

A GRID AND GROUP EXPLANATION
OF AT-RISK STUDENT CULTURE
IN AN ALTERNATIVE
MIDDLE SCHOOL

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Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

Over the last decade, the number of alternative schools and the enrollment in such schools have increased dramatically. In some states, such as Minnesota, alternative school enrollment constitutes nearly 30 percent of all secondary school students.

The focus of all educators changed during the past decade due to educational reform focusing on school accountability, standard-based instruction, and student achievement. Ensuring that “all students can learn” is the new mantra for schools throughout the nation. With the inception of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, districts and schools are mandated to develop programs that enable all students to make “adequate yearly progress.” Student populations not making progress have been targeted to ensure that no child will be left behind (National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2003).

Concern for at-risk youth during early adolescence and their ability to make academic gains have intensified as schools struggle to meet the needs of all students. Gable, Hendrickson, and Rogan (1996) defined the at-risk student as one who could not meet the traditional and sometimes rigid requirements of school because of financial hardships, changing demographics, dysfunctional family structure, and other factors. A recent study suggests that the developmental needs of adolescents represent a set of characteristics and pre-conditions that should guide educational reform at the middle school level, especially for at-risk youth (Wheelock, 1998).

Many schools, according to Testerman (1996), do not seem to be user-friendly to many students. When students do not recognize schools as opportunities to meet their academic needs, and they do not receive the necessary attention from their teachers and peers, they become at-risk. In the past, school officials have described these children as lackadaisical and unable to perform schoolwork, uneducable, or simply culturally deprived. Many went to reform schools or dropped out of school altogether.

The number of at-risk students has historically ranged from four to five percent of the student population (Foster, Siege, & Landes, 1994). As of 1989, the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development believed that over seven million students between the ages of 10 and 17 were vulnerable to school failure, and were likely “at-risk” candidates. Another seven million were placed in the category of “moderate risk.” Rossi and Stringfield (1995) stated, “By the year 2020, the majority of students in America’s public schools will be living in circumstances traditionally regarded as placing them at risk of educational failure” (p.73).

Since these students were labeled as being deficient and at-risk of academic failure, representatives of the Federal government initiated action with the goal of providing corrective or remedial services. Through the compensatory education movements in the 1960’s, organizational programs were designed to improve the structure of the system but not always the welfare of the student (U.S. Department of Education, 1994). Two of the concepts designed to aid students with their academic deficiencies were grouping and retention, both of which have been shown ineffective for at-risk students.

Grouping has allowed students to be placed in a homogenous learning environment geared to the needs of the students' learning abilities. Tracking of this type usually involves lowering the standards in the at-risk groups. Therefore, challenging students to improve on their academic skills is not typically the focus.

Another way of assisting students is through retention. The goal of retention is to allow these students another opportunity to grasp the concepts. However, research has shown that this method causes attendance problems, poor self-esteem, and little or no improvement in academic achievement (Compensatory Education: Traditional Responses and Current Tensions, 1994). Fiske (1991) conducted research at a middle school in Hannibal, Missouri, whose administration believed strongly in retention. The staff was surprised to learn that students who had previously been retained performed at two years below grade level when they left school, and 43 percent dropped out of school altogether. Due to the failure of grouping and retention, these two methods are not as widely used today as they once were.

Statement of the Problem

Because of the increasing number of at-risk students, thereed arose to change the design and structure of the present school system to meet the special needs of these students, needs that had not been adequately addressed. More efficient, effective programs were needed to avoid the risk of increased numbers of dropouts and poorly educated students. Will (1986) wrote that a new classification was needed for at-risk students because they previously had not been identified under federal legislation, especially Public Law 94-142, which was enacted to help serve students with disabilities. He also stated that at-risk students failed to meet most criteria for governmental

assistance and were not provided a proper educational program. These students had significant learning problems, and schools must address the need for specialized instruction and support to the at-risk student (Gable et al., 1996). State legislation and local initiatives have mandated alternative schools to serve this growing population (School Laws of Oklahoma, 1998).

Taylor-Dunlop and Norton (1997) stated that a lack of student motivation was, many times, due to the schools themselves. Few meaningful rewards, teachers remaining firm with the curriculum, technical definitions of knowledge, and an often outdated, monotonous style of teaching created frustrations for the at-risk student (Gable et al., 1996; Mahoney & Cairns, 1997).

Oakes and Lipton (1990) agreed that the responsibility for nurturing the needs of at-risk students belongs to competent educators. Gilstrap (1995) stressed four major points concerning the status of at-risk students. First, at-risk students deserve the full attention of educators, administrators, and counseling professionals. Second, at-risk students should be provided efficient and effective programs designed for their unique behaviors. Third, at-risk students deserve to be identified and assessed properly. Finally, conditions that dictate at-risk behaviors should be appropriately identified and measures taken to build suitable programs. Rossi and Stringfield (1995) added that once effective alternative programs are placed in needed areas, schools must receive useful information that would allow them to pursue excellence in educating the at-risk student. They further stated that these schools should also be given realistic requirements in policy and procedures to implement an effective program.

Responding to this need, the alternative middle school was formed to create a setting that would enable a select group of students to attend a school much smaller in size than traditional middle schools and one that limited enrollment. This structure was designed to ensure that these students at risk of failing would not be lost in the shuffle of a large school.

Most alternative schools have utilized various approaches in their efforts to satisfactorily serve at-risk students (Cardon & Christensen, 1999; Weir, 1996). However, these programs have varied significantly in both effectiveness and specificity of students served. For example, Cardon and Christensen (1999) found an alternative middle school that incorporated technology to challenge and motivate at-risk students, and a program at Greenville County Schools that provides short-term intervention to address the academic and social needs of at-risk students, with the goal of reintegrating them into the regular school setting. They also discovered a program at Brevard County School District that was designed only for students with behavior disorders. A closer look at the literature reveals an abundance of anecdotal evidence concerning the success of alternative school programs, but little well-designed, substantive research. For instance, most studies on alternative schools explore the organizational structure and processes rather than interactive aspects of student success and organizational culture (Raywid, 1994b).

Although there are some specific studies (Lange, 1998) that examine alternative schools serving students with disabilities, little national research is evident disclosing the extent to which and how at-risk students are being served in such settings. Due to this lack of information, it is difficult to conclude what specific challenges are prevalent or the impact of this educational option for at-risk students. The minute amount of existing

research pertaining to students with disabilities attending alternative schools combined with recent educational reforms (e.g., IDEA 1997) gives necessity to data collection on a deeper scale.

Alternative schools have proven to be somewhat beneficial to at-risk students in numerous ways. They have stimulated students' interest while increasing their desire to learn, diminished the dropout rate and provided more hands-on activities and practical learning experiences, allowing students to become more involved in the instructional process (Drake & Roe, 1994; Raywid, 1984).

Although many alternative schools are created largely due to state mandates and claim to be successful, the true needs of many of these at-risk students may not be adequately addressed. Even though proponents of alternative education claim that it dramatically improves the academic achievement and behavior of potential dropouts, Hilliard (1989) and Letgers, McDill, & McPartland (1993) contend that students who are placed at-risk are rarely well served by their schools. At-risk students are often tracked into substandard courses and programs holding low expectations for learning (Oakes, 1985; Wheelock, 1992), turning these schools into "dumping grounds" for undesirable students and not meeting the students' needs (Cooley, 1995; Gregg, 1998;).

Wehlage (1983) suggests that school culture plays an important role in at-risk student success. Successful programs for at-risk students contain a culture that supports the rules and goals of the program. At-risk students should feel confident in their ability to achieve goals established by peers who share the same culture (Houston, 1991). Attention must be paid to school culture, as it influences student performance either positively or negatively (Patterson et al., 1986; Harris, 1995; Harris, 2005). Although

potentially beneficial, in some cases culture can also be counterproductive, oppressive and discriminatory for certain subgroups. Duke and Griesdorn (1999) agree that the cultural dimension is critical and a major continuum on which to judge alternative education programs. Middle school is a crucial time in students' lives, as stated by Lounsbury (2005),

No other age level is of more importance to the future of individuals, and, literally, to that of society; because these are the years when youngsters crystallize their beliefs about themselves and firm up their self-concepts, their philosophies of life, and their values - the things that are the ultimate determinants of their behavior.

Thus, this research focuses on comprehensive cultural aspects of an alternative school environment at the middle school level.

Purpose of the Study

The problem statement poses a need to describe the relationship of school culture and at-risk students at the middle school level. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to describe the culture of an alternative school environment at the middle school level. For this study, I investigated the roles of at-risk students in the culture of an alternative school and described how at-risk students interacted among themselves and with the teacher. I also described the perceptions of at-risk students as well as their educational needs and goals in relation to the values and dimensions of an alternative school culture.

Investigating Questions

The primary question for investigation is the relationship of culture and at-risk middle school students. Questions in support of this are:

- 1) What is the grid and group makeup of an alternative school?
- 2) How is the student culture explained in terms of grid and group in the alternative school?
- 3) How useful is grid and group theory in explaining the interrelationship of an alternative school and its students?

Significance of the Study

Research has been conducted on alternative schools for at-risk students.

However, the research has largely been limited to high school students or to early intervention programs centering on elementary students. Little regard has been given to middle school at-risk students, and dropout prevention programs have not been satisfactory in the public schools (DeBlois, 1999). Intervention at the middle school level is a necessity since middle school students are making more choices that will affect their lives more than any other time in their maturation stages. Unfortunately, some of those decisions are critical to the in-school success of that student and to the rest of society. The amount of education a student receives will often determine society's role in taking care of those uneducated students.

Alternative middle school programs have provided a choice for students.

Designed to meet the varying needs of middle school adolescents, as well as the unique needs of students at-risk, alternative schools are filling a gap in middle level education. Far too many children, especially those from poor and minority families, are placed at-risk by school practices that are based on a sorting paradigm in which some students receive high-expectation instruction while the rest are relegated to lower quality education and lower quality futures (Oakes, 1985). Without alternative schools, many

students manage to succeed marginally through the elementary years, only to be lost in large, impersonal junior high schools. The academic mission of alternative education programs is to enable students to perform at grade level (Cole-Henderson, 2002).

Even as programs were beginning to be designed for the at-risk middle school student, one must question their appropriateness to the individual needs of the student. Relying on research, previous experiences, teacher input, and replicating programs in other districts and states was leading to the creation of excellent alternative programs. Yet, what was lacking from these sources was the true input of the at-risk student him/herself, and specifically the interrelationship of school culture and at-risk students. This study is designed to assist in examining the worth of an at-risk alternative program by making the interrelationship of school culture and at-risk students the focal point of research. Through a mini-ethnographic study, I gained insight into the needs and desires of the at-risk student. These findings provide information useful in designing a suitable school culture for the at-risk middle school student.

Theoretical Framework

When considering school culture and the interrelationship of that culture with its students, many factors must be considered. The culture of a private school would be expectedly different from that of a public school. High school environments would obviously be much different from elementary environments. Factors such as student mobility, teacher turnover, and socioeconomic status come into play when identifying school culture.

Grid/Group Analysis, a cultural theory of organization originating in anthropology, is a conceptual framework for examining organizations and change. This

typology, proposed by Mary Douglas (1970, 1978), is used for describing cultures and the forms of social organization that support them. This model proposes that an individual's behavior, perception, attitudes, beliefs, and values are shaped, regulated and controlled by constraints that can be grouped into two domains, grid control and group commitment. These two factors contribute to social constraints between individuals interacting within an organization and their environment.

Grid represents the individuation of members of the organization and the degree to which their choices are constrained by imposed rules and role descriptions. High-grid refers to a social environment where individual interactions are regulated and autonomy is minimal. In this instance, role and rule dominate social interactions (Douglas, 1982). A low-grid environment consists of few distinctions among members as roles are more achieved than ascribed. Individuals negotiate relationships and life choices and are valued for their skills and character rather than their role status. Douglas (1982) uses four criteria to determine grid: insulation, autonomy, control, and competition.

The group continuum represents the value people place on collective relationships and the commitment they have to the larger social unit. This is measured by the holistic aspect of social incorporation and the extent to which people's lives are absorbed and sustained by corporate membership (Harris, 1995). High-group environments consist of specific membership criteria and pressures to maintain group relationships. The survival of the group is more important than the survival of the individual members within the group. The goal of group interaction is to preserve the life of and allegiance to the entire school or class. In low-group environments, short-term activities and objectives are the focus due to fluctuating membership and allegiance to the group. Here, individuals are

not restricted by others, nor are they reliant on one another, but individual interests are the priority. Group is also evaluated by four criteria: survival, membership, life support, and group allegiance.

When considering both the grid and group dimensions simultaneously, Douglas (1982) identifies four distinct social environments:

- 1) Individualist (low-grid/low-group)
- 2) Bureaucratic (high-grid/low-group)
- 3) Corporate (high-grid/high-group)
- 4) Collectivist (low-grid/high-group)

School cultures can be classified by these social structures, which is why this theory is useful in broad analyses of school organizations. Douglas's (1982) frame provides a means to understand, compare, and explain different school cultures through a humanistic lens.

Methodological Framework

Mini-ethnographic methodology is the primary data-collection strategy. Mini-ethnography utilizes strategies designed to provide detailed information of particular individuals, programs and situations. Intensive interviewing and participant observation are the primary approaches of this method. Douglas's typology of grid and group is also used to explain behavior and interactions in the alternative school setting.

This study was conducted in an alternative school located in a building separate from the regular school building. Although separate in educational policies and procedures, the alternative school shares facilities with the regular school. Studied were a small group of 10 to 15 students; thus, it is termed as a "micro-ethnography" (Werner &

Schoepfle, 1987a) or mini-ethnography. It is also considered a mini-ethnography due to the length of the observation period being no longer than six weeks (Miller, 1991). McFeat (1974) called these studies “small group cultures” and mentioned the most appropriate sample size may be only five members.

Definitions

For clarity of meaning, the following concepts have been defined.

Alternative School

The alternative school is a placement for students who do not fit into the norm of the regular school environment. The alternative school appears in many shapes and sizes and provides services to several types of student. Some of these alternative schools are located in separate facilities and some are located within the regular school building (Drake & Roe, 1994; Raywid, 1984; Rossi & Stringfield, 1995).

Artifacts

Determining what the culture makes or uses that can be a vital ingredient in the outcome of the study (Spradley, 1980).

At Risk Student

Gable et al. (1996) defined the at-risk student as one who could not meet the traditional and sometimes rigid requirements of school because of financial hardships, changing demographics, dysfunctional family structure, etc.

Culture

Culture is defined as the behavior, language, artifacts, and personality of a group (Spradley, 1980). In this study, these characteristics are explained in terms of grid and group.

Culture-Sharing Group

The unit or group the researcher studies is called the culture-sharing group. The researcher analyzes the culture of the entire group to offer some explanation of how the culture operates (Creswell, 1998).

Fieldwork

This includes where and how data collection occurs by the researcher. The researcher will go to the physical environment of the culture while becoming immersed in the rituals, events, and activities of that culture (Sanjek, 1990).

Gatekeeper

This is the individual who provides the researcher's access to the cultural environment, without which, the researcher would be unable to conduct the study (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983).

Grid and Group

Mary Douglas's typology of grid and group is a theoretical frame that assists in understanding school culture by providing a matrix for classification.

Middle School

A separately organized and administered school between the elementary and senior high schools. Typically, the middle school involves students in sixth through eighth grades and is what is included in this study.

Mini-ethnography

Mini-ethnography can be defined as the art of describing culture, to the point the researcher becomes an ingredient in the cultural scene (Spradley, 1980). It is not only a study of the culture, but the learning from the people of the culture as well.

Participant Observation

A method used to observe the group being researched and to participate in the activities of that group (Jorgenson, 1989). Boyle (1994) added that participant observation combines being involved in the group's activities while maintaining a safe enough distance to allow for recording of data and other observations

Summary

For many middle school students, poor attitudes about school are often related to low achievement and behavioral problems. Previous research suggested the importance of middle schools and emphasized middle school students are at a critical crossroads of their lives in determining the direction of their future in education (Weir, 1996). This study attempted to present research evidence of what students perceive is lacking in programs for at-risk students and to determine if a specialized culture exists among at-risk students.

Chapter one introduces the study. Although alternative high schools have been in existence for many years, middle level alternative schools have recently been developed to meet the needs of at-risk learners. The study involved qualitative fieldwork designed to describe the culture of at-risk middle school students by observing their in-school experiences. The research questions targeted the cultural make-up of this group of students and a design to explain that culture.

Chapter two discusses areas that provide support to this study's research. Alternative education is discussed as the broad topic, while middle level education narrows the focus. Research on at-risk youth and information on the unique needs of these students, as well as effective program strategies that help meet those needs, are

noted. Examples of the variety of alternative middle school programs currently in operation are also included.

Chapter three discusses the methods for the study and outlines the research design, information on the participants and the setting, procedures used, the instrument, and the analysis of the data. Chapter four presents a summary of the findings in narrative form, detailing the thoughts and perceptions of the students participating in the study. Chapter five provides an analysis of the data, and chapter six enables readers to determine for themselves if any additional objectives need to be met to enhance the educational directives for the at-risk student.

Chapter II

LITERATURE REVIEW

This study was designed to describe the culture of an alternative school environment at the middle school level. Current information regarding the successes and failures of existing alternative school programs is presented. In addition, data are provided to show evidence of the growing concern for the ever-increasing population of at-risk students.

The literature was examined to determine if changes are necessary to improve the educational future of the at-risk student, and what steps are needed to implement those changes. The school-within-a-school concept is explored as well as the use of separate facilities for an alternative program.

The existing research examining at-risk students falls into two groups. In the first group are quantitative studies providing general information about school learning environments correlated with drop-out rates. However, these studies lack rich, descriptive data about school processes, namely the how and why of school outcomes. Bryk and Thum (1989) concluded that schools where the faculty was more engaged with the students experienced lower rates of students dropping out than schools with lower faculty engagement. However, how faculty became more engaged with students and why this was correlated with a lower drop-out rate could not be inferred. The second group includes qualitative studies with rich descriptions of why students drop out; however, these studies focus on students' perceptions after they have left the school environment.

Both groups of studies explore the negative aspects of students' learning environments, but neither offers rich descriptions of what is happening within schools while students are attending school.

Need For Alternative Schools

Changes in public schools began to emerge during the 1960's and 1970's due to social, political, and economic pressures, which demanded action to meet the needs of students from differing populations. Students with disabilities were evaluated and given the opportunity to receive seemingly more appropriate educational services. Federal legislation, such as Public Law 94-142 (now the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act – IDEA), was enacted to aid disabled students in receiving some of their instruction while in the regular classroom (U.S. Department of Education, 1994). The increasing number of dysfunctional families, the growing mobility of students, and more family financial hardship created a new category of students, “at-risk.” Unfortunately, these at-risk students failed to meet most of the criteria for governmental assistance and often were not adequately served (Will, 1986), yet, they were found to have significant educational needs. Schools were challenged to address pedagogical methodologies for specialized instruction and support for the at-risk student (Gable et al., 1996).

Cardon and Christensen (1999) believed at-risk students face a number of consequences. The student who lacked a basic education was denied career advancements, accompanied by feelings of frustration and alienation. The need for an unskilled labor force dropped drastically and school dropouts were finding opportunities more limited than ever before. Cardon and Christensen also added that criminal activity

was highly correlated with students who did not finish school, as more than 80 percent of previously incarcerated persons were dropouts.

Administrators should evaluate schools to determine if all students' needs are being met and if the traditional school environment provides the best setting for meeting these needs. Often, students respond differently when given an opportunity to perform in an alternative setting. Mintz (1998) listed ten signs that would help determine if a child is more suitable for a unique school placement:

1. Did the child inform the parent that he or she hated school? This could be the most important indicator because children are natural learners.
2. Did the child have trouble relating and interacting with students younger and older? This could be a common occurrence for students who have only a narrow group of peers for socialization purposes.
3. Did the child have an abnormal infatuation with designer clothes? This could be related to the peer pressure all children face in trying to establish self-esteem.
4. Did the child come home from school stressed or lackadaisical? This could be an indicator the learning process was no longer exciting but overly demanding for the child.
5. Did the child come home complaining about disagreements that happened at school and how they might have been treated unfairly? This could indicate the school was not adequately resolving conflicts and may not be keeping communication lines open between school and home.

6. Did the child no longer show enthusiasm for expressing himself/herself creatively through music and art? In some cases, schools may be downsizing their elective and extracurricular programs to concentrate more on state-mandated core classes.
7. Did the child no longer read or write for entertainment? Did the child give limited effort on homework to quickly escape to some other activity? This could mean reading and writing exercises may not be given the proper priority at school, or the activities involved in these exercises were no longer energetic and meaningful.
8. Did the child procrastinate in doing homework or class projects? This could be a sign the homework was not practical, not interesting, and not relevant to the child.
9. Did the child come home talking about exciting events that took place at school that day? If not, maybe there was no stimulation from the school environment.
10. Has the school nurse, counselor, or teacher suggested that the student might have a disorder and may be better served with Ritalin or another type of drug? This could be related to behavior disorders that were only appearing at the school scene, due to a lack of interest on the student's part.

Mintz (1998) suggested that if a parent observed several of these signs, an alternative program probably would better serve the child in his or her educational process. These signs are not pure indicators, although parents need to face the reality that their child may not be adjusting to the traditional school setting. Osborne and Dimattia

(1994) warned that parents and school staff need to thoroughly examine any type of pull out program from the regular education classroom, especially for the self-contained classroom that attempts to meet all social and academic needs in one environment.

Dettmer, Thurston, and Dyck (1993) agreed that all special needs children, including at-risk students, could be addressed in the regular classroom if teachers were willing to use cooperative teaching strategies, cooperative learning among all students, and the use of highly motivational techniques.

Research on successful secondary schools found that four critical factors take place with individuals of those schools: shared values, a sense of belonging, a sense of school membership, and academic engagement (Goodlad, 1984). On closer examination, all of these factors were virtually nonexistent with the at-risk student (Gregorc, 1989). Gregorc also conveyed the idea that almost all secondary school instruction uses abstracts while presenting ideas in a sequential, ordered style. However, this style was foreign to some at-risk students, who needed ideas presented in a concrete form, which could appear to be practical to their own life. Rieck (1996) assumed that most at-risk students were tactile learners, who learn most when they physically became part of an activity.

Rossi and Stringfield (1995) named three rationales as to why schools must be prepared to handle the projected increases of the at-risk population: the continuity of our societal values would be endangered, our present democratic state would be in jeopardy, and the nation would transition into a high-tech, global society. First, without adequate knowledge and skills obtained through education, the at-risk student has limited opportunities to extend to the family and to the community the societal values discovered in school. Second, the preservation of democracy in our nation is a major concern. If the

citizens of a democracy lack the ability to read, comprehend, and analyze, then democracy can not survive. Students not only need information, but they need to be able to process and use that information. Finally, with the turn of the century and an approaching high-tech, global society, no longer were there plenty of low-skilled, low-paying jobs available. The consequences of turning out unskilled, uneducated students would be disastrous to the country.

