

The Impact of Distance Learning on Nontraditional High School Student's Attendance at a predominant Hispanic Alternative High School in South Texas

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Abstract: High school dropout rates have long been a problem for school districts, and various contributing factors have solved the problem. Most of these students have been plagued by the inability to integrate into the mainstream of school life due to socio-economic standing, lack of parental support, and many other problems. This qualitative study examined how distance learning courses have the potential to increase high school graduation rates and attendance rates. This study was conducted at an alternative high school where the primary goal is to ensure nontraditional students' academic and personal support needed to graduate from high school. Five themes emerged from the participants responses: Academic Acceleration, Flexible Scheduling, Academic Support, Safe Environment, and Transportation. These themes were consistent with previous literature that supports the success and demand of distance learning settings, and the lower dropout rate for older students.

Keywords: Online courses, alternative high school, graduate, dropout, nontraditional students, socio-economic status

Introduction

Policymakers and school administrators have been troubled with student dropout rates for many years (Steeg et al., 2012). A variety of approaches have been implemented to combat student dropout rates (Kyun-Nyum, 2014). However, the number of students dropping out continues to rise. The Texas Public School Attrition study concludes that in 2018-2019, the attrition rate in Texas was 21% which is the lowest that the state experienced since 1986 (IDRA 2018-19).

Empirical findings show that high school students drop out for a variety of reasons; therefore, is difficult to predict and implement effective dropout prevention measures (Bowers & Spratt, 2012). Yet, declining grades is a sign of student disengagement that leads to student dropout.

The school learning environment is a determinant factor in the academic success of the school. School climate has a direct impact on academics (Davis & Warner, 2015). Ortigosa et al. (2019) found that distance learning allowed nontraditional students to continue their education despite personal situations that impeded them from attending face-to-face courses. Nonperformance students that experience negative encounters at their traditional schools, while experiencing personal struggles, tend to end up at alternative school settings where they receive a supportive environment of family and community (Ginright, 2015). Belsky and Pluess (2015) argue that if the school intervenes promptly the student could overcome the situation without dropping out. However, the school would need to provide guidance and assistance to the students to cope with the stressors and provide them with alternative solutions to those problems.

Statement of the Problem

Dropout is a national concern because when a high school student drops out of school, the cost to the US economy is at least \$250,000.00 during his/her life because of the costs of welfare, Medicaid, and fewer tax contributions (Lansford et al., 2016; Wood et al., 2017; Goux et al., 2017). According to Obinna and Ohanian

(2018), eleven million of the students in America are Latinos. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2019), the Latino dropout rate is the highest: Latino 13%, African American (8%) and Whites (4%) (Obinna & Ohanian, 2018). To appropriately target the present high school dropout problem, it was necessary to understand the reasons why students do not graduate from high school.

Research Questions

The following research questions were used to guide the researchers:

1. What perceived benefits does distance learning have on nontraditional high school students' attendance rates at a predominantly Hispanic South Texas alternative high school?

Review of Literature

According to Bowers and Sprott (2012), overaged students who cannot graduate in four and a half years are likely to become dropouts. An alternative school setting offers these potential dropouts the opportunity to graduate in an environment that provides a positive and nurturing school climate. Bowers and Sprott's findings show that high school students drop out without having experienced a history of academic or behavioral problems in elementary or middle school. Furthermore, stressful, and dramatic events that take place during their high school academic journey, such as parenting, the loss of a close relative, economic hardship, mental illness, depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and eating disorders, and result in student drop out.

Distance Learning

According to Statti et al. (2020), K-12 distance learning has increased at a fast pace since the start of the 21st century to accommodate families that are not content with the traditional educational system. The traditional educational system is not able to accommodate issues such as family illnesses or other social responsibilities. Furthermore, some families are seeking flexibility in class schedules that do not limit the students due to time or geographical space.

Distance learning is becoming more popular due to the student's ability to adapt faster (Tortorella & Graf, 2015). According to Popa (2017), online learning classes continue to increase educational institutions to accommodate student and social demands. Popa's findings reflect that distance learning was more accessible to a nontraditional type of student due to work and family obligations. Furthermore, findings showed that nontraditional students were able to adapt faster to online platforms than traditional face-to-face settings. Moreover, the adaptation to online platforms also allows students to gain knowledge in the new technological platform features, which can be beneficial when they apply to the workforce (Popa, 2017).

