A Grounded Theory Approach to Understanding Educators' Perspectives on the Missouri

Option Program

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July 2025

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David Wayne Armstrong

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Abstract

This study explores the implementation and perceived effectiveness of the Missouri Option Program, an alternative graduation pathway for high school students significantly behind in credit accumulation. Despite the program's widespread use across Missouri's public schools, limited empirical research exists regarding how educational leaders interpret its value, select participants, or define its success. Using a constructivist grounded theory methodology, 17 in-depth interviews were conducted with teachers, administrators, and other support personnel who facilitate the program. Data were coded and analyzed through constant comparative methods, resulting in the development of the grounded theory of Conditional Redemption. This theory seeks to explain how students' eligibility and progress are governed not solely by formal policy, but by subjective judgments shaped by institutional priorities, staff discretion, and broader sociocultural narratives of worthiness. The findings reveal significant variability in implementation, access, and outcome measures across districts. This dissertation contributes to scholarship on dropout prevention and alternative education by highlighting the need for clearer placement standards, more equitable support systems, and a redefinition of success that reflects the lived realities of at-risk students. Implications for policy and practice are discussed, with particular attention to how educational systems can more consistently foster student dignity, opportunity, and redemption.

Keywords: Missouri Option Program, Alternative Education, Constructivist Grounded Theory, Conditional Redemption, Educational Leadership, At-risk Students, Dropout Prevention

Dedication

To my cats: Cricket, Hopper, Louie, and Betty.

Your presence, mischief, and quiet loyalty sustained me through every page.

Meow.

Acknowledgements

This dissertation is the result of many hands, voices, and hearts.

To the students who participate in the Missouri Option Program: your resilience, honesty, and pursuit of a new path gave this research its purpose.

To the teachers, counselors, administrators, and staff across Missouri who carry out this work each day: your commitment to alternative pathways, your advocacy, and your belief in every student's potential made this project possible.

To those who labor, often without recognition, to ensure that education remains a place where redemption is possible: this work stands on your shoulders.

Thank you.

Table of Contents

List of Tables

List of Figures

List of Appendices

Chapter One

Introduction

Like many other states, Missouri offers select students who reach the senior year of their kindergarten cohort the opportunity to graduate even if they are a year or more behind in credit accumulation. This is accomplished through the Missouri Option Program (MoOpt), which, since 2002, has provided an alternative pathway to graduation which is not dependent on credits. This is important because research has suggested that credit accumulation could be the most significant factor associated with academic success (McKee & Caldarella, 2016). For those students who qualify for MoOpt, graduation is achieved through a competency-based model which uses one of two Missouri high school equivalency exams, the High School Equivalency Test (HiSET) or the General Educational Development (GED) test, as its measure of content mastery (Department of Elementary and Secondary Education [DESE], 2023). In addition to students who are credit deficient, MoOpt is also open to students identified "for other significant reasons" which could include any number of factors (DESE, 2021, p. 4). In practice, this means that any student who can pass the program's entrance exam could be identified for MoOpt.

Carver and Lewis (2010) reported that in the 2007-2008 school year, 64% of local education agencies (LEAs) in the United States administered or participated in either an alternative school or an alternative program designed to meet students facing the risk of academic failure. In LEAs with populations of 2,500 to 9,999 that percentage was 86% while LEAs larger than 10,000 reported a 96% rate of participation. Since 2002, roughly half, 262, of the LEAs in Missouri have used MoOpt as an alternative pathway for

students to graduate in the 2020-2021 school year (see Appendix B). This puts MoOpt in the unique position of being the only standardized alternative program to have been implemented by such a wide variety of Missouri LEAs.

Statement of Problem

According to DESE (2021), MoOpt provides "an effective means to retain students, decrease dropout rates, and increase the number of students who are prepared for postsecondary education opportunities or to enter the workforce" (p. 4). Despite the widespread use of MoOpt, little literature on its effectiveness or the overall impression that educational leaders have of it exists. Additionally, it is unclear why the program has only been adopted by half of Missouri's LEAs in the two decades since its inception (see Appendix B).

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this research will be to explore the validity of the claims made by DESE regarding MoOpt and to gain insight into the perceptions that the administrators and teachers who facilitate the program have about its effectiveness. Additionally, since little to no information exists regarding the implementation of MoOpt across LEAs, the study will seek to gain insight into how students are selected and screened for the program. To gain the insight necessary to answer the research questions, the Researcher will use both traditional and constructivist grounded theory (GT) methodologies to collect rich data using intensive and semi-structured interviewing strategies designed to "allow individual participants some latitude and freedom about what is of interest or importance to them" (Hesse-Biber, 2017, p. 112).

Significance of Study

According to Haggar and Hamilton (2019), "Researchers examining the antecedents of academic attainment have tended to focus on two sets of factors; those related to ability (e.g., general intelligence, executive functioning) and those related to perseverance (e.g., motivation, personality)" (p. 324). Students who are identified and eventually enter into MoOpt must first demonstrate reading and math levels of at least ninth grade with the aptitude to achieve an independent reading level of eleventh grade by the time they are ready to take the HiSET (DESE, 2021). This entrance requirement has the effect of limiting the program to a unique student population within the at-risk world to those who, despite experiencing academic failure, are able to achieve passing scores on the HiSET. Understanding how students are identified, the general use of the program across Missouri, and the perceptions of the program's success in the eyes of those who administer it all have the potential to add to the overall success of the program and aid in its expansion to LEAs who might otherwise not see the value in adopting the program.

Definition of Terms

Alternative Program. A course of study housed within a regular school where students who are at risk of academic failure are educated alongside the general student population (Carver & Lewis, 2010).

Alternative School. A course of study housed in a facility outside of the regular school where students who are at risk of academic failure are educated apart from the general student population (Carver & Lewis, 2010).

At-Risk. A label applied to students who potentially require interventions to avoid academic failure and eventual dropout. An assessment of a student's at-risk status is generally applied as the result of culminating risk factors which can be identified by LEAs such as socioeconomic status, a low GPA, disruptive behavior as measured by office referrals, pregnancy, and so on (Moore, 2006b).

At Risk. Despite being widely used, the term at risk retains the flexibility to be used in a variety of settings. In a school setting, at risk generally refers to negative life outcomes such as academic failure as defined by poor attendance, failure to complete courses, disengagement, and eventual dropout (Moore, 2006a).

Chronic Absenteeism. The point at which a student is absent 10% or more of a school term (Balfanz, 2016).

Course Completion. The process whereby a student receives a passing grade from a course of study. Course completion is typically expressed through a student's grade point average (GPA) where letter grades are assessed on a 4.0 scale and then averaged to provide a metric which stands in for a student's overall academic performance (McKee & Caldarella, 2016).

Dropout. The process whereby a student disengages from school and abandons their course of study. This process can come as the result of a number of factors such as unexpected events, long-term problems, skill deficits, or socioemotional issues (Evans & DiBenedetto, 1991).

High School Equivalency Test (HiSET). The HiSET is a standardized test published by Professional Service Industries (PSI) consisting of five subtests in Language Arts-Reading, Language Arts-Writing, Mathematics, Science, and Social Studies. PSI

acquired the HiSET from Educational Testing Services (ETS) in 2021. In January 2014, DESE changed its high school equivalency exam requirement from the GED to the HiSET (DESE, 2021). At the beginning of the 2024-25 school year, DESE approved the GED for use with MoOpt again, which made both exams viable for program completion.

Theoretical Framework

The Missouri Graduation Handbook offers students only one alternative pathway to graduation, MoOpt. MoOpt provides students the opportunity to graduate using a competency-based metric based on the Missouri HiSET or the GED, the same tests used in adult education programs in Missouri (DESE, 2023). Despite its twenty-year history in Missouri education, there is no information regarding the program available other than which districts have participated in the program. This lack of data has created an opportunity for research to be developed to understand the perceptions that educational leaders and teachers have regarding the program.

To understand the perceptions that educational leaders and teachers have regarding MoOpt, intensive interviewing will be used to collect rich data that will be interpreted using GT (see Figure 1). Hesse-Biber (2017) explained that the GT "analysis perspective starts from an engagement with the data and ends with a theory that is generated from or grounded in the data" (p. 316). GT is both a methodology for collecting data and a framework for analysis and theme generation (Åge, 2011). Developed by Glaser and Strauss in 1965, GT seeks to generalize the experience of individuals who share a common experience (Charmaz, 2014). GT has since diverged along three different paths: positivist known as Glaserian GT, postpositivist known as Straussian GT, and constructivist GT (Qureshi & Ünlü, 2020). This research study will

approach GT through a blend of positivist and constructivist lenses which, as Charmaz

(2014) explained, "start[s] with the assumption that social reality is multiple, processual,

and constructed" (p. 13). Additionally, grounding the research though constructivist GT

will allow the Researcher to acknowledge their own role in constructing the data. In this

research study, the Researcher will gather data using intensive interviewing strategies to

gather thick descriptions. The thick descriptions will be developed into initial categories

which will be systematically analyzed using theoretical sampling until saturation is

reached.

Figure 1

Grounded Theory Research Design Framework
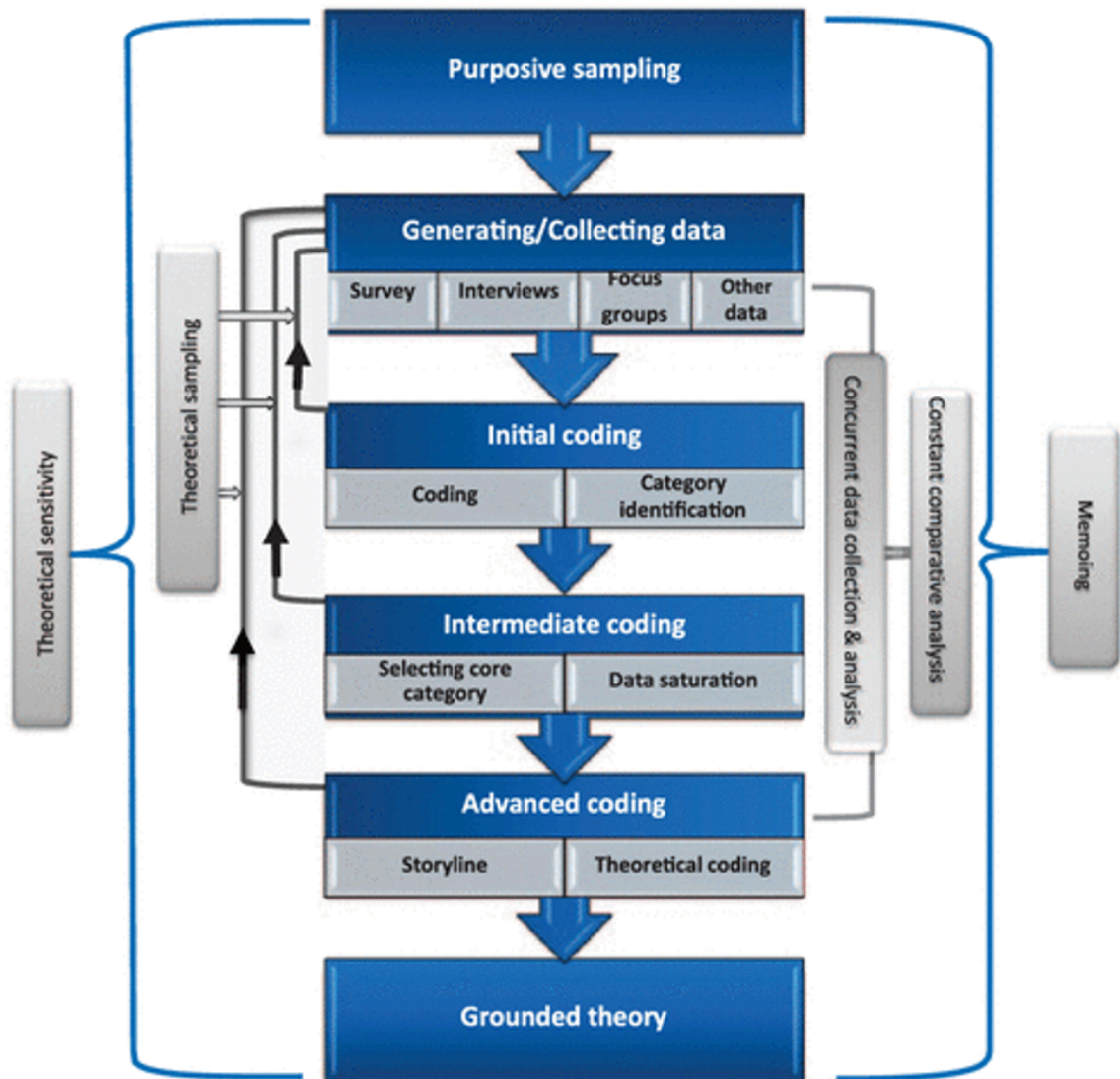
Note: Reprinted from "Grounded theory research: A design framework for novice researchers," by Chun Tie et al., 2019, *SAGE Open Medicine, 7*(1-8), p. 3 (http://doi.org/10.1177/2050312118822927).

Generally, all GT methods follow the same basic principles. Figure 1 (Qureshi & Ünlü, 2020, p. 3) visualizes the GT process while also highlighting the importance of theoretical sampling and memoing. What separates constructivist GT from other forms of GT is that constructivism acknowledges the role that the Researcher and researchees play in the co-construction of theory, thus rejecting the notion that theories emerge from data (Charmaz, 2014; Qureshi & Ünlü, 2020). This study will focus on generating categories and ultimately a theory based on the experience and expertise of administrators and teachers who work directly with MoOpt. Initial interviews will be used to generate codes which will be further developed as the research progresses. Constructivist GT begins with an understanding that the Researcher is an active participant in the study; as Charmaz (2014) contended, "Constructivists study how – and sometimes why – participants construct meanings and actions in specific situations" (Charmaz, 2014, p. 239). Understanding the shared lived experiences of administrators and teachers in relation to MoOpt using constructivist GT provides the Researcher the tools necessary to interpret, contextualize, generalize, and theorize answers to the research questions driving the study.

Research Questions

The research questions for this study were developed to provide the Researcher and participants the freedom to explore various topics surrounding the implementation of MoOpt. The Researcher will make use of rich data, thick descriptions, memos, reflective notes, and focused coding to develop themes which, using the constant comparative method, will be constructed into themes and the overall GT regarding MoOpt.

Research Question One (RQ1) How do educational leaders perceive the effectiveness of the Missouri Option Program in retaining students who might otherwise drop out of high school?

Research Question Two (RQ2) What are educational leaders' perspectives regarding the Missouri Option Program's impact on dropout rates?

Research Question Three (RQ3) How does participation in the Missouri Option Program prepare students for postsecondary education opportunities or workforce entry, according to educational leaders and stakeholders?

Research Question Four (RQ4) What factors contribute to an LEAs adoption of the Missouri Option Program?

Research Question Five (RQ5) How do implementation strategies, resource allocation, and student outcomes vary among Local Education Agencies of different sizes and demographics that adopt the Missouri Option Program?

Limitations

There are two basic limitations to this study. First, there is limited data available from DESE which has not kept records regarding the implementation of the program, the number students who have participated in the program, or overall success of the program. Second, there is no research pertaining to MoOpt. While there are studies which focus on adult education and high school equivalency, no study regarding MoOpt could be found.

Delimitations

The delimitations used by the Researcher in this study will be put in place to limit the nature of the data collected. While the Researcher is interested in a myriad of aspects related to MoOpt, the goal of this study is to reveal the perceptions held by administrators

and teachers regarding how students are identified for the program, the facilitation of the program, and the perceived success of the program. The focus on these perceptions means that the Researcher will focus on LEAs in Missouri which employ staff to implement MoOpt who have direct knowledge of how students are selected and how the program is administered.

Assumptions

The Researcher will assume that the information provided in questionnaires, surveys, and interviews is truthful and accurate with regard to the implementation of MoOpt.

Organization of the Study

This research study is presented in six chapters, each of which builds toward a comprehensive understanding of MoOpt through the lens of constructivist grounded theory.

Chapter One introduces the study. It provides the background to the problem, presents the statement of the problem, outlines the purpose and significance of the study, defines key terms, and describes the theoretical framework and research questions. It concludes with a discussion of the study's limitations, delimitations, and assumptions.

Chapter Two presents the review of literature. It begins by exploring the concept of risk in education, including indicators of risk, risk and protective factors, and pathways to dropout. It then turns to how schools respond to at-risk students, focusing on types of alternative schools and intervention programs. The final section examines MoOpt, including its history, Assurance Standards, and the role of high school equivalency assessments such as the HiSET and GED.

Chapter Three details the methodology used in the study. It describes the research design, outlines the participants and sampling strategies, and explains the role of the Researcher. It also provides an overview of the instruments used, the data collection process, and the analytic strategies employed. This chapter emphasizes the study's grounding in constructivist GT and addresses ethical considerations.

Chapter Four presents the findings of the study. It introduces the four axial categories developed through focused coding and analysis: Educators as Advocates and Navigators, Structural Challenges and Institutional Gaps, Student Renewal and Re-engagement, and Program Identity and Legitimacy. Each category is explored in narrative form with supporting participant quotations.

Chapter Five elaborates the grounded theory that emerged from the data: Conditional Redemption. This chapter explains how the theory qualifies as a middle-range theory, rooted in the lived experiences of educational leaders and supported by the data collected. The relationship between the core theory and the axial codes is made explicit, demonstrating how Conditional Redemption offers insight into the unique role MoOpt plays in retaining students. Chapter Five concludes by answering the research questions in light of the grounded theory of Conditional Redemption.

Chapter Six concludes the study. It offers a synthesis of findings and revisits the research questions, highlighting key insights and implications for policy, practice, and future research. Particular attention is given to gaps identified during the study, such as limited clarity from DESE on the GED versus HiSET and inadequate support for administrators unless they attend paid conferences. Recommendations for improving communication, consistency, and programmatic supports are offered.

Chapter Two

Review of the Literature

Introduction

The persistent issue of high school dropout remains one of the most pressing challenges in education, with significant consequences for both individuals and society. Students which did not complete high school were more likely to face unemployment, lower lifetime earnings, and an increased risk of incarceration (Neild et al., 2007). In addition, these students were less likely to pursue postsecondary education, further limiting their opportunities and contributing to a deepening of social inequalities. Doll et al. (2013) reported that dropout disproportionately affected students from marginalized communities, particularly those facing poverty, instability at home, and inadequate support from their schools. Understanding the specific risk factors that contributed to dropout and identifying effective interventions was essential to addressing this crisis.

This chapter explores the risk factors associated with high school dropout, particularly focusing on the students most vulnerable to disengagement from traditional schooling. These included students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, students with inconsistent school attendance, and those facing significant personal or academic challenges (Moore, 2006a). While traditional educational models often failed to meet the needs of these students, alternative pathways, such as Competency-Based Education (CBE) programs, offered promising solutions. CBE allowed students to demonstrate mastery of academic content at their own pace, shifting the focus from time-based credit accumulation to skill acquisition (Blankenberger, 2024). The Missouri Option Program (MoOpt), a CBE model implemented across Missouri, was an alternative pathway to

graduation for students behind in credits but capable of demonstrating competency

through standardized testing (DESE, 2021).

Figure 2

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory
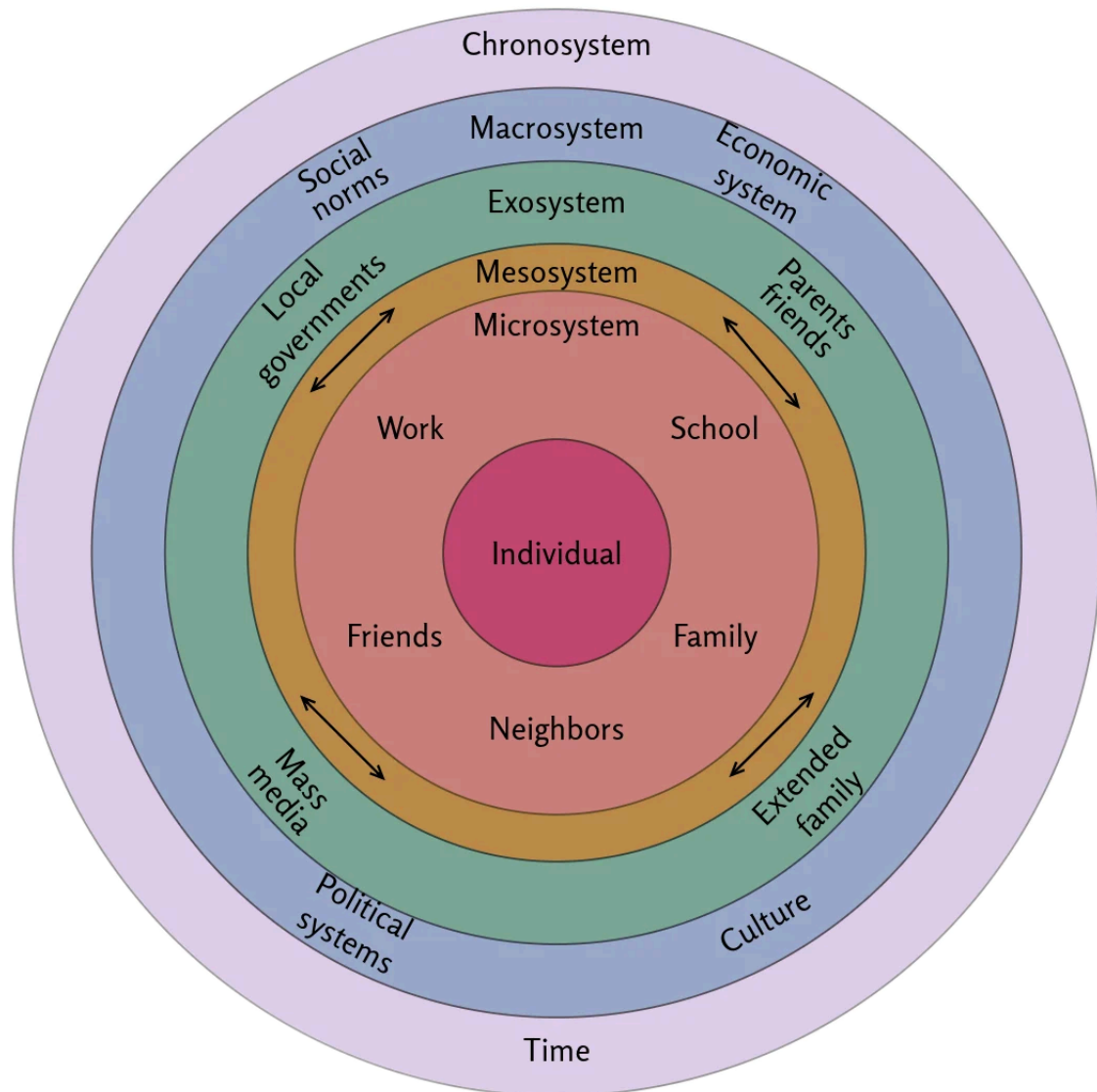
Note. This figure is adapted from Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, which

explains the multiple layers of environmental influences on an individual's development.

The microsystem involves direct interactions (family, school), while the mesosystem

links these microsystems. The exosystem refers to external environments that indirectly impact the individual. The macrosystem encompasses societal values, and the chronosystem includes time-based influences. Adapted from "Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory" by Simply Psychology, 2023 (https://www.simplypsychology.org/bronfenbrenner.html).

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (EST), later informed by his Process-Person-Context-Time model, provided a useful framework for understanding how different factors contributed to student dropout (Renkert, 2005; Tudge et al., 2009). This theory, as seen in Figure 2, posited that individual behavior was influenced by multiple nested/networked systems, from immediate family and school contexts (microsystem) to broader societal structures (macrosystem) (Neal & Neal, 2013; Tudge, 2016;). As Brendtro (2006) noted: "A child's behavior reflects transactions within these immediate circles of influence. One can only gain an accurate understanding of a child by attending to transactions within the family, school, peer group, and neighborhood" (p. 163). At the microsystem level, students could struggle academically due to poverty, unstable home environments, or negative peer influences, which could undermine their engagement with school (Suh et al., 2007). At the mesosystem level, the interaction between home and school could either support or hinder student success. Research has shown that strong family-school partnerships improved student outcomes, yet many at-risk students lacked this connection, leading to feelings of isolation and disengagement, particularly during key transition years such as the ninth grade (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010; Somers et al., 2009). At the broader exosystem and macrosystem levels, under-resourced schools and systemic inequalities further

compounded the risk of dropout, particularly in low-income communities where educational resources were limited (Ecker-Lyster & Niileksela, 2011).

Despite the complexity of these interconnected factors, research suggested that a combination of protective strategies could help re-engage at-risk students. These strategies included early intervention programs, social-emotional learning (SEL) initiatives, and alternative educational models such as CBE. Additionally, early intervention programs which target key indicators of disengagement like absenteeism and poor academic performance, had proven effective in keeping students on track to graduate (McKee & Caldarella, 2016). SEL initiatives, which focused on building emotional resilience and social skills, also played a crucial role in helping students navigate the challenges of both school and life (Gardner & Stephens-Pisecco, 2019). However, for students who had already fallen significantly behind, alternative educational models like MoOpt offered a critical pathway to graduation (DESE, 2021).

MoOpt represented an innovative application of CBE within the high school setting. By allowing students to demonstrate mastery through either the HiSET or GED rather than accumulating traditional credits, the program provided a flexible and accessible pathway for students at risk of dropping out (DESE, 2021). Since its implementation in 2002, MoOpt has been adopted by approximately half of Missouri's LEAs, though its effectiveness and the perceptions of educational leaders regarding its success remain under-explored (see Appendix C). This study sought to fill this gap by examining the implementation of MoOpt across different LEAs, exploring how students were identified for participation, and evaluated the program's perceived success from the perspective of administrators and teachers.

Through this research, the Researcher aimed to contribute to the broader understanding of how CBE served as an effective intervention for at-risk students, particularly within the context of Missouri's educational system. By examining MoOpt in detail, this study provided insights into how alternative education models could help mitigate dropout rates and offer students a meaningful pathway to academic and personal success.

Understanding the Nature of Risk and Who is At Risk

Educational outcomes are shaped by a variety of risk factors, many of which stem from the individual's social, economic, and family environments. These risk factors interacted with the educational system to produce barriers which prevented students from achieving academic success (Moore, 2006a). Identifying who was most at risk and understanding the nature of these risks was crucial for educators and policymakers as they developed interventions to mitigate these challenges. This section provides an in-depth analysis of the dimensions of risk in education, focusing on the key factors that predispose students to drop out and the specific populations most vulnerable to these risks. Furthermore, it delved into the interplay of multiple risk factors and emphasized the necessity for holistic approaches to intervention.

The Nature of Risk in Education

Risk in education can be conceptualized as a set of factors or conditions that increase the likelihood of a student experiencing negative academic outcomes, including dropping out. These factors were multi-dimensional and could include academic struggles, behavioral issues, socioeconomic challenges, and psychological difficulties (McKee et al., 1998; Suh et al., 2007). Doll et al. (2013) identified these difficulties in

three groups: pushing factors, pulling factors, and disengagement, classified as falling out. These interrelated factors can affect students on multiple levels, particularly the chronosphere, as they multiply over time. Educational researchers categorize risk factors according to these dimensions because of the cumulative effect they have on students' ability to succeed in school (Boca et al., 2017; Doll et al., 2013).

Push, Pull, and Falling Out Factors

A comprehensive framework for understanding dropout risk is based on push, pull, and falling out factors (Doll et al., 2013; Jordan et al., 1994). This framework is useful for categorizing why students leave school and helps in identifying intervention points which lead to pathways (Evans & DiBenedetto, 1991). Additionally, EST provides a lens for understanding how these factors are influenced by various levels of a student's environment, from immediate family to larger societal structures (Tudge et al., 2009).

Push Factors. Push factors occurred when adverse conditions within the school environment forced students out. These included strict disciplinary policies, poor academic performance, and conflict with teachers or peers. Doll et al. (2013) explained that students often experienced push factors when they were subject to punitive consequences such as frequent suspensions or expulsions, leading to disengagement and dropout.

These push factors were primarily seen in EST's microsystem and mesosystem. The microsystem referred to the student's immediate interactions, such as those with teachers and peers, where harsh discipline or negative relationships could alienate students from the school environment (Brown et al., 2003). Additionally, the mesosystem, which consisted of the relationships between a student's school and home

environment, could intensify push factors; e.g., a lack of parental support for school policies or communication issues between the school and family could further contribute to students feeling disconnected from school and being pushed out (Asson et al., 2023; Doll et al., 2013).

Pull Factors. Pull factors referred to external circumstances that drew students away from school. These factors included the need to work to support family members, teenage pregnancy, or other family obligations that shift students' priorities away from education. Doll et al. (2013) emphasized that pull factors were especially common among students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, who often faced pressure to contribute financially to their households.

Pull factors are influenced by the exosystem and macrosystem in EST. The exosystem includes broader societal influences that indirectly affect the student, such as parents' work demands or societal pressures to earn an income. These external demands pulled students away from their academic commitments, making school a lower priority (Doll et al., 2013). At the macrosystem level, societal norms related to work, teenage pregnancy, or gender roles could encourage students to leave school prematurely. For example, in economically disadvantaged communities, the cultural norm might prioritize immediate financial contributions over long-term educational success, pulling students into work at an early age.

Falling Out Factors. Falling out factors described a more subtle form of disengagement, where students gradually lost interest in school without necessarily being forced out or pulled away by external obligations. This process often occurred as students experienced consistent academic failure, lack of support, or feelings of alienation within

the school environment. Over time, they could become apathetic and disconnected from their education (Doll et al., 2013).

EST situates these falling out factors within both the microsystem and chronosystem. The microsystem refers to the day-to-day interaction students have with teachers, peers, and the school itself. If students did not receive adequate academic support or felt excluded from the school community, they might slowly disengage, losing motivation to continue their education (Brown et al., 2003). The chronosystem captures how this disengagement unfolds over time, reflecting the cumulative impact of academic struggles, lack of school support, and broader life changes that contribute to students gradually falling out of the school system (Doll et al., 2013).

By viewing push, pull, and falling out factors through the lens of EST, it becomes evident that students' risk of dropping out is shaped by multiple interconnected layers of influence. Push factors within the immediate school environment interact with external pull factors like family and societal pressures, while falling out factors illustrate the gradual and complex process of disengagement over time. Understanding these dynamics through EST allows educators and policymakers to identify where interventions can be most effective, targeting not only the immediate school setting but also the broader environmental systems that influence students' educational outcomes.

Academic Risk

One of the most extensively documented dimensions of academic risk is early underperformance in core subjects such as mathematics and reading. According to McKee and Caldarella (2016), "academic difficulties can trap students in a cycle of failure that is very difficult to escape" (p. 517). Balfanz (2011) similarly identified three

key predictors of student success: attendance, behavior, and course failure, noting that

course failure was closely related to a student's grade point average (GPA). As academic

deficits accumulated over time, it became increasingly challenging for students to

recover, particularly during the transition from elementary to middle school, where

academic expectations intensified (McKee, 2009). Additionally, Anderson and Keith

(2001) emphasized that students facing early academic struggles were at an elevated risk

of continued underachievement throughout high school unless targeted interventions were

introduced. Students from marginalized communities were also more likely to attend

schools with limited academic support programs, further exacerbating these early

academic failures (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010).

Chronic absenteeism was frequently an early indicator of academic risk, with its

long-term effects extensively documented. Neild et al. (2007) found that students with

poor attendance, such as those missing more than 20 days of school annually, were

significantly more likely to experience academic failure and drop out. This issue was

further compounded by discrepancies in reporting, as "a school could have an average

daily attendance rate of 92% and still have 20% of its students missing a month or more

of school" (Balfanz, 2016, p. 9). Chronic absenteeism often reflected deeper challenges,

such as family instability, mental health issues, or inadequate transportation, issues

particularly prevalent in rural areas (Ecker-Lyster & Niileksela, 2011). The connection

between absenteeism and socioeconomic56 conditions highlights that the causes of

academic risk extend beyond the classroom, rooted in broader systemic issues.

Moreover, academic risk does not operate in isolation; it frequently intersects with

other risk factors, such as behavioral or psychological challenges. For instance, students

who developed a poor academic self-concept early in their schooling often internalized their struggles, leading to lower self-esteem, disengagement, and, ultimately, academic failure (Szlyk, 2021). Students who perceived themselves as less capable were more likely to develop learned helplessness, a psychological condition where they believed that no amount of effort would improve their academic outcomes (Pagani et al., 2008). This sense of helplessness was particularly common in schools with large class sizes, where individual attention is limited, further reinforcing students' negative perceptions of their abilities. It was crucial to implement academic support programs, such as one-on-one tutoring or personalized learning, to counteract this trend (Balfanz, 2016).

Early warning systems (EWS), which monitored academic performance, attendance, and behavior, demonstrated potential in identifying students at risk of dropping out (Blad, 2024; Clausen, 2024). These systems enabled educators to intervene before academic challenges escalated into complete disengagement. However, as Jordan et al. (1994) highlighted, addressing both in-school and out-of-school factors was essential to preventing dropout, particularly for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Neild et al. (2007) emphasized that the success of EWS depended on a school's ability to provide timely and effective interventions early, which could be hindered by limited resources. Furthermore, Kearns (2023) and Landis and Reschly (2013) both argued that schools lacking sufficient funding or staff struggled to implement EWS effectively, limiting their ability to mitigate academic risks and support students in meaningful ways. As a result, students with disengagement issues remained unnoticed or unsupported, increasing their risk of dropout.

Behavioral Risk

Equally important is the dimension of behavioral risk, which includes disruptive classroom behavior, defiance of authority, and involvement in disciplinary incidents. Often, behavioral risk factors, such as classroom disruptions, disciplinary actions, and a lack of motivation were strong predictors of academic failure and dropout (Deaton, 2020). Students who exhibited these behaviors often had underlying academic or emotional issues that went unaddressed, leading to a cycle of punitive disciplinary measures and increased disengagement (Roca, 2024). The connection between behavioral risk and academic disengagement was particularly strong in students from low-income and minority backgrounds, where exclusionary discipline practices disproportionately impacted their educational outcomes (McKee, 2009).

Exclusionary discipline practices, such as suspensions and expulsions, disproportionately impacted African American students, contributing to higher dropout rates, increasing the likelihood of involvement in the juvenile justice system. Nationally, Black students represented approximately 25% of those identified with emotional or behavioral disorders but were suspended at higher rates than any other racial or ethnic group (Green et al., 2020). In fact, African American students are suspended at rates three times higher than their White peers, exacerbating the school-to-prison pipeline (Irby et al., 2012). These disparities were often linked to systemic biases, including discriminatory policies and cultural mismatches between students and teachers, which lead to unequal treatment in disciplinary actions (Neal & Neal, 2013). Additionally, students who faced multiple suspensions were significantly more likely to drop out of

school, further perpetuating cycles of poverty and justice system involvement (Stroup &

Robins, 1972).

However, the relationship between behavioral risk and dropout was not solely a

result of individual student actions. Schools that relied heavily on punitive discipline

practices, rather than restorative approaches, contributed to the problem by alienating

students and removing them from the learning environment (Toby & Armor, 1992).

Restorative justice programs, which emphasized rehabilitation over punishment, showed

promise in reducing suspension rates and improving student behavior. For instance,

schools that implemented restorative practices saw reductions in suspension rates and

improvements in student engagement and academic outcomes (Agudelo et al., 2021).

These programs helped address the root causes of student behavior, encouraging

accountability while fostering a positive school climate that built supportive relationships

between students and staff (Ryan & Goodram, 2013; Longmuir, 2023). Through

strategies like peer mediation, restorative circles, and community service, restorative

justice offered an effective alternative to punitive discipline, helping students stay

connected to their educational communities (Agudelo et al., 2021).

In addition to restorative justice, behavioral interventions that incorporate SEL

were increasingly recognized as effective tools for reducing behavioral risk. SEL

programs taught students how to manage their emotions, set positive goals, and establish

healthy relationships, all of which contribute to improved behavior and academic

performance (Boyd, 2012). Schools that integrated SEL into their curricula often saw

reductions in behavioral incidents and improvements in overall school climate, which had

a positive impact on reducing dropout rates (Nizri et al., 2024). However, implementing

these programs effectively required sufficient training for educators and administrative

support, which could be lacking in under-resourced schools (Bacher-Hicks et al., 2021).

Socioeconomic Risk

Socioeconomic risk significantly influenced educational outcomes, as students

from low-income backgrounds often faced barriers that extended beyond academic and

behavioral challenges. Students frequently encountered food insecurity, limited access to

healthcare, and unstable housing conditions, all of which adversely affected their

academic performance (Moore, 2006a; Moore, 2006b). Such socioeconomic deprivation

introduced multiple obstacles to educational success, including inadequate learning

environments, a lack of educational resources, and heightened psychological stressors

(Dogaru & Anghel, 2019). These stressors not only impeded academic achievement but

also contributed to increased rates of chronic absenteeism and behavioral problems, both

of which were strong predictors of school dropout (Ecker-Lyster & Niileksela, 2011;

Tavakolian & Howell, 2012).

Low socioeconomic status (SES) was one of the most consistent and significant

predictors of academic failure and dropout. In low-income areas, schools frequently

lacked the funding necessary to provide adequate educational resources, individualized

support, or extracurricular activities to engage students outside the classroom (Anderson

& Keith, 2001; Carver & Lewis, 2010). This lack of support infrastructure further

widened the achievement gap between low-SES students and their higher-income peers.

Compounding this issue, many students from low-income families were forced to take on

part-time jobs to help support their households, diverting their time and focus away from

schoolwork, further jeopardizing their academic progress (DeLuca et al., 2015; Suh, Suh, & Huston, 2007).

Rural students, in particular, faced unique socioeconomic challenges compared to their urban counterparts. Studies have shown that rural students encountered difficulties such as transportation issues, inadequate school infrastructure, and limited access to educational resources, all of which increased their risk of academic failure and dropout (Boca et al., 2017). Rural students also contended with long travel times to school and limited access to advanced coursework, both of which negatively impacted their academic engagement (Foreman-Murray, 2022). These findings highlighted the need for targeted interventions that addressed the specific needs of rural students, such as transportation subsidies, expanded online learning opportunities, and community-based support programs that could mitigate the geographic and infrastructural challenges they faced.

Moreover, the intersection of socioeconomic risk with other forms of disadvantage, such as academic and psychological challenges, magnified the difficulties low-income students experienced. Many students from low-income families were more likely to experience trauma, including exposure to violence or parental substance abuse, which further impaired their academic success (Szlyk, 2021). These traumatic experiences, combined with socioeconomic stress, contributed to a cycle of academic underachievement and disengagement. According to Buckman et al. (2021), schools serving low-income populations should adopt a multi-faceted approach to intervention to address not only academic deficits but also the broader social and emotional needs of students through comprehensive support systems.

Socioeconomic disparities thus play a critical role in shaping the educational trajectory of at-risk students, further complicating efforts to ensure equity in education. To mitigate these disparities, schools and policymakers must implement holistic strategies that address the academic, social, and psychological needs of students from low-income backgrounds, recognizing the complex interplay between socioeconomic status and educational outcomes.

Psychological Risk

The psychological risk dimension encompasses mental health challenges such as anxiety, depression, and trauma, which are often compounded by socioeconomic stressors. Mental health issues in students, particularly those that go undiagnosed or untreated, were a significant driver of academic disengagement and dropout (Hagger & Hamilton, 2019). Psychological risks were especially high among students who experienced trauma, such as domestic violence or parental neglect, leading to chronic absenteeism, behavioral issues, and academic underperformance (Pagani et al., 2008).

Students in alternative education settings are particularly vulnerable to psychological distress. Szlyk (2021) explored the heightened psychological risks faced by these students, noting that a combination of academic and emotional challenges, including suicidal ideation and hopelessness, significantly increased their risk of dropping out. A lack of adequate mental health resources in many alternative education programs intensified this issue, leaving students without the support they needed to address their emotional and mental health challenges (Murphy, 2023). Nizri et al. (2024) emphasized that addressing psychological risks in schools required a comprehensive, school-wide approach, where mental health services were integrated into daily operations

and accessible to all students. This approach was especially critical in environments like alternative schools, where students' mental health can be often overlooked.

To mitigate the psychological risks prevalent among students in alternative education settings, trauma-informed teaching practices have emerged as a promising approach for fostering resilience and reducing dropout rates. Trauma-informed teaching practices have been shown to reduce dropout rates among students at high psychological risk. These practices focused on building supportive relationships between students and educators, promoting emotional regulation, and creating safe learning environments where students felt valued and understood (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010). Tudge (2016) highlighted the positive outcomes of such approaches, reporting improvements in student behavior, academic performance, and overall engagement. Schools that adopted trauma-informed strategies not only saw better student outcomes but also fostered a more inclusive and supportive atmosphere that addressed the unique challenges faced by students with high psychological risks (McKee & Caldarella, 2016; Tayfur, 2022).

In alternative education settings, the integration of mental health services was particularly essential. Programs that included mental health components, such as counseling or therapy, have demonstrated significant benefits, improving both academic performance and emotional well-being (Ellerbe, 2017). However, without adequate resources, students in these programs continued to face high levels of disengagement and mental health crises. As Szlyk (2021) suggested, the presence of supportive mental health resources in alternative schools was not just beneficial but necessary to mitigate the higher levels of psychological distress these students experienced. The evidence strongly

supports the need for comprehensive mental health services within schools to foster

student resilience, reduce dropout rates, and improve overall educational outcomes.

Who is At Risk?

While risk factors affected all students to some degree, certain groups were

disproportionately vulnerable to dropping out. These groups often experienced a

combination of academic, socioeconomic, behavioral, and psychological challenges that

compounded one another. The most vulnerable populations included students from low

socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds, ethnic minority students, students with

disabilities, and students experiencing family instability. Each of these groups faced

unique, overlapping risk factors that increased the likelihood of disengagement from the

educational system (Gregory et al., 2021; McKee & Caldarella, 2016; Szlyk, 2021).

Low Socioeconomic Status (SES) Students

Students from low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds were one of the most

at-risk groups for academic failure and dropping out of school. Research consistently

showed that students from low-income households were four times more likely to drop

out than their higher-income peers (Boca et al., 2017). These students often faced

multiple barriers, including inadequate housing, food insecurity, and limited access to

healthcare, all of which negatively impacted their ability to focus on their studies (McKee

& Caldarella, 2016). Moreover, they often attended underfunded schools with fewer

academic resources, larger class sizes, and less experienced teachers, which exacerbated

their academic challenges (Balfanz, 2016).

For low SES students, the need to work part-time to support their families further

detracted from their ability to engage with their education (Suh et al., 2007). This was

particularly true for older students who felt pressured to contribute financially to their households, leading to absenteeism and eventual disengagement from school (Boca et al., 2017). Furthermore, the stress associated with poverty led to mental health issues such as anxiety and depression, which further impeded academic success (Szlyk, 2021). The combination of these factors created a cumulative risk that was difficult to overcome without targeted interventions.

One approach to addressing these challenges was providing students with access to after-school programs, tutoring, and mentoring, which helped to mitigate the academic risks associated with poverty. Additionally, community-based interventions, such as transportation subsidies and meal programs, helped reduce the external barriers that low SES students faced, enabling them to focus on their academic progress (Balfanz, 2016).

Ethnic Minority Students

Ethnic minority students, particularly African American, Latino, and Indigenous students, faced additional risks due to systemic inequalities, including racial discrimination, biased disciplinary practices, and unequal access to quality education. Neild et al. (2007) noted that minority students were more likely to attend under-resourced schools that lacked the funding necessary to provide a supportive learning environment. These schools often had larger class sizes, lower teacher retention rates, and fewer opportunities for advanced coursework, all of which contributed to poorer academic outcomes for minority students (Gregory et al., 2021).

Disciplinary practices in schools further disadvantaged minority students. Research revealed that African American and Latino students were disproportionately suspended or expelled compared to their White peers, even for similar infractions

(Bacher-Hicks et al., 2021). This exclusionary discipline not only removed students from the learning environment but also increased their likelihood of disengagement and eventual dropout (Gregory et al., 2021). These disciplinary disparities were part of the broader school-to-prison pipeline, where minority students were funneled out of the education system and into the criminal justice system due to harsh school policies (Bacher-Hicks et al., 2021).