Middle Schools

As previously mentioned, the majority of research on alternative schools has not revolved around middle school students, yet 61 percent of students considered at-risk dropped out before finishing the tenth grade (Bhaerman and Kopp, 1998). Beilke and Peoples (1997) conducted a study titled “Failure to Thrive Syndrome” of students at-risk of failure at the middle school level. Over a four-year period, records of all middle school students were kept, including tardy slips, numbers of suspensions, absentee dates, and behavior logs. A trend in negative behavior increased at a rate of one hundred percent over the four-year period. The rate of failure continued to rise, increasing by over 34 percent. Besides examining the school, the researchers studied the community and discovered that there had been a recent decline in population. The school system was forced to downsize, causing the offering of fewer extra-curricular activities and resulting in less student involvement and an increase in student dropout rates. Most of the students identified as at-risk in this study had been placed in the general education track. William T. Grant Foundation (1988) research indicated that students in the general education track account for 80 percent of all dropouts in secondary schools.

Most middle school students leave an elementary environment characterized by one classroom and one teacher and enter into a constantly changing environment that often lacks a personal touch from adults. Wenz-Gross and Siperstein (1998) added that any unique problem a child had before middle school was compounded by the extra expectations placed on him/her. The amount of material for which the student must be responsible, not to mention the need for organization, can be quite overwhelming. The new social interactions and conflicts with even more peers than before, and having many teachers rather than one, can be frustrating for a young adolescent. The new middle school student seeks some type of independence from home and school, a need to form more intimate relationships, and a powerful urge to establish a unique identity. These factors are compounded by the fact that an at-risk student already had stresses related to problems at home and from having low self-esteem.

Huntington and Bender (1993) discovered that at-risk students with learning problems often made academics an internal problem and then were forced to deal with self-concept, self-worth, and even depression issues. Wenz-Gross and Siperstein (1998) suggested an intervention for dealing with academic stressors among at-risk students by helping them understand their role in peer relations. The hope was that if a student could relate well with others, he/she would feel better about him/herself, which in turn would alleviate some stress, allowing him/her to focus more on academics. Wenz-Gross and Siperstein also state that most at-risk middle school students face an uphill battle with stress in their academic performance and stress in their peer relationships. Parental support, involvement and communication with the school staff could help to thwart the damages of stress upon the learning environment of the at-risk middle school student.

Wenz-Gross and Siperstein (1998) noted that at-risk students should be given assistance in developing time management and organizational skills. It would also be beneficial for teachers to present information in more meaningful ways that are understood by the at-risk student. Help with peer pressure issues and peer relations could be accomplished through assertiveness training, conflict resolution, and refusal skills training. These skills are necessary for building self-esteem of at-risk students and achieving a sense of belonging in the environment. Midgley and Urdan (1992) believed that to overhaul the middle school environment for the at-risk student, a school must change its culture. The school should not reward and reinforce ability and competition, but should emphasize the individual's learning without comparison to other students.

The Talent Development Middle School was a model first used at Central East Middle School in Philadelphia in 1996 (<http://www.ed.gov/pubs/ToolsforSchools/tdms.html>). This program focused on high standards of excellence among its students, but it also developed a variety of paths for reaching those standards. This model maintained five strategies for operation. First, the core classes were standards-based, where hands-on learning activities took place only in non-tracked sections. Second, opportunities for additional help were available through cooperative learning and elective classes such as labs for math and reading. Third, a communal organization was established to form teams that would maintain their structure during the three years students attended. Fourth, more emphasis was placed on career goals through exploration activities and weekly meetings. Finally, an intensive program was developed to ease the transition for incoming students.

The TEAMS (Teacher Educational Assistance for Middle School Students) is a concept developed in the 1990's and used in middle schools to mainstream at-risk students into the regular classroom (Gable et al., 1996). This collaborative team is useful in terms of accommodating the various learning styles of students. Such teams often consist of several content area teachers and one or more special education teachers. The team is typically grouped together in order to reduce travel time for students between classes as well as to ensure accessibility among staff members. This arrangement also helps the team with student management issues in and out of the classroom.

Such a collaborative approach does provide the at-risk student a number of benefits. For example, when staff members are able to interact with one another regarding instruction and support, some negative attitudes from students about their academic achievement may be affected (Little, 1989). Also, teachers have the freedom to alter the schedule in order to remove students and work with them on a more one-to-one basis. Collaborative teaming enables teachers to share information that could be beneficial in providing optimum instruction to each individual student (Gable et al. 1996).

The difficulties in teaching a classroom of students with numerous learning abilities was noted and it was suggested that multilevel units be taught in order to accommodate all students (Gable et al., 1996). A teacher could use a certain textbook for most students on level and simultaneously utilize a workbook of a lower level for others. Although not the only way to address the needs of at risk students, the collaborative approach seems to work well at the middle school level.

Alternative Schools

Successful alternative schools, according to Finn (1989), should have three categories of implementation: organizational, instructional, and interpersonal. The organizational content consists of the school administration taking the following steps:

1. Maintaining a low student-teacher ratio and seeing that the student population is kept to a small, workable number.
2. Placing the alternative school in a totally separate environment from the regular school.
3. Devising a fair discipline policy, allowing for some leniency in the attendance and suspension areas.
4. Linking the school to community agencies for counseling, school-to-work options, and medical assistance.
5. Providing staff development in the area of communication skills.
6. Including students in decision-making procedures.
7. Developing programs for students at all levels of their at-risk condition.

The instructional component maintained that alternative school teachers could strive for the following:

1. Develop projects to improve attendance.
2. Provide opportunities to explore career paths.
3. Utilize peer tutoring and cooperative learning styles.
4. Promote computer-assisted instruction.
5. Use a variety of alternative instructional materials.

6. Incorporate accelerated lesson plans to help students regain grade level abilities.
7. Provide interdisciplinary projects to connect school with life experiences.

For the last component, Finn (1989) suggested that interpersonal skills should be addressed by:

1. Improving students' self-esteem and attitudes toward school.
2. Counseling.
3. Building the alternative school program through parent and community cooperation.
4. Cooperative learning for diverse populations.
5. Increasing positive interactions with outside adults.

A successful alternative school program for middle school students was found at Hood Canal School in Shelton, Washington (Weir, 1996). This school was established because teachers were concerned about the regular education program due to the number of students at risk of becoming dropouts and the academic failures many special education students experienced when mainstreamed into regular classes.

Much research indicated the need for at-risk students to stay in the regular school environment, or at least on the regular school campus. However, staying in the regular school environment was not always possible due to the severity of behavioral problems or due to the consequences of their actions. Brevard County School District (<http://www.brevard.k12.fl.us/Schools/4072/ROPES.htm>) developed ROPES (Refocus Opportunity Program of Education and Service) to give these students just such an opportunity. ROPES was a short-term, alternative school designed for sixth through

ninth graders who had been unsuccessful in their regular school. The program not only addressed the behavior desired for these students, but also emphasized academics as well. The focus remained on teaching the students life skills and reinforcing the importance of reading skills. Two objectives were met by placing students here. First, disruptive students were removed from the regular classroom, allowing other students to proceed freely with their education. Second, special attention was given to every student in order to encourage appropriate behavior while learning the value of an education.

Improving Alternative Schools

Every student should have the opportunity to be successful, and it is the responsibility of the schools to ensure this process. In the past, the educational system appeared to reward students that fit the most-used learning styles. These skills were tied to family assistance since they could not be accomplished completely at school. Therefore, students who come from dysfunctional families or ones with little support often failed because of their inability to master the skills needed in the classroom (Boss & Powell, 1991). For some students, educational success did not take place in the traditional school setting but rather in an alternative school environment.

Two of the early warning signs of at-risk students are inattentive and withdrawn behaviors. Finn (1998) believed that engaging students in academic processes could best be accomplished in small classrooms. By hosting students in smaller classes, students may be less likely to withdraw from participating in activities. In addition, it is more difficult for teachers to overlook students showing a lack of interest in their schoolwork. Cetron and Gayle (1991) agreed that smaller class sizes would help as would increasing the number of classes from six to seven a day. This would decrease the 55-minute class

periods to 45-50 minutes, decreasing the idle time for students and giving them an extra class period to pursue an elective that more adequately meets their needs.

Participation in and identification with the school environment are two means of engaging students in the learning process and help to ensure an effective program. Hootstein (1996) designed an effective program for the purpose of giving teachers motivational strategies for the at-risk student. This program, called RISE (Relevant Subject Matter, Interesting Instruction, Satisfied Learner, Expectations for Success) was developed to aide teachers with unmotivated students by utilizing instruction that was more appealing and self-rewarding to the student. The four points were used to determine if the classroom provided enough motivation for the at-risk student to learn.

1. R – Relevant Subject Matter—Content must be related to the students’ needs, desires, hobbies, and goals. Students should also be allowed to make the content relevant to them. Finally, students must understand the practical value or purpose of the activity. Would they be able to apply what they have learned to their everyday life?
2. I – Interesting Instruction—Although most children began their education with a curiosity and interest to learning, that often faded away by the time they reached middle school. Lessons should be delivered in sometimes bizarre and unpredictable styles. What was known and what was unknown should be the difference in how lesson plans were constructed. Students at this level have the need to explain phenomenon themselves, not have it explained to them. The instruction still had to be related to the students’ experiences, but could be done so by using concrete information through

analogies, stories, and metaphors. In this way, students did their own discovering in the way they desired.

3. S – Satisfied Learner—The use of rewards for learning could be appropriate, but Firestone (1989) mentioned that the at-risk student must believe that efforts in school must reward values. Teachers should use rewards that have informational value, instead of the value of just trying to please the teacher i.e. “you used great imagination on your design” as opposed to “I like your design.”
4. E – Expectations for Success—When students knew they were expected to perform successfully, they often gave the extra effort. In addition, the more effort they gave, the more success they experienced. At-risk students also should experience the opportunity to have personal control over learning activities by establishing their own obtainable goals.

Rieck (1996) observed a classroom composed mostly of at-risk students. When entering the classroom, he noted an array of three-dimensional projects ranging from pizza pans, to car models, to guitars hanging on the walls and from the ceilings. He discovered that the projects were “personality boxes.” Rieck stated that these personality boxes served no practical purposes except to define the personality of the individual student. From this experience, Rieck drew three conclusions regarding the at-risk student. First, students were truly concerned about their images and how others perceived them. This became quite evident in the at-risk student who already had a low self-esteem and was often perceived as lower class by other students. Second, success was obvious because the teacher taught to the most prevalent learning style of her

students—a hands-on approach. Finally, by using strong motivational techniques, the teacher was able to persuade her students to exhibit much more effort in their learning process.

Technology can also be an asset to help keep at-risk students in school (Cardon & Christensen, 1999). At a Pittsburgh middle school, 100 at-risk students were enrolled in a pre-vocational program called OASES (Occupational and Academic Skills for the Employment of Students). The mission of this program was to incorporate technology in order to assist in promoting high academic achievement. Another use of technology was incorporating Learning Circles. Learning Circles used the AT&T (American Telephone and Telegraph) Network to communicate with students in other states and even other countries. Writing skills increased dramatically by using this form of technology with at-risk students.

Thus far, the physical and academic structures of what a variety of authors have perceived as the best procedures for working with at-risk students were examined. However, some concern was noted about the personality of the teacher in the at-risk classroom. Schools are allowed to employ any certified teacher to teach in an alternative school according to School Laws of Oklahoma (1998). Botwinik (1997), however, shared some insights of how teachers of the at-risk student could provide instruction without becoming at-risk themselves:

1. Arranging the classroom – Make the atmosphere relaxing to all by arranging the class neatly and orderly. Place the teacher’s desk at a position so it does not appear authoritative to the students. Place a full-length mirror immediately inside the door so students can examine themselves as they enter.

2. Establishing routines – Have an easily read objective on the board describing the plans for that hour or for the day. Immediately provide independent assignments to get students focused for class.
3. Organizing materials – Keep separate folders for each student to assist with tracking of individual work and to assure work is actually done by each student.
4. Planning programs – Be creative by introducing activities centered on students’ interests and hobbies.
5. Knowing co-workers – Utilize other teachers as valuable resources for classroom instruction or support.
6. Involving parents and community members – Outside resources can not only provide additional resources for at-risk classes, but can also be a positive public relations opportunity.
7. Fund-raising – Attempt to gather local donations and then apply for state and national grants.
8. Prevent teacher burnout – Eliminate out-dated lesson plans and activities. Become more computer literate. Do not be afraid to attempt new and innovative ideas. Travel professionally and personally when the opportunity arises. Attend invigorating workshops to discover more teaching approaches.

Culture and Alternative Schools

School culture has been defined in various ways by many authors, but all agree that culture is important. Maslowski (1997) defines school culture as “the basic assumptions, norms and values, and cultural artifacts that are shared by school members,

which influence their functioning at school”(p. 5). An examination of school culture is important because, as Goodlad’s study (1984) suggests, “alike as schools may be in many ways, each school has an ambience (or culture) of its own, and, further, its ambience may suggest useful approaches to making it a better school” (p. 81).

The field of education lacks a clear and consistent definition of school culture. This term has been used synonymously with a variety of concepts, including “climate,” “ethos,” and “saga” (Deal, 1993). The concept of culture was introduced to education from the corporate world with the idea that it would provide direction to create a more efficient and stable learning environment.

Anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973) has contributed to our understanding of culture as a “historically transmitted pattern of meaning.” These patterns are expressed both implicitly, in our beliefs which are taken for granted, and explicitly, through symbols. A review of the literature on school culture reveals much of Geertz’s perspective, stating that this system of meaning often shapes what people think and how they act.

Cheng’s study (1993) revealed that school culture was related to perceived organizational effectiveness and that it correlates with teachers and students’ attitudes. Purkey and Smith (1983) emphasize the importance of school culture in building a theory of school improvement and insist that imagining schools or programs as cultures suggests a framework for understanding problems and indicates how to move toward solutions. By deepening our understanding of school culture, we are “better equipped to shape the values, beliefs, and attitudes necessary to promote a stable and nurturing learning environment”(Stolp, 1994, p. 21).

While there are numerous elements that comprise a school's culture, there is one of particular relevance to both reconnecting at-risk students and reducing the likelihood of failure. Vitally important is the issue of redefining the standards by which the alternative school staff and the broader school community measure success. CRESPAR (Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed At Risk) stated that transforming schools to best serve at-risk students requires three tasks: ensuring that all students experience success at key points of their adolescent years, building on previous personal accomplishments of students, and further enhancing programs that suit at-risk students (<http://scov.csos.jhu.edu/scos.html>).

Identification, the method Finn (1998) proposed to help at-risk students, referred to the student belonging to the school, being a part of the culture, valuing the resources the school provides, and sharing in the rewards of the school environment. Yet most at-risk students viewed school as neither providing advantages or helping them establish relationships with faculty and peers. When students perceived that they were unduly harassed or punished, they tended to retreat further from peers and teachers. On the other hand, Testerman (1996) believed when an at-risk student was secure in his cultural environment, the student's attendance would be positively affected.

Certain aspects or features of any culture are visible, meaning they show up in people's behavior, while many other aspects of culture are invisible, existing only in the realms of thought, feeling, and belief (www.peacecorps.gov/wws/students/culturematters/summaries.html). The two realms, the visible and the hidden, are related to each other and truly do affect behavior. To understand where behavior comes from

and to understand why at-risk students behave the way they do, we must learn about their values and beliefs, and their culture.

Theoretical Framework

A framework that provides a common language to explain behaviors and interactions in a school setting is Douglas's Typology of Grid and Group. Douglas (1982) posits that the identification of grid (the roles and rules that define members of an organization) and group (the social experience of the members within the group) shape the perceptions of those within the organization.

The grid dimension alludes to the degree of limitation of choices by an individual constrained by the organization's imposed rules, role expectations, and procedures (Harris, 1995). For example, some schools may have stringent rules that constrain teachers to certain procedures or methods to be used in the classroom. Others may have few regulations, allowing teachers to vary their styles and demonstrate increased autonomy.

Grid strength can be classified from high to low, according to the level of role and rule domination. High-grid is characterized by definite role distinction, a high level of expectations, and a specific pecking order. This type of environment lends itself to little self-governance and a great deal of bureaucratic power, while maintaining security of social status. Low-grid systems promote individuality, freedom of choice, and less authoritative leadership. Roles are less distinctive, fewer rules regulate decisions, and more value is placed on individuals based on skill and ability level.

The group dimension is "the degree to which people value collective relationships with one another and define those relationships in terms of insider/outsider distinction"

(Lingenfelter, 1996, p.24). Group represents the social aspect of the individuals in membership. The more the individuals work together in the interest of accomplishing a task, the more they become absorbed with one another. The group dimension can also be measured on a continuum from low, individuals acting as individuals, to high, individuals forming a group for the good of the order.

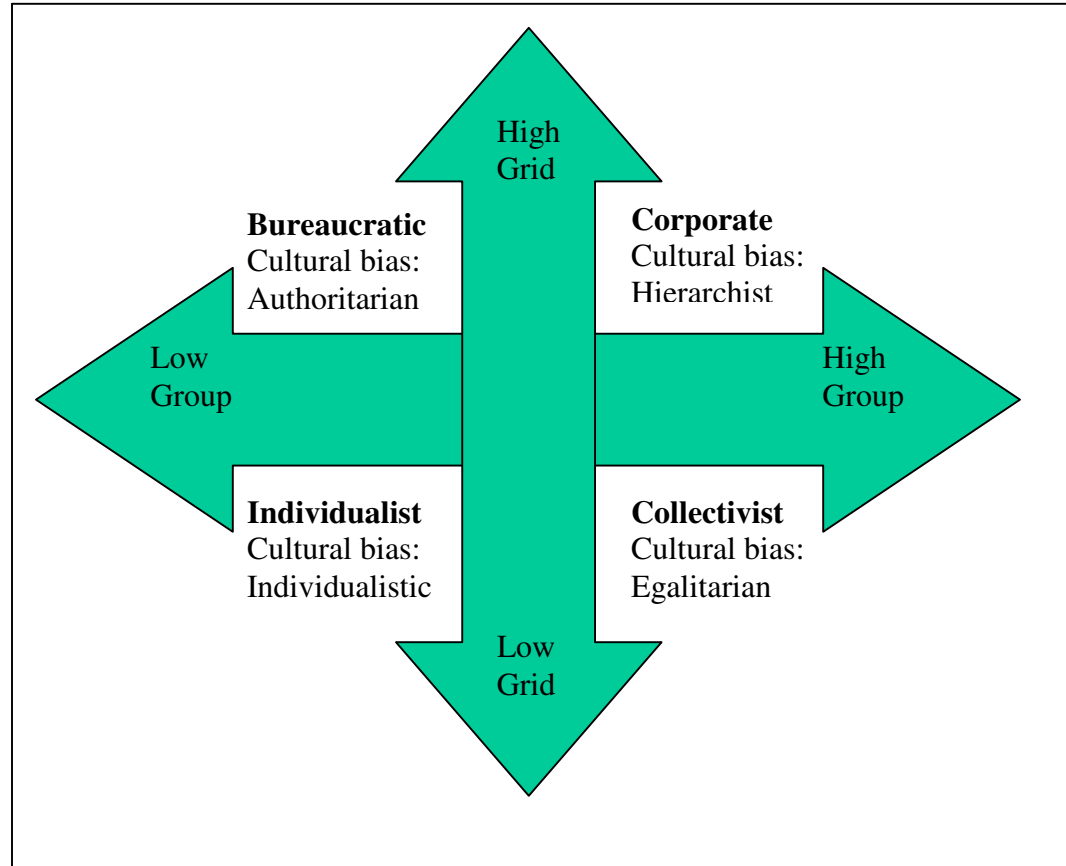
Group strength that is considered high, or strong, may be revealed through a strong social environment with explicit guidelines for membership, holding outsiders at bay. This demands intensive commitment from the members to ensure group stability and allegiance. Low, or weak, group environments are less dependent on group decisions and relationships. Individual interests far outweigh those of the group, as the group members tend to fluctuate due to morale or staff turnover.

When the two continuums interact simultaneously, four dynamic social environments emerge as presented in figure 1.

Douglas (1982) pairs the two continuums together to create four distinct social environments: Individualist (low-grid, low-group), Bureaucratic (high-grid, low-group), Corporate (high-grid, high-group), and Collectivist (low-grid, high-group).

Figure 1

Douglas's Typology of Social Environments



These four systems, or “social games” (Lingenfelter, 1996), are important to educators in understanding the structure of their classrooms and the roles and relationships of the students (the culture). This knowledge can also be beneficial when resolving conflicts and creating a conducive classroom learning environment. The four culture types are described more thoroughly below:

Individualist (low-grid, low-group)

1. The social experience of the individual is not constrained by group rules or traditions.

2. Role status and rewards are competitive and based on merit.
3. There is little distinction in role status of individuals.
4. Long-term group survival is not emphasized.

Bureaucratic (high-grid, low-group)

1. There is little individual autonomy.
2. Roles and rules are defined without ambiguity.
3. The environment is hierarchical with predominately set criteria.
4. Group goals and survival are not important.

Corporate (high-grid, high-group)

1. The group maintains boundaries against outsiders that limit social relationships and experiences of its members.
2. The individual's identification is derived from group membership.
3. Individual behavior is subject to controls exercised in the name of the group.
4. Greater individual power is found at the top of a hierarchy pyramid of role levels.
5. Group survival and perpetuation of traditions are of utmost importance.

Collectivist (low-grid, high-group)

1. Individual identification is granted through group membership.
2. Authoritarian leadership and hierarchy are rejected.
3. Individual behavior is subject to controls exercised in the name of the group.
4. The perpetuation of group goals and group survival is of utmost importance.

Douglas's (1982) framework provides assistance in analyzing specific characteristics that are influenced by these grid and group qualifications. The researcher can then identify an organization's cultural bias by considering the most appropriate quadrant. No preferences, or choices, are considered to be predetermined when using grid and group typology to analyze these individual preferences. This method also considers the cumulative effect of personal choices on each social situation and is beneficial in explaining these preferences in a cultural context.

The significance of using Douglas's (1982) grid and group typology as the theoretical framework in this study rests on the research calling for a cultural perspective of alternative schools and their at-risk students. Cultural theory acknowledges that the diversity of world views within one society might result in difficulty for members of that society to understand each other (Wynne, 1992). This framework will provide a conceptual analysis of individual and group influences and relationships in an alternative middle school setting.