Academic Performance in Distance Learning Instruction

Tingir et al. (2017) found that achievement climbing all subjects at the K-12 level on for students that have access to mobile devices. Students that were exposed to mobile devices score significantly higher than the students with traditional educational methods and strategies. Furthermore, in this 21st century, students need technological skills to reach their academic goals. Nontraditional students are more likely to take online courses than their traditional-age counterparts (Anderson, 2018; Slover & Mandernach, 2018). Furthermore, Slover and Mandernach (2018) argue that nontraditional students scored higher in academic online instruction because of the flexibility of curriculum materials and the flexibility of classes.

Dropout Prevention

Dropout prevention has long been a major concern for school administrators. Many programs have been created to address this issue, and yet, the problem persists. One particularly vulnerable population are the nontraditional students who fall into one or more of these categories: married with children, family breadwinner, overage, and/or an underachiever. Because a traditional campus setting is not accommodating and providing relief to these students, it is imperative that other options be explored. The most viable of these is distance learning which offers the flexibility and environment that these students require. Studies identify different behaviors that predict student

dropout. According to these studies, dropping out of high school does not occur suddenly. It is the result of a long development of events that have resulted in school disengagement (Baker et al. 2019; Wang & Fredericks, 2019).

High School Attendance

Attendance is one student behavior that is highly linked with positive student achievement (Darling-Adwana, 2019). Popa (2017) notes that online learning classes continue to increase in educational institutions to accommodate student and social demands. Due to work and family obligations, distance learning is more accessible to a diverse type of students. Furthermore, different reports and surveys of students attending distance learning educational settings continue to increase annually. The online setting provides the students and the institutions with lower costs due to the reduction of utility cost, consumables, travel expenses, educational materials, and not having to attend a campus setting while earning an income.

Alternative High Schools

Alternative school settings are intended to provide individualized instruction for students who need intensive academic support (Griffiths et al., 2019). Alternative educational programs have been established for the past fifty years. These educational centers have been developed for young individuals of compulsory age that have been excluded from their home campuses. The main goal of the alternative high schools is to provide an alternative education route to continue their education and at the same time receive some work training skills (Pennacchia et al., 2016). Furthermore, TeRiele et al. (2017) argue that students who attend alternative education centers are the ones with the highest needs. Therefore, the importance of providing a nurturing positive school environment is critical, so teachers must create an affective learning environment. Alternative centers meet all the educational elements of the home campus such as high academic expectations, consistent attendance, and positive behavior.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this qualitative study is Bandura's (1997) theory of self-efficacy which facilitated the development of the research question related to the impact of distance learning on high school nontraditional student's graduation rates and attendance rates. Bandura defines self-efficacy as "belief in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments" (Bandura, 1997, p. 3). Furthermore, Bandura suggested that individuals tend to function at their best when their physiological arousal is at the medium stage, not too high nor too low. Furthermore, reducing negative emotional situations strengthens self-efficacy. The conceptual framework for an effective 6th through 12th distance learning program is to explore the relationship of distance learning opportunities in a supportive, flexible learning environment with experienced teachers. Student experiences and different learning styles play a role in identifying strong instructional strategies (Beasley & Beck, 2017). Bandura's theory of self-efficacy is a crucial component for social learning. Students with low self-efficacy will struggle in the learning process while students with high self-efficacy will translate their learning as a challenge (Olson & Hergenhahn, 2013).

Method

The research method implemented in this study is a qualitative approach. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2011) qualitative research is a method that focuses on human and social sciences. A qualitative research single instrumental case study was conducted. This design allowed the researchers to use a case study, a bounded system by time and place to learn about a specific problem or issue (Creswell and Poth, 2018). Creswell and Poth (2018) define a single instrumental case study as a design that studies a case to provide perceptions of a particular issue. In this case, the researchers learned about the impact that distance learning has on high school nontraditional students' attendance rates and graduation rates at an alternative high school setting.

