for content. Alternative schools continue to create strategy that is intentionally personalized and self-directed (Barr & Parrett, 2001). This delivery is characterized by a self-motivation and self-governance of the process by the learner. The success of this approach is valuable if proven effective in helping students learn and use content. The study can inform practice, as related to a more student-centered philosophy for education.

The study can also inform the options as related to the traditional role of the teacher. Educators must become learners themselves to develop the collaboration and strategic means necessary to personalize education (DuFour, 2007). Within the self-directed environment, the functions of educators will be even more directed toward student-centered tasks, teaching the student to be a self-directed learner (Keefe, 2008).

Young adults without a high school education are in our society and need opportunities to succeed back in school (Simpson, 2004). Many students in our schools are at-risk and
considering dropping out of the system altogether to join the ranks of those lost to graduation possibilities (Pascopella, 2007). The need for innovative, relevant methodologies is clearly acknowledged. Knowing what is best practice for students, and creating the strategies necessary to reach these students is important for student success.

The next chapter, Chapter III, introduces the research methods used for this study. Using the structural framework of the literature review and relying on the research questions as guides, the methodologies used by alternative schools were investigated. Chapter III also discusses the design, the participants involved, the instruments utilized, and the plan for the interpretation of the data analysis.
CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This study was conducted to determine statistically significant differences, if any, between performance on the Texas Assessment and Knowledge Skills (TAKS) testing of at-risk populations attending alternative schools using teacher-directed instruction strategies and those attending alternative schools using self-directed strategies. This was a quantitative study designed to address the three research questions using a repeated measures ANOVA research method. Though this method diminishes the probability of inference on causes, such as practice effects and the ability of campuses to improve the effectiveness of their strategies over a three year period, the findings from data can be effective in comparison studies (Huck, 2004).

Chapter III details the research method including the instrumentation, selection of participants, procedures, and data analysis strategies. The research was guided by the following research questions:

1. What performance differences existed between secondary students attending alternative education campuses using teacher-directed strategies and campuses using self-directed strategies?

2. What performance differences existed over a three year period between secondary students attending alternative education campuses using teacher-directed strategies and campuses using self-directed strategies?

3. Which strategy showed greater increase in performance results for secondary students over a period of three years?

In addressing the needs of at-risk students, educators on alternative education campuses are concerned with providing effective and reliable strategies designed to maximize achievement. Much debate has occurred, and continues, between those who practice self-directed strategies and those who employ teacher-directed practice. Many believe the self-directed
environment is ineffective and minimizes the positive effects teachers make in the classroom. Those opposing teacher-directed environments maintain that this strategy continues a practice that has already failed to help the at-risk student succeed.

While the debate continues, enough time has passed since the proliferation of self-directed strategies to assess whether this strategy is more effective, less effective, or as effective as a teacher-directed classroom environment. All three questions are important. The first question provides a base analysis for the research year’s performance for each strategy. The second question provides the ability to see an extended three-year period of performance comparison, which can give a broader view of any differences. The third is an objective measure question designed to address improvement measures.

Research Design and Data Collection Procedures

The Texas Education Agency (TEA) recognizes alternative education campuses (AEC) as separate educational entities under a different accountability system from general education campuses. This distinction is awarded schools that serve a large population of students who qualify as at-risk of dropping out of school. These schools include campuses operating as part of independent school districts, charter schools, and residential facilities. Archival data were used for schools in Texas that qualified as AEC’s in the research years of 2006-2008 (unless the school specifically opted out). The Texas Education Agency conducts the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills test in the spring semester of each school year. Results of the high stakes testing are recorded using a statewide, public database called the Academic Excellence Indicator System (AEIS). Data for this study were obtained utilizing this public database. This data shows
school performance, the performance of grade levels as well as specific demographic and sub-
population groups.

