Educating Students with Disabilities in Alternative Schools:

Challenges and Opportunities for School Leaders

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Alternative schools are designed to educate students who have not been successful in the traditional school setting. These schools tend to have low teacher to student ratios and provide more personalized instruction. The Department of Education defines an alternative school as one that addresses the needs of students who are not successful in a regular school (Lehr & Lange, 2003). Alternative schools have been classified as one of three types: Type I schools, considered magnet schools, typically employ an application process; Type II schools, ones that provide educational services to students on long term suspension or expulsion; and Type III schools, remedial in nature and using a therapeutic approach to transition students back into their traditional school (Lehr & Lange, 2003).

While alternative schools existed as early as the 1920s, their numbers have increased dramatically in the last 10 years. The reason for this sudden increase could be due to the inception of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (Gable, Bullock & Evans, 2006). Graduation standards have been developed that have required school districts to ensure that all students are progressing. Students with disabilities and those who commit major discipline infractions must meet the same standards as the general student population. For this reason, many of these students are transitioned to an alternative school either by their choice or the school divisions' placement.

When students with disabilities are educated at an alternative school, two issues arise. The first is whether the alternative school is an appropriate setting for the student. Students with disabilities have a right to a free and appropriate public education under the law. The second issue is whether the alternative school is the less restrictive environment for the student.

These questions must be addressed when the IEP team meets to develop the student's educational plan. The educational requirements of students with disabilities who are placed at alternative school for disciplinary reasons may become a secondary issue (Lehr & Lange, 2003). Students with disabilities attending alternative school should be provided the proper resources to meet their needs.

The future of alternative education relies on the success of the students who attend these schools. Dropout rates will need to be reduced and a greater number of students will need to meet the requirements for graduation. High expectations and standards must be maintained in a flexible environment for student success (Lehr & Lange, 2003). Qualified staff members will need to work with a variety of students to provide academic and social supports. Alternative schools cannot be judged on academics alone. These schools develop students socially, emotionally, vocationally, and academically (Lehr & Lange, 2003). Greater exploration is needed to provide data that can lead to educational improvement in the field of alternative education for all students served.

The purpose of this page is to explore the challenges that arise when students with disabilities are educated in alternative schools. Studies will be reviewed and analyzed to identify common themes. A discussion of the themes will be presented along with current trends. The paper will conclude with implications and opportunities for educational leaders in the field of alternative education.

Atkins, T., & Bartuska, J. (2010). Considerations for the placement of youth with EBD in

alternative programs. *Beyond Behavior,* **19(2), 14-20.**

Atkins and Bartuska (2010) conducted a qualitative study of youth with emotional and behavioral disorders who had been placed in alternative schools. A brief description was given concerning the characteristics of alternative schools along with their rapid growth over the last 10 years. The author cited two congressional acts that had increased the need for alternative schools: the Gun Free Schools Act of 1994 and the IDEA Act of 1997, which allowed the placement of students with disabilities in alternative settings for a 45 day term. The expansion of alternative schools has also resulted in more students with disabilities being served. For this reason, the authors conducted the study to investigate three areas: the characteristics of youth with disabilities that are being served, the characteristics of the alternative education programs, and recommendations to improve the process for students with emotional and behavioral disorders (Atkins & Bartuska, 2010).

The study was conducted in three alternative schools located in Oregon. Data were gathered using qualitative techniques that included interviews and direct observations. While 16 students participated in the study, only nine received special education services through an IEP. The study was conducted over a year, and a cross-case analysis was done comparing the three schools. The schools varied in size, location, and how they received funding. Two of the schools were public while the third was private (Atkins & Bartuska, 2010). At all schools, the students, staff, and parents took part in the interview process.

The authors found that all three schools incorporated programs that addressed drug and alcohol abuse. The level of special education services varied at the three schools with one not having a certified special education teacher on staff. Also it was noted that all of the schools worked closely with the juvenile justice system. Three recommendations were made for parents and alternative school administrations. The first recommendation was that the IEP team should meet to determine the proper placement for disabled students in an alternative setting. The second was that the IEP team should then consider what services should be implemented and how the students' progress should be monitored. The final recommendation involved the exit and transition of students from the program. Items that should be considered are diploma types and the transition of students back into the regular school setting (Atkins & Bartuska, 2010).

