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Better Together: Building Supportive Teacher-Student Relationships With Adolescents Using Alternative School Practices As A Model

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BETTER TOGETHER: BUILDING SUPPORTIVE TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIPS
WITH ADOLESCENTS USING ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL PRACTICES AS A MODEL

by

Leigh Michelle Salyer
Bachelor of Science, Oklahoma City University, 1993
Master of Science, Southern Nazarene University, 1995
Master of Arts, University of Central Oklahoma, 2002

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Submitted to the Graduate Faculty

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c 2022 Leigh Michelle Salyer

Name: Leigh Michelle Salyer
Degree: Doctor of Education

This document, submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree from the University of North Dakota, has been read by the Faculty Advisory Committee under whom the work has been done and is hereby approved.

DocuSigned by:
Dr. Jared Schlenker
Dr. Jared Schlenker

DocuSigned by:
Michelle Griffin
Dr. Michelle Griffin

DocuSigned by:
Dr. Steven LeMire
Dr. Steven LeMire

DocuSigned by:
Sarah Sletten
Dr. Sarah Sletten

This document is being submitted by the appointed advisory committee as having met all the requirements of the School of Graduate Studies at the University of North Dakota and is hereby approved.

DocuSigned by:
Chris Nelson
Chris Nelson
Dean of the School of Graduate Studies

4/29/2022
Date

PERMISSION

Title Better Together: Building Supportive Teacher-Student Relationships with
 Adolescents using Alternative School Practices as a Model

Department Educational Practice and Leadership

Degree Doctor of Education

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Leigh Michelle Salyer
April 4, 2022

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In memory of my father, The Honorable Jerry Lee Salyer,
after whom I am proudly named,
and who instilled the value of education within me.

ABSTRACT

Oftentimes, alternative schools are viewed with a deficit perspective. Yet, the way teachers are taught to build and enhance supportive relationships with adolescent students helps those students to become more successful in the alternative school setting. This study focused on characteristics of this central phenomenon and important factors used for building adolescent supportive teacher-student relationships in the alternative school setting. A qualitative study comprised of 10 individually structured interviews was conducted. Recorded using the online platform Zoom, interviews were conducted with five administrators and five teachers in five different secondary alternative schools located in the south-central part of the United States. A list of 13 predetermined open-ended questions was used to learn about the schools' adolescent supportive teacher-student relationship building practices and the resulting improved success rates of students in their schools. A White Paper was then created to highlight the important adolescent teacher-student relationship building practices within alternative schools that enhanced student success, so that supportive teacher-student relationship building practices could be identified and implemented for use within traditional schools. Adolescent students in traditional schools may also benefit from supportive teacher-student relationship building practices, resulting in enhanced success beginning at the middle school level which is typically when relationships between teachers and students begin to decline.

Keywords: supportive teacher relationships, alternative school, adolescent

INTRODUCTION

Historically, alternative schools have been perceived with a negative connotation. Wolf and Wolf (2008) stated that such schools can have a reputation as gateways to the juvenile justice system. However, students who enter those doors can often achieve success that has not occurred within traditional schooling, as teachers in alternative schools serve their students differently (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011). An alternative school is a place where students can effectively learn when they cannot continue in a traditional school for various reasons. Teachers at alternative schools attempt to repair and create relationships that assist in learning for students facing emotional and behavioral challenges (Szlyk, 2018). Trustworthy and supportive teacher-student relationships are the foundation of alternative school practices (Maillet, 2017).

Little research has been conducted on alternative schools (Farrelly & Daniels, 2014), and few researchers have examined the influence of teacher-student supportive relationships on students at higher risk for negative outcomes (Decker et al., 2007). Exploring alternative schools' positive and supportive teacher-student relationship building practices and how teachers are taught to make those connections with their students could serve as a model for traditional schools to help students be more successful in the regular school environment. As Quaglia and Corso (2014) stated, "The traditional school model was not designed to be personal or to foster healthy relationships" (p. 25).

There is a need for positive and supportive teacher-student relationships in order to increase a sense of belonging for students in schools. These relationships are also needed to

positively impact students who exhibit challenging behaviors (Faust et al., 2014; Jones et al., 2016). The design of education should include building supportive relationships among teachers and students (Owusu-Ansah & Kyei-Blankson, 2016). It is important for educators to not only meet the academic and cognitive needs of students but also the students' social and emotional needs (Silverman & Mee, 2018). Teachers should become involved, communicate concern, know about their students, and build caring and supportive relationships with them. These practices contribute to positive student academic outcomes, school connectedness, and trust building (Klem & Connell, 2004; Lubelfeld et al., 2016; Zullig et al., 2014). A study by Decker et al. (2007) found that as supportive teacher-student relationships increased, student suspensions decreased, showing that the status of the relationship can either help or hinder the student who is at higher risk for dropping out of a traditional school.

There is a lack of supportive adolescent teacher-student relationships within traditional schools, as adolescence is a time when these relationships begin to decline (Farrelly & Daniels, 2014). Supportive relationships in alternative schools assist in promoting more student success. These relationships are also needed in traditional schools in order to increase student success. When engaged in supportive teacher-student relationships, students encounter opportunities to develop more positive behaviors, achieve higher school performance, and increase the chance of enhancing their outcomes.

The purpose of this study was to explore the impact of supportive teacher-student relationships on adolescent success in alternative schools and to create a White Paper for use in traditional schools that outlines important alternative school supportive relationship building practices for enhanced student success. One result may be keeping students from needing to apply to alternative school. The goal was to gather perspectives regarding the positive outcomes

that result from building supportive teacher-student relationships. This study adds value to the limited existing research regarding alternative schools as models for best practices concerning the significance of supportive teacher-student relationships and the impact of implementing those practices on adolescent student success. This study also offers an understanding of adolescent student successes when they have supportive relationships. Supportive relationship building practices in traditional schools could decrease alternative school referrals.

All teachers need to become aware of the importance of making connections and building supportive and caring relationships with students because these relationships can lead to enhanced student success. Further, they need to experience proper training and gain appropriate tools to face the challenges that occur during the process of building those relationships. The alternative school model of building supportive teacher-student relationships can be modified and implemented in traditional schools, beginning with the middle school level when relationships between teachers and students typically begin to decline (Farrelly & Daniels, 2014).

ARTIFACT 1

Review of Literature

Supportive relationships between teachers and students are often built at the elementary school level and begin to decrease significantly at the middle school level (Farrelly & Daniels, 2014). When adolescents begin middle school, they gradually distance themselves from their relationships with teachers and begin focusing on peer relationships. As Marsh (2018) stated, age is a factor that relates to being connected. Farrelly and Daniels (2014) noted that there is a critical turning point that occurs in middle school. This can be a challenging time for both teachers and students as students begin to develop physically and emotionally.

Teachers who work with the middle school age students need to focus on building positive relationships with them (Owusu-Ansah & Kyei-Blankson, 2016). Students may be trying to assert themselves without having learned the skills to do so in an appropriate manner. Continuing relationship building practices is particularly important during this transitional time to help adolescent students remain engaged and connected to school (Carlisle, 2011). Adolescents benefit from positive role models during this process. Moreover, teachers need to be taught the importance of making these connections with students while still taking education classes themselves (McFarland-Piazza et al., 2012). Students in college education programs should have the opportunity to learn how to appropriately facilitate supportive teacher-student relationships with different age groups and various populations while still under supervision.

Traditional Schools

Historically, traditional schools, defined as public schools that are divided into grades, tend to largely focus on academics; however, in addition to academics, traditional schools should focus on the social and emotional needs of students. When teachers and students work to develop a relationship over time, positive behaviors develop, which in turn, leads to better school performance (Lubchenko, 2016; Sojourner, 2014). As Carlisle (2011) stated, “Healthy teacher-student relationships involve the perceptions of high levels of support given to adolescent students by teachers within the school environment” (p. 8). When a student does not have a connection with a teacher, and the supportive teacher-student relationship is absent, many issues develop such as low student performance and commitment, school truancy, negative behaviors, academic concerns, diminished cooperation, and increased aggression toward other students (Jones et al., 2016; Klem & Connell, 2004).

Traditional schools have the added occurrence of a large numbers of students within their classrooms which can make relationship building practices more challenging for teachers. Professional development where traditional school teachers can learn ways to build the supportive teacher-student relationship within their classrooms may empower them even within the confines of larger groups, recognizing that even small victories count. Structuring teams of teachers with assigned students to each team creates smaller groups of students within large numbers of grade level students.