The cultural theory of risk proposes a distinction between acceptable and unacceptable risks. Acceptable risks are those that do not pose a threat to cultural diversity. Unacceptable risks, in contrast, threaten the culture by undermining the foundations of the socio-cultural fabric as a whole (Cantor, 1987). It is important, therefore, to understand the culture of an alternative school in order to determine the most appropriate programs for its at-risk students.

In current research on the influence of social and cultural factors on risk perception, the cultural theory of Douglas and Wildavsky (1983) is the most influential approach. Many experts and consultants think that all cultures correspond to a range of ideal types, which is why typologies are found useful in the broad analysis of organizations (Hampden-Turner, 1990). Douglas's (1982) typology of grid and group, therefore, is suited for this study of the culture of an alternative school in a middle school setting.

Summary

The growing population of at-risk students has become an important issue in education. Schools can no longer attempt to serve all students in a typical classroom environment. The increasing number of students not being adequately served can no longer be tolerated. Change in the way public schools perform has become a requirement. Although the endeavors to improve have all been worthwhile, none have been foolproof. Oakes and Lipton (1990) concluded that teachers must begin to thoroughly examine how students are spending their classroom time; how lessons are being organized; what type of teaching method is best suited for each individual; and

whether the students are benefiting from being in the classroom. Most importantly, does the teacher believe that all students can be successful?

Gilstrap (1995) stressed that at-risk students: 1) deserve the full attention of educators, administrators, and counselors, 2) should be provided effective programs for their unique behaviors, and 3) deserve to be identified and assessed properly. Conditions that dictate at-risk behaviors should be appropriately identified and measures taken to build suitable programs. Rossi and Stringfield (1995) added that once effective alternative programs are in place, they must receive useful information that would allow them to successfully educate the at-risk student.

While most of the literature prescribed remedies instead of describing the person, insight was given into the problems associated with the at-risk student and the need for better schooling. Even though most of the research agreed on the role of the teacher in the education of the at-risk student, it failed to actually record the students' perceptions of what was best for them or the role they play in the alternative school culture. Moreover, while studies emphasize the importance of school culture, few have focused on the cultural environment. Using mini-ethnographic methodology and Douglas's typology to explain the cultural context, I studied the culture of an at-risk middle school alternative program.

Chapter III

METHODOLOGY

As discussed in the previous chapter, the review of the literature identified: types of alternative schools that have been developed, reasons students became at-risk, some predictions for possible increases in the at-risk population in the future, and the importance of school culture in at-risk education. This study examines only a small segment of the at-risk student population and the student culture. I utilized a mini-ethnographic methodology and Douglas's Typology of Grid and Group for the purpose of describing the culture of an alternative school environment at the middle school level.

Research Method

The literature review found few studies examining the cultural contexts of at-risk students, or even considering the views or opinions of the students placed in an alternative school setting. Obtaining such a holistic portrait requires a qualitative study approach to study the alternative school and the viewpoint of students enrolled in such a school.

Creswell (1998) described qualitative research as:

An inquiry process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social or human problem. The researcher builds a complex, holistic picture, analyzes words, reports detailed views of informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting (p. 15).

Through observation of a qualitative design, the researcher is able to gain first hand experience of the situation or people studied. According to Tsourvakas (1997), a qualitative approach brings the researcher closer to the actual performances and practices of the group being studied. The primary instrument in the study was the investigator, herself. The human participants were the students observed and interviewed. The products of the study were the field notes, the language, the stories, and the events in which I participated and reflected upon.

Data analysis was conducted throughout the study in order to stimulate a variety of questions and strengthen the research. I used Spradley's (1980) domain analysis, taxonomic analysis, and a componential analysis, which will be explained in further detail later, to understand the cultural scene. This allowed me to make focused observations, identify relationships in those observations, and assign meaning to the observations. Once collected, the data were analyzed to establish the presence of continuously reoccurring patterns and categorize them under thematic headings (Streubert & Carpenter, 1995). In presentation of the research findings, I used rhetorical devices such as figure of speech (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983). Douglas's (1982) typology was used *ex post facto* to further explain the findings.

The data were tested for reliability and validity through triangulation (Fetterman, 1989; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983). Triangulation involved comparing information from one source against another source to ensure comparable explanations. In this study, I consulted with the teacher of the at-risk students to confirm the information obtained from the students during data collection. In addition, Hammersley and Atkinson (1983) found that respondent validation consisted of comparing information collected at different times

of the study. For example, contrasting perceptions from the at-risk students were often documented depending on the climate of the classroom at the time.

Qualitative Data

Germain's (1986) ethical considerations, deemed necessary in establishing qualitative research, were followed as an integral part of any study. I obtained informed consent from each of the participants, and, due to the age of the participants, consent was also obtained from a parent or guardian. Participants were assured the protection of privacy and confidentiality during the research process so that they would be comfortable sharing information and answering interview questions.

The participant group benefited from the study even before its conclusion, in that bits of data were shared with the administration to improve certain situations. For example, eighth graders wished they could eat lunch with other eighth graders rather than seventh graders they did not know. This arrangement was made only because students were able to express their feelings as a result of my probing questions. This supports Maxwell's (1996) statement that qualitative research is more concerned with human reasoning and interpretation than comparison and contrast, and that it is interactive in nature.

Mini-Ethnography

Mini-ethnography has long been associated with examining one culture for the purpose of explaining other cultures. Vidich and Lyman (1994) believed the original type of mini-ethnography has been replaced with a postmodern perspective. Their view was that research should not necessarily be used for interpretation of events, but for its reflection on society. That is why most mini-ethnographic studies have been narrowed down from their

broad scope to better reflect a unique culture. Streubert and Carpenter (1995) related that the need for sharing information concerning a specific culture allowed mini-ethnography to become more of a study of patterns or the way of life of that culture. Morse (1992) added that since culture was a learned phenomenon and could be shared among its group, then it has the potential to be given meaning and to be understood by others.

To perform research through a mini-ethnographic study, one must understand the speech or language of the culture. Wittgenstein (1995) affirmed that there were no specific rules regarding the meaning of language. However, Wittgenstein continued that it was possible to understand the meaning of language when we understand the society where that language exists. Germain (1986) wrote that a mini-ethnographic study would benefit an individual who was interested in learning about other cultures, would report data in an intriguing and narrative form, would build personable relationships, would have no problem with vagueness in his/her researching the culture, and would perform the research comfortably on his/her own. This research was compiled through a mini-ethnographic study of a critical nature, meaning there will be some advocacy for change in the present status of the culture (Thomas, 1993).

Mini-ethnography is both a process and a product of research (Agar, 1980). Included in the product is some history along with the social, physical, and emotional environments portrayed by the culture-sharing group. Mini-ethnography must also be accomplished through a contextual study (Boyle, 1994). The traits of human behavior to be observed must remain in the cultural environment to truly gain the meaning of the culture. Boyle also believed that the purpose of mini-ethnography was to fully explain the interrelationships among the culture-sharing groups facilitated by the researcher remaining

in that group's environment. Werner and Schoepfle (1987a) described the responsibilities of a mini-ethnographer in this way:

As ethnographers, we try to do more than just describe the cultural knowledge of the native. We try to understand and, if possible, explain. We need to be able to explain how the natives could possibly view the world as they do. The paradox of this situation is that all description, understanding, and explanation of the natives' cultural knowledge is based fundamentally on two disparate, incompletely transmittable, presumptive systems of knowledge – the knowledge to the native and the knowledge of the ethnographer (p. 60).

Participants

The study focused on sixth through eighth grade middle school students in an alternative school setting, located in a suburban school district. The purposive sample was an entire classroom of 10 to 15 students from the at-risk alternative school program. The majority of the students were Caucasian males, but a few females were also in attendance.

These students were purposively selected because they were enrolled in a middle school alternative program. I focused on this particular program because students here are enrolled due to their inability to function successfully in the regular school environment, (failing grades and social instability) and not because of expulsion or adjudication. Middle school students are at a critical crossroads in their educational pathway, and it is essential that we recognize and understand the needs of these at-risk youth.

A mini-ethnography is described as an ethnography using fewer than fifteen members. The purpose is to focus on a small group unit to examine the roles members play and how they interact with one another. By maintaining a lower sampling, the researcher

can observe the norms and values of the group, and also gain an understanding of each member's role in the group. Leininger (1985) described a mini-ethnography as smaller and having a more specific focus. McFeat (1974) suggested that for this type of particularistic research, the ideal number of participants might be as low as five.

Data Collection

The main goal of a mini-ethnographic study is to explain what was implied in the culture (Germain, 1986). Streubert and Carpenter (1995) give three necessary characteristics to accomplish a successful mini-ethnographic study: the importance of the researcher as an instrument, the quality of fieldwork, and the understanding of the revolving nature of data collection and data analysis. I was the primary instrument, and the quality of fieldwork was determined partially by my willingness to physically be in the middle of the culture.

Collecting data for a mini-ethnographic study is much more than just recording notes and findings (Tamakoshi, 1996). The researcher often included his/her own reactions, moods, and thoughts so as to accurately recollect the events that took place during the observation. Blending the researcher's perspective along with the actual culture allowed the researcher to recall and explain vivid details.

When beginning a mini-ethnographic study, Streubert and Carpenter (1995) maintained that the researcher should acquire some cultural knowledge. This knowledge could be gained through cultural inferences, which is what the researcher witnesses while observing the culture. Spradley (1980) asserted that in order to gain cultural inferences, the researcher must obtain information through three different areas: cultural behavior (what the group does), cultural artifacts (what kind of things the group makes and uses), and

speech messages (what the group says). Spradley also suggested that there would be some information the group did not express or demonstrate, called tacit knowledge, that the researcher would not be able to access.

A mini-ethnography can be useful in working with a small group, and the time of observation would usually be limited to six to eight weeks (Miller, 1991). I used a critical mini-ethnography rather than a conventional mini-ethnography in this particular study. A critical mini-ethnography is utilized to empower the culture or to be performed on behalf of the culture-sharing group (Thomas, 1993).

To gain access to this environment, gatekeepers such as the superintendent, the director of special services, and the principal were utilized. A letter was obtained (Appendices A, B & C) from each, requiring his/her approval for implementation of the study. In the research plan, an explanation of the purpose of the study, the procedures for collecting data, and a plan for confidentiality are presented. The teacher of the at-risk student sample signed a consent form (Appendix D) before data was collected. Since the sample involves minors, the researcher provided a consent form to the parent/guardian of each student (Appendix E) to be signed and returned. Next, the researcher met with students in the at risk classrooms, read the assent form (Appendix F) and asked if there were any questions before agreeing to participate. Students were informed that one-on-one interviews would be conducted and would last approximately 30-45 minutes each with a possible follow-up interview.

It is important for the researcher to not just observe the culture, but to ask questions, collect artifacts, and listen to the language unique to the group being studied (Streubert & Carpenter, 1995). Spradley (1980) mentioned three ways to be a participant observer:

descriptive observations, focused observation, and selective observation. These skills allowed me to examine the culture using a stronger objective evaluation and enabled me to choose from all areas of observation to best describe the culture.

Descriptive observations are used to describe the classroom environment and physical features of the class and determine why one culture is physically different from any other. Spradley (1980) gave nine major dimensions that could be described in any given social situation: space, actor, activity, object, act, event, time, goal, and feeling. Space is where the culture or event takes place. Actors are the actual people being studied. Activities are the functions carried out by the culture. Objects are the inanimate recordings, memos, papers, or anything else that would add purpose to the culture. Acts are the individual feats of the culture. Time focuses on when the researcher makes her observation and how it relates to the other eight dimensions. Goals are the desires of the culture and their future plans. Feelings and emotions of the culture may also be vital to observe.

A focused observation consisted of observing specific happenings or events in the lives of the culture. Streubert and Carpenter (1995) maintain that focused observation usually occurs after the researcher has analyzed the findings from the descriptive observations. Only then can the researcher begin to interpret separate social situations by limiting the observations to single events.

Selective observation was used to determine why an event is important to the culture, and to help understand differences in the lives or events of certain situations. Selective observations tend not to be those that repeat themselves, but events that have a major impact on the decisions of the culture-sharing group.

Field notes were collected so as to keep a detailed account of what takes place in the study. Attempting to use a wide-angle approach, these notes include all individuals, activities, and artifacts that are specific to the culture. I included as many details of the situation as possible to prevent the inclusion of personal assumptions or insights.

Open-ended interviews took place intermittent with participant observations in order to gain insight and generate more relevant questions. Boyle (1994) stated that the researcher should rely on the interview process to produce additional questions and even theories. Bernard (1998) explains that the combined process of data collection and analysis in a mini-ethnographic study serves as a continuous validity check. Douglas's typology of grid and group was used as a theoretical framework for providing a common language to explain the behaviors and interactions in this school setting.

Data Analysis

Prior to analyzing the data, a description of the environment of the culture-sharing group was presented. This description may answer questions the reader might have concerning the nature of the culture studied. Wolcott (1994b) suggested several different methods for description including: chronological order, researcher order, progressive focusing, description of main events, plots and characters, group interaction, analytical framework, and stories told through different perspectives. Plots and characters of the group were described as well as the group as an interactive unit.

Four types of analysis were made during the phase of data collection: the domain analysis, the taxonomic analysis, the componential analysis, and grid and group analysis. The domain analysis involves the researcher making focused observations on particular situations in the culture-sharing group (Streubert & Carpenter, 1995). It is the

responsibility of the researcher to isolate the situation desired for the focus and to utilize the nine dimensions in descriptive observation noted previously (Spradley, 1980).

Hammersley and Atkinson (1983) suggest a different approach by defining certain concepts and breaking them down into domain sub-categories. Regardless, both methods are acceptable as long as the analysis leads to more questioning by the researcher. This questioning results in categorization into appropriate grid and group quadrants.

The taxonomic analysis follows focused observations and allows the researcher to gain a more in-depth study of the concepts or domains previously established (Streubert & Carpenter, 1995). This type of analysis seeks relationships within some or all of the culture and helps to classify the culture on the group continuum. Larger themes may be discovered when using this type of analysis.

Componential analysis is “the systematic search for attributes associated with cultural categories” (Spradley, 1980, p. 131). The researcher now begins to look for meanings in the domains and considers each a vital component to the organization of the culture. In this analysis, concepts, patterns, and meanings can be grouped based on similarities and differences (Streubert & Carpenter, 1995) in relation to the grid continuum.

Douglas’s (1982) grid and group typology was also used throughout the analysis process. The alternative school culture was placed in the Individualist quadrant after data collected through interviews, field notes, and observations were analyzed. Document analysis also reinforced this group’s placement in the Individualist quadrant of cultural bias. Student’s written reflections were obtained and analyzed according to both grid and group criteria.

The data were examined in an attempt to identify continuously reoccurring patterns (Streubert & Carpenter, 1995). Tesch (1991) describes this process as decontextualizing and recontextualizing the data gathered. The text is separated into notes and placed under thematic headings. Spradley (1980) shared six themes that help explain categories patterns may fall into: social conflict, cultural contradiction, informal techniques of social control, managing interpersonal relationships, acquiring and maintaining status, and solving problems. Partial analysis of data during the data collection stage was beneficial to me by generating more in-depth questions later in the research.

Storytelling is the genre used to convey cause and sequence of events. Richardson (1990) noted the importance of story telling as a mini-ethnographic tool by using flashbacks and flash-forwards, giving the reader the opportunity to recall previous important points or to begin to make his/her own interpretations for the study. I also presented dialogue among the members of the culture-sharing group.

Ethical Considerations

Tsourvakas (1997) reported that mini-ethnographic studies could become subjective research causing misunderstandings with external validity. Researchers have had a tendency to produce information with too much zeal or too characteristic of the researcher's own personality. Due to the participants' knowledge that the research is about them, the tendency exists for participants to overemphasize features or responses when the researcher was present. Creswell (1998) termed this behavior as reactivity.

It is the researcher's responsibility to include procedures that verify the information. Fetterman (1989) used the approach of triangulation where one source of information was compared against another source to ensure comparable explanations. Hammersley and

Atkinson (1983) advocate using respondent validation as well. This requires comparing information from other sources as well as from different times of the research period.

Thomas (1993) notes that verification is necessary in collecting data and writing the narrative, and that triangulation helps prevent errors in the transcription or the narrative.

I attempted to separate myself from what was observed and from what was interpreted. Tsourvakas (1997) relates that internal validity failed to exist when the researcher did not comprehend what was being observed, attempted to influence the experience, or was blinded to what events took place. Hammersley and Atkinson (1983) added that the researcher must be aware of his personal biases or values and not to let them influence his interpretation of the data collected.

Being the researcher in this study, I must also disclose my particular role in this environment. As an administrator on the same campus, I was involved in the inception of this Transitional Learning Center (TLC) program two years before. I assisted in developing the criteria for enrollment, the hiring of the teacher, and the placement of several of the students. Even though I am not the supervising administrator of the alternative school, I have access to this classroom at will and am very familiar with the program.

Personal biases to this study could be my expectations of the findings and the desire for success of the program. I based my preconceived expectations of findings on the group of students in the TLC program last year. The class this year had only four returning students and the environment was completely different. Being involved in this program from the start, I want it to be successful by providing students identified as at-risk a safe, meaningful educational experience.

Limitations of the Study

Some researchers have questioned the notion of objectivity in mini-ethnographic studies. I interpreted findings based on multiple perspectives and acknowledged any apparent biases. Mumby (1993) provided the following comment concerning the limitation of mini-ethnography:

The failure of mini-ethnography lies in its refusal to assume an evaluative position; a stance based on an implicit need to be neutral. The study of organizational behavior is replete with research that claims such neutrality but that actually privileges managerial rationality by falling into the trap of being value neutral. Therefore, the validity of a particular interpretive act is not tied to conditions of verifiability or verisimilitude. Rather, interpretation is legitimate if it produces social transformation or if it enables actors to engage in self-reflection and hence reevaluate their conditions of existence (p.225).

Therefore, even though the research may reflect some of my own values, which are included in the previous section, it is still valid if it proves to hold some purpose to either society or me.

Gaining complete access into the nature of the culture was difficult due to the “emic view” (Streubert & Carpenter, 1995). The “emic view” is how the group perceives itself with a true understanding of its beliefs, rituals, and language. Streubert and Carpenter stress that the researcher will need to rely mostly on the “etic view” which is the interpretation by the researcher of what the observed behavior means. Agar (1980) added that the mini-ethnographic study would not necessarily end the research but would create

more questions to be pursued further. Relevant information was analyzed and an informed decision was made as to when to conclude the study.

Summary

I chose to utilize the qualitative research approach with a mini-ethnographic methodology for the purpose of describing the culture of an alternative school environment at the middle school level. This was accomplished through a mini-ethnographic study and will be of a critical nature, meaning there will be advocacy for change in the present status of the culture (Thomas, 1993). The sample was the entire classroom from an at-risk alternative school. While collecting data, I used instruments Spradley (1980) suggested: participant observation, field notes, and individual interviews of the students. Douglas's typology of grid and group was also used in order to assess and explain the culture of these programs. Data analysis was conducted throughout the study for the purpose of stimulating more thought and more questions to enhance the research. Once the data collection was complete, I identified continuously reoccurring patterns and placed these patterns under thematic headings (Streubert & Carpenter, 1995). To present the research findings, I used figures of speech and storytelling as rhetorical devices (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983).

Data were tested for reliability and validity through Fetterman's (1989) and Hammersley and Atkinson's (1983) method of triangulation. The interpretation of the study is presented in a subsequent chapter along with any direction for additional studies.

Chapter IV

DATA PRESENTATION

The purpose of this study was to describe the culture of an alternative school environment at the middle school level. This chapter presents the information gathered from interviews with students, observations of student behaviors, and data obtained from student documents. A vivid description of the events, activities, and participants in the study are given with students in the classroom being the culture-sharing group. I used a mini-ethnographic design to conduct the study, which involved three components: field notes, participant observation, and interviews. The culture-sharing group was observed and a thorough description of the alternative school was presented, as well as interaction with the students and their perceptions of events. The culture further included the language, behavior, and the artifacts (the things used or made in the culture-sharing group) of the at-risk students. Finally, through the lens of grid and group, the study allowed the reader to gain an understanding of the roles at-risk students play in an alternative school environment. The mini-ethnographic study was critical in nature because the culture-sharing group continuously proposed changes within and for their environment (Goldstein, 1998).

Throughout this chapter, the research demonstrated focused observations of the culture-sharing group (domain analysis), established relationships in those domains (taxonomic analysis), and gave meaning to those relationships (componential analysis)

(Spradley, 1980). These were also given from reoccurring patterns that developed through the course of gathering data (Streubert & Carpenter, 1995). Furthermore, the data were shared with rhetorical devices that allowed the reader to comprehend the interaction taking place with the culture-sharing group (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983).

To ensure reliability and validity in the study, I utilized triangulation and respondent validation throughout the gathering of data (Fetterman, 1989; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983). Through triangulation, I continued to verify the information received from the at-risk students with their teacher. Respondent validation was verified by the collection of field notes from the same type setting but at different times. For example, the class was often grouped for a time of open discussion as well as for collaborative work-study.

The intention of this format is to take the separate snapshots of perceptions presented by the students and form them into one picture, describing a specific culture. Beginning with Jon's candid statements about school and moving to Lori's glowing comments about her experience at Boyle Middle School, the remaining students' words seem to provide the final focus for the picture. Pseudonyms have been used in all cases. The importance of the perception is not who said it, but what was said as it relates to the formation of the culture.

The Alternative School

This study centered on an alternative school that exists in a prefabricated building located behind a regular middle school. The alternative school day begins and ends at the same time as the middle school, starting at 8:15 and ending at 2:55. The prefabricated building looks fairly new, with clean white paint inside and out. Students are required to

use the main school building for restroom facilities and water fountains, because they are not available in the pre-fab.

The door to the alternative school contains a poster on it labeling the program as TLC, which stands for Transitional Learning Center. The title is typically followed by the symbol of a lighthouse and the phrase “A Beacon for Learning” to further explain its purpose. Inside the classroom is a phrase that reads:

This is a safe place to be:
You can speak, and
We will listen.
You can ask, and
We will answer.
You can be yourself, and
We will accept you.

One must tug on the door to get it open, as it sticks slightly. The floor is covered in indoor/outdoor carpet and the room is well lit against the stark white walls and ceiling. Five double windows adorned with mini-blinds allows plenty of sunlight to enter the large room. The furniture is a mixture of round tables, desks, and cubicles. Four computers are spaced around the room and a television and VCR are on a cart over to the side. The intercom announcements from the main building can be heard as well as the bells signaling class changes.

The walls are decorated with brightly colored posters, which the teacher has used to encourage positive attitudes and good choices. Bookshelves containing curriculum resources and a few textbooks are in a corner near the white board that is used for whole class lessons.

