

HOPELESSNESS, ITS IMPACT ON AT-RISK STUDENTS
AND A COMPARISON OF ALTERNATIVE
EDUCATION PROGRAMS

by

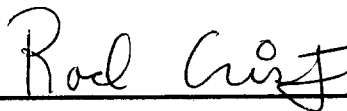
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A Research Paper

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the
Master of Science Degree
With a Major in

Guidance and Counseling

Approved: 2 Semester Credits



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University of Wisconsin -Stout
May, 2000

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ABSTRACT

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Hopelessness, Its Impact on At-Risk Students and a Comparison of Alternative Education
(Title)

Programs

Guidance & Counseling Rod Crist May, 2000 46
(Graduate Major) (Research Advisor) (Month/Year) (No. of Pages)

American Psychological Association (APA) Publication Manual
(Name of Style Manual Used in this Study)

The purpose of this study was to investigate hopelessness, its impact on at-risk students and an examination of alternative education programs.

This review includes an examination of studies and articles which investigates hopelessness and how it affects behavioral outcomes. This study further explores the different markers that creates at-risk designations and identifies the elements that lead to more effective behaviors.

This study examines the history of alternative education and profiles the following: a School to Work program; a School within a School program; and two alternative high school programs; one administered by CESA #7 in Green Bay, Wisconsin and a program administered by Northeast Wisconsin Technical College for northeast Wisconsin school districts. Studies show that there several characteristics where alternative programs differ

from conventional schools. Studies also show the impact on students in an alternative program.

Success in an alternative program is not guaranteed. In spite of the flexibility of the program, non-competitiveness, and the supportive environment, students fail to complete the programs. Schools cannot address all the issues in a student's life. There are some things beyond the scope of the school's influence.

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Findings of this research include:

- 1) School atmosphere, its culture, plays an important part in student success.
- 2) Eleven elements have been identified that help lead at-risk students to more effective behaviors.
- 3) There are three major factors that impact individuals and contribute to at-risk designation: economic factors, family problems, and school related issues.
- 4) Alternative education programs differ from conventional school programs by: class size, location, decision making, voluntary participation, curriculum, administration, school mission, atmosphere, teacher role, services and technology.
- 5) Alternative programs define success more broadly than conventional schools.
- 6) The flexibility of the alternative program allows the program to adapt to the needs of the student. It works with the whole student.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Rod Crist, for his understanding and support, as I completed this paper. His willingness to step in when needed made all the difference. I will forever be grateful to him.

In addition, I would like to thank my family for their love and encouragement. I would particularly like to thank my husband, Bob, for his endless support as I worked on my dream.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Success, as defined in Webster's New World Dictionary, is "a favorable outcome, something having a favorable outcome, the gaining of wealth, fame, etc." (Webster, 1982) Success is a word that can be individually defined. One recognizes success when one sees it, yet, what success is for one person may not measure up for another.

Educators are concerned with success and its outcomes and students are concerned with success and how it applies to them. The acquisition of success is another matter.

How to become successful seems fairly straightforward. Work hard. Apply yourself and success will be yours. Keep your nose to the grindstone. Keep your eye on the prize. Set your goals high, aim for the stars. These are all well meaning platitudes, but how do they apply to someone who does not see himself/herself in the role of someone having the opportunity to succeed?

Society seems to have a formula for accomplishing success, unfortunately this formula does not suit all individuals. Our country's history is rich with the stories of self made men and women who were able to overcome tremendous obstacles to achieve success. What was intrinsic in their character that seems to be missing in others?

In 1983, the report *A Nation at Risk*, brought to the attention of the public the problem of school failure and the at-risk student population. The term "at risk" has come to be more broadly defined to encompass students impacted by "poverty, dysfunctional families, substance abuse, early sexual experiences, health and fitness deficits and a range of other situations attendant on coming of age in the United States in the 1990's". (Spittgerber, Allen 1996)

In *Fateful Choices: Healthy Youth for the 21st Century* (Hechinger 1992) the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development described the depth and extent of the problems facing students of the 1990's. According to their findings "7 million of the 28 million young people enrolled in middle or junior high school are considered at high risk of failing in school and participating in such harmful behaviors as alcohol and drug abuse and premature and unprotected sexual activity." "Another 7 million young people may be at moderate risk; they constitute a subgroup with serious academic, social, and personal problems." (Splittgerber, Allen 1996)

Marian Wright Edelman, the president of the Children's Defense fund, presented some frightening information about at-risk youth. "Every 16 seconds of every school day, as we talk about a competitive workforce in the future, one of our children drops out of school. Every 26 seconds of every day, an American child runs away from home. These are not just poor or black children--these are all of our children. This is not something affecting just a few families--these are national problems. Every 47 seconds, a youngster is abused. Every 67 seconds, a teenager has a baby. We produce the equivalent of the city of Seattle each year with children having children. Every seven minutes, a child is arrested for a drug offense. Every 30 minutes, one of our children is charged with drunken driving. Every 53 minutes, in the richest land on Earth, an American child dies because of poverty."(Splittgerber, Allen 1996)

These at-risk factors add to the complexities of youth, years marked by significant developmental changes matched only by the significance of the first two years of life. Young people find themselves at a junction where the decisions they make can have a positive or negative impact.

Much of the at-risk behaviors mentioned are beyond the extent of school systems. However, in a study of students at-risk conducted by Phi Delta Kappa, five different situations were identified that can lead to at-risk behavior: "personal pain, academic

failure, family socioeconomic factors, family instability, and family tragedy.” (Splittgerber, Allen 1996) Of these five factors the school can oversee and impact on student’s personal pain and academic failure. The other factors of the family’s economic health, the family’s stability and the family’s tragic history may be addressed by other agencies.

Even though the school plays an important role in a student’s life, it is important to remember school can only impact so much. The majority of the student’s time is spent outside of the school setting.

Families typically spend the most time with a young person, however with more parents working outside of the home and spending less time at home leaves young people with a lot of unsupervised and unstructured time. The Carnegie Council found that “60 percent of family time is spent in directed activities like homework, eating, family chores, or paid employment. The remaining 40 percent is uncommitted time” which for at-risk youth can be problematic. (Splittgerber, Allen 1996)

Our thinking needs to shift from “effective or ineffective schools, strong or weak families and responsive or unresponsive community organizations to solutions for individual students. (Splittgerber, Allen 1996)

Being sensitive to and aware of the problems that may plague some of our students allows educators the opportunity to invent opportunities for student self exploration into the aspects of their lives that presents problems for them.

The litany of problems previously listed leave one with the feeling that anyone with an inability to deal effectively with any one of these issues would be left with a feeling of hopelessness. The question is then raised; How can a person become successful if they are awash in hopelessness?

Hopelessness is “to be without hope, allowing no hope, impossible to solve or deal with.” (Webster 1982) If we go back to the platitudes of “Work hard and you will be successful,” when paired with the definition of hopelessness one can see where failure is

just waiting in the wings. Students that do not see themselves as being able to solve or deal effectively with the problems in their lives are unable to write a life script with a successful outcome. Their failure becomes much more than a personal one. We as a society suffer and pay the price for such failure. We pay in costs beyond that of money. These life failures impact our society and country to its very core. The issue of where our society will be in the next millennium may be determined by how effectively we help these millions of at-risk students adjust to life and all it demands

By identifying the degree that hopelessness affects a student's life, allows educators an opportunity to develop effective strategies and techniques to combat this feeling. By being able to address this issue a student will be able to write a different life script, one with a positive and successful outcome.

