Shifting Our Gaze to the Strengths of Alternative Education Students

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Abstract: This study addresses the need for educators to understand what matters for alternative education students. Three male alternative education students were interviewed about their educational memories, realities and aspirations. Results revealed family influences prevailed over inhospitable socioeconomic factors in students' educational choices. Findings supported recommendations for alternative education teacher development.

The problem of this study is the need for contextually-grounded understanding among educators about what matters for alternative education (AE) students. This study is viewed through the lenses of (a) sociocultural diversity research, which views culture as dynamically and socially constructed (Orellana & Bowman, 2003); (b) strengths-based research, which empowers the participants to create social change (Kanaʻiaupuni, 2004); and (c) critical action research, which posits that improved understanding can be gained while changing the quality of life together in an existing situation. Critical action researchers (a) reject the positivist view that knowledge is based on a universal truth; (b) include the participants' (e.g., students, families) perspectives in educational decision making and interpretation of educational practices; and (c) link theory and practice (Kincheloe, 1991). To warrant the significance of this study, I will begin with a definition of terms followed by a brief overview of the history and literature of AE and juvenile justice education (JJE).

Definition of Terms

At-risk Student

The adolescent may be at risk of failing or dropping out of school if he or she exhibits high absenteeism, has been retained, performs poorly in class, has pre-violent disposition, is pregnant, lives in a low-income single-mother household, or arrives from another country (Fine, 1990).

Dropout

The term *dropout* is used to describe both the event of leaving school before graduating and the status of an individual who is not in school and who is not a graduate (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2001).

Urban Schools

Urban schools are characterized by a diverse student body, unsuccessful student achievement, and low school effectiveness. The opportunity to learn is drastically reduced due to poor resource distribution and other systemic forces (Artiles, 1996). The urban schools are part of the mainstream system that uses the standard curriculum and graduation diploma.

Alternative Education

AE refers to the portion of the public school system that is "responsible for the design and implementation of educational alternatives for students who are unsuccessful in the traditional public school system" (Miami-Dade County Public Schools [M-DCPS], 2004).

Alternative Schools

AS are specialized AE programs outside of the mainstream public school system with (a) their own administration and personnel, (b) a voluntary option, and (c) community feedback

(Friedrich, 1997). AS are based on the philosophy that each student brings unique circumstances to the educational setting.

Brief Overview

Before the 1960s, our country had educational alternatives (e.g., private, parochial, and home). However, the social criticism and educational reform movement of the 1960s supplied the ideological momentum for public AS of choice, which were initially continuation, dropout, pregnancy, and evening schools. These remain the most common and ultimately serve students from low-income communities, who are disruptive and disinterested in school (Friedrich, 1997).

The failure of the public education system in the early 1970s led to widespread recommendations for AE to meet students' needs by providing (a) for the community needs, (b) more focused instructional programs, (c) a shared purpose and greater autonomy for its schools, and (d) smaller, more personalized schools. Additionally, the late 1980s offered support for AE within the framework of restructuring schools and school choice as a result of several national reports (Friedrich, 1997).

The U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency (OJJDP), first promoted AE programs in the 1980s based on the argument that schools could play a significant role in curbing youth crime. AS could remove disruptive students from traditional public schools and provide them with a chance for success in a smaller, more supportive, and less structured environment. Theoretically, students who attend AS are believed to have better self-esteem, attendance, and performance, and feel less alienated toward school (Cox, 1999).

Since the 1980s, youth educational placement has become greatly varied among states in special legislation governing juvenile justice education, curriculum consistency, expenditures per pupil, teacher-student ratio, and percentage of students in special education (Wolford, 2000). In 1998, the Florida Department of Education (FDOE) addressed these inconsistencies by generating a research-driven system to develop the most promising practices in juvenile justice education in the state. The Juvenile Justice Educational Enhancement Program (JJEEP) is currently responsible for conducting research that identifies, validates, and implements best practices in Florida's juvenile facilities for the successful transition of juveniles into communities, schools, and work (Blomberg & Waldo, 2001).

Review of the Literature

General and special education literature agree that AS must live up to their name by eliminating the mindset that obscures social issues and doing something new and exciting for those who are unsuccessful in traditional settings. Confirming the importance of social factors will strengthen community-school relations and our society in the long run (e.g., Groves, 1998; Tobin & Sprague, 2001). Offering AE teacher development will improve the quality of teacher-student relationships in AS. Moreover, the involvement of caregivers is critical to the stability of AE programs' effects, but is often overlooked (e.g., King, Silvery, Holliday, & Johnston, 1998). Robust studies on the effectiveness of AE programs are minimal and report mixed results on the conditions necessary for successful AS (e.g., Guerin & Denti, 1999). Future research should address the promising, yet not fully-established effectiveness of AE programs in diverse cultural settings and in educating the less resilient AE students (Gold, 1995).

