Academic Alternative School Settings: A Conceptual Analysis - Part 1*

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Abstract

In this article, we review the issues faced by students who are at-risk of dropping out of school. Specific topics examined herein were: (a) students in danger of dropping out of school; (b) defining dropouts; (c) at-risk students and dropouts; (d) the history of traditional education; (e) alternative schools; and, (f) accountability and alternative education. Also explored in this literature review are studies about school settings and the impact the aforementioned issues have on at-risk students.

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1 Introduction

Although any student may be at-risk of dropping out of high school, some students are more likely than are other students to do so. Natriello, Pallas, and McDill (1986) created a conceptual framework to organize the factors related to students' decision to complete school. The student's final decision may have several possible outcomes which might include completing school in a traditional setting, dropping out and completing school in an alternative setting (such as an alternative high school or receiving a GED), or not graduating from high school and never completing a diploma or an equivalency. The theoretical framework for this student decision-making process included elements such as student characteristics and school processes, which negatively influenced students, and might lead to the resulting consequences of leaving school, as shown in Figure 1.

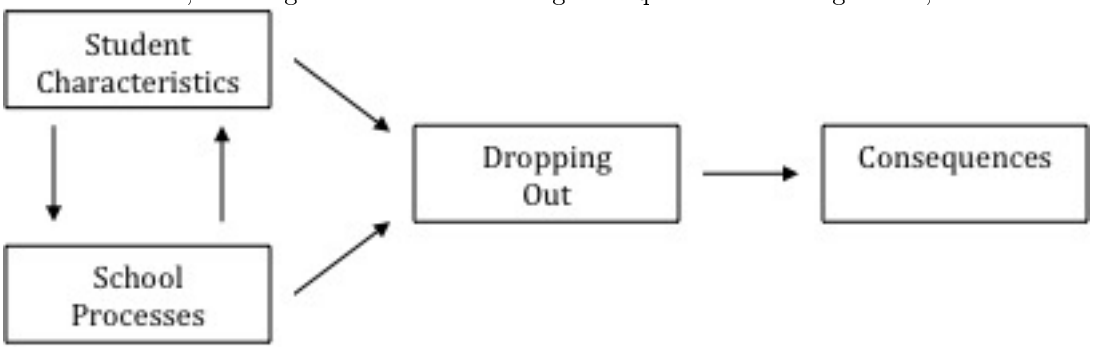

Figure 1. Decision-Making Framework. From "Taking Stock: Renewing our research agenda on the causes and consequences of dropping out," by Natriello et al., 1986, *Teachers College Record, 87,* p. 430. Copyright 1986 by Teachers College Record. Reprinted with permission.

A substantial number of researchers have detailed the characteristics of students deemed to be at-risk of leaving school early (Druian & Butler, 1987; Raywid, 1999; Slavin, 1990). Natriello et al. (1986) acknowledged that school processes, as they related to at-risk students, required more serious consideration. The first two elements, student characteristics and school processes, interact to create a cumulative effect on students' development over the course of their school career. Depending upon individual experiences, students develop and respond differently. Individuals' responses to these experiences determine students' educational future. The third element, dropping out, results in the outcome of a cumulative effect of negative experiences both in factors that mold students' character and the school's failed attempt to meet successfully the needs of at-risk students.

Students who decide to leave school early are more likely to perceive the school setting as non-supportive or irrelevant than do students who continue with their schooling. Natriello et al. (1986) stated that if educators used this framework to develop methods that lessened the effects of risk factors that students were exposed to and increased the awareness of educational alternatives, students would better be able to facilitate their long-term educational goals. Druian and Butler (1987) used this framework in their study of effective schooling practices and at-risk youth. They questioned whether increased standards made it more difficult for at-risk students to succeed in school. They further indicated that, on the positive side, when students were confronted with challenging standards, they were more likely to pay attention in class and spend time on homework than when they were not confronted with challenging standards. However, the authors noted that the results of higher standards might lead to expectations that are too high for some students to succeed without additional assistance. One projected, potential negative effect was that greater academic separation would occur as students had fewer choices available to them. Another projected, potential negative effect noted by the authors was that more demanding time requirements from the schools conflicted with other demands faced by students. These negative conditions led to students leaving school early and the harmful consequences associated with not graduating from high school. Natriello et al. (1986) provided an explanation of the dropout cycle that provided a framework for investigating the performance differences of at-risk students served in traditional high schools and academic alternative high schools.

2 History

The concept of the alternative school, with its attempts to address the needs of students at-risk for dropping out of school, has an extensive history. Its beginnings can be traced as far back as the turn of the century, when educators were in search of a school that could "serve as a site for production of alternative and or oppositional cultural practices" (Apple & Weis, 1983, p. 201). *The Merriam-Webster Dictionary* (2004) offered three definitions of the word *alternative*. They were "offering or expressing a choice, "different from the usual or conventional," "and existing or functioning outside the established cultural, social, or economic system" (p. 18). When these definitions are applied to public schools, they highlight the differences between traditional schools and alternative schools in the areas of the programs that serve students at-risk of dropping out of school.