This research is a quantitative study collecting archived database information for the
tenth to twelfth grade students in alternative education schools. Three years of data were
collected for the 2006-2008 school years from the Academic Excellence Indicator System public
database maintained on the Texas Education Agency website and filed records. The data
collected targeted the performance results of high school student populations attending
alternative education campuses. This study used the All Tests section of the accountability tables
and, rather than focusing on specific subject areas, the study utilized the passing percentages of
students calculated by the state by combining all tests taken. The data results were grouped into
two distinct areas: schools using teacher-directed strategies and schools using self-directed
strategies.

Data for this study were taken from the secondary school archival information in the
following order to narrow the study group:

- Create list of alternative education campuses from the directories provided by the
  Texas Education Agency.
- Randomly select schools choosing every third campus on list.
- Research demographic data for each campus.
- Interview campus personnel concerning the strategy used.
- Contact or research a minimum of 50 campuses.
- Create 2 lists of 25 campuses (similar in demographic data) to represent the self-
directed sample and the teacher-directed sample.
- Research the TAKS performance data for the years 2006-08.
- Retrieve the data for secondary students (all students) for each year.
- Enter performance of secondary students for each campus in a data worksheet.
Selection of Participants

In this study, there were two sample populations. In creating the two sample populations, attention was given to specific demographic elements in order to ensure that the study compares samples that are similar.

The study used campuses designated as secondary schools. The overall campus size was recognized as important to inclusion on the list. The study included schools that were similar in overall population. This is important because of the effects of large versus small campus populations related to academic success (Barr & Parret, 2001).

Size of the population of student samples was also important to the study. Careful attention was given to only include campuses that had similar student populations of the specific research group. All campuses included had similar populations of secondary students.

Economic levels of the student populations were also considered in creating the sample lists. While the study does not recognize Title I status as an inclusion or exclusion factor, there was an effort to balance the lists according to economic levels.

The final demographic consideration was to note the total at-risk numbers on campuses. The study recognizes alternative education campuses as having large at-risk populations. However, as with economic levels, attention was given to creating a balanced number of at-risk populations between the two lists.

Statistical Measurement

The dependent variable for the study was the passing percentages of secondary students. The independent variable was the two types of strategies; teacher-directed and self-directed. To
compare the performance of the student populations, the statistical measurement used was a repeated measures ANOVA.

Collected data were inserted into ANOVA summary tables. These tables provided useful information for understanding the structure, purpose, and results of the data collection. It is important to clearly define and illustrate the variables in a manner relevant to the study (Huck, 2004).

The repeated measures design of the study used the same subjects (the campuses) in every treatment (year of data), therefore observed variability between treatments was not on individual differences, such as the ability of specific campuses to use their strategy more effectively. However, treatment effects (the possibility that individual students may perform better in subsequent years) may exist (Tanguma, 1999). Rather than measuring the individual student performance or the increasing capacity of a campus to be successful, the study was designed to measure the success rate of the chosen strategy. Acknowledging that the study measured the strategy rather than the campus effective use of the strategy or the ability of the student to progressively perform better each year, it was assumed that the practice effect existed (McCall, 2004).

Data Analysis

The three research questions guided this study. The data collected and analyzed provided responses to the research questions and presented an indication of the effectiveness of each instructional strategy for at-risk students during the three years used for the study. Statistical procedures, including descriptive statistics and repeated measures ANOVA, were used to analyze the data using SPSS 15.0 software. These procedures determined whether a statistically
significant relationship exists between the independent variable (instructional type) and the dependent variable (TAKS scores).

Specifically, the two instructional strategies were compared on the dependent variable (TAKS scores) through the use of descriptive statistics. In addition to descriptive statistics, data were analyzed using repeated measures ANOVA. This analysis allowed for the examination of group differences across time. Expressly, the repeated measures ANOVA indicated whether there is a statistically significant difference between the two instructional strategies when comparing at-risk students’ TAKS scores across the three years included in the study.

Results of the analyses were presented in various formats. Initially, descriptive statistics for the data was presented in table format and was organized by instructional strategy. This provided a clear description of the data collected for each group (instructional strategy). Graphs for group TAKS performance over the three years included in the study were also provided to further illustrate the data collected. Results from the repeated measures ANOVA were presented in an ANOVA summary table and indicated the statistical significance of the findings. In addition to statistical significance, the variance accounted for effect size, $\eta^2$, was also calculated. This effect size ($\eta^2$) provided an estimate of the strength of the relationship between the independent and dependent variables. The $\eta^2$ value is an indication of the amount of variance in the dependent variable (TAKS scores) that can be explained by the independent variable (instructional strategy).