Statement of the Problem:

The purpose of this study was to examine hopelessness, its impact on at-risk students and examine different alternative programs.

Educators and counselors need an awareness of the different factors that contribute to an at-risk profile. By understanding all the at-risk descriptors, educators and counselors can help develop approaches that will assist students as they work out these issues.

Furthermore, if at-risk students are to be given an opportunity to succeed, they will need an appropriate educational atmosphere. Understanding the components that contribute to such an atmosphere is necessary and understanding the ways students need to change is important. If the educational setting is not appropriate for a student, then an alternative program must be found.

Alternative education programs have been around for a long time. Research has shown that there are specific characteristics that a successful alternative program will

embody. Not all alternative programs possess these characteristics. This study profiles several alternative programs and examines their delivery system. In understanding the programs offered, schools can make informed referrals based on student need and program variables.

This research is intended to assist school district personnel responsible in making decisions about at-risk students and their placement. Understanding the components that makes an effective alternative education program different, will generate the support necessary from all the participants in such a program, and contribute to a successful outcome.

Definition of Terms:

At-risk- adj. broadly defined to encompass students impacted by “poverty, dysfunctional families, substance abuse, early sexual experiences, and health and fitness deficits.”

HSED- High School Equivalency Diploma. The state of Wisconsin issues an HSED diploma when a student completes the following components: The 5 General Equivalency Diploma (GED) exams; meet a Health and Civics requirement and complete an employment portfolio

CESA-Cooperative Educational Service Agency. Located throughout the state of Wisconsin, these agencies provide professional support for school districts.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Success and the achievement of success is affected by many different factors for students. What kind of school culture they are expected to thrive in is a factor. How they perceive themselves and how they are perceived by teachers is a factor, and how hopeless they feel about their lives is a factor.

Hopelessness can impact on the perception one has of school and life in general. Hopelessness can lead to learned helplessness which results in the individual's avoiding challenging situations and a failure to persevere. This sets in motion a "cycle of failure" which can only be broken if new strategies and behaviors are learned.

By determining the degree of hopelessness a student may be experiencing and by understanding the impact of this condition on the student's behavior, we will be able to help the student adopt new thinking patterns and develop behaviors which will lead to their improving their chances of success.

School culture

The atmosphere found in the school one is attending, has a great impact on the experience. The culture of the school expresses the norms, beliefs, traditions and rituals that occur over time as people deal with the problems and challenges of life. School culture involves everything that goes on in a school: how students dress, how individuals talk to one another, how the population adjusts to change, and how the atmosphere of learning impacts on both students and teachers. (Peterson, Deal, 1998)

Herb Kohl, in an interview about his book Discipline of Hope, remarked how important the element of hope is in the learning process. He stated that a teacher should

not only engage the imagination of a student but also help the student feel as if they are worthy people capable of accomplishing what they need to in a difficult world. He indicated that if you give up on hope what would be the point of learning the necessary tasks in school such as reading, or passing an entrance exam if you are not going to be accepted at the school one desires. Why learn when the only opportunity available to you is a job at McDonalds? (Scherer, 1998)

Furthermore, when Herb Kohl was asked how one instills this capacity to hope, he stated that respect for the student and the potential of that student was integral. He also stated that the technique of humiliation must go. Teachers need to find a more effective way to deal with defiant students. (Scherer, 1998)

School cultures should then reflect respect and acceptance of others. (Ediger, 1997) Many researchers studying various organizations, including schools, have shown that organizations work best and are most effective when the individuals working in them are committed to commonly shared values and are a cohesive team. (Gaziel, 1997)

Different researchers basically arrived at the same results when studying the elements of school culture that were identified as being important in explaining school effectiveness. How many schools operate fully utilizing the eight different items isolated by the researchers? Certainly many schools attempt to meet the needs of their students and their parents. Many schools value the personnel working there and attempt to involve them in the process of maintaining and improving the learning environment. Many encourage student responsibility and set forth clear and explicit expectations and objectives. (Gaziel, 1997) Yet even with all those efforts, there are students who do not feel connected and a part of the assembly. These students, who struggle with school success, find the climate in their schools toxic because all they experience is negativity and failure. What else is taking place to prevent these students from fully participating in their school setting? Let us examine the next part of the puzzle.

Perception

Perception is defined as “awareness, insight or intuition.” (Webster, 1982) The perception of education as being interesting and important can be defined in terms of whether one intrinsically values schooling. Ames and Archer (1988) found that individuals who perceived school and education as important and valuable exhibited more effort and higher performance. (Davalos, Chavez & Guardiola, 1999)

Several researchers found that attributional beliefs in adolescents and adults are an important issue because a substantial amount of research indicates that these beliefs about the causes of events are related to achievement-oriented behavior (Koestner, Zucherman, & Olsson, 1990; Ames, 1984; Butler, 1987; Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Jagacinski & Nicholls, 1984) People who believe that their behavior has no impact on outcomes are likely to develop learned helplessness, avoid challenging situations and fail to persist. (Dweck & Leggett, 1988) This starts a vicious cycle of failure in which a negative belief system results in lack of persistence, which leads to failure and potentially lowered self-esteem. Failure and low self-esteem confirm the negative belief system and the cycle continues. (Turner, Pickering, & Johnson, 1998)

Weiner (1985) found that beliefs about the causes of success and failure vary along three dimensions: locus, stability or control. So how one perceives the situation, whether it is internal or external, stable or unstable and controllable or uncontrollable will determine the amount of effort and persistence put to the task at hand. Failure is viewed as beyond their control and consequently individuals possess little incentive to persist in similar tasks in the future. (Turner, et al., 1998)

E.A. Skinner suggests that action is related to beliefs about what strategies are successful and one’s perceived capacity to access these strategies. She contends that individuals are “likely to behave effortfully when they believe effort is an effective strategy, and when they believe they can behave effortfully.” (Turner, et al., 1998)

The issue of perception is not just limited to self-perception. How others view us plays a part in how we view ourselves. In a study examining the school performance of learning disabled or emotionally handicapped students, it was found that while the students perceived themselves in a positive fashion in most respects, teachers had a different perception. Teachers were found to make assumptions not reflected by the students responses. Teachers often rated the learning disabled students as less motivated, less competent and suffering from lower self-esteem. (Wiest, Wong, & Kriel, 1998) Research also suggest that disruptive classroom behaviors also exert influence on teacher's ratings on other's behaviors. (Mioduser, Margalit, & Efrati, 1998) These inconsistencies lead to misunderstanding and missed opportunities.

It has already been stated that if an individual attributes failure to ability, they view failure as an internal, stable and uncontrollable event. A student experiencing failure in school can easily slip into the "cycle of failure". If failure is linked to one's feelings of self-worth there is strong evidence to suggest that continued failure can lead to feelings of depression and hopelessness.

How children feel about themselves is a crucial component in child growth and development. (King, 1997) Understanding the various components that affect one's perception of self, allows teachers to assist students in developing the necessary strategies to change their behavior patterns.