In this article, we review the issues faced by students who are at-risk of dropping out of school. The specific topics included (a) students in danger of leaving school early, (b) defining dropouts, (c) at-risk students and dropouts, (d) the history of traditional education, (e) alternative schools, and (f) accountability and alternative education. Also explored in this literature review are studies about school settings and the impact the aforementioned issues have on at-risk students.

3 Students in Danger of Dropping out of School

3.1 Characteristics of Dropouts

In their studies of students who made the decision to drop out of high school, researchers have examined extensive demographic information and have identified several characteristics that dropouts often demonstrate (Rumberger, 1987). Several indicators of potential school dropouts have included low socioeconomic backgrounds, single-parent families, and parents or siblings who were dropouts (Fernandez & Velez, 1989; Hartnagel & Krahn, 1989; Norwood, 1989; Rumberger, 1983). Of these indicators, Rumberger (1987) concluded that socioeconomic status was the most important factor in predicting dropouts.

Educators often are faced with the challenges of educating children living in poverty (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). Students living in poverty often have experienced physical and emotional handicaps, lack of health care, poor nutrition, difficult family conditions, and inner city neighborhoods (Dubow & Luster, 1990). "Home is the most unequal environment in education, and school should be an arena of equity" (Conrath, 2001, p. 82). Students who live in poverty are rarely enrolled in advanced placement classes; conversely, students of wealth are rarely served in at-risk programs. Conrath stated, "Of all the measurable differences between successful and unsuccessful students, in my experience, family income trumps all others" (p. 82).

In addition to poverty, Westheimer, Kahne, and Gerstein (1992) identified two external factors related to the student at-risk of leaving school prematurely: poor attendance and low self-esteem. They cited non-attendance as the most prominent behavioral outcome related to the academic deficiency of these students (Westheimer et al., 1992). Truancy is the act of being unlawfully absent from school (Hale, 1991). Often, students who skip school fall behind in their schoolwork and eventually drop out of school (Martin, Tobin, & Sugai, 2002). Kronick and Hargis (1990) stated that delinquency and truancy were responses to the adolescent's perceived failure to satisfy social and emotional needs or to achieve a meaningful position within a social context, such as the school. Wood (1991) suggested that students were more likely to attend school if they believed that attending school would satisfy their immediate needs or benefit them in the future.

A primary measurement of school success is attendance. Those students who have problems with truancy are more likely to drop out than are other students (McLaughlin, 1990). Chronic truancy has been documented as a sign of a student disengaging from the learning process and being on the verge of dropping out of school. Attendance could be a good indicator of a student's motivation and interest in school (Hale, 1991). Truant students demonstrated a lack of commitment to learn because they have not been motivated to attend school on a regular basis. Also, truant students have faced low self-confidence in their ability to succeed in school because their absences have caused them to fall behind their classmates.

Bridgeland, Dilulio, and Morison (2006) reported in a 2006 study that persons who fail to graduate from high school had continual patterns of refusing to wake up to attend school, taking extended lunch breaks, and consistently skipping class. Students reported that each absence made them more unwilling to go back to school. Of the students interviewed, 59% to 65% admitted that they dropped out because they felt they could not catch up with their classmates (Bridgeland et al., 2006).

When compared to academic performance or discipline issues, absenteeism was the highest predictor of course failure (Bridgeland et al., 2006). Absenteeism dramatically increased the likelihood that truant students would drop out of school. Teachers were limited in the amount of attention they could provide to help chronically absent students catch up on the work they had missed. Therefore, students declined in their academic performance and began to view school in a negative light. As a result, students found dropping out easier than catching up (DeKalb, 2003).

Another issue relevant to at-risk students is self-concept. Self-concept develops as people evaluate how they behave in certain situations and how others respond to that behavior. If the behavior and feedback are consistent over time, individuals internalize these behaviors as part of their self (Bracken, 1992). The development of self-concept requires attention to one's behavior, the specific environment, and the responses one's behavior evokes in other people. As a child develops, self-concept changes. Greater differentiation of self-concept occurs with age (Crain & Bracken, 1994), and these different domains appear to be influenced by the environment (Cauce, 1987). Marsh (1989) reported that children experience a higher level of self-concept in Grade 6, a drop in Grades 8 through 9, and an increase in Grades 10 through 11 and into young adulthood.

Examining self-concept was important when looking at the characteristics of students at-risk of dropping out of school. Marsh (1990) examined self-concept profiles of adolescents suspended from high school using the Self-Description Questionnaire-II. Marsh determined that the questionnaire categories of Physical Appearance, Opposite-Sex Relationships, Honesty, and Trustworthiness were in the average range for the suspended students. However, Parent Relationships, General Self, and General School Self-Concepts were low for both males and females. Girls' self-concepts were low for Same-Sex Relationships and Emotional Stability. When examining self-esteem, locus of control, and engagement in at-risk African American and Hispanic students, gender and ethnic differences were present only for self-esteem, with male students having higher average self-esteem than Hispanic students (Finn & Rock, 1997).