Ethnic minority students also faced unique cultural challenges that affect their engagement in school. Szlyk (2021) highlighted that discrimination and microaggressions in the classroom contributed to feelings of alienation and disengagement among minority students. This cultural disconnect was compounded when schools failed to foster inclusive environments where minority students felt represented and valued. Schools that promoted cultural competence and inclusivity were shown to improve academic outcomes for minority students by creating a sense of belonging and reducing the effects of discrimination (Nizri et al., 2024).

Interventions for minority students should address both the academic and social aspects of their educational experience. Restorative justice practices, which focus on conflict resolution rather than punishment, have been effective in reducing disciplinary disparities and keeping minority students engaged in their education (Bacher-Hicks et al., 2021). Additionally, schools that provided mentoring programs and cultural competency training for teachers helped create a more supportive environment for minority students, reducing their risk of dropping out (Nizri et al., 2024).

Students with Disabilities

Students with disabilities were another group that faced heightened risks of dropping out (Mills & Sabornie, 2022). These students often encountered barriers to academic success due to learning disabilities, cognitive delays, and physical disabilities. Without appropriate accommodations and support, students with disabilities were more likely to struggle academically and socially, leading to frustration and disengagement (Valente et al., 2018). In many schools, students with disabilities were placed in segregated classrooms or received inadequate instruction, which limited their academic potential and increased the likelihood of dropout (Bacher-Hicks et al., 2021).

The sense of alienation played a significant role in the dropout risk for students with disabilities. According to Brown et al. (2003), students with disabilities often reported feeling isolated or excluded from mainstream school activities, which contributed to their disengagement from the academic environment. These feelings of alienation were compounded when schools failed to provide inclusive learning environments or failed to fully integrate students with disabilities into the general student body. This emotional and social isolation led to lower self-esteem, further exacerbating academic struggles and behavioral issues (Brown et al., 2003).

Despite legal protections, such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which mandated that students with disabilities receive appropriate accommodations, many schools lacked the resources or training necessary to comply fully with these requirements (Valente et al., 2018). This often led to students with disabilities being overlooked or underserved in their educational environments. For instance, they may have not received the individualized instruction or support services

needed to succeed academically, such as speech therapy, occupational therapy, or one-on-one tutoring (McKee & Caldarella, 2016).

Moreover, students with disabilities were more likely to be disciplined for behaviors related to their disabilities, such as difficulties with emotional regulation or attention. These students were often misunderstood by educators who might lack training in how to support students with special needs, resulting in exclusionary discipline practices that further isolated these students (Bacher-Hicks et al., 2021). Brown et al. (2003) found that students with disabilities were often unfairly targeted for discipline, which contributed to their feelings of alienation and a higher risk of disengagement from school. The result was a cycle of academic failure and behavioral issues that increased the risk of dropout.

Effective interventions for students with disabilities included comprehensive inclusion programs that provided tailored academic and social support. Brown et al. (2003) suggested that inclusive learning environments, where students with disabilities were integrated into the broader school community, significantly reduced feelings of alienation and fostered greater academic engagement. These programs ensured that students received the accommodations they needed to succeed in a mainstream educational setting while also addressing their unique emotional and behavioral needs (Valente et al., 2018). Schools that adopted a whole-school approach to inclusion, where all staff were trained to support students with disabilities, often saw higher engagement and lower dropout rates among these students (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010).

Students Facing Family Instability

Students who experienced family instability, such as frequent moves, housing insecurity, or parental separation, were at a significantly increased risk of academic disengagement and dropping out. Frequent relocations disrupted their academic progress, making it difficult for them to form lasting relationships with teachers and peers, which are essential for educational success (McKee et al., 1998). Each transition between schools often required these students to adjust to new curriculums, teaching methods, and social environments, leading to academic setbacks that compounded the likelihood of disengagement (Moore, 2006b).

The emotional toll associated with unstable family environments further aggravated these risks. Children raised in such environments often encountered additional stressors, including domestic violence, parental substance abuse, or neglect, which could contribute to mental health challenges such as anxiety and depression (Szlyk, 2021). Additionally, data collected by the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) (2022) suggested that mental health issues significantly impeded students' ability to concentrate on their schoolwork and maintain regular attendance, both of which were crucial for academic success. Additionally, these students were more likely to experience chronic absenteeism due to familial responsibilities or a lack of support, further jeopardizing their academic futures (McKee et al., 1998).

Parent education programs have shown promise in mitigating some of the negative effects associated with family instability. Ramos et al. (2023) highlighted the importance of culturally relevant parenting education programs, noting that such programs could improve family dynamics, reduce stress, and equip parents with effective

strategies to support their children's academic success. These programs were particularly beneficial for families navigating challenges related to acculturation and socioeconomic stressors, both of which disproportionately impacted families experiencing instability (Elrod et al. 2021; Ramos et al., 2023).

To address the academic and emotional challenges faced by students from unstable family environments, schools should offer targeted interventions such as family counseling services, home visits, and parental involvement initiatives (Ramos et al., 2023). These efforts could provide the necessary support to improve student outcomes, as strong family-school partnerships can significantly enhance both academic and emotional well-being (Brendtro, 2006; Hitchcock et al., 2021). By creating a supportive network that bridges the gap between home and school, educators can mitigate the negative effects of family instability on students' academic success.

Trauma-informed teaching practices were another effective strategy in helping students from unstable family backgrounds (Boylan et al, 2023; Maddox II et al., 2024). These practices focused on recognizing the impact of trauma and instability on students' behavior and learning, and prioritized the establishment of supportive relationships between students and educators (Hitchcock et al., 2021). Promoting emotional regulation and creating safe learning environments where students felt valued and understood were key components of this approach (Elrod et al., 2021; McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010). Schools that adopted trauma-informed teaching practices often reported improvements in student behavior, academic performance, and overall engagement (Elrod et al., 2021; Hitchcock et al., 2021).

Risk and Protective Factors in Education

Educational outcomes were influenced by a myriad of risk and protective factors that shaped students' trajectories through school. EST provided a comprehensive framework to analyze how these factors interacted at multiple levels (individual, family, school, and community), highlighting the importance of both direct and indirect influences on student outcomes (Biggs & Hacker, 2021; Sollars, 2023). Understanding how risk factors compounded and protective factors buffered against these risks was crucial for developing effective interventions that supported student success. This section delves into these dynamics, synthesizing findings from a wide range of studies.

Risk Factors

Understanding the factors that contributed to school dropout is essential for designing effective interventions and policies. Risk factors, which encompassed a wide range of academic, behavioral, socioeconomic, and systemic issues, served as early indicators of a student's likelihood to disengage from school. These factors often operated in interconnected ways, amplifying their cumulative impact over time. For instance, academic struggles may lead to feelings of frustration and disengagement, which could then be exacerbated by systemic inequalities or socioeconomic challenges (Hampden-Thompson & Galindo, 2017; Kim et al., 2020).

A nuanced examination of these risk factors revealed that they were not isolated occurrences but were often deeply rooted in structural and individual circumstances. Research showed that cumulative risk factors, such as academic challenges, behavioral issues, and systemic inequities, disproportionately affected students from marginalized and low-income backgrounds, increasing their likelihood of dropping out (Pagani et al.,

2008; Gregory et al., 2021). Moreover, students experiencing these risks often lacked the

necessary support systems to help them overcome these challenges (McKee & Caldarella,

2016).

By identifying and addressing these risks early, educators and policymakers could

implement targeted strategies to improve student outcomes and reduce dropout rates. The

following sections will explore the primary categories of risk factors in detail,

highlighting their causes and consequences (Viano, 2023; Atchison et al., 2024).

Academic Challenges

Poor Academic Performance. Poor academic performance was one of the most

significant risk factors for student dropout, especially when students fell behind in

essential subjects such as reading and math. Neild et al. (2007) asserted that students who

struggled with reading by third grade faced a steep academic trajectory that made it

increasingly difficult to catch up, which often led to disengagement and eventual dropout.

The critical nature of early literacy skills underscored how falling behind in core

academic areas could trigger a cascading series of academic challenges, exacerbating risk

factors as students advanced through school without adequate intervention (Pagani et al.,

2008).

These academic challenges were compounded by the widening achievement gap

between proficient and struggling students. As noted by Zhou et al. (2023), students who

failed to reach academic proficiency early in their school careers faced increasing

difficulties, particularly in under-resourced schools, where remedial support was often

limited. Without intervention, students who were consistently behind in core subjects like

reading and math were likely to become disengaged, further reinforcing patterns of academic failure (McKee & Caldarella, 2016).

Systemic inequalities further intensify the effects of poor academic performance. Gregory et al. (2021) observed that students in underfunded schools were often placed at a disadvantage due to a lack of resources and personalized attention, both of which were essential for overcoming academic challenges. These schools frequently lacked the capacity to provide the individualized support necessary for struggling students, perpetuating a cycle of academic disengagement (Pagani et al., 2008). Students from marginalized backgrounds, particularly those in low-income communities, faced additional barriers that hindered their academic progress. As Theron et al. (2014) pointed out, students who were placed into lower academic tracks or remediation programs were often labeled as low achievers, which negatively impacted their self-perception and discouraged further engagement in school.

The role of credit recovery programs as a response to poor academic performance has gained prominence, especially in schools with high dropout rates. These programs, which allow students to recover lost credits through accelerated or online learning, are seen as a lifeline for students who are at risk of dropping out due to academic failure (Heinrich, 2022). However, research by Atchison et al. (2024) and Viano (2023) raised concerns about the efficacy of online credit recovery programs. While they could help students meet graduation requirements, the rapid pace at which students could complete these courses often compromised the depth of learning, calling into question whether these programs truly addressed the underlying academic deficiencies that contributed to the risk of dropout.

A comprehensive understanding of dropout risk must consider the interplay of academic performance and external factors. Doll et al (2013) categorized dropout causes into push, pull, and falling out factors. Push factors, such as school policies that compounded academic struggles (e.g., strict attendance or disciplinary rules), often contributed to students feeling forced out of the school environment. Pull factors, such as familial obligations or the need for employment, lured students away from school, while falling out referred to a gradual disengagement from academic life, often precipitated by consistent academic struggles and a lack of school connectedness. For students facing academic challenges, particularly in under-resourced schools, these risk factors frequently converged, creating a perfect storm that led to dropout.

Addressing poor academic performance required early intervention strategies targeted at key subjects like reading and math, as well as systemic reforms to ensure that all students had access to the resources they needed (Viano, 2018; Viano & Henry, 2023). Equitable academic support and rigorous remediation programs, rather than quick fixes like credit recovery programs, were essential to closing the achievement gap and mitigating the risk factors that led to dropout (Atchison et al., 2024; Viano, 2023).

Grade Retention and Remediation. Grade retention and remediation were common strategies employed to address academic failure, but they often had the unintended consequence of increasing the likelihood of student dropout. Theron et al. (2014) found that students who were held back experienced significant social stigma, which negatively affected their academic motivation and emotional well-being. These negative psychological effects, compounded by feelings of alienation from their peers,

often reduced students' engagement with school. Similarly, Neild et al. (2007) observed that:

> The largest group of dropouts had earned fewer than eight credits despite being at least 17 years old, they had few opportunities to earn a diploma other than enrolling in traditional high schools, which were hardly enthused about taking in older students with histories of failure (p. 32).

The impact of retention was especially pronounced among minority and low-income students, who were disproportionately affected by this practice. Research by Zhou et al. (2023) highlighted that systemic biases in educational assessment meant that Black and Latino students were more likely to be retained, which perpetuated educational inequalities. Retention, in these cases, reinforced existing disparities by isolating students who were already at a disadvantage. Furthermore, retention has been associated with increased dropout rates, particularly for middle school students, who often struggled to recover academically and socially after being held back (Özek & Mariano, 2023).

Recent studies, however, suggested that grade retention may be more effective when applied in the early elementary years and paired with targeted instructional support. Opper and Özek (2023) found that students with lower baseline achievement in early grades often benefited from retention when it was accompanied by individualized support services, such as remedial instruction or tutoring. However, retention in later grades, particularly in middle school, tended to have more negative long-term consequences, such as higher dropout rates and lower rates of high school graduation (Özek & Mariano, 2023).

Hadebe and Moosa (2022) emphasized the profound emotional and social consequences of grade retention, particularly in under-resourced schools where students already faced numerous challenges. Their research revealed that retained students often experienced bullying and social exclusion from peers, which intensified feelings of marginalization and diminished their sense of belonging in the school community. This social alienation compounded the negative academic effects retention sought to address, further deepening students' disengagement. The stigma associated with being held back could create long-term psychological and emotional scars, making it difficult for these students to reintegrate and perform academically. In line with these findings, Larsen and Valant (2023) discussed the broader implications of retention, pointing out that the social isolation and labeling that retained students endured could erode their confidence and hinder their ability to recover academically. This stigma often led to a self-fulfilling cycle of academic failure and disengagement, with students becoming increasingly detached from both their peers and the educational system. Özek and Mariano,(2023) similarly argued that retention policies, when not combined with sufficient support, risk reinforcing academic struggles and social isolation. Furthermore, Theron et al. (2014) highlighted that students in lower academic tracks or remediation programs internalized negative labels, which not only diminished their self-esteem but also discouraged further engagement in school.

McKee and Caldarella (2016) suggested that proactive interventions, such as providing academic and emotional support before retention becomes necessary, were far more effective than simply holding students back. Similarly, Simon (2016) argued for a more holistic approach to academic remediation, asserting that grade retention failed to

address the underlying socio-emotional and academic needs of struggling students, making it a temporary solution at best. Instead, schools should focus on preventative measures like tutoring, mentoring, and early intervention programs to help students stay on track (Churchill et al., 2021).

Research from Opper and Özek (2023) and Özek and Mariano (2023) underscored the importance of identifying students who were most likely to benefit from retention and providing comprehensive academic interventions alongside it. For example, Florida's retention policies, which mandated supplemental instruction for retained students, have shown more positive outcomes than retention practices without additional support. However, retaining students without these measures risked reinforcing the very academic failures retention was meant to correct (Larsen & Valant, 2023).

Behavioral and Disciplinary Challenges

Chronic Absenteeism. Chronic absenteeism, defined as missing 10% or more of the school year, was a critical predictor of both academic failure and eventual dropout (Wisconsin Policy Forum, 2023). Research consistently showed that students who were chronically absent were significantly more likely to struggle academically, leading to increased behavioral problems and higher dropout rates. This issue was particularly pronounced in high school, where absenteeism rates tended to spike during key transitional years, making it harder for students to stay engaged. Uretsky et al. (2023) emphasized that high school students who missed a substantial portion of the school year were more prone to academic failure, social isolation, and subsequent disengagement from school.

Chronic absenteeism was often rooted in broader socioeconomic challenges. Students from low-income families were disproportionately affected, frequently missing school due to external pressures such as the need to work, care for siblings, or deal with family instability. Simon (2016) noted that these students faced significant barriers to consistent attendance, exacerbating their academic struggles and increasing their risk of disengagement. In under-resourced communities, absenteeism was often compounded by systemic issues, including inadequate access to transportation, healthcare, and mental health services, which further isolated students from their academic environments (Hadebe & Moosa, 2022). According to the Wisconsin Policy Forum (2023), students from low-income families and students of color were more likely to experience chronic absenteeism, compounding existing educational inequalities.

Absenteeism also had direct implications for behavioral and disciplinary challenges. Students who frequently missed school often struggled to reintegrate into the classroom environment, leading to disruptive behavior or truancy. These students were more likely to face disciplinary actions, such as suspensions, which exacerbated absenteeism and deepened their disengagement from school (Opper & Özek, 2023). Punitive approaches to absenteeism, such as suspensions, often worsened the problem by keeping students out of the classroom, further alienating them from both academic and social support.

Effective interventions must address the root causes of absenteeism rather than focusing solely on attendance tracking. Larsen and Valant (2023) stressed the importance of early identification of at-risk students and providing holistic support systems, including academic tutoring, mental health counseling, and family engagement programs.

Schools that have successfully reduced absenteeism have done so by employing comprehensive programs that combine academic support with wraparound services aimed at tackling broader social and economic barriers (Hadebe & Moosa, 2022; Taylor, 2018).

The connection between absenteeism and long-term academic performance is well-established. Research indicates that students who were chronically absent in early grades are far less likely to reach proficiency in key subjects like reading and math, setting them on a trajectory toward continued academic failure and increased risk of dropping out (Opper & Özek, 2023). Schools with robust early warning systems that monitored absenteeism and intervened with academic and social supports prevented absenteeism from escalating into long-term disengagement (Blad, 2024 Gage, 2024).

Chronic absenteeism was both a symptom and cause of deeper academic, behavioral, and social challenges. Addressing this issue required a comprehensive approach that targeted the underlying socioeconomic, emotional, and behavioral factors contributing to absenteeism (Education Commission of the States, 2021). By implementing early interventions and providing targeted support, schools could break the cycle of absenteeism and improve long-term academic outcomes for at-risk students (Happen & Therriault, 2008).

Exclusionary Disciplinary Practices. Exclusionary disciplinary practices, such as suspensions and expulsions, disproportionately affected minority students and had long-term consequences that increased the likelihood of dropping out. Research showed that African American students were three times more likely to face suspensions compared to their White peers, contributing to widening achievement gaps and patterns

of disengagement from school (Agudelo et al., 2021). This over-representation was particularly troubling because students removed from the classroom for disciplinary reasons lost valuable instructional time, which made it harder for them to keep up academically, exacerbating their risk of disengagement and dropout (Deaton, 2020). Owens and McLanahan (2020) emphasized that exclusionary disciplinary practices, particularly suspensions, were often applied more harshly to minority students for similar infractions, reinforcing the school-to-prison pipeline through punitive policies that marginalized already vulnerable students.

The negative effects of exclusionary discipline extend beyond academic setbacks. Students frequently suspended or expelled often felt alienated from their school communities, damaging relationships with both educators and peers. This sense of isolation was particularly harmful to students who faced additional risk factors such as poverty or family instability (Ryan & Goodram, 2013). Repeated exclusionary measures increased the chances of students disengaging from both academic and social aspects of school, heightening their risk of dropping out (Gerlinger, 2021). Additionally, research highlighted that students with disabilities were disproportionately affected by suspensions, which further compounded their academic challenges and hindered their potential for success (Owens & McLanahan, 2020).

Furthermore, exclusionary discipline was strongly linked to increased involvement with the juvenile justice system, a phenomenon known as the school-to-prison pipeline. Studies indicated that suspensions and expulsions were significant predictors of future delinquency, with students repeatedly excluded from school more likely to engage in risky behaviors and encounter law enforcement

(Gerlinger, 2021). This trend was particularly severe for minority students, who were already more likely to face exclusionary discipline and were thus more vulnerable to negative outcomes beyond school.

In response to the documented harms of exclusionary discipline, many schools adopted restorative justice practices, which emphasized reconciliation and accountability over punishment. These practices were shown to reduce suspensions and improve student engagement. For example, schools implementing restorative justice frameworks reported up to a 20% reduction in suspensions and significant improvements in dropout rates (Agudelo et al., 2021). Other non-punitive approaches, such as Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) and counseling, proved effective in reducing disciplinary infractions while improving school climate (Owens & McLanahan, 2020).

While restorative justice and non-punitive approaches have demonstrated promising outcomes in addressing the harms of exclusionary discipline, tackling broader socioeconomic and systemic challenges is equally critical to fostering an equitable and supportive educational environment. Exclusionary disciplinary practices disproportionately harmed minority students and students with disabilities, creating a cycle of disengagement that increased the likelihood of academic failure and dropout (Belser et al., 2016; Gallegos & White, 2013). By shifting toward restorative justice and other non-punitive approaches, schools fostered a more inclusive and supportive environment, reducing the negative impacts of exclusionary discipline and promoting equity in education (Agudelo et al., 2021; Vaandering, 2019).

Socioeconomic Challenges

Poverty and Resource Inequities. Poverty is a well-established risk factor that significantly increases the likelihood of students dropping out of school. McKee and Caldarella (2016) found that students from impoverished backgrounds were approximately 50% more likely to leave school prematurely compared to their wealthier peers. This disparity was largely driven by the inequitable distribution of resources in underfunded schools, where students often lacked access to essential academic support services such as tutoring, mental health counseling, and extracurricular programs. Gregory et al. (2021) underscored that underfunded schools were often unable to provide the necessary scaffolding to support at-risk students, which heightened existing achievement gaps between low-income and more affluent students.

The socioeconomic challenges associated with poverty extended beyond the classroom. Many low-income students faced external stressors, such as housing instability and food insecurity, both of which hindered their ability to focus on academics. Suh et al. (2007) found that students from low-income families were often required to take on adult responsibilities, such as working to support their families, which detracted from the time and energy they could dedicate to their education. These dual burdens often resulted in disengagement from school, increasing the likelihood of dropout. Additionally, high rates of family mobility in low-income households contributed to frequent school changes, which further disrupted students' education and weakened their social connections. Uretsky et al. (2023) emphasized that each transition interrupted learning and undermined the stability crucial for academic success.

Socioeconomic disparities also contributed to significant psychological stress, negatively impacting students' ability to engage in school. Morrow and Villodas (2017) highlighted that students from low-income backgrounds who experienced adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), such as exposure to violence or parental substance abuse, were at greater risk of academic failure. These adversities not only disrupted students' emotional and psychological well-being but also impaired their cognitive functioning. Furthermore, McCabe et al. (2020) noted that in underfunded schools, limited extracurricular opportunities compounded the problem, as vulnerable students were often excluded from activities meant to foster social inclusion and academic engagement.

Addressing these socioeconomic challenges required systemic changes at the policy level. Increasing funding for under-resourced schools and implementing community-based interventions to support low-income families, such as affordable housing and mental health services, were critical steps to reducing educational disparities (Gregory et al., 2021).

Family Responsibilities and Mobility. In many low-income families, students were expected to contribute to household income or care for younger siblings, which could interfere with their academic progress. Suh et al. (2007) reported that nearly 40% of students who drop out of high school cited the need to work and support their families as a primary reason for leaving school. These responsibilities, particularly for students already struggling academically, forced them to prioritize immediate financial needs over long-term educational goals. Uretsky et al. (2023) expanded on this, noting that students who worked more than 20 hours per week were twice as likely to drop out due to the overwhelming demands of balancing work and school.

Family mobility, often resulting from housing instability, compounded these challenges by disrupting students' academic trajectories. Moore (2006b) found that students who frequently changed schools faced significant academic setbacks as they had to constantly adjust to new curricula, teachers, and peer groups. This instability not only affected their academic performance but also impaired their ability to form stable relationships with peers and teachers. Valente et al. (2018) argued that frequent moves weakened the home-school connection, which, according to EST, was essential for fostering academic success. Schools could help mitigate these negative effects by providing flexible enrollment processes and offering targeted support services to ease transitions for mobile students.

Disproportionate Impact on Minority Students. Studies have shown that minority students were disproportionately affected by these socioeconomic challenges, which contributed to higher dropout rates. Neild et al. (2007) reported that roughly half of African American males in Philadelphia graduated within six years of starting high school, while just 46% of Latino males obtained a diploma in the same period. This gap highlighted the compounded impact of poverty and systemic inequalities that minority students faced in their educational journeys. Without targeted interventions, these students were at an increased risk of leaving school prematurely, further perpetuating cycles of poverty and disenfranchisement.

Language Barriers and Special Education Needs

English Language Learners and Language Barriers. English language learners (ELL) faced a dual challenge of learning a new language while simultaneously engaging with complex academic content. This significantly increased their risk of academic

failure and school dropout. Watt et al. (1996) highlighted that ELL students dropped out at a rate 2 to 2.5 times higher than their English-speaking peers, driven by the difficulty of acquiring sufficient language proficiency to succeed in school. Beyond the academic challenges, these students had to also navigate cultural adjustment, which often intensified their struggles. Culture shock, as described by Watt et al. (1996), could lead to feelings of isolation and mental fatigue, further hampering students' ability to stay engaged in school.

The academic delays faced by ELL students were often compounded by their placement in lower academic tracks, which restricted access to advanced coursework and opportunities for growth. Lambert et al. (2017) argued that such tracking practices limited the potential for ELL students to excel academically, pushing them further toward disengagement. Social isolation also played a significant role in the high dropout rates among ELL students. Lopez (2013) found that language barriers impeded the formation of peer relationships, further marginalizing students within their school environments. This social exclusion not only hindered academic progress but also reduced participation in extracurricular activities.

To mitigate these challenges, Minnard (2001) advocated for the implementation of bilingual education programs and culturally responsive teaching practices, which helped ELL students integrate more fully into both the academic and social fabric of their schools. Ramos et al. (2023) also emphasized the importance of tailoring educational programs to the linguistic and cultural needs of Latino students, noting that such interventions could enhance student retention and engagement by reducing cultural

clashes between home and school environments. Effective interventions should consider both the linguistic and cultural contexts of students to improve outcomes.

Students with Disabilities and Special Education Needs. Students with disabilities were another group at heightened risk of academic failure and early dropout. Simon (2016) reported that students with disabilities were 25% more likely to drop out than their peers without disabilities, a disparity largely due to insufficient resources and support in special education programs. Many students with disabilities were placed in segregated programs that isolate them from their peers, exacerbating their emotional and social difficulties. Minnard (2001) highlighted how this segregation further marginalized students, leading to disengagement from school and increased dropout risk.

Moreover, special education programs were often underfunded and inadequately staffed, which prevented schools from offering the individualized support these students required. Owens and McLanahan (2020) discussed how students from minority backgrounds, particularly Black and Latino students, faced compounded challenges when placed in under-resourced special education programs. These students not only faced academic struggles but also encountered racial disparities in disciplinary actions, such as suspension and expulsion, which further alienated them from the school system. This intersection of disability and racial discrimination increased the likelihood of these students falling through the cracks in the education system.

Theron et al. (2014) advocated for the integration of students with disabilities into mainstream classrooms, provided that the necessary accommodations were made. This inclusive approach not only improved academic outcomes but also fostered social integration, which was critical for reducing the dropout rate. McCabe et al. (2020) added

that while legal frameworks such as the IDEA mandated support for students with

disabilities, schools often fell short in providing the comprehensive services needed for

success, leaving students vulnerable to academic failure and early school leaving.

Protective Factors

Protective factors played a crucial role in buffering students against the risks that

led to academic disengagement and dropout. These factors provided the emotional,

social, and academic support students needed to overcome challenges and stay on track

for graduation. By understanding and implementing these protective factors, educators

could create environments that foster resilience and promote long-term success.

Locus of Control

Internal vs. External Locus of Control. Locus of control refers to an

individual's belief about the extent to which they can control events and outcomes in their

lives. An internal locus of control is characterized by the belief that one's own efforts

lead to success, while an external locus of control attributes outcomes to external forces

such as luck, fate, or the influence of others (Rotter, 2017). Research revealed that

individuals with an internal locus of control were more likely to take responsibility for

their actions and seek solutions to problems, while those with an external locus of control

often felt powerless in the face of challenges (Sachetta, 2001).

When analyzed through the lens of EST, locus of control becomes a significant

factor influencing how individuals interact with the various systems shaping their

development. EST suggests that individuals develop within nested systems, ranging from

immediate settings like family and school (microsystem) to broader societal influences

(macrosystem). An internal locus of control was critical for effectively engaging with these layers, as it promoted agency and empowerment (Peng et al., 2023).

At the microsystem level, where individuals interact directly with family, peers, and teachers, an internal locus of control encourages students to take ownership of their learning and actively seek solutions to academic challenges. Students with an internal locus of control were more likely to engage in self-regulated learning and goal-setting, key factors in academic success (Wang, 2005). Conversely, students with an external locus of control tended to believe that academic outcomes were beyond their control, often leading to passivity and disengagement (Peng et al., 2023).

In the mesosystem, which includes the interactions between different microsystems (such as home and school), an internal locus of control helps students manage these relationships. For example, a student facing stress at home might still seek academic support at school, believing they are able to influence their academic success despite external challenges (Yin, 2022). This dynamic interaction reflects how personal agency interacts with environmental factors within the ecological model.

At the exosystem level, which encompasses external factors such as a parent's workplace that indirectly affect the individual, an internal locus of control can help mitigate the negative effects of external stressors. A student with an internal locus might adopt positive coping strategies to manage the effects of family stress. Studies have shown that individuals who felt empowered to control their circumstances, even in indirect contexts, experienced better psychological and educational outcomes (Eriksson et al., 2023).

In the macrosystem, which includes societal values and cultural norms, an internal locus of control is associated with the ability to challenge or adapt to systemic barriers such as socioeconomic disadvantages (Eamon, 2001). Research indicated that fostering an internal locus of control within these broader systems improved students' well-being and academic engagement, encouraging them to believe in their ability to achieve long-term success (Yin, 2022).

Grit and Zest. Grit, defined as perseverance and passion for long-term goals, is strongly associated with an internal locus of control. Research by Duckworth et al. (2007) showed that grit contributed to higher achievement in various domains due to the ability to maintain effort and interest over time despite setbacks. Grit entailed working toward long-term goals with sustained effort, reinforcing the belief that persistence and effort, rather than external factors, drove success.

Similarly, zest, characterized by an energetic and enthusiastic approach to life and learning, is another trait linked to an internal locus of control. Students who demonstrated zest engaged more actively in their academic and extracurricular activities, believing that their involvement could produce meaningful outcomes (Weber et al., 2016). Zest fostered a positive attitude toward challenges and setbacks, contributing to long-term academic persistence and success.

Both grit and zest promoted positive educational outcomes by reinforcing students' belief in their ability to shape their futures through effort and determination. A study by Weber et al. (2016) found that character strengths such as zest and perseverance were positively associated with students' motivation, engagement, and overall academic achievement.

Building Internal Locus of Control through School Programs

Fostering Grit and Zest in the School Environment. Schools play a critical role in fostering an internal locus of control by creating environments that promote perseverance, responsibility, and enthusiasm for learning. Programs that focus on self-regulated learning and personal responsibility have been shown to significantly improve both academic performance and persistence (Wang, 2005). By teaching students that their actions directly influenced their success, these programs reinforced an internal locus of control, helping students understand the importance of effort and resilience.

Active learning environments that provided opportunities for project-based learning or extracurricular activities further cultivated grit and zest in students. Such environments encouraged students to take ownership of their learning and recognized the direct impact of their actions on academic outcomes (Shahram et al., 2021). Schools that created stimulating learning environments helped students develop enthusiasm for education, enhancing academic engagement and success (McKibben, 2018).

Role of Mentorships in Developing Grit and Zest. Mentorship programs play a crucial role in helping students develop traits such as grit and zest while also reinforcing an internal locus of control. One exemplary program, Hawks Take Flight, implemented at Oregon Junior/Senior High School, was designed to address rising academic disengagement and an increasing number of failing grades (Radostits, 2022). The program specifically targeted at-risk students by pairing them with volunteer adult mentors who provided consistent, personalized support throughout their freshman academic year. By building strong mentor-mentee relationships, the program helped foster not only academic improvement but also personal growth in students (Will, 2023).

Hawks Take Flight worked by encouraging students to set both academic and social-emotional goals (Radostits, 2022; Zoellner, 2023). Through regular meetings with their mentors, students were guided in setting realistic goals and reflecting on their progress. These reflections were instrumental in helping students take ownership of their educational journeys, which was directly tied to the development of an internal locus of control. As students saw the tangible outcomes of their efforts, they began to recognize the direct connection between their actions and their academic results, reinforcing the belief that they had control over their successes (Radostits, 2022; Will, 2023). This process shifted students away from the mindset that external factors, such as luck or circumstance, determined their outcomes, and instead empowered them to take responsibility for their future achievements (Will, 2023).

In terms of grit, the Hawks Take Flight mentorship model was designed to build perseverance by helping students stay focused on long-term academic goals, even when faced with challenges (Duckworth et al., 2009; Radostits, 2022). Mentors supported students by helping them identify obstacles and providing strategies to overcome them. By encouraging students to approach setbacks as learning opportunities rather than insurmountable problems, the program helped develop the resilience that is characteristic of grit (Duckworth et al., 2007). Mentors not only guided students through difficult academic periods but also modeled perseverance themselves, providing students with a real-life example of how sustained effort leads to success.

The program also actively fostered zest. By creating a supportive and engaging environment, mentors helped students view learning as a rewarding and exciting process. The mentors celebrated both the small and significant successes of their mentees,

reinforcing a positive attitude toward academic challenges (Gorman, 2017). This

enthusiasm was further bolstered as students gained confidence in their ability to

influence their own academic outcomes, increasing their desire to engage with their

studies and take on new challenges. Over time, as students became more enthusiastic

about their learning, they also became more committed to pursuing their goals with

energy and focus (Weber et al., 2016).

Through the mentorship provided by Hawks Take Flight, students were able to

reflect on their personal growth and see how their increasing efforts, perseverance (grit),

and enthusiasm (zest) translated into tangible academic improvements. As students saw

their grades improve and developed strong interpersonal skills, they began to internalize

the belief that they had the power to control their educational outcomes. This realization

reinforced their internal locus of control, as they attributed their success to their hard

work and determination rather than to external factors. This shift in mindset was crucial

for long-term academic engagement and resilience (Will, 2023).

By focusing on both personal and academic growth, Hawks Take Flight

demonstrated how mentorship can effectively develop an internal locus of control. This

re-enforced the goals that many mentorship programs share (Devoe et al., 2022;

Radostits, 2022; Turgut & Taşçı, 2024; Watson, 2020).

- Encouraging goal setting: Mentors helped students establish and reflect on both
  academic and emotional goals, fostering a sense of ownership over their success.
- Building resilience: Mentors supported students through setbacks, helping them
  view challenges as opportunities for growth, thereby reinforcing perseverance
  (grit).

- Promoting enthusiasm: Mentors created an environment where student efforts were acknowledged and celebrated, leading to increased enthusiasm for learning (zest).

- Reinforcing agency: By guiding students to understand the connection between their actions and academic outcomes, the program strengthened students' belief that they could control their success, aligning with the principles of an internal locus of control.

The success of Hawks Take Flight highlighted the importance of targeted mentorship programs in transforming students' attitudes toward their education and personal growth (Radostits, 2022). By cultivating grit, zest, and an internal locus of control, such programs empower students to take charge of their educational journeys, equipping them with the resilience and agency necessary to overcome challenges and achieve long-term success.

Locus of control, particularly an internal locus, plays a critical role in how individuals engage with their environments across various levels, as outlined by EST (Strayhorn, 2010). Developing an internal locus of control through fostering traits like grit and zest is essential for improving educational outcomes, especially for at-risk students (Agrawal & Luqman, 2019). Schools are key players in this process, creating environments that encourage self-regulation, responsibility, and perseverance. Through structured programs like Hawks Take Flight and other mentorship models, students can develop the resilience and agency needed to succeed, empowering them to take control of their educational journeys and achieve long-term success (Gorman, 2017; Radostits, 2022).

In addition to traditional mentorship models, reverse mentoring, typically used in corporate settings, where younger employees mentor senior colleagues, could also be adapted for schools. This model offered students the opportunity to mentor others, which reinforced their sense of responsibility and internal locus of control (Raymond et al., 2021). Giving students leadership roles, such as mentoring peers, allowed them to see the impact of their actions on others, further enhancing their belief in personal agency.

Even brief, targeted interventions by educators, what Pollak (2021) referred to as micro-mentoring, could make a meaningful difference. Short, focused interactions, such as offering specific praise or guidance, helped students feel more in control of their learning. These small moments of encouragement played a significant role in helping students internalize the belief that they had the power to shape outcomes (Pollak, 2021).

Hope as a Protective Factor

The Role of Hope in Academic Success. Hope is a critical protective factor in academic success, fostering resilience and motivating students to persist through educational challenges. Defined as the belief in one's ability to set and achieve future goals, hope enables students to focus on long-term success despite obstacles. Gallagher et al. (2017) found that students with high levels of hope were significantly more likely to persist through academic challenges and graduate on time, even in the face of adversity. Hope empowered students to take control of their educational trajectory by setting concrete goals and developing pathways to achieve them.

In addition to promoting perseverance, hope acted as a buffer against external stressors, such as poverty, family instability, and social pressures. Theron et al. (2014) highlighted that hope provided psychological resilience, allowing students to view

setbacks as temporary and surmountable rather than insurmountable. By fostering a sense of control over their future, hope helped students stay engaged in their education, even when they faced significant personal challenges.

Research further supported the impact of hope on academic engagement. Lopez (2013) found that goal-setting programs that encouraged students to map out pathways toward their aspirations increased academic engagement significantly. These programs helped students see the connection between their current efforts and future success, motivating them to overcome academic and personal obstacles.

Hope Theory. According to Snyder's Hope Theory, hope consists of two main components: agency thinking and pathways thinking (Snyder et al., 1991). Agency thinking referred to an individual's belief in their ability to achieve goals, while pathways thinking involved the perceived availability of routes to achieve those goals. These two cognitive components worked together to sustain hope, motivating individuals to pursue their objectives despite challenges.

In educational settings, both agency and pathways thinking were crucial for maintaining student engagement. Students with strong agency thinking believed in their capacity to overcome academic challenges through personal effort, while those with well-developed pathways thinking were more adept at identifying strategies to navigate obstacles. This dual approach to hope made it a powerful predictor of academic success, helping students maintain focus on long-term goals, even when faced with adversity.

Hope and Academic Resilience. Hope is closely linked to academic resilience, enabling students to bounce back from setbacks and persist despite challenges. Resilient students view failure not as a reflection of their abilities but as an opportunity to grow.

Snyder et al. (1991) demonstrated that hope provided students with both the belief in their ability to achieve (agency) and the strategies needed to reach their goals (pathways). This combination of motivation and strategy made hope a key component of resilience.

Students with high levels of hope maintained a growth-oriented mindset, focusing on solutions rather than becoming discouraged by difficulties. Hopeful students viewed challenges as temporary obstacles that could be overcome with effort. This ability to sustain hope was particularly important for at-risk students, as it enabled them to remain engaged with their education and maintain a positive outlook during difficult times.

Building Hope Through School Programs. Schools play an essential role in fostering hope by implementing programs that encourage goal-setting, problem-solving, and resilience. Lopez (2013) found that students who participated in goal-setting programs that helped them articulate their aspirations and map out pathways to achieve those goals showed increased academic engagement. Such programs were especially important for at-risk students, as they helped students visualize how their current efforts impacted their future success.

Mentorship programs are particularly effective in building hope, especially for at-risk students. Gallagher (2017) found that students who participated in mentorship programs were more likely to develop a strong sense of self-efficacy, as mentors helped them set realistic goals and provided guidance on how to achieve them. Programs like Hawks Take Flight, where students were paired with adult mentors to guide them through academic and social-emotional goal-setting, offered personalized support and helped students develop a sense of control over their educational outcomes. By encouraging

students to view setbacks as surmountable, mentors helped foster both hope and resilience.

Hope, Grit, and Internal Locus of Control. Hope is closely connected to grit and an internal locus of control, forming a powerful combination for academic success. Hope provided the vision for success, while grit ensured perseverance in the pursuit of long-term goals, and an internal locus of control reinforced the belief that personal effort determined outcomes. Together, these traits formed a strong foundation for students to overcome challenges and stay engaged in their education. Research suggested that students who exhibited high levels of hope, grit, and an internal locus of control were more likely to remain resilient in the face of adversity and achieve their long-term academic goals (Agrawal & Luqman, 2019; Chang et al., 2019; Gorman, 2017). Hopeful students believe that with sustained effort and strategic planning, success was attainable, even when faced with obstacles (Duncan et al., 2009).

Hope is a vital protective factor for students, especially those at risk of academic disengagement or failure. By fostering a sense of purpose, agency, and resilience, hope empowered students to set and pursue meaningful goals (Duncan et al., 2009). Schools that implemented mentorship programs, goal-setting initiatives, and resilience-building strategies could create environments where students felt supported and capable of achieving their academic potential (Le Courtois, 2019; Mai & Chan, 2020). When combined with grit and an internal locus of control, hope provided students with the motivation and tools they needed to navigate academic challenges to succeed in school and beyond (Tong et al., 2010).

Social-Emotional Learning

SEL as a Protective Factor. SEL programs are recognized as essential for fostering emotional resilience, improving academic performance, and reducing dropout rates. These programs teach students critical skills for managing emotions, building relationships, and making responsible decisions. SEL helps students develop emotional regulation and stress-coping strategies, which are key for preventing disengagement from school.

A meta-analysis by Durlak et al. (2011), which reviewed over 200 studies of SEL interventions, found significant positive outcomes, including improved social-emotional skills, reduced conduct problems and emotional distress, and enhanced academic performance. These findings highlighted the broad effectiveness of SEL programs in creating supportive school environments that promote both emotional growth and academic success.

Emotional Intelligence and Social Learning. SEL programs are grounded in emotional intelligence theory, which emphasizes self-awareness, self-regulation, empathy, and social skills (Goleman, 1995). Brackett (2024) highlighted that emotional intelligence directly affected classroom dynamics, student-teacher interactions, and overall school climate. By helping students regulate their emotions and understand others' feelings, SEL promoted a positive learning environment that was conducive to academic success.

Social learning theory, as articulated by Bandura (1977), also underpinned SEL, explaining how students learn behaviors by observing and modeling others. Kattari (2015) noted that social modeling within SEL programs fostered improved emotional

regulation and social behavior, as students learned by observing the positive behaviors of their teachers and peers.

Fostering Positive Relationships. A central component of SEL is fostering positive relationships between students and their teachers and peers. Hogan (2022) emphasized that empathy, a core aspect of emotional intelligence, was crucial for building trust and collaboration in the classroom. Research consistently showed that students with strong interpersonal relationships were less likely to disengage, as these relationships provided emotional support and a sense of belonging, which buffered against external stressors.

Rico-Gonzalez (2023) highlighted that SEL programs focusing on cooperative learning and community engagement improved students' interpersonal skills and social-emotional development. These relationships were especially beneficial for at-risk students, as they served as a support system, helping students navigate both academic and personal challenges.

Emotional Resilience. SEL programs are vital in building emotional resilience, enabling students to cope constructively with setbacks. Emotional resilience, as Anand (2019) described, helped students maintain a positive outlook and persevere through challenges. SEL taught students how to regulate emotions and problem-solve, which enhanced their ability to remain focused on their goals even when faced with difficulties.

Rico-Gonzalez (2023) found that SEL programs that incorporated emotional intelligence training significantly improved students' ability to manage emotions, stay motivated, and handle stress, all of which contributed to greater academic persistence and resilience.

Long-Term Outcomes of SEL. SEL programs not only benefit students in the short term but also have lasting impacts on their future success. Datu and Restubog (2020) found that students who develop strong social-emotional skills through SEL demonstrated greater long-term academic achievement, career readiness, and emotional well-being. This was largely due to the emphasis on skills such as perseverance, empathy, and emotional regulation, which were critical for navigating the challenges of adult life. Yardley et al. (2012) further emphasizes that experiential learning, which was closely aligned with SEL principles, enhances students' ability to apply problem-solving and emotional regulation in real-world settings. This prepared students for life beyond the classroom, equipping them with the tools they needed for personal and professional success.

Addressing At-Risk Students. At-risk students benefit significantly from SEL programs, as they often face heightened emotional and social challenges. Brackett (2024) noted that SEL helped students develop self-awareness and empathy, which was critical for building resilience against systemic barriers such as poverty and discrimination. Anderson (2021) highlighted that culturally responsive SEL programs were particularly effective for marginalized students, as they addressed the unique emotional and social needs of these populations.

Teacher Training and Implementation. The effectiveness of SEL programs depends heavily on the quality of teacher training. Brackett (2024) underscored that teachers who possess high emotional intelligence were better able to model SEL principles, create positive classroom climates, and support students' emotional resilience. Hogan (2022) further asserted that empathetic leadership was essential for fostering a

school culture that prioritized emotional and social development. Without adequate

teacher training and systemic support, the full potential of SEL programs could not be

realized, especially in schools serving at-risk populations.

SEL programs provided a comprehensive approach to education, promoting

emotional resilience, positive relationship-building, and long-term academic success. By

equipping students with essential social-emotional skills, SEL programs not only

improved immediate academic outcomes but also prepared students for future challenges.

Teacher training and the integration of SEL into school cultures were critical to the

effectiveness of these programs, especially for supporting at-risk students who faced

heightened emotional and social challenges. With proper implementation and support,

SEL served as a powerful protective factor for all students.