What if efforts to change behavior fall short and the student's self-perception is one of failure? The individual feels that no matter how hard one works one will not be successful and therefore, gives up, what then?

Hopelessness

In 1983, the report *A Nation at Risk*, brought to the attention of the United States the problem of school failure and the at-risk population. "At-risk" refers to students

touched by poverty, dysfunctional families, substance abuse, early sexual experiences, health and fitness deficits and a range of other factors that impact their lives. (Spittgerber, Allen, 1996) These factors have a profound impact on students lives, making them feel vulnerable and powerless.

The impact of hope and how important it is in the learning process has been discussed. It has been pointed out that without hope learners see no benefit in pursuing knowledge. When individuals do not see a point in acting effortfully, they will not act. When they fail to act they do not succeed. When they do not succeed, they feel depressed. When they feel depressed and not in control of the situation, they feel hopeless.

Young people may find themselves in a state of hopelessness if they attend a school that has a toxic school culture. They may experience feelings of hopelessness if they are in a classroom filled with sarcasm and humiliation; taught by teachers that may perceive them as less motivated and capable because of negative behaviors or poor academic performance.

It is difficult to value school if all one has experienced is failure. If students fail to believe they are capable of success, they will make little effort to succeed. Instead they will learn a “cycle of failure”. Believing they have no control over the circumstances surrounding them, they feel they are at the mercy of the forces around them. Powerless to change what is happening, they learn helplessness and develop a lack of persistence.

There have been a number of studies that support the findings that the higher a student scores on the measure of hopelessness the more significantly depressed they are. In addition to that, they suffered from lower levels of self-esteem and scored lower in social behavior ratings. (Palmer, Wehmeyer, 1998)

All that is left is a pattern of failure which becomes a numbing sense of hopelessness. By determining how affected students are by hopelessness one can then begin to develop the skills necessary to establish new models of behavior.

Wehmeyer (1996) identified 11 elements that are important in developing more effective behaviors. By completely understanding the impact hopelessness has on students, and by understanding our own biases, we can begin to help students learn these new strategies.

The 11 elements to more effective behaviors are: (1) choice-making skills,(2) decision-making skills,(3) problem-solving skills, (4) goal-setting skills, (5) self-management skills, (6) self-advocacy skills, (7) leadership skills, (8) internal locus of control, (9) positive attributions of outcome expectancy, (10) self-awareness, and (11) self-knowledge. (Palmer, Wehmeyer, 1998)

By determining the depth of the hopelessness a student may be experiencing, one stands a better chance of helping students develop the skills necessary to develop healthier patterns of behavior. In addition to the eleven skill building elements, students need to have the opportunity to experience control and choice. These behavior changes need to occur together. Empowering students to take control and develop the necessary skills to handle this kind of responsibility, gives them a feeling of hopefulness for the future and enables students to become more self-determined and involved in their lives.(Palmer, Wehmeyer, 1998)

A-risk students

According to the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction children at risk are defined in section 118.153 to mean “pupils in grades 5 to 12 who are one or more years behind their age group in the number of high school credits attained or 2 or more years behind their age group on basic skill levels, and are also one or more of the following:

1. Dropouts.
- 2m. Habitual truants, as defined in s. 118.16 (1) (a).
3. Parents.

4. Adjudicated delinquents.”

This definition applies to children at risk for not completing school, but it barely covers from what these children are really at risk. If our role as a society is to prepare our young people to be educated, responsible, and well adjusted, then we need to address the problem of at risk youth and what is causing such a lack of success for so many of our young people.

The statistics are alarming: one in four children under the age of six living in poverty; an increase in the numbers of children being neglected or abused; a steady increase in the numbers of families facing divorce with increasing numbers of children living in single parent households. Children using and abusing drugs at earlier ages and experimenting with other risky behaviors only increases the potential for failure.

There is no question that the behaviors considered to be risky such as dropping out of school, drug and alcohol abuse, teenage sexual activity and childbearing, juvenile delinquency, crime, violence and youth suicide are serious problems. Oftentimes, the at risk behaviors of children are often viewed and studied independently; however, these behaviors do not occur independent of each other; many times they are intertwined. In addition to this, these young people often live in the same neighborhoods and communities where they are exposed to the same influences. The damage begins in childhood, is more visible in adolescence, and continues to grow into a continuous cycle of dysfunction.

This cycle of at risk markers can be thought of as occurring on a course from minimal or remote risk, to imminent risk, to high risk categories. This course is made up of various at risk characteristics that can be identified, and it is the combination of these characteristics that determines the level of at risk category. As an individual adds another characteristic to those at risk behaviors already manifested, the level or degree of being at risk increases.

When we start to look at the high risk characteristics it is easy to understand how the combinations of these markers lead to problems. Dysfunctional families, poor schools and poor school performance coupled with negative social interactions can push a person to fall into an at risk category. Add to this the person's own negative attitudes, hostile behaviors and an inability to cope with the problems created by these social problems and the level of risk increases. Other high risk characteristics such as depression, anxiety, aggression and hopelessness only add to the already precarious mix.

Let us focus on three major issues that impact individuals and contribute to at risk classification. These three primary categories are: 1.) Economic factors; 2.) Family problems; and 3.) School related issues.

Economic changes and trends that can be documented involve job and income loss, economic stagnation, poverty in young families, single parent households and homeless families.

Poverty as a single factor is most closely related to family stress and there is a high correlation between school failure. In fact, twice as many children living in poverty are likely to drop out of school as those in families that are economically stable. (CDF, 1995) Many of these children begin school unprepared, lacking the basic skills to succeed and do not have the parental support to insure success.

Economic instability impacts the family in a variety of ways. Parents who are financially stressed may be dissatisfied with themselves which leads to feelings of anxiety, depression, and hostility. These behaviors impact the family as a whole, putting a strain on the relationships within the family, and impact on a child's development. This stress and strain within the family carries over into the school environment affecting success.

These issues are not just restricted to urban families. Rural families experience these problems too. Lower incomes and lack of job opportunities are just some of the

problems for rural families. Many of these wage earners have not completed high school themselves, and lack the skills for job advancement.

Young families struggling to make ends meet is another problem. Oftentimes, both partners need to work just to maintain the standard of living. Mothers work not so much out of desire as out of necessity. Long hours away from the family and not enough time spent nurturing by either parent is its own recipe for disaster. However difficult this may be, it is better than the situation of single parent households.

Single parent households are, most often, headed by females. With one in three marriages ending in divorce, and an increase in out of wedlock births, this category is maintaining its numbers. Single mothers are in the largest category of working poor. Poor skill levels lock them into menial jobs with little opportunity for advancement. Expensive or inadequate childcare makes it difficult to manage the family's needs. They have no one else to rely on financially, and they are at risk for poverty and its resultant problems. Single parent households headed by fathers may experience similar difficulties in family management, but will not experience the same level of poverty as households headed by women.

Homeless families are among the fastest growing component in the homeless population. Low income families are impacted by rising rents. The lack of and availability of affordable housing is another problem homeless families face. As cities convert once affordable housing to dwellings for urban living, upwardly mobile clientele the numbers of available housing decreases. This creates a housing squeeze ensuring that someone will be left out.