The Intercultural Development Research Association's (2006) attrition study reported that 137,000 Texas students, or 35% of the freshman class of 2002–2003, left school before graduating in the 2005–2006 school year. In the last 20 years, the gap in the holding power of students of various racial and ethnic backgrounds has widened, with attrition rates increasing for Hispanic students and Black students, at the same time decreasing for White students (IDRA).

Researchers have identified educational experiences as the best predictors of dropping out—better than race, poverty, age, gender, and personal circumstances. Although educators often believe dropping out of school to be driven by personal and family circumstances unrelated to schooling, most dropouts exhibit highly predictive educational warning signs (Roderick, 1993). For example, a federal survey revealed that dropouts were twice as likely to cite school-related reasons over family or work-related reasons for leaving school (Berktold, Geis, & Kaufman, 1998), something that held true for all demographic subgroups (Jordan, Lara, & McPartland, 1999).

When young people make the decision to not graduate from high school, they and American society as a whole, face various negative consequences. Simon (1960) proposed a three-phase model of decision processes to describe this decision-making process. These three phases were termed as Intelligence, Design, and Choice. Simon's Model of the Decision Process Intelligence, which was borrowed from and based upon the military meaning of the same word, involves identifying the need for a decision or searching the environment. This phase describes what happens as students begin to fear that they are not being successful and have little hope of completing their diploma. Simon described that once the environment has been searched and the need for a decision identified, the design phase begins. This phase involves investigating and developing the problem domain and alternatives. Potential dropouts also begin to pursue their alternatives to dropping out which might include the General Education Development certificate (GED) or alternative approaches to schooling.

Simon's final phase is that of Choice, which describes the activity of selecting the most appropriate course of action from the alternatives previously generated. The Choice phase can be related to the point at which students make the decision to drop out, which leads to serious consequences for the student and for society.

3.2 Consequences of Dropping Out of School

Students who leave school prematurely are more likely than high school graduates to become dependent on welfare and other government programs, engage in criminal activities, and experience health problems (Rumberger & Thomas, 2000). In the 1990s, between 347,000 and 544,000 Grade 10 through Grade 12 students left school each year without successfully completing a high school program (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2002).

Researchers have pointed out that the negative impact of dropouts on the American economy is as substantial as their impact on the educational field (Rumberger, 1983). Several researchers have concluded that a dramatic increase in unemployment rates occurs as dropout rates increase (Alspaugh, 1998; Croninger & Lee, 2001; Fine, 1986). When students drop out of high school, they severely diminish their chances of obtaining satisfactory jobs. The consequences of students leaving school prematurely are costly to both the individuals and society. For example, dropouts have fewer options for employment and are usually employed in low-skilled, low-paying positions (Martin et al., 2002). These young adults compete for jobs with other adults who have received their high school diplomas. A high school diploma appears to be a societal prerequisite for employment (Lagana, 2004).

Naylor (1989) indicated that dropouts and marginal students were an ever-increasing drain on the economy due to their substandard academic and employability skills. They further stated that corporations have been spending millions for training so that their workers can read and write to perform adequately in entry-level positions. Catterall (1985) reported that over $75 billion in welfare benefits and unrealized tax revenues are lost annually in the United States due to the dropout problem.

Increasing evidence indicated that the United States' economic well-being is linked directly to three factors: the capability to participate actively in the global economy, the ability to incorporate information technology into the workplace, and the capacity to develop a labor force with the knowledge and skills necessary to operate in an increasingly complex and dynamic work environment (Judy & D'Amico, 1997; Katz, 1992). The last of these three elements, an educated and skilled pool of workers, was the key characteristic that has allowed the United States to progress in a sophisticated global environment. Four-fifths of compensated employment positions were skilled jobs, and applicants who finished high school were more likely to obtain these jobs than applicants who were dropouts (Stringfeld & Land, 2002). Between 1997 and 2001, more than one-quarter of all dropouts were unemployed for one year or longer, compared with 11% of those persons with a high school diploma or GED (Wald & Martinez, 2003).

Fritsch (2005) indicated that dropouts were 72% more likely than graduates to be unemployed. Dropouts made up about half of the heads of households receiving welfare. Fritsch also reported that 75% of prison inmates never earned a high school diploma. In addition, 77% of state prison inmates who did not complete high school or earn their GED returned to prison. Increasing the high school completion rate by 1% for all men ages 20–60 would save the United States $1.4 billion annually in reduced cost associated with crime (Moretti, 2005).

In the United States in 2000, the average income of a person without a high school degree was only $28,974 compared to $45,368 for a person who was a high school graduate and $84,029 for a person with a bachelor's degree (Murdock, Nazrul, Michael, White, & Pecotte, 2002). Such differences, when experienced over a lifetime, have implications for the quality of life of the individuals involved and for the private and public sector economies (Rumberger & Larson, 1998). Education and its impact on the economic lives of individuals is likely to continue to be an area of concern for both public policy makers and private-sector decision makers (Murdock et al., 2002).