**Summary**

The purpose of this study was to determine if there were statistical differences between students using teacher-directed strategy and students using self-directed strategy. The data were
collected from the Academic Excellence Indicator System using the records from the Texas
Education Agency, from 2006-2008. The specific student population included secondary school
students in alternative schools. The data were compiled and analyzed using SPSS 15.0 for
CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

This study was designed to analyze teacher-directed and self-directed instructional strategies. Statistical testing and analysis were conducted to determine performance differences between alternative education campuses in Texas using teacher-directed strategies and self-directed strategies. The research questions guided the study concerning campuses and time span involved. Results of the statistical analyses related to the three research questions are reported in this chapter.

Data Collection

Determining the performance differences between teacher-directed and self-directed instructional strategies required the creation of two lists of schools. The first list included only schools using teacher-directed strategies. The second list included schools using only self-directed strategies.

The list of all alternative education campuses reported on the Texas Education Agency website was the starting point for the creation of the two lists. This state agency report provided demographic and performance data for each alternative education campus in the state of Texas. Additionally, this report provided contact information for each campus.

Efforts were made to eliminate any schools that did not meet the qualifications required for inclusion in the study. Schools that served age and grade populations below secondary school were eliminated from the list. Schools that did not have state testing reports for the three years of research used for the study were also deleted from the list.

Once these steps were performed, the remaining list of alternative education campuses
listed schools alphabetically. The two research lists for the study required 25 campuses from the state agency with the distinction between teaching strategies. The process of stratified and random sampling was used to create the two lists. Every third campus on the state agency list was contacted and a school official was interviewed concerning the specific strategy utilized for instruction. The interviewer explained the study and the distinction between teacher-directed strategy and self-directed strategy as related to the study. Each school official was asked to identify the primary, or sole, instruction strategy used on the campus. Once the interview concluded, the school was placed on the appropriate list related to the specific strategy used.

Once the lists were created, school demographic information was reviewed to confirm relative similarity and conformity as related to size and scope. Multiple schools from the same school systems were not used once one campus from that specific system had been listed.

Once these steps had occurred, the two distinct charts were created. Table 4.1 lists secondary alternative education campuses in Texas with TAKS results from 2006 – 2008 identifying the instructional strategy as being teacher-directed or self-directed.

Each campus was assigned a corresponding number for listing on the chart. The TAKS public information data was utilized to complete the lists. The results for each research year (2006, 2007, 2008) were located on the Texas Education Agency website. A review of each campus was conducted to retrieve the performance results data for each year. The data reported for “All Students” was documented on the lists corresponding to the assigned number for each campus.
Table 4.1