Research Design

A qualitative research single instrumental case study was conducted. According to Mills and Gay (2016), the case study approach allows the researchers to study a unit such as a school (Mills & Gay, 2016). Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. The case study may be implemented to explore more detailed educational strategies,

allowing the researchers to observe the subject in his/her environment, such as a classroom. Case studies allow the researchers to explore data in a real-life environment, helping him/her to explain the complexities of the real-life situations which would not be able to transpire in an experimental research environment (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Participants and Sampling

This study consisted of students attending or recently graduated from an alternative high school in a school district located along the Texas and Mexico border. An alternative high school provides individualized instruction while providing counseling services that support all students in completing their secondary education. The students who attend are identified as 100% at-risk for academic failure (TEA 2021-2022 TAPR). The demographic make up of the students is 99.6% Hispanic, 34% English Learners, 98% Economically Disadvantaged, with a mobility rate of 57.1% (TEA 2021-2022 Report Card).

A purposive sampling technique was used for this research. The purposive sampling technique allowed the researchers to select the site and individuals due to their knowledge of the phenomena of interest (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researchers selected twelve individuals in grades 9 through 12 from an alternative high school so they can purposefully provide information for a depth understanding of the research problem investigated (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This technique was implemented to find students that are representative of the indicated population and answer the researcher's questions (Mills & Gay, 2016). The students who qualify to participate in the research (nontraditional students attending an alternative high school or have recently graduated from the same alternative high school) were asked to volunteer.

Instruments

The instruments used to analyze the impact of distance learning on high school attendance and dropout prevention were one-to-one interviews, focus group interviews, learning analytics reports, and the analysis of artifacts such as lesson plans and progress reports. Participants' demographic data were gathered before individual interviews. A well-organized setting was developed to ensure a non-distracting environment for participants with comfort and privacy. Individual audio-recorded interviews scheduled to last no more than sixty minutes were conducted. Every effort was made to ensure that the students felt comfortable in answering the questions. Furthermore, their confidentiality was guaranteed.

Data Collection Procedures

Data collection began with individual interviews to gain students' perspectives and experiences of distance learning courses towards their graduation attainment. Interviews took place via zoom to ensure safety for all the participants. Students emailed the researchers the best day and time for the interview. The researchers emailed participants the zoom meeting invitation. The individual interviews did not exceed sixty minutes. Individual interviews with in-depth interviewing allowed for in-depth detailed information to better understand their perspective with distance learning. Once all the individual interviews were finalized, a focus group interview via zoom took place, allowing the students to express their experiences and opinions towards distance learning in a group setting. The researchers captured nonverbal responses, such as facial expressions and body responses from them, to record authentic responses. This technique allowed the researchers to observe and record students' perspectives in a group setting.

Data Analysis

The researchers transcribed video files into notes that represent emergent ideas. The researchers read the data several times to have a clear picture of the individual interviews, focus group interviews, learning analytics reports, lesson plans, and progress reports. At this time, the researcher took general notes, short phrases, ideas, or critical concepts. The researchers studied in detail the data, discovering categories, and finding evidence that supported each category so that the researchers were able to create an audit trail as a validity strategy.

Coding for content was implemented. Responses were grouped by cause-effect relationships and similar events (Guest et al., 2012). The next step was to describe and classify codes into themes. The researchers read the

transcripts to find categories that emerged. In these sections, the researchers developed themes according to interpretations of the text. Once all the codes were created, a codebook was developed, an essential instrument for analyzing interview data. The researchers investigated patterns, statements, and examples. The researchers identified connections between the raw data collected and the research objectives to discover if distance learning courses have the potential to increase high school graduation rates and increase high school attendance rates.

Validity and Reliability

The researchers corroborated evidence through triangulation of multiple data sources. This approach can impact the credibility of the research because it allows for the collection of data from multiple sources, thereby creating a larger pool of data from which to conclude. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2011), qualitative research is fundamentally multimethod in focus. Therefore, triangulation, the use of multiple methods, investigators, or theories reveals the effort to ensure an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon. Secondly, discovering negative case analysis or discord firming evidence is a strategy utilized to ensure validity. Furthermore, the researchers clarified researcher bias or engaging in reflexivity.

The researchers implemented member checking, seeking participant's feedback. This strategy allowed the participants to verify the accuracy and credibility of the findings and gave them the opportunity to provide correctives or different interpretations of the findings. The researchers generated detailed, thick descriptions in which the researchers wrote with detail and thick description, allowing the readers to make decisions concerning transferability (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Results

Thirty-three percent of the participants were male (4), and sixty-seven percent of the participants were female (8). Based on data from twelve individual interviews (see Table 1), a focus group interview was comprised with nine of the participants. Table 2 demonstrates the themes that emerged during this study.