Homeless families are at risk for depression, anxiety, and behavioral problems. Children of homeless families experience difficulties in school due to these problems within the family, as well as, lack of school attendance.

A study conducted to test the association of family functioning and adolescent adjustment did find that family functioning was significantly associated with some of the indicators of psychological well-being, school adjustment, and problem behavior. (Shek,1997). Furthermore, the measures of adolescent adjustment were more strongly related to the adolescents' reports of family functioning than to the parents' report. This suggests that adolescents are more sensitive to their family problems than parents are. This leads us to the next area to be examined; family problems of the at risk child.

It is difficult today to describe the typical family structure. Over time there has occurred an erosion of the family network; grandparents, aunts and uncles, and cousins are not as involved in the care taking of children. The role models, once available from these family members, are not as accessible as they once were. The family, as a unit, is undergoing significant changes. How these changes affect children and contribute to creating an at risk atmosphere will be examined.

Families undergo changes as they progress in their history. The newly married couple with no children, the family after the birth of their first child, as parents of toddlers, as parents with school age children, as parents with teens, the couple after children leave home, the couple in their middle years and the older couple. Each stage requires adjustment, and each stage requires transition, which most families manage. Some families, however, do not function well. They experience difficulty in traversing the stages families travel. These families have a different family system than families that deal with life's issues. A family system refers to the behaviors and dynamics that exist within the family to maintain balance within the family relationship.

One type of family system that is problematic is a closed family system. This system is isolated from the environment and unresponsive to change. It is not open to external stimuli. An open family system, on the other hand, interacts with the environment, and is both adaptable and flexible. Families that are detached are one type of

closed family system. Individuals in a detached family system do not develop adequate skills in forming relationships, either within the family or outside of the family unit.

The opposite of a detached family is equally a problem. Families that exhibit an extreme closeness are called enmeshed. Enmeshed families fail to respond effectively when necessary. Instead of teaching coping skills to deal with problems, they come to the rescue. Boundaries in an enmeshed family are not differentiated well, this blurring causes role confusion, and results in ineffective parenting. Because of the nature of closed family systems, isolation from the environment and resistance to change, it is difficult to get members to learn different patterns of behavior.

Another sizable category of family dilemmas are stressed families. Blended families fall into this category. Blended families occur when partners remarry and bring children into the relationship. Children have to adjust to a new parent, new extended family members, possibly step brothers and sisters, and a different family routine. The family is dealing with various stages all at once; the newlywed stage and the parenting stage, while trying to create some family balance. All these factors are stressful and can make these second marriage more prone for divorce.

Another category of stressed families are families dealing with substance abuse. Children of substance abusing parents run the risk of neglect and abuse. These children lack skills in adjusting to emotional and social problems. Oftentimes, these children may have a predisposition to alcohol abuse themselves.

Violence in families, whether directed at a spouse or at the children, damages self esteem and confidence. Children who continually witness violence suffer from stress disorders and other problems which impedes development. Children learn violent patterns of behavior and are more likely to grow up and engage in violent behavior in the future.

Another form of family violence is child abuse. It can have many forms: physical, verbal, and emotional abuse, as well as neglect, and sexual abuse. Physical abuse is any physically harmful act toward a child. Verbal and emotional abuse occurs when a parent is overly critical or ridiculing; has unrealistic expectations, inappropriate punishments, or withholds their affection. Neglect is failure to protect the well being of the child. Children who are not fed regularly, given proper hygiene and left unattended and ignored are neglected. Sexual abuse is any form of sexual contact with a child. Molestation, incest and rape are forms of sexual abuse. It should be noted the incidence of abuse can be traced back to the abusers as having been abused themselves.

The last category of stressed families are those families struggling with parental mental illness. Depression, bipolar disorder and schizophrenia in caretakers is destructive to children. The parent's illness contributes to a pattern of damaged parent -child relationship. This damaged relationship impacts on many levels, social, emotional, and mental. Children fail to develop adequate skills to cope with problems at school, problems encountered in social situations, and problems with the self-management of their emotions.

There are many stressors on families today. How well each family deals with the problems it faces determines its success or lack of it in dealing with life's problems. It is important to know the family system a child may be raised in in order to understand the behavior. In thoroughly understanding these circumstances, it makes it possible to create effective strategies.

There are three school related issues that need to be considered in reference to at risk children. These issues are school culture, which encompasses student and teacher climate, and the school and classroom structure.

The culture of a school is influenced by the amount of student involvement in the school, teacher collaboration and morale, the community's support of the school, decisions involving curriculum, and the level of leadership at all levels in the school.

Students that are at risk know fairly early that they are different from other students. They feel the lack of acceptance from peers and recognize the unacceptability of their behavior from their teachers. Many times at risk students are placed in low level groups where performance and expectations are not anticipated. Oftentimes, these students lack a positive self perception and display an inability to see themselves in anything successful. This perception leaves the at risk student with a sense of not belonging, not being a part of the school culture and affects the student climate.

Another factor that impacts an at risk student from feeling a part of the school environment is the lack of good decision making skills. Behaviors such as acting up in class, arguing with their classmates and teachers, and not turning in homework interfere with learning and lead to school failure. Giving at risk students better decision making skills and improving their ability to problem solve can lead to school success. In addition, students who learn the importance of self control, are better able to settle disputes which improves the school climate. School meditation programs are especially effective for this (McWhirter, 1996).

A final element in school culture as it relates to the at risk student is that student's involvement in the learning process. Students along with teachers are responsible for learning. What teachers do to facilitate and promote learning are as important as what the students do in this process. Each is responsible for the outcome. Effective and successful students take responsibility for their learning, can monitor their progress, have positive self esteem, can problem solve, and are capable of making good decisions. These are elements that describe aspects of student climate. At risk students struggle with these responsibilities lacking the skills necessary to function.

School culture is also affected by the teacher and staff morale in a school. Teachers that are included in the decision making process, rather than being told to

implement something they may not support, are more effective in the classroom. They feel empowered.

When teachers are trained to work collaboratively on issues concerning students, they can problem solve more effectively. For at risk students, this means a more complete understanding of the student's situation, with several concerned individuals presenting solutions.

Teachers are professionals and respond when treated with professionalism. The school culture improves when the teacher climate is one of support and willingness to connect and commit. Students can only benefit from this atmosphere in the learning environment, particularly at risk students.

Schools that have a philosophy that can be supported by the community and its surrounding support groups, that involves the families of the students and has the conviction of its staff, both professional and support, will be more effective. Schools that are effective possess certain characteristics. These characteristics are: 1) Leadership behaviors; 2) Academic emphasis; 3) Teacher and staff factors; 4) Student involvement; 5) Community support; 6) Social capital. (McWhirter et al., 1996). By including the very people it serves, it empowers them to become involved and active in the school environment. This involvement helps all students including the at risk population.

Another aspect of school climate as it relates to students is the classroom structure. Student's self esteem is affected by the atmosphere in the classroom. A classroom where each student is treated as an individual with ideas to contribute to the group will foster success. A student, who feels accepted and appreciated for his differences, accepts responsibility for his part in the learning process. A caring feeling between student and teacher can help the at risk student deal with the task at hand.