**Teacher-Directed and Self-Directed Strategies**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School ID</th>
<th>05-06</th>
<th>06-07</th>
<th>07-08</th>
<th>Results</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Teacher-directed instruction</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>82%</td>
<td>91%</td>
<td>91%</td>
<td>88.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td>73.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>82%</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>74%</td>
<td>78.66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>60.66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>64.33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>79%</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>76.66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>64.66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>73.66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>92%</td>
<td>94%</td>
<td>90.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>86%</td>
<td>76.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>82%</td>
<td>74%</td>
<td>75.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>69.33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>73.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>77%</td>
<td>74.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>87%</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td>87%</td>
<td>85.66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>82%</td>
<td>85%</td>
<td>94%</td>
<td>86.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>78.66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>89%</td>
<td>85%</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>85.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>74%</td>
<td>68.66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>62.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>89%</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>79.33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>66.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>79%</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>82.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>88%</td>
<td>77%</td>
<td>87%</td>
<td>84.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>87%</td>
<td>82%</td>
<td>79.66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Results</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>74.12%</td>
<td>84.52%</td>
<td>77.28%</td>
<td>78.64%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| **Self-directed instruction** |       |       |       |         |
| 1         | 79%   | 68%   | 74%   | 73.66% |
| 2         | 66%   | 71%   | 74%   | 70.33% |
| 3         | 87%   | 92%   | 80%   | 86.33% |
| 4         | 60%   | 61%   | 60%   | 60.33% |
| 5         | 94%   | 95%   | 92%   | 93.66% |
| 6         | 94%   | 77%   | 86%   | 85.66% |
| 7         | 87%   | 83%   | 76%   | 82.00% |
| 8         | 65%   | 68%   | 82%   | 71.66% |
| 9         | 65%   | 45%   | 66%   | 58.66% |
| 10        | 61%   | 69%   | 74%   | 68.00% |
| 11        | 95%   | 93%   | 95%   | 94.33% |
| 12        | 70%   | 77%   | 75%   | 74.00% |
| 13        | 55%   | 56%   | 66%   | 59.00% |
| 14        | 65%   | 74%   | 78%   | 72.33% |
| 15        | 69%   | 76%   | 78%   | 74.33% |
| 16        | 54%   | 52%   | 55%   | 53.66% |
| 17        | 92%   | 88%   | 79%   | 86.33% |
| 18        | 71%   | 68%   | 62%   | 67.00% |
| 19        | 82%   | 84%   | 86%   | 84.00% |
| 20        | 76%   | 82%   | 90%   | 82.66% |
| 21        | 64%   | 73%   | 88%   | 75.00% |
| 22        | 72%   | 81%   | 91%   | 81.33% |
| 23        | 76%   | 54%   | 40%   | 56.66% |
| 24        | 73%   | 87%   | 80%   | 80.00% |
| 25        | 99%   | 84%   | 84%   | 89.00% |
| **Results** |       |       |       |         |
|           | 74.84%| 74.32%| 76.44%| 75.20% |
Statistical Analyses

Research Question 1: What performance differences exist between secondary students attending alternative education campuses using teacher-directed strategies and campuses using self-directed strategies?

To investigate the performance differences between the two groups, a one-way ANOVA was conducted for each group at each year. Tables 4.2 through 4.4 indicate the descriptive results between the groups.

Table 4.2

*TAKS Performance for “All Students” 2005-06*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teacher-Directed</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>74.12</td>
<td>10.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Directed</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>74.84</td>
<td>13.22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.3

*TAKS Performance for “All Students” 2006-07*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teacher-Directed</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>76.00</td>
<td>8.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Directed</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>74.32</td>
<td>13.33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.4

*TAKS Performance for “All Students” 2007-08*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teacher-Directed</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>77.28</td>
<td>9.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Directed</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>76.44</td>
<td>12.79</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Tables 4.5 through 4.7 show the results of the tests. Significant differences among the means were not found ($p < .05$).

Table 4.5

*ANOVA Results for TAKS Performance for “All Students” 2005-06*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Sum of Squares</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Mean Square</th>
<th>$F$</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
<th>$\eta^2$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Between Groups</td>
<td>6.48</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6.48</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.83</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within Groups</td>
<td>6956.00</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>144.91</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>6962.48</td>
<td>49</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.6

*ANOVA Results for TAKS Performance for “All Students” 2006-07*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Sum of Squares</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Mean Square</th>
<th>$F$</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
<th>$\eta^2$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Between Groups</td>
<td>35.28</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>35.28</td>
<td>.28</td>
<td>.59</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within Groups</td>
<td>6013.44</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>125.28</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>6048.72</td>
<td>49</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.7

*ANOVA Results for TAKS Performance for “All Students” 2007-08*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Sum of Squares</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Mean Square</th>
<th>$F$</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
<th>$\eta^2$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Between Groups</td>
<td>8.82</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8.82</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.79</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within Groups</td>
<td>6321.20</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>131.69</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>6330.02</td>
<td>49</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Although no statistical differences were found, a measure of association ($\eta^2$) was calculated to determine the strength of the relationship between the independent and dependent
variable. The calculated $\eta^2$ for research question 1 is .00. Therefore, the type of instructional strategy, the independent variable in this ANOVA, accounts for no variance. ANOVA assumptions were checked during the conducting of the tests and the assumptions were met.