In traditional schools, it is common for students with behavioral issues to receive an out-of-school suspension. Short-term disciplinary practices like suspensions often do not address long-term behavioral concerns and usually prove to be disadvantageous. When supportive relationships are not present, there are limited opportunities to properly discuss the issue causing

the behavior disruption (Jones et al., 2016; Zolkoski et al., 2016). Students often feel that they struggle with punitive discipline measures as opposed to teachers seeking the reason for the disengagement and finding ways to avoid punitive discipline measures (Day et al., 2017; Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011).

Crisis

Moments of crisis can present opportunities for the development of stronger teacher-student relationships (Ashley, 2016). Crisis situations give teachers a chance to work through an issue with the student. Wang and Lee (2019) asserted that it is important to attempt to repair any issues when they occur. Teachers should identify other school personnel who are available to assist as needed. Decker et al. (2007) expanded on Wang and Lee's thoughts, indicating that "school psychologists may be critical agents in the school that can help intervene when relationships between students and teachers are less than desirable" (p. 100). School psychologists have sufficient direct training for handling difficult behaviors and could be a resource for teachers in helping to manage supportive teacher-student relationships.

Ramifications for Student Behavior

Ramifications for negative student behavior, such as suspensions, can be detrimental to building trust and positive relationships (Jones et al., 2016). An out-of-school suspension often makes the student's reentry to the school very difficult. Suspensions can lead to disconnections between students and teachers that may further strain those relationships (Henderson & Guy, 2017). Students experiencing an overuse of suspensions may have also been marginalized within the school (Farrelly & Daniels, 2014). Stigmas are sometimes attached to students because of repeated disciplinary issues. These students often become targeted by traditional school staff which results in higher behavioral standards (Wolf & Wolf, 2008). Consequently, alternatives to

suspensions might be withheld. Henderson and Guy (2017) stated that further suspensions from school decrease when a supportive teacher-student relationship exists. This ultimately shows that solid teacher-student relationships help to minimize dropout rates of students who exhibit challenging behaviors (Owusu-Ansah & Kyei-Blankson, 2016).

Students are often referred to an alternative school after experiencing long-term suspensions and continued emotional, behavioral, and academic concerns that are usually associated with being at-risk for failing in the traditional school environment (Duffield, 2018; Henderson & Guy, 2017). Reasons for an alternative school referral may include course failure, excessive absences, juvenile justice issues, emotional difficulties, or learning difficulties (Szlyk, 2018). Generally, students in alternative schools share the same traits of behavioral, social, and emotional difficulties (Mann & Whitworth, 2017).

Alternative Schools

Alternative schools are designed to educate students who have not been adequately successful within a traditional school for various reasons that often include emotional and behavioral challenges. Alternative schools can serve all levels of students, but most serve high school grades. Relationship building practices should become a focus at the middle school level as this is a time when building those relationships becomes more challenging. Alternative school personnel are trained to educate students with emotional and behavioral challenges. It is important for all school employees to participate in not only meeting students' educational needs but also meeting emotional needs, so students can effectively feel understood and move forward with their education (Smaller, 2010a). Alternative school teachers then work with students to discontinue the marginalization and stigma sometimes experienced in traditional schools (Amitay & Rahav, 2018). Ideally, students should be given opportunities to do better or begin

again. As Farrelly and Daniels (2014) stated, “Alternative education plays a critical role in the opportunity gap that persists in the US public education system” (p. 106).

Alternative school admissions often help students to continue their education in a more supportive environment (Duffield, 2018). Smaller (2007) found that students in alternative schools just want to be heard and understood. The alternative school environment tries to create a safe space where students feel respected, are treated fairly, and have opportunities for success through supportive teacher-student relationships, whereas their counterparts in traditional schools generally experience a decline in these relationships.

Teacher-Student Relationship Studies

In a study by Faust et al. (2014), the researchers examined 187 male and 156 female 6th grade students in a traditional suburban school district in the Southeastern part of the United States. The students’ performance and perceptions of belonging in school were studied over the course of one academic year. Students completed a survey at different times over the fall, winter, and spring that assessed student perceptions of belonging in the school. The scale was implemented to consider student perceptions of teacher support, academic competence, satisfaction, and peer support.

The results of the study showed a decline in the quality of teacher-student relationships as the year progressed. The students did not feel that teachers were strong contributors in the traditional school setting for helping the students to develop positive identities and a sense of belonging in the school. Because of inadequate support from the teachers, students’ sense of satisfaction and belonging decreased. Faust et al. (2014) highlighted that supportive teacher-student relationships are of utmost importance for fostering student success and sense of belonging in school. These researchers suggested creating middle school communities as a way

for students to speak more openly about concerning issues to further enhance the supportive teacher-student relationships that are fundamental for continued student growth.

Edgar-Smith and Palmer (2015) conducted a case study to compare secondary students' perceptions of what traditional school was like compared to alternative school. The participants attended an alternative school for four months and later another eight months. Of the 7-12th grade participants, 51 were male, and 24 were female. The case study used a scale to assess the students' perceptions specifically related to school environment. The measure consisted of categories including involvement, affiliation, and teacher support. Edgar-Smith and Palmer's (2015) findings showed that students felt that the alternative school environment was superior to the traditional school environment. The participants also reported that teacher support was more prevalent in the alternative school setting. Another result was that students felt more connected and a sense of belonging in the school when the relationships with their teachers were strong in the alternative school. In this case study, it was clear that supportive teacher-student relationships and school involvement were conducive to student success in the alternative school setting versus the traditional school setting. The student participants also regularly experienced the guidance of a case manager, as well as individual and group counseling experiences that contributed to their success in the alternative school setting.

The Solution Focused Alternative School (SFAS) in the Austin Independent School District participated in a case study approach using in-person interviews by Lagana-Riordan et al. (2011) to explore students' perceptions of their current alternative school placement. The study participants included 33 students who were between the ages of 16 and 19. The alternative school implemented the solution-focused brief therapy which was then compared to the students' former traditional school environment. The students felt much more connected with teachers at

the solution-focused alternative school than at their prior traditional school. Students talked about the positive relationships they had developed with their teachers in the alternative school and how they were learning in a supportive environment and exercising responsibilities. In contrast, students discussed poor teacher and peer relationships, as well as inadequate feelings of safety and strict rules experienced in their traditional school. Many students discussed the caring and supportive relationships they shared with their teachers at SFAS. They noticed that the SFAS teachers focused on the positive aspects of the students and had a genuine interest in them. Lagana-Riordan et al. (2011) found that a supportive teacher-student relationship plays a large part in a student's feelings toward school and overall success. Other areas of influence were home and school connections, improving school climate, flexibility in discipline practices, continuing education for all staff, and utilizing a strength-based approach.

Zolkoski et al. (2016) completed a study with 11 males, ages 18-23, who had started their education in a traditional school but were later placed in and graduated from an alternative school. The purpose of the study was to determine the factors related to resilience in those with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD) who had graduated from the alternative school. The researchers utilized a survey scale and semi-structured interviews to measure students' perceptions of their resilience. Overall, the traditional school experiences did not produce positive outcomes for any of the participants. The descriptions of the teacher-student relationships in a traditional school setting were mostly negative, as discipline procedures were reported as punitive. In comparison, the students' overall description of their alternative school experience was positive. Students found teachers to be helpful, kind, and caring in the alternative school setting. Discipline procedures were much less punitive, as the alternative school used step or point systems to encourage positive behavior. The participants reported that teachers took time

to talk with their students about their behavior or helped to redirect the behavior which resulted in better outcomes and stronger supportive teacher-student relationships in the alternative school environment. Another factor that made the alternative school more desirable was the smaller student-to-teacher ratios.

Collectively, these studies show that students experienced a more positive atmosphere in the alternative school setting, which is largely attributed to the support from the students' teachers in the alternative school environment as compared to the traditional school environment. The supportive teacher-student relationships in the traditional school began to decline over time or did not exist for the students who were eventually admitted to the alternative school. Once at the alternative school, students found the teachers to be more helpful, caring, communicative, and less punitive which allowed them to move forward in a more positive direction. These studies emphasize the importance of the supportive teacher-student relationship for better student outcomes that have occurred for students in alternative schools. This also reiterates what Wolf and Wolf (2008) expressed regarding several studies finding that students in alternative schools tended to have positive views of those schools largely due to attentive teachers.

Identification of Approaches

There are many practices in alternative schools for continuing to build the supportive teacher-student relationship. Alternative school teachers engage in special practices such as remembering birthdays or journeying with their students through a personal crisis (Amitay & Rahav, 2018). Edgar-Smith and Palmer (2015) mentioned taking the time to greet students personally each day, as well as giving chances to earn rewards such as a student having lunch with a teacher or enjoying a brief recreation time including both teachers and students. Social

skills and character development are important life components that can be practiced each morning (Duffield, 2018).