The sixth, seventh, and eighth grade students in TLC must meet certain criteria before being admitted to the program. These students must have good attendance, few

discipline referrals, failing grades in several classes, and not be classified as a special education student. Teachers, counselor, administrator, parents, and the student must agree to this placement and the parent and student must sign a contract. This program is truly for those students “falling through the cracks” and not for those constant discipline problems. These students want to be at school, but just can’t handle the typical middle school environment.

The At-Risk Class

There are thirteen students in the classroom and they are all seated in various areas of the room, at tables, desks, and study carrels. In the following few pages, a brief description of each student assists the reader in observing the role each student plays in the culture of this alternative school. In addition, the reader is able to gather information on how each student interacts with each other and with the teacher by noting partial transcriptions of interviews. Pseudonyms are used for each participant.

Jon

Jon is a popular, fun loving 8th grade student. He dresses as a typical teenage boy with comfy jeans and t-shirts, which may or may not have holes in them. He likes to talk whenever he feels like it in class, but complies when the teacher addresses it.

I was getting bad grades in regular school. Mr. Camp [the teacher] asked me how come I got bad grades and why I didn’t like the regular school and stuff. It’s not that I didn’t like the school, there’s just too many people in there. You don’t get to talk to the teacher at all and don’t get any help. Here, you get a lot more help because there’s only one teacher.

I wasn't too sure about it at first and then I thought, "This is going to be so easy." But once I was in here, it was pretty much like regular school except you get a lot more help.

My dad likes me going here, too. He used to always yell at me because I got bad grades and stuff. I never did my homework and that made him mad. But now I don't have any homework and that's cool. That's why my grades were so bad before.

Mr. Camp actually expects more from you out here because you have to do good to stay. If you get in trouble, you might get Saturday School or In House, but hardly anybody has gotten suspended. He wants you to do good, so most everybody tries.

Lori

Lori is a fairly confident 7th grader who enjoys being in the TLC and is excited to talk about the school. One administrator stated that Lori had made terrific progress in TLC and would be considered "most improved" for her efforts in school. Lori joined the program last year as a 6th grader when her teachers noticed her struggling to fit in and make passing grades. She was retained once in the 3rd grade.

Now I like to come to school every day (mostly). I feel more accepted – like I'm more like everybody else. At Boyle, I didn't really fit in and had a lot of F's and people teased me and made fun of me. TLC and Mr. Camp is great – I'm doing a lot better. I get more help and I'm not tardy.

I think I would do okay at my old school now because I have more confidence and know that I can do the work, but I don't really want to try. We

have to do the same amount of work out here, but we get more help. I like that. Some kids think that we're out here because we're stupid or something, but that's not true. We work just as hard as they do.

I want to go to college so I can get a good job like at Wal-Mart or Atwoods. I want to be a cashier. It looks fun – most of my family works at Wal-Mart.

Stacie

Stacie is a very upbeat student that likes to smile. She made friends easily upon entering the alternative school and is always polite and courteous. Stacie is an eighth grader who was retained once in the first grade.

I like a lot of stuff here. I like to hang out with my friends. I like to search for blond jokes on the Internet – I can't get enough of them. I even like the work we have to do here – I understand it.

I came here because things weren't explained very well at my other school. Here, Mr. Camp explains stuff and doesn't load you up with homework – in fact, we don't have any. The teachers didn't take time with you before because there were 30 people in the classroom. I couldn't get everything organized either so my grades were bad.

I was a little nervous when I came here, but since it was so small, I fit right in. Small is good. I'm doing much better now – getting A's and B's. I'm not sure how I would do if I went back to my old school. I think I need more time here.

Jack

Jack seems to be a “leader” in the class and a very social 8th grade student. He is a “skater” who thrives on the thrill of mastering new tricks. He was eager to speak with me and loved the microphone. Jack was retained once in the 4th grade.

I came out here because I got in trouble sometimes and I didn’t turn in my homework most of the time. When I did turn in my homework, I got a good grade, but I never turned it in. I didn’t listen in class because I didn’t really like the teachers.

If I had to go back to my old school, my grades would probably go back to D’s and F’s. If I had to go back there and flunked, my dad would ship me off to boot camp. He said that if I flunked, that would be the last straw. He was always on my case last year. Now, he loves this place. I’m getting good grades and he’s actually proud of me and does stuff with me. My dad says he knows what I went through at the regular school because he wasn’t the only child, but he was the youngest. I’m the only boy in my family. I have two sisters and my dad and that’s it. My mom lives somewhere else. My dad had to be my dad before, but now we’re more like friends.

Next year, I have to go to the 9th grade and a different school. I’ll have to do my work, slow down, take my time, turn in my homework and stuff because then I’ll be going to high school and’ll have to do all that to graduate. I can do it, but it’ll probably be tough at first.

Art

Art was one of the better students in the class, academically. He consistently did his work and often assisted others, sometimes by his choice and sometimes by Mr. Camp's choice. Art was age appropriate for the 7th grade and seemed to be one of the more mature students in the group.

Most everybody comes out here because of their grades, F's mostly. I used to get distracted in regular classes by so many people. Mr. Camp helps me more and my grades are better now. I miss the labs in science, but I wouldn't go back now.

I like it that we're together all day and get to know each other better. We get to go outside and stuff – it's pretty cool

I want to go to OU or Michigan and play baseball. My whole family is in Michigan but I like OU, too. I might like to be a lawyer or a framer (carpenter) – that's what my dad does. Being a lawyer just sounds like fun.

Sharon

Sharon is an 8th grade student who often dictates the demeanor of the class. She laughs and speaks rather loud at times and is quick to criticize others. She enjoys being the center of attention and acts out in hopes that others will notice her. Sharon has noticeable piercings other than in her ears and wears tight, holy, unmatched clothes that often reveals extra skin. She had taken another girl, Stacie, under her wing and helped her come out of her shell so to speak. Sharon had never been retained and started in TLC as a 7th grader. She removed herself from the program once last year, but returned after not being able to maintain passing grades in regular classes.

I came out here because I was failing most of my classes and couldn't keep up with the work. You can also get away from bullies out here. I can get my work done here. It's easier and he [Mr. Camp] lets you have more time on your work. You don't have to go to different classes. There's not as many people.

The counselor suggested that I come out here but the decision was mine. I'm glad I'm here. I would stay in this program next year if they had one. But since they don't, I'll just do the best that I can with what I've got. I think I'll do okay 'cause I've learned to focus more and get my stuff done.

I like that we have more time to do stuff. I have friends in here, too, like Karen. Karen and I are best friends. She's pretty cool. I don't like the people who talk too much and don't know what they're talking about – mouthy. Mr. Camp helps us a lot. He gets annoying, too, sometimes.

I want to go to college, don't really know why. I guess I'd like to be a vet – I like animals.

Jacob

Jacob is a 6th grader and possibly the most unique student of the group. He constantly makes comments in class, but does not try to stay close to anyone. Jacob rarely does any of his work without much redirection from Mr. Camp, but stays busy with some sort of activity, such as tapping pencils on the desk or humming to himself. He often refers to himself and others as “stupid” or “retards.” Most of the other students are annoyed by Jacob and rarely speak to him in or outside of class. Jacob's mom did not want him to participate in interviews; therefore, I have no direct quotations from him.

Karen

Karen is an 8th grader who was retained in the 8th grade and just started in TLC this year. She sported blue hair at the time of the interview, but had worn other colors previously. She wears primarily black on a daily basis as well as black make-up around the eyes and mouth. She also wears chains as jewelry and draws on her hands and arms with markers. Although a bit intimidating to look at, Karen has beautiful blue eyes and a sweet, rather quiet tone. She had few words.

Kids come here because they can't focus in the other school and make bad grades. My grades have come up since I've been in here because it's easier. There's less kids. The counselor and my mom wanted me to come here. I didn't really want to, but now it's okay. I'm making better grades.

I think I'll do okay next year. I wish they didn't have homework. I like that the work is easier here and you get more help. I don't like the weird kids and some of my friends aren't here. Mr. Camp is pretty cool, though.

I haven't thought about going to college. I'll probably finish high school. I might be a tattoo artist or a beautician or do body piercing.

Billy

Billy is one of the few quiet students in the class. He sometimes seems overwhelmed by the other students and tries his best not to make enemies with anyone. Billy does most of his work, although Mr. Camp often has to keep him on task. He appears to be well liked by most of the other students. Billy usually responds with only short answers and gives the indication he does not want to talk to others (besides David),

yet his attendance in class is one of the best of all the students. Billy is also in the appropriate grade for his age.

My dad tried to home school me this year, but that didn't work out. I came here because I didn't like the other school. I was making bad grades and didn't have many friends. Now my grades are better 'cause I get help from Mr. Camp.

I really like it here. It's more fun because it's just us and we get to do neat stuff like eat and drink and listen to CD's. We get to play on the computer when we get our work done, too. Me and David are good friends, too, since I came in here.

I like Mr. Camp because he works with us when we need help. He gives us sixth graders work just for us so we understand it. He's not like the other teachers, not that they were so bad. I just like him better.

Cale

Cale is an 8th grader who entered TLC in the middle of 7th grade. He enjoys drawing and doodling on paper but does little other work without constant prompting. He seems very capable of doing his assignments, but he easily becomes bored. Cale is not very talkative and has little to do with others in the class. His attendance is fair and his behavior is good most of the time.

Kids come here because of bad grades or to change what has happened in school. In regular school, my grades were slipping tremendously, now they're stabilizing. I like TLC because we get a bunch of privileges like computer time, pop, food.

The counselor gave me the papers to take home one day and my parents liked the idea of me going here. I was pretty much completely for it after the

counselor explained it to me. Next year is going to be kinda hard in 9th grade. I've heard it's a pretty big place. I'm going to have to speed up and not be tardy. I think the work will be fine.

I like how easy the work is he gives us. It's pretty easy work. He'll explain and if you don't get it, he'll explain again in easier terms. Before, I'd get help once and if I didn't get it I probably wouldn't get help again. I don't really like the punishments. A lot of people in there – I've had it once – but a lot of people get PASS [in school suspension] in there. I haven't seen anyone get suspended this year – only one last year for fighting.

I'll probably go to college – I might – depending on the career I want. I might take on where my dad went – pilot/air craft mechanic. Or I'll just join the army – mainly for the explosives and stuff. The army is pretty cool.

Mr. Camp, he's a nice teacher, friendly, funny at times. He can get a little overboard, too, when we do.

Lucas

Lucas is an 8th grader who had never been retained and seems to enjoy being in the alternative classroom. However, he struggles trying to fit in with the rest of the group. Lucas makes comments that others consider dumb and makes it known that he is not friends with many in the class. Lucas was polite but really struggled with the attitudes and the behaviors of the other students.

I guess most kids come out here because of grades and discipline. I like it because there's not a whole lot of kids and I can focus on work. Before, I would talk to other people and not get my work done. This place is for me. No

homework helps a lot – except next year we will have [homework]. I would stay here next year if I could.

I like that we only have one teacher to help and not as many kids. I like going outside – we talk and play football, can drink pop, eat, listen to music, take longer breaks. I don't like kids talking trash and annoying kids.

Mr. C is nice, strict, more helpful than other teachers. He cares about us. You can't really teach a kid if you don't care about them. I plan to go to college – to TU – so I can get a good job. I haven't really thought about what kind of job yet, but I want a good one that pays a lot of money.

David

David is a 6th grader who cried nearly every day at the regular school. He still fought going to school for the first week or so of TLC. Now he seems happy as he smiles all the time and has made friends, a best friend in Billy, and his grades are inching up.

I was having some trouble with classes, teachers – trouble in regular classes. I'm in here to get my grades up. I want to bring my grades up to go back to the 6th Grade Center and have a good time over there. I like it here because we – the 6th graders – get to do stuff to get our grades up so we can go back to regular classes and have the same grades.

I like the people here (big smile) because they're all so friendly and no one wants me out. I have some friends in here, especially Billy. I like that we can drink pop and play football, too. I like football, although I like skateboarding more. I don't like 7th hour – regular PE – bullies. This guy pinched me – an 8th grader.

I want to go to OSU, my favorite school – I root for them. I’ve always liked them. If I don’t make it into football or skateboarding, I’d like to be a mechanic – my dad’s a mechanic.

Mr. Camp

The TLC teacher has worked with troubled children at the Tulsa Boys Home and at the Rader Detention Center before taking this position just last year. Although a man of large stature, he is very soft-spoken with a slight speech impediment, but not severe enough to be troublesome. He is also an assistant football and wrestling coach.

Mr. Camp expects students to claim responsibility for their own actions. He states, “You have to be responsible for the things that you do, right or wrong. There are consequences and there are rewards.” Classroom rules also speak to responsibility for good decisions, reaching goals, and time management.

Mr. Camp aids the students by using several motivational techniques such as verbal praise and rewards. According to the class contract, rewards such as bonus points, computer time, and time outside the classroom can be earned by students for showing responsibility and meeting certain expectations. Mr. Camp also motivates students with phrases such as, “Good job,” “Great,” and “Excellent!” He was also observed giving high fives and pats on the back.

The expectation that students will be successful at something and take pride in it is also evident through the data that were collected. Mr. Camp states,

You have to give them situations where they can be successful. I’ve got to get it across to them that they have to look at themselves as being successful at what they do. Kicking the football is an example of that. Doesn’t have a lot to do with

schoolwork, but it has everything to do with confidence in one area, and then we can apply it in the class. Some students do not feel that confident in skills as far as school is concerned, so they don't know yet whether or not they can succeed.

Mr. Camp went on to say that he wants to see his students walk across the stage (graduate) and that that is the purpose of the program. According to the program description, TLC is set up for students who, in the past, have lacked motivation, self-esteem, and or need a little more guidance in adapting to school life.

Placement in the Alternative School

Out of the thirteen students surveyed, there were various reasons (see Table I) students listed for their placement. Some of the students had an accumulation of difficulties necessitating their placement, including poor grades, attendance problems, and behavioral and social issues.

Table I

Student Reasons for Alternative School Placement

Reasons for Placement	Yes	No
Academic Deficiencies	12	1
Poor Attendance	8	5
Behavioral Problems	4	9
Social Problems	9	4

Academic Deficiencies

Academic deficiencies are defined as two or more core subject grades below seventy percent and are identified in Table I as the greatest reason for students'

placement in the alternative school. Jon stated that he just never did his homework and that was the reason for his bad grades. Lori believed her problems for poor academics in her core classes were related to being made fun of and not fitting in. Jack said, "I didn't listen in class because I didn't really like the teachers or school in general." When asked why he disliked school, he responded, "It wasn't fun. Art mentioned that he used to get distracted in regular classes by being with so many other students. Sharon talked of not being able to keep up with the work because, "I would just slack off. If I didn't feel like doing something, I just didn't do it." Cale did not have a specific reason for failing except that he felt he didn't get enough help. Lucas said, "I would talk to other people and not get my work done. I couldn't focus." Karen agreed that it was difficult to focus with so many students in the class.

Poor Attendance

Poor student attendance is defined as being absent from the regular school day an average of one day every week and was also a reason for placement in the alternative school. Often, academic deficiencies were either a direct result of poor attendance or occurred simultaneously. For the most part, the reason given for poor attendance was that students simply did not like going to school. Some attendance issues were tied to behavior, but most issues stemmed from a social nature. Lori commented,

I didn't like going [to school] because people teased me and I didn't have any friends. I didn't really fit in there. Here, I'm doing better and have a lot of friends. I like to come to school every day.

David stated,

I just didn't like all the people and having to change classes and all the different teachers and stuff. I liked elementary where you just had one [teacher]. I would get so mad at my mom for making me go that sometimes she just didn't want the fight and let me stay home.

Behavioral Problems

Behavioral problems are defined as receiving one or more discipline referrals every two weeks and the third reason gathered from students for their placement in the alternative program. Art felt like he was doing fine in the regular school; however, he had difficulty refraining from fights with other students. He believed he could get along with most students but would not back down from another student's "trash talking." Jack added that his grades also suffered due to suspensions from fights "that others started." Sharon chose to blame her behavioral problems on the regular school as a whole, including her teachers. She commented,

I can't do regular school. I can't sit there long enough. I get into too many arguments and fights. Teachers don't like me and just, everything. It's like, this ain't going to work. I don't want to sit down. When I want to get something done, I don't want to wait on someone else to give me directions for it. I want to get it done and get it over with.

Spike would get into trouble for talking back and for just sitting and doing nothing. He likes to act tough and has a rough vocabulary, but is not the fighter type.

Social Problems

Social problems are defined as the inability to "fit in" with the regular student population, make and/or keep friends, and not get lost going from class to class. This is

the fourth characteristic for placement in the alternative school. Lori stated that she had always been a loner. She believed she could make friends if she chose to, but most of the time, in the past, she chose to be by herself. Stacie felt that all the name-calling she received at the regular school caused her not to have many friends. Sharon commented,

All my friends are older than me except for Karen. And I don't like those kids [regular school students]. Preps, preps, preps! They think they're all that. Or the little druggies who don't really do drugs, they just act like it so they can be cool. I think that's just stupid trying to be something you're not. I hate that and I hate the whole concept of people being better than you. So, its really like, I didn't have any friends there [regular school].

Jack stated, "I used to think I was strong and could beat everybody up. They all thought they were big and bad, so I had to prove myself." Art mentioned that he could never get to know everyone in all his classes in the regular school because there were so many students. Karen didn't like the large number of students at Boyle. She said people didn't accept her for who she was. Lucas stated that he didn't like kids talking trash and annoying him. He had a hard time focusing on his work because of those students. David said he just couldn't get used to middle school and all the kids and teachers. He felt like he didn't really have any friends before going to TLC.

Enrolling in Alternative School

Students were questioned regarding who was responsible for suggesting and ultimately deciding they should go to alternative school. Most students explained that the decision was mostly theirs. However, some of the students viewed the decision as a joint effort between themselves, school personnel and parents (see Table II).

Table II

Decision for alternative School Placement

Decision made by	Numbers of responses
Individual Student	7
Parent	5
School Counselor or Administrator	4

Student and Parental Decision

The majority of the students' decisions were made entirely with their parents or by themselves. Jon and his dad agreed to pursue another option because he was doing so poorly in regular school. Jon stated,

The counselor told me about TLC and gave me the application thing to take home and show it to my dad. He thought it would be good for me, so I started the next day. That was last year as a 7th grader and I've been here ever since.

Art knew he had three choices: live with his grandmother and attend another school, go with his mom and repeat seventh grade, or attend alternative school with hopes of making better grades. He stated,

The counselor suggested that I go to TLC and my dad thought it might be good for me. My brother should have been out here. Maybe he would be doing better and not in so much trouble. He's in jovie now. Anyway, I had heard about it and wanted to try. I love it. I'll probably stay in next year, too.

Sharon was very assertive in explaining, "I make my own decisions. I always have. I do what I do and what I want because that's just how it is."

School Counselor or Administrator

For Lori, the counselor of her regular school met with her mom and they both agreed an alternative school climate would best suit her needs. On the other hand, Jack mentioned,

Everyday I would go up to the school counselor and ask her about going to the alternative school. I said that if I didn't get to go to the alternative school, I would fail for sure, and they would have me back in the eighth grade again next year.

David's principal and counselor visited with his mom about the prospect, and his mom decided this would be the best situation for David. He said,

It was my mother's idea to stay in one class all day and get used to it [middle school]. I will probably stay here in 7th grade and go back to regular classes for 8th grade. In 8th grade I might get my grades up and keep up in regular classes.

When the school counselor informed Jack about alternative school, he became excited and quickly decided this was the best opportunity for him. However, Jack's parents were not as convinced as he was that this was the best avenue for him. Jack added,

My parents didn't really like it and I was like "I don't care if my parents like it or not." I decided I was going to go to it and my parents were like "okay." My dad didn't really care. My dad was like that's probably going to be good for you."

My mom didn't think I was going to get a good education out of it. She doesn't know anything. She doesn't know anything about alternative school and isn't around anyway.

Inside the Alternative School

Classroom rules are posted in the alternative school classroom. The dress code is the same as the regular school's, but Mr. Camp doesn't seem to hold them to it quite as regimented. Most dress much like other middle school students – blue jeans or shorts and t-shirts. Some of the shorts are shorter than most schools allow and some blouses reveal the girls' midsections. However, this seems to have very little bearing on the behavior of the students, so they are allowed to dress, for the most part, as they please. Their dress is not expensive, but it also does not distinguish them as being poor.

It is not uncommon to find students drinking pop or eating snacks in the middle of an assignment in this classroom. Lori said, "We get longer breaks and get to drink pop and eat candy, as long as we do our work." It does not seem to be an issue to the students, or to the teacher. Students are also allowed to listen to music while working, as long as the teacher is not talking. Mr. Camp reserves the right to listen to the music himself, without warning, to ensure that it is school appropriate.

Absenteeism in the alternative school is not much of a problem. Students know that that is one criteria for them remaining in the program, although not a major influence. If students are absent, there is typically a valid reason, aside from Sharon not being able to get a ride since she is now living outside of the district. "It's hard for me to get a ride since we moved. I've missed a lot, but Mr. Camp will help me get caught up." she stated.

Students are usually given the freedom to sit where they like and how they like as long as they work on their assignments and are not disruptive to other students. One day Karen was coloring on her hand, Jack had his feet propped on a desk, and Art was sitting

on the floor. Another day, Jon was working in a cubicle with his back to everyone else and Lucas was at a desk removed from the rest of the group at the other side of the room. The sixth grade students are almost always sitting at a table together as are Karen and Sharon. The rest of the group will sit in various areas of the room and near different students on any given day.

No matter where or how they are seated, the students appear to remain focused and on task the majority of the time. If a student or group of students does get too loud and off task, the others do not seem too bothered or distracted by it. If the whole group does get too excitable and disruptive, Mr. Camp takes them outside to the walking track to walk laps. Upon their return, most settle down and quickly returned to their tasks.

Discipline in the Alternative School

As mentioned previously, basic classroom rules are posted on the wall of the pre-fab. Behavioral consequences tend to depend on whether or not Mr. Camp has tolerated enough of that behavior. Sometimes a verbal reprimand is all that is necessary. Occasionally his voice is raised. The majority of the time, behavior does not seem to be an issue.

Students are often called to the teacher's desk individually to receive extra help because the other students tend to ridicule their classmates' comments or questions. A common response would be, "I don't know" or "Who cares?" followed by a more appropriate answer. Students also seek Mr. Camp's help at his desk where they can sit next to him and get one-on-one assistance.

One day, while students were busy on an assignment, Sean accused Jacob of stealing his mechanical pencil. Jacob responded, "I didn't take your freakin' pencil."

The teacher quickly approached the table where the boys were sitting and calmly began asking questions of Sean such as, “Where did you last have your pencil? What does it look like?” He then asked the entire class if anyone had seen the pencil in question. Several students responded that they had seen it on the floor or on the table or that another student had had one looking just like it. In the end, someone had borrowed it and accidentally carried it off to another table. Mr. Camp warned Jacob about reacting too harshly and cautioned Sean about invalid accusations. The students quickly returned to the task at hand as if nothing ever happened. The same day, Karen was heard saying to Art, “Trade me my seat back.” When the answer was no, she again said, “I want my seat,” in a slightly raised voice, but rather calm. When the response was still “no” she gave up and returned to her assignment.