Based on the results of the one-way ANOVA tests, there were no statistically significant differences ($p < .05$) between teacher-directed instruction and self-directed instruction in secondary students attending alternative education campuses in Texas during the three years of performance from 2006-2008. The testing also showed no practically significant differences between the two groups.

**Research Question 2:** What performance differences exist over a three year period between secondary students attending alternative education campuses using teacher-directed strategies and campuses using self-directed strategies?

To test the performance differences over an extended period of time (three years), a two factor repeated measures ANOVA was conducted. The secondary question for the test is, “Are people behaving differently across time in the two distinct instructional environments?” All appropriate assumptions regarding repeated measures ANOVA were evaluated and the data was found to be consistent with these assumptions. Table 4.8 shows the results of the analysis.

The results of the two factor repeated measures ANOVA revealed a non-significant main effect, $F (1,48) = 1.59, p > .05$ and a non-significant interaction effect between teacher-directed and self-directed, $F (2.48) = .98, p > .05$. The effect size $\eta^2$ reported within 1% accuracy in variability.

The results of the two factor repeated measures ANOVA testing showed no practical or statistical differences between the two groups over a three year period. Based on these results, the Hypothesis 1 is rejected. Student performance remained relatively stable and equal between
the two groups over an extended period and performance results did not increase significantly between the groups or within each group.

Table 4.8

*Within-Subjects Effects*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Type III Sum of Squares</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Mean Square</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
<th>η²</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teacher-directed instruction</td>
<td>Time Sphericity Assumed</td>
<td>37.08</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>18.54</td>
<td>.39</td>
<td>.676</td>
<td>.008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-directed Instruction</td>
<td>Time Sphericity Assumed</td>
<td>150.28</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>75.14</td>
<td>1.59</td>
<td>.20</td>
<td>.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Instruction Type</td>
<td>13.50</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>855037.50</td>
<td>2778.85</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Error</td>
<td>14769.33</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>307.69</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Research Question 3: Which strategy shows greater increase in performance results for secondary students over a period of three years?

To address the third question, the testing showed the comparison of increase in performance for each group over the extended period of three research years. Table 4.9 shows the results.

Table 4.9

*Percentage Increase of Strategy over Three Year Period*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Dev.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teacher-directed instruction</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>-20.00</td>
<td>27.00</td>
<td>3.16</td>
<td>10.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-directed instruction</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>-36.00</td>
<td>24.00</td>
<td>1.60</td>
<td>13.05</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Over the three year period, the teacher-directed strategy increased a total of 3.16%. The self-directed strategy increased a total of 1.6% during the same time period. This shows the teacher-directed strategy had an overall increase of 1.56% more than the self-directed strategy. The answer to the third research question, therefore, is that the teacher-directed strategy increased more during the period of research. This increase, however, shows no statistically or practically significant difference in the increase performances when compared with each other.

The data chart of performance results shows that over the three year period, 78.64% of all students attending alternative education campuses using teacher-directed strategies successfully passed the TAKS tests. During the same time period, 75.20% of all secondary students attending alternative education campuses using self-directed strategies successfully passed the TAKS tests.

Although a slight difference exists between the two groups, statistical testing shows no statistically significant difference between the two groups 1) for each year of research, 2) for the overall period of time, nor 3) in the percentage of increase in performance results. It appears from these results that the two groups remain balanced and stable in comparison.
CHAPTER V
SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to research the performance results and differences of two distinct instructional strategies in Texas schools. These strategies are commonly used on alternative education campuses with large populations of at-risk students. One strategy replicates the conventional teacher-directed system utilized in traditional school systems in Texas in which content and instruction is provided primarily by a teacher who may also facilitate and tutor as well as teach. The second strategy employs a system focusing on students processing content independently with teachers acting as facilitators and tutors but not filling the role of a traditional teacher.