Socialization

Community service, organized recreational activity, and life skills training were suggested by Henderson and Guy (2017) for addressing the psychosocial needs of students in alternative schools. Participating in service-learning projects is another method that has taught leadership, respect, empathy, and responsibility, as students learned to give to others (Duffield, 2018; Lubchenko, 2016). Character trait lessons in the classroom, such as acts of kindness, helped to build stronger teacher-student relationships when students interacted with others positively (Lubchenko, 2016). The Department of Juvenile Services helped some students to become better law-abiding citizens (Duffield, 2018).

SECURE

Jones et al. (2016), researchers from Harvard Graduate School of Education, developed a program called SECURE (Social, Emotional and Cognitive Understanding and Regulation in Education) to help with teacher-student relationship building. The researchers created names for their various relationship building activities in the program. “Cool Kid” was an activity where each student was shown their value and positive traits about them. The “Class Council” activity was a regularly set time period when teachers and students discussed any concerns and learned how to resolve conflict. “Conflict Solvers” was where students practiced role playing for solving conflicts for productive use in the future. The “Peace Path” activity involved a floor poster that literally walked students through the steps to resolving conflicts. “Cool Down Strategies” allowed teachers to demonstrate various ways to effectively handle self-regulation which helped to lower the emotional temperature of the room.

Restorative Practices

Silverman and Mee (2018) discussed restorative practices and how this method can constructively resolve conflict by building healthy relationships and repairing ones where harm may arise. When using this practice, teachers were calm and understanding of emotional needs. “Community circles” were built to enhance trust and helped to create healthy relationships in the classroom where the teacher can pose questions to students. This was an opportunity for teachers and students to learn about each other in a safe atmosphere and learn to express and respect feelings as a good outlet for adolescents. These practices can give the students a sense of being “all in this together” (Silverman & Mee, 2018) with those surrounding them.

Responsive Circles

Implementing “responsive circles” was another technique for supporting conflict resolution and community building with students. Wang and Lee (2019) noted that one teacher said her responsive circle worked well due to the relationships she had built with her students. If there were any issues, the teacher and students were able to work them out before any escalation occurred. Second chances were also given to begin again after any conflict (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011; Szlyk, 2018).

Solution-Focused Brief Therapy

Szlyk (2018) discussed solution-focused brief therapy (SFBT) in alternative schools. Also studied by Lagana-Riordan et al. (2011), SFBT seeks to discover solutions by exploring the future with students and utilizing quick resolutions to any problems in present day. Community agencies were on site to help each week in many alternative schools (Szlyk, 2018). A Code of Honor was another technique implemented in alternative schools that focused on three concepts: honor and integrity, respecting oneself and others, and choosing peace over conflict (Szlyk,

2018). “Today is a new day” was the phrase used to continue to treat students with respect when they had been out of school for any concerns (Szylk, 2018). Also, Szylk (2018) stated that a crisis presented opportunities for growth when incorporating those practices.

Adventure-Based Counseling

Maillet (2017) studied an alternative school that utilized Adventure-Based Counseling (ABC) as a therapeutic tool where students encountered experiential learning, outdoor adventure, group counseling, interpersonal exploration, and problem solving. Students focused on building trust, establishing expectations, and collaborating while solving problems. After every activity, students debriefed what they had noticed or if there was anything that pushed them out of their comfort zone. Every school morning, teachers ate breakfast with their students and held morning meetings in which announcements, the daily schedule, field trips, and relevant topics of interest were discussed (Maillet, 2017). “Connect time” was a daily incentive for good behavior where students and teachers interacted by playing games (Maillet, 2017).

Analytic Services

Smaller (2007), a psychoanalyst, created an in-school treatment and research program called Analytic Service to Adolescents Program (ASAP). The program was started in Cicero, IL, at the Morton Alternative High School. Weekly at this school, Smaller (2007) and other social workers facilitated individual and group psychoanalytic treatment. Through this program, the facilitators of the treatment recorded that there were significant reductions in depression, anxiety, and aggression in the attending students, as measured by a depression and anxiety scale given at the beginning of the school year and again at the end of the school year (Smaller, 2007). Group parent meetings were also held at the school (Smaller, 2010a). Basketball was offered as an integral part of the school’s recreational outlet for the students. The program hosted an annual

student-faculty basketball game as well (Smaller, 2010b). The program combined intensive psychotherapy with regular academics to help participating teenagers finish school (Breu, 2010).

Professional Development

The research clearly shows that in addition to academics, teachers need to approach each student's psychological needs and strive to meet those needs as part of their learning practices (Farrelly & Daniels, 2014). Professional development for faculty and staff on how to facilitate conversations and attend to any student concerns would promote students' abilities to express themselves (Faust et al., 2014) and to speak openly with teachers in a productive way (Amitay & Rahav, 2018). Students should be taught appropriate ways to effectively communicate (Quaglia & Corso, 2014). Staff members should regularly engage students in constructive conversation when time allows to continually build that supportive relationship (Edgar-Smith & Palmer, 2015; Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011; MacSuga-Gage et al., 2012).

When students share interests, teachers can listen and incorporate those interests into lessons as another way to show support. When teachers foster purposeful connections with students, the students are compelled to work hard to prove themselves and exhibit more progress in learning, trust building, mutual respect, and responsibility for improving their success in school (Amitay & Rahav, 2018; Marsh, 2018; Quaglia & Corso, 2014; Wachel, 2015). Even seemingly insignificant conversations assist in building a supportive teacher-student relationship which then makes an impact on a student.

Emotions and Behaviors

Behavior is more effectively managed when teachers choose discipline practices that allow for choices for redirection (Edgar-Smith & Palmer, 2015). It is important to have practices in place when a student has been removed from the classroom for behavioral issues, like being

welcomed back by the classroom teacher who models forgiveness and positive regard in addition to unconditional acceptance (Jones et al., 2016). This supportive relationship helps students build resilience during times of affliction (Jones et al., 2016).

Emotions and behaviors can be used as measures of the supportive teacher-student relationship in the classroom. A technique often used in alternative schools is when teachers “take the temperature of the room” or plan morning check-ins that assess the current emotional state of students in the classroom (Ashley, 2016; Duffield, 2018; Maillet, 2017; Newland et al., 2019). These reactions can be connected to the level or quality of the teacher-student relationships in the classroom (Newland et al., 2019). If a student is struggling, the teacher could set aside some time to discuss the emotions to help the student work through them.

Teacher Support

Students have expressed that they desire more teacher support (Decker et al., 2007; Turhan & Akgul, 2017) and want to feel like they matter to their teachers (Quaglia & Corso, 2014). Teacher support is essential for student engagement (Klem & Connell, 2004). Zolkoski et al. (2016) stated that a student in their study wished that teachers could see life from the students’ points of view. Quaglia and Corso (2014) noted that a principal in South Carolina created “In Their Shoes” where teachers spent a day shadowing a student in order to see their perspective on life, school, and relationships. Teachers did everything students were expected to do such as ride the bus, eat in the cafeteria, and even complete homework. Not only did teachers successfully see life from the students’ perspective, but the students also observed their teachers determined to better understand the students’ points of view.

A teacher-student relationship may be one of the only positive relationships that a student encounters. The school may be the only reliable place for them (Smaller, 2007). Teachers need to

take an interest in understanding students' backgrounds, learn about their hopes and dreams, and compliment them on what they are doing well (Jones et al., 2016; Quaglia & Corso, 2014; Wachel, 2015). Additionally, continuing to maintain high expectations is crucial for academic rigor and encouraging students to do their best (Farrelly & Daniels, 2014; Norris, 2010).

Role Modeling

When teachers model appropriate behaviors or apologize after making a mistake, students learn to respond to others in similar ways (Owusu-Ansah & Kyei-Blankson, 2016). In order to build a supportive teacher-student relationship, teachers should facilitate collaborative problem solving, skill building, social responsibility, and independence (Szlyk, 2018). According to Decker et al. (2007), supportive teacher-student relationships promote positive outcomes. Showing care toward adolescents, even when the care is not reciprocated, demonstrates support for students and should be used as part of instructional and relational practice (Owusu-Ansah & Kyei-Blankson, 2016). Teachers who embody these approaches have shown high investment in their practices (Amitay & Rahav, 2018).

Trauma

Students come from a variety of backgrounds including those who have been exposed to trauma. This exposure can lead to behavior disruptions in the classroom. Trauma sensitive training for teachers is an approach that helps teachers appropriately incorporate trauma theory into classroom practices when needed (Ashley, 2016; Day et al., 2017). Additionally, helping teachers understand diversity is important for the classroom (Norris, 2010), as students from diverse backgrounds might view supportive relationships in different ways (Owusu-Ansah & Kyei-Blankson, 2016). "In general, a teacher shows care by not being judgmental but rather

respectful, patient, available, dependable, flexible, supportive, open, warm and genuine, and by being receptive of students from all backgrounds” (Owusu-Ansah & Kyei-Blankson, 2016, p. 5).