Since most delinquents 16 and over drop out and do not successfully return to school after release from a correctional facility, the literature strongly suggests developing nontraditional ways for motivating students to return to school through strategies for rehabilitation rather than discipline (e.g., Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention [OJJDP], 1994). The thrust is to replace the negative with prosocial peer contexts, actively

include the parent, and promote collaboration among those who work with at-risk youth in juvenile justice, education, mental health, and social work. Quality education and educators are considered a determining factor in reducing recidivism (i.e., repeated incarceration), since juveniles in correctional facilities exhibit poor academic achievement, especially in reading. The old paradigm that basic skills must be learned before more demanding tasks are given is debunked and replaced by a new paradigm based on the assumption that all (e.g., educationally disadvantaged) students can succeed and will profit from more challenging tasks. Promising practices include ongoing professional development for teachers involved with students in the juvenile justice system. Instructional approaches for effective rehabilitation are described as nontraditional, motivational, and immediately responsive to the students. Correctional rehabilitation and education research has shown inconclusive results for 25 years but concludes that more scientifically-designed, robust evaluations of effective educational programs and practices are required for legislative funding and policy changes to be made. With more than 200 JJE programs in Florida alone, the ability to recognize, build consensus on, and disseminate unambiguous research-validated curricula, teaching strategies, and methodologies for the juvenile corrections field is critical (Blomberg & Waldo, 2001; Wolford, 2000).

Significance

A significance of this study lies in the future of our country and whether we are willing to continue to imprison 2,085,620 prisoners a year of which (a) 3,405 per 100,000 were Black males in 2003; (b) 41% had not completed high school; and (c) between 1991 and 1997, there was a 44% increase in individuals who entered State prisons without a high school diploma (Office of Justice Programs, 2003).

Educators must understand how to make school an exciting, meaningful place for AE students who are disproportionately dropouts and recidivists. NCES (2001) reports the most common reasons given for the lack of educational success are failing, dislike for school, conflicts with teachers, or suspension and expulsion. Having to become self-sufficient at an early age, homelessness, learning disabilities, drug and alcohol abuse, illiteracy, teenage pregnancy, and mental illness are closely related to dropping out. This research shows preparing teachers to understand the ramifications of AE students' place-bound educational realities is critical (Kincheloe & Pinar, 1991).

Even though progress was made during the 1970s and 1980s in reducing the number of high school dropouts, the rates were stagnant for 10 years. From 1990 to 2001, 347,000 and 544,000 students dropped out of high school each year, and they were six times more likely to be the students living in low-income families (i.e., lowest 20% of all family incomes). In 2001, 3.8 million (10.7%) of the 35.2 million 16- to 24-year-olds were not enrolled in a high school program (NCES, 2001). The research literature (e.g., Gold, 1995; OJJDP, 1994) recommends changes for more successful AS, but the statistics reveal that everyday reality remains the same for the AE students. Therefore, alternative solutions may question fixed social categories (e.g., at-risk, learning disabled) and gaze on the insights and strengths of the AE students rather than focusing on their differences as static deficits (Kanaʻiaupuni, 2004; Orellana & Bowman, 2003).

Research Questions

The study's design evolved from two questions: (a) How can the educational memories of AE students enlighten educators to the social factors that affect the students' educational choices? and (b) How can the present realities and future aspirations of AE students inform educators toward the development of more quality teacher-student and community-school relationships?

Method

  This research study is informed by a process-focused (i.e., critically interrogates standard social categories) qualitative research viewpoint (Orellana & Bowman, 2003). Qualitative researchers ground (i.e., develop) theory by analyzing data to discover themes (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2003). The autobiographical nature of the interview used in this study justifies the narrative style of delivery in the method and results sections (hooks, 1994). The autobiographical method is one in which the constructions of ourselves are linked with the constructions of others as a prerequisite for knowing (Kincheloe & Pinar, 1991). The ongoing construction of the personal congruence (i.e., beliefs necessitate actions) of the teacher-as-researcher is linked with the constructions of the student for greater understanding of the educational strengths of AE students (Chubbuck, 2004).

