THE IMPACT OF THE TURNAROUND OPPORTUNITY SCHOOL

ON STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

A Thesis Presented to the Faculty
of
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In partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the Degree
of Master of Arts in Education

By
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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my loving husband Jeremy Pound. I could have never completed my Master of Arts degree without his constant patience for my late nights in class and weekends on my computer.

This work is also dedicated to my future children. This is proof that with hard work and determination, you can complete anything.

Finally, this work is dedicated to my fur babies. Thank you for keeping me company while I worked long nights and weekends to complete this next step in my education.
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ABSTRACT

The high school dropout rate has remained a critical concern of school districts across the nation. In California, the overall high school dropout rate in 2012 was 13.2% and reached 22.2% for at-risk minority groups. To increase graduation rates, many states have developed alternative education programs to make earning a high school diploma more accessible for at-risk populations. One alternative program, the Turnaround Opportunity School (TOPS) aims at remediating ninth- and tenth-grade high school students who are behind in credits and off-track for graduation. This transitional alternative education program began in 2011–2012 and is an attempt at increasing student achievement and graduation rates for ninth- and tenth-grade at-risk students. The present study assessed the impact of the TOPS program on increasing student achievement in terms of grade point average (GPA) and graduation rate. A paired sample t-test and a Pearson Chi-square analysis were used to determine if TOPS had an impact on student achievement and graduation rate. The results of the paired sample t-test revealed a significant difference in mean GPA before ($M= 1.09$, $SD=.93$) and during TOPS enrollment ($M= 2.50$, $SD= 2.08$). The results of the chi-square revealed a significant difference in the distribution of students who graduated and those who did not graduate. The TOPS program appears to have had a significant positive impact on student achievement in terms of GPA and graduation rate.
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to determine the effectiveness of the Turnaround Opportunity School (TOPS), an alternative education program designed at helping at-risk ninth- and tenth-grade students increase their grade point average (GPA) and stay on track to graduate from high school. Chapter I begins with a brief background of the high school dropout crisis, and the statement of the problem. The research question, hypotheses, and the significance of this study will be described. Also, the limitations and delimitations, and defining terminology relevant to this study will be presented.

Background of the Study

The United States is in the midst of a high school dropout crisis. Across the nation, there is a major focus on reducing the high school dropout rate and the percentage of students who do not complete high school. In the 2008–2009 school year, the average freshman graduation rate (AFGR) which measures the percentage of high school students who graduate from a comprehensive high school in four years was 75.5% (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2011). This percentage was lower in California where the average graduation rate in 2008–2009 was 71.0% (NCES, 2011). The study revealed an alarming trend; a quarter of all ninth grade students entering high school will not earn a diploma (NCES, 2011). The California
high school dropout rate in 2012 was 13.2%, and reached 22.2% for some at-risk minority cohorts (California Department of Education [CDE], 2012). Though high school dropout rates have decreased slightly over the past decade, the rates remain high for at-risk student populations.

The negative consequences of dropping out of high school can be costly, not only to the individual but to the government in general. High school dropouts have higher unemployment rates, higher mortality rates, lower wages, decreased standard of living, poorer health, increased dependence on public assistance, and higher incarceration rates in comparison to high school graduates (Belfield & Levin, 2007).

There are a number of reasons that categorize students as at-risk for dropping out of high school. These reasons range from life experiences and personal conflicts to more generational socioeconomic patterns and trends. Students who have dropped out of high school report that it was school, family, or work related reasons that ultimately lead to them quitting school (Bridgeland, DiIulio, & Morison, 2006; Rotermund, 2007). Regardless of the cause, high school students at-risk of dropping out are cause for concern among educators.