A consequence of dropping out of school often results in the dropout demonstrating "low aspirations, reduced motivation, and a sense of hopelessness" (Harris, 2006, p. 1). Harris also reported that a growing issue of African American youths who have dropped out of school is idleness, which is most often characterized

by individuals continuously walking the streets, and routinely doing nothing productive. The year-round idleness rate for Black men varies by age, educational attainment, and geographic location. Idleness rates in 2002 ranged from a low of 18% for those ages 35 to 44 to a high of nearly 42% for those ages 55 to 64. Forty-four percent of Black men with no high school diploma were idle year-round versus 26% of high school graduates and only 13% of those persons with a bachelor's or higher degree (Sum, Fogg, Magnum, Fogg, & Palma, 2000).

3.3 Serving Students At-Risk of Dropping Out

Leaving school early is probably the most studied education problem in the United States (Roderick, 1993). Roderick reported that students who were retained before entering high school were more likely to experience attrition prior to entering high school. These same students were also included in the population of students failing to achieve. Finn (1989) argued that it would be a good thing if educational risk factors turned out to be better predictors because they were alterable, as opposed to status risk factors such as poverty, gender, race, and family background, over which educators had little or no control. Schools must be able to address the alterable variables, and the alternative school setting is an effort to do that.

The majority of children in the United States are educated in traditional public schools (NCES, 2002). Yet many alternatives to traditional public schooling exist and are serving a significant number of students. Some of the available alternatives include charter schools, magnet programs, distance learning programs, home schooling, and private schools (Funkhouser, 2000). These educational options have emerged for many reasons, and in general, advocates have argued that multiple educational models are essential to meeting the needs of all students (Barr & Parrett, 2001; Natriello, McDill, & Pallas, 1990; Young, 1990). Alternative schools and programs have comprised one educational option often designated as a setting for students who have not succeeded in traditional schools.

Kleiner, Porch, and Farris (2002) reported that the number of alternative schools serving students at-risk of school failure has grown significantly over the past decade. According to Hoffman (2001), 3,850 public alternative schools existed in the United States during the 1997-1998 academic year. In 2002, the number increased to nearly 11,000 public alternative schools and programs for at-risk students (Kleiner et al., 2002). Similarly, legislation on alternative schools has increased significantly across the nation. In 1998, researchers reported that 22 states had some form of legislation on alternative schools (Katsiyannis & Williams, 1998). At-risk students were served in over 11,000 alternative schools in the United States in 2003 (NCES, 2003). In the state of Texas, 417 campuses were registered as AECs as of May 19, 2006 (TEA, 2006b).

Scanlon and Mellard (2002) reported factors that pushed students out of school compared to factors that pulled students out of school. Push factors included retention, low academic achievement, and a lack of concern by school personnel. Pull factors were defined as factors that were outside of a school's influence. Some pull factors included pregnancy, work, peer pressure, and family issues. Fritsch (2005) indicated common reasons that students dropped out of high school. The reasons for dropping out included family breakups, pregnancy, problems with the law, and trouble waking up on time.

At-risk youth require an atmosphere that acknowledges their essential and unique needs for safety, trust, and recovery from many years of failure (Baker, Bridger, Terry, & Winsor, 1997). Researchers have concluded that, because of these needs, alternative education programs should be well founded in psychological theory and supported with sound educational practice (Pianta & Walsh, 1996; Rogers, 1969).

3.4 Defining Dropouts

Recently, a controversy developed stemming from the inconsistencies that existed from state to state in methods of reporting dropout rates. In The Harvard Project, researchers tracked the success of groups of students as they moved from Grades 9 through 12 and reported that slightly more than half of the students completed four years of high school (Sunderman & Kim, 2004). However, the districts' statistics were that more than 75% graduated that year. California schools reported an overall graduation rate of 86.9%, with San Bernardino schools reporting 75.7%. However, using a different measure called the Cumulative Promotion Index (CPI), the Harvard Project calculated California's graduation rate to be 71%.

Swanson (2005) stated that the CPI indicator is the only method that is able to overcome the technical challenges involved in calculating realistically reliable graduation rates for individual racial and ethnic categories. The CPI approximates the possibility that a student entering the ninth grade will complete high school on time with a regular diploma (Swanson, 2005). It accomplishes this task by representing high school graduation rate as a stepwise process composed of three grade-to-grade promotion transitions (9 to 10, 10 to 11, and 11 to 12), in addition to the definitive high school graduation event (Grade 12 to diploma). Being progressive, the CPI effectively looks forward from the freshman year and estimates the likelihood that a ninth grader from a particular school system will complete high school with a regular diploma in four years. The CPI may be an attractive option for states or districts that are implementing new data collection systems because it provides information about graduation rates that might be incorporated into accountability systems after only a brief time, as opposed to other methods which require 4 to 5 years of data (Swanson).

In a study of the dropout rates of New York City high schools, Gotgaum (2002) documented that large numbers of high school students were leaving New York City public schools without graduating. Some school officials were encouraging students to leave regular high school programs, although the students were still of high school age. More than 160,000 high school students were discharged from 1997–2001 (Gotgaum, 2002). Anecdotal evidence suggested that school administrators forced many of these students out, although students had the legal right to remain in school.