Table 1 Participant Demographics

Participant Code	Race/Ethnicity	Grade Level	Gender	Age	Enrollment Status
1	Hispanic	12 th	M	20	Graduated
2	Hispanic	12 th	F	21	Graduated
3	Hispanic	11 th	F	20	Enrolled
4	Hispanic	12 th	F	21	Graduated
5	Hispanic	12 th	F	19	Graduated
6	Hispanic	12 th	M	20	Graduated
7	Hispanic	12 th	M	19	Graduated
8	Hispanic	12 th	F	22	Graduated
9	Hispanic	9 th	F	18	Enrolled
10	Hispanic	12 th	F	22	Graduated
11	White	10 th	F	19	Enrolled
12	Hispanic	12 th	M	20	Graduated

Note: Demographic data was obtained from the participants before the interview process.

Table 2 Emerging Themes

Themes	Predominant / Less predominant
Academic acceleration	Predominant
Flexible scheduling	Predominant
Academic support	Predominant
Transportation	Less Predominant
Safe environment	Less predominant

Research Question

The research question was “What perceived benefits does distance learning have on nontraditional high school student’s attendance rates at a predominantly Hispanic South Texas alternative high school?” This research question looks at the effects that distance learning had on nontraditional high school attendance rates. Students voiced that at the beginning of the pandemic switching to distance learning was frustrating; however, once they adapted to the online requirements, all the participants voiced that they were able to meet attendance requirements. All the participants shared how they had to organize their day to ensure they met the attendance requirements and completed assignments. This behavior outlines constructivist pedagogy where the learners use their cognitive skills and are active participants in their learning. The participants had to organize their day and execute a plan to complete their coursework. Participants actively construct their knowledge from their own experiences utilizing a technological environment. Bandura’s (1997) theory of self-efficacy suggests that believing in one’s capabilities to organize and perform needed action to reach goals is essential. All the participants shared how supportive teachers, counselors, and school staff were, and how motivated they were to complete their courses.

Themes

The following five themes emerged from the coded data concerning this research question: Flexible scheduling, Academic Support, Transportation, Safe Environment, and Instructional Pace.

Flexible Scheduling

The first theme was flexible scheduling. The alternative settings are characterized by the flexibility of time and place which allows the student to progress in conjunction with work and/or parenting responsibilities (Anderson, 2018). Distance learning extends this flexibility allowing the students to have access to school coursework twenty-four hours a day and seven days a week. All participants shared that they liked the fact that they could do their schoolwork on their convenient schedule. Fifty-eight percent of the participants were able to have jobs while completing their high school requirements. Forty-two percent of the participants were able to take care of their children or family health issues while completing high school courses. One of the participants shared that distance learning allowed him to create his school schedule and provided him with an opportunity to get a job. “I like to do my schoolwork at night, so I would stay late every night completing my schoolwork, so I could go to work on the weekends” (Participant 1). Having a flexible schedule via distance learning allowed a student to continue attending school even though she was experiencing health issues.

Distance learning allowed me to do my work on my own time. I have health issues, therefore even when I was sick, I was able to continue working on my courses. Distance learning helped me attend school even when I was unable to leave my house due to my illness. (Participant 3)

Another participant shared that due to her risk of pregnancy she experienced attendance issues. Again, having access to a fixable schedule allowed the student to continue her schoolwork from her bed.

Due to my risk pregnancy, the doctor placed me on bed rest. Distance learning allowed me to work on my coursework from my bed. It was very convenient, and I was able to finish my coursework faster than I would of

at school and without missing any days.

(Participant 5)

Distance learning allow a participant to take care of his father and attend school:

Distance learning allowed me to take care of my father during the day and complete my course work at night or early in the morning. Sometimes I would start at 6:00 in the morning. (Participant 6)

Fifty-eight percent of the participants experienced concerns with attending face-to-face classes due to parenting responsibilities, health issues, or family responsibilities. Distance learning via a flexible schedule allowed students to reach their attendance requirements, preventing the loss of course credit.

During the focus group interview, students expressed positive feelings about distance learning; however, they expressed some concerns that distance learning helped to solve. Participants shared that attendance was not an issue since they could log in at any time of the day to get credit for the day. Participants also agreed that it was very convenient to have access to their schoolwork at any time.