The study identified key elements to consider in regards to FAPE. The researchers noted that each of the alternative programs varied due to location and the students who were served. The small number of students that participated in the study could be considered a limiting factor. Due to the uniqueness of the schools, it would be difficult to generalize these findings and then apply them to other schools. The overall design allowed the researchers to gain insight into each student's experience with alternative education. The selection of alternative schools that varied drastically was problematic. By selecting schools with similar demographics, the themes identified would be more generalizable for practitioners.

Foley, R. M., & Pang, L. (2006). Alternative education programs: Program and student

characteristics. *The High School Journal,* **89(3), 10-21.**

Foley and Pang (2006) conducted a quantitative study investigating the alternative education

programs in the state of Illinois. The two areas that were investigated were the characteristics of the alternative programs and the students being serviced. A brief history of the types of alternative schools was discussed which outlined the three major categories of alternative schools: Type I, magnet schools; Type II, alternative schools for disruptive students; and Type III, schools that remediate students so they can return to their base school (Foley & Pang, 2006). The authors also found that many of the alternative schools were small in size with fewer than 200 students. The most common reasons for youth entering the alternative school were behavior problems, suspension, academic failure, or having a disability. The authors stated that little data had been collected on the characteristics of the alternative schools in the state. The stated purpose of the study was to describe the governance, physical facilities, student population and support being provided (Foley & Pang, 2006).

The researchers identified 84 alternative schools in the state by contacting the state's department of education. Questionnaires were developed to gain information from each of the alternative schools. Six domains of interest were included in the questionnaire that was comprised of 31 questions (Foley & Pang, 2006). The domains investigated included "program administration, student population, program characteristics, program supports, characteristics of the staff, and characteristics of the schools leadership" (Foley & Pang, 2006, p. 12). Each school leader was provided a packet that included the questionnaire along with information on the purpose of the study. Of the 84 packets distributed, 50 were returned which equated to a 59% return rate (Foley & Pang, 2006). The results of the questionnaire were analyzed determining the mean and standard deviation for each of the six domains.

Analysis of the data revealed that the program typically used site base management practices and received approximately 50% of their funding from state grants. Facilities were typically stand-alone schools that were separate from base schools. The principals typically rated the facilities as good or excellent. One area of concern was found to be in the lack of libraries and science laboratories (Foley & Pang, 2006). The author also found that there was little parental support but the programs were supported by social workers and counselors. Student data revealed that 63% of those in the program were Caucasian. It was also found that students with disabilities comprised approximately 50% of the population. A general curriculum format was used in the alternative schools with programs to support work readiness and vocational education. The staff was typically composed of general education teachers with only five certified in special education. The school administration was found to have a general education certification (Foley & Pang, 2006).

The study was very well developed and included a large number of respondents. The six domains were inclusive and gave a broad picture of the alternative schools located in the state of Illinois. The use of quantitative data would allow for generalizations to be made concerning the characteristics of alternative schools and their students. The return rate of 59% also gave validity to the information gathered in the study. The questionnaire designed in the study addressed the themes that had been identified through literature review of alternative education by the researchers. By working with the Illinois State Board of Education, more opportunities were provided to gather data. The themes should be reviewed by those working with youth in an alternative setting.

Atkins, T., Hohnstein, S., & Roche, V. (2008). Perceptions of their new school: Students with and without disabilities changing to an alternative and charter school. *Journal of School Choice,* **2(1), 47-65. doi: 10.1080/15582150802007390.**

Atkins, Hohnstein, and Roche (2008) researched the perception of students who were attending alternative and charter schools. The researchers employed a quantitative design and collected data from students with and without disabilities. The three domains explored in the study were academic, behavioral, and social perception of the new school (Atkins et al., 2008). The authors discussed the growing number of students that were being served by alternative and charter schools. It was also stated that a growing number of these students are considered at risk. Atkins et al., (2008) states that "estimates show that 12 percent of students attending alternative and charter schools have an IEP" (p. 48). Typically these students have not been successful at their base school.