Class size also affects at risk students. Large numbers of students in a class limits the amount and quality of time a teacher has to spend with students. For convenience

sake, large classes are arranged into smaller groups, determined by the student's ability. Studies conducted on students grouped by ability indicate that students in the high group receive little advantage where students assigned to the low group suffer significantly. Slavin study (as cited in McWhiter et al., 1996). Research indicates that smaller class size made up of heterogeneous groups that work together in the classroom promotes a better classroom atmosphere than one made up of homogeneous ability groups. Johnson et al., study (as cited in McWhiter et al., 1996).

Students who are at risk are at least two years behind their peers in basic skills. A classroom where there is cooperation and not competition will better meet the needs of at risk students, because of the positive atmosphere created in the classroom. A feeling of encouragement is created which builds confidence in students and invites them to accept responsibility and control of themselves and their situation.

Alternative Education

One expert defines the term *public alternative school* to mean "any school that provides alternative learning experiences to those provided by conventional schools and that is available by choice to every family within its community at no extra cost" Smith, 1974 (as cited by Young, 1990). Alternative schools are different from their counterparts by the following characteristics:

- "A greater responsiveness to a perceived educational need within the community.
- A more focused instructional program, usually featuring a particular emphasis, instructional method, or school climate.
- A shared sense of purpose. Common goals and a defined educational philosophy are held by students and staff.
- A more student-centered philosophy. Emphasis is on the whole student. Affective as well as cognitive needs are met.

- A noncompetitive environment. Students are not pitted against one another for grades and recognition. Student progress is measured in terms of self-improvement.
- A greater autonomy. Principals, teachers and students have greater freedom from the central administration than their counterparts in traditional schools.

A smaller school and more personalized relationship between students and staff.”
Young, 1990.

Unlike traditional schools, alternative schools do not try to be all things to everyone. They usually offer programs designed for and administered to a particular population, such as dropouts, teenage parents, students with vocational/career goals and the gifted and talented . Because of this focus, alternative schools can more effectively meet the needs of the population it serves.

The choices in the realm of alternative education are many. It includes schools within schools; school to work; off campus learning centers; fundamental schools; continuation schools; home schooling, and residential schools. There are also magnet school which offer specialized curriculum for particular clientele. The idea of alternative education is not new, as a matter of fact, it dates back as far as the colonial period in our history.

In early America, the most popular approach to education was home instruction. However, public schools were established and a variety of choices were available that reflected both differences in curriculum and quality. The prime schools were reserved for the middle and upper class boys. These schools were run year round and had a classical curriculum. Students attending these classical schools intended to continue their education.

The intermediary choice to these prime schools were common schools for middle and lower class boys and girls. These were often dame schools, run by women out of their

homes. These schools were open a few months during the year. Boys and girls that attended these schools were trained in domestic skills and the three R's. Older boys that wanted an education in a trade attended an entrepreneurial school which provided vocational training varying in cost and quality.

The last of the school choices available were the charity schools for the poor and minority students. These schools provided a shortened program directed towards basic literacy. These schools were free and were supported by church and missionary groups.

The fore runner of our present day high school was established by Benjamin Franklin in 1751. He founded a school that was an alternative to the classical education available to the upper and middle class boys. He established an academy for intelligent older boys, who did not want to continue their education, but wanted to prepare for careers in commerce and business. The school's curriculum was English based and included accounting, drawing, and mechanics as well as general subjects (Young, 1990).

It was during the nineteenth century that enrollment in public education outdistanced home and private instruction. Educational leaders worked hard to promote the idea of a free common school education for children. The notion of how long schools should be open, teacher training, and pupil testing were developed at this time (Young, 1990).

In addition to these ideas, the belief that schools should teach values and skills that would contribute to a productive society were in conflict with those that believed the individual was more important than conformity. These two points of view are still in debate today (Young, 1990).

Changes in society and the industrialization of the country led to additional changes in school curriculum that reflected what the society expected in its schools. As

school enrollment in public education increased, particularly at the high school, there was increased pressure to expand and develop a curriculum that would meet students needs.

The high school curriculum introduced more vocational options. Federal money became available for the expansion of programs in home economics, agriculture, trades and industrial education (Young, 1990). The industrialization of the country further encouraged the standardization of the curriculum. Other innovations impacted by this trend were group testing, ability-group tracking, age-specific grade levels, and teaching by objectives (Young, 1990).

The impact of society on the educational system continued. Two World Wars, the Cold War, the launching of Sputnik, had a part in taking the emphasis of education away from individual growth and child centered curriculum, to course work that would be in the national interest and subject driven. In the 1950's and 1960's, emphasis on performance increased the competition in schools as students were tracked into programs that stressed business, vocations, general studies or college preparation. Students were selected for a particular program based on student test results.

This competition created an atmosphere that encouraged the disparity between the economically disadvantaged and students that were less successful. This alienated students from school and impacted on their self-worth. To address this inequity, in the 1960's, a war was declared on poverty and schools were singled out as the place the attack would start. The impetus of education became one of equity rather than excellence. As society demanded that schools respond to the needs of disadvantaged students, schools were encouraged to develop alternative ways to teach and deliver education to this diverse population.

However, in the 1970's, social unrest and distrust of the government and its policies also created change in the educational system. The mission of education to create a citizen that supports national policy and works for the common good came under

criticism. Reformers felt schools were behind in their dissemination of information, and that learning was rote. They also felt that students needed to be taught how to think versus what to think. For the hard line reformers, the answer came in the form of Free Schools.

Free schools offered students a variety of choices. Folk dancing, jewelry making, black and women's liberation studies, as well as, traditional studies were offered. Teachers were guides assisting in the learning process. The free school movement did not gain acceptance and had a short life span. As the 1970's came to a close the radical ideals that fed this reform movement found trouble in sustaining itself and the schools ceased existence.

The reformers, that were less militant, chose to work within the system and develop programs that the schools would accept. This led to the open education movement. This approach was closely aligned with the progressive education movement. Both held that children were curious and motivated to learn and should be allowed to do so at their own rate. This was a child centered approach that reflected the student's interests. Learning was concrete and hands on and students advanced at their own pace and ability. Many of the open schools were at the elementary level with a majority at the primary level, although some secondary schools were opened in the late 1960's and early 1970's. With the acceptance of the open school concept, secondary schools were willing to try some other alternatives to education. Some of the more popular alternatives were schools within a school, continuation schools, schools without walls, multicultural schools, and learning centers (Young, 1990)

Alternative education has a rich and varied past. In recent years though, alternative schools have developed a negative reputation. They are viewed as "less than" by mainstream educational systems. In some instances, this reputation has been deserved. It seems any program with a different delivery system, and working with at-risk students

could call itself “alternative education” and get away with it. The term alternative education has become clouded in confusion among educators, students and the general public. However, there are programs with the appropriate structure that have a record of success with at-risk students and deserve the label alternative education.

