An Examination of School Climate in Effective Alternative Programs

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ABSTRACT: The alternative education field lacks a common definition and has a major divide between differing philosophies of alternative programs; little empirical evidence is available to identify the components necessary to create effective alternative educational programs. Tremendous growth in the availability of alternative programs in the United States over the past several decades, however, illustrates continuing demand for such programs as well as the need for research on the characteristics that constitute effective alternative programs. In this article, the authors study exemplary alternative programs in 3 racially and economically diverse communities to characterize the school climate as viewed by the students and the staff. At this relatively early stage in the field of alternative education, it is essential to examine the similarities, as well as any differences, in the social climate of highly effective alternative programs and to consider their potential relationship with student academic and behavioral success. Furthermore, it is important to recognize how these findings might be one foundation for future inquiry and research on alternative education.

KEY WORDS: alternative schools, at-risk students, program effectiveness, school climate

EDUCATORS HAVE LONG struggled to understand why some students fail to thrive in traditional classroom settings. A number believe that the problems lie within the student. Indeed, the literature tells us that many students in alternative programs share behavioral traits and often are described as "cynical, suffering academic and behavioral adjustment problems in school, possessing antisocial attitudes and behaviors, lacking educational and/or career goals, and having problematic relationships with both family and peers" (Fuller & Sabatino, 1996, p. 295). Students in alternative programs are believed to be at risk of educational failure, as suggested by various risk factors including disruptive behavior, poor grades, suspension, and truancy (Kleiner, Porch, & Farris, 2002). While these children have characteristics that differ from the norm, this fact does not explain the cause of these differences or equally important, how to prevent and treat such differences.

Others argue that the problem does not lie within the student; instead, they believe that the traditional system of education is ineffective in meeting the diverse and rapidly changing needs of young people in today's society (Fizzell & Raywid, 1997). Many experts believe, as did Nicholas Hobbs (1994), that emotional problems in children are a symptom of a malfunctioning ecosystem rather than individual pathology. Followers of Hobbs' reeducation (RE-ED) philosophy advocate that adults have a responsibility not only to work with children, but also to change the system in order to facilitate their growth in areas of competence, independence, responsibility, and self-respect. Therefore, when a child fails to learn and grow, the fault lies not solely with the child but instead lies mainly with the system and with the adults responsible for it.

Regardless of the perspective on where failure to thrive originates, the reality is that many students will move beyond the tolerance level of teachers and school administrators, will be excluded from traditional schools, and will be referred to alternative schools. Advocates of both philosophies agree on the need for alternatives to traditional educational settings; however, the structure and the goals of these alternatives differ markedly depending on their philosophical foundation.

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For instance, if the philosophy is that the student needs to be changed, alternative programs seek to reform the student. If the philosophy is that the system needs to be changed, the alternative program provides innovative curriculum and instructional strategies to better meet the needs of the students. This basic philosophical difference has led to decades of controversy over what the primary focus of alternative education should be and who it should educate.

Alternative school programs as we know them today began in the 1960s as private alternatives to public education. These private alternative education initiatives were predominately in urban and suburban areas. In urban areas, the initiatives primarily focused on developing alternatives for students failing in public schools. For the most part, these urban programs served poor students from minority backgrounds. On the other hand, initiatives in suburban areas focused on reinventing the educational system through use of innovative approaches (Raywid, 1998).

The different philosophies provided the impetus for several movements within the U.S. educational system. Two of these movements were particularly popular. First, the free school movement based its political ideology and educational philosophy on the work of A. S. Neill, an innovative educator who founded Summerhill, a private residential school in Great Britain in 1921 (Conley, 2002). Neill believed that traditional schools confined students and did not respect the personal freedom that students needed in order to learn. The second movement, very popular in the American south, was the freedom school. The philosophy guiding freedom schools was that traditional schools were not appropriate for African-American students because traditional schools produced “subjects, not citizens” (Conley, p. 63). Therefore, the mission of the freedom school initiative was to “initiate a mental revolution by teaching reading, writing, and speaking skills through discussion of black history, the power structure, and building a movement to struggle against the latter” (Conley, p. 63).

