

ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION

Alternative Education Overview: What is Alternative Education?

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~ Introduction, Session 1~ Lecture Notes

Objective: Teachers will gain a basic understanding of alternative education and what it portends for youth at-risk of failure both academically and socially.

Intro: "Alternative education is a perspective, not a procedure or program. It is based upon the belief that there are many ways to become educated, as well as many types of environments and structures within which this may occur. Further, it recognizes that all people can be educated and that it is in society's interest to ensure that all are educated to at least...[a] general high school... level. To accomplish this requires that we provide a variety of structures and environments such that each person can find one that is sufficiently comfortable to facilitate progress." (Morley, 1991, p. 8)

Morley's definition implies that the primary goal of alternative education is to help young people become productive members of society. Furthermore, it assigns a large part of the responsibility for achieving that goal to the school system, suggesting that schools meet students' differing needs rather than expect them to conform to one particular educational environment. Alternative education proponents and other education reformers certainly view this goal as an important one (Morley, 1991; Raywid, 1994b). A long history of educational initiatives for students facing challenging situations is evidence of the belief in helping all students succeed.

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A second goal also drives the establishment of alternative education programs: the need to remove disruptive influences to create classrooms that are productive and safe. Many educators and policymakers recognize this need, but disapprove of discipline policies that merely facilitate the removal of suspended and expelled students from schools. Such removal often leaves these students without adult guidance or supervision (Jacobs, 1994).

Alternative education provides educational options to diverse student populations referred by local school districts, probation, and social services. The purpose of alternative education is to support students with programs that fit their individual needs. Alternative education programs offer non-traditional learning environments to help students grow academically and socially. A school district, an area vocational or technical school, a group of school districts or an intermediate unit such as a county schools office may implement alternative education programs.

More specifically, alternative education programs provide students who are disruptive in regular school programs or do not adhere to school norms (habitual truancy) with a sound educational course of study and counseling designed to modify their behavior and return them to the regular school curriculum. Alternative education programs for youth that are disruptive may operate outside the hours of the normal school day and on Saturdays. School districts that do not submit an application to operate an alternative education program for disruptive youth must provide basic education programs for these students in conformity with the requirements of the School Code, including days, hours, curriculum and certification requirements.

Eligible Students

A student who is disruptive poses a clear threat to the safety and welfare of other students or the school staff, who creates an unsafe school environment or whose behavior materially interferes with the learning of other students or disrupts the overall education process. A juvenile that poses a threat to the community and/or commits a crime that an adult can be tried for is eligible for services.

Alternative education programs for disruptive youth may admit students/juveniles that demonstrate any or all of the following conditions:

- (1) Disregard for school authority, including persistent violation of school policy and rules;
- (2) Display or use of controlled substances on school property or during school activities or in community;
- (3) Violent or threatening behavior on school property or during school-affiliated activities or in the community;
- (4) Possession of a weapon on school property or in the community,
- (5) Commission of a criminal act on school property or during school-affiliated activities or after school;
- (6) Misconduct that would merit suspension or expulsion under school policy; and
- (7) Habitual truancy

Students served through alternative education programs are usually secondary students (grades 7 through 12), although exceptions may occur for middle school students or for expelled younger students if the local program meets that student's educational needs. Unless they have been expelled, students under age 21 are eligible for these programs even though they exceed mandatory attendance age. The structure of the program that is created for disruptive youth must enable its students to make normal academic progress and pursue credits needed for graduation.

No student eligible for special education services pursuant to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (20 U.S.C. Section 1400 et seq.) shall be deemed a disruptive student unless state and school district education protocol determines that the disruption was or was not a manifestation of the disability. Any special education student placed in a disruptive youth program must be allowed to make normal academic progress in accord with his or her IEP.

Students assigned to any disruptive youth program must be provided with due process, in the form of an informal hearing in accord with state education code. An informal hearing should precede placement in the program. However, if the student's presence in the regular classroom poses a danger to persons or property or provides a disruption of the academic process, immediate placement in the alternative program for disruptive youth may occur with the informal hearing to follow as soon as practicable.

Alternative education also includes services for students returning from placements or who are on probation resulting from being adjudicated delinquent or who have been convicted of committing a crime in adult criminal proceedings.

Program Requirements

Program requirements are as follows and vary from state to state:

Programs must offer either twenty (20) hours of instruction per week or fewer hours of instruction per week covering at least four of the following curricular areas: language arts, math, science, social studies, health or life skills. Programs that provide fewer than twenty hours of instruction per week must demonstrate satisfactorily how normal academic progress will be achieved.