One approach to addressing the high school dropout crisis for at-risk student populations is providing alternative education paths. Alternative education programs provide at-risk students multiple paths to finish high school including credit remediation, an alternate school setting, or different learning approaches to better meet their individual and circumstantial needs. According to the 2007 report from the California Legislative Analyst, “State law authorizes three types of alternative
schools—continuation schools, community schools, and community day schools to serve high school students who are ‘at-risk’ of dropping out of school” (Hill, 2007, p. 3). Beyond that, local school districts can provide other paths or “safety nets” to help students complete their high school education. In 2007, between 10 and 15% of high school students were enrolled in one of the state mandated types of alternative education programs (Hill, 2007).

**Statement of Problem**

The high school dropout crisis remains a high priority for state education departments nationwide. In response to this crisis, there has been a drastic increase in alternative education programs (Hill, 2007). Many continuation schools and alternative education programs are becoming impacted and flooded with students who have been unsuccessful in a comprehensive high school. In California, there is a significant need for increased alternative education programs to help meet the needs of at-risk students and hopefully assist them in completing their high school education (Hill, 2007). However, current education accountability programs “do not permit an evaluation of whether participating students are making progress” (Hill, 2007, p. 3). Evaluation of alternative programs is critical to determining their impact on student achievement and graduation rates.

**Research Question**

What are the effects of the Turnaround Opportunity School on high school academic achievement and graduation rate?
Hypotheses

H1. There is no significant difference in GPA of ninth- and tenth-grade students between the periods prior to and after enrolling in the TOPS program.

H2. There is no significant difference in graduation rates between former students who participated in the TOPS program during the 2011–12 school year and former students who were enrolled in a traditional continuation school in the same district during the 2011–12 school year.

Significance of the Study

The objective of this study is to examine the effectiveness of the TOPS program, a new alternative education program implemented by a school district in the Central Valley of California. Program effectiveness will be determined in terms of GPA and graduation rate. The results of this study may help educators and policy makers determine whether transitional alternative education programs are successful in addressing the needs of at-risk high school students.

Limitations and Delimitations

Limitations

This study was limited to former ninth and tenth grade students enrolled in the TOPS program during the 2011–2014 school years.

Delimitations

For the purpose of this study, ethnicity, socioeconomic status (SES), gender, and special education status were not taken into consideration.
Definition of Terms

*Alternative education.* Education designed to provide alternative paths and approaches for students to complete their high school education.

*At-risk Student.* A student who is failing courses, behind in credits, and is not on track to graduate from high school. These students are at-risk of dropping out of high school.

*Continuation high school.* A type of alternative education program designed to help at-risk students earn credits at a faster pace with more flexible scheduling.

*High school dropout.* A student who does not successfully complete the requirements for high school graduation or completion and stops attending high school prior to earning a diploma or certificate of completion.

*Turnaround Opportunity School (TOPS).* A transitional alternative education program designed to assist failing ninth and tenth grade students make up courses they have failed, increase their overall academic achievement in terms of GPA, and graduate from high school.

*Transitional high school.* A type of alternative education program designed to help at-risk students recover from past deficiencies by making up failed courses before transitioning back to a regular comprehensive high school.

Summary

Chapter I presented the purpose, the research question, the hypotheses, and the significance of the study. Additionally, limitations, delimitations, and terms and
definitions were presented. Chapter II will present a review of the literature that is pertinent to alternative education and the high school dropout crisis.
CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The purpose of this study is to determine the effectiveness of the Turnaround Opportunity School (TOPS) in terms of student achievement and student graduation rates. This chapter will address the evolution of alternative education, modern alternative education, and transitional programs including the TOPS program. Additionally, a review of studies on at-risk students and successful alternative education programs will be presented.

Evolution of Alternative Education Programs

Alternative education programs were developed to provide students with more flexible opportunities to receive an education. Programs were designed to meet specific needs of at-risk students whether by providing more flexible instructional approaches, smaller class settings, or shorter school hours. Alternative education has developed over the past few decades and has expanded quickly. As stated in a recent Education Policy Brief from the Center for Evaluation and Education Policy, “Today, alternative schools may look different from their predecessors, but they exist because of the same philosophy: one size does not fit all” (Cable, Plucker, & Spradlin, 2009, p. 2).