In 2006, The National Center for Education Statistics (2006), in conjunction with the U.S. Department of Education Institute of Education Sciences, released a new measure to estimate the percentage of high school students who graduated on time. This new measure, referred to as the Averaged Freshman Graduation Rate, expanded the number of categories that the NCES allowed for identifying high school dropouts and completers in the United States (NCES, 2006). The categories of school dropout and school completion included the event dropout rate, the status dropout rate, the status completion rate, and the average freshman graduation rate. According to the NCES (2006), the definitions of its indicators of school dropout and school completion were as follows:

1. The event dropout rate is the percentage of private and public high school students who left high school between the beginning of one school year and the beginning of the next without earning a high school diploma or its equivalent.
2. The status dropout rate is the percentage of individuals in a given age range (i.e., 16–24, 16–18, 18–24) who were not in school and did not earn a high school diploma or equivalency, irrespective of when they dropped out. (This rate focused on an overall age group or cohort rather than on individuals.)
3. The status completion rate is the percentage of individuals in a given age range who were not in high school and who did not earn a high school diploma or equivalency credential, irrespective of when the credential was earned. This rate also was referred to as the inverse of the status dropout rate.
4. The averaged freshman graduation rateis the proportion of high school freshmen that graduated with a regular diploma four years after starting ninth grade. This rate measured the extent to which schools graduated students on time (NCES, 2006).

3.5 Texas Definition of Dropouts

When successful alternative schooling was not available for students, the consequences often led to students dropping out of school. In the Texas Education Agency's (2005c) Study of Secondary School Completion and Dropouts, a dropout was defined as "a student who was enrolled in school at some time during the school year, but left school during the school year without an approved excuse" (TEA, 2005b, p. 79). Further, a dropout was also identified as a student who completed the school year but did not return the following year.

In the same study, a student reported to have left school for any of the following reasons was considered a dropout for accountability purposes: (a) a student who left to enroll in an alternative program and was not in compliance with compulsory attendance, (b) a student who left to enroll in an alternative program and was not working toward a General Educational Development (GED) certificate or a high school diploma, (c) a student who left to enroll in college but was not pursuing a degree, (d) a student whose enrollment was

revoked because of absences, (e) a student who was expelled for criminal behavior and could return to school but had not, (f) a student who was expelled for reasons other than criminal behavior, (g) a student who left because of low or failing grades, poor attendance, language problems, exit level testing failure, or age, (h) a student who left to pursue a job or join the military, (i) a student who left because of pregnancy or marriage, (j) a student who left because of homelessness or non-permanent residency, (k) a student who left because of alcohol or other drug abuse problems, (l) a student who did not return to school after completing a term in a Juvenile Justice Alternative Education Program, or (m) a student who left for another or an unknown reason. This description adopted by Texas educators is different from the definition used at the national level. Cunningham (2007) stated that an on-going issue of accurate coding by counselors, administrators, and clerks to identify the reason accurately that a student left school is a challenge for the accuracy of the state data collection system.

4 At-Risk Students and Dropouts

The term at-risk has become routine in the ongoing debate about students, families, schools, and educational policy (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983; Pallas, Natriello, & McDill, 1989). Traditionally, society has used the term at-riskas an arbitrary label for students who were likely to drop out because of undesirable educational experiences, such as low academic achievement, poor school attendance, and grade retention (Johnson, 1997). Consequently, in theory, the term at-risk indicated a permanent psychoeducational condition that could be defined in unconditional terms (Ayers & Ford, 1996; Clayton, 1996). However, much evidence suggested that, in practice, the term was unclear, reflecting a lack of consensus about its meaning and criteria (Donmoyer & Kos, 1993; Richardson, Casanova, Placier, & Guilfoyle, 1989).

What social, psychological, and environmental factors are associated with the risk of dropping out? Which particular groups of students are currently at-risk, and what can occur to minimize the dropout risk? These kinds of questions suggested that the condition of being at-risk in general, and at-risk of dropping out in particular, was a pathology that was peculiar to identifiable groups of children, families, and communities and that, eventually, needed treatment. Ayers and Ford (1996) contended that the risk of dropping out of school was a public disease that should be regarded as seriously as physical health risks. Consequently, the scientific importance placed upon the notion of risk within the medical community helped to legitimize and validate the descriptive power of the term at-risk in the field of education. Ayers and Ford (1996) used the notion of being medically at-risk and transferred this idea into the educational and social arena.

Pearson (1991) asserted that one fundamental problem associated with the concept of being a dropout risk was that it tended to place the blame for educational failure directly upon the shoulders of children, their families, and their communities. In doing so, schools, and society at-large, were excused of their responsibilities to meet the educational needs of diverse populations. Rather than helping these students, the at-risk label further threatened their educational progress by supporting negative stereotypes about students and families from diverse backgrounds or those persons who lived in impoverished communities (Ayers & Ford, 1996; Clayton, 1996; Fine, 1986).