Data was collected and analyzed through public information directories, campus contacts, interviews with school officials, examination of demographics, and recording of performance results. A total of 50 schools were used for the research. Research questions were created to address assess if there were any performance differences between schools that used teacher-directed and schools that used self-directed strategies. Statistical testing was conducted to analyze performance differences on a year by year, extended period of time, and overall increases of performance. Once the data was collected and statistical testing was completed, findings were recorded and analyzed.

Discussion

Much debate has occurred concerning how best to engage the at-risk student in an effective learning process. As stated previously, at-risk students are most vulnerable to
disengaging from an educational system and subsequently dropping out (Barr & Parrett, 2001). While efforts to re-engage a dropout are ongoing and useful, preventing the at-risk student from disengaging from school can reduce the dropout numbers, and offer greater opportunities for students to complete their high school education.

The study began as a comparison of instructional strategies. However, the results led to a more focused approach to the status of at-risk populations attending alternative education campuses in Texas. Initially, the study was conducted to analyze the teaching of content for these populations and possibly show which strategy is more effective. The results showed that both strategies, teacher-directed and self-directed, had been equally effective in improving the performance of at-risk students. Therefore, the study became more student-centered rather than strategy-centered.

Alternative education campuses primarily serve an at-risk population. The instructional strategies used to educate these students are important to the success of the campus. Whether it is best to use teacher-directed strategies or self-directed strategies is an issue that has gained attention and sparked controversy over the last 10 years (Leiding, 2008). The study, rather than making a determination of which strategy is better for at-risk students, was designed to provide educators with a statistical analysis of any performance differences between these two strategies. The results of the study give educators data that can assist with decision-making and implementation of instructional programs suited to meet the growing demands of at-risk youth. The purpose of this research is to record the performance of each strategy, calculate the differences, if any, between the strategies, and discuss the implications from the results.

As noted in Chapter IV, there were no statistically significant differences between teacher-directed and self-directed strategies in this research study. Based on the testing, roughly
three-quarters of all students attending alternative education campuses in Texas from 2005-2008 passed the state mandated tests. This 75% approximate result held true for both strategies during this study. The percentage of passing, as well as the percentage of failing, students leads to several implications and discussions concerning the performance of students in alternative education schools in Texas.

Implications

First, attention is given to the viability of teacher-directed and self-directed strategies in helping students achieve success. The results of the statistical testing and data show that both strategies are equally effective for the schools and years tested in this study. It can be concluded each strategy as implemented provided the capacity to address the needs of the at-risk student in Texas. A follow-up to this conclusion is to investigate some reasons why each strategy is equally effective.

Teacher-directed strategies in alternative education schools often use similar methods and practices used in schools where at-risk students previously attended. These practices include teachers serving as tutors, facilitators and guides. The primary role of the teacher in this environment is that of primary instructor, delivering content in a classroom setting. However, whereas these students were most likely a small part of a much larger pool of students before attending alternative education campuses, in the alternative school they are now in a smaller environment and receive more focused attention from instructors. In their former schools, they may have been developing signs of disengagement (Barr & Parret, 2001), thus requiring them to be placed in a setting designed to give them greater assistance (Leiding, 2008). In an alternative education setting, they most likely received more assistance and guidance from instructors.
Therefore, it can be inferred that the success of the instructional strategy on these campuses may be due to the population size, smaller teacher-student ratios and the student’s accessibility to direct help and instruction.

Self-directed strategies employ an independent approach to instruction. Instructors play an important role functioning as facilitators, tutors and guides when necessary. However, most of the instructor’s time is spent teaching students to take responsibility for their progress. Content, rather than being delivered to the student in a classroom setting by the teacher, is delivered through technology or curriculum designed for self-study opportunities. These students control the pace of their learning and advance to subsequent levels of subject material once the previous level is mastered. The teacher devotes the majority of the time to assisting students organize their work and gives specific assistance only when a student is experiencing difficulty. Rather than being in a classroom setting, the student in the self-directed school is often in a learning lab or study center. In this environment, the student learns content and independence during the learning process. This process directly relates to the success of Marzano’s Self System, which relies on the decision-making process used by the learner to commit to new content (Marzano, 2000). Therefore, it can be inferred that the success of the self-directed strategy on these campuses may be due to the autonomy offered and personal responsibility taken by the student.