Throwing objects seems to be a habit of some students. Some throw paper wads at each other. Some throw pencils or pens to other students. On one day, Spike threw a paper wad towards the trash can and missed. Mr. Camp commented, “Oh, you need to practice, Spike.” When he continued, he informed him, “That’s enough.” Later, Mr. Camp took a straw away from Jon. He reached into his pocket and pulled out another one. He argued that it was not hurting anything, but eventually put it away.

Mr. Camp continues to stress the importance of good listening skills and not talking while others are talking. Sometimes students carry on conversations with each other even while Mr. Camp is giving instructions. Mr. Camp simply stops talking until they realize what they are doing and cease their conversation. Most students can not sit still during instruction. Chairs are constantly being moved, scooted across the room - as

best they can on carpet, or tipped back on two legs. One can often hear burping noises, whining about assignments, or complaints of being too tired or having a headache.

The Alternative School Curriculum

The core subjects are taught daily and presented to each student according to the ability level of the student. Each day typically begins with math, followed by reading, writing, grammar, literature, and careers/leadership, and ends with an elective. Two to three times per week science and social studies take the place of writing. The day ends with PE, or another elective for some, which allows the teacher a planning period to prepare for the following day. Most of the students feel they are getting just as good an education in TLC as students in regular classes. The consensus is that they are just afforded more help and more time to do their work. Jon commented,

Some people think it's so easy out here, but it's really the same except there aren't so many kids. Some people started saying I was dumb cause I was going to the dumb program, but I didn't care after my grades started going up.

A few students believe the work is truly easier than before, but are not concerned about missing out on anything in particular. Lucas commented,

We don't really cover that much all at once. He doesn't overwhelm us with stuff. It's not that he just gives us a few things. We do a lot in one day, but he doesn't just throw it all on us.

Jack continued,

Like my math teacher [in regular school], she would give us 50 or 60 problems a day. Sometimes you would just have to do the even or odd ones, but it still was like long division or something that would take five minutes to do a problem.

And she would give us homework and we would spend the first thirty minutes or so grading it and another fifteen going over it. Sometimes you wouldn't get the assignment until five minutes before the bell rang and we had all this homework to do. That's what I like about alternative school, you don't have homework. Unless you're sick or something, you can take it home, but we don't ever have just regular homework.

Math

The math curriculum started out slow for all students and advanced depending on their ability to achieve success. Math is taught in different styles, depending on what best suits each individual student. Some of these methods included: daily contests, multiplication/division timed contests with rewards, multiplication/division bingo, consumer math in the workplace, and card games focusing on different mathematical strategies.

Mr. Camp admitted to me that math was not his strongest subject, so he had to get creative in order to get the students interested. Many lessons are focused on understanding consumer math, and utilized worksheets or newspaper classifieds. During one lesson, students used the classifieds to find ideal prices for furniture items listed on a worksheet and stay under a \$1500.00 budget. Then, with a \$60,000.00 budget, students had to locate at least three apartments or three houses they could purchase and list their reasons to purchase any of them. Students enjoyed working together on the project, although Cale and Spike chose to work independently.

Reading/Grammar

Mr. Camp took advantage of an available SRA reading program for his students. This gives them the ability to start at the appropriate reading level for them and work at their own pace as reading and comprehension improves. Although the students work independently on the assignment, they all share a portion of what they had read and are asked to answer one question aloud. On occasion, Mr. Camp will also read aloud to the class as they follow along, using a set of novels which had been borrowed from another teacher. They seem to enjoy listening to the teacher and, although they often get out of their seats or play with objects at their table, respectfully pay attention to the story.

Periodically, students are asked to read aloud or to take character parts for a play. Students seem to enjoy this exercise, yet there is some slight tension between the students over their lack of reading abilities. At one group setting, students were assigned reading parts, which allowed me to gain insight into which students were more or less proficient in their reading ability. Jack read well but mispronounced a few words, which caused some chuckles. Jon had a little difficulty reading, but all the other students continued to follow along with him. Mr. Camp took up the reading to try and move faster, but then allowed Lori to read. Lori read quite well, needing only a little help. Jacob was making hacking and clicking noises with his mouth the entire time, although no one seemed to mind. Kari was hard to hear, read slow, and her sentence structure was choppy. It was hard to understand what she was saying as her speech seemed slightly slurred. Stacie and Cale were reading ahead in the book so they did not read aloud. Students did not necessarily volunteer to read, but all did when they were called on. Sharon had not been called on to read and did not say a word, but did appear to stay right with the group.

Although grammar is not stressed as frequently as reading, students still devote time to improving their skills, as it is a problem area for many of them. Since not many of them are eager to write on their own, Mr. Camp gives them a choice of a few short topics to get them started. The students consistently write about themselves or family members and feel comfortable writing freely about the topic. Some are even comfortable having their writings read aloud by Mr. Camp or themselves. Throughout the year, students discuss, review, and are tested on the eight parts of speech. In addition, there is a focus on grammar mechanics such as capitalization, punctuation, and paragraph format. Daily contests are given to test mastery and games are also played with the parts of speech and punctuation.

Social Studies/Science

As stated previously, the social studies and science subjects are only taught a few times per week. Mr. Camp intends to add more hands on experiences and incorporate more field trips into these units in the future. The class had already visited the Oklahoma Aquarium last month as an introduction to one science unit. Mostly, students use the library and the Internet for various activities relating to particular lessons. It is hoped that in the following year the alternative school would have more accessibility to technology in their immediate classroom to provide more research development.

Careers/Leadership

Students in the alternative school have the opportunity to gain information about preparing for careers. Mr. Camp sets aside a time for students to discuss their futures, although some of them are still quite young and have not put much time into thinking about it. Sometimes such discussions are incorporated into the core subjects when those

“teachable moments” present themselves. Other times, meaningful discussions take place while walking around the track or tossing a ball on the field.

One chapter of a book they were reading dealt with the difficulty of a teenager giving birth and raising a baby. Sharon went into a lengthy list of problems in having to raise a child. Lori said that she would really like to have a baby. She then clarified her statement by saying that she did not want one until she turned twenty. She added that she was having too much fun as a teenager. Mr. Camp asked how many of them remembered their parents bailing them out of trouble, defending them when they were wrong, and tolerating their behavior. Most students realized their parents had done these things many times.

Another day students were watching the movie “Rudy.” There was some talking from the students during the movie but, for the most part, they were very attentive. Mr. Camp explained that not many people are like Rudy in that he “guts it out.” His point was that most people quit when they didn’t think they could make it. During the video, reference was made to Rudy being dedicated, determined, a goal setter, and having the ability to overcome obstacles. Students really appeared to be identifying with the underdog. They continued to ask Mr. Camp why Rudy didn’t just quit. Afterwards, students discussed goal setting by completing a handout about “Rudy.”

After the movie, students were assigned a partner in the class. They were asked to stand in front of the class and ask their partner questions such as, “What is your favorite subject?” The goal was to get them to stand in front of a group and carry on a conversation, which demanded more than yes or no answers. Students had difficulty talking in front of the rest of the class. They leaned on tables, fidgeted with their pockets,

and would not speak clearly. They seemed extremely uncomfortable carrying on a meaningful dialogue in front of a group. Students were asked to talk directly to their partners and not to look down at the floor. Mr. Camp stated that the students were in this class because they had trouble communicating with other people. The teacher reminded students that the exercise was similar to how they would prepare to interview for jobs. Employers would ask questions and expect complete answers and eye contact. These students, however, did not seem interested in practicing this skill.

Students gathered around the tables in a circle and read a magazine article about “77 Ways to Say No to Weed and Still Be Cool.” Each student took a turn reading one of the listed ways with some snickering, but also with a strong emphasis on saying “no.” They also read an article on teen music star Brittany Spears. The students described her using comments like “slut” and “hottie.” The article was about how Brittany was actually very shy. Students were then asked to stand up and say something about themselves while being serious. Jack shared that he wanted to be a fireman and Art said he was going to be a framer like his dad. David admitted that he was going to be a professional skateboarder.

During another assignment, students were asked to answer two questions written on the board. The first was “If you could be either the most attractive, most athletic, or the smartest kid in school, which would you choose and why?” The second was “Whenever I am mad or upset at my parents, I try to get back at them by...” These questions promoted strong discussion in the class without the students agreeing on any of their answers.

Student Assignments

Some students in the alternative school enjoy occasional group activities, but most seek individual help from the teacher. Since they never have homework, many students are motivated to complete assignments in class. However, some students only do enough problems to prove their mastery of the task. Mr. Camp admitted that if he only required the students to do half a page, they would tend to relax and only complete half of the required half. Since the students agreed it was only fair for Mr. Camp to require appropriate effort out of them, if they successfully completed half of the assignment with acceptable accuracy, they were allowed to move on to master the next assignment. Mr. Camp acknowledged that this style of instruction has been largely successful for both him and the students.

Sharon shared with me that she believed that students could get their work done better in the alternative school because they were allowed to move at their own pace. She stated,

If you need certain things, you can get them here. Like Jack, he has ADHD. In regular school, he would have been kicked out like the first week. He's been in a lot of trouble. So have I. But in here you have more chances because Mr. C looks at everybody's needs and abilities and stuff. He does stuff according to each person, not like we're all the same. It's not like if you do something twice, you're out. That's what's so different.

Lucas added, "When I came here [alternative school], they were working a little bit slower, but on the same things; which kind of got me to understand it more."

Although the pace of work allows most students to accomplish more, Karen insisted that

the size of the class allows for fewer distractions. She stated, “It makes me work better when there’s not so many people. I can focus more and not worry about everyone else.”

Most of the class work is loosely structured. There is often no set time for completion of an assignment. Distractions are allowed, but encouragement is continuous for students to refocus their efforts on their tasks. If students struggle with understanding the directions of the assignment, there is no pressure to force them into completion of their work. Jack stated,

TLC is cool because there’s no homework and it is easier for me. Those teachers’d just talk about it [the work] for like 5 seconds. “OK, we’re doing long division 1 through 20” and I couldn’t do it very well so I just didn’t do it. Here, Mr. C teaches you and spends time with you until you get it. He gives you time to work and stuff so you can get it done in class. It’s cool.

One day, Art commented that it was beginning to rain. Spike replied, “It’s raining?” and proceeded to move from his table to the window while the class was working on an assignment. The distraction was not extremely disruptive to the class, but Mr. Camp could detect the distraction took place because students were not understanding their assignment. Other students simply did not bother doing it although they were not necessarily misbehaving. Mr. Camp then went to the front of the room and tried to explain the assignment again in different terms.

Most students seem to work best while a variety of activities are taking place with constant noises around them. Some listen to music, some draw pictures on paper or on themselves, and others get up and walk around the room before returning to work at their

table. Throughout all the activity and noise, the students' behavior is good and respectful toward each other and the teacher.

One day the students were working on a scavenger hunt with a partner. They had to find ten different items from the newspaper. The items were listed on a handout. The winning team was to win a free soda. The students were really competing to win. Some would lose their cool and throw their newspapers all over the floor. Others would get agitated and call their partners names. Students did not appear to really know why they were doing the scavenger hunt other than for the chance to win a pop. When Jack and Lucas were not allowed to use one of their items, they threw their poster on the floor and said, "This sucks!" However, they kept looking for more answers in the paper. The competition was exciting, but frustrating to some. When the students realized that participation was the main requirement for their assignment, they tended to give more effort.

What Students Enjoy Most

Six of the at risk students stated that the best part about the alternative school was that there were fewer students. The smaller class size helped these students focus on schoolwork and worry less about pressure from peers.

Table III

Students' Favorite Aspect of Alternative School

The best part of alternative school	Number of students responding
Small class size/fewer students	6
The activities	2

The teacher	1
The pace/No homework	6

Small class size

Jon and Jack enjoyed the smaller class because they got more help. Jack stated

Since it's so small out here, it's easier because there's not as many kids and you get more help. It's not that the work is so much easier, but since you get more help, that makes it easier.

Lori and Art liked the fact that all the students could get to know each other in a small class. Art said, "There's no way you could get to know everyone in all your classes in there [Boyle]." Sharon stated, "When there aren't as many people and you don't have to go to seven classes, you have more time on your work."

The Pace/No Homework

Cale mentioned that the pace of the class was slower and that Mr. Camp would explain things until he understood them. He stated, "The work seems easier because we go slower." The fact that there was no homework was popular with Jon, Jack, Karen, and Lucas. Jack stated, "Because he gives you time in class to work, there is no homework." Lucas said, "No homework helps a lot."

The activities

Cale and David both enjoyed the alternative school best because of the activities involved. Cale stated,

We get a bunch of privileges like computers, pop, junk food, and time outside.

We get to go outside and play football, golf, or just hang out and talk. We get to do some fun projects, too, like hands on kinds of stuff. That's cool.

The teacher

Finally, Lucas felt one of the best things about alternative school was Mr. Camp.

Mr. C is nice, strict, more helpful than other teachers. He really cares about us.

You can't teach a kid if you don't care about them. He explains things in a way that we can understand. I don't think I would be making decent grades if it weren't for him.

What Students Enjoy Least

The at-risk students seemed to have a difficult time coming up with what they considered negative aspects about the alternative school as they were all relatively happy to be there. The most common answer, with five students agreeing, was that they did not like certain students in the class (see Table IV).

Table IV

Students' Least Favorite Aspect Regarding Alternative School

Worst part of alternative school	Number of students responding
The students in the class	6
Miss their friends	5
No response	2

The students in the class

Many of the students in the alternative school believed that the worst part about the school was the other students in the class. Lori felt it was particularly the boys in the class who created a poor environment. She stated, “They are mouthy. They are rude and stuff.” Stacie concurred, “The way some of them talk, like their language and stuff just isn’t right.” Lucas added,

Some of them [other students] are just stupid. I don’t want to be mean or anything, but they really are. They get us all in trouble by doing stupid stuff. Sometimes we don’t get to go outside because Spike was cussing or having a fit. Jared just lies all the time. He throws things at people or takes stuff and lies about it. He calls people names, too and it really makes me mad. I wish he would go back [to Boyle].

Cale stated, “I sort of get along with the others in TLC – we argue and bicker a lot.” Jack commented,

There’s this one kid in here who thinks he’s all that and is real annoying. Besides that, everyone is pretty cool. Since it’s just us, nobody thinks they’re big and bad really. Like I used to think I was strong and could beat everybody up. I still could, I just don’t really want to anymore.

Miss their friends

Several students reported that they miss getting to see their friends at lunch and in the hall. “Some of my friends aren’t here, and I miss them,” said Karen. Lucas added,

We don't have 8th grade lunch. I'd like to eat with 8th graders. I see them sometimes when we go in for breaks, but it's not the same. That would be cool if we could hang out with our friends at lunch and still be in TLC.

Jon and Lori both agreed that they don't get to see their friends in regular classes as much as they would like.

No responses

Neither Art nor David could think of anything they truly disliked about the alternative school. Art commented that he didn't like the desks they had had before, but now they had tables that allowed them to work more in groups. David said, "I don't know if I would change anything. I like it just the way it is."

Changes in the Regular School Environment

The at-risk students were asked if there were any changes that could have been made in the regular school that would have allowed them to be more successful. Responses ranged from a later start time to fewer classes (see Table V). Most students mentioned more than one change that would have been beneficial to them. Virtually all students were quick to stress that there were areas of the regular school environment that made it difficult for each of them to be successful.

Table V

Changes Believed Necessary in the Regular School

Changes needed in the regular school	Number of responses
Less changing of classes (fewer classes)	5
Fewer people	3
Teachers to help more	3

Less or no homework	3
Longer breaks	2
Later start time	1
No tardies	1

Less changing of classes

The regular middle school class schedule is based on a seven period day with five minutes between classes. Lori and Karen both had a concern with the amount of times they had to change classes. The lack of changing classes at all was one of the main reasons Karen enjoyed the alternative school so much. She stated, “It would be better if they didn’t have seven teachers and seven classes.” Lori concurred that the changing of classes with only a short period of passing time was extremely stressful. The passing time and the crowds alone were a complete distraction that made refocusing on their schoolwork a difficult task. Cale agreed,

We come out here to get away from changing classes. It’s a lot easier than switching all the classes and going to your locker and all that. I would probably end all the switching of classes from one class to another if I change anything.

David’s comment was, “It’s hard with seven different teachers. Fewer teachers would be better.”

Fewer people

A typical classroom in the regular middle school contains approximately 25 to 30 students. Three students were adamant that there were too many students in the regular

school, although they all still maintained friendships in the regular school. Jon commented,

Nobody wants to go back to regular school because it's too crowded in there. I like to see my friends in there at break times and stuff, but I don't want to stay in there too long.

Art and Sharon agreed that there were just too many people in the halls and in the classes although they enjoyed seeing their friend in the regular school during breaks and at lunch.

Teachers to help more

Several students expressed concern that teachers in the regular school environment did not offer enough assistance and did not seem to care about the students and their success. Lori stated, "Mr. Camp is really nice. He really cares about us and wants us to be successful. I like that there is only one teacher." Art added, "Those teachers would only show me stuff one time and I wouldn't get it, but Mr. Camp shows me as much as I need. They need to explain stuff better." Karen also felt that teachers did not offer enough help in the regular classes. She shared,

The teachers need to comprehend the students more. I just want them to understand the students and if they need help or something. They don't have to get mad. They don't really get mad, but you know how they kind of get frustrated if you keep asking them. I probably would too if I was the teacher, but they need to comprehend. Some teachers have this attitude and they do stereotype students. They really do by the way they dress or who they see them with or how their older brothers or sisters have been and stuff. I've had some really good teachers that actually changed my life because they did something for me and they reached

out. But some of them, they can make or break you. They play favorites and I just don't like that. I know there's not that many terrible teachers, but they need to be more careful when they hire them.

Less or no homework

Jon felt that teachers made learning more difficult because of the amount of homework required of him. Although he admitted he knew the teachers were trying to educate him, he sometimes felt overwhelmed because of the extra work involved. Jon commented,

I think it's real good to try to teach them [students]. I just don't think they should cram all that work down them. I mean you get the point without having to do a hundred problems. I mean, you know what it is and you can do it. I would do as many as I had time to do. The thing is, homework is stupid. I don't get the point of it. You go to school, work all day at school and then you go home and have to do more schoolwork at home. I don't want to do schoolwork at home – it's for school. I don't see the point. If they would give us time to do it in class where there is not as much...where it is quieter. At home, you just don't want to do homework because you are sick of school all day and you come home to rest, but you have more homework. Stupid.

Karen and Cale both felt there should be no homework required in school.

Longer breaks

Lori and Lucas both wished for longer breaks in the regular school. Lori stated, "It's too hard to get from class to class, go to the bathroom, get a drink and stuff in five minutes. We need more time to wind down from class." Lucas added,

If I could change anything about the regular school it would be shorter hours and longer breaks. I like going outside to walk or talk between classes. It's more relaxing and helps us focus more when we do go back to class.

Later start time

Students in the regular middle school begin their day at 8:05am. Sharon was the only student who mentioned wanting to start school at a later time. She said, "I would like a later start time, like around 9:00. I'm not very awake in the mornings, and it would help me to get going better."

No tardies

Lori's frustration in the regular school had a lot to do with feeling rushed and not being able to get to class on time. She also disliked it being counted against her. She accumulated many tardies in that environment which added undue stress to an already stressful middle school experience.

Students Classified as At-Risk

Students were also questioned about their understanding of what it meant to be "at-risk." Several of the students had no idea what the terminology meant and guessed that I was discussing students being in potential danger or being involved in fights. "You mean like somebody out to get somebody else?" asked Jack. Although all of the students in the alternative school were placed there because they were considered at-risk of failure and possibly dropping out at a later date, the majority of them believed they were not at-risk (see Table VI).

Table VI

Perceptions of Students Being Labeled At-Risk

Students academic perceptions	Number of student responses
Students at-risk of dropping out	1
Students not at-risk of dropping out	11
Students unsure of their academic future	1

Students at-risk of dropping out

Karen, who was just held back in eighth grade and wanted to return to the regular school, was the only student who felt she was truly at-risk. She wasn't too interested in finishing school and was content with becoming a tattoo artist or body piercer. She said, "I probably am what you would call 'at-risk' because I'm probably not going to make it here or anywhere. I'm just buying time right now."

Students not at-risk of dropping out

The majority of the students in the alternative school voiced strong opinions about their desire to remain in school and even pursue higher degrees. Stacie very deliberately stated,

I'm not going to fail. I'm just not. I'm too smart to fail. I may not be doing as good as others, but I'm not going to let myself fail. And there's no way I'm going to drop out – I'm not stupid. I know I need an education to get anywhere.

Lucas also commented,

I don't care – they can call me whatever they want. I know me and what I can and can't do. I couldn't drop out if I wanted to, and I don't really want to. I couldn't get a job or anything if I did. Besides, my dad would kill me.

Lori simply stated, "I don't want to [drop out]. I like school – now." Art was just as up front when he responded, "I'm not a dropout. I'm going to learn and become somebody." Cale added, "I'm not failing and I'm not going to drop out, period."

Jack and Sharon spoke with mixed emotions about being labeled at-risk. They both knew they had put themselves in compromising positions in their academics, but they also were bothered that people would think of them as potential dropouts. Jack responded, "I'm at-risk for probably nothing. I don't think I'm at-risk so why should anyone else?" Sharon joined in,

I don't think that I'm at-risk because I can do just about anything I want to do.

Like, if I say I'm going to do something, I do it. And I don't think I'm putting myself at-risk or whatever. I may want to quit some things, but I don't usually. I can do pretty much whatever I want. I'm not at-risk of anything.

Students unsure of their academic future

Jon, on the other hand, did not really understand what it meant to be at-risk or he just could not foresee his future in education. He maintained that his poor reading ability was keeping him from being successful in school – regular or alternative.

Connection of the Alternative School to the Regular School

The at-risk students in the alternative school were also asked what type of setting would be best for an alternative school. They were given three choices. The first choice was a school-within-a-school, where students were enrolled in the regular school and

would attend an alternative classroom only a couple of hours a day as needed. They would be a part of all the functions that took place within the regular school environment. The second option was to remain the same. The alternative school would have its own classroom and teacher but would continue to share some of the facilities with the regular school in which they were located. The third option would be to have a totally separate facility with no attachments at all to the regular school. Students' choices are shown on Table VII.