Multi-Tiered Systems of Support and Response to Intervention

Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) was a structured framework designed to

meet the diverse academic, behavioral, and social-emotional needs of students through

progressively intensive tiers of support (Zhang et al., 2023). Response to Intervention

(RTI) was one of the key components of MTSS, particularly focused on academic

intervention for students who struggled with core subjects (Miesner et al., 2023; Zhang et

al., 2023). Both MTSS and RTI frameworks operated on a tiered system that aimed to

provide every student with the appropriate level of intervention at the right time. MTSS

was built upon three tiers of support.

Tier 1: Universal Supports. The first tier included universal instruction and

interventions that benefited all students. Research indicated that up to 80% of students

succeed with these interventions, which included evidence-based teaching practices,

classroom behavior strategies, and universal screening (Zhang et al., 2023). Additionally, behavioral interventions like School-wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (SWPBIS) were commonly embedded within this tier (Gage et al., 2020; Lee & Gage, 2020). Universal screening conducted multiple times a year helped schools quickly identify students who may need additional support.

Tier 2: Targeted Interventions. About 10-15% of students required Tier 2 support, which was focused on small-group instruction or interventions designed to address specific deficits (Zhang et al. 2023). Farkas (2020) emphasized that this tier often includes supplemental instruction, either through small-group tutoring or targeted behavioral interventions for students struggling with specific academic or behavioral issues.

Tier 3: Intensive Interventions. The final tier provided intensive, individualized support for the approximately 5% of students who had not responded to interventions at Tiers 1 and 2. Interventions at Tier 3 were highly customized and might involve collaboration with specialists, counselors, or behavioral therapists to address severe academic or behavioral challenges (Miesner et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2023).

Early Warning Systems (EWS). EWS plays a pivotal role within the MTSS framework. These systems track key indicators like attendance, behavior, and academic performance to identify students at risk of dropping out. Balfanz (2011) found that EWS paired with targeted interventions could significantly reduce dropout rates by providing real-time data to guide school staff in delivering appropriate supports. By identifying students before they disengaged, EWS enabled timely Tier 2 or Tier 3 interventions, preventing further decline in academic or behavioral performance.

Credit Recovery Programs within MTSS. One example of Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions within MTSS is credit recovery programs. These programs allow students who have fallen behind academically to make up missing credits and stay on track for graduation. Research by Hawes et al. (2020) highlighted that credit recovery programs, often delivered through online platforms or after-school learning sessions, provided at-risk students with flexible options for catching up. Credit recovery has been particularly effective in reducing dropout rates for older students who may be at risk of leaving school due to academic struggles (Heinrich, 2022; Rickles, 2023).

Equity and Implementation Challenges. While MTSS has demonstrated effectiveness, one of the ongoing challenges is ensuring equitable access to interventions. Cannistrà (2022) pointed out that culturally responsive practices must be embedded in all tiers of MTSS to address the needs of diverse student populations. Schools serving marginalized communities might require additional resources to implement interventions equitably, including professional development for staff and access to mental health services.

The integration of early warning systems, credit recovery programs, and culturally responsive practices into the MTSS and RTI frameworks ensures that schools can address the complex academic, behavioral, and social-emotional needs of their students (Bohnenkamp et al., 2023). Through this structured, tiered approach, schools can provide timely, targeted interventions to prevent student disengagement, reduce dropout rates, and promote overall student success.

Parental Involvement and Family Engagement

The Importance of Parental Engagement. Active parental involvement is a critical factor in promoting student success and preventing dropout. Research has consistently shown that students whose parents were engaged in their education perform better academically and demonstrated improved behavior and social skills (Christie, 2008; Hebert, 2013; Ward-Roof et al., 2008). According to Epstein (2002), parental involvement encompassed six key areas: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and collaborating with the community. These areas of engagement, when fostered by schools, led to higher levels of student achievement and emotional resilience.

Parental engagement helped reinforce the importance of education and provided the support necessary for students to stay focused on their studies. Valente et al. (2018) found that "students whose parents are actively engaged in their education—through homework help, parent-teacher conferences, and fostering a positive home environment—are significantly more likely to succeed academically" (p. 43). This involvement strengthened the mesosystem by fostering a strong home-school relationship. According to Gitonga (2023), the stronger the communication between parents and schools, the better the outcomes for student achievement, particularly in the early years.

Parental Engagement as a Bridge between Home and School. Parental engagement serves as a critical link between the home and school environments, contributing to a cohesive support system that strengthens both academic and emotional resilience. As highlighted by Gallagher (2017), when parents are actively engaged with

schools, students benefit from a more cohesive support network, which reinforces their motivation and resilience during academic challenges. However, it is essential to acknowledge that parental involvement could be limited in low-income families due to external stressors such as work obligations and limited resources. Theron et al. (2014) cautioned that schools must consider these barriers and offer flexible options for engagement.

Building Strong Home-School Connections. Schools that prioritize parental involvement foster a stronger support network for students. Programs aimed at increasing parent participation, such as family literacy nights and workshops, are particularly effective. According to Lopez (2013), "programs that encourage parent engagement can significantly improve student outcomes by fostering a deeper connection between home and school" (p. 148). These initiatives not only kept parents informed about their child's progress but also provided them with the tools to support learning at home. Moreover, research by Newman et al. (2019) emphasized that parent involvement programs enhanced student success by improving communication between schools and families, thereby reducing dropout risks and promoting long-term academic engagement.

Overcoming Barriers to Parental Involvement. Equity in parental involvement is crucial for creating an inclusive school environment. Gitonga (2023) discussed how low-income families often faced challenges in maintaining consistent engagement due to obstacles such as time constraints, language barriers, and a lack of understanding of the school system. These challenges disproportionately affected families from disadvantaged backgrounds, making it difficult for them to participate fully in their children's education.

Schools should offer bilingual support, flexible meeting times, and provide child care during events to ensure equitable opportunities for all families to engage.

Additionally, parental involvement has a particularly strong impact on students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Valente et al. (2018) noted that "students from low-income families who have strong parental support are more likely to overcome academic challenges and stay engaged in school" (p. 44). Schools that created opportunities for parental involvement, especially in ways that acknowledge the constraints of socioeconomic conditions, played a critical role in enhancing this protective factor and reducing dropout rates (Cassells, 2018).

Parental Engagement through Ecological Systems Theory (EST). Parental involvement can also be viewed through the lens of EST. According to Epstein (2002), family, school, and community formed overlapping spheres of influence on a child's development. In this framework, parental engagement strengthened the mesosystem by connecting the school and home environments, facilitating consistent messaging and support for the child's education. This interconnectedness was vital for student success, as parents reinforced at home the academic expectations set by teachers, thereby creating a stable and supportive environment for learning. Gallagher (2017) emphasized that when parents actively participated in their children's education, students received consistent encouragement across both their home and school environments, promoting higher academic achievement and emotional resilience.

Community-Based Support Systems

After-School Programs and Mentoring Initiatives. Community-based programs, such as after-school activities and mentoring initiatives, provide crucial

academic and emotional support for at-risk students. Nabors et al. (2022) highlighted that mentoring programs helped students build life skills, offering the support needed to navigate academic and personal challenges. These programs created safe spaces where students could receive academic guidance and fostered relationships with positive role models. Additionally, Weaver et al. (2018) emphasized that structured after-school programs could positively impact both students' physical activity levels and their overall engagement with school. This combination of emotional and academic support played a significant role in keeping students engaged and resilient. Hunter and Bierman (2021) underscored the importance of organizational support for these programs, noting that successful implementation often depended on strong leadership and consistent funding. Without these structural supports, even well-designed community programs struggled to achieve long-term positive outcomes.

Career Pathways and Vocational Training. Vocational training programs offer practical alternatives for students who may not thrive in traditional academic environments. These programs equip students with job-specific skills that make education more relevant to their career goals. Zhou et al. (2023) found that vocational programs provided a direct link between academic learning and employment opportunities, which helped keep students motivated and engaged in their studies. According to Wang (2024), students who participated in career-focused training programs were 35% more likely to graduate than their peers, as these programs offered a clear sense of purpose.

Fantuzzo et al. (2005) emphasized the importance of community-based interventions in reducing truancy and increasing student engagement, particularly for

students at risk of dropping out. These findings aligned with recent data suggesting that vocational training programs, when integrated into a broader educational framework, offered students a pathway to meaningful employment and long-term success (Karttunen et al., 2023; Washington State Board of Education, 2022).

Challenges and Limitations. Despite the proven benefits of community-based support systems, they often face significant challenges. Nabors et al. (2022) cautioned that mentoring and after-school programs required sustained funding and organizational backing to be effective over the long term. Similarly, research by Weaver et al. (2018) indicated that vocational programs relied heavily on partnerships between schools and local businesses, and without these collaborations, the impact of such programs could be limited.

Pathways to Dropout

The decision to drop out of school is rarely the result of a single event; rather, it emerges from a gradual process marked by a series of academic, social, and emotional challenges. As Evans and DiBenedetto (1991) highlighted, dropout was best understood as a developmental progression, shaped by pathways that reflected the complex interactions between individual experiences and the broader educational environment. These pathways were not uniform; they took many forms and evolved over time, depending on the unique combination of factors influencing each student's life.

Pathways to dropout often began with small setbacks, such as academic struggles or social difficulties, which, if left unaddressed, accumulated and intensified. Evans and DiBenedetto (1991) described these challenges as part of a behavioral progression where students faced with mounting obstacles began to disengage from school. This

disengagement manifested through a combination of absenteeism, declining academic performance, and behavioral issues. Importantly, these behaviors were not fixed traits but were shaped by interactions within various systems, including family, school, and peer groups, which together created the conditions that made dropout more likely.

At the core of these pathways was the student's interaction with the school system. For some, early academic failures or social isolation served as the catalyst for disengagement, while for others, systemic barriers such as underfunded schools, overcrowded classrooms, or a lack of individualized support compounded their struggles. Evans and DiBenedetto (1991) suggested that dropout was not a predetermined outcome but a behavior influenced by these cumulative experiences. This realization allowed educators to move beyond simplistic notions of at-risk students to instead focus on the broader contexts that shaped their educational trajectories.

By examining the different pathways that led to dropout, educators could better understand the points at which students began to disconnect from school. Thinking in terms of these pathways offered insight into the conditions under which students gradually lost their engagement, and highlighted the importance of addressing not just individual behaviors but also the systemic factors that contributed to disengagement. In understanding dropout as a dynamic process rather than a fixed endpoint, the door to identifying the various supports and resources that could help students remain connected to school and navigate their challenges effectively had been opened (Evans & DiBenedetto, 1991; Huynh & Grossmann, 2020; Varner, 2023).

Disengagement to Dropout

The process leading to dropout is typically the result of multiple interconnected academic, social, and emotional challenges. According to Neild et al. (2007) and Pagani et al. (2008), these challenges often began with small academic setbacks that, when left unaddressed, compounded over time, leading to increased disengagement from school. As students encountered mounting academic difficulties, they began to disconnect emotionally, socially, and academically, creating a cycle of disengagement that was hard to break. To understand how students moved from risk to dropping out, it was important to consider both individual factors, such as academic struggles and systemic influences, including inadequate school resources and support (Balfanz, 2011; Viano & Henry, 2023).

Escalation of Academic Failures

Academic struggles often mark the starting point on the pathway toward dropping out. Neild et al. (2007) explained that students who experienced early academic challenges could start to miss school more frequently and develop behavioral issues, further intensifying their disengagement. Research by Pagani et al. (2008) highlighted that absenteeism was a significant predictor of dropout, with students who missed more than 10% of school showing much higher dropout rates than their peers. These academic challenges were often worsened by larger systemic issues within schools, such as overcrowded classrooms and insufficient academic support, which contributed to further academic decline and detachment from school (Balfanz et al., 2011).

In addition, Zhen et al. (2020) pointed out that students lacking self-regulation skills, such as the ability to effectively monitor and reflect on their own learning, were

especially vulnerable in educational environments that required greater independence, such as flipped classrooms or online programs. Without adequate self-regulation, students quickly fell behind, deepening the cycle of academic failure. Viano and Henry (2023) noted that while online credit recovery programs were intended to help struggling students catch up, these programs often lacked the structured support necessary to build academic confidence, resulting in mixed outcomes. This was particularly concerning in the context of increased reliance on virtual learning environments following the COVID-19 pandemic (Heinrich, 2022).

Emotional Disconnection and Learned Helplessness

As students experience repeated academic failures, they often begin to disengage emotionally from the learning process. Emotional disconnection is not an immediate response but develops gradually as students internalize the belief that their efforts will not result in academic success. This phenomenon, known as learned helplessness, was particularly problematic for students who, after facing continual failure, came to believe that no amount of effort would change their academic outcomes (Gregory et al., 2021). As these students lost faith in their ability to improve, their motivation to engage in schoolwork diminished.

The emotional toll of repeated failure was heightened by the absence of positive reinforcement and academic support from teachers and school staff. Without targeted interventions or encouragement, students became isolated in their struggles. Morrow and Villodas (2017) noted that adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), such as family instability or economic hardship, could intensify emotional disconnection, particularly for students who faced these challenges outside of school. The accumulation of such

emotional stressors further reduced students' ability to engage in school, both academically and socially.

Over time, the emotional disengagement became self-reinforcing. As students felt increasingly isolated, they became less likely to seek help or actively participate in school-related activities. Social isolation compounded this issue; Snyder (1991) pointed out that students who felt disconnected from their peers were more prone to disengagement, which could further escalate the likelihood of dropout. The absence of strong peer relationships, combined with negative self-perceptions, drove students deeper into emotional withdrawal, resulting in a cycle that was difficult to interrupt (Avant et al., 2021; Kim et al., 2023).

Absenteeism often emerged as a coping mechanism in response to these emotional and academic struggles (Kearney & Graczyk, 2020; Kearney, 2021). Initially, students might skip school to avoid the emotional stress associated with academic failure, but this behavior often reinforced the disengagement process. McCallumore and Sparapani (2010) emphasized that chronic absenteeism was one of the most reliable predictors of dropout. As students missed more school, they became increasingly disconnected from both academic instruction and peer relationships, further perpetuating the cycle of disengagement. The emotional distance created by absenteeism also led to the breakdown of critical support structures within the school, including relationships with teachers, counselors, and other staff who could otherwise intervene (Kearney & Graczyk, 2020; Wisconsin Policy Forum, 2023).

Research from Lessard et al. (2014) underscored the importance of addressing the emotional needs of students early on, suggesting that schools needed to implement

proactive support systems to prevent emotional disconnection from spiraling into learned

helplessness. Programs that focused on emotional resilience, self-regulation, and student

engagement could be instrumental in reversing the negative patterns of disengagement.

Without such interventions, students' emotional disconnection could become permanent,

pushing them closer to dropping out. The National Center for Education Statistics (2019)

further supported this argument by highlighting that the majority of dropouts identify

academic struggles as a leading cause of their decision to leave school.

Peer Influence and Social Pressures

Peer Group Dynamics

Peers play a central role in shaping students' attitudes toward school, and peer

relationships often influence whether students remain engaged or become disengaged.

Booth and Shaw (2023) highlighted that during adolescence, peer approval could

overshadow other influences, including those from parents and teachers. Negative peer

groups, particularly those that devalued education, could create a culture where skipping

school and disengagement from academic responsibilities became normalized.

Adolescence was a particularly sensitive period, as students began to seek social

validation, often prioritizing peer approval over academic achievement (Kornienko et al.,

2019). In environments where peer networks supported negative behaviors, such as

truancy or defiance toward school authorities, students were more likely to disengage

from school in an effort to conform to their social group's expectations.

Research from Sunbal and Jabeen (2023) also reinforced this dynamic, showing

that bullying behavior often emerged in peer groups where deviance from school norms

was encouraged. Students who belonged to such groups engaged in bullying as a way to

assert dominance or gain social standing, contributing to a broader culture of disengagement. Hamstra and Fitzgerald (2022) linked this behavior to poor social skills and mental health issues, such as anxiety, anger, and low self-esteem, which compounded the effects of negative peer influences. Students who lacked coping mechanisms or social support were more likely to be drawn into negative peer dynamics, further distancing them from academic engagement.

Moreover, Fink et al. (2020) underscored how the early development of social preferences within peer groups predicted later bullying behavior. Students who were not well-liked by their peers or who struggled with social interactions were often at greater risk of adopting aggressive or disruptive behaviors to assert their presence in the social hierarchy. These patterns became particularly pronounced during middle school, where peer influence peaked, and students who felt marginalized resorted to negative behaviors (Hafina et al., 2024).

Bullying, Social Isolation, and Disengagement

Bullying and social isolation are significant contributors to student disengagement. Zequinão et al. (2017) emphasized that students involved in bullying, whether as perpetrators, victims, or bystanders, were more likely to experience academic failure, absenteeism, and ultimately, dropout. Students who were bullied often felt unsafe at school, leading them to avoid attending classes, which in turn resulted in lower academic performance and higher dropout rates. Sunbal and Jabeen (2023) further discussed how bullying amplified absenteeism, as students who feared being targeted skipped school to avoid hostile interactions. The long-term effects of bullying included

not only academic disengagement but also psychological issues such as anxiety, depression, and feelings of helplessness.

Social isolation, which often accompanies bullying, played a key role in the disengagement process. Ottosen et al. (2023) found that students who felt excluded from peer networks or unsupported by their teachers were more likely to experience frustration with school. This sense of alienation was particularly acute for students from marginalized backgrounds, who already faced additional challenges such as economic instability or family dysfunction. Without strong social connections at school, these students were more likely to disengage emotionally and academically, viewing dropout as a way to escape their difficult circumstances (Chapman et al., 2011; McGee, 2022).

Interventions to Mitigate Peer Influence

Addressing the negative influence of peer groups and reducing the prevalence of bullying requires comprehensive interventions that focus on building supportive school environments. Sunbal and Jabeen (2023) advocated for the implementation of school social work programs, which could provide targeted support for students struggling with peer pressures and bullying. These programs not only helped students develop stronger social skills but also worked to create a more inclusive school culture where negative peer behaviors were less likely to thrive. By promoting empathy, resilience, and conflict resolution, school social workers could play a pivotal role in reducing the risk of disengagement and dropout.

Additionally, peer mentoring and structured extracurricular activities have been shown to mitigate the effects of negative peer influences. Fink et al. (2020) highlighted the importance of early interventions that fostered positive peer relationships, particularly

for younger students who were still developing their social identities. When schools

invested in programs that promote collaboration, inclusivity, and mutual respect, students

were less likely to fall into patterns of negative peer behavior that lead to disengagement.

Institutional Failures and Systemic Barriers

Underfunding and Lack of Resources

Institutional failures, especially the chronic underfunding of public schools, play a

pivotal role in pushing students toward dropping out. According to Balfanz (2011),

schools with inadequate resources were often unable to provide the individual attention

and support required to keep struggling students engaged in their education. Schools in

low-income communities typically faced overcrowded classrooms, outdated instructional

materials, and limited access to enrichment programs, all of which contributed to a

disengaged school environment.

Baker and Cotto (2020) emphasized that the disparities in school funding were

particularly prevalent in districts serving minority populations, which suffered from

chronic underfunding compared to wealthier, predominantly White districts. This funding

gap made it difficult for these schools to retain qualified teachers and provide necessary

academic and emotional support. This structural disadvantage was worsened by a funding

system based on local property taxes, which limited the ability of schools in poorer areas

to meet the needs of their students.

Furthermore, Burnette (2020) discussed how predominantly minority-serving

districts were disproportionately affected by systemic inequities in school funding. These

districts often had fewer resources despite serving populations with greater academic and

social needs.

Inconsistent Discipline and School Policies

Punitive disciplinary policies, particularly zero-tolerance measures, disproportionately affect minority and low-income students, accelerating their path to dropout. Ryan and Goodram (2013) highlighted how exclusionary discipline practices, such as suspensions and expulsions, were disproportionately applied to Black and Hispanic students, who were significantly more likely to be removed from the classroom than their White peers. This reflected broader systemic inequities in school discipline, which often pushed students further into disengagement from school.

Zheng et al. (2019) suggested that restorative justice practices, which emphasized conflict resolution and community building, offered a more effective alternative to punitive policies. Restorative justice practices, as reported by Agudelo et al. (2021), have been shown to reduce both suspension and dropout rates by fostering a more supportive and inclusive school environment. Schools implementing restorative justice approaches reported significant improvements in student engagement, particularly among minority students disproportionately affected by zero-tolerance policies.

Transition Points in Education

Critical Transition to High School

The transition from middle school to high school represents a critical point in students' educational journeys, particularly for those who have struggled academically or socially. McCallumore and Sparapani (2010) identified this period as one in which students often faced increased academic expectations and social pressures while simultaneously losing the familiar support systems they relied on in middle school. This shift in the academic environment created significant stress for students, particularly

ninth graders, who were especially vulnerable to falling behind. Eggleston (2014) found

that many students experienced marked declines in academic performance, particularly in

English Language Arts and mathematics, during their first year of high school.

Ninth-grade success has been directly linked to graduation rates, with students

who fail at least one course in ninth grade being at greater risk of dropping out. Roybal

(2014) highlighted that students who successfully navigate their first year are far more

likely to graduate. Programs designed to support students during this period, such as

summer bridge programs and freshman academies, have proven effective in mitigating

these risks. For example, Vera et al. (2016) found that students who participated in

summer dropout prevention programs reported increased feelings of school belonging

and academic self-efficacy, both critical to their success in high school.

Furthermore, the role of school counselors cannot be overlooked. Cooper and

Liou (2007) emphasized that counselors were essential in providing students with

"high-stakes information" about navigating the complexities of the high school

environment, especially in low-income, urban areas where students lacked other support

networks (p. 52).

The Challenge of Self-Regulation in Higher Grades

As students move through higher grades, they are expected to take on greater

responsibility for their own learning. This increased need for self-regulation can be

particularly challenging for students who have already struggled with academic

motivation or performance. McKee and Caldarella (2016) found that middle school

indicators, such as GPA and attendance, were strong predictors of future success in high

school. One such indicator was D grades in middle school which were strongly related to

the number of Fs received in high school (McKee, 2009). Students who entered high school without strong self-regulation skills were at a higher risk of academic failure and disengagement.

Zheng et al. (2019) underscored the importance of developing self-regulation skills, particularly during the transition to high school. Students who lacked these skills often struggled with the independence required in high school, leading to poor performance and an increased likelihood of disengagement. Programs that taught self-regulation, including goal-setting and time management, helped students better manage the academic pressures of high school. Roybal (2014) added that comprehensive programs incorporating multiple strategies, such as peer mentoring, collaboration between middle and high school staff, and targeted academic interventions, were most successful in fostering students' self-regulation and reducing dropout rates.

Family and Economic Pressures

The Role of Caregiving and Economic Survival

Family instability and economic pressures are significant factors driving student dropout, particularly in low-income communities. McKee and Caldarella (2016) found that students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds were significantly more likely to leave school early due to financial pressures, often as a result of needing to contribute to their family's income. Many students in low-income households took on part-time or full-time jobs, reducing the time and energy they could devote to their education. These financial burdens had a long-term impact, exacerbating their likelihood of disengagement and ultimately leading to dropout.

Beyond the financial constraints, caregiving responsibilities often fell disproportionately on students from low-income families. Suh et al. (2007) observed that students who served as primary caregivers for younger siblings or ill family members faced overwhelming pressures, forcing them to prioritize family obligations over their academic pursuits. This shift in focus placed them at higher risk of academic disengagement, which was compounded by limited institutional support for such students.

Short-Term Financial Necessity Over Long-Term Education

Economic survival often supersedes educational goals for students grappling with immediate financial pressures. DeLuca et al. (2015) found that students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, particularly in rural and urban high-poverty areas, were more likely to view short-term employment opportunities as more critical than the long-term benefits of education. In these communities, where economic hardship was prevalent, students perceived well-paying jobs not requiring a diploma as more attainable than investing time and effort in completing their education.

Similarly, Golden (2003) emphasized that many students from disadvantaged backgrounds, particularly those who have dropped out and returned for high school equivalency (HSE) programs, may also face pressures to prioritize financial stability over educational advancement. They were often driven by the immediate necessity of supporting themselves and their families.

The Impact of Economic Pressures on Dropout Decisions

The economic challenges students face, such as balancing school with the need to work or care for family members, create a profound risk for disengagement. Dogaru and

Anghel (2019) stressed that external factors such as family economic instability played a more significant role in school outcomes than the quality of education itself. Students from low-income backgrounds, particularly those in disadvantaged areas, faced higher dropout rates due to a combination of economic pressures and caregiving responsibilities.

Further supporting this, Toyon (2024) noted that for working students, especially those balancing employment and education, the pressure to maintain financial stability could lead to disengagement from academic life. This phenomenon was observed in higher education as well, where social capital played a critical role in retaining students, but without institutional support to manage these dual responsibilities, students often dropped out.

External Societal Factors

Media Influence and Community Perceptions

External societal factors, particularly media portrayals and community norms, play a pivotal role in shaping students' attitudes toward education. In communities where educational attainment is not highly valued, students may see little reason to complete high school. Neild et al. (2007) found that students in communities where fewer adults have completed high school were more likely to follow the same path, as they did not view a diploma as critical to their future success. Community norms, reinforced by media, perpetuated this disengagement from education, particularly in disadvantaged areas where cultural expectations were often to prioritize immediate economic survival over long-term educational investment.

The Impact of Media on Student Motivation

Social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube have heightened the impact of societal perceptions on students' educational engagement. These platforms frequently glorify individuals who achieve fame and financial success without completing their formal education, suggesting that school is not necessary for achieving high status or wealth. Szlyk (2021) asserted that these portrayals created a false sense of hope for students, especially those already at risk of disengagement, as they might begin to view formal education as irrelevant to success. This perception was particularly harmful in virtual learning environments, where, as Zhang and Lin (2020) noted, students distanced from traditional support systems were vulnerable to external pressures that encouraged disengagement.

Social Media and Mental Health

Social media not only shapes perceptions of success but also contributes to mental health challenges, which can further erode students' motivation to engage in school. Ahmed (2023) discussed how social media contributed to higher rates of anxiety, depression, and body image issues, all of which negatively impacted students' ability to focus on education (Twenge, 2024). Azizan (2024) echoed this concern, emphasizing that prolonged engagement with social media correlated with an increase in mental health disorders among adolescents, further compounding the difficulty of staying motivated in academic settings (Twenge, 2024).

The pervasive use of social media has also led to an increase in feelings of isolation among adolescents. Vanderkam (2024) reported that adolescent depression rates nearly doubled over the past decade, a rise linked to social media use. As students spent

more time online, their connections with their school and peers weakened, further

disengaging them from their academic environment. This trend was particularly

concerning as students substituted real-world connections for virtual interactions,

fostering an environment where disengagement from school became normalized.

Societal Expectations and Peer Influence

The pressure to conform to social media norms can have a profound effect on

students' academic performance. Sangani and Razavi (2024) found that virtual social

networks such as Telegram led to educational decline, as the excessive time students

spent online often replaced valuable study time that contributed to mental health issues

such as anxiety. Furthermore, peer influence within social networks tended to prioritize

social validation over academic success, creating additional barriers to educational

engagement. Stewart (2014) added that immigrant students, particularly those from

Latino backgrounds, often experienced a conflict between the sophisticated literacy

practices they engaged in online and the devaluation of those skills in traditional

educational settings, further alienating them from school.

The Role of Conformity and Social Norms

Social influence theory helps explain how students' behaviors are shaped by

societal expectations and peer norms reinforced through social media. Fajri et al. (2023)

discussed the emergence of "Sad Culture" on platforms like Instagram, where sharing

mental health struggles became a form of social conformity. This culture diverted

students' attention from academic responsibilities, as they became more focused on social

media validation than on their educational goals (Twenge, 2024). The normalization of

mental health struggles on these platforms also encouraged students to disengage from

school as they adopted societal narratives that de-emphasized the importance of

education in favor of online acceptance.

Mental Health and Stress Accumulation

The Impact of Mental Health on Academic Disengagement

Mental health challenges significantly intersect with academic struggles, leading

to student disengagement and eventual dropout. McCabe et al. (2020) emphasized that

students experiencing multiple stressors, such as academic pressure, family instability,

and social isolation, were more prone to mental health issues like anxiety, depression, and

burnout. When mental health challenges went untreated, especially in underfunded

schools, the likelihood of disengagement from school increased. Schools often lacked the

resources to provide essential mental health services, exacerbating these issues.

Without proper support, students who face mental health challenges are left to

cope on their own, which often results in academic decline. Hobbs (2018) argued that the

absence of mental health services increased the likelihood of dropping out, especially

among at-risk students. These challenges were further amplified in virtual learning

environments when isolation and a lack of social support contributed to increased anxiety

and depressive symptoms among students. Zaeske (2023) underscored how students in

these virtual learning settings faced heightened mental health issues, which further

alienated them from their academic responsibilities.

Addressing Mental Health to Prevent Dropout

Early intervention is critical in preventing disengagement due to mental health

issues. Hagger and Hamilton (2019) emphasized that timely mental health interventions

significantly improved a student's likelihood of remaining engaged with school. Schools

that provided mental health services, particularly in underserved areas, saw notable

reductions in dropout rates and disciplinary issues. Comprehensive programs that

included counseling and peer support became key strategies in addressing mental health

challenges among students.

Cockerill (2019) found that alternative education settings, when supported by

mental health programs, showed improved student engagement. A sense of belonging,

often fostered through supportive mental health initiatives, significantly reduced the

likelihood of disengagement.

Additionally, Santiago et al. (2017) demonstrated that teaching students coping

strategies, such as primary control coping (problem-solving) and secondary control

coping (cognitive restructuring), helped them manage stress and remain engaged.

However, without these interventions, students often turned to disengagement strategies,

which worsened academic outcomes.

Systemic Barriers to Mental Health Support

Despite the growing recognition of the importance of mental health in academic

success, systemic barriers persist. Many schools, particularly in low-income areas, lack

the resources to provide adequate mental health services. Vaughn (2011) noted that many

students with psychiatric conditions go untreated in school settings, resulting in

cumulative disengagement from academics and social environments. Without proper

mental health services, students with psychiatric challenges were more likely to

experience long-term negative outcomes, such as dropout.

Furthermore, students from low-income or marginalized communities often faced

greater mental health challenges, with fewer resources available to address them. Coles et

al. (2023) pointed out that the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated these challenges, disproportionately affecting low-income students who already had limited access to mental health services. These systemic inequities left many students without the support they needed to succeed academically and emotionally.

Addressing the mental health needs of students is essential for reducing dropout rates, particularly in underserved communities. Early interventions, comprehensive mental health programs, and strategies to reduce systemic barriers are crucial for mitigating mental health challenges and preventing academic disengagement.

The Need for Alternative Pathways

Understanding the various pathways that lead to dropout is essential for recognizing how different academic, social, and emotional challenges can compound, pushing students further from the possibility of graduation. These pathways highlight the complex interplay between individual struggles and systemic shortcomings, making it clear that traditional educational environments often fail to provide the necessary support for students on the brink of disengagement. While some students may benefit from targeted interventions within the existing school structure, others require more flexible, tailored approaches to meet their unique needs. For these students, remaining within the traditional system may no longer be a viable option. This is where alternative educational models become crucial. In the next section, we will explore Alternatives to Traditional Schooling, which offer diverse pathways to graduation for students at risk of dropping out, providing them with renewed opportunities to succeed on their own terms.

Alternatives to Traditional Schooling

The traditional model of education, commonly referred to as direct instruction

(DI), is characterized by a structured, teacher-centered approach where learning is driven

by the explicit delivery of information by the instructor. In this model, teachers play a

central role in explaining concepts, providing demonstrations, and ensuring that students

acquire specific knowledge and skills through guided practice (Lange et al., 2023). DI is

grounded in the belief that students learn best through structured lessons, repetition, and a

focus on mastery of content before moving on to more complex material (Sweller, 2020).

While DI could be particularly effective for foundational learning and skill-building, it

often lacked the flexibility needed to address diverse learning styles and needs (Brons,

2017).

In states like Missouri, where direct instruction forms the basis of most traditional

public schooling, students are expected to meet standardized requirements for graduation.

Graduation was typically measured through the accumulation of units of credit, with each

unit representing a set number of instructional hours, usually corresponding to seat time

(Silva & White, 2015). Missouri high school students, for example, had to earn 24 units

of credit across various subject areas, including English, mathematics, social studies, and

science, to meet the state's requirements for graduation (DESE, 2023). These time-based

credit systems have been criticized for prioritizing attendance and seat time over true

competency and mastery of subject matter (Silva & White, 2015).

In response to the limitations of the DI model and the rigidity of traditional credit

systems, a range of alternative educational models emerged. These alternatives offered

more personalized and flexible approaches to learning, catering to students who struggled

to thrive in standardized environments. For example, credit recovery programs allowed students who had fallen behind in their coursework to regain credits at their own pace, often through online or blended learning environments (Ballard & Bender, 2022). Similarly, CBE programs enabled students to progress by demonstrating mastery of specific skills rather than accumulating time in the classroom (Henrekson & Wennström, 2023). Other models, such as dual enrollment programs, allowed students to earn both high school and college credits simultaneously, offering a more accelerated pathway to postsecondary education (Brons, 2017; Community College Research Center, 2024). Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the adoption of distance learning, which allowed students to engage with their education remotely using platforms such as Zoom, Google Meet, and other virtual tools. This model offered a flexible and accessible alternative for students during a time of global restrictions, allowing for individualized pacing and reducing the barriers to traditional in-person education (Kaliuzhka et al., 2020).

In addition to these academic programs, many alternative models integrated social and emotional support systems that focused on the holistic development of students. Programs like the School Flex Program, that make use of wraparound services and other behavioral intervention programs, were designed to provide comprehensive support to at-risk students, addressing not only their academic needs but also their personal and social challenges (Armstrong, 2018; Ballard & Bender, 2022; Taylor, 2018). These programs aimed to create more inclusive learning environments that recognized the complex needs of today's diverse student populations.

As education continues to evolve, the traditional model of direct instruction remains a valuable foundation, but its limitations highlight the need for more adaptive systems that meet the needs of all students. In the following section, various alternative education models will be explored, including credit recovery, competency-based learning, dual enrollment, and behavioral intervention programs (Community College Research Center, 2024; Heinrich, 2022). These alternatives, as well as others, represent critical steps toward creating a more flexible and equitable educational landscape that supports the diverse needs of all learners.

Changing Pedagogical Frameworks

The educational landscape has shifted dramatically over the past few decades, particularly in how learning is structured and delivered. At the heart of this transformation is the transition from DI, a teacher-centered, didactic approach that emphasizes rote learning and mastery of discrete skills, to Constructivist Learning Theory (CLT), which focuses on the active role of students in building their own understanding through interaction, collaboration, and reflection (Pierpont, 2007; Sweller, 2020).

DI, while effective in delivering foundational knowledge and ensuring mastery of basic skills, often fails to engage students in higher-order thinking or in understanding how to apply knowledge to real-world situations. DI's emphasis on standardization and the passive reception of knowledge means that students were frequently required to follow a set curriculum with little room for exploration or personal engagement (Sweller, 2020). As a result, DI could limit students' ability to develop critical thinking, problem-solving, and metacognitive skills, competencies that are increasingly essential in the modern world (Ștefan, 2017).

In contrast, CLT represents a paradigm shift in educational philosophy. CLT is grounded in the works of theorists like Piaget and Vygotsky, who posited that learning is not a passive process of absorbing information but an active, dynamic process in which learners construct knowledge by interacting with their environment and reflecting on their experiences (Miller-First & Ballard, 2017; Wink & Putney, 2002). In the constructivist model, students were not merely recipients of information but rather were active participants in their own learning, engaging in inquiry, experimentation, and collaboration to make sense of the world around them (Kizkapan, 2024).

Constructivist approaches aligned well with alternative education models that prioritize personalized, student-centered learning environments. In these settings, students had greater autonomy in their learning, often working on projects that were meaningful to them and collaborating with peers to solve complex problems (Almazroui, 2023). Project-based learning, for instance, was a hallmark of constructivist pedagogy and allowed students to explore real-world issues, engage in critical thinking, and apply their knowledge in practical ways (Ștefan, 2017). Similarly, inquiry-based learning encouraged students to ask questions, conduct research, and draw their own conclusions, fostering a deeper understanding of the material.

Constructivism's emphasis on the social nature of learning was particularly relevant to EST, which examined how various environmental layers, ranging from the immediate family to broader societal influences, interacted to shape a student's development (Tudge et al., 2009). In a traditional DI classroom, these interactions were often overlooked, as the focus remained largely on the individual student's ability to master the curriculum. However, constructivist approaches were more likely to engage

with these broader systems by acknowledging the role of family, community, and even

policy in shaping a student's learning experience (Pierpont, 2007). This more holistic

view of education aligned closely with the goals of alternative schooling models, which

often provided wraparound services and addressed the social, emotional, and academic

needs of students, particularly those from marginalized or at-risk backgrounds (Kirwan et

al., 2018; Taylor, 2018).

Additionally, the constructivist model was well suited to the flexible, adaptive

learning environments found in many alternative educational programs. For example,

credit recovery programs, which allowed students to regain lost academic ground at their

own pace, benefited from constructivist approaches that focused on individualized

learning goals and self-directed study (Henrekson & Wennström, 2023). Similarly, CBE,

a model that allowed students to progress once they demonstrated mastery of specific

skills, drew heavily on constructivist principles, as it emphasized the importance of

student agency and the active application of knowledge (Miller-First & Ballard, 2017).

These models moved away from the rigid structures of time-based learning, offering a

more personalized, student-centered approach that fostered deeper engagement with the

material.

The adoption of distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic also

accelerated the shift toward constructivist principles in education (Rickles et al., 2023;

Wang et al., 2023). With the sudden move to online platforms, traditional DI approaches

struggled to adapt to the asynchronous, flexible nature of remote learning. In contrast,

constructivist methodologies, which emphasized student agency and self-directed

learning, proved to be well-suited to the demands of distance education (Kritt & Budwig,

2022; Malhotra et al., 2022). By leveraging technology and online collaboration tools, many educators were able to create constructivist online environments that facilitated meaningful interactions and allowed students to engage with content at their own pace (Kizkapan, 2024; Ștefan, 2017). This approach also fostered peer-to-peer learning and reflection, further enhancing the social and collaborative aspects of learning that were central to constructivist theory.

As education continues to evolve, the principles of CLT provide a strong foundation for the development of more adaptive, student-centered approaches to teaching and learning. Whether through project-based learning, CBE, or distance learning, the shift from traditional models to Constructivism reflects a broader recognition of the need to equip students with the skills and dispositions necessary to navigate an increasingly complex and interconnected world. In the next sections, this shift will be explored through various alternative education models, including credit recovery, CBE, and hybrid education programs.

On-Campus Alternative Programs

In-school alternative education programs have become an essential part of the modern education landscape, especially for students who struggle within traditional academic structures. These programs provide flexible, personalized learning paths while keeping students within the physical school building. Lawrence et al. (2022) noted that this proximity allowed for consistent access to school resources, social structures, and support systems while catering to the specific needs of students who may need additional academic, emotional, or behavioral assistance. By integrating alternative models within

school settings, these programs offered a bridge between traditional education and the more adaptive, student-centered approaches of alternative education.

Credit Recovery Programs

Credit recovery programs aim to help students who have fallen behind or failed courses by providing an opportunity to regain lost credits. According to Viano (2023), rather than requiring students to retake entire courses, credit recovery programs should focus on targeted areas of need, allowing students to catch up and stay on track for graduation. These programs played a critical role in helping at-risk students overcome academic setbacks, ensuring that a temporary academic failure did not derail their educational future (Churchill et al., 2021).

Credit recovery programs evolved from in-person remedial classes to include online and blended learning options. Online credit recovery gained traction as a flexible, accessible option, allowing students to complete coursework at their own pace, often from home or during designated study periods (Fink et al., 2023). The use of digital platforms enabled schools to offer more personalized learning experiences, catering to individual student needs. Additionally, some programs adopted a blended learning model, combining online instruction with face-to-face support from teachers and tutors within the school setting. This approach allowed students to receive the benefits of self-paced learning while still having access to in-person guidance and assistance (Viano, 2023).

Credit recovery programs were vital for helping students stay on track for graduation. They offered flexibility, allowing students to focus on specific areas of weakness without repeating entire courses, thus saving time and resources (Lawrence, 2022). However, concerns have been raised regarding the rigor and quality of some

online credit recovery programs. Studies indicated that while these programs increased

graduation rates, students who completed them still struggled with long-term retention of

the material, which hindered their performance in future academic and career endeavors

(Harrington et al., 2019). Moreover, students who lacked self-discipline or adequate

support struggled with the self-paced nature of online programs, leading to lower success

rates in more flexible formats (Fink et al., 2023).

Competency-Based Learning Programs

CBE shifted the focus from traditional time-based instruction to a model that

emphasized mastery of skills and knowledge. In CBE programs, students progressed by

demonstrating proficiency in specific competencies rather than by spending a fixed

amount of time in the classroom (Aladini et al., 2024). This approach allowed for more

personalized, student-centered learning, where students moved through content at their

own pace, advancing once they had fully mastered each concept.

Within physical schools, CBE is often integrated through specialized academies

or programs that provide individualized learning plans for students. Performance-based

assessments, such as projects, portfolios, or practical tasks, were used to measure student

mastery rather than traditional exams or seat time (Harrington et al., 2019). Schools that

implemented CBE models typically offered flexible schedules and multiple pathways for

students to demonstrate their competencies, aligning with the broader goals of

personalized learning (Valenzuela et al., 2016).

The primary advantage of CBE programs is that they offer a personalized learning

experience, allowing students to focus on mastering essential skills at their own pace.

This model was particularly beneficial for students who struggled in traditional

time-based education systems or those who had specific areas of strength they wish to

pursue in-depth (Aladini et al., 2024). However, the implementation of CBE within

traditional school settings remained challenging. It often required significant changes in

how student progress was tracked and assessed, which could be difficult to align with

existing graduation standards and policies. Additionally, some educators expressed

concern over ensuring consistent academic rigor across competency-based assessments

(Valenzuela et al., 2016).

Performance-Based Graduation Programs

Performance-based graduation programs offer an alternative to traditional

academic pathways by focusing on students' ability to demonstrate their knowledge and

skills through real-world applications. Instead of relying solely on classroom instruction

and exams, students in these programs completed projects, presentations, or portfolios

that showcased their mastery of core competencies (Kadir, 2023). This approach was

especially beneficial for students who excelled in hands-on, applied learning

environments.

These programs were typically offered within the school as part of senior

capstone projects, internships, or career and technical education (CTE) tracks. Students

worked closely with educators to develop individualized learning plans that aligned with

their academic interests and career goals. Projects were often tied to community-based

experiences or industry partnerships, allowing students to apply their learning in

meaningful, practical contexts (Pfleger, 2024).

Performance-based programs are praised for their ability to engage students in

relevant, real-world learning experiences. These programs often helped students develop

critical thinking, problem-solving, and collaboration, essential skills for success in both

higher education and the workforce (Adjei et al., 2023). However, critics argued that

there could be inconsistencies in how performance-based assessments were evaluated,

leading to concerns about the rigor and standardization of these programs across different

schools (Kadir, 2023). Ensuring that all students met the necessary competencies for

graduation could be difficult when the assessment process was largely subjective.

Charter Schools

Charter schools are publicly funded but operate independently of local school

districts, giving them greater flexibility to innovate with curricula and teaching methods.

The National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (2023) noted that many charter schools

focused on specialized areas of study, such as STEM (science, technology, engineering,

and math), the arts, or language immersion programs, offering students unique learning

opportunities that might not be available in traditional public schools.

Charter schools are often designed to serve specific student populations or to

focus on particular academic approaches. For example, STEM-focused charter schools

provided students with advanced coursework in science and technology, often

incorporating project-based learning and partnerships with industry professionals

(Pfleger, 2024). Arts-based charter schools, on the other hand, emphasized creative

disciplines such as visual arts, music, or theater, offering students in-depth opportunities

to develop their talents.

While charter schools provided innovative learning environments, there were

significant concerns about equity and access. Many charter schools relied on

lottery-based admissions, which could limit access for students from underrepresented or

low-income backgrounds (Harris, 2022). Critics also argued that charter schools could

inadvertently contribute to segregation by attracting more affluent students or those with

specific academic strengths, leaving traditional public schools to serve students with

fewer resources (Bratberg et al., 2007).