A second implication of the study is to consider the equality of success rates of students on alternative campuses regardless of the strategy that was used. It is possible that at-risk students respond positively to any attention paid to them. This response is congruent with the Hawthorne Effect. This practice, based on research conducted at Hawthorne Works in 1925, was later studied and named by Henry Landsberger in 1955 (Landsberger, 1958). Employees were shown to be more productive when elements of attention, research, and study were performed on
their behalf. Though the original study was conducted to test the effects of lighting on productivity, the study showed that any modification or varied condition to the work environment improved the output of workers. The studies showed that workers improved performance simply because they knew they were being studied. Therefore, the intensity of attention paid to the subjects of the study increased performance rather than the actual modification of conditions. It could be suggested that the process of assigning at-risk students to a grouped environment, such as an alternative campus, and increasing the intensity of attention during the learning process, may be a determining factor in increased performance of individuals within the population. If so, the act of identifying and assigning students to alternative education campuses may be a significant factor in success, whether the strategy is self-directed or teacher-directed.

A third implication is to reflect why some students do not succeed on alternative education campuses. We know that approximately 75% of students in alternative schools succeed and that 25% of these students do not succeed. A comparison can be drawn between alternative and non-alternative campuses. Success rates in traditional schools leave a percentage of students behind who ultimately are identified as at-risk of dropping out. However, when this population of students is assembled on one campus in an alternative setting, there is a similar percentage of students who succeed but also a percentage of students who are unsuccessful. If, as noted above, students respond to dedicated attention, it would be useful to know whether educators, even in alternative education schools, divide their assistance and attention unequally among any populations. Uhrmacher (1993) contends that focal activities or conditions such as shaking hands with students as they arrive at school, sometimes relegated as secondary interactions between students and teachers, can actually be strong motivational elements for
student success (Uhrmacher, 1993). It may be that all educators, even in self-directed systems, condition students concerning engagement through the amount and level of attention they give or withhold from each student. While knowing that content learning is a process, motivation and engagement may rely largely on the quality of attention given by educators to individual students. Knowing this might help explain why 25% of an alternative education campus continues to fail and disengage from the learning process.

A final implication of this study is to consider the possibilities each strategy has for innovation and change. All students deserve the opportunity to succeed. Even if alternative education schools increase their potential to succeed, though, many students still fail to achieve (Fashola & Slavin, 1998). Attempts to reduce the 25% of unsuccessful student populations and increase the percentage of engaged students on alternative education campuses must be further refined and improved. In considering each strategy, the potential for innovation and change offers greater capacity to engage and affect at-risk populations (Christensen, Horn, & Johnson 2008).

Teacher-directed strategies rely primarily on the ability of the individual instructor. Therefore, the weaknesses of the educator may prevent change and innovation as related to methods and practice. However, if at-risk students achieve more when they receive focused attention and assistance from teachers, giving teachers training in these areas could improve the learning experience for every student. In light of this, innovative opportunities could be developed that assists educators to understand the role of attention, to train them in methods designed to offer this attention and focus to more individual students, and to create dynamic environments within traditional practice to allow this to occur. Though the system is designed to progressively advance and promote large populations, innovative strategies created within the
system could cause change for more students. When teachers, while using their skills to deliver content in a classroom environment, develop and use their interactions with students to give focused attention to more students, a greater percentage of students have the potential to succeed. Self-directed strategies, dependent on the student’s motivation and increased advances of technology, have an increased capacity for innovation and change (Christensen, Horn, & Johnson 2008). The environment relies on current and developing technology to deliver content and offer individualized learning. Educators serve in the role of facilitators and tutors, giving assistance to students as needed. As technology increases, so too will the ability for innovative strategies to be developed. The varying abilities and needs of students may be addressed through the effective implementation of technology designed to allow students to work independently. This technology challenges the student at an individualized manner and is adaptable to each student. Recognizing the student’s learning style, the delivery technology can modify and change according to the student’s progress or difficulties. Software, designed to address specific needs and student abilities will continue to provide a greater capacity for individual student improvement (Christensen, Horn, & Johnson 2008). Consortiums, long-distance learning, and the ability to design the learning process according to individual strengths and weaknesses allow self-directed environments to be more adaptable to the needs of students.