However, some concerns were expressed. One student expressed not having internet access. A student shared "I didn't have internet, so I had to go to the library every day to do my schoolwork" (Participant 4). Another participant shared that the device that was assigned to him by the school did not work properly; therefore, he experienced some technical difficulties. Another concern that a participant shared was not having the appropriate device. The participant did not receive a device from the school, so she had to buy a laptop (Participant 11). Another student shared that even though he appreciated the flexible schedule to take care of a family member who was ill, family members took advantage of his flexible schedule. "Because my family knew that I could do my schoolwork at any time, they would ask me to help with more chores during the day" (Participant 6).

Academic Support

The second theme that emerged was academic support. All the participants shared that because they felt supported; they were able to complete their course assignments. Students shared how teachers called them daily to ensure a full understanding of the academic coursework.

Alternative school settings are intended to provide individualized instruction for students who need intensive academic support (Griffiths et al., 2019). Moreover, the school environment is a determinant factor in the school's academic success (Davis & Warner, 2018). The school climate has a direct impact on academics. The participants shared that during their experience with distance learning, teachers were contacting them daily to ensure that they were progressing accordingly. Teachers utilized the Google Class web-based application to post pre-recorded lessons on the difficult concepts. Students had access to the pre-recorded lessons at their convenience. If they needed more help, students were able to contact teachers via email, text, or phone. Students shared that they utilized the Internet to access more resources. They said that with internet resources and teacher pre-recorded lessons, they were able to complete their course work quicker. One of the participants shared "When I needed help, I would email my teacher and she would call me the same day, or I would call other students for ideas or resources" (Participant 1). Participant 4 shared "My teacher emailed me daily and checked my progress. I was able to complete my work with a little help. I was able to utilize internet resources at my convenience".

Participant 7 shared:

My teacher contacted me daily via email, and the counselor contacted me once a week to make sure that I was working on all my graduation requirements. I truly feel that all the staff at school helped me reach my goals faster during this difficult time.

Other participants shared similar experiences:

All my teachers were very supportive. The teacher was monitoring my progress by emailing me daily. The counselor would call me once a week to make sure that I was doing fine. If I needed assistance from another

teacher, the counselor would help me arrange a google meeting or a phone call. (Participant 5)

A couple of participants shared that some teachers took longer to respond to their emails. One participant shared:

My teacher sometimes would take more than a couple of days to respond. Another issue that I had was that sometimes the pre-recorded lessons were difficult to hear because they were recorded at a low volume. However, I was able to find resources on the internet to continue my progress on my courses. (Participant 6)

During the focus group interview, eight three percent of the participants shared that the teachers responded to them promptly; however, two participants expressed a delay in teacher response. Participant 6 shared: I would email my teacher and sometimes I would get a response four days later.

However, since I didn't want to wait, I would Google videos and find the answers before her response.

Additional lessonplanartifacts were utilized to corroborate participant statements. As previously mentioned, alternative schools are known for students receiving individualized instruction. Lesson plans reflected asynchronous pre-recorded lessons targeting student needs. Lesson plans offered more in-depth explanations. The teachers utilized different instructional strategies to reach the participants' needs with the extra help provided. Progress reports showed the communication that took place between the student and the teacher, and the student and the counselor.

Distance learning allows the students to implement self-regulated learning and monitor their progress. Moreover, the feedback provided by the teachers and counselor allowed the students to make changes and adjustments in their goal settings (Callan & Shim, 2019). Ninety percent of the participants mentioned that the teachers and the counselor were monitoring their progress and that they received external feedback to increase their self-regulated skills.

Transportation

The third theme that emerged was transportation. Other participants shared that they were experiencing transportation issues; therefore, their attendance was affected. One participant shared:

Since I live far from school, I had to wake up early to get a ride to school and I was the last one to get picked up from school. With distance learning, I was able to get more sleep and work on my modules at all hours of the day. I was able to complete my modules faster (Participant 4).

Some of the participants shared that because family members had health issues, they had transportation issues. Participant 6 shared that because his father had health issues, sometimes he was not able to take him to school. He also shared that sometimes he needed to accompany his father to doctors' appointments; therefore, he was not able to attend school. "Sometimes I missed school because, due to my father's illness, he was not able to drive, and I couldn't find a ride to school" (Participant 6). Some of the participants had jobs; therefore, they needed transportation to report to work on time. One participant shared "I had to rely on friends or family members to pick me up at school and take me to work on time" (Participant 12).