Behavioral Intervention Programs

Behavioral intervention programs focus on supporting students with emotional,

social, or behavioral challenges that interfere with their academic success. These

programs provided targeted interventions aimed at helping students to develop coping

strategies, improve emotional regulation, and successfully reintegrate into the traditional

classroom environment (Harrington et al., 2019).

These programs are often delivered within resource rooms or special education

settings, allowing students to receive individualized support throughout the school day.

Interventions typically included counseling, behavioral therapy, and SEL activities

designed to address the root causes of behavioral issues while maintaining academic

progress (Adjei et al., 2023). Some programs also incorporated family engagement and

wraparound services to provide holistic support for students (Taylor, 2018).

Research showed that behavioral intervention programs were effective in reducing

disciplinary incidents and improving academic outcomes for students with behavioral

challenges (Lawrence, 2022). These programs also helped students build

social-emotional skills that contributed to long-term success in both academic and

personal settings. However, there was often a stigma associated with participation in

behavioral intervention programs, which affected student willingness to engage fully

(Harrington et al, 2019).

Off-Campus Alternative Programs

Off-campus alternative education programs provide students with non-traditional

learning environments that are tailored to individual needs, often delivering education

outside of a conventional school setting. These programs are particularly valuable for

students requiring flexibility due to personal, health, or family circumstances. Common

off-campus alternatives include homeschooling, virtual schools, hybrid models, CBE, and

community-based education programs. Each offers unique benefits but also presents

challenges that must be addressed to ensure equitable access and high-quality learning

experiences.

Juvenile Detention Center Schools

Juvenile detention center schools present a unique model of education designed to

cater to the needs of incarcerated youth. These schools serve the dual purpose of

rehabilitating young offenders and ensuring they do not fall behind in their education

while serving time. The primary aim of juvenile detention centers was to rehabilitate

rather than punish, which aligned with the broader goals of the juvenile justice system

that sought to reintegrate youth into society as productive members (Sullivan, 2018).

Educational programs within these facilities were central to this mission, as they provided

crucial opportunities for personal growth, skill development, and academic progress.

Educational access in juvenile detention centers was guaranteed by most state

constitutions, though implementation varied widely across the United States. For

example, while some states ensured a comprehensive curriculum similar to traditional

schools, others struggled with resource allocation, teacher availability, and program

oversight (Sullivan, 2018). Many facilities offered equivalency programs that allowed

students to complete high school requirements (Putri et al., 2022). These programs

provided an alternative route to graduation, helping incarcerated youth stay on track

academically even while behind bars.

Research highlighted the critical role that education played in reducing

recidivism. According to a 2013 RAND Corporation study, participation in academic and

vocational education programs within detention centers reduced the likelihood of

reoffending by over 40% (Sullivan, 2018). This statistic underscored the importance of

maintaining high-quality educational offerings within juvenile detention centers, despite

the logistical challenges involved. Juveniles who earn their high school equivalence or

high school diploma while incarcerated were far more likely to reintegrate successfully

into society and avoid future legal trouble (Putri et al., 2022).

However, several challenges hindered the effective delivery of education in these

settings. Teacher availability was a major issue, with some facilities facing a chronic

shortage of certified educators. For instance, at Central Lombok Juvenile Detention

Center, only one certified English teacher was available, supported by a tutor with

minimal qualifications (Putri et al., 2022). Moreover, learning resources were often

limited, making it difficult to deliver a robust curriculum. Despite these challenges,

educators in detention centers were tasked with engaging students who may have

experienced previous educational failure or disengagement due to behavioral or social

issues (Sullivan, 2018).

Virtual and Online Learning

Virtual and online learning has rapidly evolved into a prominent alternative to

traditional schooling, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. These

programs allow students to complete their education entirely online, offering flexibility for those who need to manage health concerns, family responsibilities, or work commitments. Virtual schools and online programs utilize digital platforms to deliver instruction, assignments, assessments, and interaction with teachers and peers. Huh et al. (2024) noted they provided a fully immersive learning experience without the need for physical attendance at a traditional school.

The rise of virtual learning has been driven by advances in technology and the increasing demand for flexible education options. During the pandemic, virtual schools and online learning programs expanded exponentially, with a 43% increase in online school enrollments between 2020 and 2021 (Colorado Department of Education, 2023). These programs served students across various age groups and educational levels, from elementary school to high school and beyond.

Virtual schools were structured to replicate the core elements of traditional schooling, with daily schedules, structured lessons, and assessments. Lessons were often delivered through live or recorded video sessions, allowing students to learn at their own pace. Most virtual schools also provided students with access to discussion boards, peer collaboration tools, and virtual office hours for support from teachers (Huh et al., 2024). These programs were run by public school districts, charter schools, or private entities.

One of the primary advantages of virtual schools was the flexibility they offered. Students could learn at their own pace, a feature that particularly benefited students with health concerns, those who required flexible scheduling due to work or family responsibilities, and those who thrived in independent learning environments (Rienties et al., 2023). Virtual learning allowed students to focus on areas where they needed

additional time while accelerating through subjects where they excelled. This customization of pacing led to greater academic success for students who struggled with the rigid structure of traditional schooling.

Additionally, virtual learning programs often provided access to a wide variety of courses that might not have been available in traditional schools, including advanced placement (AP) classes, specialized subjects, or career and technical education (CTE) programs (Corlett, 2014). This expanded access to curriculum choices allowed students to pursue their academic interests and career goals more effectively.

Despite the flexibility and customization offered by virtual learning, there were significant challenges associated with this model. One of the primary barriers was the digital divide, which referred to the unequal access to technology and high-speed internet that persisted in many rural and low-income communities. Students who lacked reliable access to the internet or the necessary devices to engage in online learning faced significant disadvantages in virtual schools (Huh et al., 2024).

Another challenge was student engagement. Without the physical presence of a teacher and the social environment of a classroom, some students struggled to stay motivated and engaged in online programs. Research showed that students in virtual schools often required higher levels of self-discipline and time management compared to their peers in traditional settings (Colorado Department of Education, 2023). Schools attempted to mitigate this by incorporating features like live instruction, peer collaboration opportunities, and personalized support services, but maintaining engagement remained a hurdle for many schools.

Moreover, some subjects, particularly those requiring hands-on learning or physical practice, such as laboratory sciences or the arts, were difficult to fully replicate in an online environment. Virtual schools worked to integrate more interactive elements, such as virtual labs and simulation software, but those tools proved not yet able to fully replace the hands-on experience provided by in-person education (Corlett, 2014).

As technology continued to evolve, the future of virtual and online learning appeared promising. Virtual schools invested in improving digital tools and interactive learning experiences to enhance the educational process. In addition, policymakers explored solutions to the digital divide, ensuring that all students had access to the technology necessary to participate fully in online education (Huh et al., 2024). Additionally, virtual learning continued expanding in combination with hybrid models, providing students with even more flexible learning options that blended the best of both online and in-person education (Rienties et al., 2023).

Homeschooling

Homeschooling has emerged as a prominent off-campus educational alternative, offering families complete control over their children's education. Parents or guardians take on the responsibility of teaching and managing the curriculum, allowing for a highly personalized learning experience tailored to the unique needs of the child. Hudson et al. (2023) observed how homeschooling provided flexibility in terms of schedule, teaching methods, and pacing, which made it particularly appealing to families seeking individualized education. The growth of homeschooling, especially in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, reflected a broader trend toward educational autonomy, with many

families choosing this route for reasons ranging from dissatisfaction with traditional

schools to a desire for more control over curriculum content (Lai, 2023).

Homeschooling families could choose from a wide variety of educational

approaches. These included traditional structured curricula that mirrored the subjects and

methods used in public schools, as well as more progressive, unstructured models such as

unschooling, which emphasized child-led learning (Dwyer, 2022). Hybrid models were

also common, where families combined self-directed study with online classes or co-op

learning groups (Hudson et al., 2023). This flexibility allowed homeschooling parents to

adopt approaches that best suited their child's learning style, interests, and academic

goals.

Homeschooling also allowed parents to integrate experiential learning

opportunities, such as field trips, hands-on projects, and community service, which could

enhance the educational experience beyond what was typically available in traditional

schools. For example, homeschooling students might study marine biology by visiting

aquariums, conducting water quality experiments, or engaging in local environmental

conservation projects. Such approaches allowed students to learn in meaningful,

real-world contexts (Sullivan, 2018).

A common critique of homeschooling was the potential for social isolation.

Without the daily interactions afforded by traditional school environments, homeschooled

children could miss out on crucial opportunities for social development. However, many

homeschooling families address this challenge by joining homeschooling co-ops,

participating in extracurricular activities such as sports or arts programs, and taking part

in community events (Becker, 2003). These activities provided homeschooled students

with socialization opportunities and foster collaboration with peers, balancing the individualized learning experience with broader social engagement.

Access to educational resources was another critical factor in homeschooling. While families had more flexibility in designing curricula, they also bore the responsibility of sourcing learning materials, textbooks, and technology. This could be a barrier for lower-income families, as homeschooling often required one parent to stay home and invest in educational tools (Putri et al., 2022). However, the rise of online learning platforms and open educational resources has made homeschooling more accessible by providing a wealth of free or affordable educational materials (Hudson et al., 2023).

Homeschooling was governed by a patchwork of state regulations in the U.S., with varying levels of oversight and accountability. Some states required minimal reporting or standardized testing, while others mandated detailed curriculum submissions and regular assessments (Hudson et al., 2023). This variability led to discrepancies in educational quality and outcomes, depending on the state in which a family resided. Advocates for homeschooling argued that flexibility and freedom from rigid standardized testing allowed for more creativity in education. However, critics warned that a lack of oversight could lead to gaps in a child's education if the parents were not adequately prepared to provide comprehensive instruction (Putri et al., 2022).

The primary benefit of homeschooling was the ability to create a highly personalized learning environment that catered to the child's strengths, interests, and learning pace. Homeschooling was often seen as a way to protect children from negative social environments, such as bullying or peer pressure, which could affect learning and

emotional well-being in traditional schools (Lai, 2023). Furthermore, homeschooling allowed families to incorporate religious or cultural teachings that may not be covered in public school curricula (Dwyer, 2022).

However, homeschooling required a significant investment of time and resources from parents, who were expected to take on the role of both teacher and administrator. It also required discipline and structure to ensure students met academic milestones. For families with limited financial resources or single-parent households, homeschooling might not be a viable option (Putri et al., 2022). Additionally, as homeschooling grew in popularity, policymakers continued to debate the appropriate level of state involvement to ensure educational standards were met without infringing on parental rights (Sullivan, 2018).

Work Experience and Cooperative Programs

Work experience and cooperative education programs provide students with practical, hands-on learning opportunities by integrating academic study with real-world employment. These programs aim to bridge the gap between classroom learning and career preparation, giving students the opportunity to apply their knowledge in professional settings while earning credits toward their high school diploma. Grubb and Badway (1998) found that cooperative education and work-based learning were particularly effective for students interested in career and technical education (CTE) pathways, as well as those who benefited from experiential learning environments.

In work experience programs, students split their time between traditional classroom learning and part-time employment in fields related to their studies. These programs were often run in collaboration with local businesses, industries, or community

organizations, allowing students to gain experience in their areas of interest while still completing their academic requirements (Cameron & Rexe, 2022). Cooperative programs typically followed a structured model where students alternated between periods of classroom learning and work placements, giving them the opportunity to apply academic concepts in a professional context.

Many cooperative education programs focused on career readiness by offering students the chance to explore potential career paths before graduating. Students might work in industries such as healthcare, information technology, engineering, or hospitality, depending on their interests and the partnerships available through their schools. These experiences provided valuable insight into the working world and helped students develop the skills and networks needed for future employment (Sullivan, 2018).

Work-based learning provided numerous advantages for students, especially those who might not thrive in traditional classroom settings. One of the primary benefits was the opportunity for students to apply their academic learning in real-world situations, making their education more relevant and engaging. Research showed that students involved in cooperative education and work-based learning programs demonstrated higher levels of motivation, better engagement with their studies, and greater retention of knowledge (Grubb & Badway, 1998).

Additionally, these programs helped students develop critical employability skills such as communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and time management, which were essential in any professional setting (Cameron & Rexe, 2022). Work experience programs also allowed students to build professional networks and gain references, which could be invaluable when seeking employment after graduation. In some cases, students were

offered full-time positions with their employers upon completing their work experience,

providing a smooth transition from education to the workforce (Putri et al., 2022).

For students pursuing technical careers, cooperative education offered direct

pathways into high-demand fields. By gaining practical experience alongside their

academic studies, students were better prepared to enter the workforce with the technical

skills and certifications required for their chosen professions. This approach was

particularly beneficial for students in vocational and technical education programs

(Sullivan, 2018).

While work experience and cooperative education programs provided significant

benefits, they also faced challenges. One of the main issues was ensuring that the work

placements offered meaningful learning opportunities aligned with the students'

academic and career goals. Some programs struggled to find placements that met both

educational standards and the interests of their students (Cameron & Rexe, 2022).

Additionally, not all schools or regions had access to a wide variety of industries, limiting

the range of opportunities available to students, particularly in rural areas (Sullivan,

2018).

Another challenge was balancing work and school responsibilities. Students in

these programs had to manage their time effectively to meet both their academic

obligations and the demands of their jobs. This could be particularly difficult for students

who also had other personal responsibilities, such as caring for family members or

managing health issues (Grubb & Badway, 1998). Schools and employers would need to

work together to ensure that students were supported throughout the program and that

their workload remained manageable.

Finally, some critics argued that the quality of education in work experience programs could vary significantly, depending on the oversight and coordination between schools and employers. Ensuring that students were learning in meaningful, structured environments required strong partnerships and continuous monitoring of the work placements (Putri et al., 2022).

Community-Based Education

Community-based education programs provide students with the opportunity to engage with their local communities as part of their learning experience. These programs, as described by Cameron and Rexe (2022), often focused on experiential, hands-on learning, allowing students to gain practical skills while addressing real-world problems. Community-based education was particularly effective in rural areas or underserved communities, where access to traditional schools might be limited. Programs like these often emphasized local culture, economic development, and social issues, helping students build connections with their communities while advancing their education.

For example, Indigenous work-based learning programs integrated education with community development initiatives, promoting both academic and cultural growth (Cameron & Rexe, 2022). These programs could lead to improved educational outcomes and better employment opportunities, particularly for students who might not thrive in traditional academic environments. However, community-based programs needed to carefully balance the expectation of academic rigor with the practical, hands-on experiences they provided (Grubb & Badway, 1998).

Off-campus alternative programs, including homeschooling, virtual schools, hybrid learning, CBE, and community-based education, provided diverse educational

pathways for students who required flexibility outside traditional school settings. These

programs grew significantly, especially in response to the challenges posed by the

COVID-19 pandemic. Each model offered unique benefits tailored to different learning

needs but also presented challenges that required careful consideration, particularly

regarding access to resources and maintaining academic rigor. As education continued to

evolve, off-campus alternatives remained essential components of a more personalized,

adaptable educational landscape.

Blended and Hybrid Models

Blended and hybrid models have transformed the educational landscape by

offering flexible approaches that combine traditional face-to-face instruction with online

components. These models provide students with opportunities to tailor their learning

experiences to their individual needs, making them especially appealing in alternative

education. As schools and educators seek to offer more personalized, adaptive learning

solutions, hybrid and blended models have gained traction for students who struggle in

conventional educational settings or need more flexible scheduling options. This section

explores hybrid learning models, dual enrollment, and early college programs as key

alternatives to traditional education.

Hybrid Learning Models

Hybrid learning integrates both in-person and digital instruction, allowing

students to engage with materials both inside and outside the classroom. Sarwendah et al.

(2023) observed that flexibility enabled students to learn at their own pace while still

benefiting from face-to-face interactions with teachers and peers. Hybrid models became

particularly prominent during the COVID-19 pandemic when educational institutions

were forced to pivot toward online learning to comply with health and safety guidelines.

Hybrid learning remained a vital part of educational frameworks moving forward (Brake,

2023).

Hybrid learning was particularly effective for students who needed flexible

learning schedules due to work, family obligations, or personal challenges. The

combination of online coursework and in-person support allowed students to stay

connected with their academic community while managing their time effectively.

According to Jamieson and Smith (2022), hybrid models promoted greater student

engagement and autonomy, as students were given more control over their learning

experience. Hybrid learning was also well-suited for students with disabilities, as it

allowed them to access materials in a format that suited their needs while still receiving

the support of in-person services (Glennie & Smith, 2023). Additionally, rural schools or

schools in remote areas benefited from hybrid models, enabling students to overcome

geographical barriers to education.

However, hybrid learning also came with challenges, particularly in ensuring that

all students had access to reliable technology and internet connections. The digital divide

remained a critical issue, especially for students from low-income families or rural areas

who did not have access to high-speed internet or the necessary devices to engage fully in

hybrid learning (Sunarto et al., 2024). Educators had to also find ways to balance the

online and in-person components of their courses to ensure that both remained

meaningful and contributed to student learning (Jagesic et al., 2022).

Despite these challenges, hybrid learning remained a powerful tool for fostering

student-centered learning. Research showed that hybrid models improved student

outcomes, particularly for students who might not thrive in fully traditional or fully

online environments (Sarwendah et al., 2023). For example, hybrid models allowed for

differentiated instruction, giving teachers the ability to tailor lessons to individual student

needs through online resources while providing direct support in face-to-face settings

(Glennie & Smith, 2023). As a result, hybrid learning continued to be an essential

component of alternative education, offering flexibility and personalization to meet the

diverse needs of students.

Dual Enrollment Programs

Dual enrollment programs offer high school students the opportunity to take

college-level courses, earning both high school and college credits simultaneously. Brake

(2023) observed that these programs were designed to provide students with a head start

on their postsecondary education while still completing their high school requirements.

Dual enrollment programs were often seen as key components of college readiness

initiatives, particularly for first generation college attendees (Brake, 2023; Community

College Research Center, 2024).

Research has consistently shown that dual enrollment has positive effects on

students' academic outcomes. According to Jagesic et al. (2022), students who

participated in dual enrollment programs were more likely to persist in college, achieve

higher GPAs, and complete a bachelor's degree compared to their peers who did not

participate in these programs. Dual enrollment provided students with early exposure to

the rigors of college coursework, which helped ease the transition to postsecondary

education (Community College Research Center, 2024). This early exposure also helped

students develop critical academic and time-management skills, both of which were essential to success in higher education (Cortez et al., 2024).

However, access to dual enrollment programs remained uneven. Students from low-income families, rural areas, or schools with fewer resources faced barriers to participation, including transportation issues, lack of program availability, and financial constraints (Brake, 2023). Moreover, while dual enrollment programs helped accelerate a student's academic progress, they required students to have a certain level of maturity and self-discipline to handle college-level work while still managing their high school obligations. For some students, the rigor of these courses could be overwhelming without adequate support (Jagesic et al., 2022).

Despite these challenges, dual enrollment proved to be an effective way to reduce the overall time and cost of earning a college degree. Students who took dual enrollment courses often graduated from college earlier and with less debt. Additionally, these programs helped to close the achievement gap for underrepresented students by providing access to college-level education before they left high school (Colorado Department of Higher Education, 2022). By fostering early engagement with higher education, dual enrollment programs provided a critical pathway to academic success for students who might have otherwise faced barriers to college access (Community College Research Center, 2024).

Early College Programs

Early college high schools expand on the dual enrollment model by integrating high school and college curricula, allowing students to earn both a high school diploma and an associate degree by the time they graduate. Early college programs are often

housed on college campuses, where students take a mix of high school and college-level courses, providing them with a more immersive postsecondary experience. These programs, as described by Brake (2023), were particularly beneficial for low-income students, students of color, and first-generation college students, offering a direct pathway to higher education.

Research indicated that early college programs had a significant positive impact on student outcomes. According to the Colorado Department of Higher Education (2022), students who attended early college high schools were more likely to enroll in and complete a four-year college degree compared to their peers in traditional high school settings. Early college programs also reduced the financial burden of higher education, as students could earn college credits at no or low cost, effectively shortening the time it took to complete a degree while lowering tuition expenses (Glennie & Smith, 2023).

One of the key strengths of early college programs was that they provided students with a supportive learning environment while exposing them to the demands of college-level work. By taking classes on a college campus, students gain access to college resources, including libraries, labs, and academic support services. This helped ease the transition to college and increased students' confidence in their ability to succeed in higher education (Glennie & Smith, 2023).

However, like dual enrollment, early college programs faced challenges related to accessibility and equity. Not all students had access to early college high schools, particularly those in rural or underserved areas. Additionally, early college programs required strong partnerships between high schools and postsecondary institutions, which could be difficult to establish and maintain in some regions (Brake, 2023). Nevertheless,

early college programs have proven to be a powerful tool for expanding college access and success, particularly for students from historically underrepresented groups.

Blended and hybrid models, alongside dual enrollment and early college programs, represented significant innovations in how education was delivered. These models offered flexibility and personalized learning experiences that catered to the diverse needs of today's students, especially those in non-traditional settings (Cortez et al., 2024). Hybrid learning allowed students to benefit from both in-person and online instruction, providing the flexibility needed to balance education with other life responsibilities (Dineva, 2024). Meanwhile, dual enrollment and early college programs provided students with critical exposure to postsecondary education while reducing the time and cost of earning a degree (Cortez et al., 2024). As education continued to evolve, these programs remained essential in bridging the gap between high school and higher education, fostering academic success and equity for all students (Powell et al., 2015, Youmans, 2016).

Missouri's Alternative Pathway

As alternative education models continue to evolve, they offer promising solutions for students who may not thrive within the confines of traditional schooling. Hybrid learning, dual enrollment, early college programs, and virtual schools provide flexible pathways that cater to diverse learning needs, equipping students with the tools and opportunities to succeed in both academic and real-world settings. These models not only bridge the gap between high school and postsecondary education but also offer a lifeline to students facing barriers related to geography, socioeconomic status, or personal

circumstances. However, ensuring equitable access, quality control, and sustainable

funding remains a pressing challenge for policymakers and educators alike.

Despite the successes of these alternative models, they often rely on a framework

of credit accumulation that aligns with traditional graduation requirements. While this

works well for many students, it leaves gaps for those who may struggle with traditional

credit-based systems. For students at risk of dropping out or those facing unique

challenges that prevent them from completing a traditional credit-based curriculum, a

different approach is needed.

In Missouri, MoOpt offers a unique alternative pathway to graduation, one that

does not rely on the accumulation of credits. This program is designed for students who

are significantly behind in credits but are otherwise capable of completing high

school-level work. MoOpt provides an avenue for students to demonstrate competency

and meet graduation requirements through performance-based assessments, offering a

critical lifeline for students on the brink of leaving the education system without a

diploma.

As we transition to discussing MoOpt, it becomes clear that this alternative is not

just a solution for students who need flexibility, but a necessary response to the

limitations of credit-based graduation systems. The program stands as a testament to

Missouri's commitment to educational inclusivity, ensuring that all students have a

chance to succeed, regardless of their academic journey thus far.

The Missouri Option Program

MoOpt was introduced by DESE in 2002 as an alternative pathway for students at

risk of not completing high school. Designed for students who fell behind in credits or

faced significant personal or academic challenges, the program offered a flexible route to earning a high school diploma. Instead of focusing on traditional credit hours and seat time, MoOpt emphasized CBE, allowing students to graduate once they demonstrated proficiency in core academic areas (see Appendix C).

Since its inception, the program has expanded significantly. Used by more than half of Missouri's school districts, MoOpt provided an effective means to reduce dropout rates and support students seeking graduation (see Appendix C). The program specifically targets students aged 17-20 who were at least one year behind their cohort group or who were unable to complete their education through traditional means due to challenges such as absenteeism, homelessness, or socio-emotional issues (Miller, 2024). By shifting the focus from credit accumulation to skill mastery, MoOpt provided a unique opportunity for at-risk students to achieve academic success and earn a high school diploma through alternative assessments (DESE, 2023). This approach ensured that students could progress at their own pace, focusing on their individual strengths and needs (Canfield et al., 2017).

MoOpt's primary goal was to reduce dropout rates while providing students with the knowledge and skills necessary for success in postsecondary education or the workforce. Through a combination of CBE and individualized support, the program addressed the diverse needs of students who might otherwise have fallen through the cracks of the traditional education system (DESE, 2023).

Competency-Based Education in the Missouri Option Program

At the core of MoOpt is CBE, a flexible learning model that shifts away from the traditional time-based approach to high school education. In a typical educational setting,

students advanced through grades by accumulating credits based on the amount of time

spent in the classroom, often referred to as seat time. In contrast, CBE allowed students to

progress as soon as they demonstrated mastery of required academic competencies,

regardless of how long it took to achieve those skills (Klein-Collins & Shafenberg, 2023).

This model was particularly well-suited for students who fell behind in traditional schools

due to academic or personal challenges (Miller, 2024).

MoOpt used this competency-based approach to help students who were at least

one year behind their cohort group or faced significant barriers to graduating on time.

Rather than focusing on credit deficiencies or attendance records, the program

emphasized what students knew and could demonstrate. This not only provided a more

personalized and flexible learning experience but also gave at-risk students a second

chance to succeed in an academic environment (Bennett et al., 2022).

In MoOpt, students demonstrated their readiness for graduation by passing a

standardized exam; this exam could be the HiSET or the GED (see Appendix D). These

exams were designed to assess a student's knowledge and skills in key academic areas,

including language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies. The emphasis on

competency allowed students to focus on mastering the skills required to pass, rather than

simply accumulating time in the classroom. This alignment with CBE principles ensured

that students were measured on their actual abilities, which leveled the playing field for

those who had faced educational disruptions (Valenzuela et al., 2016).

The Individual Student Plan (ISP) in MoOpt was a critical element of CBE (see

Appendix E). Each student received a tailored plan that targeted areas where they needed

the most improvement, allowing them to focus their efforts on mastering specific

competencies. These plans helped ensure that students were not held back by the pace of

a traditional classroom and could advance through the curriculum at a speed that worked

for them (Canfield et al., 2017). This flexibility was especially important for students

dealing with issues like absenteeism, homelessness, or socio-emotional difficulties, as it

allowed them to learn in a way that accommodated their unique circumstances (DESE,

2023).

Furthermore, CBE in MoOpt encouraged student agency and accountability. By

giving students control over their progress, the program fostered a sense of ownership

over their education. This empowerment was crucial for at-risk students, many of whom

felt disconnected or disempowered in previous traditional educational settings. CBE

enabled these students to actively engage in their learning journey and work toward

specific, attainable goals (Zheng et al., 2019).

CBE was the foundation of MoOpt's success. Its focus on mastery rather than

time, its personalized learning plans, and its flexibility allowed students who had

struggled in traditional settings to work toward their high school diploma on their own

terms. The competency-based model not only prepared students for graduation but also

equipped them with the skills necessary for postsecondary education or the workforce,

making it an essential element of MoOpt's mission to support at-risk students.

The Role of the McKinney-Vento Act in Supporting Homeless Students

One of the critical supports within MoOpt is the McKinney-Vento Homeless

Assistance Act, a federal law that ensured homeless students had access to education,

despite the instability of their living situations. Homelessness presented unique barriers to

academic success, including frequent relocations, lack of access to transportation, and

socio-emotional difficulties. These challenges often led to inconsistent attendance,

making it difficult for students to meet the requirements of traditional credit-based

education models. The McKinney-Vento Act, combined with the flexible and

personalized structure of MoOpt, provided a crucial safety net for these students,

ensuring they could remain engaged in their education and work toward graduation

(Cunningham, 2014).

The McKinney-Vento Act mandated that school districts identify homeless

students and provide the necessary services to support their academic engagement. These

services included free transportation to and from school, immediate enrollment without

typical residency requirements, and access to tutoring or counseling when needed

(Canfield et al., 2017). For students in MoOpt, these provisions were critical. Many

homeless students faced extended periods of absenteeism or were forced to move

frequently, making it nearly impossible to succeed in a traditional credit-hour-based

program. However, because MoOpt was competency-based, students could continue to

progress at their own pace as long as they demonstrated mastery of the required academic

skills, regardless of how much time they spent in the classroom (DESE, 2023).

Additionally, MoOpt benefited from the McKinney-Vento requirement that every

school district appoint a homeless liaison. This liaison worked to ensure that homeless

students were enrolled, connected to necessary resources, and supported throughout their

educational journey. The liaison played an essential role in helping students access

MoOpt and ensured that they did not fall behind due to external factors beyond their

control. The liaison also helped to coordinate with other community services to meet the

broader needs of homeless students, including shelter, healthcare, and socio-emotional

support (Cunningham, 2014).

Homeless students were particularly vulnerable in traditional educational settings,

where they often fell through the cracks because their academic challenges were

compounded by their unstable living conditions. MoOpt's emphasis on CBE offered a

viable solution for these students. Since CBE did not rely on seat time or continuous

attendance, students could focus on mastering competencies in core subjects like math,

science, and language arts at their own pace. This flexibility allowed homeless students to

engage in their education without the pressure of meeting arbitrary time-based

requirements, which were often unrealistic for those facing housing instability

(Valenzuela et al., 2016).

Moreover, the McKinney-Vento Act ensured that homeless students in MoOpt had

access to the same academic and extracurricular resources as their housed peers. These

included not only transportation and academic support but also participation in school

programs that fostered a sense of belonging and stability, which were often critical to

improving educational outcomes for homeless students. By removing these barriers,

McKinney-Vento helped level the playing field, making it more likely that homeless

students would succeed academically and ultimately earn their high school diplomas

through MoOpt (DESE, 2021).

Assurance Standards and Accountability

The Assurance Standards

To ensure the academic integrity and consistency of MoOpt, DESE established a

set of Assurance Standards (see Appendix D). These standards were critical in

maintaining the credibility of the program and ensuring that students who graduated

through MoOpt met the same rigorous benchmarks as those in traditional high school

programs. Each standard governed a key aspect of the program's operation, from

eligibility and instruction to graduation requirements.

Program Eligibility Standards. MoOpt was designed for students who were

significantly behind in credits or faced other barriers to graduating with their cohort.

Unlike traditional high school programs, students in MoOpt were exempt from the need

to earn a specific number of credits to graduate. Instead, eligibility was based on the

recommendation of a school counselor, teacher, or administrator, ensuring that the

program was available to those who would benefit most from a competency-based

approach. Participation was voluntary, and students between the ages of 17-20, who were

behind their peers in credit accumulation or had other significant reasons for not

completing their diploma, were typically eligible (DESE, 2021).

Additionally, the program did not discriminate based on race, ethnicity, or gender,

and students had to sign a consent form if they were under 18. For unaccompanied

homeless youth, the McKinney-Vento Act waived the parental consent requirement,

ensuring that homelessness did not create additional barriers to accessing the program

(Cunningham, 2014).

Program Instructor Standards. Qualified instructors were key to ensuring the

success of students enrolled in MoOpt. According to the Assurance Standards, instructors

in the program needed to hold a valid Missouri teaching certificate in any subject area or

possess an Adult Education and Literacy certification. This flexibility ensured that a

broad range of qualified educators could guide students through the program, helping

them develop the competencies needed for graduation through the standardized exams.

Instructors played a dual role as both content-area expert and mentor, providing the

personalized guidance and support integral to CBE (DESE, 2021).

Instructors in MoOpt had to not only deliver academic instruction but also provide

ongoing guidance, particularly in areas such as postsecondary and career planning. This

role was especially important for at-risk students, including those who had experienced

educational disruptions due to absenteeism, homelessness, or socio-emotional challenges

(Canfield et al., 2017). Research showed that teachers who actively mentored and

supported students were essential in fostering student engagement and motivation, both

of which were critical for the success of students in alternative programs like MoOpt

(Garza, 2012; Tully, 2004).

Instructors were required to participate in ongoing professional development to

remain updated on best practices in CBE and alternative graduation pathways. This

ensured that teachers in MoOpt were equipped to address the diverse needs of their

students, whether through differentiated instruction, technology integration, or providing

support for exam preparation (DESE, 2023). Furthermore, ongoing professional

development was essential for preparing instructors to meet the socio-emotional needs of

students who might require additional support due to factors like homelessness or

absenteeism.

Program Counseling Standards. Counseling services were a vital component of

MoOpt, providing essential academic and socio-emotional support to students facing

significant personal challenges. Under the Assurance Standards, schools had to ensure

that students in MoOpt had access to professional counselors holding a valid Missouri

Counseling Certificate. These counselors played a pivotal role in identifying eligible

students, providing academic and career guidance, and addressing the personal barriers

that often impeded student progress (DESE, 2021).

Counselors in MoOpt were tasked with helping students navigate both their

academic journey and the broader challenges they faced (see Appendix E). This dual role

was especially critical for at-risk students, including those who were homeless or

struggling with absenteeism, trauma, or socio-emotional issues. Counselors provided

individualized support, helping students set achievable goals and develop coping

strategies that enabled them to succeed in the program (Goodman-Scott et al., 2018;

Spellman et al., 2022). This comprehensive support helped reduce the likelihood of

dropouts and fostered resilience in students, many of whom had experienced significant

disruptions in their education.

Research showed that strong guidance and counseling services were linked to

improved academic outcomes and increased engagement for students in alternative

education settings like MoOpt (Ahrens et al., 2010; Spellman et al., 2022). Effective

counseling practices helped students re-engage with their education by addressing the

underlying issues that had contributed to their academic struggles. This is particularly

important for students in MoOpt, as many faced compounded challenges that require

specialized interventions (Miller, 2024).

Additionally, MoOpt counselors work closely with other school staff, including

instructors and administrators, to develop and implement ISPs (see Appendix E). These

plans were tailored to each student's needs and included strategies for both academic

success and personal growth. The ISPs ensured that students received not only the

academic instruction necessary to pass their exams but also the counseling support needed to overcome personal barriers (Canfield et al., 2017).

Furthermore, counseling services in MoOpt aligned with the goals of the McKinney-Vento Act, ensuring that homeless students received additional supports to address their unique challenges (National Center for Homeless Education, 2021). Under this federal mandate, counselors helped coordinate services such as transportation, tutoring, and referrals to community resources, ensuring that no student was left behind due to personal circumstances (Havlik & Bryan, 2015). This coordination was critical in providing students with a stable foundation from which they could succeed academically.

The role of counselors extended beyond academic guidance, as they also provided crisis intervention and long-term supports for students dealing with mental health issues, substance abuse, or familial instability (Burrow-Sanchez & Lopez, 2009; Çıtak & Yazıcı, 2022). By building strong, trust-based relationships with students, counselors fostered a safe and supportive learning environment where students felt valued and empowered to succeed (Spellman et al., 2024).

Academic Instruction and Assessment Standards. Academic instruction in MoOpt was aligned with Missouri's HiSET and GED, which covered key academic areas including mathematics, science, social studies, and language arts. To meet the Assurance Standards, MoOpt students had to engage in at least 15 hours of academic instruction per week, which could include traditional, computer-assisted, or virtual learning (DESE, 2023).

In addition to exam preparation, students were required to participate in other school-supervised activities, such as career education courses or work experiences, to

ensure that they met the full-time student status requirement. These activities were

designed to provide students with the academic and practical skills necessary for both

graduation and postsecondary success (Thacker, 2022).

MoOpt students must also meet specific graduation requirements set by the state,

including passing a course on government and the U.S. and Missouri Constitutions, as

well as half-unit courses in Personal Finance and Health (see Appendix D). Additionally,

all students had to receive CPR training and complete state-required End-of-Course

(EOC) assessments in core subjects (DESE, 2021).

Graduation Standards. To graduate from MoOpt, students had to pass either the

HiSET or GED and meet all other program and district requirements. Once these

conditions were fulfilled, students received a regular high school diploma, identical to the

one awarded to graduates of traditional high school programs (DESE, 2021).

Graduation through MoOpt did not circumvent Missouri's compulsory attendance

regulations. Students had to remain engaged in school-supervised activities, including

coursework or work experience, until the end of the school year in which they completed

the program. This ensured that students maintained full-time student status and met state

educational requirements. Furthermore, MoOpt graduates were eligible to participate in

the high school graduation ceremony with their peers, allowing them to celebrate their

academic achievement alongside classmates (DESE, 2021).

The Assurance Standards established for MoOpt ensured that students who

graduated through this pathway received a rigorous and well-rounded education,

equivalent to that provided in traditional high school settings. By outlining clear

expectations for eligibility, instruction, counseling, and graduation, these standards

maintained the integrity of the program while offering a flexible and supportive

environment for at-risk students (see Appendix D).

Accountability in the Missouri Option Program

Accountability was a key pillar of MoOpt, ensuring that the program maintained

its educational integrity and continued to serve at-risk students effectively. While the

Assurance Standards set the framework for program eligibility, instruction, counseling,

and graduation requirements, accountability ensured that these standards were

consistently applied and that the program achieved its goal of student success and

reduced dropout rates. Accountability mechanisms in MoOpt were overseen by both

DESE and LEAs, creating multiple layers of oversight.

A key component of accountability was MoOpt is ensuring the integrity of

assessments, particularly the HiSET and GED. While the HiSET served as the primary

tool for measuring student competencies, the GED became available to LEAs following

the beginning of the 2024-2025 school year (GED Testing Service, 2023; HiSET, 2023).

To safeguard the fairness and consistency of the testing process, DESE required that all

exams be administered at DESE-approved testing sites (DESE, 2021). This ensured that

the testing environments adhered to strict standards for security, fairness, and

accessibility, protecting the validity of the exam results.

Approved testing centers were held to high standards and had to comply with

state and national guidelines. These centers were expected to provide secure testing

conditions, maintain strict confidentiality of test materials, and follow standardized

procedures for the administration of the exams. This rigorous oversight helped prevent

breaches in testing integrity, such as cheating or improper administration, which could

undermine the credibility of MoOpt's diplomas. By mandating the use of approved

testing sites, DESE ensured that all students had equal access to a fair testing experience

regardless of their geographic location or school district (HiSET, 2023).

In addition to external audits conducted by DESE, schools themselves were

required to implement internal monitoring systems to guarantee the integrity of the

testing process. This included ensuring that students were properly prepared for the

exams and that they met the necessary prerequisites before taking them. Schools had to

document and report any irregularities that occurred during testing to DESE, further

enhancing transparency and accountability (DESE, 2021).

By centralizing the administration of the HiSET in approved testing centers,

DESE ensured that all MoOpt students were evaluated in a consistent and fair manner.

This standardization was essential for maintaining public trust in the program, ensuring

that the diplomas awarded through MoOpt were respected by postsecondary institutions

and employers alike (DESE, 2023).

Competency Assessments: The HiSET and GED

MoOpt offered two primary pathways for students to demonstrate their academic

proficiency and earn a high school diploma: the HiSET and, starting in the 2024-2025

school year, the GED. Both assessments served as competency-based alternatives to

traditional high school graduation requirements, measuring whether students possessed

the necessary knowledge and skills in core academic subjects (GED Testing Service,

2023; HiSET, 2022a; HiSET, 2022b). The use of these standardized tests aligned with the

program's focus on CBE, allowing students to progress based on demonstrated mastery

rather than time spent in the classroom (DESE, 2023).

The High School Equivalency Test (HiSET)

The HiSET had long been the primary competency assessment for students in MoOpt. Administered in approved testing centers throughout Missouri, the HiSET covered five key academic areas: Language Arts (Reading and Writing), Mathematics, Science, and Social Studies (HiSET, 2023; PSI Services LLC, 2022). The test was aligned with Missouri's academic standards and evaluated students' readiness for both postsecondary education and the workforce (DESE, 2023).

HiSET candidates were required to demonstrate mastery across all five subject areas to graduate, and the exam was offered in both English and Spanish, to ensure accessibility for students whose primary language was not English (HiSET, 2022b). The exam was available in both paper-based and computer-based formats, allowing students to choose the mode that best fit their learning style and access to technology (DESE, 2021).

A critical feature of the HiSET within MoOpt was its flexibility. Students could take individual subtests at different times, allowing them to focus on one subject area at a time. This flexibility reduced the pressure on students who might be dealing with various personal or academic challenges. (HiSET, 2022a). Additionally, students had the option to retake sections of the exam, if necessary, which was particularly beneficial for at-risk students who might need additional time to master certain competencies (HiSET, 2023).

The HiSET is structured as follows:

1. Language Arts – Reading

    a. **Time:** 65 minutes (English), 80 minutes (Spanish)

    b. **Number of Questions:** 50 multiple-choice questions

c. **Content:** 40% literary texts, 60% informational texts

d. **Skills Measured:** Comprehension, inference, analysis, and synthesis of ideas from complex texts. Questions assess the ability to understand both narrative and informational materials, making this section essential for evaluating students' reading proficiency.

2. Language Arts – Writing

a. **Time:** 120 minutes

b. **Number of Questions:** 60 multiple-choice questions and 1 essay

c. **Content:** The first part focused on grammar, sentence structure, punctuation, and usage, while the second part involved writing an essay.

d. **Essay Requirements:** Students were asked to construct a well-organized essay that either argued a point of view or explained a concept. The essay assessed students' ability to develop ideas, using evidence to support claims while maintaining clarity and coherence.

3. Mathematics

a. **Time:** 90 minutes

b. **Number of Questions:** 55 multiple-choice questions

c. **Content:** This section covered a broad range of mathematical concepts, including numbers and operations, algebra, geometry, data analysis, probability, and statistics.

d. **Skills Measured:** Students had to demonstrate their ability to solve quantitative problems, interpret data, and apply mathematical reasoning to

real-world scenarios. This section was critical for evaluating students'

problem-solving abilities and mathematical competence.

4. Science

    a. **Time:** 80 minutes

    b. **Number of Questions:** 60 multiple-choice questions

    c. **Content:** Life sciences, physical sciences, and earth sciences are covered

       in this section.

    d. **Skills Measured:** The science portion of the HiSET assessed students'

       understanding of scientific principles, their ability to interpret scientific

       data, and their critical thinking skills in applying these concepts to

       real-world problems.

5. Social Studies

    a. **Time:** 70 minutes

    b. **Number of Questions:** 60 multiple-choice questions

    c. **Content:** Topics covered included U.S. history, world history, civics and

       government, geography, and economics.

    d. **Skills Measured:** Students had to interpret historical texts, political

       documents, and economic graphs, while also demonstrating an

       understanding of key events and concepts in social studies (PSI Services

       LLC, 2022).

The General Educational Development (GED) Test

Starting in the 2024-2025 school year, MoOpt students had the option to take the

GED as an alternative to the HiSET. Like the HiSET, the GED assessed core academic

competencies in subjects such as Reasoning through Language Arts, Mathematical

Reasoning, Science, and Social Studies (GED Testing Service, 2024). However, the GED

placed a greater emphasis on critical thinking and real-world problem-solving,

particularly in its science and math sections, which made it a suitable option for students

planning to enter the workforce or pursue postsecondary education (DESE, 2021).

The GED was exclusively computer-based, which might present challenges for

students with limited access to technology. However, this format aligned with the

growing emphasis on digital literacy in both education and the workforce (GED Testing

Service, 2024). The computer-based format also enabled the GED to integrate more

interactive question types, such as drag-and-drop and fill-in-the-blank questions, which

assessed students' ability to apply their knowledge in practical situations (Murphy, 2020).

The addition of the GED provided MoOpt students with more flexibility and

choice in how they demonstrated their academic readiness. Students could select the

assessment that best aligned with their personal strengths and future goals (GED Testing

Service, 2023). While the HiSET offered a more traditional approach to academic

assessment, the GED's focus on real-world application could be appealing to students

who prefer problem-solving and practical challenges to a more academic based exam

(Kearns, 2023).

The GED is structured was follows:

1. Reasoning through Language Arts

   a. **Time:** 150 minutes (including a 10-minute break)

   b. **Types of Questions:** A combination of multiple-choice, drag-and-drop,

   fill-in-the-blank, short answer, and extended response

  c. **Content:** This section covered reading comprehension, writing, grammar, and language conventions.

  d. **Skills Measured:** Students read passages and answered questions that required critical thinking and analysis. The writing portion involved crafting an extended response essay that demonstrated the ability to construct a coherent argument and support it with evidence.