Recommendations for Further Research

In considering the results of the study, and implications derived from those results, further study is recommended regarding students on alternative education campuses. The importance of understanding, and meeting the needs of, the at-risk student continues to challenge educators and increases the need for innovation, change, and modification of strategies in the
environment of alternative education (Barr & Parrett, 2001). Further research can assist in addressing some of the issues raised in this study and increase the capacity for educators to meet all students’ needs.

Qualitative studies, targeting specific individual students, can be conducted to assess causes for increased motivation, lack of increased engagement, and student perceptions of their potential within the alternative education environment. Anecdotal evidence, derived from interviews and dialogue, can record students’ understanding of the learning process, perception of the requirements for success, and elements they attribute to their current academic status. This type of study can inform educators on how intrinsic motivation is attained and developed in students. Skinner’s studies showed a connection between perception and motivation, and how that connection can affect and improve results in education (Skinner, 1984). Results and implications of the study could assist educators in developing effective training for those working with at-risk students.

Another qualitative study would be to identify the most successful schools from each list. The highest performing campuses using teacher-directed strategies and the five using self-directed strategies should be studied. These schools performed above the statistical average for all schools. Research through interviews and observations could be conducted to ascertain best practices used for both strategies. This approach, similar to previous studies used to identify effective schools, could inform educators as to methods and strategies that improve student performance on alternative education campuses.

Quantitative studies could be conducted comparing individual student performance prior to and after attending alternative education campuses. Another study could show, in greater detail, the capacity for success of specific instructional strategies within an alternative education
environment. Academic histories of students could be reviewed showing the year by year status and progress. These students could be assessed at the onset of their attendance at alternative education campuses using diagnostic measurements showing their current status. The same students could be tracked on a year by year basis, showing the level of performance. This study could also be a comparison analysis between instructional strategies. This would serve to give further evidence of the validity of instructional strategies and show the individual levels of performance on a student by student basis.

Studies should be conducted on the 25% of students not responding to the alternative education environment. These studies could incorporate mixed methodologies. Much like the study suggested above, these studies could identify specific students within the alternative education environment. The study, however, would focus on students who have not succeeded in alternative education schools. Nunn and Miller (2000) contend that it should not be assumed that at-risk students have inherent qualities such as achievement orientation and rewarded systems of goal perseverance. Interviews, questionnaires, and tracking could be used as methods and instruments to determine the perceptions of students in this population. Outcomes as related to academic success or failure could be recorded and analyzed. By focusing and researching the lower 25% of the at-risk population, attention should be given to the performance levels of these students. Baker (1999) asserts that relationships with others is an important variable in the learning process. This study may provide increased understanding of the role of interactions by educators and the role of student independence on academic success and eventual achievement of a high school diploma.
Summary

The dropout crisis continues to be a serious issue in our society. Addressing the crisis also garners much attention and uses limited resources. However, addressing at-risk students before they reach dropout status demands an increased level of attention and intervention. While knowing that alternative education schools exist to meet the needs of those placed at-risk, the strategies and practices used by educators in these schools must also continue to develop. Innovative change, specifically in the areas of addressing student motivation, educator preparation, and current technology, may create an improved capacity for these schools to meet needs and foster success for at-risk students. Educators may also recognize the need for further training in facilitating learner-centered environments and be willing to avail themselves of that training. In so doing, more opportunities for engaging at-risk students will be available and dropout rates may be stemmed.

Learning the techniques for engaging students, and maintaining that engagement, may result in a greater number of students achieving their high school diplomas before entering their adult years. This higher rate of graduates in Texas schools can increase the opportunities for students as they begin to navigate the challenges of society, higher education, and adulthood.
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