The history of alternative schooling began in the United States in 1960s. Frustrated with the classic strict model of “common schools,” the “free school movement” began in the 1960s as an attempt to make learning more flexible,
obtainable, and unrestrictive. Though the free school movement faded away in the 1970s, a new education infrastructure that included alternative programs in addition to classic comprehensive “common schools” was created (Cable et al., 2009).

In the 1970s and 1980s, the definition of alternative schools expanded and diversified to resemble current alternative education. In California, statutes authorizing community schools at the county level were developed to serve students who were unsuccessful at a comprehensive high school (Hill, 2007). Often, the students who attended these early county alternative schools had been expelled from their original schools or were students who had been incarcerated in the juvenile justice system.

The popularity and attendance at alternative school programs decreased in the 1980s. In response to a decline in student achievement in the 1980s coupled with the looming pressure to compete internationally, a new education movement developed. This new movement focused on strengthening performance in core subjects like mathematics, science, English language arts, and social science (Urban & Wagoner, 2008).

Further, in the 1990s, another shift in educational law caused a shift in alternative education program policy. Mandatory expulsion laws in many states including California motivated education policy makers to push for the creation of community day schools as an alternate route to help at-risk students complete their high school education (Hill, 2007). Since then, county offices of education and local school districts have relied on alternative education programs as an approach to help
increase their high school graduation and completion rates. The result has caused a surge in alternative education programs across the nation and an expansion of the alternative education school (Hill, 2007).

**Modern Alternative Education**

The modern definition of alternative education in the United States is quite broad and encompasses a vast range of alternative programs. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2012), an alternative school is “a public elementary/secondary school that: 1) addresses needs of students that typically cannot be met in a regular school; 2) provides nontraditional education; 3) serves as an adjunct to a regular school; or 4) falls outside the categories of regular, special education, or vocational education” (para. 2).

In California, four models of alternative education programs are offered, which include: continuation schools, community day schools, county operated community schools, or independent study programs (EdSource, 2008). Continuation schools are often separate school environments that offer students more flexible and less restrictive paths at earning credits. Community day schools and county operated community schools are often operated by county offices of education and serve expelled students and those with disciplinary issues. Finally, independent study programs are often run by local school districts and include both short term and long term independent study programs where students can complete school work in a home setting at their own pace (EdSource, 2008). All of these models of alternative education have the same goal in mind: to help at-risk students who have not been
successful in a regular school setting successfully complete their high school education.

The popularity and overall attendance of alternative education programs have drastically increased in the last two decades. According to an EdSource study from 2008, each year more than 10% of public high school students in California attend some type of alternative program. A report from the California Legislative Analyst concluded that in the 2007 school year, there were 851 alternative schools in California or about “2 schools for each district in the state that serves high school students” (Hill, 2007, p. 9). Of these 851 schools, 501 were classified as continuation type alternative programs (Hill, 2007). In terms of the total number of students, accountability data showed that 116,551 students in California during the 2005–06 school year were attendees of a continuation school (EdSource, 2008). Consequently, more and more programs following the continuation model are being created across the state (Hill, 2007).

**Turnaround Opportunity School (TOPS)**

The TOPS program is an example of a new alternative education program that fits the continuation school model. The TOPS program was created by a central valley school district in California to meet the increasing needs of at-risk students. The program model is a combination of a continuation school and a ninth-grade transitional program; both research based approaches are designed to increase student achievement (Knoeppel, 2007; Stoddard, 2012). The concept behind a continuation school is that it provides an alternative, more flexible option for high school students
to earn their diplomas. Successful continuation schools incorporate an alternate school setting, shorter school day, smaller class sizes, and different instructional strategies (Knoeppel, 2007). These program qualities are incorporated into the TOPS program.