2. Mathematical Reasoning

  a. **Time:** 115 minutes

  b. **Types of Questions:** Multiple-choice, drag-and-drop, and fill-in-the-blank

  c. **Content:** The mathematics section covered quantitative and algebraic problem-solving, including topics such as number operations, fractions, algebra, and geometry.

  d. **Skills Measured:** Students applied mathematical reasoning to solve problems, interpret data, and analyze graphs and charts. Approximately 55% of the questions focused on algebraic problem-solving, making this section particularly challenging for some students.

3. Science

  a. **Time:** 90 minutes

  b. **Type of Questions:** Multiple-choice, drag-and-drop, and fill-in-the-blank

  c. **Content:** This section covered life science, physical science, and earth and space science.

  d. **Skills Measured:** The science portion evaluated students' ability to interpret scientific data, apply the scientific method, and draw conclusions

based on evidence. Topics included human health, energy, and

environmental issues.

4. Social Studies

    a. **Time:** 70 minutes

    b. **Type of Questions:** Multiple-choice, drag-and-drop, fill-in-the-blank, and

        extended response

    c. **Content:** This section covered civics, U.S. history, economics, and

        geography.

    d. **Skills Measured:** Students analyzed historical documents, interpreted

        graphs and data, and applied critical thinking to understand key social

        studies concepts. The extended response question required students to

        write an evidence-based argument on a given subject (GED Testing

        Service, 2024).

Comparison of HiSET and GED

    While both the HiSET and GED served as valid high school equivalency exams,
they differed in several key ways.

- **Format:** The HiSET offered both paper-based and computer-based options, while

  the GED was exclusively computer-based (GED Testing Service, 2024; HiSET,

  2023).

- **Structure:** The HiSET consisted of five subject areas, while the GED covered

  four. The GED placed a greater emphasis on critical thinking and real-world

  application, especially in mathematics and science (GED Testing Service, 2024;

  HiSET, 2023).

- **Cost and Retakes:** The HiSET typically offered more flexible retake options and was generally more affordable depending on the state. The GED might have higher fees associated with retakes (GED Testing Service, 2024; HiSET, 2023).

These differences allowed students in MoOpt to choose the assessment that best fit their learning style and future plans. Both assessments, however, maintained the same rigorous standards for demonstrating academic proficiency, ensuring that all graduates were well-prepared for success beyond high school.

Conclusion

The high school dropout crisis remained a critical issue for educators, policymakers, and communities, with profound implications for individuals and society. This chapter explored a range of risk factors that contributed to student disengagement, including academic struggles, socioeconomic barriers, and behavioral issues. Through EST, we analyzed how individual, family, and societal factors interacted to influence student outcomes, revealing the complexity of dropout risk (Tudge et al., 2009; Neal & Neal, 2013).

Early intervention programs, which focused on identifying signs of disengagement such as absenteeism and poor academic performance, were particularly effective at addressing student needs before they resulted in dropout. By integrating support systems that provided targeted academic and emotional assistance, schools could help students stay on track for graduation. Beyond the school, community-based support systems offered mentorship and career exploration opportunities, helping students build a sense of belonging and purpose.

SEL programs also played a crucial role by equipping students with the emotional resilience needed to cope with challenges in both school and life. These programs emphasized critical skills in emotional regulation, decision-making, and relationship-building, ensuring that students were prepared to navigate personal and academic obstacles. Similarly, restorative justice practices reformed traditional disciplinary methods, promoting conflict resolution and accountability rather than punitive measures. This approach fostered a more positive school climate, encouraging students to learn from their mistakes, and strengthening the relationships between students and educators.

In addition to these strategies, MoOpt, which used a CBE model, offered an essential alternative pathway for students who struggle within traditional credit-based systems. By allowing students to demonstrate mastery of content through standardized exams, the program provided a flexible and accessible pathway to graduation.

In conclusion, the integration of protective factors such as early intervention, SEL, and restorative justice, alongside alternative educational models like MoOpt, offered a comprehensive framework for reducing dropout rates. By addressing academic, emotional, and behavioral challenges, schools could create environments where all students, regardless of their background, had the opportunity to succeed. These strategies provided not only the academic competencies but also the social-emotional skills necessary for students to thrive in both postsecondary education and the workforce. As educational systems evolved toward adopting these approaches there arose a greater potential for all students to graduate equipped with the tools necessary for lasting success.

Chapter Three

Research Methodology

Students in Missouri who reach the senior year of their kindergarten cohorts yet remain behind their peers in credit accumulation are often faced with the choice of either staying an extra year to finish school or dropout. However, to students who qualify, MoOpt exists as a way to graduate outside of the standard Carnegie unit model. Listed as the only Alternative Pathway to Graduation in the Graduation Handbook, MoOpt is competency-based, using a high school equivalency exam as its standard for mastery (DESE, 2023). In addition to students who are credit deficient, MoOpt is also open to students identified "for other significant reasons," which could include any number of factors (DESE, 2021, p. 4). In practice, this means that any student who can pass the program's entrance exam could be identified for MoOpt.

Since 2002, MoOpt has been available to Missouri LEAs as an alternative to credit-based graduation (see Appendix C). Unfortunately, in that time DESE has kept no records associated with the enrollment or success of the program. This study, therefore, will seek to answer several questions related to the program by gathering the perspectives of the administrators and teachers who facilitate it. They are:

Research Question One (RQ1) How do educational leaders perceive the effectiveness of the Missouri Option Program in retaining students who might otherwise drop out of high school?

Research Question Two (RQ2) What are educational leaders' perspectives regarding the Missouri Option Program's impact on dropout rates?

Research Question Three (RQ3) How does participation in the Missouri Option

Program prepare students for postsecondary education opportunities or workforce

entry, according to educational leaders and stakeholders?

Research Question Four (RQ4) What factors contribute to an LEAs adoption of

the Missouri Option Program?

Research Question Five (RQ5) How do implementation strategies, resource

allocation, and student outcomes vary among Local Education Agencies of

different sizes and demographics that adopt the Missouri Option Program?

Research Design

This study will use qualitative research methods in order to analyze educational

leaders and teachers' perspectives regarding aspects of the implementation and success of

MoOpt at LEAs of various sizes across Missouri. GT will serve as the theoretical

framework for the study. GT, as relayed by Qureshi and Ünlü (2020), must include seven

basic principles:

- Starting research with a broad research focus or question

- Delaying literature review until later stages of research

- Conducting simultaneous data collection and analysis

- Conducting constant comparison method

- Keeping memos

- Theoretical sensitivity

- Theoretical sampling (p. 2)

Additionally, GT is divided into three schools of thought in design: positivist,

postpositivist, and constructivist. This study will approach GT from the positivist

approach espoused by Glaser which is also regarded as the traditional approach (Qureshi & Ünlü, 2020, pp. 2-3).

Using Glaserian GT, the Researcher will develop surveys, questionnaires, and interviews in order to collect data which will be coded and developed into themes (Hesse-Biber, 2017, p. 316). Lee (2018) observed that, "Grounded theory focuses on developing a theoretical frame to explain how a particular phenomenon is formed, developed, and changed into individual and specific types rather than deducing generalized rules" (p. 107). The Researcher will use the data collected to develop descriptive and categorical codes through the use of reflective notes and memos using the processes of theoretical sensitivity and theoretical sampling. These codes will be used to develop analytical codes which will be focused into analytical categories which "take into account the meaning of concepts from the participant's perspective" (Hesse-Biber, 2017, p. 337).

Research Participants

The research participants for this study will consist of administrators and teachers in Missouri who have direct knowledge of the implementation of MoOpt. Research participants will hold a valid certificate from DESE and be from LEAs of various sizes across Missouri.

Role of the Researcher

The Researcher may have a relationship with some of the administrators and teachers who will be interviewed for this study through professional networking and professional development. The participants, schools, and LEAs will remain anonymous. The Researcher will have no supervisory role over the participants.

Instrumentation

Glaserian GT, also known as traditional GT, is rooted in a positivist worldview

that holds "that there is a knowable reality that exists independent of the research

process" (Hesse-Biber, 2017, p. 11). To collect data about this reality, the Researcher will

make use of several tools common to GT such as surveys, questionnaires, and

semi-structured interviews (Saldaña, 2021). The development of these instruments will be

"to generate a conceptual theory that accounts for a pattern of behaviour," which is the

goal of Glaserian GT (Chun Tie et al., 2019, p. 2). Additionally, the Researcher will use

reflective notes and memos to engage in the constant comparison method which "asks

researchers to constantly compare their emerging codes within the same data item and

across the same data set" (Qureshi & Ünlü, 2020, p. 2).

Data Collection

The Researcher plans to make use of surveys, questionnaires, and semi-structured

interviews. The use of surveys and questionnaires will be to gather data from as many

administrators and teachers who facilitate MoOpt as possible and will consist of several

open-ended questions. In a recent study, Nelson (2019) employed a similar method for

collecting qualitative data when looking at what characteristics defined an effective

alternative program in Missouri. Her mixed-methods study consisted of surveys, Likert

scales, and quantitative data provided by the LEAs which participated in the study.

In addition to surveys and questionnaires, the Researcher will make use of

semi-structured interviews with administrators and teachers from LEAs of various sizes.

This will allow the Researcher to establish how MoOpt is administered within districts

which serve different sized populations. Ellerbe (2017), in a study entitled Gaining

Insight into Alternative Education: The Lived Experience of Alternative Educators, used

the personal narratives of three educators "to construct the reality of the participants and

the truths, meanings, intersections, and understandings that they hold about how they

envision the current culture and practices of alternative education" (p. 51). Similarly, the

Researcher will interview administrators and teachers in order to understand their lived

experience with MoOpt.

These interviews will be roughly half an hour to an hour in length. Half of the

interviews will be with administrators and half with teachers. The interviews will be

recorded and transcribed by the Researcher. The recordings and transcripts will be kept

secure until they are destroyed by the Researcher at the conclusion of this study.

Data Analysis

The process of turning interview data into what Wolcott (1994) described as

"intelligible accounts" is a four-step process (as cited in Hesse-Biber, 2017, p. 307).

Those steps are:

1. Data Preparation

2. Data Exploration

3. Specification and Reduction of Data

4. Interpretation

This study will begin its data analysis by first collecting the data needing to be

analyzed. One important aspect the Researcher recognizes is the role the Researcher has

in co-creating the data being analyzed. That is to say, "The relationship the researcher has

with the data, how it is generated and collected, will determine the value it contributes to

the development of the final [grounded theory]" (Chun Tie et al., 2019, p. 4).

In preparing the data, the Researcher will first gather all surveys and questionnaires as well as all transcripts from conducted semi-structured interviews. The Researcher further acknowledges that "Transcription is not a passive act" and will begin the memoing process as soon as possible (Hesse-Biber, 2017, p. 309). The second step, Data Exploration, will see the emergence of meaning as the data is analyzed using metaphors, compare and contrast, and clustering. Additionally, as the Researcher engages with the data, memoing will allow for simultaneous data collection and analysis which is a key aspect of GT (Qureshi & Ünlü, 2020, pp. 5-6).

Steps three and four involve the coding process. Glaserian GT coding begins with the process of open coding, proceeds to selective coding, and ends with theoretical coding (Chun Tie et al., 2019, p. 5). This is similar to the method suggested by Hesse-Biber (2017) of descriptive coding, categorical coding, and analytical coding (p. 315). Likewise, theoretical sensitivity is essential to a successful step three. Birks and Mills (2011) explained that theoretical sensitivity is "the ability to recognize and extract from the data elements that have relevance" to the creation of the GT (p. 181). The final step, Interpretation, is where the Researcher identifies the themes present in the codes and memos while also ensuring internal reliability and validity of the study. Reliability will be established by ensuring that the codes and memos create a consistent narrative throughout the research. Additionally, the Researcher will engage in analysis and comparison with existing theory regarding alternative schools and programs to ensure the validity of the findings (Hesse-Biber, 2017, pp. 327-328).

Summary

      This study will use the methods associated with constructivist GT to analyze the

perspectives of administrators and teachers who have direct knowledge of the

implementation of MoOpt to develop a substantive theory. Chun Tie et al. (2019)

explained that, "A substantive theory is a theoretical interpretation or explanation of a

studied phenomenon," which in this case is the implementation and perceived success of

MoOpt (p. 7). The Researcher will use data collected from surveys, questionnaires, and

semi-structured interviews to code data while also engaging in simultaneous data analysis

and comparison from Missouri LEAs. This will be done primarily through the use of

memos and reflective writing. Additionally, the Researcher will remain sensitive to what

the research presents, allowing the emerging themes to guide any analysis (Qureshi &

Ünlü, 2020, p. 2).

Chapter Four

Findings

The purpose of this chapter is to present the findings of the study, which explored how educational leaders experience, interpret, and implement MoOpt as a means of supporting students at risk of dropping out. Using a constructivist grounded theory approach, data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 17 educators across diverse Missouri school districts. The goal of the analysis was to develop a theory grounded in the participants' lived experiences and perceptions.

This chapter is organized according to the three primary stages of GT analysis: initial coding, focused coding, and axial coding (Qureshi & Ünlü, 2020). The coding process generated over 700 initial codes, which were then refined into 15 focused codes and grouped into four axial categories representing the core themes of the study. These categories reflect how educators described their multifaceted roles, the systemic challenges they faced, the transformative journeys of their students, and the contested legitimacy of MoOpt within the broader educational landscape.

Throughout the chapter, participants' voices are presented through direct quotations and paraphrased excerpts to support and illustrate each category. Cross-categorical themes are also explored, highlighting areas of conceptual overlap and deeper integration. These themes helped illuminate the complex interplay between people, systems, and meaning-making in alternative education.

Overview of Participants and Context

This study drew upon qualitative data collected from 17 semi-structured interviews with educational leaders across Missouri who had been involved in the

implementation, oversight, or direct instruction of students in MoOpt. These individuals played central roles in shaping students' access to and experiences within the program. Their insights were informed by district policies, school demographics, professional philosophies, and personal histories with nontraditional education.

Participant Roles and Leadership Levels

The participant pool included a wide range of educators with varying degrees of operational and administrative responsibility. Among the 17 participants:

- Six served in direct instructional roles as MoOpt teachers

- Five functioned as administrators or building leaders

- Two served at the district level or in a coordination capacity

- Four held dual roles, balancing teaching with leadership, coordination, or student services responsibilities

This diversity allowed the study to capture both front-line challenges and district-level decision-making. Several participants reported over five years of experience with MoOpt programming, while others offered newer perspectives shaped by more recent involvement. This provided the Researcher with a wide array of insights ranging from finishing their first year with the program to more than 15 years of involvement.

District Contexts and Program Models

Participants described varied implementation models shaped by district resources and student needs:

- Embedded programs within traditional school schedules

- Standalone alternative campuses

- Night school at a variety of campuses

- Part-time school and part-time work options

- Regional consortiums sharing personnel and facilities

- Hybrid models incorporating a menu of alternative program options

These approaches reflected the program's decentralized design and the discretion afforded to LEAs. Model choice was often tied to staffing capacity, policy interpretation, and logistical feasibility.

Geographic and Demographic Representation

Participants were selected from across Missouri, including urban, suburban, and rural districts. Some served in or near densely populated cities such as Kansas City and St. Louis, while others represented isolated rural communities. Urban leaders frequently noted issues such as overcrowding and student mobility. Rural educators emphasized transportation barriers, especially related to testing site location and staffing shortages.

Recruitment and Ethical Protections

Participants were recruited following a preliminary survey of Missouri educators familiar with MoOpt. At the conclusion of the survey, respondents had the opportunity to volunteer for interviews. All participants gave informed consent and completed an individual, semi-structured interview. Interview transcripts were anonymized, and pseudonymous codes (P1–P17) were assigned to ensure confidentiality. Research procedures were approved by the Institutional Review Board.

Why This Diversity Matters

The study used a maximum variation sampling approach to capture diverse experiences within MoOpt programming. This allowed for theory development grounded

in a range of local conditions and leadership philosophies. Although implementation

models differed, several themes, such as student motivation, relational support, and

program flexibility, emerged consistently. Others, such as special education access and

postsecondary guidance, varied by region and structure.

Participant Summary Table

The following table summarizes participant roles, settings, and regions. These

codes (P1–P17) are used throughout Chapters 4 and 5 to reference anonymized

participant quotations and examples.

Table 1

Participant Information Regarding Role, Setting, and Region

Participant		Role	Setting Type	Region
Participant 1	(P1)	Counselor/ Director	Alternative School	Springfield Metro
Participant 2	(P2)	Teacher	High School	Kansas City Metro
Participant 3	(P3)	Teacher	High School	Southwest
Participant 4	(P4)	Teacher	High School	Springfield Metro
Participant 5	(P5)	Teacher	Alternative School	Northeast
Participant 6	(P6)	Teacher	High School	St. Louis Metro
Participant 7	(P7)	Teacher	Alternative School	Kansas City Metro
Participant 8	(P8)	Principal	Alternative School	Northeast
Participant 9	(P9)	Teacher	Alternative School	St. Louis Metro
Participant 10	(P10)	Principal	High School	Southwest

Participant	Role	Setting Type	Region
Participant 11 (P11)	Director/ Teacher	Alternative School	Southwest
Participant 12 (P12)	Assistant Principal	High School	Southwest
Participant 13 (P13)	Director	Alternative School	Southwest
Participant 14 (P14)	Principal	Alternative School	Kansas City Metro
Participant 15 (P15)	Teacher/ Director	Alternative School	Kansas City Metro
Participant 16 (P17)	Principal/ Teacher	Alternative School	Southwest
Participant 17 (P17)	Superintendent	Administration	Southwest

The Coding Process

This study followed the principles of constructivist GT, as outlined by Charmaz (2014), to analyze qualitative interview data from 17 educational leaders across Missouri. A constructivist approach was selected for its emphasis on co-constructing meaning through participant narratives and iterative researcher interpretation. The methodology supports the emergence of theory from data, rather than the application of pre-existing frameworks, making it especially suitable for exploring the diverse, context-specific ways in which MoOpt is implemented across Missouri.

As proposed in Chapter 3, the coding process was modeled on four stages of qualitative analysis described by Wolcott (1994) and adapted by Hesse-Biber (2017): Preparation, Exploration, Specification, and Interpretation. These stages map directly onto the GT framework adopted in this study, and were executed using the following constructivist GT techniques: initial coding, focused coding, axial coding, and constant comparison.

All 17 interviews were transcribed and analyzed using a systematic, iterative coding process designed to identify patterns and relationships grounded in the participants' own language. The analytic process proceeded through three primary GT coding phases: initial coding, focused coding, and axial coding. Each phase built upon the last, with increasing abstraction and conceptual depth.

Throughout all three phases, the constant comparative method was used to compare data segments within and across transcripts. Analytic strategies such as clustering, contrast, and the use of metaphors were also employed to support theoretical sensitivity. Analytic memos were used consistently to document decision-making, track developing insights, and ensure that theoretical saturation was approached thoughtfully.

Initial Coding

The initial coding phase represented the foundation of grounded analysis in this study. Initial coding was conducted line-by-line using participants' actual language whenever possible. This approach, referred to as in vivo coding, allowed the analysis to remain grounded in the specific terms and experiences articulated by educational leaders. Rather than beginning with pre-formed categories or theoretical assumptions, codes were developed inductively from the data in real time.

Initial coding was guided by a commitment to stay close to the data and avoid premature abstraction. Each segment of the transcript, ranging from single clauses to complete sentences, was examined for meaningful content and labeled using a short phrase or direct quotation. Special attention was given to verbs and gerunds (e.g., "failing out," "trying again," "building support") to emphasize process, action, and participant agency (See Table 2). This use of gerunds reflects a key feature of grounded theory

analysis, as it foregrounds what participants are doing or experiencing rather than what they are or what they have (Gibbs, 2015).

Scope and Procedure. Each transcript was reviewed individually before codes were compared across cases. The process was iterative: codes from earlier transcripts informed subsequent analysis, while new codes continued to emerge in later transcripts, prompting periodic re-review of earlier material. This back-and-forth movement between cases reflected the constant comparative method central to grounded theory (Qureshi & Ünlü, 2020). Coding was done using a word processor and spreadsheet software to allow tracking, categorization, and sorting of codes without the use of a formal qualitative data analysis platform.

At this stage, the goal was not to reduce or consolidate, but rather to preserve diversity of expression and allow patterns to begin forming organically. The large number of codes developed reflected both the richness of the interview data and the inductive, non-reductive stance of GT.

Sample Codes and Illustrative Quotes. The following table includes a representative sample of 20 initial codes with accompanying transcript excerpts, anonymized participant references, and analytic notes.

Table 2

Sample Codes

Participant	Transcript Excerpt	Initial Code	Notes
P1	"They only come to us when everything else has failed."	Failing everything else	Highlights MoOpt as a last resort placement
P2	"We're the last chance before they drop out."	Last chance framing	Emphasizes urgency and finality of intervention
P3	"I built my own testing lab because no one else would."	Building our own lab	Reflects district initiative and problem-solving
P4	"It's about getting them to believe they're not broken."	Getting students to believe again	Addresses emotional repair and self-worth
P5	"Some days it feels like pushing through chaos, just to keep the door open."	Pushing through chaos	Symbolizes operational strain and resilience
P6	"This program saves lives. Literally."	Saving lives	Strong emotional and ethical justification
P7	"They come with trust issues, and we have to earn it every day."	Earning student trust	Relational labor and student skepticism
P8	"We adapt for each kid, because no two come in with the same needs."	Adapting for each kid	Emphasizes individualized support
P9	"There's no one-size-fits-all with these students."	No one-size-fits-all	Reinforces program flexibility
P10	"I don't care about their past. I care about their potential."	Focusing on potential	Reframing from deficit to asset mindset
P11	"The HiSET isn't just a test—it's a gatekeeper."	HiSET as gatekeeper	Highlights structural barrier
P12	"Transportation is our biggest issue."	Transportation barrier	Practical access limitation
P13	"You have to be more than a teacher—you're a counselor, a coach, everything."	Wearing multiple hats	Role complexity and burnout risk

Participant	Transcript Excerpt	Initial Code	Notes
P14	"They get sent to us when nothing else works."	Dumping ground perception	Stigmatized referral patterns
P15	"This program only works because we believe in it."	Belief sustains the program	Staff buy-in as a success factor
P16	"I'm not here to punish. I'm here to protect their shot."	Protecting opportunity	Contrast with punitive paradigms
P17	"The state lets us do it, but barely supports us."	State neglect	Ambivalence in policy-practice relationship
P6	"It's a daily hustle to keep them engaged."	Daily hustle	High-stakes environment
P4	"They don't believe they can pass the test."	Self-doubt	Student confidence as barrier
P11	"Everything here runs on relationships."	Running on relationships	Centrality of trust and connection

These codes exemplify how early meaning was distilled from the language and actions of participants and laid the foundation for more refined categories in subsequent coding phases.

In vivo codes were prioritized when participants used vivid or repeated language that signaled personal meaning or systemic critique. These direct borrowings helped preserve the integrity of the participant's voice while allowing early codes to remain analytically rich. When no clear in vivo phrase was available, the Researcher crafted a short, analytic label using language that reflected participant intent without reinterpreting or abstracting too early.

Emergent Patterns. Although the initial coding phase prioritized openness and inclusivity, a number of recurring ideas and themes began to surface across interviews. These early patterns, often expressed in participants' own words, signaled key conceptual concerns that would later become focused codes and, ultimately, axial categories.

Several broad patterns were evident:

- **Redemptive Framing:** Many participants described MoOpt as a "last chance" or "lifeline," portraying it in moral or emotional terms as a space of recovery and possibility. Educators framed their work with students as restorative, redemptive, and sometimes spiritual in tone. Phrases like "saving lives," "second chance," and "starting over" were used frequently to describe the emotional weight the program carried for both students and staff. One participant explained, "They've been kicked out of everywhere else. When they show up here, we have to make it work."

- **Structural Barriers:** Participants noted logistical and institutional obstacles such as limited transportation, difficulties accessing HiSET testing, and inadequate support or recognition from the state. These barriers often shaped who could participate in the program and how consistently services could be delivered. Educators voiced frustration over feeling unsupported or under-resourced despite the program's success. Multiple interviewees referred to the burden of acting as test centers themselves, describing it as "doing it all on our own."

- **Teacher Advocacy:** The role of educators extended beyond instruction. Teachers and counselors described themselves as mentors, advocates, and life coaches.

They spoke about "wearing multiple hats" and being the constant figure in a student's turbulent life. One participant stated, "I'm their coach, social worker, sometimes even their ride." Many credited the success of MoOpt not to policy but to the dedication and creativity of the individuals who kept it running.

- **Student Transformation:** Many stories revolved around students who had "given up," "lost hope," or "felt invisible" before entering MoOpt. Participants reported moments where students regained confidence, re-engaged with learning, or completed milestones they had previously thought impossible. These transformations were described as both academic and personal, often marked by improved attendance, new career goals, or emotional healing. A participant shared, "She told me no one had ever called her smart until she passed the HiSET."

- **Systemic Marginalization:** Participants often referred to their students as those who had been "pushed out" or "forgotten" by traditional educational systems. MoOpt served as a catchment for students who had faced compounding disadvantages, including disciplinary histories, trauma, housing instability, and both met and unmet special education needs. One administrator noted, "We serve the kids no one else wants."

As these patterns emerged, they were not simply noted and set aside, they were recorded, reflected upon, and explored through analytic memo-writing. Memos written during this phase helped the Researcher document the conceptual potential of early codes and kept track of ideas that would require follow-up in subsequent interviews or re-coding sessions. Memoing served as a bridge between coding and theory construction,

encouraging theoretical sensitivity and allowing the Researcher to remain attentive to subtle patterns or contradictions in the data.

Use of Memoing. Memo-writing was an integral component of the initial coding process. As codes were assigned and emergent patterns began to form, memos provided a reflective space for capturing analytic insights, questions, and theoretical hunches (see Table 3). These documents ranged in length from short notations attached to specific excerpts to more extended reflections that synthesized several emerging ideas across transcripts.

During initial coding, memos often focused on tracking recurring phrases, identifying conceptual tensions, and considering alternative interpretations. For example, when multiple participants described their work as a "last chance" for students, a memo was written to interrogate whether this framing implied deficit thinking or moral commitment, or both. In another case, when several interviewees mentioned building in-house testing centers, memos considered how such acts reflected both resourcefulness and institutional neglect.

Memos also helped the Researcher to remain critically self-aware, noting where personal assumptions or emotional reactions might influence interpretation. These memos were not treated as final analyses but rather as working documents that shaped ongoing decisions about what to return to, explore further, or question more deeply. Over time, several of these early memos became the seeds for focused code definitions and theoretical constructs.

In sum, memo-writing during initial coding served three essential functions: first, deepening the conceptual meaning of codes; second, identifying links across participant narratives; and third, preserving the inductive and iterative nature of grounded theory.

Table 3

Illustrative Examples of Memo Use During Initial Coding

Memo Title	Type of Memo	Trigger Quote or Pattern	Analytic Insight	Used in...
"Second Chance Rhetoric"	Conceptual	"We're the last stop before they drop out."	Identified theme of redemptive framing and moral language	Focused Code: Redemptive Framing
"Building Our Own Testing"	Descriptive	"We built a HiSET lab ourselves."	Highlighted lack of structural support and school-level initiative	Axial Category: Structural Challenges
"Wearing Multiple Hats"	Conceptual	"I'm a coach, counselor, mom, everything."	Explored multi-role expectations and emotional labor	Focused Code: Teacher Advocacy
"Earning Student Trust"	Theoretical	Recurring phrase: "they don't trust the system"	Emergent idea that trust mediates engagement in the program	Theoretical Saturation Note
"State Support Paradox"	Process	Policy inconsistencies across districts	Tracked contradictory perceptions of state involvement	Category Development Tracker

Focused Coding

Focused coding represents the second major phase of data analysis within this study's GT framework. According to Charmaz (2014), focused coding involves selecting the most significant or frequent initial codes to synthesize and explain larger segments of data. While initial coding sought to preserve participant language and generate broad

conceptual possibilities, focused coding moved toward refinement, abstraction, and thematic cohesion (Britsoci, 2013).

This phase required the Researcher to make analytic decisions about which codes best captured recurring processes, concerns, and experiences articulated across multiple interviews. Focused codes were not merely more frequent, they were also more conceptually robust, holding the potential to connect participant experiences and advance theoretical understanding.

The process remained iterative and comparative, consistent with GT. All transcripts were re-reviewed in light of emerging focused codes, and constant comparison was used to test whether a given code held explanatory power across different contexts and participants. In tandem with this, memo-writing continued as a critical tool to document decisions, explore relationships between codes, and refine category definitions.

Focused coding served as a bridge between open, grounded engagement with participant language and the more structured development of categories. It marked a pivotal turning point in the analysis, one that moved the research from descriptive insight toward explanatory power.

Methodological Process.

Selection of Focused Codes. The process of developing focused codes began with a comprehensive review of the more than 700 initial codes generated during the open coding phase. These initial codes were reviewed not only for frequency, but also for their capacity to represent significant participant perspectives and conceptual clarity. While

many codes appeared only once or were highly contextual, others emerged repeatedly in different forms across participants and carried interpretive weight.

To determine which codes warranted elevation to focused status, the Researcher applied several criteria grounded in constructivist GT (Charmaz, 2014), including recurrence across multiple interviews, theoretical richness, interpretive depth, and alignment with emerging patterns noted during memo-writing. Particular attention was paid to codes that conveyed process, consequence, or underlying social meaning. Codes that appeared emotionally charged or symbolically dense were also prioritized for deeper consideration.

Fifteen focused codes were ultimately selected through a process of iterative reading, comparative review, and analytic memo consultation. These codes were chosen because they provided insight into how participants experienced MoOpt, the challenges they encountered, and the practices they employed to navigate those challenges. In this phase, the Researcher's role shifted from simply identifying meaning to deliberately interpreting how certain ideas recurred and connected. Early memos were frequently revisited, functioning both as analytic repositories and as heuristic tools to guide focused code refinement.

Constant Comparison and Iteration. Focused coding did not mark a break from grounded theory's comparative logic. Instead, the constant comparative method intensified during this phase. Once a code was provisionally defined, it was applied across new and previously coded transcripts. Segments were reread and re-coded with an eye toward both consistency and diversity, seeking not just whether the code "fit," but how it fit differently across settings and individuals.

In practice, this involved identifying the same conceptual code in different contexts and examining its manifestation. For example, the code "Redemptive Framing" might be applied to one principal's description of the program as a "lifesaver," and to another teacher's statement that "we're the last door before they drop out." While both instances affirm the code's validity, subtle differences in tone and emphasis were recorded in memos, and in some cases led to the identification of subcodes or clarified distinctions.

This phase also involved abandoning or merging codes that proved too narrow, duplicative, or insufficiently explanatory. Some initial codes collapsed into broader categories, while others were elevated from fragments into fully conceptualized codes with clear definitions and boundaries. This iterative back-and-forth process ensured that focused codes were not static assignments but analytic tools under ongoing development.

Memo Support and Theoretical Sensitivity. Memo-writing remained a critical analytic activity throughout the focused coding phase. Memos provided a space to explore and test the boundaries of each focused code, assess coherence, and reflect on how concepts might relate. Each focused code was paired with at least one memo elaborating on its conceptual function, relevance to the research questions, and potential connections to other codes.

For example, memos written around the code "Teacher Advocacy" initially emphasized role expansion and personal investment. As these memos accumulated, they revealed patterns of staff burnout, emotional labor, and professional identity that deepened the code's meaning. This memoing process enhanced theoretical sensitivity by

allowing the Researcher to notice contradictions and nested meanings that were not always visible at the surface level.

The memos also served as bridges between individual codes and the categories that would emerge during axial coding. They allowed the Researcher to pause and assess what a code might mean beyond its literal appearance, how it might be influenced by institutional conditions, and what theoretical story it could help tell. These analytic reflections contributed directly to the next phase of conceptual abstraction.

Integration and Saturation Check. To ensure that each focused code was both conceptually sound and empirically grounded, the Researcher conducted a saturation check. This involved assessing whether new data continued to produce novel insights within a code or whether subsequent examples merely confirmed what was already known. A code was considered saturated when additional instances added nuance but not fundamentally new ideas.

In cases where codes remained weak, narrowly applied, or conceptually vague, they were either removed, renamed, or merged with other more robust codes. For example, early coding efforts generated separate codes for "testing infrastructure" and "testing environment," but these were ultimately combined under the focused code "HiSET Infrastructure" to reflect their shared analytic concern.

The final set of 15 focused codes in Table 4 represented a stable and coherent analytic structure. These codes accounted for core themes across all 17 interviews and were validated through constant comparison, memos, and repeated testing against the data. This framework provided a strong foundation for the axial coding that followed,

where codes would be grouped and explored in terms of their relationships to broader

conceptual categories.

Table 4

Focused Codes

Focused Code	Definition	Example Quote
Redemptive Framing	The narrative of MoOpt as a moral or emotional second chance for students.	"This program saves lives."
Teacher Advocacy	The expanded emotional and functional role of educators, often going beyond instruction.	"I'm their counselor, coach, sometimes even their ride."
Structural Barriers	Institutional and logistical challenges that inhibit program access and effectiveness.	"We're doing testing ourselves because no one else will."
Student Transformation	Observed changes in student self-perception, behavior, or engagement.	"He came in ready to quit. Now he's looking at tech school."
Program Legitimacy	How MoOpt is perceived within the district and by stakeholders.	"Some people still think it's not a real diploma."
Role of Relationships	The centrality of trust and human connection to program success.	"Everything we do here runs on relationships."
Testing Pressure	The emotional and logistical weight associated with the HiSET testing requirement.	"They freeze up before the test even starts."
Personalized Support	Adjustments made by staff to accommodate diverse student needs and life circumstances.	"We build a plan for every kid, one at a time."
Crisis and Survival	The precarious, high-stress situations many students face outside of school.	"Some of them are couch surfing, some are working full time."
Staff Burnout and Commitment	The emotional toll on educators and their deep personal investment in students' success.	"It wears on you, but I can't let them down."
Policy Ambiguity	Lack of clarity or consistency in how MoOpt is supported by the state.	"The state says we can do it, but gives us nothing to work with."
Alternative Pathways	Program viewed as an alternate route to success for students who don't fit traditional models.	"This isn't a shortcut, it's a different road."

Focused Code	Definition	Example Quote
Restoring Agency	Helping students regain a sense of control over their academic journey.	"It's the first time they feel like this is their choice."
HiSET Infrastructure	The technical and institutional systems needed to administer HiSET testing effectively.	"We had to convert a janitor's closet into a test room."
Interagency Gaps	Disconnects between schools, state agencies, and community supports.	"We're constantly trying to fill in the cracks the system leaves."

Focused Coding Outcomes. The outcome of focused coding was a framework of 15 robust, conceptually rich codes that represented recurring themes across participants. These codes formed the analytical scaffolding for the next phase of data analysis and contributed directly to the development of axial categories and ultimately a grounded theory.

While focused coding required abstraction and interpretation, it remained grounded in the words, experiences, and insights of participants. For example, the code "Teacher Advocacy" encompassed not only the functional roles of educators but also their emotional investments, daily labor, and relationship-building practices. Similarly, the code "Structural Barriers" captured recurring logistical and policy-related obstacles such as transportation, HiSET access, and inconsistent state support.

These focused codes were not isolated, they began to cluster and form thematic families. For instance, codes like "Redemptive Framing," "Student Transformation," and "Restoring Agency" coalesced around a broader idea of personal and academic renewal. Meanwhile, "Testing Pressure," "HiSET Infrastructure," and "Structural Barriers" illustrated systemic constraints and operational fragility.

Focused codes also provided a roadmap for returning to earlier transcripts and rechecking assumptions. Quotes were revisited, memos were compared, and codes were continuously interrogated to ensure they held explanatory power across diverse contexts.

Axial Coding

Axial coding in this study served as a critical turning point in the analytic process, a bridge between descriptive pattern recognition and conceptual explanation. While initial and focused coding illuminated recurring language, concepts, and concerns across participants' narratives, axial coding advanced the analysis by asking: How do these ideas relate to one another? What larger processes or structures are they part of? Rather than treating focused codes as discrete categories, axial coding aimed to uncover the relationships, tensions, and interdependencies between them. It marked a transition from identifying what participants said to understanding what their collective perspectives revealed about MoOpt as a social phenomenon.

This process drew from, but did not rigidly apply, the formal schema associated with traditional (Straussian) grounded theory, such as coding for conditions, contexts, actions/interactions, and consequences. Instead, this study followed the constructivist interpretation advanced by Charmaz (2014), in which axial coding is more fluid and inductively responsive. Here, the goal was not to impose a pre-existing framework but to allow thematic coherence, conceptual fit, and analytic richness to guide the organization of focused codes into broader categories. Each category was evaluated not only for internal consistency but also for its explanatory power in illuminating the dynamics of dropout prevention, student transformation, educator advocacy, and institutional design.

Central to this phase was the practice of analytic memoing, which served both as a record of insight and as a tool for sense-making. The Researcher returned to earlier memos, written during initial and focused coding, and used them to test assumptions, refine meanings, and identify patterns of convergence across data sources. Memo-writing allowed for active dialogue with the data, capturing interpretive hunches that might otherwise have remained implicit. For instance, memos questioning whether "redemptive framing" was a discrete code or a through-line across several others led to its repositioning as a unifying category under *Program Identity and Legitimacy*. Similarly, early memos noting the emotional burden experienced by teachers helped link "teacher advocacy" with "staff burnout and commitment," clarifying their shared role within the broader category of *Educators as Advocates and Navigators*.

Rather than working in a linear fashion, axial coding in this project was iterative. Categories were tested, re-tested, and sometimes discarded when they failed to hold together conceptually or were not sufficiently distinct from others (see Table 5). The process relied on constant comparison, not only across participants but across time, revisiting transcripts and memos to ensure that emerging categories remained grounded in the data while evolving toward theoretical abstraction.

Table 5

Examples of Constant Comparison

Comparison Type	What Was Compared	Insight Gained	Resulting Category or Code Adjustment
Across Participants	P3 described "doing everything for the kids" vs. P9 who said "they're not mine to raise"	Illuminated variation in educator role boundaries	Refined Teacher Advocacy to include emotional labor
Across Initial Codes	"Last chance" and "only place left" appeared in different transcripts	Revealed a shared moral framing of the program	Merged into Redemptive Framing
Within a Single Transcript	P5 spoke about both "burnout" and "why I stay up late making plans"	Exposed tension between emotional exhaustion and deep commitment	Created new memo: The Cost of Caring
Across Time (Early vs. Later Memos)	Early memo: "Teacher as multitasker"; later memo: "emotional load"	Shifted interpretation from logistics to emotional strain	Contributed to Staff Burnout and Commitment
Across Settings	Urban vs. rural HiSET access: rural P12 described DIY testing, urban P7 relied on testing centers	Showed infrastructural disparities based on geography	Refined Structural Barriers into broader Institutional Gaps

Ultimately, four axial categories emerged. Each represents a distinct but interrelated domain of meaning that helps to explain how educational leaders experience, interpret, and enact MoOpt. These categories are not merely containers for codes, they are analytic stories developed through cycles of coding, reflection, and re-coding (see Table 6). Their development depended not only on pattern recognition but on critical interpretation, with memo-writing serving as the connective tissue between raw data and theoretical insight.

Table 6

Illustrative Memos That Informed Axial Categories

Memo Title	Insight from Memo	Focused Codes Influenced	Resulting Axial Category
The Emotional Labor of Teachers	Highlighted repeated references to multi-role strain and student dependence	Teacher Advocacy, Staff Burnout and Commitment	Educators as Advocates and Navigators
Patching the System with Tape	Reflected on local innovation in response to state-level neglect	Structural Barriers, HiSET Infrastructure, Policy Ambiguity, Testing Pressure, Interagency Gaps	Structural Challenges and Institutional Gaps
Finding Meaning in the Work	Explored how staff narrated the program as morally redemptive	Redemptive Framing, Program Legitimacy, Alternative Pathways	Program Identity and Legitimacy
They Don't Just Quit School	Traced participants' insights into how trauma, mobility, and home instability affect students	Crisis and Survival, Restoring Agency, Student Transformation	Student Renewal and Re-engagement
Relationships Over Rules	Argued that student success was more often attributed to relational trust than to structure	Role of Relationships, Personalized Support	Student Renewal and Re-engagement

Grouping Focused Codes into Categories. The transition from focused coding to axial coding involved a deliberate and iterative process of conceptual grouping. While focused codes offered specific, grounded insights from across the 17 interviews, axial coding required the Researcher to examine how those insights related to one another, both within and across participant narratives. The goal was not simply to reduce data further, but to construct meaningful categories that could explain the processes, tensions, and patterns underlying educators' experiences with MoOpt.

This process relied heavily on constant comparison, memo-writing, and analytic reflection. Memos developed during earlier phases were revisited, sorted, and clustered according to thematic resonance. Through this clustering, the Researcher was able to identify relationships among codes that pointed to shared functions, roles, or challenges, even when the language differed across transcripts. For example, the focused codes "Teacher Advocacy" and "Staff Burnout and Commitment" began to coalesce into a broader category centered on educator responsibility and emotional labor. This cluster was later named *Educators as Advocates and Navigators* to reflect both the supportive and strategic roles educators played in the program.

The Researcher also returned to earlier analytic tables and compared which focused codes appeared most consistently across participants, which ones showed variability by district type, and which were most often linked in memos. As this process unfolded, focused codes were compared not only semantically but functionally, considering what role they played in explaining broader systemic or interpersonal dynamics.

Importantly, this process was neither linear nor automatic. Several focused codes were initially miscategorized, or seemed to fit in multiple clusters. For instance, "Testing Pressure" was initially linked to student experience but was eventually grouped with "HiSET Infrastructure" and "Structural Barriers" under a more systemic lens in *Structural Challenges and Institutional Gaps*. Through memo review, it became clear that these codes collectively represented issues beyond individual performance: they pointed to resource access, administrative burden, and policy interpretation.

Each axial category was defined not only by internal coherence, but by its analytic

distinctiveness (see Table 7). The Researcher asked: Does this category reveal something

different from the others? Does it deepen understanding of a key process or challenge

within the program? Can it support theoretical insight that remains grounded in the data?

Table 7

Mapping Table with Rationales

Axial Category	Focused Codes	Rationale for Grouping
Educators as Advocates and Navigators	Teacher Advocacy, Staff Burnout and Commitment, Personalized Support	All reflect the expanded roles and emotional labor of front-line staff who support students beyond academic instruction.
Structural Challenges and Institutional Gaps	Structural Barriers, Policy Ambiguity, HiSET Infrastructure, Testing Pressure, Interagency Gaps	These codes identify the infrastructural and systemic obstacles that complicate program delivery and access.
Student Renewal and Re-engagement	Student Transformation, Restoring Agency, Crisis and Survival, Role of Relationships	Focuses on student journeys of growth, identity, and resilience as shaped by trauma, trust, and individualized support.
Program Identity and Legitimacy	Redemptive Framing, Program Legitimacy, Alternative Pathways	These codes explore how the program is socially, morally, and institutionally framed by educators and systems.

The Four Axial Categories. Through iterative memoing, constant comparison,

and clustering of focused codes, four axial categories emerged to represent the primary

conceptual threads running through participant narratives. These categories are not

simply thematic groupings; rather, they represent higher-order interpretations that explain

how educational leaders experience, implement, and navigate MoOpt. The categories

below serve as the foundation for the organization of the findings in the remainder of

Chapter 4.

Category 1: Educators as Advocates and Navigators. Throughout the interviews, a compelling portrait emerged of educators who did far more than teach content; they consistently stepped into roles of advocates, mentors, and navigators. In nearly every case, participants described their engagement with students not as passive support, but as active intervention on behalf of youth who had, in many ways, been left behind by traditional schooling structures.

Educators in MoOpt often served as the connective tissue between students and the system. Many participants spoke of walking students through bureaucratic processes, interpreting policy, managing communications with administration, and providing emotional regulation during crises. One educator shared, "They come in with so many things weighing on them. You can't just hand them a test and say 'good luck.' Sometimes the first thing I do is give them breakfast and ask what's going on at home." This kind of holistic care reflects the broader reality of Missouri Option practitioners as navigators of institutional and personal complexity.

Some participants framed their role as needing to "decode the system" for students. The traditional school environment, its credit requirements, pacing guides, and disciplinary frameworks, often seemed inaccessible or even hostile to these students. One participant explained, "I try to be their advocate in the building. I go to the meetings, I follow up with counselors. Sometimes they don't even know what's being asked of them." The educator's voice here represented a broader consensus that students in the program often lacked access to the social capital or institutional fluency needed to succeed in high school environments, and that it became the job of the educator to close that gap.