Programs must be developed in consultation with the faculty and administrative staff of the school and parents and members of the community.

Criteria to identify those eligible for placement in the program must be established.

The program may be used only when other established discipline methods have been used and have failed unless the seriousness of the behavior warrants immediate placement.

Participating students must be provided with a course of instruction that recognizes their special needs and prepares them for successful return to the regular school curriculum and/or completion of requirements for graduation.

Certification

School personnel assigned to an alternative education program for disruptive youth must possess appropriate state certification.

Progress Review

School districts that establish an alternative program for disruptive youth must adopt a policy for periodical review of each student to determine his or her readiness to return to the regular school curriculum. At a minimum, this review shall occur at the end of each semester that the student participates in the program.

Alternative Educational Settings

For the most part students who are disruptive are referred to or placed in four alternative education settings. Placement options are usually involuntary, however students can choose to attend a continuation/alternative education high school to better meet their needs. The four alternative educational settings explored in this session are in contrast to voluntary alternative education options such as free schools, magnet schools, charter schools, that cater to particular student, parent, and community interests. The four alternative education opportunities for secondary students are as follows:

Continuation/Alternative High School: Continuation high schools serve local school district students who have (a) committed an act which warranted suspension or expulsion from their school, or (b) who have been habitually truant or irregular in attendance from instruction. Continuation high schools and classes provide an opportunity for students to complete academic courses of instruction to graduate from high school. The program of instruction emphasizes independent study, regional occupation programs, work-study, career counseling, and job placement services as a supplement to classroom instruction. Faculty members at continuation schools offer extensive guidance services to meet the special academic and social needs of the students.

Community (Day) School/Center: Community (Day) School programs serve expelled and at-risk students at regional locations. Students are typically enrolled for one semester up to one year. Frequently students stay longer.

Community (Day) Schools provide an alternative learning environment with small classes, individualized instruction, a focus on healthy lifestyle, and pro-social skills. Though removed to regional locations, students at Community (Day) Schools usually follow their home district course of study. Community Day School/Center characterizes the placement option for students referred by the courts or county agencies in California. For expelled youth, placement options and name of the setting may vary from state to state.

Short Term Locked Facilities (Juvenile Hall Court Schools/Ranches/Youth Centers): Youth are referred to Juvenile Court Schools/Youth Centers by probation, social services and the attendance school board. Education for youth detained in juvenile hall is provided through court schools. Students have an average stay of 15-20 days. Curriculum is designed and delivered in complete daily lessons. In take assessments assist teachers in developing individualized learning programs. More comprehensive programming (six months to a year) may be provided to youth detained in a Youth Center. This extended length of stay allows teachers to provide more in-depth instruction in basic education and elective courses.

Long Term Locked Facilities (Youth Detention or Ranch Facilities): The state operates schools for the reception of wards of the juvenile court and other persons committed to the department. The objective of the program is to improve the academic (reading, writing, and math), vocational (training in marketable skill, job placement), and life survival skills (consumer economics, family life, personal and social adjustment) of each ward so as to enable them to return to the community as productive citizens. The education program at locked facilities must be responsive to the needs of all wards of the state, including those who have disabilities or are limited-English speaking.

Successful Program Components

In all of the above settings education can generally be characterized as proactive and positive (note: negative aspects of lock down facilities will be explored in sessions associated with this module). Teachers, counselors, probation officers, mental health professionals, and other related service personnel work tirelessly to provide services to help students grow personally and academically. The following are key areas that professionals focus on when helping students in alternative educational environments.

Obtaining a high school diploma or GED: Professionals associated with alternative education want students to graduate from high school with a diploma or GED. Graduating from high school is a clear indicator of potential for success later in life. Students who graduate from high school have learned to set goals, delay gratification, and persevere; all attributes needed to be successful.

Life survival skills: Professionals in alternative education environments spend an inordinate amount of time helping students take responsibility for their behavior. Social skills, life survival, substance abuse, tattoo removal, parenting, and gang suppression programs provide opportunities for adolescents to take more control of their lives; thus helping them resist negative influences and pressure from peers and adults.

Vocational counseling: Students are exposed to career options and given opportunities to explore their options through on the job training, regional occupational programs or school and business partnerships.

Training in marketable skills: Students in alternative education settings often profit from learning an employable skill. For many students this is equally as important to obtaining a high school diploma.

Key Features of Successful Alternative Education Programs

The most easily recognized aspects of a successful school or program include such features as its culture or climate, organizational structure, curriculum and instruction, and links to other programs and services.

Successful programs vary in their specific features because program creators design each one to meet the needs of a unique student population.