Amitay and Rahav (2018) found that before students began attending alternative school, they often felt hopeless about their academics and struggled with handling emotions due to poorer teacher-student relationships experienced in traditional school settings. Day et al. (2017) found that students often felt that their opinions were disregarded. Alternative school teachers are trained to understand the perspective of the student and to unconditionally accept them by being flexible in their interactions (Edgar-Smith & Palmer, 2015; Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011). Once a student entered alternative school, teachers began working to build supportive relationships with them. Teachers assisted their students not out of duty but out of a sense of caring for their students’ well-being (Amitay & Rahav, 2018). Alternative school attendance can be a place of collaboration and safety for students (Szlyk, 2018). Students attending alternative schools felt accepted “as they were” (Amitay & Rahav, 2018), and many students came to value education for the very first time (Farrelly & Daniels, 2014).

Hiring Procedures

When hiring school personnel, it is important for school districts to seek compassionate and caring teachers who understand the significance of positive and supportive teacher-student relationships and are willing to learn how to build those relationships with their students (Edgar-Smith & Palmer, 2015; Zolkoski et al., 2016). Since supportive teacher-student relationships contribute to pivotal evidence of student success in any school setting, alternative school practices may now be perceived more positively, as teachers in those schools model how to build supportive relationships with their students while witnessing progress from those students. “Learning what practices participants deemed positive during their time in alternative education

programs may inform future practice, not only in alternative education programs, but also in regular education programs” (Zolkoski et al., 2016, p. 241).

Relevant Theoretical Foundation

Growth Mindset

Dweck’s (2010) research revolved around individuals’ attitudes about intelligence and resulting behaviors. With a fixed mindset, intelligence was viewed as innate. Conversely, with a growth mindset, there were chances for growth (Dweck, 2010). Dweck emphasized that teachers could facilitate the creation of a growth mindset in students by structuring lessons in the classroom that would teach that thought process. Specifically, preparing students for challenges by teaching resiliency was a key factor for a growth mindset. Students could then learn to overcome obstacles when they were taught how to utilize and accept help from others (Yeager & Dweck, 2012). When adolescent students are taught that there is always potential for change, experiences can be less aggressive and effectively handled (Yeager et al., 2013).

Utilizing Dweck’s growth mindset is important for continued research regarding adolescent students, as well as students who transferred to alternative schools, since those individuals need to understand that hard work, helpful strategies, and other people will contribute to their continuing growth even when there are obstacles. Mistakes may occur along the way, but there is always room for improvement and learning from those mistakes when a growth mindset exists. Growth mindset application is a vital component for adolescent students to learn resiliency and meet the challenges along the way to student success.

Within alternative school settings, specially developed and implemented supportive relationship building practices are used to expose students to more opportunities for success. There are many characteristics and important factors used for building and maintaining the

supportive relationship in the alternative school setting. Alternative school teachers are also taught to build and enhance supportive relationships with the adolescent students in their schools based on a growth mindset.

To further examine relationship building practices within alternative schools, a qualitative study was conducted to explore the specific supportive teacher-student relationship building practices that are utilized within alternative school settings. These relationship building practices could be identified and implemented for use within traditional schools. All students would benefit from supportive teacher-student relationships in their quest for success beginning in the traditional school setting.

ARTIFACT 2

Procedures

A qualitative research approach using purposeful sampling with individually recorded online interviews was used for this study. Interviews were conducted separately and recorded via the online Zoom platform with one building administrator and one teacher at five secondary alternative schools in the south-central region of the United States. The superintendents received an email offering clarification to any questions regarding the research process (see Appendix A). Superintendents from each of the five school districts wrote a letter of permission on my behalf to the University of North Dakota's Institutional Review Board for research to be conducted within their school districts. All interviewees signed a consent form to participate in the recorded online research interviews prior to the interview (see Appendix B). This research approach was chosen to best understand the supportive teacher-student relationship building practices among adolescent students in alternative schools. Engaging in directed conversations with the chosen personnel allowed for expanded input.

Though qualitative data gathering cannot be analyzed mathematically and can be time consuming, the interviews brought valuable data to the study. This process allowed for outside of the box answers, opinions, and beliefs to be used in the analysis of the collected data regarding supportive relationship building practices within alternative schools. It also allowed for versatility in question expansion for better understanding. The reliability of the qualitative data came through the themes which emerged upon the analysis of the data from each interview.

The research design process focused on how to build the supportive teacher-student relationship with adolescent students in 6-12th grades from the perspectives of building level administrators and teachers who worked within an alternative school, through conducting structured interviews using a list of 13 predetermined and open-ended questions. Alternative school personnel were specifically interviewed, as adolescent students who attend alternative schools become more successful with the supportive relationships they experience in the alternative school environment. The supportive teacher-student relationship building process is important for opportunities of better student success among adolescents. Alternative school relationship building practices with adolescents were studied to learn how to build similar relationships within traditional schools for better adolescent student success within the traditional school environment.

In addition to academics in traditional schools, adolescent students' social-emotional needs should be a prime focus for determining student success. Qualitative data collected from alternative schools on supportive relationship building practices can be used for optimizing teacher-student supportive relations with adolescents in traditional schools. In order to effectively understand what drives human behavior as observed in the secondary alternative schools from the perspectives of administrators and teachers, a White Paper was created to discuss ways to develop the supportive teacher-student relationship with adolescents for better student success in traditional school settings.

The following is a list of the 13 questions asked in each interview (see Appendix C):

Interview Questions

1. Is there a specific plan that you use to begin building supportive relationships with students who are in your school?

2. How do you focus on academic needs?
3. How do you focus on social-emotional needs?
4. What are some identification of approaches used for students in your school?
5. Are there any trainings that the students go through such as life skills, character development, or resiliency training?
6. Do the students receive any type of counseling through the school?
7. How are students seen through a personal crisis?
8. Is there any specific thing that you have noticed that really makes a difference in building the supportive relationship with a student?
9. Do teachers go through any type of training or specific professional development?
10. What are school discipline practices?
11. How are school crises handled?
12. Do students engage in any type of community service, service-learning, or organized recreational activities?
13. Is there anything else that you would like to share that has not been asked or discussed?

Findings

All students in the studied alternative schools were required to apply to the alternative school and undergo an interview process to be admitted to the school. All the alternative schools had their own individual buildings located within the traditional school district where the student had attended. None of the alternative schools' students were there for punitive placement reasons. All entrants applied to the schools by choice, and the alternative schools were deemed a school of choice.

There were several different reasons why the adolescent students applied to an alternative school. Some of the reasons were grades, emotional health, physical health, pregnancy, drugs,

home life, and behavior. Many of the alternative schools had wait lists for entrance. A few alternative schools allowed students to begin and end their time in the school every six weeks, whereas others allowed daily arrivals and departures.

Recorded semi-structured in-depth interviews were used. The researcher asked questions in one-to-one conversations. This process allowed participants to elaborate extensively, which would not be possible using a tool such as a survey. The interview process elicited detailed information in the participants' own words for better understanding of social processes within alternative schools. Field notes were kept and used for data analysis to examine for patterns and repeated ideas in to identify recurring themes. Many themes emerged from the interviews as general relationship building practices. Several important factors went into creating the supportive relationship. Each theme was important to developing positive relationships for enhancing student success. Table 1 shows the following 10 themes that emerged from the research.

School Interviews

The relationship building practices began immediately during the required admission interviews. This was also a time when the students learned that they would take ownership of their education. Instead of an administrator or teacher giving them a plethora of rules, the students were asked what they were willing to do to change and how personnel could help them reach their goals. The administrators became pillars of support for the students entering the school. They were positive, real, and consistent with the students starting with the initial meeting and interview.

Table 1

Alternative School Supportive Relationship Building Themes

School Interviews
Classroom Culture
Alternative School Structure
Counseling and Individual Crisis Management
Relationship Building Focus
Teacher Trainings
Discipline
Schoolwide Crisis Management
Community Service and Activities
Traditional School Participation

The adolescent students would hopefully begin to know that they were cared about, valued, and important. During the interview process, the administrator and teacher intentionally remembered student names, asked about their story, and learned about their interests. The interview was an opportunity to make a connection at the very beginning of the students' experience at the alternative schools. Students were offered a new and different opportunity to begin again and put the past behind them.

Classroom Culture

Teachers created a classroom culture by modeling appropriate ways of sharing and by giving students opportunities to share. The teachers purposefully listened to students by initiating

conversations about the students' interests or hobbies to build a supportive teacher-student relationship. One teacher utilized a favorites questionnaire to get to know the students better.