One of the main strategies behind the TOPS program is the idea of early remediation. TOPS began in the 2011–2012 school year as a program designed at remediating students who had fallen behind early in high school (within their freshman or sophomore year) and to help them earn back their credits and transfer back to a comprehensive site to graduate. In short, TOPS is a safety net to help prevent at-risk students from dropping out or transferring to an alternative continuation school (Modesto City Schools [MCS], 2013).

Students are referred to TOPS as both voluntary and involuntary transfers. The majority of the students who attend TOPS are by involuntary referral. Students who are referred to TOPS are behind in credits and are falling behind academically in school, and usually have either attendance or discipline issues at their regular site (MCS, 2013). In addition to being behind credits towards graduation, some of the most common reasons for these involuntary referrals to attend TOPS are: sixth step truancy, second offense fighting, second offense harassing of a student, second offense of being under the influence of a controlled substance, second offense of causing or attempting to cause damage to property, and having several discipline referrals and failure to remediate behavior (MCS, 2013).
The TOPS program is designed with several modifications from a regular education high school to help meet the needs of at-risk students who attend the program. These modifications include: smaller group instruction, direct instruction and computer-based instruction, a shorter school day, physical education daily, and faster paced credit recovery using computer based courses via Class.com (MCS, 2013). All of these program characteristics are designed to make earning a high school diploma less restrictive for these at-risk students, and many of these program modifications are research based strategies implemented at successful continuation schools (Knoeppel, 2007).

One of the main differences in the program design of TOPS and other more traditional continuation and remediation schools is that TOPS targets only ninth- and tenth-grade students and aims at transitioning those students back to their comprehensive sites (MCS, 2013). Early high school transitional programs have experienced success in increasing student achievement for at-risk students (Stoddard, 2012), making them more likely to graduate from high school.

The TOPS program is housed at two different high schools, and each site accepts referred students from the comprehensive high school sites within the same school district (MCS, 2013). Between 2011-2014, TOPS had accepted 434 students: 140 in 2011–2012; 143 in 2012–2013; and 151 in 2013–2014 (MCS, 2013). Since TOPS is a new approach at alternative education for the school district, determining program effectiveness becomes essential. The end goal is to help decrease the high
school dropout rate and increase the rate of graduation for the participating students (MCS, 2013).

**Review of Studies on Alternative Education**

**At-Risk Students**

In order to address the needs of at-risk students and better assist them in completing their education, the first step is to understand the underlying causes that lead to high school student dropouts. Meeker, Edmonson, and Fisher (2008) sought to determine the factors that prevent students from completing high school. The authors focused general equivalency diploma (GED) students in Texas who had dropped out of high school. There were 158 students who fit this description and thus were chosen to participate in the study. All of the students were asked to complete a survey containing open-ended questions, participated in focus groups, and completed semi-structured interviews.

The results of the study concluded that the top ten reasons why students dropped out of high school were: 1) pregnancy/parenting a child, 2) bad attitude/poor choices, 3) dysfunctional school/conflict with teachers, 4) dysfunctional home, 5) did not fit in, 6) working too many hours, 7) moved too often, 8) frequent discipline referrals, 9) peer pressure to leave, and 10) substance abuse. The study concluded that the majority of the reasons why students were at-risk of dropping out of high school were related to the school setting and personal home life which are often beyond the control of the school. The majority of factors that the respondents reported, however, were factors related to the school (Meeker et al., 2008).
Lemon and Watson (2011) sought to determine if potential high school dropouts could be identified early on the basis of various factors. The factors examined were: wellness, perceived stress, mattering, and at-risk status. Participants in the study consisted of a convenience sample of 177 students from a mid-sized high school in the southeastern part of the United States. The participants in the study were limited to students who submitted a permission slip to take the Five Factor Wellness Inventory Teenage Version, Student At-Risk Identification Scale Student Questionnaire, General Mattering Scale, and Perceived Stress Scale. Using a regression analysis, the results of the study revealed the following seven variables could significantly predict \( F(7, 167)= 12.89, p<.05 \) if a student was at-risk of dropping out of school: 1) perceived stress, 2) mattering, 3) coping self, 4) creative self, 5) physical self, 6) essential self, and 7) social self.