With the growth in alternative programs came the challenge of defining alternative education. In 1994, Raywid developed a three-level classification for categorizing the range of alternative programs available in the United States: (a) Type I—schools that students choose to attend (e.g., magnet schools) that emphasize innovative programs and strategies; (b) Type II—schools also known as last chance schools that students are typically sent to as a last step before expulsion or detention; and (c) Type III—schools that are remedial and therapeutic in nature.

This categorization provided a structure for the discussion and study of alternative schools over the last decade. However, recent changes in the way schools and school districts are structured, led Raywid (1998) to redefine her structure in an attempt to better capture the complexities of alternative education today. This restructuring also has three levels:

1. Change the student—alternatives that attempt to fix the student. These schools are temporary assignments that are highly structured and often contain therapeutic components.
2. Change the school—highly innovative schools that focus on changing the curriculum and instructional approaches to traditional education. These schools are typified by a highly positive school climate.
3. Change the educational system—alternatives that attempt to make system-wide change in educational systems. Many of the approaches to education championed through advocates for these types of systems are in effect today and include the small-schools movement and the school-within-a-school movement.

The effectiveness of these alternative programs varies. Change-the-student programs, especially those that are punitive oriented, rarely actually change the student and most often become permanent rather than temporary placements. Change-the-school programs have mixed results. Students do respond to the alternative environment and seem to thrive academically and behaviorally, but often do not succeed when they return to the traditional setting, a fact that advocates use to show the need for change-the-educational-system programs. Finally, the change-the-educational system programs, which have been implemented in urban school districts in the United States, report early data showing positive results (Raywid, 1998).

Controversy persists, even given the last two decades of Raywid’s and others’ work in defining what an alternative program should be. Recent research indicates that states adopt their own definitions of what is meant by alternative education and only about half report the passage of legislation to address alternative education (Katsiyannis & Williams, 1998). In 2002, the U.S. Department of Education defined an alternative education school as a “public elementary/secondary school that addresses needs of students that typically cannot be met in a regular school, provides nontraditional education, serves as an adjunct to regular school, or falls outside the categories of regular, special education or vocational education (U.S. Department of Education, 2002, p. 55).

Although the field lacks a common definition and suffers a major divide in philosophies of alternative programs, the tremendous growth in the availability of these programs in the United States over the past several decades illustrates a continuing demand. One estimate puts the number of U.S. alternative programs at about 20,000 (Barr & Parrett, 2001), significantly higher than the estimated 464 programs in 1973 (Stuart, 1993). Further, the U.S. Department of Education reported that during the 2000–2001 school year, 39% of public school districts administered at least one alternative program for at-risk youth, and districts with high
minority enrollments and high poverty concentrations were more likely to have such programs (Kleiner et al., 2002).

Furthermore, recent changes in federal legislation have fueled our need to explore effective alternatives to traditional educational settings. With the 1997 Amendments to the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), alternative programs became mandated federal policy for placement of children with disabilities whose behavior is unacceptable in the traditional setting. In addition, the greater emphasis on the accountability of schools outlined by the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB; 2001) stresses the need to offer alternatives to programs that do not currently meet NCLB criteria and to create systems that will more effectively meet the needs of all students. Subsequently, it is now even more important that researchers, educators and other stakeholders establish and disseminate information about the components that characterize effective alternative programs.

Unfortunately, there is scant evidence on the characteristics of effective alternative programs. Observations of such programs have led to the identification of several components of effective alternative education (Quinn & Rutherford, 1998; Quinn, Rutherford, & Osher, 1999). Nevertheless, clearly “little is known about the overall current state of public alternative education across the nation” (Kleiner et al., 2002). Therefore, it is paramount to establish a body of research in this area.