Academics were addressed with credit recovery programs. A lot of the classes were self-paced which required the students to practice self-discipline. Independent study, online classes, and teacher-led instruction were options for academic formation. One alternative school did offer the more traditional schedule of changing from class to class each hour. Students always had the opportunity to return to traditional high school by choice. Almost all the students chose to remain at an alternative school due to the relationship building and success that they experienced in the alternative school environment.

While noting the vitality of supportive relationships, one administrator shared that they used "get to know you" papers to learn about their students, understand what kind of a learning environment they required, and how they worked best. A teacher shared that lessons were created based on people who were similar to the students. Lessons highlighted individuals who look like the students or have similar experiences as the students. This practice effectively created open discussions in the classroom. Students were also encouraged to journal about their experiences. Due to the wide variety of skill sets, it was crucial to meet the students where they were by assessing needs and creating opportunities for success which increased motivation.

Alternative School Structure

In this study, the enrollment of the alternative schools ranged from 65 to 250 students. Some of the alternative schools operated on a half day schedule, whereas others offered the traditional full day. Students assumed control over choosing their pathway and took responsibility for their success in the alternative school. All classrooms maintained a maximum capacity of 15 students to allow for optimal relationship building during class time. Students

could finish their academics at different times but still had the option to graduate in their traditional school.

Individual counseling was either mandatory or encouraged for each student, as stated during the interview process depending on the alternative school. The alternative schools placed infinite value on the benefits of counseling and explained the process to the students. Referrals were given for outside community agencies if needed. Counseling was utilized to help at-risk students (hereafter referred to as at-promise students) feel like regular students.

The alternative schools in this study aimed to meet the social-emotional needs of students in a variety of ways. In the smaller classrooms, whole group conversations were easier to generate. Teachers and students effectively became quickly acquainted with one another. This was an opportunity for teachers to learn copious details about each student and any struggles that needed to be addressed. A couple of teachers in this study referred to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs when they shared that the basic needs of the students must be met first before the higher-level needs could be addressed. Alternative school personnel tried to meet all of those needs through school and community resources. One school implemented a classroom unit on social-emotional needs at the beginning of the school year so that the students could make connections to their own lives to give meaning to their learning.

A variety of identification of approaches was utilized for students in the alternative schools. Community and team building practices were implemented at one school. A survey was distributed to students to assess their level of connectedness after seven weeks of attending the alternative school and the students' opinions regarding how faculty could improve connectedness. Another school "monitored student pulse" every morning by greeting them with a smile and reminding the students that they cared. This practice assisted in determining the

students' emotional status that day. For a student no-show, the school immediately placed a phone call asking where the student was and if they were okay. This action let the student know that school personnel cared about them and that they would always keep close contact with the student.

A motto at one alternative school was, "One student at a time." The focus was to develop a supportive teacher-student relationship with each student to help them be more successful. Another alternative school emphasized that the physical environment and atmosphere were also important for their students. Classrooms were transformed to feel like a room at home.

Many types of educational trainings were offered to the students in the alternative schools. Most of the schools offered 30-minute blocks of time each day or week for addressing different topics. One school implemented a practice called "Advisories." Teachers were assigned certain students on a regular basis that became "theirs." The teachers regularly checked in on their students to address any concerns. Another school used a program called CARE – Curriculum, Attendance, Resources, Education. Within CARE, the students focused on a character word that served as a theme for the month.

During those 30-minute time slots in the alternative schools, many topics were introduced and discussed. The topics included grief, resiliency, family planning, character education, sexual education, relational conflicts, how to communicate without blow ups, learning about compassion, how to handle disappointment, etiquette, life skills, career development, college visits, and guest speakers. Teachers and students also had the opportunity to candidly discuss any of the presented topics during those time slots.

Counseling and Individual Crisis Management

The alternative school students received counseling services from outside counseling agencies. Counselors entered the schools once a week to address different topics in small groups. Some of the topics included anger management, dating, drugs, anxiety, and social skills. All sites utilized an on-site school counselor to assist with acute crisis management. Art therapy was also used on a regular basis at the alternative school sites.

Two alternative schools integrated animals into their therapeutic school programs. One school's program incorporated equine therapy once a week. This program helped to build confidence within the students when they learned to groom and ride the horses, as well as understand the emotions of the animals and how their own emotions affected the horses. Working with the horses helped the students to be more vulnerable. Another school arranged for animal shelter dogs from the local humane society to spend the day in their classrooms. Each class received a dog for the day. This was a partnership program in that it helped to socialize the dogs for adoption while also proving to be therapeutic for the students. If any student needed time out of the class, they would take the dog for a walk outside. The students fed, walked, and took the dogs on bathroom breaks throughout the day. The school maintained a bulletin board in one of the halls where a 4x6 picture of every dog that has ever been in the school was kept and displayed.

Many of the alternative school personnel referred to Wraparound, which assisted a student through a personal crisis. A team of individuals, well known to the student, collaboratively worked through an individualized care plan for the student in need. Academics were paused while the student experienced the situation. A student could leave the school for the

day if needed. The assistance through Wraparound extended to the student beyond the walls of the school.

Relationship Building Focus

When asked what one thing stood out to make the difference in building the relationship with an adolescent student, participants shared three prominent answers. Those three components were listening, respect, and a smaller number of students in the classrooms. The participants reiterated that when teachers truly listened, they became relatable to the student. The teachers also demonstrated authenticity while giving the student space. True, active listening imprinted an understanding that a student's thoughts and feelings were important without having judgment, which validates the student. The students do not have to earn respect in an alternative school setting. It is modeled by school personnel and freely given to the students. The students enter alternative school with a clean slate. The administrators and teachers noted that students can see whether a school employee is genuine. With the smaller classrooms of a maximum of 15 students, supportive relationships have an opportunity to grow in a more open environment.

Other terms shared by the participants in the study were honesty and caring for building the supportive relationship. When a teacher was honest to an appropriate degree about their own experiences, it modeled honest behavior to the student. The teacher saw the student as the person they were and respected them. Showing mutual caring without pretending or having power differences built on the support. The alternative school personnel emphasized the importance of hiring teachers who can genuinely care for at-risk students. When the suitable teachers were carefully hired, the schools experienced low employee turnover, which in turn, gave students the consistency of the supportive teacher relationship.

Finally, getting to know a student one-on-one tremendously helped to build the supportive relationship. Teachers started by acquiring students' interests and family stories. Asking the student real questions sincerely conveyed the care, honesty, listening, and respect that each student deserved. These practices demonstrate effective relationship building at the core.

Teacher Trainings

Teachers participated in various trainings regarding effectively working with at-risk kids. One training was a mindset program where teachers helped students begin to acknowledge their feelings, better understand them, and learn to change the feelings without arguments. The students successfully discovered solutions through this program. Other teacher trainings included topics such as trauma, resiliency, child abuse awareness, mental health, first aid, PBIS, MTSS consultation, ACES, and book studies. Teachers participated in ongoing training regarding efficacious ways to communicate with students, like practicing tough conversations before working with the students on communication skills. One participant shared that their alternative school met with the Department of Mental Health monthly to discuss various mental health issues.

Discipline

When it came to discipline, flexibility was key. There were not a lot of rules. Teachers modeled respect to the students. The students were provided guidance and direction and were then, with great care, held accountable. Exceptions were made for students when they were having an off day. If a student fell asleep on the floor, they were allowed to keep sleeping. If a student needed to draw all day, that is what they did. The priority was the student's overall well-being. Students were allowed cell phones, food, and restroom breaks at their discretion. Attendance contracts were formed if necessary. One alternative school offered school Monday-

Thursday if the student attended each of those days. If not, school on Friday was added. One school offered open campus at lunch but became closed to a student if needed. Nothing was a problem unless it became a problem.

Participants shared that restorative practices were a common mode for handling discipline. The school personnel approached a behavioral situation by first trying to understand the student's perspective and what they could do better. The term "Take a Lap" was used in another alternative school. If the student needed to calm down, an administrator might say, "Let's go take a lap." The administrator and the student then walked a lap outside around the campus to talk and redirect the behavior. The participants stressed the importance of open dialogue, conversation, and encouragement in an alternative school. The essential piece to addressing any crisis was to approach it thoughtfully.

Safe, Respectful, and Responsible was the mantra at another alternative school. The students were asked to determine what a certain behavior looked like as a way to take ownership of their own behavior and learning. None of the schools indicated any major discipline complications. Even though it rarely happened, one school administrator offered that a student could always earn their way back into the school if it was determined that they could not stay in the alternative school. Participants in this study stated that their alternative schools were not punitive and reiterated that they were schools of choice.