  The sample for this study was three 10th grade male students from an AS in a large multicultural public school district, purposively chosen for homogeneity (i.e., typical AE male students). Chan was a 17-year-old, African-American/Latino. He was in the AS as a last resort, having been expelled from several schools. The other two participants were African Americans from a poor community. Shayn had been ordered to the AS by the judge as an aftercare student. Aftercare students attempt a return to society after a period of incarceration and school is part of their adjudication requirements. Kurf was also at the AS as a last resort, having been in trouble before his aunt heard about it and suggested that he try it.

  I was the teacher-as-researcher for this study, a White, upper-middle class, female from the South. I had taught at TROY for nine years and had developed an understanding that (a) one's beliefs and knowledge necessitate one's actions in the classroom; (b) theory and practice coexist; and (c) community-oriented classroom milieus increase living excitement for learning and quality teacher-student relationships (e.g., Freire, 1998).

  Consent forms were signed prior to the data collection, which included open-ended, semistructured interviews. I conducted the interviews as a native participant observer and videotaped them for greater reliability in transcription. I used a constant comparative method (i.e., a process of categorizing a designated unit of analysis, such as the sentence or paragraph) of qualitative data analysis to investigate commonalities in the interviewees' responses (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2003). Results could be transferred to similar contexts since the participants are typical of male AEOP students (Johnson, 1999).

Results and Discussion

  A consistent theme emerged from the data: influences from a family member to continue school prevailed over the abundance of inhospitable socioeconomic factors and unsuccessful educational opportunities in the students' lives. Chan said, "I can do what my brother did….He got a diploma (Pane, 2004, Appendix E, p. 2)." Shayn observed, "My dad taught me life is precious and education is key to everything and … my mom knew I was very smart and that I had common sense to find a school that could help with my educational benefits" (Pane, 2004, Appendix E, p. 7). He also said, "I just want to go to the University of Miami and then I want to go to a college up in Chicago where my cousin is because me and my cousin used to talk about education everyday….And he got a diploma and I was there" (Pane, 2004, Appendix E, p. 9). Kurf singled out the success of a cousin as a positive influence: "…My cousin go out to this school and it helped him a lot so I was like, yeah, that's him….he going do what I do….So it's like that. So that's how I got out here" (Pane, 2004, Appendix E, p. 12). Kurf, who had skipped school for a year remarked, "My auntie … real serious about education ….I tell my auntie I wasn't coming to summer school….She told me to come. I ain't feel like arguing or nuthin' so I

told her to come get me and bring me out here. She's a pharmacist" (Pane, 2004, Appendix E, p. 14). These stories support research that in the "expert-driven, top-down approach assumed by deficit models" (Orellana & Bowman, 2003, p. 26), AE family members have been excluded from the decision making and collaboration in their child's education. They are generally included in the conversation only when dealing with punitive measures.

From the students' perspectives, if we as educators validated the influence of family members in AE students' educational choices, improved teacher-student and community-school relations would inevitably result and work toward the betterment of our society in the long run. The results support recommendations in the literature: for the future stability of AE programs, pre-and in-service teacher education with the alternative educator in mind is needed and should actively involve students' caregivers. The overrepresentation of a recidivist population of Black students in the AS allows high achievers to justify a stereotypical image of the unsuccessful student. However, the results suggest that educators should become aware of the inhospitable socioeconomic factors that affect AE students' lives outside of school settings: lack of social and economic choices does not justify exclusion of family members' influence in educational choices.

Conclusions

Alternative perspectives from what AE students say, do, and desire in their educational realities and aspirations can diminish the dissonance between (a) student-teacher relationships, (b) teacher beliefs and quality classroom practices for AE student success, and (c) community and school educational goals. The findings in this study could be validated through collaboration and dissemination of future research to determine more effective responses to the educational strengths of the AE student. This could be done through extensive interviews with young people from a wide variety of backgrounds to explore specific experiences that helped them remain and succeed in school, despite the obstacles. One of the participants in this study said, "I just want to be the best I can be…live a successful life because I've been through good…and bad past experiences…I'm not a perfect person…I just gotta learn from my mistakes and not make them again" (Pane, 2004, Appendix E, p. 11). The answer is not quite that simple. We must dialogue with others for our words and thoughts to come together and transform us (Vygotsky, 1986). We cannot change if we are alone, but can in a community. Future research must continue to involve the memory of others for the sake of ourselves, our students,' and their families' place in the world (Kincheloe & Pinar, 1991).

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