These programs embody the elements that make an alternative program successful. The elements that successful programs have in common are the following:

1. **Class size.** Class size is kept in a student to teacher ratio of no greater than 15:1.
This allows small group and individual activity.
2. **Program site.** The site of the program should be a full day program in a rich and supportive environment.
3. **Program participation.** Participation in the program should be voluntary. Students should elect to attend and teachers should elect to teach this program.
4. **Decision making.** In addition to choosing to teach in such a setting, teachers should have a real voice in the day-to-day operation of the program. The parents and the community should also have input into the planning and operation.
5. **Curriculum.** The curriculum should be student-centered and the instruction should be related to students’ academic and personal needs.
6. **Administration.** Effective alternative programs should have a separate administrative unit.
7. **School mission and atmosphere.** The alternative program should have a clear mission, a sense of community and commitment, and shared values. Unlike traditional schools that must be all things to all people, alternative schools can create specialized programs, plus teaching and counseling approaches that are targeted to a different population. By

creating a culture of caring and concern, alternative programs strive to develop a sense of family among the participants.

8. **Teacher role.** This concept of school as family gives those who work in a successful alternative program greater flexibility and a broader role than teachers in the traditional setting
9. **Social services.** Because the student population is often disruptive and disaffected access to social services on an as needed basis should be available.
10. **Technology.** Lastly, students in an alternative program should have at least the same level of access to technology as students who attend a traditional program. Due to the fact many alternative programs are isolated from the mainstream, the state of the art technology is not always available (Kellmayer, 1998).

Successful alternative programs committed to student welfare and true to their mission will embody the characteristics listed.

One such program is school within a school. School within a school is an attempt to break down the large numbers in comprehensive high schools into more manageable units. It allows large high schools a format to provide alternative opportunities for learning without feeling they are experimenting on the students. Administrators feel this approach allows them to proceed cautiously while addressing the needs of varying constituencies and maintaining a balance between all parties, students, parents, and teachers (McQuillian, Muncey, 1998).

A school within a school program, available to Eau Claire district students, is called Preparing Students for Life (PSL). Its purpose is to develop at-risk students academic, organizational and socialization skills. It is located at North High School and is open to students in grades 10 and 11 who have shown to be “disruptive, unprepared for class, inattentive, frequently absent or tardy, or who have poor organizational skills or

have conflicts with parents, peers, and/or teachers”(Eau Claire Alternative Options, 1995). Students are referred to and interviewed by the PSL team. Fifteen is the maximum number of students at each grade level. The program runs one to two years.

The program components consist of a highly structured academic program with a set of required courses; a work component that takes place outside of school; the use of community resources; closely monitored attendance and consequences for unexcused absences; and specific behavioral goals.

The structure of the program is administered by a team of teachers under the guidance of a team leader. Classes meet during the regular school day. Students work on in-school jobs during study halls. Some students are released seventh hour for work. Each class is worth one-half credit per semester.

The program is evaluated on the percentage of students that maintain their graduation expectations, meet behavioral and social goals, show improvement in attitude toward school and earn their diploma.

Students are required to maintain a grade of C or better in all classes. They must successfully complete their behavioral objectives and be in attendance 90% of the time.

There is support in the system from guidance counselors, teen parent services, the school nurse and a work study coordinator for assistance in getting a job and developing the skills necessary for work. Referrals are made to community resources as needed.

This program was instituted in the Fall of 1982 and, since its inception, 25 to 30 students per year are served. This program is just one of several options available to students experiencing problems in the Eau Claire school district. The fact that the program is still implemented is testimony to its effectiveness in affording students a way to succeed.

Another alternative program for students is School-to-Work. Starting with the assumption that moving from high school to work presents a critical developmental

transition in late adolescence, it seems logical to apply Super's life-span, developmental perspective (Blustein&Phillips 1997). It takes into account the planning, exploration, and decision-making that is an important factor in understanding career related decisions.

The School to Work Opportunities Act of 1994 was designed to improve student learning, school retention, and transition into the workplace by improving the quality and relevance of education for all students. This is accomplished by integrating school-based and work-based learning and providing access to career opportunities.

School-to-Work programs do not reflect a single model. They reflect the conditions of the communities where they exist and may take a variety of forms. The major types of School-to-Work programs are: "apprenticeships, youth or preapprenticeships, techprep education, career academies, cooperative education, school-based enterprises, business-education compacts, employer certified programs, worksite learning, and career exposure programs"(Brown,1998).

Wisconsin's School-to-Work system is called *Skills for the Future*. It is a partnership that centers on students and involves parents, educators, employers, labor plus local, state and federal governments. It is based on how, what, and where students learn. The School-to-Work program helps students make the connection between what goes on in the classroom and what happens in the workplace. As students understand the nature of the skills needed for the workplace, they realize the need for math, science, work readiness, communication, and specific job skills. As students make these connections, they can identify goals and the education necessary to accomplish them (School-to-Work, 2000).

Programs like this exhibit a number of characteristics to make them work. It requires a comprehensive vision that makes the connections at each level of the system. There is a commitment and support at all levels from all stakeholders: schools, businesses, post-secondary institutions, community partners and parents. Adequate financial support

must be developed from a variety of sources. Students are given a strong foundation in career information and this planned sequence of events throughout their school years gives them an understanding of their abilities, interests, and goals. Lastly, the students are successful and support the integration of academic and vocational learning. (Brown, 1998).

Program goals are accomplished by providing students with job-related experiences that connect them with the work environment. Students may job shadow, have a mentor, volunteer, or be involved in an internship; all experiences that provide students an opportunity to explore job possibilities and the conditions of employment. In addition, students are able to apply their academic and vocational skills to solve problems and perform job related assignments.

Some critics feel that only students not planning on attending college will benefit from a School-to-Work program, but research indicates that all students benefit when exposed to such an opportunity (Brown, 1998).

Students benefit because they are better able to clarify their personal goals and determine the purpose for continuing their education. They obtain a broader base of information about the choices in different careers and various jobs. Students strengthen their self-confidence by taking responsibility for their learning and connecting with the community outside of school. Students' earning power is increased through their work based experience and the hands on learning enhances academic instruction.

Most educators would agree that the greatest educational gift we can give to students is the opportunity to see that they can make progress, master skills, become competent, successful and productive members of their communities (Rhoder, French 1999). Providing students an opportunity to make the connection between the subjects they work so hard to learn and their real-life goals and the relevance of these skills to the workplace can take place in a School-to-Work program.

There are two off site programs run for at-risk students that will be profiled next. One is an alternative high school run by the Cooperative Educational Service Agency (CESA) #7 in Green Bay, Wisconsin. The other is an alternative high school program run by the Northeast Wisconsin Technical College in various sites throughout northeast Wisconsin.

The Cooperative Educational Service Agency (CESA) #7 Alternative High School is a unique educational opportunity for at-risk students. The CESA #7 alternative program serves seven Green Bay area high schools. Students are given the opportunity to earn credits and graduate with diplomas granted from their sponsoring high school.

Students are considered at-risk if they fit the following categories: credit deficient, truant, lack motivation, inability to relate to authority, health concerns and academic problems. Through a screening process initiated by the student's high school, students are chosen based on the student's needs and availability of space. Each school has a limited number of openings and slots are filled on a "first come first served" basis. Students and parents meet with the CESA #7 alternative school staff and an evaluation is made at that meeting. If accepted, students are tested to determine their skill levels and a class time is selected.

Students are required to achieve a 90% mastery of the material and maintain a 90% attendance rate. Credits are calculated on a semester basis with a maximum number of six credits per semester. Students are working at an accelerated pace. All credits successfully completed at the CESA #7 high school are recommended to the home school to be placed on the student's transcript. The CESA #7 high school recommends credits, the home high school awards the credits.

