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ABSTRACT

Because at-risk students may feel alienated from school, educational reforms may be useful that make school a more supportive place. While many students identified as "at-risk" may drop out of high school, many others could be better described as "pushouts." These students may desire to stay in school and graduate, but feel pressure to leave. Pregnant students may face covert pressure from school personnel to leave school, attendance policies may prevent them from continuing, and medical and child care problems may prevent their return to school. A look at the dropout rate suggests that the traditional system of education is failing approximately 25% of the school population. The special facilitative school climate offered by alternative schools can improve student self-esteem, reduce the dropout rate, and increase productivity. Self-esteem immersion is considered an important component of many alternative schools. Teacher modeling of appropriate and effective behaviors is another very important component of successful alternative high schools. Strategies for keeping at-risk students in school and for enhancing their self-esteem and academic performance include limiting class sizes, selecting teachers carefully, being flexible, and avoiding the conventional model of school in which rewards and penalties dominate the teacher-student relationship. Teachers in alternative high schools can positively impact at-risk students' self-esteem through facilitative environmental characteristics such as trust, respect, and cooperation. (NB)

Characteristics of Facilitative Learning Environments for Students at Risk

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Running head: LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

Abstract

This paper is a brief treatise of the hypothesis or idea that alternative high schools offering at-risk students certain facilitative environmental characteristics enhance self-esteem. It is not a thorough, objective summary of relevant research nor does it report on original experimentation designed to test the stated hypothesis. A descriptive definition of "at-risk students" is given and high school "dropouts" are distinguished from "pushouts." The extent of the dropout/pushout problem and its social implications are examined and alternatives to traditional methods of managing student behavior are offered. The importance of enhancing student self-esteem and strategies for doing so are emphasized throughout. The paper provides a rationale for proposing a second hypothesis and further research is recommended.

This paper is a brief treatise of the hypothesis or idea that alternative high schools offering at-risk students certain facilitative environmental characteristics enhance self-esteem. The National Association of Secondary School Principals (1988) suggested that "many at-risk students feel alienated from school. They feel that no one cares, . . Educational reforms must focus on the affective domain - on ways to make school a more caring, supportive, and nurturing place" (p. 2).

Students at Risk

High school students at risk are those who have been identified (usually by the school principal) as being unlikely to earn a diploma in the traditional high school setting: students whose needs are not being adequately met at their traditional schools. Defined in this manner, at-risk students typically struggle with one or more of the following obstacles to academic success: pregnancy, parenting or parenting responsibilities (siblings for example), premature emancipation, extraordinary financial responsibility (the family's primary or sole source of income), chemical dependence or recovery from chemical dependence, reentry into the mainstream following incarceration or extended hospitalization, ill health (physiological or psychological), dysfunctional family of origin (families whose primary source of income is prostitution and/or the sale of illicit drugs for example), abuse (physical, verbal, spiritual, sexual, or emotional), inappropriate patterns of behavior (violence for example), or others. These students may or may not require special education services, have low intellectual abilities, underachieve, be considered behavior problems (frequently disrupting class for example), or have a long history of truancy.

Using this definition of "at risk," it is easy to see that these students are at risk of dropping out of high school before graduation. Not quite so obvious is that many of these students are actually pushed out and thus could be better described as "pushouts." These students may be referred to as pushouts because, given the choice, many of them would stay in school and graduate. Pregnant students, for example, often experience discreet pressure from school boards and administrators to leave school. The fear seems to be that allowing these students to stay in school projects the wrong kind of image to other students and the larger community. Orr (1989) noted that

> schools send signals to poorly achieving students and those who are discipline problems, in a sense urging them to leave. This lack of encouragement may compound a student's personal and family problems, further reducing any desire or ability to remain in school. (p. 7)

In addition to this covert pressure, pregnant students must often contend with natural side effects and complications of pregnancy which result in repeated absences. Moreover, many obstetricians recommend six weeks at home before returning to school after delivery.

Attendance policies in some high schools dictate that students accumulating too many absences (ten for example) in one semester be dropped from classes. Missouri requires 22 credits for high school graduation and will not finance a student's education beyond the student's 20th birthday. Consequently, students whose pregnancies span two semesters, and those who have difficulty finding affordable infant care, are likely to fall so far behind that graduation becomes an unlikely goal. Other at-risk students are victims of similar limitations of the current system.

Many students with parenting responsibilities, extraordinary financial responsibilities, or medical problems simply cannot adhere to the routine of the traditional school.