Alternative schools offer a second chance to these students in a more individualized setting. Alternative schools also act as a safety net for the school system by removing the most disruptive students (Atkins et al., 2008). Charter schools offer a slightly different opportunity for students. These schools provide students with smaller class size and more individualized instruction in specific academic areas such as math and science.

The students who participated in the study were in grades 6-10 and attended a military style alternative program. These students were enrolled in either an alternative school or charter school. Surveys were given to 128 students and the results of 117 students were used. There were 11 surveys that were excluded due to students marking "false" for all responses

(Atkins et al., 2008). The researchers believed that these students did not participate in good faith and any data provided would not be valid. Students with and without an IEP participated in the study. Responses given by the IEP students were compared to those that were not receiving special services. The researchers were interested in how the students with disabilities perceived their new school compared to students without disabilities.

Atkins et al. (2008) found that students with or without disabilities had similar responses to the survey. The majority of students had a positive perception of their new school. They also concluded that students with disabilities benefited the most by attending either an alternative or charter school. Areas that did not improve for students in the program included alcohol, drugs, and tobacco use. Overall, students felt that they were more successful academically and socially fin the new school (Atkins et al., 2008). The researchers based their conclusions on chi-square analysis of the survey responses.

The design of the study incorporated a large number of survey respondents. One hundred seventeen students participated and this added to the validity of the results. While the quantitative results could be generalized, the uniqueness of these schools would make it difficult. The majority of alternative and charter schools do not operate using a military design. The major theme that can be taken from the study is that students who feel connected to their school have positive attitudes.

Owens, L., & Konkol, L. (2004). Transitioning from alternative to traditional school settings: A student perspective. *Reclaiming Children and Youth,* 13(3), 173-176.

Owens and Konkol (2004) conducted a qualitative study to gather data on students'

perceptions of transitioning from an alternative school to a traditional school. The students who

participated in the study were identified as emotionally/behaviorally disabled. The researchers

were interested in the rise of the number of special education students served by alternative

schools. Alternative schools are more restrictive than traditional schools but offer smaller

classes and more individual attention (Owens & Konkol, 2004). These schools seem to offer an

ideal setting for students who need personalized instruction. Over time though, alternative

schools have been viewed by many as the school for the students who are not wanted at the

traditional high school. The researchers' purpose for the study was to gain an understanding of

students' perceptions of both alternative and traditional schools. In particular, they wanted to

identify obstructions students felt when transitioning back to a traditional school and what would

benefit them when transitioning back to a traditional school (Owens & Konkol, 2004).

The study took place in an alternative school located in the Midwest. Six students were

identified for the study, and each was placed at the school through the IEP process. Two focus

groups were established, which consisted of three students each. The first group was composed

of students who chose to remain at the alternative school. The second group was composed of

students who had been unsuccessful in transitioning into the traditional school and returned to

the alternative school. The researchers used open-ended interviews that were video and audio

taped. Field notes were taken by the researchers. The audio tapes were transcribed and reviewed

by the researcher and an independent reviewer to identify themes. Coding took place to identify

recurring themes and organize them. Themes within and between groups were also coded

(Owens & Konkol, 2004).

Owens and Konkol (2004) identified themes for each of the focus groups. Six themes were identified for the students who had chosen to remain at the alternative school. The themes were as follows: smaller class sizes, personal connection with teachers, remaining in a single class, familiarity with classmates, self-paced curriculum, and the inclusive setting at the school. The second group who had returned to the alternative school identified five themes. These themes included the following: not prepared to deal with anger issues, lack of relationship with teachers, class size was too large, lack of mentor, and lack of structure (Owens & Konkol, 2004). Each group identified small classes and relationships with teachers as a reason for success at the alternative school.