Beyond institutional advocacy, many educators described acting as life coaches or quasi-therapists. They facilitated goal setting, emotional support, and long-term planning that extended well beyond academic benchmarks. One participant noted, "We talk a lot about what happens after this. I don't want them to just get a diploma. I want them to be ready to use it." The interview data reflected that this forward-looking guidance was frequently informal and deeply personal, rooted in trust, repetition, and patient mentorship.

This axial category was saturated with expressions of purpose and moral urgency. The role of advocate was not reluctantly assumed; rather, it was often cited as the heart of why educators stayed in their roles. Their investment in these students went beyond job expectations. One participant offered a poignant reflection: "I tell them that I see them. That they matter. Because for some of them, no one has ever said that." These small acts of affirmation, repeated in different forms across interviews, underscored how educators in MoOpt are doing more than teaching; they are stewarding lives.

Category 2: Structural Challenges and Institutional Gaps. The category of Structural Challenges and Institutional Gaps emerged as a persistent and multifaceted theme across participant interviews. This category encompasses the systemic barriers and policy shortcomings that impede the implementation and sustainability of the program. These challenges were not isolated incidents but revealed a broader pattern of disconnection between policy-level decisions and on-the-ground realities faced by educators tasked with serving the most vulnerable student populations.

Participants consistently described how schools often lacked the institutional infrastructure and financial backing needed to support alternative education initiatives like MoOpt. Several noted that without dedicated administrative support, MoOpt instructors found themselves navigating bureaucratic red tape and shifting expectations with little guidance. This lack of clarity was compounded by DESE's inconsistent communication, particularly around changes to Assurance Standards and program expectations. One administrator lamented that unless educators attended a paid conference, "you might never even hear about the updates." The perception that vital information was locked behind paywalls or dependent on individual initiative highlighted a systemic failure to ensure equitable access to program guidance.

Interviewees also addressed the ambiguity surrounding equivalency assessments. Despite the state offering both the GED and the HiSET as high school equivalency exams, many participants noted a near-total absence of discussion about the GED. Instructors were unsure if it remained a viable path or if its use was discouraged. This absence of clarity left some administrators hesitant to explore alternate routes for students, fearing noncompliance or accountability consequences.

Additionally, interviewees discussed how MoOpt was often squeezed into existing school schedules or assigned to buildings already burdened with behavioral or academic intervention programs. The perception that MoOpt operated on the institutional margins reinforced the view that it was treated as a last resort rather than a legitimate academic pathway. One educator stated bluntly: "We're given a room, a box of tests, and told to get results." Others noted how their requests for additional support staff, counseling

resources, or flexible scheduling were denied due to budget constraints or administrative turnover.

These accounts collectively reflect a landscape where well-meaning policies meet uneven implementation. Institutional gaps, including underfunding, communication lapses, and organizational silos produce conditions where even dedicated educators struggle to deliver consistent, high-quality support. Despite these hurdles, participants also emphasized the importance of the program and their determination to make it work. Their commitment served as a powerful counterweight to structural deficiencies, but it was clear that such determination came at a cost.

This axial category, then, helped contextualize the frustrations and limitations participants described, offering insight into how even successful student outcomes are often achieved in spite of, rather than because of, the institutional structures in place.

Category 3: Student Renewal and Re-engagement. A recurring theme across participant interviews was the transformative impact of MoOpt on students' sense of self, agency, and future orientation. Participants spoke not only of academic recovery but of emotional renewal; of a shift in how students saw themselves in relation to education, work, and community. Re-engagement was not merely a return to school tasks but a broader process of reclaiming hope, rediscovering self-worth, and constructing a more empowered identity.

This re-engagement often began with the realization that MoOpt offered a pathway that met students where they were. As one participant described, students had "hit a wall, and then the wall opened." This metaphor of obstruction followed by access

resonated across interviews. Students who had once internalized the message that they

were *failures* in traditional settings found in MoOpt a space to reframe that narrative. P3

noted that "they walk different, talk different" after a few weeks in the program,

emphasizing the visible shift in student demeanor and confidence.

One central mechanism of this renewal was the program's focus on autonomy.

Because students could progress at their own pace and choose testing timelines, they

were encouraged to take ownership of their educational journey. This control contrasted

sharply with their previous experience in traditional settings, which participants often

described as rigid, standardized, and alienating. As P12 explained, "they finally feel like

school is for them, not something being done to them."

Another driver of re-engagement was the recalibration of adult-student

relationships. Several interviewees emphasized that when educators moved from

disciplinarians to mentors, students responded by leaning into the work. P6 shared, "I

stopped being their warden and became their coach." The trust built in these redefined

relationships often extended beyond the classroom, with educators assisting students in

planning careers, applying for jobs, and navigating personal challenges.

Participants also highlighted how students' re-engagement often extended beyond

academics. P14 described a student who, once disengaged and chronically absent, had

become a peer tutor and informal leader in the classroom. "He came alive," the

participant recalled, "and then he lit up others." Stories like this illustrated that the ripple

effects of student renewal could be communal, re-shaping not only individual trajectories

but classroom cultures as well.

Crucially, re-engagement was not always immediate or linear. Participants emphasized the importance of grace, flexibility, and persistence. P9 reflected, "They'll test the boundaries at first because they've been burned before. But if you're consistent, if you show up for them, they come around." The process of renewal, then, was iterative and relational, requiring both program structure and human connection.

Overall, MoOpt was seen not just as a second chance but as a transformative space where students could reimagine themselves. Through autonomy, supportive relationships, and meaningful success, students re-engaged with education as a pathway to a better future; one they now believed was within reach.

Category 4: Program Identity and Legitimacy. Participants in the study offered a wide range of insights into how MoOpt is understood and positioned within their respective districts. While each district implemented the program in ways unique to their institutional capacities and leadership structures, a common concern emerged around the program's identity and legitimacy both internally and externally.

In several interviews, educators described MoOpt as "a tool in the belt," a metaphor that suggests utility but also limitation. It is a program seen as serving a specific purpose: to recover students who are no longer served by the traditional system. However, even this pragmatic acceptance was tempered by questions about how well-understood the program is by those outside the alternative education space. As one participant noted, "I don't think anybody from the main campus even knows what goes on over here. They know we're a building, but they don't know what we do."

The program's perceived legitimacy was further complicated by shifting guidelines and inconsistent communication from DESE. Several educators expressed frustration that key updates, such as changes to the Assurance Standards or the re-approval of the GED as a high school equivalency exam were not widely disseminated and could only be reliably accessed by attending conferences. For underfunded districts or new administrators, this presents a major hurdle to staying compliant and informed.

There was also evidence that MoOpt's legitimacy is sometimes undercut by misunderstanding or mistrust from district leadership or policymakers. In some districts, limits were placed on the number of students who can access the program, not for academic or budgetary reasons, but due to philosophical resistance from administrators who view alternative diplomas as inferior. "I had one principal who didn't want his name on a diploma if the student didn't go through the traditional track," one participant explained. This belief system erodes confidence in MoOpt, creating barriers for students and educators who otherwise see the program as transformative.

Despite these challenges, most participants held firm in their belief that MoOpt represents a legitimate pathway to graduation for students who are at-risk of dropping out. Educators emphasized that students in MoOpt were required to meet rigorous standards including passing the HiSET or GED, meeting state-required credit benchmarks, and maintaining full-time status through instruction or work experience. Several participants noted that MoOpt students often carried complex life stories and demonstrated resilience that goes unrecognized in traditional metrics. "They work hard," one educator observed.

In this way, the category of Program Identity and Legitimacy centered on a paradox. MoOpt is both valued and marginalized; praised by those who witness its impact firsthand but diminished by structural and cultural forces that devalue nontraditional educational routes. This tension suggested that, for MoOpt to be fully legitimized, its identity must be clarified and championed not only by practitioners but also by policymakers and district leaders willing to advocate for the students it serves.

Summary of Key Findings

Chapter Four provided demographic context for the 17 participants in this study and analyzed their responses to semi-structured interview questions using a constructivist GT methodology. Participants' experiences and perspectives were coded through a three-phase analytic process: initial, focused, and axial coding. Based on participants' narratives and reflective memo analysis, four axial categories were identified: (1) Educators as Advocates and Navigators, (2) Structural Challenges and Institutional Gaps, (3) Student Renewal and Re-engagement, and (4) Program Identity and Legitimacy.

Each category was supported by a cluster of focused codes developed during the second phase of coding. These included: teacher advocacy, staff burnout and commitment, personalized support, structural barriers, HiSET infrastructure, policy ambiguity, testing pressure, student transformation, restoring agency, crisis and survival, role of relationships, redemptive framing, program legitimacy, alternative pathways, and interagency gaps. Participants' responses consistently illustrated the personal, relational, and institutional dimensions of implementing MoOpt, especially in how they supported students at risk of dropping out.

Data in the form of quotations and paraphrased experiences were used to support the development of each category and theme. Participants emphasized the importance of building trust with students, redefining success beyond standardized measures, and advocating for program legitimacy in the face of systemic neglect. Their responses highlighted a recurring theme: that success in MoOpt is negotiated daily through emotional labor, institutional improvisation, and relational commitment.

Collectively, these findings revealed a central process of conditional redemption, in which student progress and program legitimacy are continually earned and negotiated by educators within the constraints of a system that often under-supported them. In Chapter Five, the Researcher will offer a theoretical discussion of these findings, explore implications for educational leadership and practice, and provide recommendations for future research and policy development.

Chapter Five

Analysis and Theoretical Development

Chapter Five presents the interpretive and theoretical culmination of this grounded theory study. Drawing from 17 in-depth interviews, extensive memo-writing, and constant comparative analysis, this chapter introduces and elaborates on the emergent theory of Conditional Redemption. This theory offers a middle-range explanatory framework for understanding how students enrolled in Missouri's alternative diploma pathway, MoOpt, reconstruct educational belonging after disengagement from traditional schooling.

Rather than focusing solely on structural innovations or personal resilience, the theory of Conditional Redemption centers on the dynamic interplay of four interdependent conditions: relational trust, structural access, motivational renewal, and program legitimacy. These conditions do not operate in isolation but function as an iterative system that enables or impedes student transformation. Each axial category developed in Chapter Four is expanded here in narrative form to articulate the mechanisms through which these conditions operate.

This chapter begins by describing how theoretical saturation and analytic trustworthiness were achieved (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2020). It then presents each axial category in turn, followed by the articulation of the grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014). A visual model is introduced to illustrate how Conditional Redemption functions as a feedback loop, emphasizing the systemic and recursive nature of the recovery process. The theory is then situated within the scholarly literature, highlighting its connections to, and divergences from, established models of dropout prevention, resilience,

trauma-informed education, and alternative program design. Finally, the chapter closes by addressing the study's five guiding research questions, synthesizing how the theory responds to each in turn.

Theoretical Saturation and Trustworthiness

In constructivist GT, theoretical saturation is reached when additional data no longer yield new or significant insights into the emerging categories (Qureshi & Ünlü, 2020). Within this study, saturation was achieved through a systematic process of iterative coding, memo-writing, and conceptual integration (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2020). While absolute completeness cannot be claimed, the development of the core category, Conditional Redemption, reflects a sustained, recursive engagement with the data that prioritized both depth and variation.

This analysis was based on 17 in-depth interviews with educators and administrators directly involved with MoOpt. Participants represented a diverse cross-section of program contexts, including variations in district size, staffing models, and implementation history. As described in Chapter 3, purposive sampling continued until recurrence and convergence of concepts was evident across cases (Qureshi & Ünlü, 2020). Focused and axial codes stabilized, and no new properties emerged during the final rounds of data analysis, indicating that the core categories had reached theoretical saturation (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2020).

The analytic process followed the constant comparative method central to grounded theory. Initial line-by-line coding was used to develop open codes, which were subsequently grouped into focused codes and refined into four axial categories: educators as advocates and navigators, structural challenges and institutional gaps, student renewal

and re-engagement, and program identity and legitimacy (Gibbs, 2015). These categories were not isolated phenomena; rather, they represented overlapping, co-occurring conditions that collectively explained the process through which students re-entered and progressed within alternative education (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2020).

The trustworthiness of the analysis was supported through extensive memo-writing across multiple phases of the research. 17 participant-specific analytic memos and 15 pattern memos were developed to explore theoretical links, emotional tone, and recurring conceptual features. These memos functioned not only as internal records of analytic progression but also as spaces for reflexivity, critique, and theory building (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2020). The articulation of Conditional Redemption as the core category emerged through memo comparisons, refinement of category properties, and recursive engagement with both the data and existing literature. The presence and distribution of axial categories was systematically tracked across participant interviews and is summarized in Table 8.

Table 8

Presence of Axial Codes Across Participant Interviews

	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9	P10	P11	P12	P13	P14	P15	P16	P17
1	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
2	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓	✓	✓		✓
3	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
4		✓		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓

Note: Axial Codes: 1. Educators as Advocates and Navigators; 2. Structural Challenges and Institutional Gaps; 3. Student Renewal and Re-engagement; 4. Program Identity and Legitimacy

Triangulation was employed to strengthen analytic credibility (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2020). Data triangulation was achieved through the inclusion of 17 distinct participant perspectives, drawn from a variety of institutional roles and settings. Methodological triangulation was incorporated through the use of open and focused coding, axial analysis, and theoretical memoing. Analytic triangulation occurred through repeated comparisons between participant narratives, emergent codes, and conceptual groupings, which helped ensure that interpretations were grounded in the data rather than imposed upon it.

Throughout this process, attention was given to preserving the nuance of participant voices while elevating conceptual patterns. Pseudonymous identifiers (P#) were used to protect confidentiality while maintaining analytic coherence. Participant statements were paraphrased and interpreted within the context of larger patterns, ensuring that findings reflected both individual insights and shared experiences.

Saturation was affirmed when focused codes no longer expanded, categories were densely populated with multi-case examples, and thematic connections between categories were consistently reinforced across settings and roles (Qureshi & Ünlü, 2020). The clarity and recurrence of these relationships provided strong justification for the emergence of Conditional Redemption as a coherent, middle-range theory. In keeping with Charmaz's (2014) constructivist stance, the theory offered here does not claim universality, but rather aims to represent a contextually situated, meaning-rich explanation of how students find re-engagement through alternative education. It is through this interpretive complexity, not statistical generalizability, that the study affirms its credibility (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2020).

Presentation of Axial Categories

The analytic process of axial coding involved clustering focused codes into higher-order categories that reflected key conditions influencing student re-engagement within the MoOpt framework. Four axial categories emerged through this process: educators as advocates and navigators, structural challenges and institutional gaps, student renewal and re-engagement, and program identity and legitimacy. These categories were identified not as isolated phenomena, but as interdependent components within a larger system of meaning-making.

Each category reflected a condition that influenced whether students were able to pursue, achieve, and internalize academic redemption. While grounded in distinct patterns of participant insight, the categories share conceptual relationships that collectively inform the development of the study's grounded theory. The interpretive model that emerged was not the product of any single category but the result of their convergence. It is through the alignment of relational support, structural integrity, personal transformation, and institutional legitimacy that student re-engagement became possible.

The following subsections present each axial category in narrative form, demonstrating its internal coherence and its connection to the emergent theory. The presentation avoids quotation and instead synthesizes participant contributions to illustrate recurring patterns and themes. Together, these categories provide the analytic foundation for the grounded theory elaborated in the subsequent section.

Educators as Advocates and Navigators

A defining condition of Conditional Redemption is the presence of educators who engage in relational and institutional work that extends far beyond the conventional duties of instruction. Participants consistently described their roles as emotionally involved and strategically adaptive, providing both interpersonal stability and structural navigation for students returning to education after disengagement. These educators functioned simultaneously as advocates who protected and affirmed their students, and as navigators who managed the complex systems through which students were required to progress.

Educators reported that many students entered MoOpt programs with significant distrust toward school personnel and institutional processes. Years of academic failure, inconsistent support, and disciplinary exclusion had shaped students' expectations that schools would not serve them fairly or reliably. In response, educators prioritized consistency, presence, and affirmation as foundational elements of re-engagement. Rather than beginning with content delivery, participants emphasized the importance of meeting basic needs, checking in regularly, and adjusting expectations based on students' lived realities. These daily acts of care were not viewed as peripheral but as essential interventions that laid the emotional groundwork for learning.

In addition to their relational work, educators described extensive behind-the-scenes labor aimed at navigating institutional systems on behalf of their students. This included managing testing accommodations, advocating for enrollment flexibility, securing funding for assessment fees, and interpreting shifting policy guidance. Participants noted that without this type of guidance and support, many students would likely have been lost in bureaucratic processes. Educators often took on this labor voluntarily, framing it as a necessary condition for student success in a system that frequently failed to anticipate or accommodate complexity.

This dual role of advocacy and navigation was characterized as emotionally demanding but central to the identity of MoOpt practitioners. Many participants framed their commitment as vocational, describing their work as deeply personal and grounded in a belief in the redemptive potential of their students. The consistency of the adult presence, especially in contexts where turnover and burnout were common, was seen as a critical variable in whether students trusted the process and remained engaged.

Importantly, the educators' belief in students often preceded the students' belief in themselves. Participants spoke of maintaining hope and possibility for students during periods of disengagement or relapse, emphasizing that transformation rarely occurred in isolation. Instead, student growth was seen as a shared project initiated through sustained adult investment. The presence of a stable, affirming adult who held high expectations while providing structural and emotional support emerged as a key determinant in whether students would begin to see themselves as capable and worthy of success.

This axial category affirms the premise of Conditional Redemption: student transformation is not inevitable, nor is it purely internal. Redemption becomes possible when a trusted adult constructs the conditions in which it can occur; conditions that require time, labor, and a deep sense of relational ethics. In this context, the educator is not merely a facilitator of academic content but a builder of pathways, a translator of systems, and a guardian of possibility.

Structural Challenges and Institutional Gaps

While the commitment of educators provided a strong relational foundation, the implementation of Conditional Redemption was frequently constrained by systemic weaknesses, policy inconsistencies, and uneven resource distribution. This axial category examined the institutional landscape in which MoOpt operates, emphasizing how structural vulnerabilities shape both the accessibility and sustainability of student re-engagement.

Participants consistently described MoOpt as an improvised structure, highly dependent on local leadership and educator initiative. Formal guidance from DESE was often characterized as insufficient, inconsistent, or inaccessible. The loss of centralized

support at the state level created confusion about eligibility criteria, testing procedures, and accountability requirements. Districts were frequently left to interpret program expectations independently, resulting in wide variation in implementation across the state. The absence of a uniform framework for program fidelity heightened the precarity of MoOpt and contributed to significant inequities between sites.

Assessment and testing logistics represented another area of structural strain. Although the HiSET exam was broadly viewed as accessible and empowering for many students, participants reported frequent difficulties with scheduling, transportation, and accommodation approvals. For students with disabilities or unstable housing, these barriers posed serious risks to program completion. In many cases, delays in receiving testing modifications or reimbursement support disrupted student momentum and led to disengagement. Educators often responded by intervening directly (e.g., paying fees out of pocket, arranging transportation, or completing administrative tasks during personal time) but these efforts, while commendable, also revealed the fragility of systems reliant on individual sacrifice.

Resource disparities between districts further intensified structural inequity. Some programs were able to provide robust support for students, including academic tutoring, career counseling, and job placement services. Others lacked basic materials, consistent staffing, or even access to reliable testing facilities. These gaps were particularly evident for students with special needs, including those with individualized education plans (IEPs) or English language learning requirements. Participants acknowledged that some students were informally screened out or discouraged from enrolling due to a lack of

institutional capacity to support them adequately. These exclusionary practices

contradicted the inclusive intent of the program and undermined its redemptive promise.

In addition to eligibility and resource issues, participants described inconsistent

disciplinary approaches that affected students' ability to remain in the program. While

some sites embraced restorative practices, others applied rigid behavioral standards that

mirrored the punitive structures students had previously encountered in traditional

settings. This inconsistency not only contributed to student attrition but also called into

question the extent to which MoOpt served as a true alternative rather than a repackaging

of conventional education.

Finally, the absence of post-graduation planning emerged as a common concern.

While many students successfully completed program requirements and received their

diplomas, few were provided with structured pathways to employment, postsecondary

education, or vocational training. Without intentional planning or follow-up, graduation

sometimes marked the end of support rather than the beginning of future success. This

gap revealed a disjunction between institutional measures of redemption and the lived

realities of students who remained vulnerable even after academic requirements had been

fulfilled.

Collectively, these findings highlight that Conditional Redemption is not only

emotionally contingent but structurally dependent. The best efforts of educators cannot

fully compensate for systems that lack coherence, transparency, or flexibility.

Redemption, in this context, is conditional not only on student effort and educator

commitment but also on whether institutional environments are responsive, accessible,

and just. This axial category deepened the theoretical model by positioning structural

conditions as gatekeepers to student transformation. Without functioning systems, the

opportunity for redemption narrowed and the burden of access shifted to those least

equipped to carry it.

Student Renewal and Re-engagement

A central condition of Conditional Redemption is the student's capacity to

re-engage with learning and reconstruct their academic identity. While structural access

and adult support were essential precursors, redemption ultimately depended on a process

of internal transformation. This axial category captured the affective and motivational

shifts that occur when students move from disconnection and mistrust to renewed

purpose and participation in their own educational journey.

Participants described many students entering MoOpt with extensive histories of

academic failure, disciplinary exclusion, and emotional detachment. These students were

often characterized as disengaged not only from schooling but from the broader notion

that education could serve as a meaningful or attainable goal. Years of marginalization

had led many to adopt protective behaviors such as defiance, silence, or passive

withdrawal. Re-engagement was therefore understood not as a return to compliance but

as a gradual reawakening of agency, confidence, and self-worth.

Early signs of renewal were typically subtle and personal. These might include

arriving consistently to class, completing an assignment without prompting, or expressing

interest in future goals. Participants interpreted these behaviors as indicators of a shifting

self-concept, evidence that students were beginning to see themselves as capable of

success. These changes were often sparked by "small wins," such as passing a section of

the HiSET or receiving validation from an adult, which accumulated to produce a sense

of progress. As students began to internalize achievement, they also began to reclaim a sense of dignity.

Importantly, this renewal was framed as both fragile and contingent. Students often cycled in and out of engagement depending on external stressors, mental health fluctuations, or the reliability of support systems. Post-pandemic students were described as especially vulnerable, with heightened anxiety, inconsistent attendance, and increased difficulty managing routines. For these students, emotional safety and relational consistency became non-negotiable. Educators responded with adaptive strategies, offering flexible deadlines, personalized encouragement, and unconditional presence. These practices functioned as stabilizing interventions that allowed students to remain within the program long enough to rebuild their internal commitment.

The process of renewal was not solely academic. Participants observed shifts in students' emotional expression, interpersonal behavior, and sense of identity. Moments of gratitude, vulnerability, and self-advocacy were seen as indicators of growth that extended beyond the classroom. In these instances, students were not merely passing tests but undergoing a more comprehensive re-humanization: learning to trust others, envision a future, and take ownership of their narratives.

Despite these gains, educators emphasized that re-engagement required constant reinforcement. Without sustained affirmation and institutional continuity, students remained at risk of relapse into disengagement. Attendance emerged as a particularly persistent barrier, with missed days often cascading into loss of momentum and eventual withdrawal. In this context, the redemptive process was never assumed to be linear or

permanent; rather, it was treated as a series of iterative recoveries dependent on relational

holding and systemic responsiveness.

At its core, this category reinforces the theory of Conditional Redemption by

illustrating how internal transformation must be nurtured, protected, and mirrored by

external structures. Students begin to re-engage when they are treated as capable, when

they experience tangible success, and when they are supported by adults who do not

withdraw in the face of struggle. Redemption becomes possible when students are given

not only a second chance, but a narrative through which they can reinterpret their past

and imagine a different future.

Program Identity and Legitimacy

The final axial category centered on the symbolic and institutional standing of

MoOpt as perceived by students, educators, and external stakeholders. This category

highlighted that Conditional Redemption is not solely dependent on relationships or

internal student change, but also on whether the educational pathway itself is perceived as

legitimate. Legitimacy, in this context, functions both as an institutional condition and as

a narrative force that affirms the worth of students' efforts.

Participants consistently expressed the need to defend MoOpt from stigma and

misunderstanding. Despite its rigorous requirements and the genuine academic progress

students made, the program was often viewed by colleagues, parents, and district leaders

as a lesser alternative to traditional education. This skepticism manifested in multiple

ways, including reduced funding, limited public recognition, and the exclusion of MoOpt

students from school-wide events or ceremonies (e.g., senior class meetings for students

at off-site locations). Educators described having to repeatedly justify the program's

value, not only to others but also to the students themselves.

To counter these narratives, educators invested in practices that conferred

symbolic legitimacy. Formal enrollment procedures, public recognition of

accomplishments, and structured graduation events were all used to reinforce the idea

that MoOpt students were earning an education, not receiving a shortcut. The issuance of

standard diplomas in accordance with Assurance Standards was viewed as particularly

important in signaling equivalence and respect. In districts where the program was

well-integrated and affirmed by leadership, educators reported greater student motivation,

increased retention, and stronger post-program outcomes.

The structure of MoOpt also shaped perceptions of legitimacy. Programs that

operated with flexible schedules, job components, or night classes were often aligned

with adult education models, which lent them an air of seriousness and practicality.

Conversely, sites that lacked consistency in staffing, clear expectations, or support from

central administration were more likely to be viewed as holding areas for students

perceived as difficult or undesirable. Educators working in the latter environments

reported feeling isolated and under-resourced, which in turn affected their ability to

advocate for students effectively.

Legitimacy was not static. Participants noted that changes in district leadership,

staff turnover, or evolving policy could dramatically shift how the program was viewed.

When program champions retired or were reassigned, the value of MoOpt often needed to

be reestablished. These fluctuations created a sense of vulnerability among staff and

reinforced the idea that legitimacy was not inherent but had to be continually constructed and defended.

Crucially, legitimacy also influenced student identity. When students perceived that the program was respected by the broader community, they were more likely to view their own achievements as meaningful. When legitimacy was questioned, students internalized doubts about whether their efforts "counted." Educators described working deliberately to counter these messages, reinforcing that completion of the program was not only valid but admirable. This emphasis on recognition and narrative framing was essential to helping students construct positive academic identities.

In the context of Conditional Redemption, program legitimacy operates as both a condition and an outcome. Redemption is not simply about earning a credential but about doing so in a way that is acknowledged as real, respectable, and transformative. When the program is legitimized through policy, ceremony, and public narrative, it becomes a credible vehicle for student reinvention. When it is marginalized, the redemptive process becomes more fragile, dependent on individual conviction rather than institutional affirmation.

Conditions That Enable Redemption

Taken together, the four axial categories presented in this section demonstrate that student re-engagement through the pathway of MoOpt is not the result of a singular intervention, but the convergence of multiple, interdependent conditions. Relational consistency, institutional navigation, personal renewal, and program legitimacy each operate as enabling factors within a broader process of redemption. These categories do not function in isolation; rather, they form a dynamic ecosystem in which student

transformation becomes conditionally possible. When one element is missing, when support falters, structures fail, motivation wanes, or legitimacy is denied, the redemptive arc is disrupted. The theory that emerges from this analysis is grounded in these complexities. It offers a conceptual framework for understanding how alternative education functions not merely as a second chance, but as a constructed space in which success must be continuously negotiated, scaffolded, and affirmed. The next section presents this theory in full, drawing from the analytic foundation established through the axial categories above.

Development of the Grounded Theory: Conditional Redemption

The grounded theory that emerged from this study is Conditional Redemption, a middle-range theoretical construct that explains how students in MoOpt reconstruct educational identity and reclaim institutional belonging. This process is not linear, guaranteed, or individually initiated. Rather, redemption is a contingent, co-constructed outcome that occurs when three critical domains align: structural access, relational support, and motivational readiness. These domains are not mutually exclusive; rather, they are interdependent and mutually reinforcing.

In alignment with a constructivist approach, this theory does not assert a singular model of dropout recovery but offers a contextual, meaning-based framework rooted in the perspectives of educators actively engaged in supporting marginalized students. What follows is a breakdown of the three enabling domains of Conditional Redemption, followed by a synthesis of theoretical assertions drawn from the data.

Structural Conditions

Structural conditions refer to the formal features of the MoOpt environment that either enable or inhibit student success. These include access to the HiSET or GED exams, flexibility in scheduling and seat time, availability of accommodations, transportation, funding for test fees, and administrative support. Participants consistently emphasized that redemption was not possible without the basic material scaffolding of the program.

Educators described significant disparities across sites in how structural elements were implemented. In some districts, robust support systems ensured access to resources, while others relied on informal or ad hoc solutions, often driven by the initiative of individual educators. When testing accommodations were denied, transportation failed, or eligibility rules shifted without notice, students, regardless of motivation, found themselves unable to progress. These examples underscore that structural access is not merely a background variable but a defining condition of redemption.

Structural legitimacy was also essential. When programs were visibly supported by district leadership and treated as rigorous and respectable, students responded with increased investment and pride. Conversely, when programs were hidden, underfunded, or devalued, student motivation and educator morale declined. Institutional design, in this model, is not just logistical; it is symbolic.

Relational Conditions

Relational conditions refer to the emotional and interpersonal supports provided by educators. These include daily presence, authentic communication, belief in student potential, and a willingness to extend care beyond academic instruction. Participants

described their roles not simply as teachers but as advocates, counselors, stabilizers and facilitators.

Trust was repeatedly identified as foundational. Students often entered MoOpt with deep skepticism of adults and institutions. Educators worked to establish credibility through consistency: showing up, checking in, remembering details, and adapting expectations to meet the moment. These acts of presence were framed as pedagogical in their own right, crucial to repairing the relational breaches that had pushed students out of traditional schools.

When staff turnover occurred or educator capacity diminished due to burnout, students often disengaged. The fragile trust that had been painstakingly built could be undone quickly. Thus, relational continuity and emotional steadiness emerged as vital dimensions of Conditional Redemption, especially in environments marked by volatility and trauma.

Motivational Conditions

Motivational conditions capture the internal shifts that allow students to reinvest in education. These include moments of success, renewed self-concept, aspirational thinking, and the development of academic resilience. While structural and relational conditions create the possibility for redemption, motivational readiness determines whether students will take hold of that opportunity.

Participants described students arriving disconnected from their educational future. Small accomplishments, such as passing a subtest or receiving praise from a trusted adult, functioned as turning points. These wins built confidence and allowed

students to see themselves not as dropouts or failures but as learners and achievers. Over time, these identity shifts became central to sustaining engagement.

However, motivation alone was insufficient. Many students cycled in and out of progress, particularly when external challenges such as housing instability, employment conflicts, or emotional health crises emerged. Motivation had to be reinforced continually through affirmation, structured opportunities, and responsive support. As a domain, motivational readiness is best understood not as an internal trait, but as a relational and contextual outcome.

Theoretical Assertions

The development of Conditional Redemption as a grounded theory is supported not only by the axial categories and domain conditions presented in earlier sections, but also by a series of theoretical assertions that synthesize the study's core insights. These assertions represent the interpretive core of the theory: the conceptual conclusions drawn from iterative coding, memo-writing, and analysis across multiple participant narratives (Charmaz, 2014). Each assertion captures a dimension of the redemptive process and emphasizes the interplay between structural, relational, motivational, and symbolic elements.

Together, these assertions explain how Conditional Redemption operates within MoOpt and why it remains both powerful and precarious. They reflect the interpretive depth of a constructivist grounded theory in which meaning is co-constructed between participants, researchers, and systems of practice.

Assertion One: Redemption is Co-Constructed

Student success within MoOpt is not the product of individual effort alone. Rather, it is co-constructed through sustained interaction between educators and students, grounded in mutual trust and ongoing investment. Educators act as relational anchors, institutional guides, and emotional stabilizers. Their consistent presence, belief in student potential, and willingness to engage in systems navigation all contribute to the construction of conditions in which success becomes feasible. Students, in turn, respond to these conditions by re-engaging, adapting, and ultimately reclaiming their academic identities.

Assertion Two: Redemption is Contingent

The pathway to redemption is never guaranteed. It is contingent on the alignment of multiple enabling conditions: structural accessibility, relational trust, and motivational readiness. A disruption in any of these areas can lead to disengagement. For example, even highly motivated students may abandon the program if denied access to transportation or accommodations. Similarly, strong structural support may be rendered ineffective if students do not feel seen, valued, or safe. This assertion underscores the fragility of the redemptive process and the importance of maintaining coherence across domains.

Assertion Three: Redemption is Symbolic and Material

Redemption in MoOpt is not limited to academic completion or credential attainment. It is also a symbolic act of reclamation, a process through which students reframe their identities, reinterpret their pasts, and establish a sense of future possibility. The diploma serves not only as an educational milestone but as evidence that the student

is once again visible, capable, and legitimate in the eyes of the institution. This symbolic

weight is often more significant to the student than the formal credential itself. It affirms

their dignity, narrative agency, and social worth.

Assertion Four: Redemption is Fragile

Even when students succeed within the program, the legitimacy of that success is

often questioned by others or by students themselves. Many participants described

instances where students asked if their achievement "counted," reflecting a deep

vulnerability rooted in past educational exclusion. This fragility reveals that redemption

must be continually reinforced through affirmation, validation, and symbolic recognition.

Without sustained institutional support, the redemptive gains students achieve may erode

over time, leaving them uncertain about their worth or the legitimacy of their progress.

Assertion Five: Conditional Redemption is a Middle-Range Theory

This theory does not claim to explain all forms of educational recovery or

alternative education. Rather, it provides a context-specific model grounded in the lived

realities of educators navigating MoOpt. It offers conceptual clarity about how success is

made possible within that context and why that success remains conditional. As a

middle-range theory, Conditional Redemption bridges empirical findings with broader

social theory while remaining anchored in the particularities of the research setting.

Theoretical Model of Conditional Redemption

The grounded theory of Conditional Redemption is best understood not as a set of

isolated variables or sequential stages, but as a dynamic and recursive system. Drawing

from the axial categories developed earlier, the theory conceptualizes student success

within MoOpt as the result of four interdependent conditions: relational, structural,

motivational, and legitimacy-based. Each of these domains plays a critical role in shaping whether students who have disengaged from traditional education can reconstruct their academic identities and re-enter the institution with a renewed sense of belonging. Importantly, these conditions do not function in a vacuum. They operate as a feedback loop, reinforcing and enabling one another through recursive interactions.

Relational Conditions: Trust as the Catalyst

At the foundation of Conditional Redemption lies the consistent and intentional relational labor of educators. Participants in this study repeatedly emphasized that students entering MoOpt often arrive with deep-seated mistrust of educational systems and authority figures. Many have experienced years of exclusion, discipline, or neglect and no longer perceive school as a space that values them. As a result, students are unlikely to engage with programmatic offerings unless they first experience a renewed sense of safety and recognition.

Relational trust, then, is the catalyst that initiates the redemptive process. This trust is built not through formal interventions or one-time gestures, but through persistent and personalized acts of care. Educators described messaging students on days they missed, adjusting assignments after work shifts, showing up to court dates, and simply remembering their names. These actions communicated belief before achievement, worth before performance. Trust transforms the program from a bureaucratic service into a relational commitment and it is this commitment that begins to break down the psychological and emotional barriers to re-engagement.

Once trust is established, students begin to attend more consistently; not out of obligation, but because someone expects them, values them, and misses them when they

are gone. Attendance is the behavioral signal that the relational foundation is in place. Without trust, there is no traction. But with it, attendance becomes the gateway to deeper engagement.

Structural Conditions: Making Redemption Logistically Possible

While trust may catalyze engagement, it is structure that sustains it. Structural conditions refer to the logistical and policy-based dimensions of MoOpt: the availability of flexible scheduling, access to testing, funding for retakes, provision of accommodations, and clarity around enrollment and completion requirements. These are not peripheral details; they are the infrastructure of redemption. When systems are inaccessible, opaque, or punitive, even the most motivated students and the most dedicated educators can find themselves constrained by institutional limits.

Participants shared numerous examples of how structural failures disrupted student progress: accommodations delayed or denied, test scores delayed, eligibility rules misunderstood. In contrast, when structures were designed flexibly and responsively, students were able to persist even through hardship. For instance, offering night classes allowed working students to balance employment and school, paying for multiple HiSET attempts removed financial barriers, or coordinating with counselors helped clarify eligibility and credit requirements.

Importantly, structure also contributed to the psychological viability of the program. When systems function smoothly, students perceive that the institution believes in their potential. When systems falter, that belief becomes suspect. In this way, structure and trust are not separate domains, but mutually reinforcing. Structure enables effort to be converted into progress. It operationalizes care.

Motivational Conditions: Internalizing Success and Rewriting Identity

With trust in place and systems functioning, students are positioned to begin the third essential process: motivational renewal. This dimension of Conditional Redemption concerns the internal transformations students undergo as they start to believe that academic success is possible and personally meaningful. Motivation, as described by participants, did not appear suddenly or consistently. It grew slowly through experiences of mastery, affirmation, and recognition.

The key to this shift was the experience of success in small, manageable increments. Passing a HiSET test. Finishing a packet. Attending a full week without absence. These "small wins" were not trivial; they were tectonic. For students whose identities had been shaped by failure, even modest progress disrupted long-standing narratives of incompetence or indifference. Educators noted changes in posture, language, and affect: students standing taller, speaking more confidently, asking for feedback. What was once resignation began to resemble hope.

Yet motivation remained fragile. Participants described students whose momentum collapsed after a single missed test or personal crisis. This fragility underscored the need for ongoing relational reinforcement and responsive structural support. Motivation was never a fixed trait. It was an outcome of conditions, conditions that needed to be continually upheld.

Legitimacy Conditions: Recognition as Completion

Even when students reengaged, achieved success, and rebuilt their sense of self, the redemptive arc was incomplete without legitimacy. This final condition referred to the symbolic and institutional affirmation of the pathway itself. Students wanted to know that

their effort "counted" not just in terms of credits, but in terms of recognition, dignity, and respect.

Legitimacy operated on multiple levels. Internally, students needed to believe that they were truly graduating, not simply exiting through a side door. Externally, they needed families, peers, and future employers to recognize their achievements as real. Educators played a key role in this process, defending the program's rigor, celebrating milestones with ceremony and visibility, and advocating for inclusion in district-wide recognition practices.

When legitimacy was affirmed, students internalized their transformation as valid. They were not charity cases or statistical recoveries; they were graduates. But when legitimacy was questioned, even the most remarkable personal progress could be overshadowed by stigma or doubt. In this way, legitimacy did more than complete the cycle. It closed the psychological distance between alternative education and the mainstream, allowing students to truly believe that they had returned not as guests, but as rightful members of the institution.

Conditional Redemption as a Feedback Loop

What makes Conditional Redemption a powerful explanatory model is not simply its attention to these four domains, but the way it conceptualizes them as a systemic feedback loop (see Figure 3). The process begins with relational trust, which leads to consistent attendance. Attendance enables access to structural supports, particularly testing opportunities. Testing provides experiences of success, which catalyze motivational renewal and identity transformation. This transformation increases investment in the program and a desire for legitimacy. When that legitimacy is affirmed

(through ritual, recognition, and respect) it reinforces the student's trust in the program, the adults involved, and in themselves. The cycle then begins anew, each loop strengthening the last.

Figure 3

Conditional Redemption Feedback Loop
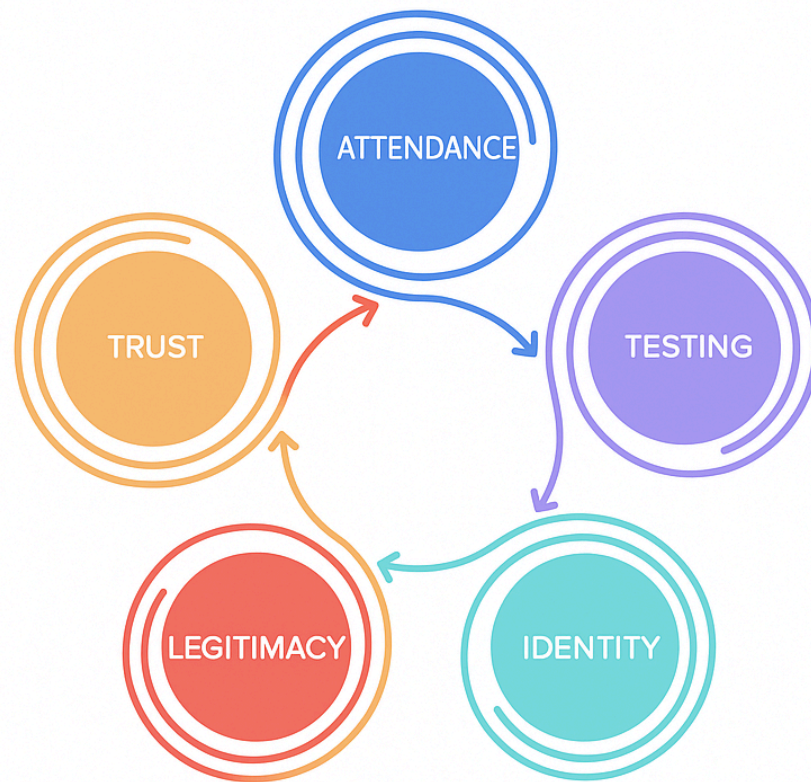
This feedback loop is not guaranteed. At any point, it can break. Trust may erode due to turnover. Testing may be inaccessible. Success may be dismissed as illegitimate. But when the loop holds, it sustains more than progress, it sustains possibility. It allows students to move not just toward a credential, but toward a different relationship with learning, with institutions, and with their own futures.

In this way, Conditional Redemption is not only a theory of recovery; it is a theory of co-authored transformation. It shows that redemption is not granted, but built. And it is built not in isolation, but in relation: through shared effort, credible structures, affirmed identity, and collective belief.

Situating the Theory in the Literature

The grounded theory of Conditional Redemption emerged from rich empirical engagement, but its value lies not only in its novelty; it lies in how it extends, reframes, and deepens existing literature. This theory was not built in isolation. As outlined in Chapter 2, this study was informed by a wide range of scholarly traditions, including dropout prevention research, resilience theory, trauma-informed practice, ecological systems thinking, and the evolving field of alternative education. Each of these traditions contributed conceptual scaffolding at the outset of the study. Now, they serve as critical points of dialogue.

This section situates Conditional Redemption within those scholarly contexts, not by layering in external frameworks post hoc, but by demonstrating how the theory both draws upon and speaks back to existing literature. In doing so, the study does not reject prior models. Instead, it refines them, showing how dropout recovery operates in lived experience and what conditions must be present for institutional redemption to occur.

Through a series of interpretive engagements, the following subsections explore how Conditional Redemption intersects with and contributes to nine key areas: (1) dropout causality and the Push–Pull–Fallout model, (2) resilience theory and the co-construction of agency, (3) trauma-informed design, (4) alternative education and the fragility of legitimacy, (5) ecological systems theory, (6) protective factors and locus of

control, (7) tiered systems of support, (8) community and symbolic affirmation, and (9) mental health and learned helplessness.

Taken together, these engagements position Conditional Redemption as a middle-range theory of educational recovery: context-sensitive, empirically grounded, and practically generative. It provides an integrated perspective on how re-engagement is made possible not just through individual will, but through systems that are intentionally designed to support, affirm, and dignify the redemptive journey.

Mirroring Dropout Models: Reversing Push–Pull–Falling Out

One of the most enduring conceptual models in the dropout literature is the Push–Pull–Falling Out framework, which attributes student disengagement to a mix of internal and external forces (Doll et al, 2013). As reviewed in Chapter 2, push factors (e.g., punitive discipline, unsupportive school culture, or academic failure), pull factors (e.g., work, caregiving responsibilities, or financial strain), and fallout events (e.g., trauma, illness, or sudden crisis) combine to dislodge students from the traditional educational trajectory (Brown et al, 2003; Doll et al, 2013). This model has been influential in shaping how educators understand the causes of dropout, however it has had less to say about the mechanisms of recovery.