Beken, Williams, Combs, and Slate (2009) compared the achievement of at-risk students enrolled at traditional high schools to those enrolled in alternative education campuses. More specifically, the study sought to determine if differences existed in at-risk students’ mathematics and English language arts (ELA) achievement between traditional and alternative high schools in 2004–2005 and 2005–2006. Schools that met the requirement of having at least 70% at-risk student populations including both traditional and alternative schools were included in the study, totaling 84 schools over 2 academic years. Data were collected from these schools including student performance on the Exit Level Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) for both mathematics and ELA.
Data were analyzed by a Mann-Whitney U test. The 2004–2005 mean mathematics score for at-risk students at traditional schools was 63.57 ($SD = 11.12$) and for alternative school at-risk students was 42.02 ($SD = 21.12$). For 2004–2005 ELA, the mean for traditional school students was 77.72 ($SD = 8.35$) and 68.50 ($SD = 17.10$) for students at alternative sites. The researchers found a significant difference in scores between the groups ($U = 916.50, p < .001$). For the 2005–2006 school year, the mean score of at-risk students at a traditional school for mathematics was 66.04 ($SD = 11.12$) and for ELA was 78.82 ($SD = 8.08$). For alternative school students in 2005–2006, the mean mathematics score was 47.00 ($SD = 22.97$) and mean ELA score was 65.70 ($SD = 22.49$). Again, the researchers found a significant difference in scores between the groups ($U = 741.59, p < .001$).

The results showed that there was a significant difference in both mathematics and ELA performance. The at-risk students in a traditional school setting outperformed the at-risk students in the alternative school setting (Beken et al., 2009).

**Effective Alternative Education Programs**

Bush (2012) conducted a study that focused on commonalities in successful continuation schools. The study focused on 23 high performing continuation schools in California that: 1) met or exceeded federal Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) targets, 2) demonstrated high attendance rates, 3) demonstrated high pass rates on the California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE), and 4) demonstrated high graduation rates. From November 2009 to May 2010, the continuation schools were visited;
students, counselors and administrators were interviewed; and focus groups were conducted.

The goal of Bush’s study was to inform community and school-based policy makers of the common traits and program methods of high performing continuation schools. The results of the study revealed that a successful continuation school had the following: structural modifications such as an altered course structure or performance credit recovery; curriculum that was designed as either data-driven, backwards mapped to state standards, or computer-based; instructional methods including either direct instruction, project-based learning, or a no homework policy; and socio-emotional supports including modified discipline, a family culture, and student advisory program. A combination of these factors led to higher performance and higher achievement among students (Bush, 2012).

Gilson (2006) sought to identify characteristics of effective alternative high schools in Iowa. The study defined an effective alternative high school as one that had high levels of student retention and a high graduation rate. Schools were chosen to be included in the study based on their size and state classification; this included alternative high schools with a population between 26-545 students. Of the 108 total alternative high schools in the state of Iowa, 66 schools fell into this classification range. A questionnaire was sent to both administrators and teachers at the schools, and the questions “were formulated from research gathered dealing with both the theory of learning communities and from research conducted by Raywid and Wehlage et al.” (Gilson, 2006, p. 52).
Gilson (2006) concluded that the following characteristics were not positively related to graduation and retention rates: teacher choice, student choice, autonomous schools, learning community characteristics, and teacher and administrator length of service. The study also concluded that “smaller schools did have a negative relationship when compared to student retention” (Gilson, 2006, p. 48).