In addition to class work, students are expected to be involved in work/community service experiences. There is an on-site employment consultant coordinating work/study

programs. The school feels that school and work experience helps the students make the connection between the academics taught and the practical application of those skills.

Since 1996 there have been 311 referrals with 143 resulting in graduation. There have been 132 withdrawals. These withdrawals cover a variety of reasons such as: employment, low attendance, broken contract, returned to high school, dropped out, moved, inappropriate behavior, dropped by high school, and referred to GED/HSED program. As with any placement, sometimes it is not appropriate; the program does not suit the student. Another option available to school districts and students is a GED/HSED program.

The General Education Diploma/High School Equivalency Diploma (GED/HSED) program, which is administered by Northeast Wisconsin Technical College in Green Bay, provides services to four of the area high schools in the Green Bay district. In addition to the sites in Green Bay, alternative high school programs are located in Oconto and Marinette counties, serving those surrounding school districts.

Procedurally, students are referred by their home high school. Once referred, a student is further screened through reading, math and other pre-tests to determine the student's skill level. A student testing lower than sixth grade on the reading test is ineligible for the program. This restriction is necessary because of the self-paced program and the GED/HSED tests require solid reading skills for success on the exams.

The characteristics of the youth the GED/HSED program serves follows the standards established by the state of Wisconsin: dropouts, habitual truants, parents, adjudicated delinquents. The program is intended for students who are seventeen years old and at least one full year behind their class in terms of credits required for graduation.

The program prepares students in the five core areas of the GED exams: Writing Skills, Social Studies, Literature and Arts, Science, and Mathematics. In addition, students need to fulfill Health, Civics and Employment skills. The Health can be satisfied with a

1/2 credit earned or a test, and the Civics by 3 earned credits or a test. Employment skills are completed on site. Students attend for fifteen hours per week with attendance mandatory. Because of the shortened school hours, students are encouraged to have jobs. Once students have completed four of the five GED exams and have completed the other requirements they may take the 5th and final test to complete the program, the semester they turn eighteen, or when their 9th grade class has graduated.

In the end of the year summary for 1998-1999, of the 321 referrals made from all the districts served by this program, 108 students successfully completed the program with 90 of these students returning for the following year. Some students were referred back to their high schools, other students moved out of the district, and some failed to complete their HSED program in the necessary time frame and their class graduated. These students may continue, as adults, on their own, through an Adult Education Program at the technical college.

Impact on Success

The programs profiled embody the elements of a successful alternative education delivery plan. They are different in what and how they deliver their programs. Each program experiences successes, and they have their failures. Some programs suit certain types of students better than others. It is important to match the student's needs to the type of program.

Students succeed when they are not in a competitive setting, but can measure their mastery by self-improvement rather than comparison with another student. Many of the programs are ungraded which alleviates student stress, and allows students to complete assignments to a level acceptable to the teacher. Students are also able to work at a pace that they determine rather than by one set by a group. Student success does not depend on someone else's failure.

In addition, alternative schools define school success more broadly than conventional schools. Alternative programs are able to deliver curriculum and services specific to the special needs of the student. Parenting classes, support groups, self-esteem and life-skills classes become a part of the fabric of the educational plan, and the very issues that may have been problems keeping students from succeeding in a conventional school setting, are now addressed. This flexibility allows the program to adapt to the needs of the student, and is one of its greatest strengths. It works with the whole student.

Students enrolled in an alternative program, when responding to a Statements About Schools Inventory, recorded higher scores than their conventional school counterparts, on the issues of security, social needs, self-esteem, and self-actualization (Young, 1990).

Additional studies have found that students enrolled in an alternative education program, improved their attendance, improved their behavior, improved their attitude about school, and were more confident about themselves as students (Gold, Mann, 1984).

Students respond to the family atmosphere in an alternative program. They feel more comfortable in a supportive peer and adult environment. One that fosters cooperation rather than competition in the learning environment. Teachers report more positive student -teacher relationships, where students are able to discuss nonacademic as well as academic subjects. Smaller class size allows students to feel part of a group, and allows the students to feel part of the school structure.

Yet, even matching the student with the program can not ensure success. Students fail to thrive despite the individual attention and smaller class size. The problems of the at-risk student are sometimes beyond the school's area of responsibility. All any of these programs can offer is an opportunity to succeed. The variety of programs that exist, and the options available to districts, helps meet the needs of the at-risk student and gives them a chance. What they make of the opportunity depends on how willing they are to

change behaviors and learn new decision making techniques. It depends on where they are in their lives. By providing an opportunity for at-risk students to complete their education, not only does the student benefit, but we as a society benefit.

CHAPTER III

RESEARCH PROCEDURES

Literature Review Procedures:

This study involved the analysis of the factors that impact student success. It explored the effect hopelessness has on success. It examined the various characteristics that create an at-risk population. It examined the elements of a successful alternative education program and compared the types of alternative education available. To accommodate the purposes of this study, the following were used:

1. Examination of the research evaluating the impact school culture has on an at-risk population.
2. Examination of the research evaluating the impact student perception has on an at-risk population.
3. Examination of the research evaluating the effect hopelessness has on at-risk students and the impact this has on school success.
4. Examination of the research on what constitutes an at-risk classification and the various factors that impact youth which creates an at-risk population.
5. Examination of the research to determine the characteristics that make an alternative education program effective
6. Examination of the research to compare and contrast the different alternative education programs.
7. Examination of the research to determine the factors that have an impact on the success for at-risk students in an alternative program.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

This chapter presents an analysis of the literature review. A variety of information and studies were presented.

Research conducted by the Carnegie Council on adolescent development describes the extent of the problems facing students in the 1990's and into the 21st century. Approximately one third of the students enrolled in middle or junior high school are considered at-risk with another one third on the brink of moderate risk. Schools are able to address the issues that deal with personal pain and academic outcomes.

One of the ways schools can address this issue, is to determine the atmosphere of the school's culture. Research has shown that learning is hampered in a school culture filled with lack of respect for the learner and teacher behavior that uses humiliation to embarrass difficult students (Scherer, 1998). Research has further shown that organizations that share common values and work as a team enjoy success (Gaziel, 1997). Research has shown there are eight important elements of an effective school culture in secondary schools. They are: teamwork, orderliness, shared culture, continuous school improvement, encouraging students to accept responsibility, adapting to customer demands, valuing teacher competency, and valuing principal competency (Gaziel, 1997). Research has shown that students who struggle with school success find the climate in their schools toxic because all they experience is negativity and failure (Gazel, 1997).

To determine what may be impacting student behavior leads to an examination of student perception. Several researchers found that attributional beliefs in adolescents and adults are important because research indicates that these beliefs are related to achievement-oriented behavior (Koestner, Zucherman, & Olsson, 1990; Ames, 1984; Butler, 1987; Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Jagacinski & Nicholls, 1984). Research indicates that this starts a vicious cycle of failure in which a negative belief system result in a lack of

persistence, which leads to failure and low self-esteem. This in turn confirms the negative belief system and the cycle continues (Turner Pickering, & Johnson, 1998). Research shows how one perceives a situation from internal or external locus, stable or unstable, and controllable or uncontrollable will determine the amount of effort and persistence to give the task at hand. (Turner, et al, 1998). Research shows that individuals will behave effortfully when they believe effort is an effective strategy, and when they believe they can behave effortfully (Turner, et al, 1998).