The perspectives of the students in this qualitative study raise questions that should be explored. A critical aspect of alternative education is transitioning students back into their base school. The results of this study would lead one to question this strategy. Students that have experienced failure at the base school may need to complete their studies in the alternative setting. The support and connections with their teachers would be difficult to duplicate in a traditional high school. The small number of participants does limit the generalizability of the study. More research should be conducted to determine if transitioning back into a traditional setting is a common fear for these students. Relationships with their teachers were a critical component of student success in the alternative school.

Bedka-Strain, K. (2010). Can you hear us now? Understanding student experiences in an

alternative school environment. (Doctoral Dissertation). Retrieved from http://www.

proquest.umi.com.arcane.lynchburg.edu; 2048.

Bedka-Strain (2010) conducted a research project that focused on student voices. These students were placed at an alternative school due to behavioral issues and were receiving special education services through an IEP. The alternative school's primary mission was to modify student behavior and provide students with a final placement before expulsion. The researcher indicated that by gaining insight from student's experiences at the alternative school, educators could develop intervention to improve using the students' experience. The stated problem for the study was that while alternative schools were being used to reduce dropout rates for at-risk students, no studies had provided data to support this idea (Bedka-Strain, 2010). She also indicated that this study would allow the students at the alternative school to have a voice in the educational process. Bedka-Strain (2010) identified one research question that would guide the study: "how do students in an alternative school understand their school experiences" (Bedka-Strain 2010, p. 11).

Bedka-Strain (2010) employed a qualitative design in the study to gain a deep understanding of the students' experiences. Collective case studies were done with eight students attending a New York alternative school. Students were interviewed individually and in two focus groups. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed at a later date. Students were also given digital cameras to record their experiences at the school (Bedka-Strain, 2010).

The researchers developed a list of questions based on the social-cognitive theory to gather data on the students' experiences at the school. The data were coded for the individuals, focus groups, and digital images. Three themes emerged when the data was analyzed: students identified themselves as being bad, students felt they had been treated unfairly, and the learning environment lacked resources and trained staff members (Bedka-Strain, 2010).

The themes that were identified by Bedka-Strain (2010) are very compelling. Students who believed they were not good people presented major challenges to the educators. Success for these students would be difficult to achieve until the students develop a positive self-image. The sense of unfairness could be due to the placement at the school. Each student had a major discipline infraction that led to his or her assignment at the school. Staff members may also view the students as problems due to their past history. Lack of staff training and resources has a direct impact on student learning. Students realized that they were different and the alternative school was not dramatically different from the traditional school (Bedka-Strain, 2010).

The use of case studies for the eight students allowed the researchers to gain an in-depth look into their experiences. Each student did bring with them his/her own perspectives and biases (Bedka-Strain, 2010). The researcher also stated that she was an alternative school educator, which could create biases. The study's results could be generalized to other Type II alternative schools that serve students with major discipline violations (Bedka-Strain, 2010). The themes identified in this study may exist in other alternative school settings. The researcher was able to make a connection with each of the students in the study. The methods selected were

appropriate for the purpose of the study. By creating relationships with the students the interviews were deeper and revealed their inner most feelings.

Discussion

Critical Evaluation

The review of the studies revealed common themes that each of the researchers found to be of interest. Each author discussed the rise of alternative schools in the past decade. Various reasons were given for this rise that included the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 and zero tolerance policies that had been instituted by many school divisions (Owens & Konkol, 2004). Another trend that was highlighted by each study was the increase of students with disabilities who are attending alternative schools. One researcher suggested that approximately one-third of students enrolled in alternative schools were those with disabilities (Atkins et al., 2008). This disproportionally is a concern to all educators, especially those working with students who have disabilities. The majority of the students with disabilities receive services for emotional and behavioral disabilities (Bedka-Strain, 2010).