EdSource (2008) conducted a study of 68,371 students enrolled in California continuation schools during the 2005–2006 school year. Researches recorded the students’ high school completion status after attending an alternative school. The researchers noted commonalities among continuation students that made them less likely to complete high school; mainly, the continuation students “reached age 16 lacking sufficient academic credits to remain on track to graduate with their age cohort” (EdSource, 2008, p. 2). Furthermore, students who were referred to an alternative school program were “many times more likely to drop out than their peers in comprehensive high schools” since “students tend to remain within the alternative education system, transferring between alternative schools, or leave school altogether” (EdSource, 2008, p. 2). The study concluded that at-risk students who attend alternative education schools continue to experience adverse odds of completing high school once they have transferred to an alternative school program.

In short, there are both successes and obstacles within alternative schools, and only with the right program model and right program infrastructure in place will an alternative or continuation school positively affect student achievement (EdSource, 2008; Gilson, 2006).
Summary

In Chapter II, a brief history of alternative education was presented and the modern state of alternative education schools in California was described. Additionally, the TOPS program was defined and described. A review of the literature that is pertinent to alternative education and the high school dropout crisis was presented. Chapter III will describe the methodology used in this study.
CHAPTER III

RESEARCH DESIGN

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to determine the effectiveness of the Turnaround Opportunity School (TOPS) in terms of student achievement and student graduation rates. This chapter will address the methodology of this study in terms of: (a) selection of the sample population, (b) instrumentation, and (c) statistical analysis.

Sample Population

This study was conducted using the data from students who attended the TOPS program between the years 2011–2014. Students who attended the TOPS program from two different sites in the same school district located in the Central Valley of California were participants in this study. Student participants were limited to those who had attended the TOPS program as a means of an alternative program. In total, there were 434 students who attended TOPS for at least a semester and up to a full year between the 2011–2014 school years. This included 140 students in the 2011–2012 school year, 143 in 2012–2013, and 151 in 2013–2014. Each student was counted only once. Data on the grade point average (GPA) and graduation status of all 434 students were used for analysis.

Since this study examined the same cohort of students before and after program participation to determine changes in GPA, a control group of similar students was used to compare high school graduation status. In this case, 111 at-risk
students who attended a traditional continuation school in the same school district were used as a control. To minimize sample population error, only former students from both the TOPS program and the continuation school who entered into the program during their tenth grade year during the 2011–2012 school year were included in the high school graduation data. All of these students had an anticipated graduation date of June 2014.

**Instrumentation**

Data were collected using the district’s student information systems. The GPA before enrolling in TOPS and GPA after enrollment in TOPS were calculated for each student. A mean cumulative GPA for all high school semesters prior to entering TOPS was calculated for each student. Additionally, a mean cumulative GPA for all semesters during TOPS enrollment was calculated for each student. The total length of time that students were enrolled in TOPS varied from one semester to a full year.

For graduation completion status, former students from both TOPS and a traditional continuation school from the same district were used in the analysis. All student participants met the following criteria: first enrolled in TOPS or the traditional continuation school as a tenth grader in the 2011–2012 school year; was an at-risk student who was behind in credits; and had an anticipated gradation date of June 2014 if graduation requirements were met in a normal 4-year period. Students were recorded as either having graduated from high school or not having graduated. In total, there were 88 students from TOPS and 111 students from the traditional continuation school that met the criteria and were included in this study.
Statistical Analysis

To determine if there was a significant difference in student achievement, a paired $t$-test was used to determine if there was a change in student GPA after enrolling in TOPS. For this analysis, statistical significance was set at .05. To determine if there was a significant difference in graduation rates between former students enrolled in TOPS and former students enrolled at a traditional continuation school in the same district, a Pearson Chi-square test of Independence was used. For this analysis, statistical significance was set at .05.

Summary

This chapter discussed the methodology used in conducting this study. This included selection of sample population, instrumentation, and statistical analysis. Chapter IV will discuss the data collection, analysis, and results of this study.
CHAPTER IV
DATA COLLECTION AND RESULTS

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to determine the effectiveness of the Turnaround Opportunity School (TOPS) in terms of student achievement and student graduation rates. This chapter will explain the data collection, analysis, and results. Chapter V will present the summary, conclusions, implications, and recommendations for this study.

