

EXAMINING ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION OVER THE PAST THIRTY YEARS

ART MEYERS*

Health Sciences

University of Nevada, Las Vegas, Nevada 89154

Over the past 30 years a wide range of Alternative Education philosophies have been introduced and implemented. This article will examine from an historical perspective the impact Alternative Education has had on our current public school system. The paper evaluates its growth in diversification, effectiveness, success rate, function, and role within our current educational system.

Introduction

Over the past 30 years a wide array of diverse alternatives to the public school system has emerged. An historical perspective of changes in alternative education in this country reveals an entire spectrum of schools from religious education (widely accepted) to the radical viewpoint of Illich who favors deschooling society. The purpose of this paper will be to develop an overall understanding of alternative schools, including their diversification, roles in our society and how they have changed over this 30 year time period.

Before we can begin our discussion of these topics, we must establish an acceptable definitive definition of "Alternative Schools." Many authors define them differently depending on their own perspective. For the purpose of this paper, we will consider alternative education as any schooling outside of the public school system.

With the roots going back to the progressive education movement and the social and political unrest of the 60's and 70's, different types of educational settings began to emerge. These types of schools offered alternatives to the public

school system that many people felt was unacceptable. Low-income and minority students who are most susceptible to a range of school problems become the principle beneficiaries of alternative schools.

Alternative schools have been successfully used to assist in the desegregation of urban schools. They have been used to reduce school violence, vandalism, and disruption. They have served as a way of increasing parent and community involvement in public schools. Most importantly, alternative schools have proven their effectiveness in meeting the distinctive instructional needs of a wide variety of students. Both gifted students and school dropouts have been shown to learn better in alternative schools than they did in conventional schools. (Hamilton, 1981, p. 45).

Alternative schools have been used as experimental laboratories for field-testing and validating new educational concepts. Only through the innovative ideas that are acceptable in these alternative educational settings can true exploration and investigation of new concepts be facilitated. Alternatives have, in fact, been instrumental in moving education out of the classroom and into business, social agencies, museums, and government offices. The concepts of a school without walls, a school within-

* Arthur Meyers is a Professor of Health Sciences at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. Mr. Meyers is currently a candidate for an Ed.D. in Post-Secondary Education.

a-school, the walkout and challenge education were all developed in alternative school settings. Alternative schools have been used to develop experimental curricula for gifted and talented students, disruptive students, students from different cultures, and students interested in a multitude of careers (Smith, 1981, p. 14)

These types of schools have been instrumental in developing different learning models: Summerhill education, open education, individualized continuous progress education, fundamental education, experimental education, and behavior modification. To the alternative school movement goes the credit for making Montessori education available within the domain of public schools. This type of alternative education is available and widely accepted nationwide.

The new breed of alternative schools has populist origins and encourages normal approaches to curriculum and instruction. Secondly, the new alternative schools are organized differently. Students, teachers and parents in many new alternative schools are given more access to decision-making and often have more influence than they do in regular public school. This attempt to depart from bureaucratic patterns is the distinguishing feature of modern alternative schools.

The largest constituents of new alternative schools is in the big urban cities. As large numbers of city dwellers have abandoned the cities and their schools in favor of suburban, public and private and parochial schools, there has been a competitive effort in most American cities to retard this migration. The tactic most frequently employed by urban school districts is the development of large numbers of alternative magnet schools that offer nearly everything a private or parochial school offers, but most importantly is supported by tax dollars.

Tremendous Growth in Diversification

Regardless of the type of alternative school parent or students decide to go, the school is usually developed as responses to particular educational needs within their communities. These needs as perceived by parents or students cannot be met by the existing public school system. We will attempt to discuss different categories of alternative education and give examples of these types of schools that have emerged in the past few decades.

Open Schools—Are learning activities and centers that are individualized and organized around interest centers within the classroom or building. This type of alternative school can help the existing schools who cannot meet of individual needs of particular students.

An example of the open school philosophy is the Brown School in Louisville, Kentucky. This school was opened in 1972 in the former Brown Hotel in downtown Louisville. The school had an enrollment of 400 students in grades 3 through 12. The center was designed to attract a cross-section of all children—poor, affluent, minority, non-minority, high ability, low ability, etc. All students are bused from their home schools to the learning center. Voluntary participation in the learning center program was 90 percent. (Smith, 1974, p. 83)

Schools-Without-Walls — These are learning activities that are carried on throughout the community and with much interaction between school and community. This type of school can help students become more involved in community activities and relate better to existing programs.