Schoolwide Crisis Management

The alternative school personnel indicated that no schoolwide crisis has occurred in the last few years. The staff were trained to follow a crisis plan if a crisis would occur. A few administrators stated that there had been a crisis, such as a suicide, within a traditional school. During these crises, they provided counselors for any students who wished to speak to one. All

personnel worked together as a team to meet any needs. Outside community partnerships were also formed as necessary. When a crisis did occur, the alternative schools paused academics and resumed at a later time.

Community Service and Activities

The students all participated in community service at each of the alternative schools. All the administrators expressed that community service had been suspended due to COVID-19 pandemic restrictions in place. Some of the community service activities pre-COVID-19 included the Salvation Army, Goodwill, food pantries, recycling, Special Olympics, creating cards for veterans, being mentors to younger students, Habitat for Humanity, Meals on Wheels, and maintaining a greenhouse. Other activities involved the Up with Trees organization where students planted trees along a river and serving at assisted living centers where the students danced, made cards, and played dominoes with the residents. One alternative school undertook the movement “Generation Citizen” where the students discussed community issues and brainstormed ways to create a project to help with a specific situation. Student internships were also options for students to learn on-the-job skills.

The students participated in a variety of recreational activities including wellness days, team building activities, Halloween costume contests, decorating pumpkins and donating them to the pumpkin patch for a fundraiser, playing team games, picnics, and healthy competitions. One alternative school implemented an activity called “Focus,” a daily 35-minute time period designed for friendly competitions and games.

Traditional School Participation

All students could enroll in classes at the traditional school if desired. Any class offered at the traditional school was open to the students at the alternative school. Each alternative

school had a few students who participated in band, orchestra, a foreign language class, or sports at the traditional school. All students could also attend any traditional school events such as prom, clubs, or sporting events. Students could elect to participate in high school graduation with their traditional school class as well. Diplomas and transcripts were the same as their traditional school.

A couple of the alternative schools hosted celebratory events for graduating seniors, but these events differed from the formal traditional school graduation ceremonies. One alternative school hosted a senior banquet where graduating students picked the theme and the menus for a dinner in their honor. They all dressed up and enjoyed a slideshow presentation. Another school utilized an honorable event called “The Walk.” Students wore their graduation caps and were encouraged to invite whomever they wanted such as parents and extended family members. All the guests and the graduates lined the halls clapping as each graduate walked through. Pictures were also taken to celebrate their achievements and commemorate the event.

Summary of Findings and Recommendations

According to the alternative school personnel’s remarks, supportive relationship building practices created better compliance and lowered discipline problems overall, which in turn, led to more successful academic achievements for students. One administrator referred to disliking the word “alternative” as part of the term alternative school. Another administrator affirmed, “These are not bad kids; they are good kids who may have made some poor choices.”

Based on the findings, the following is a summary of recommendations for building supportive teacher-student relationships:

- Create a classroom culture beginning on day one; the teacher should get to know all students through initiated conversations so that each student feels heard and valued

- Work to discover how each student in the classroom learns most effectively and offer those opportunities
- When classrooms are large, intentionally create times for smaller groups within the classroom
- Utilize Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs to notice if any student has needs that should be met at more basic levels before focusing on higher-level needs
- Implement identification of approaches for the classroom such as creating a warm environment and utilizing procedures where students are noticed and shown care
- All types of relevant student trainings should be offered at various times
- Refer students to the school counselor with any noted concerns so that appropriate referrals can be given to the family
- Wraparound services should be implemented for any type of student crisis
- Use core relationship building practices with students such as listening, respect, small groups, appropriate honesty, caring, and getting to know a student one-on-one
- Attend teacher trainings in subject areas that would be beneficial in understanding at-risk students such as trauma, resiliency, PBIS, and communication skills
- Discipline with flexibility and respect
- Execute specific plans and discuss schoolwide crisis management procedures should they occur
- Offer different types of community service for students
- Include recreational activities for team building and wellness days
- Encourage participation in extracurricular activities within the school district
- Organize special events for accomplishments when appropriate

A White Paper was created to highlight the important adolescent supportive teacher-student relationship building practices within alternative schools that enhance student success, so that supportive teacher-student relationship building practices can be identified and implemented for use within traditional schools. Adolescent students in traditional schools could also benefit from supportive teacher-student relationship building practices. Such practices might prevent a student from choosing to attend an alternative school. Supportive relationships could result in overall enhanced success within traditional schools beginning at the middle school level when relationships between teachers and students typically begin to decline.

Limitations and Future Research

One limitation of this study is that the five studied alternative schools were all within the south-central region of the U.S. Future studies could include alternative schools in diverse regions of the country. Online platform interviews could be used for understanding alternative school policies and procedures in different regions for expanded data and implementation comparisons of supportive teacher-student relationship building practices on student success.

ARTIFACT 3

White Paper Introduction

Oftentimes, alternative schools are viewed with a deficit perspective. Yet, the way teachers are taught to build and enhance supportive relationships with adolescent students helps those students to become more successful in the alternative school setting. This study focused on characteristics of this central phenomenon and important factors used for building adolescent supportive teacher-student relationships in the alternative school setting.

The goal was to gather perspectives about positive results stemming from supportive teacher-student relationships in alternative schools in order to modify and implement supportive relationship practices into the traditional school setting. This study brought value to limited existing research on alternative schools as models for best practices regarding the significance of supportive teacher-student relationships and the impact of implementing those practices on adolescent student success.

Supportive relationships between teachers and students are often built at the elementary school level and begin to decrease significantly at the middle school level (Farrelly & Daniels, 2014). When adolescents begin middle school, they gradually distance themselves from their relationships with teachers and begin focusing on peer relationships. As Marsh (2018) stated, age is a factor that relates to being connected. Farrelly and Daniels (2014) noted that there is a critical turning point that occurs in middle school. This can be a challenging time for both teachers and students as students begin to develop physically and emotionally.

Teachers who work with middle school age students need to focus on building positive relationships with them (Owusu-Ansah & Kyei-Blankson, 2016). Students may be trying to assert themselves without having learned the skills to do so in an appropriate manner. Continuing relationship building practices is particularly important during this transitional time to help adolescent students remain engaged and connected to school (Carlisle, 2011). Adolescents benefit from positive role models during this process. Moreover, teachers need to be taught the importance of making these connections with students while still taking education classes themselves (McFarland-Piazza et al., 2012). Students in college education programs should have the opportunity to learn how to appropriately facilitate supportive teacher-student relationships with different age groups and various populations while still under supervision.

Historically, traditional schools tend to largely focus on academics; however, in addition to academics, traditional schools should focus on social and emotional needs. When teachers and students work to develop a relationship over time, positive behaviors develop, which in turn, leads to better school performance (Lubchenko, 2016; Sojourner, 2014). As Carlisle (2011) stated, “Healthy teacher-student relationships involve the perceptions of high levels of support given to adolescent students by teachers within the school environment” (p. 8). When a student does not have a connection with a teacher, and the supportive teacher-student relationship is absent, many issues develop such as low student performance and commitment, school truancy, negative behaviors, academic concerns, diminished cooperation, and increased aggression toward other students (Jones et al., 2016; Klem & Connell, 2004).

In traditional schools, it is common for students with behavioral issues to receive an out-of-school suspension. Short-term disciplinary practices like suspensions often do not address long-term behavioral concerns and usually prove to be disadvantageous. When supportive

relationships are not present, there are limited opportunities to properly discuss the issue causing the behavior disruption (Jones et al., 2016; Zolkoski et al., 2016). Students often feel that they struggle with punitive discipline measures as opposed to teachers seeking the reason for the disengagement and finding ways to avoid punitive discipline measures (Day et al., 2017; Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011).

Students are often referred to an alternative school after experiencing long-term suspensions and continued emotional, behavioral, and academic concerns that are usually associated with being at-risk for failing in the traditional school environment (Duffield, 2018; Henderson & Guy, 2017). Reasons for an alternative school referral may include course failure, excessive absences, juvenile justice issues, emotional difficulties, or learning difficulties (Szlyk, 2018). Generally, students in alternative schools share the same traits of behavioral, social, and emotional difficulties (Mann & Whitworth, 2017).

The supports provided in an alternative school create an environment that helps a student stay in school (Duffield, 2018). Alternative school teachers work with students to discontinue the marginalization and stigma sometimes experienced in traditional schools (Amitay & Rahav, 2018). Ideally, students should be given opportunities to do better or begin again. As Farrelly and Daniels (2014) stated, “Alternative education plays a critical role in the opportunity gap that persists in the US public education system” (p. 106). The alternative school environment is designed to create a safe space where students feel respected, are treated fairly, and have opportunities for success.