Table VII

Students' Choices of Preferred Alternative Schools

Type of Alternative School Preferred	Number of student responses
School-within-a-school	1
Remain the same with partial attachment	8
Totally separate facility	4

School-within-a-school

School-within-a-school is understood to be a smaller educational unit with a separate educational program, its own staff and students, and its own budget, but within the walls of a larger school. Jon was the only at-risk student who was more interested in a school-within-a-school alternative program. His concern was with the friends and activities that would make school more interesting. He explained,

It would be pretty cool if it was in the school. I think it would be neat like that because you wouldn't be out by yourself and stuff. You could be around other people and hear other classes doing stuff. Not so boring and alone like.

Remain the same with partial attachment

Most of the students were convinced that the present situation for an alternative program was the ideal one. Lucas was concerned that a totally separate school might lack certain facilities that the alternative school students enjoy, i.e., a gym. Stacie was more comfortable being close to the regular school building although not a true part of it. She stated, "I guess I like it like it is now. We're not too far away from the school, but then we're not like right in the middle of it either." Being in a totally separate facility was discouraging to Jack because, "I guess I don't want to be completely separate and feel secluded or something. It's great just the way it is." Cale and Lori agreed that this was the perfect arrangement for them.

Totally separate facility

Four students were decisively for creating an alternative program completely separate from the regular school environment. Art complained,

We don't even have our own bathrooms. No, I would rather have it separate. Completely. It's just...I would like to have our own buses and our own bathrooms. Inside, we would have to use everything they use. At a different school we could have our own fridge, pop machine, or even little kitchen to make stuff in. That would be cool.

David felt that remaining close to the regular school environment created too many opportunities for students to misbehave.

If it's inside, the people that got in trouble all the time would probably still get into fights because they would be around those people. And if it was the same, it probably wouldn't be much like whenever they wanted to go to the bathroom...well, they say they want to go to the bathroom but they roam around the halls instead. Sometimes they get in trouble and then they really have to go to the bathroom later and can't.

Sharon and Karen were both for moving to a separate location because they felt they were often treated as second-class individuals. Each girl had experienced an occasion where they were treated poorly either from a teacher or a student only because they happened to be in the alternative school. Karen stated,

I think it should be in a separate building because some of the kids like to tease us when we go around to catch the bus because we are in alternative school. That way we would have our own bathroom and we wouldn't have to walk through the school to go.

Sharon continued,

I think it should be separate because we don't get to do things like everybody else. Like one time I missed the bus and went inside the school to use the phone. The lady in there said, "You aren't supposed to be in here." I'm not a leper, you know. People just look at us like we're so different from the other kids. It's not right.

Attitudes

As the various interviews and observations confirmed, the attitude of the teacher at TLC is a big factor in the success the students feel. Jon and Lori both stated that Mr.

Camp was different than teachers at their previous traditional middle school. As Jon and Lori both inferred, the teacher seemed to care more and was willing to work with them on a more personal basis. Barr and Parrett (2003) supported these comments when they stated, “Because teachers choose to participate in alternative schools, students are surrounded with adults who want to work with them, assist them, and support them. These adults also hold high expectations for student learning.” (p. 132)

During the preliminary study that was conducted in the TLC program in the spring of 2005, the teacher, the counselors, and the building principal were interviewed to get their opinions of their alternative middle school students. The statements made by these professionals seem to be very similar to the perceptions of students. This similarity in comments adds validity to the statements made by students when they indicated their alternative school teacher really understood them and believed in them.

Comments about students

- “Alternative school students are so great to work with. They (for the most part) work harder than any of the students at the traditional middle school where I worked before.”
- “Many of these kids have low self-esteem. Something bad has happened to them at the big school and they need to make a change.”
- “These kids are not stupid. They have some deficits in their skills, and are often immature, but they’re not stupid.”
- “Brave, that’s how I would describe these students. First, you’ve got a reputation to overcome and the kids know it. Second, it’s just hard to move to middle school anyway, yet these kids are willing and brave enough to sit there

and know that whatever they're doing isn't working. They're brave enough to say, 'I need to make a change.'”

Comments about teachers

- “Alternative school teachers need to have lots of patience and a whole lot of love. The three top things I stick with are: respect, attitude, and try.”
- Teaching alternative school isn't for all teachers.
- An alternative school teacher must have energy and enthusiasm. They have the ability to know that something is not working for their students and are quick on their feet and change it.

Student Relationships

Many of the students in TLC have a common problem – peer interaction and relationships. During the interviews with students, it was common to hear that they had been in some trouble at their old school, fighting, disrupting class, not feeling they fit into the school in general.

There does not seem to be much of an emphasis placed on students establishing relationships with each other in the alternative school. However, some of the students are in TLC because they had had social difficulties in the regular school. Lori commented,

I like that it is small and you can know everybody. Although I have friends out here, I also have some in the regular school, and I do stuff with both of them. We talk on the phone and go to the movies.

The single classroom and the low number of students promotes some interaction between the students, although not always positive interaction. The class was observed discussing birthmarks and scars that take away from personal appearance. Comments were made as to why anyone would want to be with someone with those types of marks and defects.

The conversation then turned to people with odd names that were considered silly or stupid. However, it became obvious to me as a researcher that students' proximity to each other created a bond.

Once, Sharon and Stacie were overheard carrying on a conversation about drugs and people they knew who were involved with drugs. Sharon complained that Jon pierced his ear so he would be like Jack. She said that Jon had called Jack a "faggot" because of the way he dressed (baggy clothes, piercings, dyed hair), but then Jon began to dress like Jack.

Another day, students were all playing board games with each other. Karen, Jon, and Art were all playing Monopoly. Lucas, Cale, and Lori were playing the game of Life together. Cooperation was amazing between students. These groups of students usually had little to do with each other. However, there was very little pressure to try and impress others.

Art actually feels more successful in the alternative school because of a lack of relationships. He stated, "I don't have many friends in here, so I don't have to worry about talking and getting distracted." Lori agreed with Art and added her attitude towards others had improved by being in the alternative school. She stated,

I mean when I was in regular school, I really didn't talk to anybody. I was quiet and I would stay by myself. I try to stay by myself. I have friends that sit by me and stuff, but other than that, I sat by myself. But now, I can sit by anybody. Now, I don't care what they think. If they don't want to be my friend, that's okay.

Billy added that he, too, had benefited by the improvement of his social skills while in the alternative school. He expressed that he felt more comfortable going back to the regular school because of what he had learned from being in TLC. Jack describes how he perceives his experience at Boyle, in TLC, and with his peers.

I came to TLC because I was getting into trouble and I got F's in almost every class. It's obviously working because now I have almost all A's. I've never gotten straight A's before. I'm pretty proud of myself. My parents are excited about my grades. That's how I got my new board.

Sometimes you think the work is easier here. It was pretty hard at my old school, I think because of the teachers. Mr. C don't run me down and get me in trouble for no reason. Like last year, my teacher got me in trouble for no reason because he didn't like me and he made up an excuse and it was just stupid. My math teacher made us write all these notes for the whole entire hour and then we had the whole days worth of homework, too. I didn't like her. We don't have homework here.

When people ask me where I go to school, I say Boyle in the TLC program. I'm not ashamed of it. If they ask what is TLC, I say it's an alternative school where you get more help and get to listen to music, work on computers and have fun.

I like to just hang out and walk around and talk to my friends. I probably have as many friends in here as in the regular school so it works out. When Mr. C lets us go outside – which is almost every day – we play football or golf or just walk around and talk. I like that.

Some of the other students expressed similar attitudes about their peer's relationships at the middle school. The following are comments about peer relationships:

- “I like that TLC is small and you can know everybody. I have friends who are true friends. We talk on the phone and go to movies together. I didn't fit in at my old school.”
- “A lot of the people at my other school were like – they weren't really good people, they were kind of trouble makers. I was pretty popular, so everything I did everyone knew about. If I go back, I bet different people from the different groups like skaters, preps, and stuff will want to hang out with me.”
- “Most of the kids know each other here and they are friends and stuff.”
- “I have more friends in general here. It's just really cool here cause everybody wants to be your friend sort of thing.”
- “There are kids here that bug you just like my old school. That happens everywhere. I just ignore them and go talk to other people.”
- “Some of my friends think an alternative school is a school for dumb or retarded kids. I used to think the same thing before I came here. You almost have to come here to understand how great it is and how good it is for some students.”

Summary

This chapter began with an introduction of how the research study results would be reported. The reader was given a description of the studied alternative school, both the physical structure and its contents. In addition, a vivid description of the at-risk students was given, describing their appearance, age, and personality.

In order to get a holistic picture of the students' perceptions of attending an alternative middle school, a narrative format was required. The words of the students were used to describe how they perceived their school experience. The culture was best defined and conveyed through the students' interaction among themselves. This was presented through tables throughout the chapter that classified student's beliefs, feelings, values and their knowledge about education and how it applied to them.

Students in the alternative school continued to stress that they simply wanted to be treated like regular students. Most of them readily admitted they had problems beyond their control, which necessitated them having a different learning environment. Although the group of at-risk students rarely agreed on how they could best be served in an alternative school, they did agree that they all wanted to learn and improve themselves. Chapter V will include a more in-depth analysis of the data and incorporate Mary Douglas's Grid and Group Typology.

Chapter V

DATA ANALYSIS

The purpose of this study was to describe the culture of an alternative school environment at the middle school level. In an effort to get a holistic picture of the students' perceptions and roles in their environment, a mini-ethnographic approach was utilized. The study was limited to one alternative school program; however, it provided adequate information to accurately assess the culture. The words of the students described their experience and perceptions as alternative middle school students and aided in understanding the goals and values of students in an at-risk culture.

Barr and Parrett (2001) stated that as young adolescents begin to differentiate themselves from their own families and define their own individual identities, they need increased contact with adult role models who can represent a variety of potential choices for students. At the same time, students' preoccupation with acceptance by their peers reflects their need to develop confidence in interacting with a wide range of other students.

The culture of any group or organization actually defines and sets parameters for that particular community. It includes values, beliefs, goals, and even the social habits of the members. Hargreaves (1994) describes culture as "the lens through which participants view themselves and the world." School culture is comprised of unwritten rules and traditions, norms, and expectations that permeate everything: the way people act, how they dress, what they talk about, whether they seek out others for help or don't, and how

they feel about themselves and others (Deal & Peterson, 1999). A classroom can also have its own culture, which is determined by the behaviors, relationships and interactions of the individual group members. Douglas's typology of grid and group provides an explanation for behaviors and interactions in such a setting and is what was used to analyze data.

Analyzing the Data

Table VIII summarizes focused observations (domain analysis), relationships within the observations (taxonomic analysis), meanings of the relationships (componential analysis), and conclusions drawn upon those meanings. The information gathered during the course of data collection allowed the researcher to make conclusions and offer further recommendations for study in the following chapter.

Table VIII

Data Analysis

Domain Analysis	Taxonomic Analysis	Componential Analysis	Conclusion
The design of the classroom – equipment, lighting, and structure	Students spent some time complaining of needs not being met.	Students felt inferior and excluded from activities of other students.	Better recognition for students would create a pride in their school environment.
Location and setting of the alternative school	Sharing facilities with the regular school was ideal for most students.	Some students desired their own identity in their own program.	The alternative school should be separate, although adequate supplies and facilities are necessary in creating a positive learning environment.
Students enrolled in the alternative program	Students were intimidated and frustrated by disruptive students.	Disruptive students impede and jeopardize the progress of students	The alternative school is best suited for students struggling in a

		expecting a quality education.	traditional school, but not for those with behavior issues.
Domain Analysis	Taxonomic Analysis	Componential Analysis	Conclusion
The curriculum	Students had poor study habits, shorter attention spans, failed to complete assignments, and most struggled with academics.	The curriculum was designed to address certain academic needs. The ultimate objective was to offer some life-skills and give students a reason to come to school.	TLC is a different type of school setting for students with different types of needs. Students are able to re-enter the regular school when deemed ready.
Academic achievement	Almost all students enjoyed the slower pace offered in the alternative school.	When students were allowed to work at their own pace, they felt they were treated with more dignity.	Most students will excel and even give more effort when they receive individual attention and instruction.
Student goals	Most students did not believe they were at-risk. They all believed their future goals remained intact.	Students' ages and academic abilities were creating roadblocks in their school expectations.	The alternative middle school student may have unrealistic goals of graduation and career opportunities.
The alternative school teacher	Students were more attentive when the instruction related to them and their needs, when they were continuously encouraged, when they were challenged, or when they were rewarded.	The majority of students had been placed in the alternative school because they felt the school work was no longer important. The alternative school instruction gave a purpose for their efforts.	The alternative school student will benefit most from a teacher that makes instruction exciting and applicable to the student.
The at-risk student	Students were at different levels of maturity, academics, and self-esteem.	The alternative school was a conglomeration of personalities of students with a variety of social or other issues.	The one common denominator is that alternative school students are unique in their needs, their beliefs, and their desires.

In regards to classroom design, many students felt their needs were not being met due to restroom and drinking facilities not being readily available. Even though TLC students ate lunch with students from the regular school, they still felt excluded and “out of the loop.” Sharing facilities and certain areas, such as the cafeteria and gymnasium, was ideal for most alternative students, although a few wished to have all the same amenities all their own.

Alternative school students are not allowed to have major discipline issues and remain in the program. However, minor class disruptions are a common occurrence and frustrate many classmates struggling to make the most of their TLC experience.

TLC students are governed by the same general curriculum standard as their peers in the regular school. However, due to poor study habits and short attention spans, these students are offered a modified curriculum that is self-paced, less in depth, and enriched with a life-skills program. Students feel they are treated with dignity and tend to give more effort as they are showered with individual attention and instruction.

The academic goals of most TLC students are much the same as those of regular middle school students. They believe they can and will continue into high school and graduate with their classmates. They do not view themselves as at-risk of academic failure, nor do they have any plans to drop out of school. Those students who were already a grade level behind their peers and still struggling academically, may not realize the hurdles standing between them and their educational and career goals.

The alternative school teacher plays an important role in the success of the alternative school student. Mr. Camp constantly relates the subject matter to individual

interests and needs, while challenging and encouraging his students to achieve. When at-risk students are able to apply the curriculum to real life experiences, the instruction is much more beneficial to them.

The at-risk students in TLC are all on different levels academically, emotionally, socially, and physically. They all come to the program with a variety of personalities, defense mechanisms, and other issues typical of middle school students. What they all have in common, however, is the need to experience a degree of success, a belief that they just are who they are, and a desire to be somebody special.

During grid and group analysis of the data, two areas of environment were considered: 1) physical & 2) social/emotional. This particular class of alternative school students is designated as an Individualist Environment (low-grid, low-group) according to the boundaries set by Douglas. The cultural bias of this quadrant is referred to as “Individualism,” which encourages risk taking and competition in order to make the most of individual opportunities. In this type of environment, individual experiences and relationships are not bound by specific rules or standards and little value is placed on group survival.

Grid Considerations

Students’ perceptions in the areas of physical and social/emotional environment within the context of Douglas’s (1982) grid typology were analyzed.

Low-grid

TLC has a low-grid structure. Douglas (1982) contends the general characteristics of a low-grid environment are the high value of autonomy, few rules and role distinctions, and competitive negotiating. In TLC, students are often found negotiating with the teacher

on assignments, seating arrangements, and free time activities. For example, Jon was overheard bargaining with Mr. Camp to play a computer game if he got all the problems right on the even problems of the math assignment rather than doing all the problems. Lucas made a deal with Mr. Camp that he be allowed to rejoin the group if he stayed in his seat and completed his work for the entire morning.

Classroom rules are few, are agreed upon by the students, and enforcement of those rules is rather lax at times. I was informed that the students in TLC all sat down during the first week of school and developed the rules of the class, with direction from Mr. Camp. One day, Sharon came in late displaying an unpleasant attitude toward the entire group. She made a comment to Mr. Camp that was disrespectful and should have gotten her In School Intervention. Instead, he took her aside for a talk and dismissed the whole incident. This informal communication system between student and teacher also reinforces the low-grid environment.

Defined roles are almost non-existent in this school. Few formal boundaries exist between student and teacher as his respect is gained through actions rather than from his title. For example, many of the students refer to Mr. Camp as “Mr. C” or “Coach” because he and they are comfortable with these titles. Even though formal interactions rarely take place, the students acknowledge their teacher’s concern for them and respect is granted in return. Sharon said about Mr. Camp, “A teacher has to have a lot of patience to deal with kids like us and he’s got it.” Billy added, “He’s not like the other teachers.” Lucas shared, “Mr. C is nice, strict, more helpful than other teachers. He really cares about us. You can’t teach a kid if you don’t care about them.”

The students all view each other as individuals on equal ground, all after the same goal of graduating, but on their own terms. David is enjoying TLC, but working hard so he can return to the regular school. Jack sees himself as staying in an alternative setting as long as possible before continuing on to graduation. They all know why they are in alternative school, choose to remain, but are unique to each other.

Physical culture

The classroom is located on the grounds of Boyle Middle School but in a pre-fabricated building detached from the main school. Three grade levels are represented in this classroom and the students are not segregated by age or ability. All students have a voice in nearly all aspects of the classroom, from room arrangement to rules and procedures, typical of a low-grid environment. For example, several students voiced their dislike for the typical student desk in the classroom because they were “uncomfortable.” When the opportunity arose to replace most of the desks with round tables from the library, the students and Mr. Camp agreed it would suit their purpose. Art mentioned, “I didn’t like the desks we had at first, but now we have tables and we can do more group work.”

The curriculum is designated by the district as these students are held to the same standards of accountability as students in the regular school. However, a more individualized approach is utilized as learning styles are taken into consideration. Students who work best with music are allowed to listen to a headset as long as it does not interfere with other students. Students are also allowed to move to a secluded corner of the room, sit on the floor, or even go outside to work. At any given time, two to five different assignments may be given according to the subject and ability of particular students. One

morning, Jack and Jon were working in separate study carrels in the back of the room, Spike was at a student desk in the front corner of the room, Sharon was listening to music from her CD player, Art was on the computer, and the other students were seated at tables. All students were on task working on an assignment unique to them.

Individual student success is rewarded and acknowledged openly as friendly peer competition is often used as motivation. One day during a discussion, the assassination of President Lincoln came up but the details were rather sketchy for the students. Mr. Camp offered a candy bar to the first person to name the person who shot the president. Many guesses were blurted out, but several students set out on a search for the correct answer, using history books, encyclopedias, etc. Cale finally prevailed as winner and was given his reward as the entire class learned a piece of history. Students are not required to complete every assignment as long as they can demonstrate mastery of the concept as noted previously in an exchange between Jon and Mr. Camp.

No homework is required of these alternative school students. Although the students enjoy this aspect of the program, some might question its appropriateness. Proponents of homework maintain that the practice leads to better retention of knowledge, increased understanding, better study habits, better self-discipline, and better time management. Opponents of homework express concern regarding fatigue, lack of academic satisfaction, and loss of interest. For poor, at-risk, and other low-performing students, concerns over homework are often even more intense. A primary reason for students' failure in a traditional school, dropping out, or transferring to alternative schools is often related to a failure to complete homework (Bar & Parrett, 2003).

Social/Emotional Culture

In TLC, relationships are negotiated and change regularly. Because of the high degree of autonomy, students typically only work together and form a temporary bond when it is of benefit to them, such as when small groups are competing with each other for a reward. Some of the friendships formed in this program remain at school only and do not carry over to life outside of school. For those, it's a relationship of convenience. Jon stated, "I get along with most everybody in here, but I wouldn't say we're good friends or anything." On the other hand, a couple of students have developed relationships that exist both in and out of the school environment. David mentioned, "I have good friends in here, especially Billy. We even hang out after school sometimes."

Competitiveness emerges as students are offered a reward for certain behaviors or accomplishments. This takes place individually as well as in small group settings such as when Mr. Camp challenges the class to get an answer first or when he divides them into groups for assignments or games. This is when true relationships emerge and when new ones are negotiated.

In this environment, the individual is valued for his/her skills, behaviors, and abilities. The "we are who we are" mentality is evident in discussions and weekly personal writing assignments. Lori writes,

Girls are sometimes mean and sometimes they're nice. But we all have our own sense of style. Some of us are jugalets. Some of us are preps. Last but not least, some of us are punks. We all have our own personalities. Some of us have enemies. Some of us don't.

Individual personalities, goals, and values are reflected on a regular basis and are not openly judged by the teacher or other classmates as demonstrated in weekly writings such as this one. Elias (1993) indicated that the transition into middle school required students to be capable of accepting many social challenges. Students need to be able to communicate, participate and work cooperatively, to have self-control, and to be able to resolve conflicts thoughtfully without resorting to avoidance or aggression. In other words, students need to be emotionally intelligent.

Group Considerations

Students' perceptions in the areas of physical and social/emotional environment within the context of Douglas's (1982) group typology were analyzed.

Low-group

The Transitional Learning Center would be considered a low-group structure. Group represents the degree to which people value collective relationships and the degree to which they are committed to the larger social unit (Harris, 1995). Students in the TLC program are generally committed to themselves and their success in school and are not concerned with the overall productivity of the group. Most students in this class will collaborate willingly with each other when instructed to work in groups. They will also ask a classmate when they are in need of help before approaching the teacher. However, few will offer assistance to a classmate or show concern for the feelings of others, demonstrating a non-cohesive atmosphere.

Physical culture

High-group environments value specific membership criteria and pressures are imposed that influence group relationships. In TLC, although criteria for membership do

exist, it is not prestigious or emphasized for the good of the group, nor is the criteria developed by the group. Students must adhere to certain standards to remain in the program; however, those standards are not reliant upon the group as a whole. For example, students in TLC must maintain good attendance and behavior to remain in the program. If a student is lacking in one or both of these areas, they may be removed from the program. According to Mr. Camp, this has happened a few times in the past, but it did not have an impact on the group as a whole.

Also, new students were enrolled in the program on a regular basis during the six-week observation period. The new students were accepted into the class, but no effort to make them feel part of a group was noted. The survival of the individual is more important than the survival of the group, and group relationships are not a vital part of student success in a low-group environment.

Due to the structure of the program, the membership of TLC varies almost on a month-to-month basis. The program is also relatively new so students, teachers, and community members are not fully educated in its purpose and impact. Therefore, strong allegiance to this particular institution is not entrenched in tradition and norms. Instead, the group structure is ever changing and consistently manipulated, presenting no barriers to outsiders. This type of structure lends itself to a low-group environment.

Social/Emotional Culture

In low-group environments such as this one, pressure for group-focused activities and relationships is relatively weak. These classmates tended to focus on short-term activities that would further their individual cause rather than long-term group objectives. Most of the students in TLC enjoyed working together in small groups, but only because

they could finish the work faster, not because they enjoyed the camaraderie of working together. This is evidenced by what Art had to say, “I like working together. We get done twice as fast and then we can do other stuff. I don’t like working with some of them, but most are okay.” Karen added, “I really only have one friend in here, and I like working with her. If we have to work in groups, it’s okay, but I just want to get it [the assignment] done.” Small group activities were successful only if each individual gained something from his/her participation.