The second theme common to each of the studies was student placement procedures. Alternative schools prior to 2000 operated primarily on a student choice basis. If students were not successful at the base school then the parents or IEP team could make recommendations for the students to attend an alternative school. These schools offered students small classes with more individualized instruction. Since 2001, many of the alternative schools have become a disciplinary setting (Lehr & Lange, 2003). Students are placed at an alternative school due to major disciplinary infractions. Alternative schools have become less desirable and more

restrictive (Lehr & Lange, 2003). Two policies that appear to have increased enrollment for students with disabilities in alternative schools are the "Gun Free School Act of 1994 and the Individual with Disabilities Education Act of 1997" (Atkins et al., 2010, p.14). These acts allowed schools to place students with disabilities in an alternative school on an interim basis.

The third theme that was found across the studies focused on students' needs. Students with disabilities identified three areas that supports were needed. The areas were academic, social, and transition services. Many of the students who attended the alternative schools were struggling academically. Gable et al. (2006) stated that students with emotional and behavioral disabilities tend to fall behind academically due to their removal from the classroom. The second area where students believed they needed support was with social issues. Students felt that they did not fit in and were different. Drug and alcohol abuse was also an area that students received counseling while attending alternative school (Atkins et al., 2010). The final support that students identified dealt with transitioning back to the traditional high school or into the workforce. Students developed relationships with their teachers at the alternative school and felt they fit in better. The larger classes and lack of structure were also a concern for the students (Owens & Konkol, 2004).

The fourth theme that was revealed dealt with the quality of staff that served students at the alternative schools. Students with disabilities have a variety of needs and required trained staff to assist them with educational and social aspects of their education. Foley and Pang (2006) found that a large number of educators working in the alternative schools were certified subject area teachers. Many times these teachers relied on the support of special education teachers at

the base school when working with students with disabilities. Lehr and Lange (2003) stated that quality instruction should be provided by both subject area and disability area certified teachers. Staff development opportunities should also be available to all members of the faculty. An area that is often overlooked when training alternative schools staff is mentoring. Students attending alternative schools need their teachers to develop a relationship with them as a mentor/teacher (Gable et al., 2006).

The final theme that was present in the studies was the question of success. Are alternative schools successful in educating the students they serve? Areas that need to be explored are the graduation rates for students attending alternative school. What types of diplomas are students receiving who are educated in an alternative setting? When students enter alternative schools, does the dropout rate decline for students with disabilities? Is there empirical evidence that alternative schools benefit students (Lehr & Lange, 2003)? Each study stressed the need for more information on the policies and practices of alternative schools that served students with disabilities.

Implications for Leaders

School leaders have a responsibility to provide appropriate opportunities for all students to achieve academic success. Students attending alternative schools should be afforded the same opportunities as those in the traditional school. It is imperative that those in leadership positions develop policies and procedures that are fair and comply with federal guidelines when identifying students who will attend alternative school. Services and supports should be

available to students with disabilities when they are placed in an alternative school. Left

unchecked, alternative schools could easily become holding

tanks for the students who are not wanted at the base school. FAPE and LRE should always

guide the decision to educate students with disabilities.

Providing qualified staff members and adequate facilities should also be a priority for

school leaders. Alternative schools cannot be the place that the weakest and least qualified staff

members are assigned. A competent and knowledgeable principal should lead the school. The

principal should have experience working with at-risk students and those with disabilities.

Teachers should be provided on-going staff development to assist them with working in this

unique environment. Leaders should also ensure that quality facilities are available for students

and staff at the alternative school. Students with disabilities struggle with self-esteem issues and

attending a school that is in disrepair will only compound these feelings.

Educational leaders are charged with the duty of evaluating their programs. Alternative

school practices should be examined critically. Practices that are found to be unsuccessful

should be eliminated. Empirical data should be used to determine which practices benefit the

students. When successful practices are identified that are researched based they should be

implemented with proper staff training (Gable et al., 2006). It is not acceptable to continue

educating students in the same fashion as has always been done. Leaders create a vision for

change and without this vision students with disabilities in the alternative school will continue to

struggle. More of the same is not the answer. Students deserve an opportunity to be successful

no matter where they are educated.

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