In this study, we sought to address the void in this body of research by providing a foundation for a research agenda to identify the essential components of effective alternative programs. Through a grant from the Office of Special Education Programs at the U.S. Department of Education, we conducted a 4-year study of alternative education programs in three racially and economically diverse school districts with a focus on the characteristics, components, and outcomes of these programs. In this article, we discuss findings from the component of this study that examined school climate as viewed by the students who attend these schools and the faculty who teach and support students in the classroom.

Method

Program and Within-Program Site Selection

We used a variation of purposeful sampling, called extreme case sampling (Wiersma, 2000), to select three urban alternative school programs for this study. Field experts and members of the study’s expert panel recommended alternative programs recognized as exemplary that also had available data to show their effectiveness. This process yielded three alternative education systems. Schools providing day treatment were selected as the units of study across the three alternative programs. In total, 11 schools across the three programs were included in the study.

Program A is a county Department of Education Division of Alternative Education that provides programs and services at approximately 140 sites including alternative, correctional, and adult correctional education programs. The mission of this program is to care for, teach, and inspire all students to discover their potential, develop their character, and maximize their learning so they may successfully contribute to society. At the time of our study, this program had approximately 37 community day schools spread across five regions. One school was randomly selected from each region to ensure representation of the five areas of the county educational system.

Program B is a single day treatment site that is an approved private school funded by its state department of education and operated by a local university. One of its missions is to serve children and youth with educational disabilities, which at the time of the study numbered 84 students who were referred to the program by more than 40 surrounding school districts. In contrast, Program C is a nonprofit mental health agency chartered by the state and a special education program operating under the auspices of the local education service center; its mission is to help troubled and troubling children and their families build skills to grow and learn successfully. This program has nine day treatment centers that serve approximately 750 students, many of whom have been identified as severely emotionally disturbed. We excluded three of these centers from the study because they serve students with both cognitive delays and challenging behaviors.

Sample Selection

We desired a sample of at least 50 students for each program to ensure comparable sample sizes. The sampling frame for student participation consisted of students in grades 7–12 with several exclusions: (a) students who could not speak and read English, and (b) students who were significantly developmentally delayed. We also excluded several other students from Program A, such as students in contracted learning and from Program C, students in the custody of Child and Family Services. We selected all students who met the selection criteria in Program B for participation. Students who met selection criteria in Programs A and C were randomly selected for participation. Informed consent was obtained from all students and from parents as well in cases of students 17 years old or younger. In the end, the percentage of students consenting to participate in the study ranged from 70–90% by program. Participation rates, defined as the percentage of students in the original sample who both consented to participate and did participate by completing a student survey, ranged from 91–100% by program. Of the 147 students who participated 53 were in program A, 45 were in program B, and 49 were in program C.

The majority of the student participants were males (117), with only 29 female participants (1 missing). Of the 143 participants who responded to the question regarding age, 6%
reported being 11 years of age or younger, 19% reported being 12–13 years of age, 32% reported being 14–15 years of age, 20% reported being 16 years of age, and 13% reported being 17 years of age or older. Most students reported that they were Caucasian (34%) followed by African American (24%) and then Hispanic American (23%; term used on ESB was Spanish). The remaining students categorized themselves as Other (14%), American Indian or Alaskan Native (3%), and Asian American or Pacific Islander (2%).

We asked all teachers working with students in grades 7–12 in the 11 schools to complete the teacher Effective School Battery (ESB) survey (n = 152). By program, from 95%–100% of the teachers responded and agreed to participate. Of these teachers, between 88%–100% completed the survey totaling 76 in program A, 23 in program B, and 36 in program C (n = 135).

The gender of participating teachers was nearly even with 71 females and 64 males. A majority of staff reported being Caucasian (76%) followed by African American (15%) and Other (6%). Fewer than 3% of teachers reported being American Indian or Alaskan Native, or Hispanic American; no teachers reported being Asian American or Pacific Islander. With regard to academic qualification, most staff reported their education level as possessing a bachelor’s degree (43%) followed closely by a master’s degree or higher (38%). Small percentages of teachers reported having a fifth year certificate (12%) or less than a bachelor’s degree (7%). Most teachers (73%) reported being employed as regular full-time teachers.