Rarely did the whole group work together to accomplish a goal in which the group would benefit. I did, however, witness the class working together on a science unit. They actually helped each other with various projects and assignments so they could take a field trip to the Oklahoma Aquarium upon its completion.

Communication among the group was minimal. Because of the difference in grade level and ability, the members of the class were somewhat fragmented from one another. The sixth graders had a tendency to stick together at the same table, even though group discussion was typically at a minimum. Although there were eight eighth graders in the program, they were at varying ability levels and often worked on different assignments. This prevented much collaboration. Although some alliances were formed and students did interact on a regular basis, it was “every man for himself” if and when the lines were drawn.

Summary

The culture of the alternative school used in this study would be considered an individualist environment due to its low-grid, low-group classification. It is considered

low-grid due to the limited rules of the program, the few role distinctions among the students, and the high level of autonomy granted each member.

The competitive aspect of negotiating for privileges, grades, and activities makes this a low-grid environment. In TLC, students can negotiate individually with the teacher for special privileges, assignment length and due dates, and even non-curricular activities. This type of bartering is typical in a low-grid structure.

There are few classroom rules that are generated by the teacher because the students themselves determine most of the rules. Since the teacher is free to exercise autonomy in his classroom, he chooses to pass along some of that autonomy to his students. This informal communication system and student teacher rapport is also indicative of a low-grid environment.

Defined roles are almost non-existent in this program. There are few formal boundaries between student and teacher, with the teacher acting as more of a role model and tutor than authority figure. His respect is gained through his caring attitude, charisma, and rapport-building ability rather than from coercion and title.

The students in TLC are recognized by their achievement, behavior, and character rather than by role distinction. There is an emphasis on individual worth and accomplishment rather than social distinction, encouraging individualism. Personal freedom and autonomy is not only allowed, but encouraged, which also resembles a low-grid culture.

There are also several indications that this alternative school is a low-group structure. Low-group environments function as individuals cooperating with one another for the purpose of personal gains rather than for reaching goals of the entire group.

Students may work together in temporary small groups, but only if it benefits each individual.

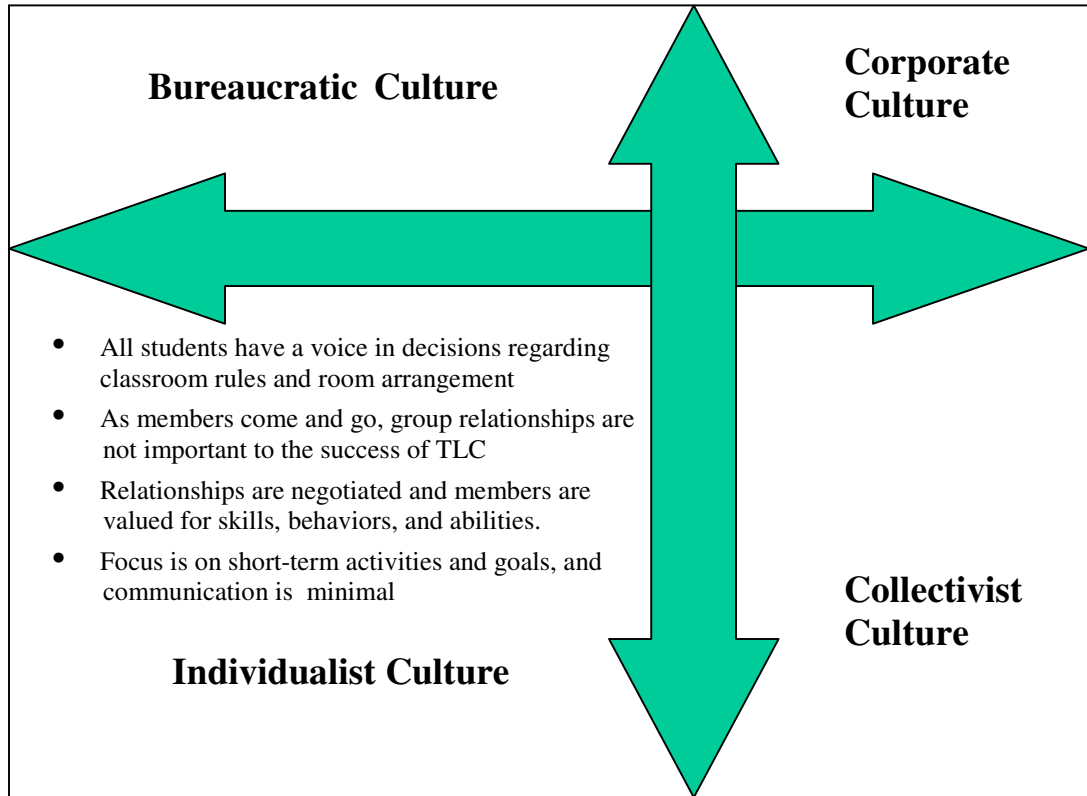
Students meet with the teacher to determine individual needs and pacing with little consideration for the needs of the group as a whole. The entire class does participate in the same subject at one time, but rarely on the same assignment; thus, utilizing an individualized curriculum.

The mobility of students entering and exiting the program contributes to its low-group classification. The very existence of this program is only two years, with just four of the fifteen students enrolled returning from the previous year. Due to the minimal existence of the program, it is seen as a vehicle for teaching the individual and there is no strong allegiance or concern for group survival. Thus, the focus is on short-term activities rather than long-term group goals.

A summary of the Transitional Learning Center through the lens of grid and group continuums can be seen in Figure 2.

Figure 2

Transitional Learning Center's Grid and Group Typology



Chapter VI

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND COMMENTS

Summary of the Study

Gable et al.(1996) defined the at-risk student as one who could not meet the traditional and sometimes rigid requirements of school because of financial hardships, changing demographics, dysfunctional family structure, and other factors. Ten years ago the number of at-risk students ranged from four to five percent of the student population (Foster, Siege, & Landes, 1994). The review of literature in chapter two stated that this number was on the increase and that prediction has proven to be true. The purpose of this study was to describe the culture of an alternative school environment at the middle school level and explain that culture in terms of Douglas's (1982) Grid and Group theory.

I chose a mini-ethnographic design to conduct the study of at-risk students. The study was condensed to a mini-ethnography based on the protocol of Werner and Schoepfle's (1987a) study using fewer than 15 participants for a sample size and collecting data for only six to eight weeks. The data collection involved interviewing, participant observations, and collecting fieldnotes as suggested by Streubert and Carpenter (1995) and Spradley (1980). Data analysis was accomplished throughout the process by examining social situations and cultural patterns.

The study was conducted with sixth through eighth grade alternative school students ranging in age from 11 to 14. At the time of the study, there were 13 students in

the classroom, which were all placed in the alternative school for various, non-punitive, reasons. I grouped most of the data collected from interviews, field notes, and participant observations into themes represented by charts, which can be seen throughout chapter four.

The purpose of this study was to describe the culture of an alternative school environment at the middle school level using grid and group typology (Douglas, 1982).

This purpose was accomplished by:

- Data collection from one middle level alternative school using interviews, observations, and collecting fieldnotes during a six week period;
- Data presentation regarding the students' perspectives on participating in an alternative school; and
- Data analysis through the lens of Douglas's (1982) typology of grid and group.

Chapter IV explained the culture through a vivid description of the alternative school. It demonstrated that students were placed for a variety of reasons and that most student needs were being met. Students strongly expressed their beliefs regarding their learning styles, characteristics of good teachers, and even the type of facility that would create the best environment for them. These at-risk students were also able to identify barriers that prevented them from being successful in the regular school. School size, teacher attitude, and homework were noted as key areas that students attributed to their lack of success.

The underlying theme throughout all my observations, fieldnotes, and interviews was that the students did not believe they were at-risk, in the sense that they were at-risk for dropping out of school without graduating. Each student felt strongly that he/she could and would be academically successful. Although most of the students were not functioning on

the same academic tract as their peers in the regular school, they still believed that they needed an education to become productive members of society. As a group, the students tended to belittle themselves for being in the alternative school. However, as individuals, the students felt confident about their self-worth. The attitudes and values of the at-risk students gave credence to the importance of providing an alternative school for students that typically have not been successful with the regular school environment.

Roles the at-risk students played in the alternative school were also explained. It was assumed that certain students would emerge as leaders of the class, as was seen throughout the previous year; however, all students demonstrated an equal voice. Most of the students acknowledged that the alternative school environment motivated them to learn more and be better students due to teacher expectations and smaller class size. Teacher attitude and behaviors were also noted as contributing to their motivation and needs being met in TLC. They indicated that the teacher was more understanding of their struggles with schoolwork than teachers in the regular classroom.

Chapter IV also portrayed how students in the alternative school interacted among themselves. Although some of the interaction that took place between the students was negative, upon closer examination and observation, these students relied on each other when it was individually beneficial. Even though the students worked well together when necessary, and a few friendships existed, no group bond was evident in this class.

Specific research questions that guided this study were:

1. What is the grid and group makeup of the school?
2. How is the student culture explained in terms of grid and group in the alternative school?

3. How useful is grid and group theory in explaining the interrelationship of an alternative school and its students?

These questions are answered in the following section.

Findings

What is the grid and group makeup of an alternative school?

The Transitional Learning Center in this study was most appropriately plotted in the Individualist (low-grid/low-group) quadrant.

The Individualist culture as described by Douglas (1982):

1. Relationships and experiences of the individual are not bound by imposed rules or traditions.
2. Role status and rewards are competitive and based on existing standards.
3. Little emphasis is placed on social distinction with few insider-outsider screens.
4. Long-term corporate survival is not valued as much as individual survival and personal gain.

In an Individualist culture, one will find little or no heritage embedded in the culture and a variety of values and beliefs. Due to the short life of TLC and its ever-changing enrollment, nothing is tradition-bound and students have not developed any kind of group membership requirements. Even though the maximum enrollment is fifteen, students in this program come and go on a regular basis. For example, Billy entered the program September 12, followed by David on September 20. On October 24, Jon exited, followed by Cale on October 31.

Group survival is unimportant as these students function for the good of the individual rather than for any group goals. Although most TLC students enjoy the small class size and get to know each other well, the emphasis is on individual accomplishment rather than group success. They compete with one another for rewards, preferential treatment, and attention on a regular basis.

Communication is informal as all students have a voice in their educational environment. An Individualist environment is characterized by few social and role distinctions; therefore, individual autonomy is unconstrained with a high degree of personal freedom. Mr. Camp stated, “These kids come from all kinds of homes and backgrounds, but it doesn’t matter because they’re still just kids. They’re all different and should be treated as such.” These students know who they are and aren’t concerned with what others think about them. They feel free to say what they think or write how they feel without fear of judgment.

High value is placed on personal importance as the teacher strives to meet the individual needs of his students by making allowances for various learning styles and behavior in the classroom. Mr. Camp expresses care and respect for each student by his words and actions, and individualizes instruction as much as possible. A file is kept on each student so that teaching strategies can be tailored to personal needs. Students are recognized by their character and behavior, rather than by role distinction, emphasizing individual worth.

Due to the grid considerations of autonomy, control, and competition, TLC is classified as a low-grid environment. Because little emphasis is paid to group success, there are no traditions or allegiance to the school and individual interests are the priority,

which are all characteristic of low-group. Therefore, this alternative school environment falls in the low-grid/low-group, or Individualist, quadrant of the Douglas typology.

How is the student culture explained in terms of grid and group in the alternative school?

The prevailing mindset, or social game, of TLC, as in all individualist environments, is intense, determined individualism. All the freedoms granted the American culture and a “pick-yourself-up-by the-bootstraps” attitude shape the values and practices of this program. Jack commented, “When kids found out I was going to TLC, they said, ‘Oh you’re going to the dumb class’ and stuff like that. After a while, I didn’t care what they said because it was helping me.”

Transitional Learning Center students view their school environment as a collection of individuals placed in the same classroom due to similarities in their backgrounds, primarily making poor grades or unable to successfully manage a seven period day. Each individual student, rather than the collective class, is the highest standard of value and the priority of achievement. Billy stated, “Mr. Camp works with us individually until we get it. Not all teachers do that.” Although these students are required to take the standardized tests along with the general population, their success is measured by individual progress alone.

Through his words and actions, Mr. Camp makes it known that every student is valued and can succeed given the proper tools. He gets to know each student personally, including home life, likes, and dislikes, and then relates assignments to each individual student whenever possible. He strives to meet them where they are when they arrive and help them progress as quickly as possible. He states, “They’re all successful at

something. We just have to find out what that is and take pride in it together. Then they can succeed at other things as well.”

Individualism should not be confused with isolationism, which stresses that people work alone and apart from any participation with one another. Instead, individualism maintains that the individual, not the group, is the primary focus in the school environment. This is demonstrated when cooperation and teamwork do occur on occasion in this classroom. When a joint effort is the best possible means to a desired end, these students gladly participate in collaborative work. For example, when the students worked together on the scavenger hunt activity, they were able to finish more quickly, and the winning team received a soda, an individual reward.

Leaders in an individualist environment are self-motivated, understand how to build trust, and recognize and utilize the strengths of individuals. Mr. Camp has virtually built this program from the ground up. Because he felt so strongly about these kids, he has spent hours developing standards and curriculum for this program. He has obviously won the trust of his students as they confide in him things that may shock other teachers. In one free writing assignment, Stacie wrote about being on drugs previously, including how she got started and how she was able to break away. She felt comfortable with this for two reasons; first, she trusted Mr. Camp not to share this information with others in the class, and second, she knew he would not judge her based on her past. Mr. Camp also encourages peer tutoring as a means for capitalizing on student strengths.

In individualist cultures such as TLC, the status/role relationship among the students and between teacher and student is typically parallel. Informal communication between Mr. Camp and his students is the norm, although they still have a great deal of

respect for him. Students meet one-on-one with Mr. Camp to negotiate “deals” such as shortened assignments or seating arrangements. Working relationships are flexible as Mr. Camp may choose partners or small groups for one assignment and students may choose to work together or alone on another. Students are included in many classroom decisions regarding physical arrangement of the room, classroom rules, and quantity of academic work.

How useful is grid and group theory in explaining the interrelationship of an alternative school and its students?

Douglas (1989) wrote, “The most interesting questions grid and group theory is designed to answer are about attitudes, values, and established thought patterns which correlate with particular grid/group positions” (p. 175). The data collected answered questions about attitudes, values, and established thought patterns regarding at-risk students in an alternative middle school setting as well as established a descriptive position within the typology. Since grid and group coordinates are both on a continuum, it was sometimes difficult to discern the best placement of data at a particular spot on the continuum. However, because the notions of free will, choice, subjectivity, and individual worth are all considerations in grid and group theory, the majority of data collected was easily grouped within a certain quadrant.

Alternative schools take on a variety of forms in different school districts, even though similar philosophical principles and strategies are behind them. Alternative school sites in some districts have drastically changed the vision and success of the district, while others have had virtually no affect whatsoever. Douglas’s (1982) theory suggests that schools respond differently because of the unique grid and group make-up

of each context. This framework is not meant to depict social environments as static or motionless, but as zealous and unpredictable dynamic processes.

The grid and group model is valuable in this study in that it exploits specific value and belief dimensions that are characteristic of this program and its students. The degrees of the grid and group dimensions are important in determining social pressure on at-risk students to perform or act in certain ways. The teacher and administrators of this program can now understand how social roles constrain or promote individual autonomy. They can also determine the extent to which individual and collective participation are essential to the social relationships and potential success of the program.

In mini-ethnographical research, categorization of cultural themes is an important feature (Spradley, 1980; Carpenter, 1995). Grid and group theory offers four specific categories of reference to express behavioral forms. Douglas's (1982) quadrants and categorization criteria were helpful in latter aspects of my data analysis. Wolcott (1995) advises that the best use of theory is near the conclusion of a study, "where a self-conscious but genuine search for theoretical implications and links begins rather than ends" (p. 187).

Douglas's (1982) typology provided a means to attain a broader perspective of cultural research and acknowledge school culture in a larger social context. It also offered a way to strengthen my research design and to better organize and present my data. Whether we realize it or not, we all bring biases and reality constructs to research experiences, and this typology provided a lens to recognize my own biases about at-risk students and alternative schools.

Issues of social relationships, individual and group, play a crucial role in the development of school culture. So does culture influence teaching and learning? Do patterns of culture enhance or inhibit the teaching/learning process? Educational goals, objectives, and vision are linked to social relations, personal identity, and educational practice. Douglas's (1982) model can be useful in identifying these patterns in order to develop the best possible pedagogical process for at-risk students.

As with any theoretical frame, Douglas's (1982) typology should be used with a certain degree of caution. It is simply one reality construct capable of providing order, clarification, and direction to a study (Harris, 2005). When using this typology, it is tempting for a researcher to *make* the data fit rather than *allowing* it to fit in the framework. No theoretical framework is flawless, and a qualitative researcher must be comfortable settling for a small degree of obscurity in his or her endeavors.

Implications of the Study

Through qualitative questions that encouraged the respondents to share their particular stories and describe their feelings and emotions, valuable insight was added in understanding alternative school culture and at-risk middle school students. This research added a fresh perspective in understanding culture and how it changes. In addition, by examining records and documents that pertained to the alternative school and by observing first-hand at-risk students' perceptions in TLC, knowledge was gained on factors relating to school culture and the impact it has on alternative education. By using the lens of Douglas's (1982) grid and group typology, a strong framework was provided for analyzing the patterns and relationships that formulate the culture. Therefore, this study proved valuable to current theory, research, and practice.

Theory

Douglas's (1982) four-part matrix illustrating the grid/group model is "comprehensive enough to help educational researchers explore the dynamic interaction, interdependence, and interrelationships among individuals and the school environment (Harris, 1995). This model was developed to classify and compare diverse environments in society by determining the effects of group culture with regards to individual autonomy.

Douglas (1982) builds upon the works of Benedict (1934), Hoebel (1954), and Getzel, Lipham, and Campbell (1968). Benedict's book Patterns of Culture matched culture and personality and how one might effect the other. Hoebel's study of an Eskimo community illustrated its tendency to reward individual behavior, which supported the culture by aiding the survival of the community. Grid and group typology more closely parallels social systems theory (Getzels, et al, 1968), which conceptualizes the interaction of the personal and organizational dimensions of an open system. Douglas's typology complements social systems theory, and as Harris (1995) states, "Not only are grid and group inherent in open systems, but these two coordinates offer a mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive continuum of categories for dealing simultaneously with social behaviors in varied contexts" (p. 641).

Douglas's (1982) typology has not been used in the study of at-risk students and was useful as a descriptive tool focusing on at-risk middle school students in an alternative school environment. Its effectiveness in identifying the cultural context of an alternative school assisted in examining the relationships and patterns that either supported or prevented collaboration and integration of at-risk students and their

environment. By using Douglas's model, the study found this alternative school environment to be an individualistic one, with students' goals being personal rather than for the good of the group.

Research

The findings of this study add to the knowledge base of alternative school culture, at-risk students, and to the usefulness of Douglas's (1982) grid and group typology. Literature reveals that alternative schools should not function as traditional schools because many at-risk students are placed in alternative schools due to the rigidity in the regular school (Brendtro, 1995). Parents note in the literature that they would prefer for their children to be in educational environments that will prepare them for various life circumstances.

Irvine (1990) notes that many times students have negative responses in school due to the lack of cultural synchronization between school officials and students. Student respondents in this study have noted that a large part of the problem at their regular school centers on that exact notion. Several TLC students have expressed that the way in which teachers or administrators respond to them is based on their perception of the students, which is typically grounded in stereotypes.

Brendtro (1995) also maintains that student-teacher relationships are key to effective educational outcomes. TLC students note that when they know a teacher, such as Mr. Camp, cares about their well-being and their success, they begin to perform better and will strive to return to the regular school environment. Mr. Camp's responses were consistent with the literature (Ladson-Billings, 1994) in that he stresses the importance of building relationships with students, being culturally in sync with the students, and caring

for the students unconditionally. According to the teacher, when the above strategies are in place, the chances of at-risk students having more positive educational outcomes are increased.

An area that is not consistent with the literature is the issue of belonging. Brendtro (1995) alludes to the fact that if students have bonds of caring and nurturance, flexible discipline, and are included in the decision-making process, they will automatically respond positively. The reality is that not all students make the connection to alternative schools because of their perception of schooling in general, and some do not feel connected no matter what the educational environment. In the individualistic environment of TLC, at-risk students felt very little bond or loyalty to the school, the program, or even to the other students. Using Douglas's (1982) typology as the theoretical framework in this study gives credence to necessary research on a cultural perspective of effective alternative schools.

Practice

This study provides significant implications for educational practice regarding the culture of alternative schools. Due to the wide array of alternative education programs offered to at-risk students, the type of culture in these environments can vary to the same extent. Being able to describe and explain these cultures can be beneficial to school administrators and teachers, giving them a better understanding of, and respect for, at-risk students' needs.

Because alternative schools, many times, are the gatekeepers to students dropping out, their approach to addressing the problem is extremely important. No one model or strategy can be deemed best or most effective in every situation. However, devising

flexible, individualized, holistic strategies for educating students that have been deemed at-risk for educational failure is essential. Understanding the culture of the school environment when implementing such strategies could possibly lead to more students graduating from high school and having more healthy adult outcomes. The literature suggests that retention rates are even higher when effective models are implemented in the early middle school years (Jordan, 1994).

Alternative school environments must be set up so that at-risk students are not made to feel alienated from the process of effective education, but where they can learn to feel good about themselves academically. School officials must realize that most students placed at-risk for educational failure have several barriers to work around that impede the learning process. Understanding this basic principle should guide educators in affording at-risk students an opportunity to an effective education.

Conclusions and Recommendations

At Risk Students

The study uncovered one perception these at-risk students had of themselves. Surprisingly, only one of them considered herself at-risk (see Table VI). Most of the students were almost offended that the label at-risk might apply to them. Each student was able to express his or her academic goals but was unable to define how he/she might reach those goals.

Were these students truly at-risk? I was of the opinion that all of the students were at-risk in their regular school environment. The ones who had applied themselves in the alternative school program had most likely removed that label from themselves, such as Cale and Lori. The students who continued to be frustrated with school and jeopardized

their opportunities even in this environment were obviously setting themselves up for failure, such as Jon and Jacob. The middle level alternative school was not the last and only option for students at risk of failure. However, alternative school provided an opportunity for students to be productive in a different environment.

It is my perception that the at-risk middle school students in the alternative school were not enrolled in the school because they sought a different type of school. Rather, they were enrolled in the alternative school because they were different types of students. Each student's placement was determined by a variety of factors, but the common thread was that they all struggled with the structure and the demands of the regular school.