The theory of Conditional Redemption offers a natural complement to this model. If dropout is the result of layered and interacting pressures, then redemption must be the result of layered and interacting supports. Participants in this study did not speak of student success as the product of a singular turning point, but rather as the slow accumulation of conditions that reversed the effects of previous disconnection. Where students had once been pushed out by rigid policies or dismissive attitudes, they were

now pulled back in through personal outreach, relational trust, and program flexibility

(Doll et al, 2013). Where outside pressures had once pulled students away (e.g., jobs,

parenting, or homelessness) programs now made space for these responsibilities through

credit-bearing work hours, seat-time flexibility, and adult scheduling models. Where

fallout had abruptly severed engagement, educators now provided daily emotional

anchoring that helped students re-establish identity and continuity.

This conceptual inversion is key. Conditional Redemption does not challenge the

validity of the Push–Pull–Falling Out model; rather, it mirrors it. If exclusion is

multi-causal, so too must be re-engagement. The theory reframes dropout not as a

terminal event but as a temporary condition; one that can be addressed when institutions

work intentionally to reverse the conditions that caused it. Importantly, the theory also

expands the dropout discourse by emphasizing that re-enrollment is not synonymous with

redemption. A student returning to school is not necessarily a student who believes in

their capacity to succeed. It is only when schools reweave the broken threads of trust,

structure, and legitimacy that a redemptive arc becomes possible.

Redefining Resilience: From Trait to Contextual Co-Production

Resilience theory has long informed how educators and researchers approach

dropout recovery (Gardner & Stephens-Pisecco, 2019). As reviewed in Chapter 2,

resilience is often framed as an internal trait; something a student possesses that enables

them to persevere in the face of adversity (Duckworth et al, 2007; Wang, 2005; Weber,

2016). Protective factors such as adult mentorship, safe environments, and high

expectations are commonly cited as external mechanisms that enhance or trigger this

latent capacity (Will, 2023; Zoellner, 2023). However, the findings of this study

complicate that picture. The grounded theory of Conditional Redemption does not reject

resilience as a concept, but it challenges its common interpretation as a fixed attribute

residing within the individual (Duckworth et al, 2007).

Participants in this study rarely described students as arriving with visible signs of

resilience. On the contrary, they spoke of students who were emotionally closed off,

disengaged, and operating in survival mode. Resilience, when it appeared, was not innate

but constructed. It emerged only when students encountered adults who offered sustained

belief, recognized small victories, and reframed those victories as signs of potential rather

than exceptions to it. A student who passed a single HiSET test, showed up to class for a

full week, or re-engaged after a disciplinary conflict did not become resilient on their

own. These acts became transformative only when educators marked them as meaningful;

when they acknowledged the success, made it public, and linked it to the student's

developing identity.

This pattern reveals a more relational and situated understanding of resilience.

Rather than treating it as a stable characteristic, Conditional Redemption frames

resilience as a co-produced quality that emerges in specific contexts where structure,

motivation, and belief align. It is conditional in both form and function; dependent on

how well the program scaffolds progress, responds to struggle, and reinforces growth

through affirmation and opportunity. A student might have survived much before entering

the program, but it is only when survival is met with meaningful support that resilience

becomes visible and usable.

This reconceptualization reinforces resilience theory by restoring its complexity.

It supports the idea that students can grow through adversity, but it insists that such

growth is made possible through deliberate relational and institutional acts. In this way, Conditional Redemption expands the discourse by shifting attention from student psychology to the shared construction of capacity within a caring, flexible, and symbolically rich educational environment.

Trauma-Informed Design: From Compassion to Systems of Safety

Chapter 2 identified trauma-informed education as a foundational perspective for working with students who have experienced adversity. Grounded in research on adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), trauma-informed models call on educators to interpret student behavior not as resistance or defiance, but as protective responses shaped by sustained harm (McCabe et al, 2020; Morrow & Villodas, 2017). Participants in this study affirmed this understanding, frequently describing MoOpt students as wary of adult relationships, emotionally guarded, or reactive to institutional routines that resembled past school failures. Yet, while trauma-awareness was valued, it was not sufficient on its own. The theory of Conditional Redemption suggests that trauma-informed practice must move beyond professional compassion toward systems-level design.

Educators in this study repeatedly emphasized that healing environments were not built solely through empathy, but through the creation of predictable, affirming, and symbolically meaningful structures. Trust was earned not only in conversations, but in routines. Emotional safety was communicated through the physical environment, daily check-ins, posted progress trackers, and the visibility of success often in the form of student names written on celebration boards or certificates displayed in classrooms. When students saw their achievements publicly acknowledged, they began to internalize a sense of belonging and worth that counteracted years of invisibility or failure.

This approach redefines what it means to implement trauma-informed education. Rather than focusing solely on training or sensitivity, Conditional Redemption calls attention to the institutional architecture of healing. Progress was most sustained when students could rely on consistent schedules, flexible expectations tailored to emotional needs, and rituals that marked advancement. When these features were absent, when staff turnover increased, when testing accommodations failed, or when disciplinary policies reverted to zero-tolerance models, students withdrew, often without explanation.

The theory thus extends trauma-informed frameworks by asserting that systems must do more than understand harm; they must actively create counter-histories through new experiences of agency, affirmation, and control. Redemption, in this model, is not a matter of individual catharsis, but of collective design. It happens when an institution reconfigures itself to become the opposite of what it once represented: not a site of exclusion, but of re-entry; not a place of punishment, but of renewal. In this way, Conditional Redemption adds structure, intentionality, and symbolic depth to the trauma-informed conversation.

Alternative Education and the Fragility of Legitimacy

In Chapter 2, alternative education was discussed as both a historical response to the limitations of traditional schooling and a modern strategy for re-engaging marginalized at-risk youth (Cockerill, 2019). Programs like MoOpt emerge from a long lineage of educational alternatives designed to serve students who do not thrive in conventional academic settings (Ballard & Bender, 2022; Henrekson & Wennström, 2023). Yet this study reveals that the success of such programs is not solely a matter of structural design or curricular innovation. Rather, it is deeply entangled with questions of

legitimacy: how the program is perceived by students, families, educators, and broader institutional actors.

Participants consistently emphasized that for Conditional Redemption to be realized, students had to believe that the program was legitimate. The diploma had to feel earned. The experience had to feel equivalent. If the pathway was seen as a shortcut, a second-tier solution, or a last chance, then even academic success was undermined by symbolic doubt. This fragility surfaced in educator interviews through student comments, community skepticism, and even administrative hesitancy. As one participant recalled, a student's family member dismissed the program's value, prompting the student to question the worth of their own accomplishment. Such moments underscore that redemption is not only about completion, it is about confirmation. Success must be affirmed by the social structures students return to.

The program's legitimacy was often reinforced through intentional rituals and practices. Celebratory walls with student names, graduation ceremonies alongside traditional pathway seniors, and standardized testing requirements which mirror adult education functioned as public signals that this pathway was rigorous, real, and respected. In some districts, even the administrative language around MoOpt emphasized parity: students were issued the same diplomas, honored in the same ceremonies at their home schools, and held to equivalent standards (e.g., student handbooks). These practices worked to elevate student confidence and community buy-in.

However, legitimacy remained vulnerable. It could be shaken by leadership turnover, policy inconsistencies, or poorly informed stakeholders. When new administrators failed to understand the program's purpose or community narratives

framed it as a remedial workaround, educators found themselves once again fighting for

credibility. The program's ability to serve as a redemptive space was thus never

guaranteed. It had to be constantly maintained through communication, symbolism, and

demonstrated results.

Conditional Redemption clarifies that legitimacy is not just a background

variable, it is an active condition in the redemptive process. If students perceive their

success as invalidated by the broader system, the internal identity transformation central

to redemption is jeopardized. Alternative education must therefore be more than

alternative in form; it must be equivalent in meaning. This insight advances the literature

by arguing that redemption is not merely structural, but symbolic and that legitimacy,

once earned, must be vigilantly protected.

Ecological Systems Theory: Redemption Across Contextual Layers

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, introduced in Chapter 2, offers a

powerful framework for understanding the multiple and interacting layers of influence

that shape student development (Renkert, 2005; Tudge et al, 2009). From the intimate

sphere of the microsystem to the broad cultural values embedded in the macrosystem, this

model emphasizes that no student operates in isolation (Neal & Neal, 2013; Suh et al,

2007). Instead, individual outcomes are produced through the dynamic interplay of

personal, institutional, and societal forces (Brendtro, 2006). Conditional Redemption

aligns with this ecological vision, offering a layered account of how redemption is

co-constructed across these nested contexts.

At the level of the microsystem, Conditional Redemption is most immediately

visible in the direct relationship between educator and student. Trust-building, emotional

consistency, and daily presence are central components of the theory, and they operate most powerfully within this immediate interpersonal domain. Without this relational foundation, participants reported, students often remained disconnected from the learning process and unresponsive to support.

At the mesosystem level, where microsystems intersect, Conditional Redemption illuminates how programs like MoOpt serve as critical mediators between the student's school experience, home life, and work obligations. Flexible scheduling, communication with families, and integration of employment hours into credit-bearing coursework all function to bridge previously disconnected domains of a student's life. This bridging role makes the program not merely a school-within-a-school, but a relational hub that coordinates support across environments.

At the exosystem level, the study highlights how institutional policies and leadership structures can either support or undermine redemption. Participants frequently noted that state-level policy shifts, inconsistent guidance from DESE, or administrative turnover in local districts had significant ripple effects on the program's effectiveness. When exosystemic supports faltered student motivation often collapsed, despite strong internal drive or relational backing.

At the macrosystem level, Conditional Redemption depends on larger cultural narratives about the value of alternative education. When students internalize messages that their diploma is less-than, the symbolic power of redemption weakens. Participants described this as one of the most persistent challenges: countering public perceptions that MoOpt was a shortcut rather than a legitimate pathway. In this way, cultural legitimacy

grounded in societal norms and values emerges as a crucial determinant of whether redemption takes root.

Finally, the chronosystem, the temporal layer, also plays a role. Students' readiness to re-engage often unfolded in developmental rhythms shaped by age, life events, and accumulated school trauma. For some, redemption was only possible after a crisis or major transition. For others, it was the result of years of slow disconnection followed by a moment of opportunity. The theory of Conditional Redemption honors this temporal complexity, recognizing that timing and trajectory matter.

By interpreting redemption as an ecological process, the theory underscores that individual transformation is always embedded within and contingent upon broader systems. Recovery is not solely an intrapsychic journey; it is a systemic outcome. This alignment with Bronfenbrenner's model reinforces the importance of coherence across relational, institutional, and cultural domains. When these systems align, redemption is possible. When they conflict, even the most motivated student may find the path too fractured to follow.

Protective Factors and Locus of Control

Protective factors, discussed in Chapter 2, identified the environmental and interpersonal conditions that shield vulnerable students from the adverse effects of risk (Biggs & Hacker, 2021). Among these, internal locus of control, the belief that one's actions can influence outcomes, was frequently highlighted as a powerful predictor of resilience and long-term success (Sachetta, 2001; Wang, 2005). Students who saw themselves as active agents, rather than passive victims, were more likely to persist through challenges (Peng et al, 2023). However, the data from this study suggest that

locus of control is not a fixed trait but a capacity that is rebuilt through experience, affirmation, and support (Eriksson et al, 2023; Yin, 2022). Conditional Redemption provides a nuanced lens for understanding how that reconstruction occurs.

Participants described students who arrived to MoOpt with little sense of control over their lives. Many expressed learned helplessness, having internalized the belief that school was a place where failure was inevitable and authority figures were adversarial (Gregory et al, 2021). Students were often disengaged not out of defiance, but from a sense of futility (Snyder, 1991). In this context, the restoration of control became a key function of the program; achieved not through abstract encouragement but through structured opportunities to succeed and visible acknowledgment of those successes. As one educator put it, allowing students to have "one good year."

Educators intentionally designed environments where students could achieve small wins: e.g., passing a test, showing up consistently, completing a shift at work that counted toward credit. These achievements were then framed as evidence of capacity, not coincidence. The message, repeated in various ways, was: "You did this. You can do the next thing." Over time, this helped students shift from a reactive mindset to a proactive one. They began to anticipate success, make plans, and take responsibility for their choices not because they had been told to, but because they had experienced the cause-and-effect of effort and reward.

This re-centering of control was often scaffolded through symbolic rituals. Displaying test scores, naming students publicly, or inviting them to mentor peers were not just morale boosters but acts of identity reconstruction. Students began to see themselves as capable, influential, and worthy of being seen. This shift in self-perception

was central to the broader redemptive process. Without it, structural support and

relational encouragement remained external. With it, students began to internalize the

belief that they could direct their own future.

The theory of Conditional Redemption thus extends the literature on protective

factors by illustrating how locus of control is not just an input to success, it is an outcome

of successful program design. When students are placed in environments that allow for

authentic achievement, and when those achievements are made meaningful through

relational and symbolic practices, control is not just taught, but reclaimed. In this way, the

theory reframes protective factors not as static buffers, but as dynamic, co-produced

processes that can be activated through deliberate, human-centered design.

Multi-Tiered Systems of Support: From Intervention to Integration

The Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS), reviewed in Chapter 2, is widely

used in educational systems to organize academic and behavioral interventions across

three levels: universal (Tier 1), targeted (Tier 2), and intensive (Tier 3). MTSS provides a

framework for identifying at-risk students, delivering supports proportional to need, and

using data to inform practice (Zhang et al, 2023). While conceptually robust,

implementation often falters when interventions are isolated from the broader

institutional climate (Coolong & Wagner, 2015). Conditional Redemption offers an

interpretive extension to MTSS by emphasizing that effective intervention must be more

than procedural; it must be relational, motivational, and symbolically coherent.

Participants in this study often worked with students who would be classified

within Tier 3: those with extensive academic deficits, prolonged absenteeism,

disciplinary histories, or mental health challenges. Yet, traditional Tier 3 interventions

(e.g., intensive tutoring, behavior plans, or check-in/check-out systems) frequently failed

to produce lasting change when implemented in isolation (Coolong & Wagner, 2015).

What distinguished MoOpt was not merely the intensity of support, but the integration of

that support into a holistic experience of care, legitimacy, and control. The program did

not merely target deficits, it restructured the learning environment to create new terms of

engagement.

For example, participants noted that students often resisted interventions in other

settings but responded differently in MoOpt. The same student who avoided school in the

past began showing up consistently, not because of stricter policies or increased

monitoring, but because the space was redefined as flexible, affirming, and focused on

achievable success. This suggests that for Tier 3 supports to be more effective, they must

be better embedded within environments that reframe the student's relationship to school

itself.

Conditional Redemption reframes MTSS from a system of triage to a system of

trust. Rather than escalating interventions as deficits compound, the theory calls for

earlier relational anchoring, structural flexibility, and identity-affirming design.

Redemption occurs not when students are placed into more intensive silos of support, but

when those supports are experienced as coherent, affirming, and integrated with the

student's evolving sense of self.

Furthermore, the theory challenges the rigidness of Tiered thinking by showing

how students often need different forms of support simultaneously (Sodden et al, 2023).

The feedback loops described in earlier sections, where trust enables attendance, which

enables testing, which affirms identity, cannot be easily mapped onto a linear intervention

model. Conditional Redemption therefore serves as both a supplement and a critique of MTSS, affirming the need for coordinated support while questioning the siloed logic that can make those supports feel fragmented or impersonal.

Community, Family, and Symbolic Affirmation

Chapter 2 noted that student success in alternative education settings is often influenced by relationships beyond the classroom including families, community members, and local employers (Hogan, 2022; Rico-Gonzalez, 2023; Zhou et al, 2023). These relationships help define the broader social context in which redemption occurs. Conditional Redemption supports and expands this view by emphasizing that external affirmation plays a pivotal role in reinforcing or destabilizing students' developing academic identities. While schools provide the immediate structure and support, it is often the symbolic endorsement of community and family that determines whether redemption is internalized and sustained (Gallagher, 2017).

Participants in this study frequently referenced how students interpreted the reactions of others to validate their progress. When parents attended graduation ceremonies, when employers praised punctuality, or when a sibling expressed pride, students experienced a sense of legitimacy that could not be manufactured within the school walls alone. Conversely, when students encountered skepticism (e.g., a family member questioning whether their diploma was real) that doubt cast a long shadow. As one participant recounted, a student who had passed all five HiSET subtests and completed program requirements still hesitated to celebrate, asking, "Does this really count?" That question echoed beyond the student's own uncertainty as it reflected the community narratives surrounding alternative education.

This symbolic terrain was not incidental to success, rather, it was integral. Educators described how they worked not only with students but with families and community members to rebrand the program. They held information sessions, invited local leaders to observe the program in action, and made celebratory rituals highly visible. The goal was not just public relations, it was cultural repair. Many students arrived with the belief that they had failed not just academically but socially. Redemption, in this context, required more than internal motivation, it required public confirmation.

Conditional Redemption thus highlights the deeply social nature of educational identity. Students are never isolated actors; their sense of self is continuously shaped by how others see them and what others believe about their pathway. When communities treat MoOpt as legitimate those messages reinforce the internal transformation that students are working to achieve. When such validation is absent or ambivalent, redemption becomes fragile even in the face of formal achievement.

Mental Health, Emotional Disconnection, and Learned Helplessness

Chapter 2 discussed the growing body of research linking dropout risk to student mental health concerns including anxiety, depression, emotional trauma, and learned helplessness (Hagger & Hamlton, 2019; Szlyk, 2021). These internalized barriers can play a decisive role in determining whether a student disengages from school (Pagani et al, 2008). Conditional Redemption reinforces the importance of this dimension while recasting emotional disconnection not as a pre-existing student flaw, but as a system-induced condition that can, under the right circumstances, be repaired.

Participants consistently described students entering MoOpt as emotionally shut down, withdrawn, or operating in survival mode. Some displayed apathy, others hostility, and many simply disappeared for days or weeks at a time. Traditional school systems, with rigid structures and punitive responses to inconsistency, often exacerbated these patterns. MoOpt educators interpreted these behaviors through a different lens, not as indicators of resistance, but as signs of cumulative institutional failure and psychological exhaustion. In response, they focused less on behavioral correction and more on emotional accessibility: showing up, checking in, affirming presence, and allowing space for students to begin again without judgment.

This approach helped to interrupt what many described as learned helplessness: the internalized belief that effort does not lead to reward (Gregory et al, 2021). Students who had spent years failing classes, being suspended, or falling through bureaucratic cracks had little reason to believe that this time would be different. MoOpt, as constructed through Conditional Redemption, offered a counter-narrative. By redesigning systems to ensure that effort yielded progress such as credit for work hours, flexible deadlines, or visible progress tracking, educators gave students immediate proof that their actions mattered. These moments, though small, chipped away at hopelessness and allowed motivation to re-emerge.

Yet the recovery of emotional capacity was fragile. Participants emphasized that students could regress quickly if support structures faltered. A failed test, an unsupportive substitute, or a failed accommodation request could undo weeks of progress. This underscored the theory's central claim: redemption is conditional. Emotional reconnection requires continuity, reliability, and safety not just once, but repeatedly.

In this context, Conditional Redemption contributes to the literature by integrating mental health, emotional restoration, and learned helplessness into a systemic framework of educational recovery. It does not isolate mental health as a separate domain but weaves it into the very fabric of the redemptive process. The theory suggests that for many students, redemption begins not with content or compliance, but with the slow return of belief: first in others, then in systems, and finally in themselves. Emotional disconnection, when viewed through this lens, becomes not an endpoint but an invitation to reimagine what education can repair.

A Middle-Range Theory of Educational Recovery

The theory of Conditional Redemption is best understood as a middle-range theory: an interpretive framework grounded in empirical data, yet specific enough to apply meaningfully within a defined sociocultural context (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2020; Lee, 2018). Middle-range theories do not claim universal truth or generalizability across all settings. Instead, they offer focused explanatory power within bounded systems, illuminating how complex phenomena unfold through patterned interaction (Weathersby, 2025). In this case, the phenomenon is educational redemption, and the bounded system is the Missouri Option Program.

Unlike grand theories that may attempt to explain human behavior in totality, Conditional Redemption centers on what happens when students who have disengaged from traditional school are invited back into education through an alternative structure and pathway. It theorizes that redemption is not merely the act of returning to school or earning a diploma, but the co-constructed process by which students reconstruct their academic identities and re-establish institutional belonging. This process is fragile,

contingent, and recursive. It is shaped by multiple conditions: relational consistency, structural accessibility, internal motivation, and social legitimacy.

This theory adds specificity to the broader literature on dropout recovery by articulating how these domains interact. While Chapter 2 presented a range of contributing factors (e.g., protective supports, trauma-informed practices, MTSS frameworks, resilience theory, etc.), Conditional Redemption integrates these threads into a cohesive narrative. It shows not just what matters, but how and why it matters, and under what conditions recovery becomes possible.

Importantly, Conditional Redemption also introduces a new language for discussing student transformation. Rather than relying on deficit terms like "at-risk" or valorizing notions of "grit" and "perseverance" as wholly internal traits, this theory invites a shift toward understanding recovery as a shared achievement. Students do not succeed in isolation. Their motivation is catalyzed by structure. Their effort is stabilized by relational trust. Their success is affirmed through social rituals and community validation. Redemption, in this framework, is deeply human.

By framing redemption as conditional, this theory also foregrounds equity. It challenges schools, districts, and policymakers to ask: Under what conditions do we make success possible? Where do those conditions fail, and for whom? In doing so, Conditional Redemption offers not only a theory of student transformation but an ethical imperative for institutional responsibility.

This theory, then, is not an abstract conceptual model. It is a working explanation born from the lived experiences of educators who help students navigate disconnection

and return. It honors their insights while offering others a lens through which to examine, critique, and improve systems that aspire to serve those most often left behind.

Addressing the Research Questions

This section synthesizes how Conditional Redemption addresses the five research questions that guided this study. Rather than providing isolated answers, the responses reflect an integrated understanding: that student success within MoOpt is co-constructed through the alignment of relational, structural, motivational, and symbolic conditions. The four axial categories each offer essential insight into how these questions are answered through lived experience.

Research Question One

How do educational leaders perceive the effectiveness of the Missouri Option Program in retaining students who might otherwise drop out of high school?

Participants consistently framed MoOpt as an indispensable intervention for students who had been excluded or disengaged from traditional high school. While the program's flexible scheduling and alternative credentialing structures were cited as important, effectiveness was overwhelmingly attributed to the presence of committed, caring adults. These educators were described not merely as teachers, but as navigators, mentors, and advocates; figures who reintroduced students to school not as a place of punishment, but as a space of possibility. As detailed in Chapter 5, the axial category Educators as Advocates and Navigators captures this relational dynamic. Retention was understood not as a procedural outcome, but as the emotional return of a student who had once mentally and institutionally withdrawn.

Research Question Two

What are educational leaders' perspectives regarding the Missouri Option Program's

impact on dropout rates?

While MoOpt was widely described as reducing dropout rates, this impact was

characterized as conditional. Educators pointed to disparities in program access, state

support, and policy interpretation. In districts where institutional alignment existed (e.g.,

where transportation, testing, and scheduling systems supported the program) MoOpt

helped students re-engage and graduate. In others, structural failures undercut its

potential and left it generally unused as an option. For example, one educator interviewed

had over 80 students graduate while another had not had a MoOpt graduate in the past

two years. The axial category Structural Challenges and Institutional Gaps explores these

variations, suggesting that dropout prevention cannot be disentangled from the systems

that either scaffold or erode opportunity. The theory of Conditional Redemption affirms

that even the most motivated student may disengage if structural conditions are absent or

inconsistent.

Research Question Three

How does participation in the Missouri Option Program prepare students for

postsecondary education opportunities or workforce entry, according to educational

leaders and stakeholders?

Preparation for life beyond MoOpt was an uneven story. While some students

exited the program with clear goals and strong support, others graduated with no

postsecondary plan in place. Educators highlighted the emotional and symbolic

importance of the diploma but acknowledged gaps in transition services, career

counseling, and college readiness. Several educators noted that districts were driven to improve graduation rates to the exclusion of other goals, such as postsecondary preparedness, for students in second-change programs such as MoOpt. As developed in the axial category Program Identity and Legitimacy, student preparation was closely tied to whether the program was perceived as credible by others and by the student themselves. When MoOpt was respected by educators, employers, and families, students left with a sense of dignity and belonging. Where legitimacy faltered, students questioned whether their success would be recognized beyond the program.

Research Question Four

What factors contribute to students' successful completion of the Missouri Option Program?

Success within MoOpt emerged from a convergence of conditions (relational, structural, motivational, and symbolic), each necessary but insufficient on its own. Educators emphasized the importance of sustained trust, flexible program design, emotional restoration, and the affirmation of student identity. These elements mirror the four axial categories and coalesce within the grounded theory of Conditional Redemption. When aligned, these factors created an environment where students could reclaim a future once thought lost. When misaligned, when trust was broken, structures failed, or legitimacy was questioned, completion became far less likely. Thus, success was not a linear progression but a contingent process shaped by human, institutional, and cultural variables.

Research Question Five

What barriers or limitations do educators identify in their efforts to implement the

Missouri Option Program successfully?

Educators described significant barriers to program implementation, including

inadequate guidance from DESE, limited funding, procedural ambiguity, and systemic

stigma. These obstacles were not just logistical; they often undermined the emotional and

symbolic foundations of the program. Students were denied accommodations, overlooked

by counselors, or quietly discouraged from enrolling. Educators, in turn, faced

professional isolation and burnout. The axial categories Structural Challenges and

Institutional Gaps and Program Identity and Legitimacy both capture this tension.

Conditional Redemption contends that redemption is not simply granted, it must be made

visible, supported, and honored through institutional design. Without that recognition,

even the best efforts of educators may be diminished.

Summary

Conditional Redemption offers a powerful, context-sensitive theory of

educational recovery; one that affirms student transformation as both possible and

profoundly contingent. Grounded in the lived experiences of educators navigating the

complexities of Missouri's public schools, the theory reveals that student re-engagement

is not a product of isolated effort or individual perseverance. Instead, redemption occurs

through the deliberate convergence of supportive structures, relational constancy,

motivational renewal, and symbolic legitimacy.

This chapter has traced the development of the theory from initial codes to axial

categories, culminating in a feedback loop model that illustrates how trust, attendance,

assessment, identity, and legitimacy function recursively to support student progress.

Through theoretical assertions and engagement with existing literature, the chapter

situates Conditional Redemption as a middle-range theory that clarifies and deepens our

understanding of how alternative programs can be designed, staffed, and narrated to

restore institutional belonging.

While grounded in the specific context of Missouri's alternative diploma

framework, Conditional Redemption contributes broadly to the field of educational

leadership by articulating what it takes not only to retain students, but to rehumanize

them. It challenges educational leaders to view dropout recovery not as a technical

problem to solve, but as a relational and institutional process that demands clarity,

creativity, and care.

In the next chapter, these findings are revisited in light of broader implications for

policy, practice, and future research, offering actionable insights for those committed to

designing systems where redemption is not exceptional but expected.

Chapter Six

Implications and Recommendations

This chapter extends the grounded theory of Conditional Redemption from an analytic framework into a set of actionable implications for practice, policy, and future research. Rooted in the voices of educators and administrators across Missouri, the theory articulates how student re-engagement through MoOpt is not a linear recovery process, but a conditional one; dependent on the convergence of relational trust, structural access, motivational renewal, and program legitimacy. These four domains, developed in Chapter Five, now serve as the foundation for real-world applications.

The chapter opens by examining the implications for educators and school leaders, highlighting the role of relational labor, trauma-informed program design, symbolic recognition, and educator sustainability. From there, the discussion turns toward policy, offering district- and state-level recommendations to improve structural conditions and protect the legitimacy of alternative pathways. The chapter also explores how Conditional Redemption contributes to the broader literature on dropout prevention, resilience, and educational identity, before identifying key directions for future research. The final sections acknowledge the study's limitations and offer a reflective synthesis of how redemption, as described by participants, is not only a student achievement but a shared institutional responsibility.

Implications for Educational Practice

Conditional Redemption offers a clear imperative for educators working in alternative programs such as MoOpt. Success in these settings is not the result of a single innovation, curriculum, or strategy. Rather, it emerges when four aforementioned

conditions converge and are sustained through intentional practice. These conditions cannot be left to chance. They must be designed, cultivated, and protected by educators, administrators, and stakeholders who understand that redemption is both an outcome and a process.

Reframing the Educator's Role: From Instructor to Anchor

Participants in this study repeatedly emphasized that their role extended far beyond the boundaries of traditional instruction. They were not simply disseminators of content or facilitators of credit recovery; they served as consistent relational anchors in the lives of students who had experienced profound institutional disconnection. In practice, this meant messaging students after hours, arranging transportation to testing sites, providing meals, mediating between employers and schools, and intervening when students were overwhelmed by life circumstances such as working with shelters when students became homeless. These actions, though often informal, were foundational to student persistence and re-engagement.

For this reason, educators in programs like MoOpt must be hired and supported not only for their content expertise but for their capacity to build trust, model stability, and respond to trauma. Effective staffing requires continuity, emotional presence, and manageable caseloads that allow educators to form and maintain deep relationships with students over time. Professional development should move beyond traditional instructional strategies and include trauma-informed care, relational pedagogy, and narrative coaching all of which develop the capacity to help students reframe their educational stories from failure to resilience. Educators must see themselves not only as teachers, but as co-constructors of possibility.

Designing for Symbolic Wins and Daily Meaning

A powerful insight from this study was the centrality of small victories in shaping students' sense of identity and agency. A passed subtest, a week of uninterrupted attendance, or a single verbal affirmation could serve as a turning point. These wins were not incidental but were symbolic milestones in a greater redemptive arc. Participants described how progress became visible when celebrated and ritualized: a name on a wall, a note of praise, or a moment of public recognition. These gestures served as narrative interventions, allowing students to reinterpret their effort as meaningful and their presence as valued.

Schools can institutionalize these symbolic moments through thoughtfully designed routines and spaces. Test completion boards, personalized classrooms focusing on students, or hallway displays of student achievement can help make invisible effort visible. These features communicate to students that progress is real, recognized, and cumulative. They also reinforce a motivational loop wherein effort leads to recognition, which in turn reinforces future effort. Designing for symbolic meaning is not extraneous; it is a structural support for motivational renewal.

Structuring Flexibility Without Chaos

Students in MoOpt often face adult responsibilities that extend well beyond those of a traditional high school student. Many are attempting to balance work, parenting, housing instability, mental health struggles, or legal involvement. In this context, flexibility is not a luxury, it is a condition of access. However, as participants pointed out, flexibility cannot come at the cost of coherence or predictability. Flexibility without structure creates confusion; structure without flexibility reproduces exclusion.

Effective programs balance these needs by adopting modular curriculum models that allow students to work at their own pace while maintaining clear checkpoints and progress markers. Scheduling systems that allow open entry and exit points provide responsiveness without creating disruption. Direct communication through electronic messaging (e.g., texting, email, or phone calls) or scheduled drop-ins keeps students tethered even when their lives are unstable. When students know what to expect, and when staff can predict when and how students will re-engage, trust builds and participation stabilizes. Redemption, in this view, requires programs that are as structured as they are adaptive.

Embedding Trauma-Informed Systems in Program Design

Although trauma-informed education is increasingly referenced in professional development contexts, many participants expressed concern that trauma-awareness had become dislocated from systems-level design. Compassion, while necessary, is insufficient when unaccompanied by environments that actively support healing. Emotional safety is not a sentiment but the outcome of a deliberately structured experience.

Programs that support Conditional Redemption incorporate trauma-informed design principles into their physical spaces, staffing models, and daily routines. This includes intake protocols that gather not just credit information but student history, spaces within school buildings that allow overwhelmed students to decompress, routines that are consistent and predictable enough to reduce anxiety, and policy protections that account for the setbacks inherent in the lives of students who have experienced sustained adversity. Perhaps most importantly, programs must commit to relational continuity by

protecting staff from high turnover and burnout. Stability is one of the most powerful

forms of trauma intervention.

Investing in Educator Sustainability

Participants described their work as emotionally taxing, professionally isolating,

and often invisible within their larger school systems. Yet their presence was

indispensable. Without stable, emotionally available educators, redemption was not

simply harder, it was often impossible. Programs that rely on heroic efforts but fail to

support the people performing them are unsustainable. If Conditional Redemption

depends on relational trust, then it also depends on institutions that care for their

caregivers.

District leaders must attend to the working conditions of educators in MoOpt.

This includes limiting caseloads to a level that allows real relationship-building,

providing compensation that reflects the emotional and logistical complexity of the work,

and publicly acknowledging the contributions of these educators in formal district

venues. Time for reflection, peer collaboration, and professional planning should be built

into their schedules, not treated as an afterthought. Mental health supports must be made

available and clear advancement pathways should be created so that alternative education

roles are not seen as career dead ends. In this way, districts affirm not only the value of

the students being served, but the dignity and centrality of those doing the serving.

Policy Recommendations

While Conditional Redemption is enacted through daily human interaction, it is

shaped, either supported or undermined, by the policy environments in which programs

like MoOpt operate. Policy determines who gains access, what is considered legitimate,

how resources are allocated, and whether flexibility is institutionalized or improvised. Across interviews, educators consistently emphasized that while their relationships with students were central, those relationships operated within broader systems that could either enable or obstruct the redemptive process. If structure, legitimacy, and support are conditions of redemption, then policy is the mechanism through which those conditions are either made possible or denied. This section offers recommendations at both the district and state level, grounded in participant testimony and aligned with the core theory developed in this study.

District-Level Policy Recommendations

At the district level, the legitimacy of MoOpt must be consistently affirmed and publicly reinforced. Educators and students are acutely aware of how their educational paths are perceived by the adults and institutions around them. When districts treat the program as a meaningful, rigorous, and equitable pathway to graduation (rather than a last resort or workaround) those involved internalize a stronger sense of purpose and identity. One of the simplest but most powerful actions a district can take is to ensure that MoOpt students are included fully in senior year activities, graduation ceremonies and adjacent activities, and other public rituals of achievement. Websites, counseling materials, and school board presentations should communicate clearly that MoOpt students receive the same diploma as their peers. When district leadership speaks positively and frequently about alternative pathways including MoOpt, educator's reveled that it reinforces not just symbolic legitimacy but structural protection.

Equally important is the need to institutionalize flexibility in ways that are stable and sustainable. Many of the program's strengths (e.g., modular instruction, alternative

scheduling, and individualized pacing) are vulnerable when they rely solely on individual educators rather than district-level policy. Codifying flexible structures through school board approval and administrative procedures protects them from staffing turnover and shifting leadership priorities. Flexibility must also be paired with inclusion. MoOpt students should not be educationally isolated. They should retain access to electives, counseling services, career readiness programming, and extracurricular participation. Early identification of students who may benefit from the program should be data-informed, consistent, and proactive, using indicators such as chronic absenteeism, repeated course failure, or behavioral suspension history to initiate outreach before disengagement becomes entrenched.

Funding, too, must reflect the specific demands of the program. Several participants described paying for students' HiSET tests out of pocket or providing transportation through informal networks. While such efforts are admirable, they signal systemic failure. Districts must ensure that testing fees, retesting opportunities, transportation support, and wraparound services are fully funded. Caseload sizes should be small enough to allow for meaningful relationships, and budgets should include line items for student incentives, outreach supplies, and part-time staffing when needed. Without this kind of investment, the structural conditions of Conditional Redemption remain fragile, dependent on individual sacrifice rather than institutional design.

State-Level Policy Recommendations

At the state level, the role of DESE is crucial. Participants frequently reported that since the departure of key personnel, program guidance has been inconsistent, delayed, or entirely absent. The lack of a clear point of contact, up-to-date implementation

documents, and accessible training has contributed to widespread variability in program quality and fidelity. DESE should re-establish a centralized MoOpt team or coordinator responsible for oversight, communication, and professional development. An updated implementation guide which is clearly written, openly accessible, and frequently revised should replace outdated materials currently in circulation. Statewide communication channels such as webinars, email updates, and interactive Q&A sessions must be free of charge and scheduled throughout the school year to ensure accessibility for all districts, not only those able to attend paid conferences.

Another urgent need is clarity regarding the role of the GED as an alternative assessment tool. The near-total absence of discussion around the GED in participant interviews reflects a critical communication gap. While the GED is technically recognized in Missouri, most practitioners reported defaulting to the HiSET because it was familiar and institutionally supported. DESE should issue a formal clarification on whether and how the GED may be used in MoOpt, including detailed comparisons between the HiSET and GED in terms of access, structure, and validity. Testing infrastructure should be expanded to ensure equitable access to both exams, and schools should be provided with technical assistance on score interpretation, testing preparation, and documentation procedures.

Finally, DESE must reform the way success is measured in alternative programs. Educators expressed frustration that MoOpt students often fall outside of the traditional graduation cohort model, making their successes invisible to the public and to state-level accountability systems. To address this, DESE should adopt growth-based metrics that include persistence, re-engagement, and post-program outcomes such as employment or

college enrollment. These metrics should be publicly reported and integrated into district accreditation frameworks, especially those evaluating equity and inclusion. When a program's achievements are not counted, they are not valued; and when they are not valued, they are vulnerable to defunding or neglect.

In sum, state policy must align with the core logic of Conditional Redemption: that redemption is not accidental but constructed. DESE must ensure that schools have the clarity, infrastructure, and public validation needed to make recovery real, not just possible. Only through coherent, consistent, and courageous policy can the full promise of programs like MoOpt be realized across Missouri.

Future Research Directions

While the present study focuses on Missouri-based programs and centers the voices of educators, it opens multiple paths for future inquiry. One clear direction is longitudinal research that tracks MoOpt graduates after program completion. Studies could explore whether students sustain employment, continue into postsecondary education, or experience shifts in civic identity and social mobility. Such research would test the durability of Conditional Redemption and refine its explanatory reach.

Comparative studies across states or educational models could also extend the theory's utility. Programs that use the GED, traditional credit recovery, or community-based re-engagement centers could be analyzed for commonalities and divergences. These studies could assess whether the four conditions of redemption hold across contexts, or whether local adaptations are necessary for theory application.

Another critical direction is the inclusion of student voice. This study focused on educator perspectives, which offered deep insights into program design and institutional intent. However, students themselves must be invited to confirm, challenge, or expand the theory's core propositions. Their reflections on trust, legitimacy, and motivation would add richness and reflexivity, grounding the theory even more firmly in lived experience.

Finally, researchers should explore how alternative programs earn and maintain legitimacy within public education systems. How do language, metrics, and policy shape public trust? What kinds of accountability frameworks honor re-engagement rather than penalize delay? Such inquiry would deepen our understanding of how educational redemption is socially constructed and systemically sustained.

Limitations of the Study

While this study offers a grounded, theory-driven analysis of MoOpt, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. These limitations do not undermine the study's contributions but instead frame its scope and point to areas for further exploration. The limitations are grouped into five interrelated areas: researcher positionality, data collection design, institutional representation, transferability, and the absence of student voice.

Researcher Positionality

This study was conducted by a practitioner-researcher with extensive experience in alternative education. As someone deeply embedded in the field, the Researcher brought a high level of contextual understanding, empathy, and theoretical sensitivity to the interviews and analysis. However, this positionality also introduced potential bias.

The co-construction of meaning between the Researcher and participants was filtered through a shared professional lens, which may have shaped interpretation. While constant comparative methods, analytic memoing, and theoretical coding helped mitigate unchecked assumptions, the findings inevitably reflect the Researcher's worldview, values, and professional commitments.

Data Collection Design

The study relied on single, semi-structured interviews with 17 educational leaders. While the interviews were in-depth and informed by grounded theory protocols, they did not include follow-up conversations or participant member-checking. The structure of each interview was consistent, but the specific probing questions varied based on the trajectory of each conversation and the evolving theoretical insights developed through memoing. As such, opportunities for clarification, elaboration, or challenge to emerging interpretations were limited. This may have constrained the depth of insight into some categories or produced uneven treatment of participant experiences.

Institutional Representation

A notable limitation of this study is the absence of input from DESE. Multiple participants referenced DESE's policies, guidance gaps, or communication practices as shaping their implementation of MoOpt. Yet the study did not include formal interviews with DESE officials or internal policymakers. This omission means that the institutional context is constructed entirely from practitioner perspectives; useful for understanding ground-level experience, but limited in its ability to engage with the intentions, constraints, or strategic decisions at the state level.

Transferability

Grounded theory prioritizes conceptual richness over statistical generalizability. This study focused exclusively on Missouri's implementation of MoOpt, a program with specific regulatory, cultural, and assessment features. While the theory of Conditional Redemption may resonate with educators in other alternative education models or re-engagement programs, its direct applicability to other contexts must be interpreted with caution. The dynamics of structure, legitimacy, and educator-student relationships may differ significantly in other states or under other accountability frameworks.

Participant Scope

This study centered the voices of educators and administrators, offering insight into how Conditional Redemption is designed, perceived, and enacted at the professional level. However, the students themselves, the primary subjects of the redemptive arc, were not included as participants. Their absence limits the study's ability to confirm, complicate, or extend the findings from a student point of view. While educator perspectives provide valuable proxies for student experience, future work should include student narratives to more fully test and enrich the theory.

Conclusion

The grounded theory of Conditional Redemption emerged from stories of persistence, exhaustion, belief, and repair. It reframes dropout recovery as a contingent, co-constructed process made possible not through mandates or mandates alone, but through structures and relationships that affirm a student's place within the educational system. Across 17 interviews, educators described how trust must be built before attendance, how attendance enables access to testing and support, how small academic

wins reshape identity, and how legitimacy when recognized and reinforced can transform

not just outcomes, but self-perception.

This chapter translated those insights into a set of strategic implications for

educators, district leaders, policymakers, and researchers. From trauma-informed

program design to institutional recognition, from funding equity to accountability reform,

the theory affirms that redemption is not a matter of luck or grit, it is a systemic

possibility, made real by people and policies that choose to believe in students who have

been left behind.

In a time of rising disengagement and educational fragmentation, MoOpt stands

as a model not only of academic flexibility, but of human restoration. This study affirms

that students re-engage not just because they are given another chance, but because

someone made that chance real, visible, and dignified. Therefore, Conditional

Redemption is not only a theory of how students reclaim their educational stories; it is a

reminder that schools too must become places where that journey is possible.

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Appendix A

Institutional Review Board Approval

To: Dr. Francesco Giuseffi

Cc: David Armstrong

From: Tom Frankman, Ed.D.
               Chair, Institutional Review Board

Protocol Number: 589

Title: Exploring the Implementation and Effectiveness of the Missouri Option Program:
               Perspectives from Educational Leaders and Teachers

Date: February 20, 2025

On February 20, 2025, the William Woods University Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviewed and approved an extension to the above-cited protocol following expedited review procedures.

Please note the following:
1. Please keep copies of the signed consent formed used for this research for three years after the completion of the research.
2. **Any modification to your research (including protocol, consent, advertising, instruments, funding, etc.) must be submitted to the Institutional Review Board for review and approval prior to implementation.**
3. Any adverse events or unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects including problems involving confidentiality of the data identifying the participants must be reported to the Institutional Review Board office.

The anniversary date of this study is February 20, 2026. **You may not collect data beyond that date without WWU IRB approval.** A continuing review form must be completed and submitted to the Institutional Review Board 30 days prior to the anniversary date or upon the completion of the project. You will be sent a reminder prior to the anniversary date.