Developing a prescription that will guarantee the success of any program, therefore, is an impossible task. However, proponents have extracted several general features that they consider central to success (Butchart, 1986; Jacobs, 1994; Kadel, 1994; Kershaw & Blank, 1993; Morley, 1991; Raywid, 1994a; Rogers, 1991). Table 1 describes the most frequently named features.

School Culture

Choice in Involvement: Students, teachers and staff choose to be at the school: they are not placed there as a "final option." Choosing to attend the school fosters feelings of ownership and commitment to the school, facilitating a sense of community.

Focus on the Whole Student: Alternative schools focus on personal, social, emotional, and academic development. Many programs also provide, or make available, services students may need to stay in school, such as counseling or day care.

Warm, Caring Relationships: Warm, caring relationships with teachers are a central part of the alternative school culture. Similar relationships are also fostered among students in order to create a supportive peer culture.

Expanded Teacher Roles: Teachers act not only as teachers, but also as advisors, mentors, and counselors.

Sense of Community: Alternative education programs strive to create a sense of community among teachers, staff, and students that fosters the relationships described above as well as student affiliation with the school.

High Student Expectations: Teachers have high expectations for students,

but these expectations are flexible, allowing for change according to student needs.

Organizational Structure

Small Size: To facilitate the personal attention necessary to foster a sense of community in the alternative school, both schools and classes are small.

Ideally, student/teacher ratios should be 10:1 or smaller, and not more than 15:1 (Jacobs, 1994).

Relative Autonomy: Most successful alternative education programs have some degree of freedom from standard district operating procedures.

Teachers, and often students, participate in management and decision making, both in establishing the school's goals and direction and in its ongoing functioning.

Comprehensive Programs: Alternative education programs include experiential learning and vocational components to link what the students learn in school with their future life and work.

Counseling: Counseling programs are an integral part of the curriculum.

They are not limited to academic issues, but help students deal with problems and events both in school and in their daily lives.

Safe Environment: Alternative schools have a structured school environment and strict behavioral expectations that are clear to students and staff. Discipline is administered in a fair and consistent manner.

Separation from Traditional School: Programs achieve separation either by establishing themselves in a distinct area of the traditional school (such as a particular wing) or by moving to a different location entirely.

Curriculum and Instruction

Academic Innovation: Programs give teachers flexibility in designing strategies and methods that will work for their students. Specific strategies include individual learning, cooperative learning, competency based learning, team teaching, peer tutoring, teaching to multiple intelligences, and an absence of tracking. Curriculum varies, ranging from programs that emphasize basic skills, to those that focus more on personal development and behavior.

System-wide Features

School Linked Services: Parental involvement, community involvement, and access to basic health and social services are important features in many programs.

Alternative Education School Philosophy

The alternative program's underlying mission or philosophy also has an impact on its effectiveness. Raywid (1990) identified three categories of alternative programs, based on their underlying assumptions or goals:

True educational alternatives.

Based on the theory that all students can learn if provided with the right educational environment, these programs strive to meet students' needs in

order to help them succeed.

Alternative discipline programs.

These "last chance" programs for disruptive students focus on behavior modification. They attempt to change students and return them to their traditional schools or classrooms.

Therapeutic programs.

Like the second type, these programs assume that students need to change to succeed in traditional schools. They elicit change through counseling, rather than behavior modification.

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Reflections/Activities:

Take a look at the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention website in the reference section of this session. Identify an area of interest and do a one or two page summary. Share your summary in small groups.

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Rarely are alternative education programs available as a proactive choice to students or parents before serious problems develop in middle or high school. For example, at Tall Oaks Vocational High School in Bowie, Maryland, most of the 175 students currently enrolled dropped out or were suspended or expelled from their home schools before applying to and being admitted to the school. At Muncaster Challenge, an alternative middle school in Rockville, Maryland, all of the students currently attending were expelled from their assigned schools before being admitted to this alternative setting. Although both of these alternative public schools provide intensive, individualized services to youth, failure in traditional middle school and high school programs was a prerequisite for admission. For many students not experiencing success in traditional secondary public schools, limited options exist.

In contrast to alternative education as a "last chance" or a punitive response to behavioral difficulties in the public school, we believe that alternatives can and should be positive, proactive responses to the needs of children and families for whom existing school structures are a bad fit. Alternative education can promote excellence and high expectations within a nontraditional school setting.

From Cultural Transmission to Progressive Problem-Solving Models

U.S. public schools have been dominated by a cultural transmission model of schooling during most of the twentieth century. Schools have seen their primary purpose as transmitting knowledge, skills, and the social and moral rules of the culture (Kohlberg and Mayer 1972). However, structural changes in the life experiences of children and an increasingly diverse school population call for additional choices and options in public education.