Grid and Group

Theoretical frameworks help shape and direct a study as well as help to link a study to previous literature. In this study, data were analyzed through the lens of Douglas's (1982) grid and group typology. During analysis, the physical and social/emotional aspects of the group's culture were considered. This particular alternative school was classified into the individualist domain due to its low grid and low-group characteristics. This classification does not infer that this group is composed exclusively of individualists. It does, however, imply that this environment has a predominant social game while incorporating the other three social games either in complementary or antagonistic relationships.

The at-risk students in this class had a significant amount of voice in the areas of room arrangement, rules and procedures. They valued autonomy, had few rules and role distinctions, and competitive negotiating was a daily routine. The success of the individual was also more important than the success of the group.

The grid and group typology is useful in explaining a group's culture. Grid is helpful in understanding the make up of a group and the way it functions. Group explains the relationships and commitment of the individuals in the group. Low-grid environments promote a higher degree of autonomy and voice. Low-group environments inhibit bonds and camaraderie.

Recommendations

Upon listening to the words of the at-risk students, it becomes evident that they perceive the alternative middle school setting to be meeting their needs and positively affecting their attitude toward school. To this end, recommendations for further research related to this study are made.

A longitudinal study is needed to determine the long-term effects of attending an alternative middle school. Tracking the progress of alternative students as they attend traditional and even alternative high schools is warranted. Graduation rates for alternative middle school students should be part of the data collected.

A future study should target the academic growth of alternative middle school students. This study showed that the students perceived that their needs were being met. More data on academic gains would provide evidence that alternative schools meet the needs of their students.

Research to determine the effect of students transitioning from alternative middle schools with no homework to regular high schools that do require homework would be beneficial.

A study in alternative schools to determine the effectiveness of either one grade or combined grades is suggested. This study focused on an alternative school for sixth

through eighth graders combined in one classroom, causing concern for the age difference of the students (11-15). Although difficult to determine, the age difference may have created some adverse situations that could possibly have been avoided in a program for only one grade level.

The usefulness of Douglas's typology to describe the alternative school culture was successful enough in this study to justify further research. While I used the theory a posteriori, using this construct a priori to focus on specific characteristics such as relationships, values, hierarchical structure, and goals would generate a clearer focus for the research than simply allowing themes to emerge naturally from the data, as in this study. Qualifying the characteristics for study would also better define and plot the environment on the grid and group continuums.

Training for teachers in traditional schools to address the needs of struggling students should be applied. Identifying teachers who have been successful with struggling learners would provide districts with trainers. University and college teacher preparation programs should incorporate course work on working with at-risk students. Adding alternative school observations to the required school observation cycle is recommended.

Researcher's Comments and Reflections

When I first began this doctoral process, I knew exactly where I wanted to focus my research. Because my entire career as an educator has been at the middle school level, I have always had a special place in my heart for those unique adolescents. When I moved into administration, I became more aware of and involved with alternative schools

and at-risk students. I began to wonder why these kids were so different and if we, as educators, were doing the best we could for them.

I was a bit reluctant to use grid and group theory because I was not very versed in it and had not read much research where it had been used. As I studied it and my knowledge of it increased, I understood how it could be useful in this study of alternative school culture. After data were organized into emergent themes and coded appropriately, Douglas's (1982) theory provided alternative categories in which to sort data. It also provided a common language in which to explain the cultural experiences of these students.

Because alternative schools vary a great deal in format and method, as mentioned in chapter one, these findings would not be indicative of those from other alternative schools due to their differing cultures and needs. Even this particular alternative school's culture changes as students with different needs and attitudes enter and exit the program. Therefore, it would be impossible to state that all alternative schools fall into the individualist quadrant as does TLC.

Although this particular alternative school appears to meet the academic needs of its students, I wonder if an individualist environment is the most appropriate social environment for at-risk students. Most middle school students, especially those labeled at-risk, struggle with relationships at this age and could use a support network to help them through this period in their life. Should the culture of an alternative school be determined by the students participating in the program, or should the culture be "shaped" by the teachers and administrators who know what these students need?

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Appendix A

LETTER FROM THE SUPERINTENDENT

July 25, 2005

Mrs. Ellis,

I have reviewed the research plan on your study of at-risk middle school students in an alternative school environment and understand that students selected as participants in this study are from the alternative school for Clyde Boyd Middle School in the Sand Springs school district. I also acknowledge that the study will be limited to the middle school program, and that parents will be free to choose not to allow their child to participate.

I am aware that there are no known risks associated with this project which are greater than those ordinarily encountered in daily life. Furthermore, any information obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with the student will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with parental permission. Interviews will be audio taped and the tapes will be transcribed using only code numbers. No names or personally identifying information will appear on the transcription. Tapes will be erased after the transcriptions are made. The OSU IRB has the authority to inspect consent records and data files to assure compliance with approved procedures.

At this time, it is my pleasure to approve this study in the Sand Springs School District, acknowledging that I may discontinue it at any time without prejudice. Please contact the Director of Special Services and the Site Principal for further approval to gain access to appropriate students, parents, and teachers.

My signature indicates that I have read the information provided and have decided to approve the study. I may withdraw at any time without prejudice after signing this form, should I choose to discontinue this study from taking place in Sand Springs Schools.

Sincerely,

Lloyd Snow
Superintendent of Schools

Appendix B

LETTER FROM THE DIRECTOR OF SPECIAL SERVICES

July 25, 2005

Mrs. Ellis,

I have reviewed the research plan on your study of at-risk middle school students in an alternative school environment and understand that students selected as participants in this study are from the alternative school for Clyde Boyd Middle School in the Sand Springs school district. I also acknowledge that the study will be limited to the middle school program, and that parents will be free to choose not to allow their child to participate.

I am aware that there are no known risks associated with this project which are greater than those ordinarily encountered in daily life. Furthermore, any information obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with the student will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with parental permission. Interviews will be audio taped and the tapes will be transcribed using only code numbers. No names or personally identifying information will appear on the transcription. Tapes will be erased after the transcriptions are made. The OSU IRB has the authority to inspect consent records and data files to assure compliance with approved procedures.

At this time, it is my pleasure to approve this study at Clyde Boyd Middle School in the Transitional Learning Center (TLC), acknowledging that I may discontinue it at any time without prejudice. Please contact the appropriate teacher, students, and parents for proper consent regarding this study.

My signature indicates that I have read the information provided and have decided to approve the study. I may withdraw at any time without prejudice after signing this form, should I choose to discontinue this study from taking place in Clyde Boyd Middle School.

Sincerely,

Lonetta Sprague
Assistant Superintendent
Special Services

Appendix C

LETTER FROM THE PRINCIPAL

May 27, 2005

Mrs. Ellis,

I have reviewed the research plan on your study of at-risk middle school students in an alternative school environment and understand that students selected as participants in this study are from the alternative school for Clyde Boyd Middle School in the Sand Springs school district. I also acknowledge that the study will be limited to the middle school program, and that parents will be free to choose not to allow their child to participate.

I am aware that there are no known risks associated with this project which are greater than those ordinarily encountered in daily life. Furthermore, any information obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with the student will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with parental permission. Interviews will be audio taped and the tapes will be transcribed using only code numbers. No names or personally identifying information will appear on the transcription. Tapes will be erased after the transcriptions are made. The OSU IRB has the authority to inspect consent records and data files to assure compliance with approved procedures.

At this time, it is my pleasure to approve this study at Clyde Boyd Middle School in the Transitional Learning Center (TLC), acknowledging that I may discontinue it at any time without prejudice. Please contact the appropriate teacher, students, and parents for proper consent regarding this study.

My signature indicates that I have read the information provided and have decided to approve the study. I may withdraw at any time without prejudice after signing this form, should I choose to discontinue this study from taking place in Clyde Boyd Middle School.

Sincerely,

Richard G. Rosenberger, EdD
Principal, Clyde Boyd Middle School

Appendix D

TEACHER CONSENT FORM

You are invited to participate in a study of middle school students in an alternative school environment. I am a graduate student at Oklahoma State University, and am pursuing a doctoral degree in School Administration. I hope to learn about the culture of alternative education students while at a middle school age. You have been selected as a possible participant in this study because the culture being described is the alternative school (Transitional Learning Center) for Clyde Boyd Middle School. The study will be limited to the middle school program, which consists of approximately ten students and one teacher.

You are free to choose not to participate. If you choose to participate in the study, you and your students will be observed in the classroom for a period of six to eight weeks. During this time, I will be making observations and taking notes that will give me more insight into the culture and a better understanding of the students in this program. There are no known risks associated with this project that are greater than those ordinarily encountered in daily life.

Any information obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission. No names or personally identifying information will appear anywhere in my documentation. The OSU IRB has the authority to inspect consent records and data files to assure compliance with approved procedures.

Your decision whether or not participate will not prejudice your future relations with Oklahoma State University. If you decide to participate, you are free to discontinue participation at any time without prejudice. There is no cost to subjects for participation and no compensation will be made to individuals participating in this study.

If you have any questions, please ask. If you have additional questions later, you may contact me and/or the faculty advisor who will be happy to answer them. For information on subjects' rights, contact Dr. Sue Jacobs, IRB Chair, 415 Whitehurst Hall, 405-744-1676.

Researcher Melessa L. Ellis
Telephone 246-1547

Faculty Advisor Dr. Ed Harris
Telephone 405-744-7932

You are making a decision whether or not to participate. Your signature indicates that you have read the information provided above and have decided to allow such participation. You may withdraw at any time without prejudice after signing this form, should you choose to discontinue your participation in this study.

I have read and fully understand the consent form and am willing to participate in the described research.

Teacher Name (printed)

Date

Signature of Teacher

Date

I certify that I have personally explained this document before requesting that the teacher sign it.

Signature of Researcher

Date

Appendix E

PARENTAL CONSENT FORM

Your child is invited to participate in a study of middle school students in an alternative school environment. I am a graduate student at Oklahoma State University, and am pursuing a doctoral degree in School Administration. I hope to learn about the culture of alternative education students while at a middle school age. Your child was selected as a possible participant in this study because the culture being described is the alternative school (Transitional Learning Center) for Clyde Boyd Middle School. The study will be limited to the middle school program, which consists of approximately ten students. Your child will be one of those students chosen to participate in this study.

You are free to choose not to allow your child to participate. If you choose to allow your child to participate in the study, he/she will be interviewed for a period of 30-45 minutes. Questions will be asked pertaining to the student's goals and values, likes and dislikes about the program, and reasons for participating in the alternative program. I also will be a participant observer in the classroom for a period of six to eight weeks. During this time, I will be making observations and taking notes that will give me more insight into the culture and a better understanding of the students in this program.

You will be consenting to a one-on-one interview with your child and myself. This interview will take place in an open area, which will allow for privacy but not put your child in an uncomfortable situation. Also, any information shared with me that I believe is putting their life in danger obligates me to turn it over to the proper authorities. If sharing any information causes some emotional frustrations or undue stress, your child will have the opportunity to visit one of the school counselors. There are no known risks associated with this project that are greater than those ordinarily encountered in daily life.

Furthermore, any information obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with your child will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission. The interview will be audio taped and the tapes will be transcribed using only code numbers. No names or personally identifying information will appear on the transcriptions. Tapes will be erased after the transcriptions are made. The OSU IRB has the authority to inspect consent records and data files to assure compliance with approved procedures.

Your decision whether or not to allow your child to participate will not prejudice your future relations with Oklahoma State University. If you decide to allow your child to participate, you are free to discontinue participation at any time without prejudice. There is no cost to subjects for participation and no compensation will be made to individuals participating in this study. The student's grade will in no way be affected by participation in this study.

If you have any questions, please ask. If you have additional questions later, you may contact me and/or the faculty advisor who will be happy to answer them. For information on subjects' rights, contact Dr. Sue Jacobs, IRB Chair, 415 Whitehurst Hall, 405-744-1676.

Researcher Melessa L. Ellis
Telephone 246-1547

Faculty Advisor Dr. Ed Harris
Telephone 405-744-7932

You are making a decision whether or not to allow your child to participate. Your signature indicates that you have read the information provided above and have decided to allow such participation. You may withdraw at any time without prejudice after signing this form, should you choose to discontinue your child's participation in this study.

I have read and fully understand the consent form. As parent or guardian I authorize _____(print name) to participate in the described research.

Parent/Guardian Name (printed)

Date

Signature of Parent/Guardian

Date

I certify that I have personally explained this document before requesting that the parent/guardian sign it.

Signature of Researcher

Date

Appendix F

STUDENT ASSENT FORM

I agree to participate in a study that is interested in how students in alternative programs perceive themselves and their placement in the school. I understand that this study has been explained to my parent/guardian and that he or she has given permission for me to participate. I understand that I may decide at any time that I do not wish to continue this study and that it will be stopped if I say so.

I understand that I will be asked questions about how I solve problems and how I feel about myself and this program. I also understand that at any time I feel uncomfortable about saying something I may refuse to answer. If something I say causes me stress, I will be able to visit the school counselor. I also understand that nothing bad or wrong will happen to me if I decide to stop my participation in this study at any time. My grade will not be affected in any way due to participation in this study.

When I sign my name to this page I am acknowledging that this page was read to me and that I am agreeing to participate in this study. I am indicating that I understand what will be required of me and that I may stop the study at any time.

I have read and fully understand the consent form. I sign it freely and voluntarily. A copy of this form has been given to me.

Student's signature

Date

I certify that I have personally explained this document before requesting that the participant sign it.

Researcher's signature

Date

If you have any questions, please ask. If you have additional questions later, you may contact me and/or the faculty advisor who will be happy to answer them. For information on subjects' rights, contact Dr. Sue Jacobs, IRB Chair, 415 Whitehurst Hall, 405-744-1676.

Researcher Melessa L. Ellis
Telephone 246-1547

Faculty Advisor Dr. Ed Harris
Telephone 405-744-7932

Appendix G

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Why do students attend this alternative school?
2. What do you hope to do differently in this school?
3. Do you enjoy this alternative school? Why or why not?
4. Whose decision was it for you to go to alternative school? Were you in agreement with this decision? If not, are you glad you're here now?
5. Do you plan to remain in alternative school next year? Why or why not?
6. What would you do to change the regular school environment so that you could have been more successful?
7. What do you like best about the alternative school?
8. What do you like least about the alternative school?
9. Do you plan to attend college? Why or why not?
10. Have you thought about what job/career you would like to have someday? If so, tell me about it and why you chose that particular job.

Transitional Learning Center (TLC)

Boyle Middle School

Objective

The Transitional Learning center is designed to aid students in coping with the rigors of education. We understand that not all students learn in the same way, and that not all students adapt to a normal classroom setting. Because of these understandings, coupled with the idea that no child should be left behind, we have piloted a program geared to help specified students achieve success in school.

The Program

The program consists of a team of teachers, counselors, and administrators whose goal is to identify students at risk of failing one or more classes. Once identified, the team gathers data from teachers, parents, and others, to determine whether referral to the TLC Program is right for a particular student. If it is determined the TLC Program is a good fit, the team then contacts the parents for this recommendation.

A behavioral observation report is sent to each regular teacher in which a class within the TLC Program is considered. The report is a screening tool utilized to determine whether a student will excel in a regular classroom setting. Normally, we will not place a student who will stifle the program by demonstrating continual behavior problems.

Students with behavior problems may be placed on a trial basis for a two to three week period. However, at any time, if deemed appropriate and necessary by the team, a student may be removed from the program.

Curriculum

Students will be responsible for the same curriculum as a regular classroom. The main difference is that they are given shortened assignments, have a lot more individualized attention, and are allowed to progress at a rate that best fits them. Various methods of learning will be implemented. Because of different learning styles, the teacher will engage students in visual, oral, and hands-on schemes of learning. Students will receive rewards for time spent on task, good behavior, and work completed. Examples of rewards are, bonus points, computer time, and time outside the classroom setting.

Mainstreaming

Every student in the TLC Program will have the opportunity to be placed into a regular classroom setting. At various times, upon the recommendation of the teacher, the team will meet to discuss such placement. Things to be considered by the team are completed work proficiency, behavior, and attitude of the student. If returned to a regular classroom setting, a student is expected to show progress by completing classroom and homework on time, blending in with the other students, and being a successful student.

Progress

The parent may request a progress report of the student. As a rule, we would ask that you request such a report at two-week intervals, or longer. Students will receive progress reports, and report cards on the same time schedule as all other students.

TLC Reassignment

If a student is placed into a regular classroom, but he or she fails to apply him or herself, the TLC team will determine whether or not the student should return to the program. Return privileges are not absolute. The TLC team has the final say in this matter.

Behavior Plan

See attachment.

If you have any questions concerning the TLC Program, please contact any TLC Team member.

Members include:

Mr. David Campbell
TLC Instructor

Mrs. Elaine Holt
Counselor

Mrs. Mary Jane Jankowski
Counselor

Dr. Richard Rosenberger
Principal



Transitional Learning Center
TLC
“A Beacon for Learning”

Parent/Student Contract

I have read the TLC information sheet. I understand that placement of my child in the program is not a permanent remedy for my child, and that he or she may be returned to a regular classroom setting under the guidelines set forth by the TLC Team. ____

I agree to the placement of my child into the TLC Program, and to all of the requirements of this program.

Signed _____

I do not want my child placed in the TLC Program,

Signed _____

Oklahoma State University Institutional Review Board

Date: Friday, June 03, 2005

IRB Application No ED05108

Proposal Title: A Grid and Group Explanation of At-Risk Student Culture in an Alternative Middle School

Reviewed and
Processed as: Full Board

Status Recommended by Reviewer(s): Approved

Protocol Expires: 6/2/2006

Principal
Investigator(s):

Melessa L. Ellis
14950 W. 61st St.
Sand Springs, OK 74063

Edward Harris
308 Willard
Stillwater, OK 74078

The IRB application referenced above has been approved. It is the judgment of the reviewers that the rights and welfare of individuals who may be asked to participate in this study will be respected, and that the research will be conducted in a manner consistent with the IRB requirements as outlined in section 45 CFR 46.

The final versions of any printed recruitment, consent and assent documents bearing the IRB approval stamp are attached to this letter. These are the versions that must be used during the study.

The reviewer(s) had these comments:

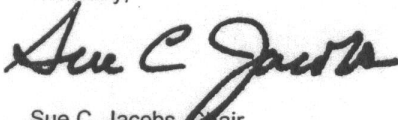
Please submit copies of the signed letters from the superintendent, principal and director of special services as they are received.

As Principal Investigator, it is your responsibility to do the following:

1. Conduct this study exactly as it has been approved. Any modifications to the research protocol must be submitted with the appropriate signatures for IRB approval.
2. Submit a request for continuation if the study extends beyond the approval period of one calendar year. This continuation must receive IRB review and approval before the research can continue.
3. Report any adverse events to the IRB Chair promptly. Adverse events are those which are unanticipated and impact the subjects during the course of this research; and
4. Notify the IRB office in writing when your research project is complete.

Please note that approved protocols are subject to monitoring by the IRB and that the IRB office has the authority to inspect research records associated with this protocol at any time. If you have questions about the IRB procedures or need any assistance from the Board, please contact Beth McTernan in 415 Whitehurst (phone: 405-744-5700, emct@okstate.edu).

Sincerely,



Sue C. Jacobs, Chair
Institutional Review Board

VITA

Melessa L. Ellis
14950 West 61st Street
Sand Springs, Oklahoma 74063
918-241-3603

EDUCATION:

Ed.D., Educational Administration, Oklahoma State University, 2006
Administrator's Certification, Oklahoma State Department of Education, 1996.
M.S., Curriculum and Instruction, Oklahoma State University, 1989.
B.S., Elementary Education, Oklahoma State University, 1986.
Completed the requirements for the Doctor of Education degree at Oklahoma State University in May, 2006.

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE:

- **Building Principal**, Clyde Boyd Sixth Grade Center, Sand Springs, OK, 2003 to present
- **Assistant Principal**, Clyde Boyd Jr. High, Sand Springs, OK, 2001 – 2003
- **Assistant Principal**, at Anderson Elementary, Tulsa, OK, 2000 – 2001
- **Dean of Students**, Cleveland Middle School, Tulsa, OK, 1999 – 2000
- **Instructor of All Core Subjects**, Nimitz Middle School, Tulsa, OK, 1996 – 1999
- **Math Instructor**, Tulsa Community College, Tulsa, OK, 1996 - 1997
- **Classroom Teacher**, Sapulpa Middle School, Sapulpa, OK, 1995 – 1996
- **Mathematics/ Language Arts Teacher**, Jenks Middle School, Jenks, OK, 1990 - 1995
- **Second Grade Teacher**, Central Elementary, Sand Springs, OK, 1988 – 1990
- **Mathematics Teacher**, Pittsburg Middle School, Pittsburg, TX, 1986 - 1988

PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATIONS:

Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development
National Association of Secondary School Principals
Oklahoma Association of Secondary School Principals
National Middle School Association
Cooperative Council of Oklahoma School Administrators
Kappa Delta Pi Honor Society
Gold Key National Honor Society
Completed Leadership Sand Springs class of 2003; presenter at ASCD National Conference in Boston and at Success for all Students Conference in Florida.

Name: Melessa Ellis

Date of Degree: May, 2006

Institution: Oklahoma State University

Location: Stillwater, Oklahoma

Title of Study: A GRID AND GROUP EXPLANATION OF AT-RISK STUDENT
CULTURE IN AN ALTERNATIVE MIDDLE SCHOOL

Pages in Study: 162

Candidate for the Degree of Doctor of Education

Major Field: Educational Leadership

Scope and Method of Study: Using the lens of Mary Douglas's (1982) Grid and Group Typology, the purpose of this study was: (1) to describe the culture of an alternative school environment at the middle school level; (2) investigate the roles of at-risk students in the culture of an alternative school by describing how they interact among themselves and with the teacher; and (3) to describe the perceptions of at-risk students regarding their educational needs and goals in relation to the values and dimensions of an alternative school culture. The participants in this mini-ethnography included at-risk middle level alternative school students enrolled in the Transitional Learning Center (TLC) at a middle school in the mid-west, referred to in the study as Boyle Middle School. Multiple methods, including interviews, observations, and document analysis, were used for data collection.

Findings and Conclusions: Through this study, the Transitional Learning Center was best described as an Individualist (low-grid/low-group) culture, meaning that rules and traditions are not embedded or imposed, and that the success of the individual is more important than the success of the group. Even though students worked well together when necessary, and a few friendships existed, no group bond was evident in this class. Students strongly expressed their beliefs regarding their learning styles, characteristics of good teachers, and even the type of facility that would create the best environment for them. Students also identified barriers, such as school size, teacher attitude, and homework, that attributed to their lack of success. The teacher had much to do with the program's success in that he set high expectations, gained student trust and respect, and individualized the curriculum as much as possible. He also held students accountable for their own decisions while motivating them to do their best in all aspects of life.

Advisor's Approval: Ed Harris