An example of such a program is Northwest High School in suburban Kansas which supports the popular theories of pupil freedom and responsibility, along with relevance, in the curriculum. Students are involved with structural programs, interviewing new teachers, and planning new courses. Students and administrators

meet weekly to discuss problems and issues. The school allows students to choose their subjects, the time they would like them, and their teachers. (Hamilton, 1981, p. 59)

Learning Centers—Learning resources are concentrated in one location available to the students in the community. This would include magnet schools, educational parks, career-education centers, vocational and technical high schools, and similar institutions. All of these help complement the learning experience within the standard high school.

An example is the Skyline Center in Dalas, Texas which is the largest educational park in the country. The center is open to students from any high school in Dalas. The center's goals include extensive preparation in career education, individualization of instruction, and involvement of community. The center also provides continuing education programs for adults and for out-of-school youths. These programs include adult basic education, trade schools and vocational education. (Smith, 1974, p. 79)

Continuation Schools—These schools provide for students whose education in the conventional school has been interrupted. This would include dropout centers, re-entry programs, pregnancy-maternity centers, evening high schools, street academies, etc. These types of education alternatives relieve much of the burden of the public facilities for educating students that may not fit in.

Multi-Cultural Schools—These schools emphasize cultural pluralism and ethnic and racial awareness and usually serve a multi-cultural students body. Bilingual schools with optional enrollment would be included. These schools help to alleviate the problems of cultural/ethnic biases and ignorances that are so prevalent in our public school system.

A multi-cultural school in Berkeley, California was found in the late 1960's caled Agora. After the school was first

started, the students, primarily white, re-named it Agora to adapt a multi-cultural identity and actively recruit minority group students. In its second year, Agora had an enrollment of one-third black, one-third chicano, and one-third white. (Smith, V., 1974, p. 56)

Free Schools—These schools emphasize greater freedom for students and teachers. This term is usually applied to non-public alternative schools, but a few are available by choice within public school system. Free schools offer sometimes radical approaches to teaching and learning theory. They meet the needs of students and parents that usually are totally disenchanted with the public school system.

An example of a free school would be a black-inner city ghetto school. These arise because many people feel that public schools do not prepare their child for the real world of "city life." Free schools are an attempt to bridge the gap between the irrelevance of public school and the need for formal education of some kind for their children. (Grubard, 1975, p. 159)

Schools-Within-Walls—A small number of students and teachers are involved by choice in different kinds of learning programs. This would include mini-schools and satellite schools. A satellite school is a school at another location which maintains administrative ties to the parent school. This type of program can complement the existing school by offering materials, facilities, activities that are not available at the main school. (Smith, 1974, p. 41)

Home-Schooling Movement—In recent years many courts have supported parent's rights to educate their children in their own homes. A recent court ruling in Rockland stated that the school committee will not pry into parent's reasons for wanting to educate their children at home. John Rogers, the superintendent of Rockland School states, "I don't think we have a monopoly on education. Who's to say

where children can get a proper education?' (Smith, 1975, p. 41)

Probably the majority of home schoolers are religious fundamentalists, unhappy with the failure of public education to teach religious and spiritual subjects.

Religious Education—The Catholic schools in this country are the largest alternative school system. It currently numbers 7,822 schools with 3,289,000 students and 150,698 teachers. Contrary to the image of private education as wealthy elites and all white, Catholic schools serve a predominantly middle class clientele and are strongly present in the urban cities.

Catholic education has obvious differences from public education—religious classes, the presence of nuns and priests, the connection of many schools with parishes and the high degree of local decision-making.

There are, of course, many other types of successfully implemented alternative education curriculums and programs. These include such schools as the John Dewey High School in New York, Horizan High School in California, and Wayland high School in Massachusetts, just to mention a few. Our discussion of alternative education would be incomplete if we were not to briefly expound upon the theories of Ivan Illich presented in the early 70's.

Illich has what most would classify as radical viewpoints about our educational system. He rejects the current system and the alternative school movement in favor of deschooling society. This system Illich speaks of does not accept the idea of organized schooling and compulsory education, but favors instead a society of informal learning networks where everyone will have free access to information and tools needed in their lives.

He discusses what is called the hidden curriculum in which all children of a certain age assemble in groups of about thirty, under the authority of a certified

teacher, for some 500 to 1,000 or more hours each year. Illich does not believe in the certified teacher in the classroom expanding knowledge to his students. Learning he feels is something that goes beyond the walls of the schools and must transcend his individual needs in the real world. (Illich, 1977, p. 102)

What Has Been the Role of Alternative Education Over the Past 30 Years?