During the past twenty years there has been a steady decline in the amount of time parents can give to their school-aged children. In 1989, nearly 70 percent of all children and adolescents in the United States lived either in two-parent families with both parents working or in single parent families (Hernandez 1993). Consequently, the time and supervision available from caring adults for many youth during nonschool hours is limited. In addition to this structural change, the schools have become increasingly diverse. Population projections by the Bureau of the Census indicate that the number of black and Hispanic children in the United States is expected to rise from 26 percent in 1990 to 34 percent in 2010 (Hernandez 1993). That dramatic increase comes at a time when schools are struggling with the over-representation of African American and Hispanic youth in special education and among those suspended or excluded from school (Leone 1997). One alternative to the traditional cultural-transmission model of schooling that may be more appropriate for some students has been referred to as progressive education. Rooted in the ideas of John Dewey, the purpose of education in this model is problem solving (Kohlberg and Mayer 1972). From this perspective, literacy, mathematical skills, and other core knowledge areas all become the basis for problem-solving activities. A progressive education model of schooling with problem solving as a central feature can become a key element of successful alternative education programs.

Elements of Effective Programs

Alternative education needs to become a meaningful alternative to traditional, contemporary public schooling. Successful programs cannot become dumping grounds for students or places for low-performing teachers. Rather, quality alternative education programs should have many of the same high expectations, standards, and outcomes valued in more traditional school settings.

Some consensus exists concerning the elements that are needed to ensure

success in alternative programs. Schorr (1997) summarizes these elements as follows:

1. Clear focus on academic learning. The most promising schools have a clear focus on academic learning that combines high academic standards with engaging and creative instruction. In her autobiographical account of the development of an alternative elementary school in Chicago, Marva Collins describes how she was able to promote high academic standards for students from the most disadvantaged neighborhoods in the city (Collins and Tamarkin 1990). Students in her alternative school, Westside Preparatory, were able to perform well above what prevailing popular opinion and studies projected for disadvantaged students. At Westside, instruction was geared to keep students engaged in learning. Teachers were energetic, took few breaks, and taught a challenging curriculum.
2. Ambitious professional development. Successful schools provide teachers with stimulating, ongoing professional development activities that help teachers to maintain an academic focus, enhance teaching strategies, and develop alternative instructional methods. Properly designed staff development involves teacher input, work with colleagues, and opportunities to visit and observe teaching in other settings. When given opportunities to examine differences between instructional aspirations and actual practice, teachers will achieve what they aspire to do, provided that they have adequate staff development and support.
3. Strong level of autonomy and professional decision-making. Partly in response to sluggish and inefficient bureaucracies, reformers in education and social services believe that effective service delivery requires decision-making at the service delivery level (Schorr 1997; Fullan and Hargreaves 1996). Decisions about staffing, leadership, budgets, scheduling, curriculum, and pedagogy need to be made by teaching and support staff who have direct contact with students. Effective schools provide autonomy that builds trust and loyalty among staff. Further, giving staff a voice in decision-making promotes creativity and instructional excellence (Collins and Tamarkin 1990).
4. Sense of community. Research suggests that schools that focus on the creation and maintenance of intentional communities are more likely to succeed than bureaucratically organized schools (Schorr 1997). Within effective school communities, students and staff share expectations for learning, and students are encouraged to take a variety of courses and activities that enable them to pursue their interests and aspirations.

Rethinking Assumptions

The elements identified above provide the foundation for a successful alternative education program. In addition to a progressive education orientation that has problem solving as an organizing framework, alternative education programs need to identify essential elements of the curriculum and how the program links with other agencies and services for youth. For

example, some youths and families who may choose alternative education will have social service or mental health needs. Finding ways to give students and parents access to these services and avoid duplication of efforts is important.

Additionally, alternative education programs need to find ways of linking their classrooms and instructional experiences to the community. Within local and regional communities are people, businesses, museums, libraries, and agencies that can provide information and learning experiences for youth. These same resources can also serve as a bridge to postsecondary education or training and employment for students in the alternative school setting.

Alternative education should have a well-defined place within public schools and within communities. Enrollment in alternative education programs should be an option for students who, for whatever reason, experience difficulty with large, and sometimes impersonal, middle schools and high schools. Educators, program developers, teacher trainers, and researchers need to rethink the assumptions we make about alternative education. For too long, professionals have adopted a "deficit" model in examining the needs of children and adolescents who fail in and disrupt traditional school settings. It is time to develop academically rigorous, engaging alternative schools.

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