Some of the participants shared that because family members had health issues, they had transportation issues. One participant shared:

Distance learning allowed me to take care of my father during the day and complete my course work at night or early in the morning. Sometimes I would start at 6:00 in the morning. (Participant 6)

Fifty-eight percent of the participants had issues with attendancebecause ofparenting responsibilities, health issues, or otherfamily responsibilities.

Safe Environment

The fourth theme that emerged was a safe environment. Some of the participants shared negative experiences at their regular home campuses; therefore, they experienced poor attendance. Among some of these inappropriate experiences were mistreatments from other students, rejection from peers, bullying, not receiving the assistance needed from teachers, and negative comments from teachers. Seventy percent of the participants shared that they had issues socializing with other students. Wilkerson et al. (2015) suggested that students attending alternative high school settings showed improved outcomes in credit accrual earnings towards graduation with a reduction of discipline referrals.

Participants shared that at the alternative high school, all teachers and staff were supportive, and they felt welcome. One of the participants voiced “I was bullied at my home campus by other students and my teacher told me that I was never going to graduate” (Participant 1). Another negative experience that a participant shared was, “Teachers ignored me at my home campus, there were too many students in the classes, and teachers seemed frustrated” (Participant 11).

Another participant shared:

I didn’t want to go to my home campus because even when I would ask for help the teacher wouldn’t help me. I was embarrassed because I couldn’t finish my science projects. (Participant 3)

Another similar situation concerning teacher’s attitudes towards participants follows:

The teacher at my home campus didn’t help me even when I would raise my hand, they would ask me to put it down and they wouldn’t help me, so I started skipping classes.

(Participant 4).

All the participants shared that at their alternative high school, they felt welcome and received more one-to-one instruction. One student shared:

I knew I wanted to join the Army, but my home campus never guided me as to how. When I decided to enroll at the alternative high school, to graduate faster, I was given all the information that I needed. When I arrived at the alternative center the counselor provided me with all the information that I needed. The alternative high school also had career days. During these activities, I was able to learn about other careers, and the Army and Navy recruiters were there to answer all my questions. (Participant 7)

Two of the participants shared that they suffer from depression; therefore, they had poor school attendance. Distance learning allowed them to continue their schooling at their home in a safe environment. One participant shared:

I suffer from depression and sometimes going to school was difficult because my peers would notice, and they kept asking me questions that made my depression worse.

(Participant 4)

Another student, (Participant 11), shared that she lost her six-year-old sister to the pandemic, and how devastated her entire family was. And after that experience, her parents felt uncomfortable allowing her to attend school face-to-face.

During the focus group interview, participants shared that they like to attend their alternative high school. All participants shared how helpful and understanding teachers were and how welcome they felt in that environment. Students voiced that they would receive one-to-one instruction when needed. However, due to the pandemic, the students felt that distance learning helped them keep their families and loved ones safe.

Instructional pace

The fifth theme that emerged instructional pace. Students shared that during face-to-face instruction, they had to participate in all instructional activities. Some of these instructional activities were not relevant for all students such as benchmarks, End of Course (EOC) review sessions, and EOC testing sessions. One of the students shared that teacher reviewed End of Course testing materials with the entire class.

Some of the students had already passed the EOC exams; therefore, they did not need the review sessions. However, they had to participate in the review session. Students were not allowed to continue working on their coursework. Some participants shared the reasons why sometimes they chose not to attend school. "I decided not to attend school during the review EOC sessions because I would get frustrated and bored" (Participant 12). Another student shared a similar situation that affected his attendance.

I decided not to attend the alternative school during benchmarks or EOC testing when I had already passed the areas tested. I got bored in the holding rooms and we were not able to continue working on our needed course work. (Participant 8)

Attendance is one student behavior that is highly linked with positive student achievement (Darling-Adwana, 2019). Moreover, Popa (2017) notes that distance learning classes continue to increase educational institutions to accommodate student and social demands.

During the focus group interview, students expressed positive feelings about distance learning that positively affected their attendance, yet they expressed some concerns. Participants shared that attendance was not an issue since they could log in at any time of the day to get credit for the day. Participants also agreed that it was very convenient to have access to their schoolwork at any time of the day. However, some concerns were expressed.

Additional data were collected from progress report artifacts to analyze if students were signing into the school website to work on their assignments. Data supported that participants were logging in at different times of the day for duration of time to work on their assignments.