**Instrument**

We used the ESB (Gottfredson, 1999) to measure school climate at all three programs. The ESB is a scientifically developed instrument that is used to assess school climate and identify school strengths and areas for improvement. Completed student and teacher surveys are analyzed and compared to a norm group composed mostly of urban schools, including some alternative programs. The ESB also collects data on a number of student and teacher characteristics scales that we include in this article to further characterize the climate of these schools.

The student ESB survey consists of 118 closed-ended multiple choice and true or false items and includes six scales of psychosocial climate measures: clarity of rules, fairness of rules, planning and action, respect for students, safety, and student influence. The survey is also comprised of 13 scales on student characteristics and an invalidity index used to detect whether students are providing sensible responses. These scales include attachment to school, avoidance of punishment, belief in rules, educational expectations, interpersonal competency, involvement, parental education, positive peer associations, positive self-concept, school effort, school rewards, and social integration. We computed Cronbach’s for each scale to test for reliability, which ranged from $\alpha = .28$ to $\alpha = .78$ (Cronbach, 1951).

The teacher ESB survey includes 115 closed-ended items that again consist of both multiple-choice and true or false questions. Like the student survey, the teacher survey includes planning and action and student influence as two psychosocial climate scales. In addition, the survey includes seven other such scales: avoidance of use of grades as sanctions, morale, parent or community involvement, race relations, resources, safety, and smooth administration. The survey includes another seven scales that measure teacher characteristics such as classroom orderliness, interaction with students, job satisfaction, non-authoritarian attitudes, personal security, professional development, and pro-integration attitudes. The Cronbach alpha reliabilities for these scales ranged from $\alpha = .33$ to $\alpha = .90$.

Trained research staff led and monitored the administration of the student surveys. All students were provided the opportunity to have the survey administered orally, in which case they were still provided a personal copy of the survey so that they could read along as it was administered; some students opted to complete the survey independently. Teachers were provided a copy of the teacher survey during the site visits. At Programs A and C, teachers were provided postage-paid envelopes in which to seal and return their completed surveys via either program administrators or mail. Program B teachers completed the surveys while research staff were on site.

**Results**

**Data Analysis**

Because the data was ordinal in nature, a nonparametric equivalent to analysis of variance Kruskall-Wallis was computed to determine if there were any significant differences on the scales among the three programs. If overall significance was obtained on a scale, we computed a Mann-Whitney U Test as a follow-up analysis to determine which of the groups differed significantly from the others. In addition, we submitted completed student and teacher surveys to Gottfredson Associates, Inc., to produce interpretative reports for each school and program. These reports summarized the findings by scale and compared them to the ESB norm group.

**Student Results**

We found no significant differences among the three programs in the measures of 4 of the 6 psychosocial climate scales on the student survey—fairness of rules, planning and action, respect for students, and student influence—as well as 7 of the 12 student characteristic scales—attachment to school, belief in rules, educational expectations, interpersonal competency, positive peer associations, school effort, and social integration. Relative to the ESB norm group, student
responses were high or very high on four of these scales including belief in rules, fairness of rules, planning and action, and respect for students, which suggests that the school climate of the alternative programs tends to be more positive in these dimensions relative to the ESB norm group.

Student responses were average on 4 of the other 6 scales with no significant difference including attachment to school, educational expectations, interpersonal competency, and social integration, suggesting that the programs tend to be similar to the ESB norm group on these dimensions of school climate. On the other two scales, positive peer associations, school effort, the programs tended to be below average when compared with the norm group. In addition, we found significant differences on two school climate scales: clarity of rules, $\chi^2(2, N = 143) = 6.59, p < .05$ and safety, $\chi^2(2, N = 111) = 13.56, p < .01$. In the area of teacher characteristics, we found significant differences on five scales: avoidance of punishment, $\chi^2(2, N = 142) = 7.39, p < .05$; involvement, $\chi^2(2, N = 131) = 10.01, p < .01$; parental education, $\chi^2(2, N = 75) = 8.2, p < .05$; positive self concept, $\chi^2(2, N = 127) = 7.76, p < .05$; and school rewards $\chi^2(2, N = 142) = 18.85, p < .01$.