The Ayers and Ford (1996) description has revealed an emerging consensus about the definition of at-riskness and its contributory factors within educational communities (Pearson, 1991). Based upon theoretical and empirical work, educational researchers have identified a variety of environmental, social, and cultural factors that potentially cause a student to be at-risk including: (a) being a minority or ethnic group identity; (b) living in a low socioeconomic household, (c) living in a single-parent family, (d) having a poorly educated mother, (e) having a non-English language background, (f) living in an impoverished neighborhood or community; and (g) living in a violent neighborhood or community (Lind, 1997; McDill et al., 1985; Presseisen, 1988).

Slavin (1990) cited a variety of reasons that might impede a student's graduation from high school. Some of these reasons were premature birth, juvenile offenses, teenage pregnancy, drug abuse, personality disorders, previous dropouts, and children who lived in poverty. Fine (1986) believed that students faced with identifiable obstacles encountered more challenges than most youth and needed additional choices in order to complete their high school education. The term at-risk became a label assigned to any youth that

an adult identified as having obstacles in the way of academic achievement (McDill et al., 1985).

The state of Texas currently recognizes 13 characteristics used to classify students as at-risk (Texas Education Code §29.081, 2004). The Public Education Information Management System (PEIMS) At-Risk Indicator Code identified at-risk students using state defined criteria only. A student at-risk of dropping out of school included students under 21–years of age who:

1. Are in pre-kindergarten, kindergarten or grade 1, 2, or 3 and did not perform satisfactorily on a readiness test or assessment instrument administered during the current school year
2. Are in grade 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, or 12 and did not maintain an average equivalent to 70 on a scale of 100 in two or more subjects in the foundation curriculum during a semester in the preceding or current school year or is not maintaining such an average in two or more subjects in the foundation curriculum in the current semester
3. Were not advanced from one grade level to the next for one or more years
4. Did not perform satisfactorily on an assessment instrument administered to the student under Texas Education Code, subchapter B, Chapter 39 (Texas Education Code, 2004) and who has not in the previous or current school year subsequently performed on that instrument or another appropriate instrument at a level equal to at least 110% of the level of satisfactory performance on that instrument
5. Are pregnant or have children of their own
6. Have been placed in an alternative education program in accordance with TEC 37.006 (2004) during the preceding or current school year
7. Have been expelled in accordance with TEC 37.007 (2004) during the preceding or current school year
8. Are currently on parole, probation, deferred prosecution, or other conditional release
9. Were previously reported through the Public Education Information Management System (PEIMS) to have dropped out of school
10. Are a student of limited English proficiency, as defined by TEC §29.052 (2004)
11. Are in the custody or care of the Department of Protective and Regulatory Services or has, during the current school year, been referred to the department by a school official, officer of the juvenile court, or law enforcement official
12. Are homeless, as defined in No Child Left Behind, Title X, Part C, Section 725 (20) (U.S. Department of Education, 2002), the term "homeless children and youth," and its subsequent amendments; or
13. Resided in the preceding school year or resides in the current school year in a residential placement facility in the district, including a detention facility, substance abuse treatment facility, emergency shelter, psychiatric hospital, halfway house, or foster group home. (TEC, 2004, p. 6)

5 History of Traditional Education

The American school system had its roots in the 1830s and 1840s when a new generation of education reformers challenged the tradition of disorganized and restricted education. Major American educators, such as Horace Mann in Massachusetts and Henry Barnard in Connecticut, sought to increase educational opportunity for all children by creating the common-school movement (Altenbaugh, 1999). In 1837, Mann became secretary of the Board of Education in Massachusetts and supervised the creation of a statewide common-school system. Barnard led similar efforts in Connecticut where he became superintendent of common schools in 1849 (Spring, 1993).

The term *common* meant several things to these educators. Their reform efforts focused on elementary education. They believed that all young children should be schooled, and that the content of education should be the same for everyone. Mann and Barnard believed that common schooling could create good citizens, unite society, and prevent crime and poverty. As a result of their efforts, free public education at the elementary level was available for all U.S. children by the end of the 19th century (Katznelson & Weir, 1985).

The first publicly supported secondary school in the United States was Boston Latin School, founded in 1636 (Duck, 1996). Until the late 19th century, mostly private tutors or privately supported academies

conducted secondary education (Karier, 1986). In the 20th century, high school attendance grew because more and more students regarded additional schooling as the key to succeeding in an increasingly urban and industrialized society (Gutek, 1986). After the introduction of strict child labor laws in the early 20th century, fewer teenagers entered the workforce, which gave them the time to attend school. School gave teenagers an acceptable alternative to labor that gave meaning to their lives before they entered the workforce, established a family, or began college. As the 20th century progressed, most states enacted legislation extending compulsory education laws to the age of 16 (Urban & Wagoner, 1996).

Public education, as known today, was shaped by the events in the early years of the 20^{th} century (Karier, 1986; Spring, 1993). The Great Depression, World War II, the Cold War, wars with other countries, the Civil Rights Movement, student protests, and numerous political events had profound effects on the educational system. Like other states, the state of Texas was concerned about the education of children and took steps to address concerns.