Discussion and Conclusions

The first theme that emerged in this study was flexible scheduling. According to Statti et al. (2020), distance learning has increased at a fast pace since the start of the 21st century to accommodate families that are not content with the traditional education system. Traditional education is not able to accommodate issues students with issues such as family illnesses or other social responsibilities. Families that are seeking flexibility in class schedules that do not limit the students' time or geographical space. Mc.A Baker et al. (2020) argue that distance learning has become an important development in the past decade. Students prefer hybrid formats because they offer flexible options. The alternative settings are characterized by the flexibility of time and place to accommodate students' needs. This allows the student to progress in conjunction with work and/or parenting responsibilities (Anderson, 2018).

Alternative school settings are intended to provide individualized instruction for students who need intensive academic support (Griffiths et al., 2019). According to Davis and Warner (2015), the school environment is a determinantal factor in the school's academic success and school climate has a direct impact on academics. Therefore, it is important to provide a nurturing, positive school environment. Teachers in distance learning education provide academic support through guidance instead of the traditional lecture. Bandura (1997) argues that self-efficacy and achievement are connected. Moreover, lack of support from teachers during instruction has the potential to deter the learner's motivation.

The participants shared that during their experience with distance learning, teachers were contacting them daily to ensure that they had all their support. Teachers utilized google class to post pre-recorded lessons on difficult concepts. Students had access to the pre-recorded lessons at their convenience. If they needed more help, students contacted teachers via email, text, or phone. Students shared that with the internet, they had access to more resources and were able to complete their course work faster. The analysis of artifacts reflected how teachers uploaded lessons according to individual student needs.

The third theme revolved around transportation. According to Casey (2008), distance learning continues to expand due to geographical and socio-economic barriers, students' willingness to reach academic goals, and rapid technological improvements. Hisse (2016) argues that distance learning provided opportunities to rural students that, without the flexibility of distance learning education, would not be feasible for them. Bandura (1981) argues that individual preoccupations, negative thoughts, and high arousal states are distracting to performance and have the potential to jeopardize expectations of success. Distance learning allows students to get more sleep, eat breakfast at home, and maximize instructional time. According to Yeung and Yeung-Hoang (2020), school travel may negatively affect student achievement. Students that ride the school bus must get up earlier and experience long bus trips. Some of the participants shared that they experienced transportation issues, and due to poor attendance, their credit accrual was affected. Participants shared that the school district provided transportation to students attending the alternative high school; however, it was only one bus. Students had to wake up very early and spend a couple of hours on the bus before arriving at school.

The fourth theme that emerged was a safe environment. Wilkerson et al. (2016) suggested that students attending alternative high school settings showed improved outcomes in credit accrual earnings towards graduation with a reduction of discipline referrals. Pendergast et al. (2018) argue that to assist students in creating an effective learning environment, it is essential to develop a sense of belonging at school. A sense of belonging at school is a critical component of student engagement in learning. Furthermore, teachers that create a positive student-teacher relationship motivate students. The teacher creates a safe environment where the student feels accepted when communication with the student is supportive and when the teacher treats the student as a person. Bettini et al. (2020) argue that administrators need to be cognizant and assist teachers with intensive student interventions to meet students' needs, when necessary.

Distance learning allows students to create a safe learning environment in their own homes. According to Bandura (2001), to harvest student participation in the learning environment, the students must feel safe.

The fifth and final theme was. Due to small classes in the alternative settings, teachers pay more individualized attention on students, assisting them as well as getting to know them better (Toro et al., 2019). The participants shared that even though they understood when the teacher would spend more time on a concept due to some students not grasping the material, they would sometimes get frustrated due to the urgency of completing their courses.

Distance learning allows students guided mastery under a simulated learning environment where corrected feedback is provided individually. Students can complete assignments at their pace. Bandura (1986) argues that corrective feedback needs to be provided in a safe environment where the student is not afraid of making mistakes.

Distance learning allows students to make progress according to their individual motivation and persistence. Bandura (2001) argues that with increased motivation and self-efficacy, individuals are more persistent when they are confronted with obstacles. All the participants shared that they were able to complete the course work faster with distance learning than in face-to-face classes. An unexpected finding was that students expressed frustration having to learn at their teacher's pace. Participants shared that having full control of their learning allowed them to complete their courses faster.

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