Teacher Results

Using the data from the teacher surveys, we found no significant differences among the three programs on 3 of the 9 psychosocial climate scales—race relations, safety, and student influence—and 2 of the 7 teacher characteristics scales—nonauthoritarian attitudes and pro-integration attitudes. In comparison to the ESB norm group, teacher responses were very high on one of these scales, the nonauthoritarian attitudes, and moderately high on two other scales, safety and student influence, which suggests that the school climate of the alternative programs tend to be more positive in these dimensions relative to the norm group.

On 2 of 5 scales with no significant difference, that of race relations and pro-integrations attitudes, teacher responses were average, suggesting that the programs tend to be similar to the ESB norm group on these dimensions of school climate. In addition, in the area of psychosocial climate, we found significant differences among the groups on six scales: avoidance of use of grades as sanction, $\chi^2(2, N = 128) = 44.63, p < .01$; morale, $\chi^2(2, N = 133) = 24.66, p < .01$; parent or community involvement, $\chi^2(2, N = 126) = 14.38, p < .01$; planning and action, $\chi^2(2, N = 129) = 20.77, p < .01$; resources, $\chi^2(2, N = 133) = 20.99, p < .01$; and smooth administration, $\chi^2(2, N = 128) = 19.84, p < .01$. We also found significant differences on five scales of teacher characteristics: classroom orderliness, $\chi^2(2, N = 134) = 65.83, p < .01$; interaction with students, $\chi^2(2, N = 133) = 6.87, p < .05$; job satisfaction, $\chi^2(2, N = 135) = 18.61, p < .01$; personal security, $\chi^2(2, N = 132) = 57.56, p < .01$; and professional development, $\chi^2(2, N = 134) = 41.46, p < .01$.

Discussion

Our findings can be used only as a preliminary step toward creating a more focused research agenda or as a resource for professionals developing or implementing alternative programs because a nonexperimental research design was used. Research on alternative schooling is a relatively new area of study; this newness requires development of a body of knowledge and understanding about alternative schools so that meaningful experimental studies can be designed. Until further research validates these findings we can only surmise that certain components may not be critical to the design and implementation of an effective alternative program. Conversely, the findings of no significant difference, with above average responses relative to the norm group, might suggest albeit lacking empirical support that these components are essential to highly effective alternative programs. When considering the results, a careful reader should keep in mind that the ESB was normed primarily on regular high schools, so the findings, especially those scales where these programs are consistently average relative to the norm group, should be viewed through this lens and the contrasting typical student populations should be taken into account.

More important, the findings reveal that: (a) students largely feel that the psychosocial climate of their schools is one in which the rules are equitably enforced, fair, and valid represented by the scales of belief in rules and fairness of rules; (b) teachers and administrators treat them with dignity represented by the scale of respect for students; and (c) staff are open to change and problem solving represented by the scale of planning and action. In essence, the results suggest that these alternative programs create personalized environments in which students feel respected and fairly treated and where expectations for social, interpersonal, and academic success are supported. Furthermore, student responses relative to their participation in school planning and decision making were on average similar to the responses of the norm group in all three programs; this is also true of four other scales including attachment to school, educational expectations, interpersonal competency, and social integration.

The quality of teacher–student interaction is a salient issue raised in existing research on alternative education. Gottfredson (1997) contrasted an alternative school program emphasizing the personal involvement of staff with students with another program emphasizing external control and discipline and found that while the latter program improved academic persistence, it had a negative effect on student attitudes toward school and delinquent behavior. The relationship-building program, on the other hand, was associated with an increased commitment to school, attachment to school, and belief in rules, along with a reduction in arrest records. Kellmayer (1996) also includes participatory
decision making on his list of key characteristics of successful alternative school programs.