Supportive Relationships to Improve Student Success

The purpose of this study was to explore supportive teacher-student relationships with adolescent students within alternative schools regarding student success. Better understanding

alternative school practices and procedures used for building the supportive teacher-student relationship with adolescents can then be used as a model for traditional school supportive relationship building practices. The alternative school supportive relationship building traits could be modified and implemented within traditional schools so that adolescent students have more opportunities for success and a higher chance of remaining in the traditional school environment.

In a study by Faust et al. (2014), the researchers examined 187 male and 156 female 6th grade students in a traditional suburban school district in the Southeastern part of the United States. The students' performance and perceptions of belonging in school were studied over the course of one academic year. The results of the study showed a decline in the teacher-student relationship as the year progressed. Students shared that teachers were not strong contributors in the traditional school setting for helping the students develop positive identities and a sense of belonging in the school. Faust et al. (2014) highlighted that supportive teacher-student relationships are of utmost importance for fostering student success and sense of belonging in school.

Edgar-Smith and Palmer (2015) conducted a case study to compare secondary students' perceptions of what traditional school was like compared to alternative school. The participants attended an alternative school for four months and later another eight months. Of the 7-12th grade participants, 51 were male, and 24 were female. Edgar-Smith and Palmer's (2015) findings showed that students felt that the alternative school environment was superior to the traditional school environment. In this case study, it was clear that supportive teacher-student relationships and school involvement were conducive to student success in the alternative school setting versus the traditional school setting.

The Solution Focused Alternative School (SFAS) in the Austin Independent School District participated in a case study approach using in-person interviews by Lagana-Riordan et al. (2011) to explore students' perceptions of their current alternative school placement. The alternative school implemented the solution-focused brief therapy which was then compared to the students' former traditional school environment. The study participants included 33 students who were between the ages of 16 and 19. The students felt much more connected with teachers at the solution-focused alternative school than at their prior traditional school. Lagana-Riordan et al. (2011) found that a supportive teacher-student relationship plays a large part in a student's feelings toward school and overall success.

Zolkoski et al. (2016) completed a study with 11 males, ages 18-23, who had started their education in a traditional school but were later placed in and graduated from an alternative school. The purpose of the study was to determine the factors related to resilience in those with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD) who had graduated from the alternative school. Overall, the traditional school experiences did not produce positive outcomes for any of the participants. In comparison, the students' overall description of their alternative school experience was positive. Students found teachers to be helpful, kind, and caring in the alternative school setting. Discipline procedures were also much less punitive.

Collectively, these studies show that students encountered a more positive atmosphere in the alternative school setting, which is largely attributed to the support from the students' teachers in the alternative school environment as compared to the traditional school environment. The supportive teacher-student relationships in the traditional school declined over time or did not exist for the students who were eventually admitted to the alternative school.

Once at the alternative school, students found the teachers to be more helpful, caring, communicative, and less punitive which allowed them to move forward in a more positive direction. These studies emphasize the importance of the supportive teacher-student relationship for better student outcomes that have occurred for students in alternative schools.

Using Alternative School Practices to Improve Student Success

In this qualitative study, 10 interviews were conducted with five administrators and five teachers in five different south-central alternative schools to learn about supportive teacher-student relationship building practices. In each of the studied alternative schools, all students were required to fill out an application and go through an interview process to be accepted into the alternative school. All of the alternative schools had their own separate buildings located within the traditional school district. The school was not seen as punitive but as a school of choice.

There were many reasons that adolescent students applied to alternative schools. Some of the reasons were grades, emotional health, physical health, pregnancy, drugs, home life, and behavior. The relationship building practices began immediately for the students who enrolled in alternative schools. Alternative school personnel realized the significance of building the genuine supportive relationships with their adolescent students as something that paved the way for better student success. Names of students were remembered, and an interest was taken in the student's story. Students were immediately told that they were cared about, valued, and important. Administrators became pillars of support for them. The students were offered an opportunity to begin again and put the past behind them.

With a wide range of academic levels in the alternative schools, academics were addressed with credit recovery programs, online classes, independent study, or teacher-led

instruction. Students assumed control over choosing their pathway and took responsibility for their success in the alternative school. Students could finish their academics at different times but still had the option to graduate in their traditional school. However, most of the students elected to continue in the alternative school due to the relationship building and success that they had experienced in the alternative school environment.

The alternative schools in this study aimed to meet the social-emotional needs of students in a variety of ways. Teachers created classrooms with an atmosphere of open sharing. They modeled appropriate ways of sharing and truly listened to the students when they spoke. Teachers utilized activities such as a favorites questionnaire or initiating conversations about students' interests and hobbies to learn about them on a personal level. Sometimes, the environment of the classrooms was less formal and felt like a room at home.

Individual counseling was not mandatory in a particular alternative school, but it was strongly encouraged as a healthy choice. Students were given outside community referrals for receiving those services. Many types of educational trainings were implemented into 30-minute time blocks each day. Some of the topics covered in those time blocks included grief, family planning, character education, sexual education, relational conflicts, communication skills, etiquette, life skills, and career development. Outside counseling agencies provided counselors once a week or bi-monthly to address different topics for small groups in areas such as anger management, dating, drugs, anxiety, and social skills. A couple of alternative schools integrated animal therapy into their classroom lessons where the students worked with horses or shelter dogs.

Wraparound services were utilized when necessary. A team of individuals, well known to the student, collaboratively worked through an individualized care plan for the student in need.

Academics paused while the student processed the situation. The student received an excused absence if they needed to be gone for the day.

The particular important factors for maintaining the supportive teacher-student relationship were listening, respect, a smaller number of students in the classroom, honesty, caring, and getting to know a student one-on-one. Each student needed to know that their thoughts and feelings were important without experiencing judgment, as those kinds of interactions were validating. Respect was modeled by school personnel and given to the students. When meeting in small student groups, the open environment allowed the teacher to assess if a student was having an off day and needed extra attention. If a student was absent, the school immediately placed a phone call asking where the student was and if they were okay.

The alternative school personnel emphasized the importance of hiring teachers who can genuinely care for at-risk students. When the suitable teachers were carefully hired, the schools experienced lower employee turnover, which in turn, gave students the consistency of the supportive teacher relationship.

Teachers participated in different trainings regarding effectively working with at-risk kids. Some of the topics of these trainings included trauma, ACES, resiliency, child abuse awareness, mental health, first aid, and several different book studies. Teachers participated in ongoing training regarding efficacious ways to communicate, like practicing tough conversations before working with the students on communication skills.

With discipline practices, flexibility was key. There were not a lot of rules that were emphasized. Students were always held accountable in a caring way. Restorative practices were utilized to help a student understand why a behavior occurred and what they could do better. Students received guidance and direction, but nothing was a problem unless it became a problem.

The alternative school personnel emphasized how important open dialogue was; many conversations explored how and why students should make good choices. Staff members were trained to follow a crisis plan if a crisis would occur, but none of the schools reported any major discipline or schoolwide crisis situations in recent years. Any crisis would be addressed thoughtfully.

All students participated in community service. Some of the community service activities included volunteering for the Salvation Army, Goodwill, Special Olympics, Habitat for Humanity, Meals on Wheels, food pantries, assisted living centers, and recycling. Some students mentored younger students by reading together. Older adolescents participated in internships for job skills training. Students also participated in recreational activities that were labeled wellness days. Those days were filled with activities like Halloween costume contests, decorating pumpkins, playing team games, picnics, and friendly competitions.

Overall, supportive relationship building practices created better compliance and lowered discipline problems, which in turn, led to more successful academic achievements for the students in the alternative schools. One administrator referred to disliking the word “alternative” as part of the term alternative school. Another administrator affirmed, “These are not bad kids; they are good kids who may have made some poor choices.”

Recommendations

As this study demonstrates, students in alternative schools experienced increased success when they engaged in supportive teacher-student relationships. It is reasonable to utilize the alternative school relationship building practices and procedures in a way that can be modified and implemented into a traditional school setting. All students in any school setting would have opportunities to be more successful by participating in support teacher-student relationships. A

traditional school may not be capable of providing classroom sizes of only 15 students, but methods for fostering teacher-student relationships could be created and implemented according to the traditional school environment. Traditional schools must place a stronger emphasis on students' social-emotional needs in addition to meeting academic goals to achieve overall student success and lower incidences of negative behavior. When students are allowed room for improvement and chances to learn from mistakes, they can achieve substantial growth academically and behaviorally.

Hiring teachers who enjoy adolescent students and who can genuinely care about all of them is essential. Traditional school administrators need to emphasize supportive relationship building practices at the adolescent age level to prevent the decline in the supportive teacher-student relationship that occurs in adolescence. It is important to train traditional teachers on how to work with at-risk students. Professional development topics could include trauma, child abuse awareness, mental health, and restorative practices. Teachers must allow flexibility and hold students accountable in a caring way.