Research shows that students faced with the following classifications are at greater risk : poverty, dysfunctional families, substance abuse, early sexual encounters, health and fitness deficits will have a profound effect on students' lives making them feel vulnerable and powerless (McWhirter et al, 1996; Shek, 1997; Spittgerber, Allen, 1996). Studies have shown that students can learn helplessness and develop a lack of persistence, which in turn leads to a loss of hope and power. Research has shown there are 11 elements of effective behavior: choice-making skills, decision-making skills, problem-solving skills, goal -setting skills, self-management skills, self-advocacy skills, leadership skills, internal locus of control, positive attributions of outcome expectancy, self awareness, and self-knowledge (Palmer, Wehmeyer, 1998).

Research has shown that comprehensive high schools have failed to meet the needs and interests of a varied student body for some time (Young, 1990). Research has shown that alternative education programs differ from mainstream education by the following characteristics: greater responsiveness to need, more focused program, shared sense of purpose, student centered philosophy, noncompetitive environment, and greater autonomy (Young, 1990). Research shows a successful alternative program has a low student to teacher ratio, rich, supportive environment, voluntary participation for students and teachers, teacher involvement in decision making, student centered curriculum, separate

administrative unit, role of teacher more flexible, social services available as needed, and access to technology (Kellmayer, 1998).

Of the programs profiled, the school within a school, provides an on campus instructional opportunity to students within the district. It embodies the elements that make an alternative program successful, yet gives the district the control over the program provided. Students have been successful in this program. The program is evaluated yearly to maintain the standards the Eau Claire district demands. If students are unsuccessful in this particular program, the district has other options available.

The School-to-Work program in Wisconsin, *Skills for the Future*, reflects the conditions of the community in which it is located. It can have many faces, apprenticeships, youth options, cooperative education, business education, employer certified programs, worksite learning, and career exposure programs (Brown,1998). It is offered to students enrolled in secondary education programs, often in their junior year. Students benefit by making the connection between what is learned in school and what is needed on the job for success. Students realize the need for math, science, communication skills, and specific job skills.

Research suggests these programs require close monitoring and connections between the stakeholders, at all levels, to make it work (Brown,1998). A successful student comments that this opportunity is a “Win, Win situation”. An employer comments, “...we are able to costume-design our future workforce and instill a good work ethic. Students benefit tremendously by getting a good foundation for their future work field and further education. This type of training and partnership with the schools is here to stay” (www.dwd.state.wi.us/cew/stw/about1.htm). Research shows that school-to-work benefits all students exposed to this opportunity (Brown, 1998).

The off site programs profiled, the CESA # 7 Alternative High School and the GED/HSED program run by the Northeast Wisconsin Technical College, display

similarities in their arrangement and embody the elements that provide a framework for success with at-risk students. Research has shown that alternative school students scored significantly higher on a Statements About Schools Inventory (SAS) in areas of social needs, self-esteem, and self actualization, when compared with students in a conventional high school (Young, 1990). Research further shows that alternative students were significantly less disruptive in school, that teachers rated alternative students that returned to conventional school as better behaved, that alternative students were significantly more positive about school and more confident in their role, that alternative students received slightly improved grades when they reenrolled while achievement test scores did not improve and were no different than conventional students (Gold, Mann, 1984).

Both, The CESA #7 Alternative High School and the GED/HSED program have students that have successfully completed their respective programs. Both programs also report students that have failed to complete the programs for a variety of reasons. Even programs that offer an individualized program of instruction, smaller class size, voluntary participation, clear school mission and caring atmosphere cannot address all the issues in a student's life. The school can address some personal issues and academic matters, it cannot be a solution to all of life's ills.

CHAPTER V

SUMMARY, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this study was to investigate hopelessness, its impact on at-risk students, and examine different alternative programs.

The study consisted of a review of the literature which was conducted during the summer of 1999 and the spring of 2000. Literature from a variety of sources from 1986 to 1999 was collected and examined.

From the research the following emerged:

1. School culture plays a role in student success. There are eight elements of school culture that are identified as being important in explaining school effectiveness: teamwork; orderliness; shared culture; continuous school improvement; encouraging student responsibility; adapting to customer demands; valuing teacher competency; valuing principal competency.
2. A negative belief system results in a lack of persistence which leads to failure and potentially lowered self-esteem.
3. There are eleven elements that have been identified as leading to more effective behaviors: choice-making skills; decision-making skills; problem-solving skills; goal-setting skills; self-management skills; self-advocacy skills; leadership skills; internal locus of control; positive attributions of outcome expectancy; self-awareness; self-knowledge
4. There are three major factors that impact individuals and contribute to risk classifications: economic factors, family problems and school related issues.
5. Students who are at risk are at least two years behind their peers in basic skills.

6. Alternative education programs differ from conventional school programs in the following: class size, program site, program participation, decision making, curriculum, administration, school mission, atmosphere, teacher role, social services and technology.
7. Studies have shown students enrolled in an alternative program improved their attendance, behavior and attitude about school.
8. Students enrolled in an alternative program recorded higher scores on the Statements About Schools Inventory than students in conventional schools, in the areas of security, social needs, self-esteem, and self-actualization
9. Student success in an alternative program does not rely on competition with another student. Students are able to work at a pace they determine, completing work at a level acceptable to the teacher.
10. Flexibility allows the program to adapt to the needs of the student, to deal with the whole student. Issues, that at one time may have been a problem keeping the student from attending school, are now addressed.

The findings of the studies suggest that at-risk students stand a better opportunity of school success in an alternative program, it should be noted that the programs profiled did experience students not completing their programs. The programs outlined embody the elements of an effective alternative program. These options are an attempt by school districts to retain students who would ordinarily drop out. These school districts want to meet the needs of the students that are considered at-risk of not completing their education. It should also be understood that the school can only address some student issues, other issues are beyond the school's area of influence.

Some studies did raise the concern that alternative programs could become a "dumping ground" for unwanted students. Other studies raise the issue of adequate data to measure alternative school effectiveness. Lack of a control or comparison group, poor

record keeping, no randomized sample of students, teachers and parents, failure to report data on program dropouts, lack of pre and posttest and lack of follow-up on dropouts and early graduates of the programs, and a tendency to apologize for negative results are just some of the criticisms raised about the evaluations of alternative programs. Based on this information, the following recommendations are made for further research:

1. Conduct research to determine why alternative schools, in spite of improving student attitudes about school, school performance and self-esteem, have been unable to affect delinquent behavior.
2. To continue research in the area of parenting difficult children and to develop programs that would deliver this information to the families that could benefit from such information.
3. Develop a system for data keeping to further explore alternative program effectiveness.
4. Continue research of at-risk youth to determine effect of early intervention, and appropriate time to intervene.

Options and choice increases school effectiveness by empowering administrators, teachers, parents, and students to create a friendlier learning environment that is student oriented. Alternative programs offer students an opportunity to succeed. These programs need community support and understanding to continue the job they are doing.

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