There are a variety of roles that different alternative schools can offer; they include:

- (1) Development of basic skills for vocation preparation not offered in the standard public school.
- (2) Concern for improvement of student's self-concept, smaller classes, more interaction allowing for greater awareness by pupils of who they are.
- (3) The development of individual talent and uniqueness. Standard public high schools may not have the time or facilities to foster the special needs of gifted students.
- (4) Understanding and encouragement cultural plurality and diversity. Many multi-cultural alternative schools have been developed to help develop better awareness and togetherness between different cultural and ethnic groups. (Joyce, 1983, p. 81)
- (5) Preparation of students for various roles in our society—consumer, voter, critic, parent, spouse, etc. Many times the standardized high school does not prepare students to accept a responsible role in society. They simply set a criteria of courses that must be taken.
- (6) The alternative public schools have a commitment to be more responsive to some need within

their communities than the conventional schools have been. This role of responsiveness to community need has become more prevalent in the inner urban high school, where many parents feel alienated by the existing public high school system.

- (7) Many alternative high schools are more flexible and therefore more responsive to planned evolution and change. This is an important role when you consider the number of high school students that have to work and need more flexible scheduled hours.
- (8) Large number of alternative high schools have set curriculum that students feel are more relevant to the needs and desires they want to learn.
- (9) The alternative high schools have been more humane to students and teachers. These schools have smaller classes, fewer rules and bureaucratic constraints for students and teachers. In many ways the role of these schools has been designed to eliminate aspects of the culture of the conventional school that are most unpleasant and oppressive to its clientele and its faculty. (Smith, V., 1974, p. 45)
- (10) Another major part that can be easily overlooked is the fact that alternative high school role is to provide a choice, and alternative to the existing school in the community. Usually these choice are open to all, but there must always be a choice for some so that the alternative high school has a voluntary clientele. There are many promising innovative alternative high schools throughout the country, but if there is no choice

of schools with a community, they would not be included in the category of alternative high school.

- (11) Alternative high schools may function in the role of taking on students that are not suited for/ or cannot get back into regular high schools. Pregnant students who may not wish to be seen by friends, may opt to go to an alternative high school that includes preparing her for motherhood. Students that have dropped-out, may feel too old or out-of-place in a standard school may be suited for an alternative high school. Last, are those students that possibly because of disciplinary problems are not allowed admission to the regular high school. An alternative high school that has less students, emphasizes interaction and positive reinforcement may be the right place for such a student.

Summary

Over the past 30 years, we have seen a tremendous growth in diversity of educational settings. But the idea of diversifying the whole public school system into a system of optional alternative schools and programs serving the youth has simply not materialized. Today more than 150 different types of schools have been identified as alternative. Some thirty years ago, there were only about thirty schools that could be classified that way. Much of the beginning of alternative schools came about because of the progressive movement of the 60's. These included some very progressive schools (Peninsula School, Summerhill, Lewis-Wathams) and some, more recently, found in the black community schools.

Although the diversity continues today, it has not had a profound effect on the overall public educational system. There

is strong evidence that the public schools of today are meeting the needs of the vast majority of their constituents. Recent Gallop Poll of public attitudes toward education indicate only 7% of the parents felt that schools were to blame when children do poorly. Many educators feel that schools were to blame when children do poorly. Many educators feel that although there are many prevailing forces to change the educational system, the general structure essentially has remained the same.

The major thrust of alternative schools can be considered a strategy for school reform, whether it be within or outside of the system. These new concepts have added new vitality and inspiration into the educational system. Many new concepts of learning, curriculum, and instruction have been developed through the ideology of alternative education. These innovative educational settings whether accepted eventually by public schools or not will have a profound effect on the accepted educational models of the future.

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Frank J. Landy (1987). *Psychology: The Science of People*. Second Edition. Prentice-Hall, Inc., Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey. The author seeks to demonstrate how science can be applied to the understanding of human behavior. There are now only 18 chapters, as opposed to the 25 for the first edition. The coverage in all areas has been updated in the second edition. New material has been added to DSM-III, new material on cognitive learning, deepened discussion on stress and the immune system, and much added supplemental material. One of the major differences between high school and college is the need for deeper understanding in college. Comprehension comes through study. The SQ3R stands for 'Survey, Question, Read, Recite, and review. The method was first described by Robinson in 1970, and is based on principles of learning and memory. SQ3R works well for normally paced studying. The essay exam requires both recall and organization. Psychology is the study of behavior and mental processes. Psychology appeared on the scene in the late nineteenth century when Wundt of Germany and James of the United States began research activities in special rooms or laboratories set aside for that purpose. Meditation is an attempt to move from the kind of thinking that involves problem-solving or analysis to the kind that involves fantasy.