Small groups are an excellent opportunity for teachers and students to engage in open conversations. This allows the teacher to learn personal details about each student. Another way to build supportive relationships is by creating a 30-minute block of time once per week for discussions about relevant topics or open sharing. Teachers can be models for how to share appropriately and can set the tone for proper open dialogue. As a supportive relationship strengthens, traditional school teachers become intuitively aware when a student begins to struggle with an issue. Teachers can also pinpoint the quieter, non-participatory students and reach out to them so the students feel cared about, valued, and important. It would be beneficial

for traditional classrooms to offer comfortable spaces so students can sit, read, or draw if they need a short break from a classroom lesson.

Study skills classes could provide an opportunity for credit recovery for students who have fallen behind on coursework. Sometimes a student simply needs to pause academics, and the traditional school teacher could allow those breaks periodically. Empathetically meeting students in their struggles and giving them space to process life experiences are some of the most helpful strategies a teacher could implement.

To allow further growth in supportive teacher-student relationships, traditional schools could create less punitive discipline practices and implement restorative practices for student behavior. Long-term suspensions should be applied infrequently, and community resources for individual counseling should be easily accessible. Counselors from outside agencies could be available in the school building once a month to meet with groups of students about relevant topics regarding adolescence. Community service projects for small groups of students could be organized.

Finally, and most importantly, traditional school personnel should incorporate the core relationship building elements into each classroom. These elements are listening, respect, caring, honesty, small classroom groups, and getting to know a student one-on-one. School staff should always circle back to these crucial elements to positively support students. All students benefit from supportive teacher-student relationships, but the at-risk students especially thrive from these relationships by making better choices and exemplifying success in and out of the classroom.

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CONCLUSION

The supportive teacher-student relationship does enhance student success. An extensive review of the literature, as well as the presented qualitative study, demonstrated that alternative school students who participated in supportive teacher-student relationships became more successful in that environment. Students developed more positive behaviors and achieved increased school performance which enhanced student outcomes.

The qualitative approach in this study effectively depicted supportive teacher-student relationship building practices within alternative schools. When administrators and teachers were asked predetermined open-ended questions, they elaborated on their thoughts to describe the specific relationship building practices used within their alternative schools. All participants commented on the essential relationship building practices that are pivotal for student success. The administrators and teachers expressed appreciation that research was being conducted on supportive relationship building practices regarding student success, as they intimately understood the profound importance of those relationships.

Alternative school personnel responses included a focus on their students' social-emotional needs as well as academic needs. This study showed the value of alternative schools' extensive effort in building supportive teacher-student relationships. It also contributed to the research regarding understanding adolescent students' success when the students engage in those supportive relationships in an alternative school.

Adolescence is a crucial time in a student's life. Unfortunately, this is when the supportive teacher-student relationships begin to decline within traditional schools. This research could be utilized to strengthen supportive teacher-student relationship building practices within traditional schools to keep students in a traditional school setting as they pursue adequate opportunities for student success.

Administrative structuring within traditional schools for enhancing supportive teacher student relationships is helpful. Beginning at the middle school level, creating teams of teachers where each team has a teacher from a different core subject and a group of students assigned to a team helps to lower the overall student numbers for teachers. These teams could have a name so that the students would know to which team they belong. The students would rotate through their classes within the same team throughout the day. Therefore, the team of teachers would have a chance to know their group of students more personally and could speak to each other about their group of students. Each teacher within a team would be assigned a certain classroom group of students where they could utilize a 30-minute block of time each week or bimonthly to have time for relationship building practices specifically. Team teachers could then share within their team meetings about any student concerns they had noticed within their team.

The high school level becomes more challenging with the wider variety of electives. Utilizing core relationship building practices at various times including the possible schedule of the 30-minute block for relationship building purposes is a way to provide support. High school teachers can also participate in professional development to learn about relationship building practices and to become more aware of the students who might stand out for needing more support. Academic lessons could sometimes be tailored specifically for relationship building practices as an option for becoming familiar with students. Even small relationship building

practices may help a student move in a more positive direction. Further studies could provide guidance for consistently implementing the alternative school teacher-student supportive relationship building practices within traditional schools to measure the growth of student success within the traditional school environment.

Appendix A
Superintendent Email Form

From: Salyer, Michelle <michelle.salyer@und.edu>
Sent: Wednesday, April 28, 2021 10:39 AM
To: _____
Subject: Research request

External Email - Think before you click

Dr. _____,

Good morning, I understand my research request within _____ was forwarded to you by _____. If you have any questions regarding my research or the brief letter I need for the UND IRB, please contact me. I am currently _____ while working on my online doctorate through UND.

Thank you for your time and consideration,

Michelle Salyer

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Page 1 of 1

Appendix B
Informed Consent

1

**THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH DAKOTA
CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH**

Project Title: Better Together: Building Supportive Teacher-Student Relationships with Adolescents Using Alternative School Practices as a Model

Principal Investigator: L. Michelle Salyer

Phone/Email Address: michelle.salyer@und.edu

Department: Teaching, Leadership and Professional Practice

Research Advisor: Jared Schlenker, Ed.D.

Research Advisor

Phone/Email Address: (701) 777-3584 / jared.schlenker@und.edu

What should I know about this research?

- Someone will explain this research to you.
- Taking part in this research is voluntary. Whether you take part is up to you.
- If you don't take part, it won't be held against you.
- You can take part now and later drop out, and it won't be held against you.
- If you don't understand, ask questions.
- Ask all the questions you want before you decide.

How long will I be in this research?

We expect that your taking part in this research will last one hour.

Why is this research being done?

The purpose of this research is to explore supportive teacher-student relationships on adolescent success in alternative schools as a possible model for traditional schools.

What happens to me if I agree to take part in this research?

If you decide to take part in this research study, you will be asked some questions over a recorded zoom meeting that relate to how supportive relationships are built between teachers and adolescent students in alternative schools. You are free to skip any questions that you prefer not to answer.

Could being in this research hurt me?

The most important risks or discomforts that you may expect from taking part in this research are minimal. We do not predict any negative educational effects. If you are uncomfortable at any time by being part of the study questions, you may ask that the study be stopped.

Approved: 5/14/2021

Expires: 5/13/2022

University of North Dakota IRB

Date: _____
Subject Initials: _____

Will being in this research benefit me?

The most important benefit that you may expect from taking part in this research include bringing more awareness to alternative school leadership practices.

Possible benefits to others include bringing an understanding of adolescent student successes when they have supportive teacher relationships at school, as well as bringing more value to alternative schools as best practices for a supportive teacher-student relationship building.

How many people will participate in this research?

A total of ten people will participate from five different alternative schools in Oklahoma.

Will it cost me money to take part in this research?

You will not have any costs for being in this research study.

Will I be paid for taking part in this research?

You will not be paid for being in this research study.

Who is funding this research?

The University of North Dakota and the research team are receiving no payments from other agencies, organizations, or companies to conduct this research study.

What happens to information collected for this research?

Your private information may be shared with individuals and organizations that conduct or watch over this research, including:

- The Institutional Review Board (IRB) that reviewed this research
- Jared Schlenker, Ed.D.

We may publish the results of this research. However, we will keep your name and other identifying information confidential. We protect your information from disclosure to others to the extent required by law. We cannot promise complete secrecy.

Data or specimens collected in this research might be de-identified and used for future research or distributed to another investigator for future research without your consent.

You should know, however, that there are some circumstances in which we may have to show your information to other people. For example, the law may require us to show your information to a court or to tell authorities if we believe you have abused a child, or you pose a danger to yourself or someone else.

Due to this interview being recorded over zoom, you have the right to review/edit the recordings. Only the research coordinator, the IRB, or Dr. Jared Schlenker will have access to these recordings that will be used for understanding relationship building practices with teachers and

Approved: 5/14/2021

Expires: 5/13/2022

University of North Dakota IRB

Date: _____

Subject Initials: _____

Appendix C

Interview Questions

Interview Questions

1. Is there a specific plan that you use to begin building supportive relationships with students who are placed in your school?
2. How do you focus on academic needs?
3. How do you focus on social emotional needs?
4. What are some identification of approaches used for students in your school?
5. Are there any trainings that the students go through such as life skills, character development or resiliency training?
6. Do the students receive any type of counseling through the school?
7. How are students seen through a personal crisis?
8. Is there any specific thing that you have noticed that really makes a difference in building the supportive relationship with a student?
9. Do teachers go through any type of training or specific professional development?
10. What are school discipline practices?
11. How are school crises handled?
12. Do students engage in any type of community service, service-learning, or organized recreational activities?
13. Is there anything else that you would like to share that has not been asked or discussed?

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