Analysis

The grade point averages (GPA) of 434 students who attended the TOPS program for at least one semester and up to a full year during the 2011–2014 school years were gathered. The cumulative GPA from all high school semesters before enrolling in TOPS was gathered for each student as well as a cumulative GPA for semesters after enrolling in TOPS. These values were used to test the first null hypothesis to determine if GPA changed during program participation.

The data for pre and post GPAs were entered into Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) for analysis. In order to determine if there was a significant change in mean GPA during participation in TOPS, a paired sample t-test was used to determine if there was evidence to reject or accept the first null hypothesis. An alpha level of .05 was used to determine significance.
To test the second null hypothesis and determine if there was a difference in graduation rates between students who participated in TOPS and students who participated in a traditional continuation school, the graduation data of students who began each program in 2011 as sophomores were gathered. In total, 88 students from TOPS and 111 students from a traditional continuation school in the same school district were included.

The graduation data of students from each program were entered into SPSS for analysis. To determine if there was a difference between the groups in the distribution of students who graduated and those who did not graduate, a Pearson Chi-square Test for Independence was used. For this test, an alpha level of .05 was established to determine significance.

**Findings Related to the Hypotheses**

H1. There is no significant difference in GPA of ninth- and tenth-grade students between the periods prior to and after enrolling in the TOPS program.

The results of the paired t-test indicated that there was a significant change ($p = .001$) in the mean GPA during participation in TOPS (see Table 1). The mean GPA of students during enrollment in TOPS between 2011–2014 ($M = 2.50, SD = 2.08$) was significantly higher than their mean GPA before entering the program ($M = 1.09, SD = .93$). Hence, the null hypothesis was rejected. The results suggest that there was an increase in mean GPA after attending TOPS. TOPS may have had a positive impact on student achievement in terms of increasing GPA during program participation.
Table 1

*Student GPA Before and During TOPS Enrollment*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>GPA before TOPS</td>
<td>434</td>
<td>1.09</td>
<td>.93</td>
<td>-13.28</td>
<td>.001*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GPA during TOPS</td>
<td>434</td>
<td>2.50</td>
<td>2.07</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05

H2: There is no significant difference in graduation rates between former students who participated in the TOPS during the 2011–2012 school year and former students who were enrolled in a traditional continuation school in the same district during the 2011–2012 school year.

The results of the chi-square analysis indicated that there was a significant difference (p = .001) in the distribution of the number of students who graduated and those who did not graduate. Students who started TOPS as sophomores in the 2011–2012 school year had a higher graduation rate (37.5%) than students who started in the traditional continuation school as sophomores during the same school year (2.7%). In total, of the 88 TOPS students in 2011-12, 33 students graduated and 55 did not. Of the 111 students from the traditional continuation school in 2011-12, 3 students graduated and 108 did not. Thus, the results of the Pearson Chi-square suggest that students who enrolled in TOPS had a statistically significant higher rate of high school graduation ($\chi^2 = 40.11, p = .001$). Therefore, the null hypothesis was rejected. The results suggest that TOPS may have had a positive impact on the graduation rate of students who participated in the program.
Summary

Chapter IV presented the results of the statistical analyzes on the impact of the TOPS on student achievement and graduation rate. There was a significant difference in mean GPA between the periods before and after enrolling in the program. Additionally, there was a significant difference in graduation rate between students who enrolled in TOPS and students who enrolled in a traditional continuation school. Chapter V will present the summary, conclusions, implications, and recommendations for this study.
CHAPTER V

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to determine the effectiveness of the Turnaround Opportunity School (TOPS) in terms of student achievement and student graduation rates. This chapter will present the summary, conclusions, implications, and recommendations.