Other research suggests that students in alternative schools prefer this type of personal attention and involvement in decision making to environments more typical of traditional schools. For example, Castleberry and Enger (1998) found that students in an alternative setting had a strong preference for more personalized learning environments and for the student-teacher relationships found in alternative schools. A study by May and Copeland (1998) found academic engagement and the positive relationships formed in the program among the top reasons that students gave for attending an alternative program.

The pedagogical literature also indicates that personal attention and inclusive atmosphere may be a widespread characteristic of alternative programs. A survey of 45 students attending an alternative school program found that when compared to traditional schools, the students thought teachers at the alternative program were more “genuinely concerned about students” and that students had more input in decision making (Richardson & Griffin, 1994, p. 109). Lange and Lear (as cited in Lange & Sletten, 2002) similarly found that alternative school students reported more positive relationships with teachers than at-risk students in a comparison high school.

Well-trained, highly qualified teachers are critical to any educational program, but are there other teacher characteristics that tend to characterize effective alternative programs? The results of the teacher survey suggest that the participating teachers in all three programs tend to have more sympathetic attitudes toward their students represented in the scale of non-authoritarian attitudes, are more likely to involve students in school decision making represented in the scale of student influence, and are more likely to perceive their schools as safe relative to the ESB norm group. As we alluded to previously, student involvement in the decision-making process is an important component in facilitating student-school bonding in that students may feel that they are an important part of the school and that they have power and control in how their school is run. This student-school bonding, along with the non-authoritarian attitudes of teachers may indicate that these teachers have a “liberal outlook on education” (Gottfredson, 1999, p. 35) and on behavior management. This finding is consistent with those of Tobin and Sprague (1999) who included positive rather than punitive emphasis in behavior management on a list of research-based strategies for alternative education students at risk for school failure, and dropout or delinquency. This finding is also consistent with Richardson and Griffin (1994) who found that students who flourished in an alternative program identified their teachers as being less authoritarian than the teachers in their traditional schools.

Conclusion

Students attending the three alternative schools were previously unsuccessful in the traditional educational setting because each had academic or behavioral problems that limited their learning and led to negative, counterproductive interactions with peers and teachers. Undoubtedly, upon entry into the alternative programs many initially fit the description of students in alternative programs that Fuller and Sabatino (1996) developed and characterized as “cynical, suffering academic and behavioral adjustment problems in school, possessing antisocial attitudes and behaviors, lacking educational or career goals, and having problematic relationships with both family and peers” (p. 295). However, an important finding of this research is that the students seen as troubled and troubling who participated in this study tended to differ from this description.

Rather than being “cynical” or having “behavioral adjustment problems in school,” the participating students to a large extent reported feeling respect from their teachers as well as levels of school attachment and interpersonal competence that were on par with that of the ESB norm group. Instead of “possessing antisocial attitudes and behaviors” they support their school rules and believe they are fair. These students do not “lack educational or career goals.” In fact, they report having educational expectations for themselves that are similar to the average for the ESB norm group.

Based on these findings, we can posit that students identified as troubled or troubling tend to flourish in alternative learning environments where they believe that their teachers, staff, and administrators care about and respect them, value their opinion, establish fair rules that they support, are flexible in trying to solve problems, and take a nonauthoritarian approach to teaching. Creating caring, non-authoritarian learning environments and populating them with adults who are sympathetic to the special needs of these students and their families is likely a key to success for these students. Although it is a more tentative finding, we can see that creating learning environments that encourage student integration into their social order and student interpersonal competency may also support student success.

We recognize, however, that additional research is needed to better understand whether the aforementioned social climate characteristics of these effective alternative programs are part of a larger set of characteristics that contribute to positive student outcomes, whether these characteristics specifically cause positive student outcomes, or whether they only correlate with positive outcomes. Regardless, it is essential to recognize similarities and differences in the social climate of three highly effective alternative programs, consider their potential relationship with student academic and behavioral success in these programs, and to build on these findings in future inquiry and research on alternative education.
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