If you have any questions, please contact me at tom.frankman@williamwoods.edu

One University Avenue   Fulton, MO 65251   www.williamwoods.edu

Appendix B

Missouri Option Approved Programs

Missouri DEPARTMENT OF ELEMENTARY & SECONDARY EDUCATION

Missouri Option Approved Programs
Office of Quality Schools
573-751-3190
Revised 6/2020

District Name & County-District Code	Phone	City
Adrian R-III (007-123)	816-297-4460	Adrian
Advance R-IV (103-129)	573-722-3584	Advance
Affton 101 (096-098)	314-467-7901	St. Louis
Albany R-III (038-046)	660-726-3911	Albany
Appleton City R-II (093-120)	660-476-2118	Appleton City
Arcadia Valley R-II (047-062)	573-546-9700	Ironton
Ash Grove R-IV (039-135)	417-751-2330	Ash Grove
Aurora R-VIII (055-110)	417-678-3355	Aurora
Ava R-I (034-124)	417-683-5747	Ava
Bayless (096-099)	314-467-7901	St Louis
Belton 124 (019-152)	816-348-1711	Belton
Blair Oaks R-II (026-002)	573-635-8514	Wardsville
Blue Springs R-IV (048-068)	816-874-3750	Blue Springs
Bolivar R-I (084-001)	417-777-8326	Bolivar
Boonville R-I (027-061)	660-672-7198	Boonville
Bowling Green R-I (082-100)	573-324-5341	Bowling Green
Bradleyville R-I (106-001)	417-796-2288	Bradleyville
Branson R-IV (106-004)	417-334-6511	Branson
Brentwood (096-101)	314-645-4755	St. Louis
Brookfield R-III (058-112)	660-258-2682	Brookfield
Bucklin R-2 (058-107)	660-695-3555	Bucklin
Cabool R-4 (107-155)	417-962-3153	Cabool
Camdenton R-III (015-002)	573-346-6336	Camdenton
Cameron R-I (025-001)	816-882-1036	Cameron
Canton R-V (056-015)	573-288-5216	Canton
Cape Girardeau 63 (016-096)	573-334-0826	Cape Girardeau
Cape Academy (016-096)	573-334-0826	Cape Giradeau
Carl Junction R-I (049-132)	417-649-7081	Carl Junction
Carrollton R-VII (017-125)	660-542-0000	Carrollton
Carthage R-IX (049-142)	417-359-7000	Carthage
Caruthersville 18 (078-012)	573-333-6100	Caruthersville
Center 58 (048-080)	816-349-3465	Kansas City
Chadwick R-I (022-088)	417-634-3588	Chadwick
Chillicothe R-II (059-117)	660-646-4566	Chillicothe
Clayton (096-102)	314-645-4755	Clayton
Clearwater R-I (111-087)	573-223-4524	Piedmont
Clever R-V (022-092)	417-743-4830	Clever
Clinton (042-124)	660-885-6101	Clinton
Clinton Co. R-III (025-003)	816-539-2184	Plattsburg
Cole Co. R-I (026-001)	573-782-3313	Russellville
Columbia 93 (010-093)	573-214-3929	Columbia
Community R-VI (004-106)	855-708-7567	Laddonia

Missouri Option Approved Programs
Office of Quality Schools
573-751-3190
Revised 6/2020

District Name & County-District Code	Phone	City
Confluence Academies (115-906)	314-588-8554	St. Louis
Cooper Co. R-IV (027-056)	660-427-5415	Bunceton
Crane R-III (104-043)	417-723-5300	Crane
Crawford Co. R-I (028-101)	573-732-3293	Bourbon
Dallas Co. R-I (030-093)	417-345-2223	Buffalo
DeLasalle Charter School (048-923)	816-561-4445	Kansas City
Desoto 73 (050-014)	636-586-1050	DeSoto
Dexter R-XI (103-132)	573-614-1030	Dexter
Diamond R-IV (073-102)	417-325-5188	Diamond
Dixon R-I (085-048)	573-759-7119	Dixon
Drexel R-IV (019-150)	816-657-4715	Drexel
Dunklin R-V (050-005)	636-479-5200	Herculaneum
East Buchanan Co. C-1 (011-076)	816-424-6460	Gower
East Carter Co. R-II (018-047)	573-322-5625	Ellsinore
Eldon R-I (066-102)	573-392-8010	Eldon
El Dorado Springs R-II (020-002)	417-876-3112	El Dorado Springs
Elsberry R-II (057-002)	573-898-5554	Elsberry
Everton R-III (029-003)	417-535-2221	Everton
Excelsior Springs 40 (024-089)	816-630-9210	Excelsior Springs
Farmington R-VII (094-078)	573-701-1310	Farmington
Fayette R-III (045-077)	660-248-2124	Fayette
Ferguson-Florissant R-II (096-089)	314-506-9087	Florissant
Festus R-VI (050-006)	636-937-5410	Festus
Forsyth R-III (106-003)	417-546-6383	Forsyth
Fort Osage R-I (048-066)	816-650-7708	Independence
Fox C-6 (050-012)	636-296-8000	Arnold
Francis Howell R-III (092-088)	636-851-4862	St. Charles
Ft. Zumwalt R-II (092-087)	636-281-9815	O'Fallon
Fulton 58 (014-129)	573-590-8103	Fulton
Galena R-II (104-042	417-357-6618	Galena
Gasconade Co. R-I (037-039)	573-486-5425	Hermann
Gasconade Co. R-II (037-037)	573-437-2174	Owensville
Gilman City R-IV (041-004)	660-876-5221	Gilman City
Golden City R-III (006-103)	417-537-8311	Golden City
Grain Valley R-V (048-069)	816-847-5000	Grain Valley
Grandview C-4 (048-074)	816-316-5164	Grandview
Grandview R-II (050-002)	636-944-3390	Hillsboro
Greenfield R-IV (029-004)	417-637-5328	Greenfield
Greenville R-II (111-086)	573-224-3618	Greenville
Grundy Co. R-V (040-100)	660-673-6511	Galt
Hallsville R-IV (010-089)	573-696-0312	Hallsville
Hancock Place (096-103)	314-544-1200	St. Louis
Hannibal 60 (064-075)	573-221-2733	Hannibal

Missouri Option Approved Programs
Office of Quality Schools
573-751-3190
Revised 6/2020

District Name & County-District Code	Phone	City
Harrisburg R-VIII (010-092)	573-875-5602	Harrisburg
Harrisonville R-IX (019-149)	816-380-3273	Harrisonville
Hardin-Central C-2 (089-088)	660-3984394	Hardin
Hartville R-II (114-113)	417-741-7676	Hartville
Hazelwood (096-088)	314-953-5407	Florissant
Henry Co. R-I (042-111)	660-647-3106	Windsor
Hermitage R-IV (043-004)	417-745-6417	Hermitage
Hickman Mills C-1 (048-072)	816-316-7178	Kansas City
Hickory Co. R-I (043-001)	417-345-2223	Urbana
Hillsboro R-III (050-003)	636-789-0000	Hillsboro
Hollister R-V (106-005)	417-243-4044	Hollister
Houston R-I (107-152)	417-967-3024	Houston
Humansville R-IV (084-004)	417-754-2219	Humansville
Hume R-VIII (007-125)	660-643-7411	Hume
Independence 30 (048-077)	816-521-5505	Independence
Jackson R-II (016-090) (w/Cape)	573-243-9513	Jackson
Jamestown C-1 (068-074)	660-849-2141	Jamestown
Jasper Co. R-V (049-137)	417-394-2511	Jasper
Jefferson City (026-006)	573-659-2510	Jefferson City
Jennings (096-104)	314-653-8041	Jennings
Joplin Schools (049-148)	417-625-5215	Joplin
Kansas City 33 (048-078)	816-418-8637	Kansas City
Kearney R-I (024-086)	816-628-4585	Kearney
Kennett 39 (035-102)	573-717-1120	Kennett
Kingston K-14 (110-014)	417-644-2223	Cadet
Kirksville R-III (001-091)	660-665-2865	Kirksville
Kirkwood R-VII (096-092)	314-213-6104	Kirkwood
Knox Co. R-I (052-096)	660-397-2231	Edina
Laclede Co. R-I (053-111)	417-589-2941	Conway
Ladue (096-106)	314-994-7080	St. Louis
Lakeland R-III (093-123)	417-644-2223	Deepwater
Lamar R-I (006-104)	417-682-5571	Lamar
La Monte R-IV (080-118)	660-347-5439	La Monte
Lathrop R-II (025-002)	816-528-7400	Lathrop
Lebanon R-III (053-113)	417-532-9144	Lebanon
Lee's Summit R-VII (048-071)	816-986-4125	Lee's Summit
Leeton R-X (051-156)	660-653-4314	Leeton
Leopold R-III (009-078)	573-238-2211	Leopold
Lesterville R-IV (090-078)	573-269-4207	Black
Lewis Co. C-1 (056-017)	573-209-3215	Ewing
Lexington R-V (054-045)	660-259-4391	Lexington
Liberal R-II (006-101)	417-843-2125	Liberal
Liberty 53 (024-090)	816-736-5470	Liberty

Missouri Option Approved Programs
Office of Quality Schools
573-751-3190
Revised 6/2020

District Name & County-District Code	Phone	City
Lindbergh Schools (096-093)	314-467-7951	St Louis
Lockwood R-I (029-001)	417-232-4513	Lockwood
Louisiana R-II (082-108)	573-754-6181	Louisiana
Macks Creek R-V (015-004)	573-363-5911	Macks Creek
Macon Co. R-I (061-156)	660-385-5748	Macon
Maplewood-Richmond Heights (096-107)	314-495-7249	St Louis
Marceline R-V (058-109)	660-376-2411	Marceline
Maries Co. R-I (063-066)	573-422-3363	Vienna
Maries Co. R-II (063-067)	573-859-6114	Belle
Marshall (097-129)	660-886-2244	Marshall
Marshfield R-I (112-102)	417-859-2120	Marshfield
Maryville R-II (074-201)	660-562-3511	Maryville
Maysville R-I (032-055)	816-449-2154	Maysville
McDonald Co. R-I (060-077)	417-845-2740	Anderson
Meadow Heights R-II (009-077)	573-866-2924	Patton
Mehlville R-IX (096-094)	314-467-7901	St. Louis
Meramec Valley R-III (036-126)	636-271-1414	Pacific
Mexico 59 (004-110)	573-581-3773	Mexico
Milan C-2 (105-124)	660-265-1465	Milan
Miller R-II (055-104)	417-452-3515	Miller
Moberly (088-081)	660-269-8800	Moberly
Monett R-I (005-128)	417-235-7022	Monett
Moniteau Co. R-I (068-070)	573-796-4911	California
Monroe City R-I (069-106)	573-735-4626	Monroe City
Montgomery Co. R-II (070-093)	833-662-6228	Montgomery City
Morgan Co. R-I (071-091)	573-377-2218	Stover
Morgan Co. R-II (071-092)	573-378-4697	Versailles
Mound City R-II (114-114)	660-442-5429	Mound City
Mountain Grove R-III (114-114)	417-926-3177	Mountain Grove
Mountain View-Birch Tree R-III (046-130)	417-934-2020	Mountain View
Mt. Vernon R-V (055-108)	417-466-7545	Mt. Vernon
Neosho R-V (073-108)	417-451-8616	Neosho
Nevada R-V (108-142)	417-448-2020	Nevada
New Madrid Co. R-I (072-074)	573-688-2165	New Madrid
Newburg R-II (081-095)	573-762-9653	Newburg
Niangua R-V (112-099)	417-473-6101	Niangua
Nixa R-II (022-089)	417-724-4085	Nixa
Normandy Schools Collaborative (096-109)	314-493-0400	St. Louis
North Callaway Co. R-I (014-126)	573-386-2211	Kingdom City
North Kansas City 74 (024-093)	816-413-5089	Kansas City
North Mercer Co. R-III (065-096)	660-382-4214	Mercer
Northeast Nodaway Co. R-V (074-194)	660-937-3112	Ravenwood
Northeast Vernon Co. R-I (108-147)	417-465-2221	Walker

Missouri Option Approved Programs
Office of Quality Schools
573-751-3190
Revised 6/2020

District Name & County-District Code	Phone	City
Northwest R-I (050-001)	636-274-0555	High Ridge
Norwood R-I (114-112)	417-746-4101	Norwood
Oak Grove R-VI (048-070)	816-690-4156	Oak Grove
Oak Ridge R-VI (016-094)	573-266-3630	Oak Ridge
Odessa R-VII (054-041)	816-633-5533	Odessa
Oregon-Howell R-III (075-086)	417-274-1148	Koshkonong
Osborn R-0 (032-054)	816-675-2217	Osborn
Otterville R-VI (027-058)	660-366-4621	Otterville
Ozark R-VI (022-093)	417-582-5740	Ozark
Palmyra R-I (064-074)	573-769-2067	Palmyra
Paris R-II (069-109)	660-327-4111	Paris
Park Hill (083-005)	816-359-6803	Seneca
Parkway C-2 (096-095)	314-415-5008	Creve Coeur
Pattonville R-III (096-090)	314-568-0488	St. Ann
Pemiscot Co. Spec. Sch. Dist. (078-013)	573-359-0021	Hayti
Perry Co. 32 (079-077)	573-547-7500	Perryville
Pierce City R-VI (079-077)	417-478-2515	Pierce City
Pike County R-III (082-101)	573-242-3546	Clarksville
Pilot Grove C-4 (027-059)	660-672-7198	Boonville
Plato R-V (107-156)	417-458-3333	Plato
Platte Co. R-III (083-003)	816-858-5420	Platte City
Pleasant Hope R-VI (084-006)	417-267-2271	Pleasant Hope
Poplar Bluff R-I (012-109)	573-712-2257	Poplar Bluff
Portageville (072-068)	573-379-3819	Portageville
Potosi R-III (110-029)	573-438-2156	Potosi
Purdy R-II (005-124)	417-442-3215	Purdy
Puxico R-VIII (103-130)	573-222-3175	Puxico
Ralls Co. R-II (087-083)	573-267-3397	Center
Raymore-Peculiar R-II (019-142)	816-892-1528	Peculiar
Raytown C-2 (048-073)	816-268-7180	Raytown
Reeds Spring R-IV (104-044)	417-272-3271	Reeds Springs
Republic R-III (039-134)	417-732-3650	Republic
Richland R-IV (085-044)	573-765-3711	Richland
Ritenour (096-110)	314-493-6033	St. Ann
Riverview Gardens (096-111)	314-493-6237	St. Louis
Rockwood R-VI (096-091)	636-733-2100	Eureka
Rolla 31 (081-096)	573-458-0140	Rolla
Salem R-80 (033-090)	573-729-2222	Salem
Sarcoxie R-II (049-140)	417-548-2153	Sarcoxie
Savannah R-III (002-097)	816-324-3128	Savannah
School of the Osage (066-105)	573-348-0115	Lake Ozark
Scott City R-I (100-059)	573-264-2138	Scott City
Seneca R-VII (073-106)	417-776-7794	Seneca

Missouri Option Approved Programs
Office of Quality Schools
573-751-3190
Revised 6/2020

District Name & County-District Code	Phone	City
Seymour R-II (112-103)	417-935-4508	Seymour
Sherwood Cass R-VIII (019-144)	660-449-2239	Creighton
Sikeston R-6 (100-063)	573-472-8850	Sikeston
Silex R-I (057-001)	573-384-5227	Silex
Smithville R-II (024-087)	816-532-0405	Smithville
South Callaway Co. R-II (014-130)	573-676-5225	Mokane
South Harrison Co. R-II (041-002)	660-425-2196	Bethany
South Holt Co. R-I (044-084)	660-446-3454	Oregon
Southern Boone Co. R-I (010-087)	573-657-2144	Ashland
Southland C-9 (035-099)	573-654-3531	Cardwell
Special School District St. Louis Co.(096-119)	314-467-7901	St Louis
Springfield R-XII (039-141)	417-523-0010	Springfield
St. Charles R-VI (092-090)	636-443-4894	St. Charles
St. Clair R-XIII (036-136)	636-629-3500	St. Clair
St. James R-I (081-094)	573-265-2200	St. James
St. Joseph (011-082)	816-671-4020	St. Joseph
St. Louis College Prep (115-920)	314-295-1393	St. Louis
St. Louis City (115-115)	314-531-2220	St. Louis
State Fair Community College (126-126)	660-596-7287	Sedalia
Steelville R-III (028-103)	573-775-2144	Steelville
Ste. Genevieve Co. R-II (095-059)	573-883-4500	Ste. Genevieve
Stoutland R-II (015-001)	417-286-3711	Stoutland
Sullivan (036-137)	573-468-3542	Sullivan
Tarkio R-I (003-031)	660-736-4161	Tarkio
Thayer R-II (075-085)	417-264-4600	Thayer
Tina-Avalon R-II (017-122)	660-622-4211	Tina
Trenton R-IX (040-107)	660-359-2291	Trenton
Troy R-III (057-003)	636-462-4967	Troy
Union R-XI (036-131)	636-583-2513	Union
University City (096-112)	314-290-4330	St. Louis
Valley Park (096-113)	636-923-3613	Valley Park
Van Buren R-I (018-050)	573-323-4281	Van Buren
Verona R-VII (055-111)	417-498-6775	Verona
Warren Co. R-III (109-003)	636-456-5802	Warrenton
Washington (036-139)	636-231-2200	Washington
Waynesville R-VI (085-046)	573-842-2400	Waynesville
Weaubleau R-III (043-003)	417-428-3368	Weaubleau
Webb City R-VII (049-144)	417-673-6010	Webb City
Webster Groves (096-114)	314-467-7901	St Louis
Wellsville Middletown R-I (070-092)	573-684-2017	Wellsville
Wentzville R-IV (092-089)	636-327-3941	Wentzville
West Plains R-VII (046-134)	417-256-6150	West Plains
Willard R-II (039-133)	417-742-5430	Willard

Missouri Option Approved Programs
Office of Quality Schools
573-751-3190
Revised 6/2020

District Name & County-District Code	Phone	City
Willow Springs R-IV (046-131)	417-469-3211	Willow Springs
Windsor C-1 (050-010)	636-464-4466	Imperial
Winfield R-IV (057-004)	636-668-8188	Winfield
Worth Co. R-III (113-001)	660-564-2218	Grant City
Wright City R-II(109-002)	636-745-7500	Wright City

Appendix C

Missouri Option Program Frequently Asked Questions

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Missouri Option Program

In 2002, the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) initiated the Missouri Option Program. The program is approved by the Missouri State Board of Education. The Missouri Option Program has been used by about half of Missouri's local education agencies (LEAs) as an effective means to retain students, decrease dropout rates, and increase the number of students who are prepared for postsecondary education opportunities or to enter the workforce.

What is the Missouri Option Program?

The Missouri Option Program is designed to serve students who lack the credits necessary to graduate with their class and are at risk of leaving school without a high school diploma. The program specifically targets students who are 17 to 20 years of age and are at least one year behind their cohort group or, for other significant reasons identified in the local Missouri Option Program plan, are unable to complete their diploma with their cohort group.

Graduation through the Missouri Option Program is not dependent on Carnegie credit attainment. It is a competency-based program approved by the State Board of Education that utilizes a high school equivalency exam as mastery for graduation purposes. The HiSET® is the exam sanctioned by the state for the Missouri Option program. It is developed and distributed by the Educational Testing Service (ETS). Missouri Option students who successfully pass the exam and complete all other program requirements are eligible to receive a high school diploma.

> **Note – A credential that includes the word "diploma" will be awarded. The LEA issues a "regular" high school diploma (the same as awarded to all students by local boards of education).**

How does the Missouri Option Program benefit a school?

Local education agencies with an approved Missouri Option Program help students who are at risk of not graduating to remain in school, allowing them to successfully graduate. Once the LEA issues a high school diploma, participants are then counted as graduates. Additionally, an LEA can continue to count these students in its average daily attendance (ADA) for purposes of state aid while the students are enrolled in the program.

How does the Missouri Option Program benefit a student?

Missouri Option Program instructors provide ongoing academic/career advisement with supplemental guidance and counseling as needed. Students have access to all educational programs and services available in the LEA, receive valuable academic and life-skills instruction, earn a high school diploma, and, upon successful completion of program requirements, are eligible to participate in commencement ceremonies.

What is required of Missouri Option Program students?

Students must participate in a minimum of 15 hours of academic instruction per week. Students

must also be enrolled in other school-supervised instructional activities (career education courses, elective classes, work experience, etc.) that lead to the student's classification by the LEA as a full-time student. The LEA should provide a level and quality of education that ensures the integrity of the Missouri Option Program and locally issued high school diploma.

Local education agencies may have additional requirements when issuing a regular high school diploma that are consistent with what is required of all students. Missouri Option students must take the required End-of-Course exams (EOCs) – Algebra I (or Algebra II if Algebra was taken prior to high school), English II, Biology and American Government. State law also requires that all graduate candidates take a course in government and the functions of government and pass the required tests related to Civics and the U.S. and Missouri Constitutions. Participants must also complete half-unit courses in Personal Finance and Health and complete 30 minutes of CPR instruction and training in the proper performance of the Heimlich maneuver.

If a student takes the HiSET®, what documentation will the LEA receive from the state verifying the student's results?
The HiSET® tests are designed to measure the major academic skills and knowledge associated with a high school program of study. Students enrolled in the Missouri Option Program take (and must pass) the HiSET® tests in order to demonstrate and document the attainment of high school-level skills. The HiSET® Score Report is one of the academic components required for the awarding of a high school diploma by the local education agency, and as such, is placed in the student's permanent record.

What happens if a student fails to complete the Missouri Option Program?
Occasionally, a student fails to complete all of the program requirements necessary to be awarded a diploma. In these instances, the passing scores on the HiSET® belong to the student, and the LEA should provide guidance on how to obtain a Missouri High School Equivalency Certificate through the DESE High School Equivalency Office (573-751-3504).

What are the requirements for the faculty in the Missouri Option Program?
Teachers working in this program must have a valid Missouri teaching certificate in any content area or in Adult Education and Literacy (AEL).

Are specific funds available to support the Missouri Option Program?
No. The Missouri Option Program is not a grant program. However, LEAs do receive state aid for attendance (ADA) of participating students.

How do Local Education Agencies sign up for the Missouri Option Program?
Local Education Agencies planning to operate a Missouri Option Program must submit a **Missouri Option Program Compliance Plan**. Please follow the directions available on the Missouri Option website under *Missouri Option Program Application.*.

Appendix D

Missouri Option Program Assurance Standards

Missouri
DEPARTMENT OF ELEMENTARY & SECONDARY
EDUCATION™

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ASSURANCE STANDARDS-MISSOURI OPTION PROGRAM

1.0	**Program Eligibility Standards**
1.1	Students enrolled in the Missouri Option Program are exempt from the requirement to earn a specific number of credits for graduation.
1.2	Each Missouri Option Program candidate is enrolled as a full-time student in the local education agency (LEA) in accordance with the criteria prescribed in Assurance Standards 4.2 and 4.3.
1.3	Student participation in the Missouri Option Program is voluntary and based on a recommendation by a school counselor, teacher, and/or administrator.
1.4	Selection criteria for the Missouri Option Program are not ethnic, racial, or gender biased.
1.5	Students are behind their cohort group in the credits needed to graduate or *for other significant reasons identified* are unable to complete their diploma with their cohort group (class). Students under the age of 17 must have parent/guardian consent.
1.6	Participation in the Missouri Option Program requires the student be 17 years of age or older. For unaccompanied homeless youths the requirement is waived in accordance with the McKinney-Vento Act.
1.7	Students served by the Missouri Option Program are expected to be able to read independently in English at a grade level sufficient to successfully complete instruction and testing.
1.8	Students with disabilities show *evidence of a current Individual Education Plan (IEP) or Section 504 Plan which indicates that participation in the Missouri Option Program is appropriate and beneficial for the student.* The IEP or Section 504 Plan documents any special education services and related aids and services necessary for successful completion of the program, including the testing component.
1.9	Missouri Option Program participants have access to all educational programs and services available to high school students. For information on the eligibility to participate in high school activities, please contact MSHSAA Missouri State High School Activities Association.
2.0	**Program Instructor Standards**
2.1	Missouri Option Program instructor(s) have a valid Missouri teaching certificate in any subject at any grade level.
3.0	**Program Counseling Standards**
3.1	School Counselor(s) have a valid Missouri Counseling Certificate.
3.2	School counseling services are accessible to Missouri Option students consistent with the LEA's high school program.
3.3	Ongoing postsecondary and career advisement is provided by the Missouri Option Program instructor(s) and counselor(s), with supplemental guidance and counseling provided as available.

4.0	Academic Instruction and Assessment Standards
4.1	Instructional content is appropriate for up to 12th grade level, aligning with Missouri's High School Equivalency Test.
4.2	Missouri Option students are engaged in a minimum of 15 hours of academic instruction/study per week which may include computer-assisted and/or virtual instruction.
4.3	Missouri Option students are also enrolled in other school-supervised instructional activities (Career Education courses, elective classes, volunteer experiences, work experience, etc.) that lead to the student's classification by the LEA as a full-time student.
4.4	As prescribed in Section 170.011, RSMo, to be eligible for graduation from high school in Missouri, students must satisfactorily pass a course of instruction in the institutions, branches, and functions of the government of the state of Missouri, including local governments, and of the government of the United States, as well as the electoral process. Students must pass an examination on the provisions and principles of the Constitution of the United States and of the state of Missouri, and in American history and American institutions. All students entering grade 9 after July 1, 2017, are required to pass an examination on the provisions and principles of American civics.
4.5	Students must pass half-unit courses in Personal Finance and Health Education as per 5 CSR 20-100.190. Prior to graduation, students must receive 30 minutes of CPR instruction and training in the proper performance of the Heimlich maneuver.
4.6	All Missouri Option students participate in appropriate state assessments, including all required End-of-Course (EOC) assessments.

5.0	Graduation Standards
5.1	All Missouri Option students take and pass Missouri's High School Equivalency Test as a competency-based assessment for a score report/transcript and complete all the requirements set forth in these standards to be eligible for a high school diploma.
5.2	Students receive a regular high school diploma as awarded to all students by local boards of education.
5.3	Upon passing Missouri's High School Equivalency Test and fulfilling all Missouri Option and LEA program requirements, fifth- through seventh-year seniors receive a high school diploma and graduate.
5.4	Students who are in the program for other significant reasons and successfully pass the HiSET® and/or GED® exam(s) before the end of the school year are either engaged in a school-supervised course of study or employment/volunteer work equivalent to full-time student status (+30 hours a week) until the end of the school year or may graduate according to LEA policy.
5.5	The Missouri Option Program does not circumvent compulsory attendance regulations or facilitate an early exit.
5.6	Graduates of the Missouri Option Program participate in a high school graduation ceremony with their peers.

Appendix E

Individual Student Planning Rubric: High School Level

Individual Student Planning Rubric: High School Level

Directions: Circle the box that represents your school/district's current counseling practice for each performance element

Performance Element	1 Emerging	2 Developing	3 Meets Standard	4 Advanced
Student Engagement	Students participate in career planning at all levels.	Students participate in career planning (including appraisal for decision-making), informally show they have attained the Missouri Comprehensive School Counseling Program (MCSCP) Grade Level Expectations (GLEs)/Standards, and are involved in transition activities at all levels.	Students participate in career planning (including appraisal for decision-making) and transition activities at all levels, can formally show they have attained the MCSCP GLEs/Standards and can apply the attainment to life choices. Annually review and update an Individual Career and Academic Plan (ICAP) for high school and beyond.	Students are actively engaged in career planning (including appraisal for decision-making) and transition activities at all levels, can show they have attained the MCSCP GLEs/Standards through formative/summative assessments and can apply the attainment to life choices, showing an evolution of career planning maturity at all levels. Annually review and update an Individual Career and Academic Plan (ICAP) for high school and beyond.
Missouri Comprehensive School Counseling Program (MCSCP) Requirements	The CSCP has plans and activities developed for the following: All 9-12 MCSCP GLEs/Standards; Transition activities at all grade levels; Basic interpretation of test results for students and parents.	The CSCP includes a process that starts to develop and implement sequential career planning activities. The program addresses all 9-12 MCSCP GLEs/Standards, transition activities at all grade levels, and appropriate interpretation of test results for students and parents.	The CSCP includes career planning activities that are developmental, sequential, and integrated into the instructional program. The annually evaluated program addresses all of the following: All 9-12 MCSCP GLEs/Standards; Transition activities at all grade levels (annually review and update an ICAP); Informed interpretation of test results for students and parents.	The CSCP integrates career planning activities that are evaluated, improved, and maintained as a vital part of the instructional program. The activities are integrated into the instructional program. The program ensures that all 9-12 MCSCP GLEs/Standards and transition activities at all grade levels (annually review and update an ICAP) are high quality. The program offers students and parents a highly Informed interpretation of test results.

Performance Element	1 Emerging	2 Developing	3 Meets Standard	4 Advanced
Counselor Engagement & Leadership	Counselor presents 9-12 grade career planning lessons and works with district counselors to begin developing a plan that addresses all MCSCP GLEs/Standards.	Counselor collaborates with administrators, district counselors, and teachers to present and maintain developmental and sequential Individual Student Planning activities (career planning lessons, assemblies, whole school celebrations, etc.) that address all MCSCP GLEs/Standards and transitioning activities for grades nine through 12.	The counselor provides leadership by collaborating with administrators, district counselors, and teachers to present, evaluate, and maintain developmental and sequential school counseling activities for all 9-12 grade MCSCP GLEs/Standards; transition activities at all grade levels; adequate interpretation of test results for students and parents. The counselor advocates for students through the MCSCP. The counselor works with students to annually review and update their Individual Career and Academic Plan (ICAP).	The counselor provides leadership by collaborating with all stakeholders to evaluate, improve, and maintain the MCSCP, integrating it into the instructional program and ensuring all of the following are of high quality: all 9-12 grade MCSCP GLEs/Standards; transition activities at all grade levels; adequate interpretation of test results for students and parents. The counselor advocates for students through the MCSCP. The counselor works with students to annually review and update their ICAP.
Administrators & Staff Engagement	Counselor communication focuses on developing mutually supportive roles for administrators and staff in career planning.	The counselor collaborates with administrators and staff to integrate career planning activities into the instructional and school program.	The administrator supports the counselor and staff by advocating for the implementation of career planning and transition activities for all students across the curriculum.	The administrator provides leadership, expectations, and support for counselors and staff to implement, review, enhance, and maintain career planning activities as an integral part of the MCSCP and school curriculum.
Parental/ Guardian Engagement	Career planning, transitioning, and assessment interpretation information is sent home to parents/guardians or posted on the website.	Career planning, transitioning, and assessment interpretation information, including suggestions for parental engagement is sent home to parents/guardians or posted on the website.	Parents/guardians are given the opportunity to participate in career planning activities and are required to review and sign their child's Individual Career and Academic Plan (ICAP) for high school. Career planning, transition information, and test results are shared and discussed with parents/guardians regularly via webinars, podcasts, emails, newsletters, group meetings, and parent conferences.	A significant number of parents/guardians participate in career planning activities, complete a needs assessment, and serve on the comprehensive school counseling advisory committee. Career planning, transition information and test results are shared and discussed regularly with parents/guardians via webinars, podcasts, emails, newsletters, group meetings, and parent conferences.

Performance Element	1 Emerging	2 Developing	3 Meets Standard	4 Advanced
Community Engagement	School career planning information and community resources are identified and posted on the school website and newsletter.	A school-wide career planning activity that engages community guest speakers and resources is planned and implemented annually.	Community partnerships (sponsoring programs, mentoring, guest speakers, providing resources, or participating in advisory and career/college fairs) are formed and functioning.	Community partnerships (sponsoring programs, mentoring, guest speakers, providing resources, or participating in the advisory and career/college fairs) are an integral part of the MCSCP.
Transition & Postsecondary Linkage	A school plan for grade-to-grade and building-to-building transitions is being developed in collaboration with administrators, counselors, and staff.	A district-wide plan for grade-to-grade and building-to-building transitions is being developed in collaboration with administrators, district counselors, and staff.	Transition plans, including grade-to-grade, building-to-building, and post-secondary linkage activities, have been established and are evaluated annually by counselors, administrators, and staff.	Transition plans include grade-to-grade, building-to-building, and post-secondary linkage activities that are implemented and evaluated annually by all stakeholders, improved, and maintained.
Program Evaluation	Counselor annually reviews career planning activities.	Counselor annually collects feedback from staff and students and reviews all career planning activities with administrators.	As a part of the CSCP, career exploration, transition, and appraisal activities are evaluated annually using the Individual Student Planning Section of the Missouri School Counseling Program Evaluation (MO-CSCPE) and feedback. Counselors collaborate with the advisory committee, staff, parents/guardians, and students to evaluate activities.	As a part of the CSCP, career exploration, transition, and appraisal activities are evaluated annually using the Individual Student Planning Section of the MO-CSCPE, at least one action research project, and needs assessment data in collaboration with all stakeholders.

Appendix F

Initial Survey for Principals and Teachers

Section 1: Basic Demographic Information

(Q1) What is your role?

- Principal

- Assistant Principal

- Teacher

- Counselor

- Other: _____

(Q2) How many years have you worked with the Missouri Option Program?

- Less than 1 year

- 1-3 years

- 4-6 years

- 7+ years

(Q3) What is the approximate student population of your high school?

- Fewer than 200 students

- 200-500 students

- 501-1,000 students

- 1,001-2,000 students

- More than 2,000 students

(Q4) How many students participated in the Missouri Option Program at your school this year?

- Fewer than 10

- 10-25

- 26-50

- More than 50

Section 2: Perceptions of the Missouri Option Program

(Q1) How do you see the Missouri Option Program impacting students who might otherwise drop out of high school? Can you share a specific example?

(Q2) From your experience, how does the Missouri Option Program influence overall dropout rates at your school? Have you noticed any trends over time?

(Q3) How well do you think the Missouri Option Program prepares students for life after high school, whether in college, technical training, or the workforce? What skills or experiences stand out as most beneficial?

(Q4) What factors contributed to your district's decision to adopt the Missouri Option Program? Were there particular challenges or motivations that played a role?

(Q5) Implementation of the Missouri Option Program can vary among different districts. In what ways do you see differences in how schools of different sizes or demographics run the program? What advantages or limitations does your school face?

(Q5) If you could change or improve one aspect of the Missouri Option Program, what would it be and why?

Section 3: Follow-Up Participation

(Q1) Would you be willing to participate in a follow-up interview to discuss your experiences in more detail?

- Yes

- No

If yes, please provide your preferred contact information:

Appendix G

Semi-Structured Interview Template

Opening Script:

Thank you for taking time to speak with me today. I'm conducting a study about the

Missouri Option Program, and I'm interested in your professional experiences and perspectives.

There are no right or wrong answers—just your honest thoughts. Everything you share will be

kept confidential. May I record this interview?

1. Background & Role

Can you tell me a bit about your role in your district and how you've been involved with

the Missouri Option Program?

Probes: How long have you been working with the program? What led your school or district to

consider this option?

Notes:

2. Retention & Reengagement

From your perspective, how effective has the Missouri Option Program been at helping

students stay in school who might otherwise have dropped out?

Probes: What signs or outcomes make you feel it is (or isn't) effective? Can you share any specific

stories or examples? How many students per graduating class?

Notes:

3. Dropout Impact

What impact, if any, do you believe the program has had on your school or district's overall dropout rates?

Probes: Have you tracked any data or trends over time? Are there particular subgroups of students who benefit most?

Notes:

4. Postsecondary Preparation

How well do you think the Missouri Option Program prepares students for life after high school, whether that's college, career, or something else?

Probes: What types of support do students receive for next steps? Are there partnerships or programs that enhance this preparation?

Notes:

5. Program Adoption

Why do you think your district chose to implement the Missouri Option Program?

Probes: Were there specific challenges or needs it was meant to address? Who were the key decision-makers or advocates?

Notes:

6. Variability Across Districts

In your experience or conversations with others, how does implementation of the Missouri Option Program vary from district to district?

Probes: Are there differences in how it's funded, staffed, or promoted? How do district size, location, or demographics play a role?

Notes:

7. Strengths & Challenges

What would you say are the greatest strengths of the Missouri Option Program? What about the biggest challenges?

Probes: How have you or your team worked to overcome those challenges?

Notes:

8. Final Reflection

Is there anything else you would like to share about the Missouri Option Program that we haven't covered?

Probes: Anything you wish had been asked?

Notes:

Closing Script:

That's all the questions I have. Thank you again for sharing your time and insight. If I have any clarifying questions later, may I follow up with you by email or phone?

Appendix H

Sample Pattern Memo

Cross-Interview Pattern Memo #13

Missouri Option as the Final Yes

Supporting Codes: affirmative access, countercultural inclusion

Emerging Insight: Educators describe the program as the only institutional space left for some students. It becomes a haven after systemic rejection.

Space as Healing Architecture

Supporting Codes: intentional space design, emotional architecture

Emerging Insight: Rooms are designed with care—softer lighting, comfort, visuals; to communicate safety and dignity. Environment becomes pedagogy.

Reframing Success and Identity

Supporting Codes: reconstructing academic identity, expanding definitions of success, future-oriented coaching

Emerging Insight: Success is not just academic—it includes self-belief, housing stability, emotional peace. Educators re-author what success means.

Collective and Symbolic Celebration

Supporting Codes: public celebration, collective progress tracking, wall of wins

Emerging Insight: Shared rituals like posting names on a wall fosters collective pride. Recognition is both personal and communal.

Invisible Labor and Extended Presence

Supporting Codes: invisible labor, extended educator reach, meeting physiological needs

Emerging Insight: Educators work behind the scenes—texting, checking in, feeding. This unacknowledged labor sustains relationships and retention.

Appendix I

Sample Analytic Memo

Focused Coding Analytic Memo - [REDACTED]

This analytic memo summarizes the focused coding insights drawn from [REDACTED] interview. Their narrative reflects an emotionally invested, systems-aware leader who acknowledges both the transformational outcomes of the Missouri Option Program and its structural limitations. They articulate the importance of student identity, staff stability, and community partnerships as core elements of program strength and vulnerability.

Student Identity and Motivation

[REDACTED] strongly emphasizes the psychological transformation students experience upon completing the program. They name pride, self-worth, and accomplishment as lasting outcomes that cannot be taken away. Their belief in the symbolic and developmental power of the diploma reinforces your broader category of identity repair and student agency.

Postsecondary Preparedness Gap

Despite acknowledging the importance of next steps, [REDACTED] admits there are few formal supports in place. They demonstrate reflective leadership, even noting that they will follow up on the gap revealed by the interview questions. Their desire for integration with the tech center, while only partially realized, demonstrates awareness of the gap between ideal and real support.

Access and Opportunity

[REDACTED] advocates for early intervention, proposing service models that begin before junior year. They view credentialing and certification as crucial components of success, especially for students whose postsecondary plans may not include college. Their vision expands the idea of what MoOpt could be; not just a last resort, but a path to skill and independence.

Resource Allocation and Constraints

A recurring theme in [REDACTED] responses is the fragility of staffing. They provide clear examples of how a two-and-a-half FTE structure becomes vulnerable when even one person is out sick or unavailable. This tension between vision and resourcing is a key insight relevant across districts.

Discipline and Behavioral Policies

[REDACTED] illustrates how behavior can be a barrier to accessing opportunities such as tech center courses. Their comment about students getting 'kicked out' if they're unsafe reveals how some structural consequences may override rehabilitative intent.

Decision-Making and Program Adoption

Their reflections on peer influence, both between districts and among parents. adds a sociopolitical dimension to program adoption. Implementation is not just internal; it's influenced by what surrounding districts offer.

Role of School Personnel

The interview ended with deep praise for [REDACTED], the long-time program

staff member who has mastered both content delivery and student relationship-building.

[REDACTED] frames their contributions as irreplaceable, emphasizing the importance of

relational continuity and institutional knowledge in student success.

Perceptions of Program Legitimacy

[REDACTED] believes [REDACTED]'s model represents a 'true program' rather

than a 'classroom.' This structural and cultural differentiation supports a perception of

legitimacy and seriousness that they believe may be missing in other schools.

Appendix J

Sample Axial Memo

Axial Category Memo: Legitimacy, Policy, and Systems-Level Insight

This axial category focuses on how educational leaders perceive and negotiate the broader policy environment surrounding the Missouri Option Program. The focused codes here are: Perceptions of Program Legitimacy, Discipline and Behavioral Policies, Decision-Making and Program Adoption, and Alternative Pathways to Graduation. These insights reveal how districts interpret, defend, and shape the program's role within their larger educational ecosystems.

Perceptions of Program Legitimacy

Participants consistently affirm that MoOpt is a vital intervention. It is described as a 'lifesaver,' 'last resort,' and 'critical tool.' At the same time, some express concerns about how others (parents, school boards, or community members) perceive its rigor. To defend the program, educators emphasize testing requirements, graduation rituals, and credit expectations that exceed the HiSET and GED for a High School Equivalency (HSE) certificate. The legitimacy of the program is upheld through narratives of redemption and self-described proof of outcomes such as students who reach out several years later.

Discipline and Behavioral Policies

Programs implement gatekeeping mechanisms not only for academic reasons but also for behavioral ones. Evening programs, for example, screen out students who may pose safety risks due to a lack of school resource officers. Districts differ in how strictly

they interpret DESE assurances around eligibility. Additionally, DESE updates Assurance

Standards at different times, so teachers who begin working the program at different

times have different understandings of the standards they are required to follow based on

how closely they read updates. This reveals local agency, but also potential inequities and

inconsistency across the state.

Decision-Making and Program Adoption

Leaders often describe a process of careful deliberation before adopting the

program. Some use it only after other interventions (e.g., the School Flex Program, credit

recovery) have failed. Others were initially skeptical but became advocates after seeing

success stories. This category reflects how the program's implementation is shaped by

leadership philosophy, community culture, and perceived alignment with district values.

Alternative Pathways to Graduation

MoOpt is part of a larger menu of nontraditional routes while also being unique as

the only non-credit based graduation route. Districts compare it to adult education

programs, credit recovery, or virtual schooling. Leaders frame MoOpt as more legitimate

than an HSE, but less academically robust than traditional diplomas. This ambivalence

positions the program in a complex hierarchy of educational value, both practically and

symbolically.

Category Summary

Legitimacy, Policy, and Systems-Level Insight reveals that MoOpt's success

depends not just on its implementation but on how it is narrated, defended, and resourced

by district leadership. Perceptions of rigor, fairness, and outcomes shape its adoption and

scope. While often described as 'not ideal but necessary,' the program is widely respected

by those who use it well. This category situates MoOpt within the political, cultural, and

philosophical context of contemporary public education.

Appendix K

Sample Theoretical Memo

Theoretical Memo: Selection and Justification of Core Category

This memo documents the comparative analysis process through which Conditional Redemption was identified as the core category in this grounded theory study. Through constant comparison, memoing, and evaluation of fit with the four axial categories, several theoretical contenders emerged; each capturing key elements of the data but ultimately failing to account for the complex interplay between structure, identity, legitimacy, and educational re-engagement. This memo explains why Conditional Redemption best integrates these dimensions, and why alternative core categories, though plausible, proved insufficient.

Competing Core Categories Considered

1. **Resilience:** Resilience captured student perseverance and determination, but framed success as an internal trait rather than a co-constructed outcome. It lacked integration with structural and symbolic elements such as policy constraints or institutional validation. Thus, it could not explain why resilient students still failed in unsupportive environments.

2. **Re-engagement:** While it strongly reflected the emotional return to learning, re-engagement was limited in scope. It did not fully capture the contingent conditions that make sustained participation and success possible.

3. **Recovery from Educational Trauma:** Though relevant to student backgrounds, this frame overemphasized personal healing and underplayed structural design and institutional trust. It explained context, not transformation.

4. **Institutional Navigation:** Educators served as navigators, but this lens described their labor more than the student experience. It was also too procedural and failed to account for symbolic and motivational elements.

5. **Educational Redemption:** A near-match, Educational Redemption described the symbolic value of student success, but assumed redemption was automatically available. Conditional Redemption recognized that redemption was often earned only under certain enabling conditions.

6. **Legitimacy Seeking:** This frame aligned closely with one axial category but failed to integrate student motivation, relational trust, or structural supports. It described desire but not process.

7. **Student Agency and Ownership:** Important for re-engagement, this frame emphasized individual choice but not the scaffolding that makes agency viable in alternative settings.

8. **Belonging in Alternative Spaces:** This concept reflected classroom climate and emotional safety, but lacked connection to policy, assessment, and public recognition crucial to institutional outcomes.

9. **Constructing New Educational Identities:** This lens highlighted self-perception, but ignored the systemic and relational dynamics required for identity transformation to be validated or sustained.

10. Access to Opportunity Structures: This systemic lens explained access and pathways, but failed to address affective, relational, and legitimacy-related experiences central to student progress in MoOpt.

Why Conditional Redemption?

Conditional Redemption emerged as the most comprehensive and unifying theoretical core. It integrated all four axial categories: Educators as Advocates and Navigators, Structural Challenges and Institutional Gaps, Student Renewal and Re-engagement, and Program Identity and Legitimacy. It explained how student success was contingent but not inevitable and required alignment of relational, structural, symbolic, and motivational conditions. Unlike other categories, it addressed both institutional constraints and student identity reconstruction. Redemption was not a given; it had to be earned, recognized, and supported by the system. This theoretical framing best captured the lived realities of educators and students navigating MoOpt.