The Texas Declaration of Independence, in 1836, listed the failure of the Mexican government to create any public system of education among the reasons for severing political ties with Mexico (TEA, 2004b). The first Anglo-American public school law in Texas was enacted in 1840, and provided for surveying and designating land to support public schools. The state constitution of 1845 provided that one-tenth of the annual state tax revenue be set aside as a perpetual fund to support free public schools. Also, in 1845, a new school law created a permanent school fund of $2 million in order to establish public schools in Texas (TEA).

After the Civil War and Reconstruction, the new state constitution of 1876 reserved 45 million acres of public domain for school support and directed that the income from the new Permanent School Fund be invested in bonds (TEA, 2004b). Currently, income from the Permanent School fund provides roughly $765 million a year to local school districts. A system of accreditation was created in 1885 when high schools submitted selected test papers for review by the faculty of the University of Texas. If the examinations were determined to be satisfactory, the school was considered affiliated with the university, and the school's graduates were admitted without examination (TEA, 2004b).

In 1911, a rural high school law was passed which established county boards of education and allowed the creation of rural high schools and consolidation of common school districts. The expansion of rural aid to schools gradually helped improve the education provided to children of the state's farms and ranches. The passage of the Gilmer-Akin law in 1949 created the Foundation School Program to apportion state funds to local school districts (Funkhouser, 2000; TEA, 2004b). It also reorganized the administration of public education, created an elected State Board of Education that appointed a commissioner of education, and reorganized the administration of state public school policy through the Texas Education Agency (TEA, 2004b).

In 1984, The Texas Legislature passed House Bill 72, enacting comprehensive reforms of the public school system. This bill provided pay raises for teachers, recreated the system of public school finance to allot more money to property-poor school districts, and took many other steps aimed at improving the academic achievement of students (Funkhouser, 2000; TEA, 2004b). Also in 1984, in addition to establishing financial equity for school districts, Senate Bill 7 created the state's accountability system. The Texas accountability system measures and holds schools and districts accountable for student performance on assessment tests and dropout rates (TEA).

Open enrollment charter schools were established in the 1990s as alternatives to traditional public education schools (Funkhouser, 2000; TEA, 2004b). In 2004, Texas had 185 operating charter schools that comply with minimum provisions of the education code, operate with state funds, and provide alternative methods of instruction (TEA, 2004b).

6 Alternative Schools

John Dewey was the voice of the progressive movement of the 1930s and 1940s, which contributed to the conception of alternative education, as it is known today. The alternative schools of today also have their roots in the Civil Rights Movement of the early 1960s, as schools began exploring successful ways to meet the

needs of all students (Raywid, 1983). The progressive movement of the 1930s and 1940s was replaced by the Cold War era and the launch of Sputnik in 1957. During the 1950s, the public school system was criticized for being insensitive toward minorities and designed for the success of few. Raywid (1983) stated that schools were "cold, dehumanizing, irrelevant institutions largely indifferent to humanity and the 'personhood' of those within them" (p. 28).

The first alternative schools were a challenge to Horace Mann's view of the common school (Kahlenberg, 2000). The 1960s were years of great advancement in the alternative school's development. Alternative school programs blossomed during the 1960s, and thousands emerged after that (Franklin, 1992). Franklin also reported that alternative education seemed to evolve " . . . through grass-roots endeavors and represent a bona fide social change movement similar to that affecting the social welfare programs of the 1960s" (p. 239).

Concern among the public, educators, and policymakers about violent behavior, weapons, and drugs on elementary and secondary school campuses, balanced with concern about sending troublesome and potentially dangerous students into the public, precipitated an increased interest in alternative schools and programs (U.S. Department of Education, 1996). Many students, who were not succeeding in regular public schools, were being sent to alternative placements. In general, students were referred to alternative schools and programs as if they were at-risk of educational failure as indicated by poor grades, truancy, disruptive behavior, suspension, pregnancy, or similar factors associated with early departure from school (Paglin & Fager, 1997).

According to Gregg (1999), suspension, expulsion, retention, persistent failure, and estrangement all contributed to unacceptable dropout and incompletion rates. Rather than look at how to improve school systems that failed more than 50% of students, many states created alternative schools for difficult students who were perceived as diminishing the quality of general education (Potter, 1996).

In the 1980s, many school districts began to have unprecedented problems with students committing crimes on campus (Ensminger & Juon, 1998). The media was inundated with reports of school stabbings, shootings, and off-campus crimes committed by students (Escobar-Chaves et al., 2002). The Texas legislature responded to this by conducting a study of alternative education programs (TEA, 1999) initiated by the Joint Select Committee in Education. The committee reported findings in regard to the impact of alternative educational programs for at-risk youth. Cited in the report were successful programs that provided students with the psychological, academic, and social skills needed to function in a traditional educational environment, as well as within society. As a result of this report, the committee concluded that it was in the best interest of all students and staff to adopt a zero-tolerance policy in which behavior problems would not be accepted (TEA, 1999). A year later, the Texas governor signed a bill that mandated alternative education programs for students who had committed felonies or serious misdemeanors.