Summary of Study

The high school dropout rate has remained a critical concern of school districts across the nation. In California, the overall high school dropout rate in 2012 was 13.2% and reached 22.2% for at-risk minority groups (CDE, 2012). The negative consequences of dropping out of high school are vast, ranging from increased rates of unemployment, incarceration, to public assistance dependence (Belfield & Levin, 2007). In an attempt to increase graduation rates, many states have developed alternative education programs to make earning a high school diploma more accessible for at-risk populations (Hill, 2007). One such alternative program, TOPS aims at remediating ninth- and tenth-grade high school students who are behind in credits and off-track for graduation. This transitional alternative education program began in 2011–2012 and is an attempt at increasing student achievement and graduation rates for ninth- and tenth-grade at-risk students.
The present study assessed the impact of the TOPS program on student achievement in terms of GPA and graduation rate.

**Conclusions**

A paired sample $t$-test was conducted to determine if there was a significant difference in GPA during enrollment in TOPS. All 434 students who were enrolled in TOPS between 2011–2014 were included in this study. Cumulative GPAs for participants prior to enrollment in TOPS as well as cumulative GPAs after enrolling in TOPS were gathered and entered into the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) program and an alpha level of .05 was set to determine significance for the paired $t$-test analysis. The result of the paired sample $t$-test revealed that there was a significant difference ($p = .001$) in mean GPA between the periods before ($M = 1.09$, $SD = .93$) and after enrolling in TOPS ($M = 2.50$, $SD = 2.08$); therefore, the null hypothesis was rejected. In summary, the results suggest that students who were enrolled in TOPS for at least a semester between 2011 and 2014 may have improved their overall GPA during participation in the program.

Additionally, to determine if students who participated in TOPS had a higher graduation rate, a Pearson Chi-square Test of Independence was calculated using the graduation status of 88 students who enrolled in TOPS in 2011 as sophomores and 111 students who enrolled in a traditional continuation school in the same district in 2011 as sophomores. Graduation completion data for all 199 students were entered into the SPSS program and the alpha level was set at .05 to determine significance. The results of the Pearson Chi-square Test of Independence revealed that there was a
significant difference in the distribution of students who graduated and those who did not graduate. Therefore, the null hypothesis was rejected as the analysis suggests that students who participated in TOPS had a higher graduation rate than students who participated in a traditional continuation school ($\chi^2 = 40.11, p = .001$).

**Implications**

The results of the paired sample $t$-test suggest that TOPS may have improved the GPAs and overall academic achievement of at-risk high school students. Though TOPS is a new alternative education program, the results of this study imply that the program may have a positive effect on the GPA of at-risk ninth and tenth grade students who enrolled in the program. Therefore, the researcher recommends that the program continue to be monitored to determine if these positive results continue.

Further, the results of the chi-square analysis suggest that students who enrolled in TOPS had a significantly higher graduation rate than students who enrolled in a traditional continuation school in the same district in the central valley of California. These results suggest that this transitional model of alternative education that targets at-risk students early on in their ninth and tenth grade year may be more effective at getting students on-track to graduate than a traditional continuation school. This conclusion was supported by the research of Stoddard (2012) who suggested that early transitional programs for high school students have had success in increasing student achievement for at-risk students.
Based on the results of this study, the researcher believes that students who are identified as at-risk of dropping out of high school and remediated within the first two years of high school have a greater chance of completing high school.

**Recommendations**

The TOPS does show significant promise in assisting at-risk ninth- and tenth-grade students in completing their high school education. However, this transitional alternative education program is still new and thus participants in this study were limited to the 434 students who were enrolled in the TOPS program between 2011 and 2014. Suggestions to further this study may include the following:

1. Conduct a study on a single year cohort of students of the same grade level who started TOPS the same year and record their GPA before, during, and after program participation to determine if student achievement increases are sustained after transitioning back to a comprehensive site.

2. Conduct a 5-year study to determine if the TOPS has a positive impact on GPA.

3. Conduct a qualitative study to determine what aspects of the TOPS program participating students found the most helpful at increasing achievement.
REFERENCES