6.1 Types of Alternative Schools

However, the discipline alternative school was only one category of alternative education programs that evolved after the turn of the century. Smith (1974) defined a public alternative school as a campus that offered families a choice for their students to receive alternative learning experiences at no additional cost. Young and Clinchy (1992) stated that alternative schools usually offered programs that were created to serve a targeted population such as dropouts, teenage parents, and students with a vocational or career orientation.

Raywid (1999) separated the population of alternative schools into three categories based upon their proposed purpose: (a) programs that focused on student performance and addressed those students who needed another chance, (b) programs that changed the educational setting and included flexible scheduling, electives specific to the trades, and smaller student-to-teacher ratios to provide more individualized instruction, and (c) programs that endeavored to change the educational system as a whole. These programs operated using the school-within-a-school concept and incorporated grouping so that adults could address specialty areas within student groups.

Lange (1998) also discussed three categories of alternative schools. They included: (a) Type I programs

which were described as magnet schools and schools of choice with programmatic themes and varied methods of instructional delivery, (b) Type II programs which focused less on academics and more on behavior modification because students were placed there by court order due to disciplinary issues, and (c) Type III programs for students who needed social or academic remediation.

School characteristics that boost the ability to keep students in school fell into two broad categories—supportive environments and academic challenge. More specifically, researchers found that students who attended high schools that had enrollments lower than 1,500 had better interpersonal relationships among students and adults, had teachers who were more supportive of students, and had a more focused and academically rigorous curriculum. These students tended to drop out at lower rates (Croninger & Lee, 2001; DeLuca & Rosenbaum, 2001; Lee & Burkam, 2003).

A student's view of the school setting has been described in the literature as the link between the decision to stay in school or to drop out before graduation. Yet, as alternative education programs have evolved and matured, they have provided lessons not only about how to reconnect with disenfranchised youth, but also how regular schools can avoid disconnection in the first place. As Raywid (1994) pointed out, "many of the reforms currently pursued in traditional schools—downsizing the high school, pursuing a focus or theme, students and teacher choice, making the school a community, empowering staff, active learner engagement, authentic assessment—are practices that alternative schools pioneered" (p. 26).

The positive impact of attending a school with a supportive environment has been related to student success. Croninger and Lee (2001) reported that, other things being equal, high schools whose teachers were highly supportive of students managed to cut the probability of dropping out nearly in half. The finding held equally true for students at low, medium, and high risk of dropping out. On the other hand, academic challenge also seemed to play a large role in student success, which may have surprised many observers in and outside of schools who believed there could be no trade off between higher academic rigor and better graduation rates (Roderick, Allensworth, & Nagaoka, 2004).

Lee and Burkam (2003) reported that high schools offering more focused and rigorous curriculum, composed of mainly academic courses with very few remedial or non-academic courses, had significantly higher graduation rates than school with different offerings. In fact, for every two additional math courses that high schools offered below the level of Algebra I, students experienced more than a 30% increase in the odds of dropping out. Lee and Burkam (2003) concluded, "This finding flies in the face of those who say that high schools must offer a large number of undemanding courses to keep uncommitted students in school" (p.112).

The NCES (2002) reported that 39% of public school districts administered at least one alternative school or program for at-risk students during the 2000–2001 school year. Nationwide in 2002, alternative high schools served approximately 280,000 students who were at-risk of failing or dropping out of regular high school or who had been expelled from school (Escobar-Chaves et al., 2002). These at-risk students were served in over 11,000 alternative schools in the United States in 2003 (NCES, 2003). In the state of Texas, 417 campuses were registered as AECs as of May 19, 2006 (TEA, 2006a).

The phrase *alternative school* often held a negative implication, but, in recent years, the phrase suggested student options or a second chance rather than compulsory, involuntary schooling (McGee, 2001). The second chance option combined the philosophies of alternative programs and school choice and offered another opportunity to those who were failing in the traditional system (Lange, 1998).

The effectiveness of an alternative school program depended upon the characteristics of its at-risk students. Learning cannot be isolated from psychosocial and affective characteristics; thus, constructs such as self-esteem and self-concept of at-risk students needed to be considered (Nunn & Parish, 1992). Nunn and Parish examined the differences between high school students, both those at-risk for school failure and a control group, and found statistically significant differences in self-concept, locus of control, and personal styles of learning between the two groups. The results showed that an at-risk student held a more negative self-concept and a more external locus of control than a student in the comparison group. At-risk students were also less motivated toward achievement, had lower self-concept as learners, and desired a more informal and nontraditional approach to learning than non at-risk students.

Other researchers have studied how schools may impact graduation rates (Swanson, 2005; Toenjes, 1989). Interestingly, just as with individual risk factors, certain school characteristics that were adjustable, such as

curriculum and teacher-student relationships, turned out to have a much bigger impact on school completion than factors beyond the control of educators, such as the demographic makeup of the student body and whether a school is public or private (Lee & Burkam, 2003).

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