Some students become disenchanted with school and choose to drop out of the system. Hamby (1989) said:

> If we can believe what dropouts themselves tell us about why they left school, failure, boredom, and loss of self-esteem stand high on their lists. To set standards for young people, have them fail these standards, and then blame the failure entirely on them, their families, or some other element outside of school is an abdication of our roles as educators. (p. 22)

The Extent of the Problem

It is generally well known that the national current dropout/pushout rate is roughly 25% and that in many large cities the rate is closer to 50%. These people almost certainly face futures of unemployment or underemployment and so are likely to remain dependent upon employed Americans. This dependence is expensive, and costs include not only welfare, but housing, hospitalization, violent crime, and incarceration. Hamby (1989) noted that "any dropout rate represents an incalculable loss of human potential and a staggering economic cost to society" (p. 21). Hodgkinson (1991) stated:

> Today, more than 80% of America's one million prisoners are high school dropouts. Each prisoner costs taxpayers upwards of $20,000 a year. . . . it is seven times more expensive to maintain someone in the state pen than it is to maintain someone at Penn State. (p. 15)

"If the system is left as it is, the social and individual costs of inadequate schooling

will severely corrode the social fabric of the nation" (Cuban, 1989, p. 29).

Insert Table 1 about here

Recommendations

Clearly, our traditional system of education is failing this 25% of our population. What we are doing is not working for these students, and it seems absurd to continue more of what is not working. For them, for all of us, we must allow ourselves to begin thinking more divergently and to implement some of the good ideas that are too often ignored because they do not conform to traditional philosophies of education or because their implementation would require too much effort or too much risk or too much change. We must make the effort, accept the risk, and embrace the change. In 1990, Glasser wrote:

"If high-quality education is what we need, does it make that much difference whether a student stays in school and 'leans on a shovel' or drops out and 'leans on a shovel'?" (p. 426). Some of our brightest kids, possessing enormous potential for improving our society, are dropping out because they simply are not interested in school. These students resist the pressure to excel on objective achievement tests measuring the acquisition of knowledge which seems unimportant and uninteresting. Though they may be hungry for a quality education, they resist the coercive management typical of our traditional high schools. In order for students to produce quality work, the work they are asked to do must be need satisfying (Glasser, 1990).

Teachers and students in traditional high schools tend to view the typical

teacher/student relationship as adversarial. Glasser (1990) contends that this attitude results from the way in which teachers typically manage students in the traditional high school. He refers to it as "boss-management," and boss-management, he says, "rarely leads to consistent hard work - and almost never to high-quality work" (p. 428). It's about power: bosses want to keep the power, to remain in charge. Teachers that Glasser refers to as "lead-managers," on the other hand, empower their students; they have discovered that the more they are able to empower their students, the harder their students will work. Resistance to traditional styles of managing student behavior results in discipline problems thus explaining, says Glasser (1990),

> the increased emphasis on strict rules of deportment (more coercion) that further define good students as passive things rather than as involved, questioning, at times dissenting, active learners. . . . Any method of teaching that ignores the needs of teachers or students is bound to fail, and we are now paying the price for that failure in the coin of increased use of drugs and high rates of delinquency and teen pregnancy. (p. 430)

It is important that we challenge students to defend their ideas and to think divergently as well as convergently. Unfortunately, however, many teachers in traditional high schools today are being coerced into emphasizing facts and "the right answers," avoiding controversy and discussion, testing frequently, tailoring what they teach to standardized government testing programs, and deemphasizing the personalized, humanized teacher/student relationship. Students who most actively resist this boss-management style of education, neither working nor following rules, are very likely to drop out if they are not first pushed out. These students

who are at risk of failing to graduate need an alternative program of education. Such an alternative must be deliberately different from the traditional program that is failing these students. It makes no sense to take these students out of one ineffective environment just to put them into another similarly ineffective environment. The successful alternative school must never do anything just because "that's the way it's done." Morley (1991) described alternative education as "a means of recognizing the strengths of each individual by seeking and providing the best available options for all students" (p. 6).

Youngs (1989) said: "No matter how excellent an education we offer, unless our students are motivated to take advantage of it, they will not apply themselves enough to learn" (p. 24). Schools that accept, respect, encourage, and empower their students, emphasizing personal choice and creativity, facilitate the natural actualizing tendency which enables students to meet their needs for self-esteem. These students are motivated to learn, and they naturally include school in what Glasser (1990) refers to as their "quality worlds." Maslow (1970) explained human motivation in terms of his well-known hierarchy of needs or motives. He indicated that higher order growth motives, such as the need to know and understand, control behavior only when the lower order deficiency motives, such as the need for esteem, are satisified.

Environmental Characteristics

Widely acknowledged among practitioners of the various diverse theories of psychotherapy, certain core conditions or environmental characteristics must be provided in order for effective psychotherapy and subsequent therapeutic movement to occur. While these conditions may or may not be regarded as sufficient, they tend

to be almost universally accepted as necessary. These core conditions (attributed primarily to Rogers) are founded on a genuine attitude which counselors maintain and communicate to their clients. This attitude is one of empathy, sincerity, warmth, spontaneity, patience, calmness, and authenticity. Others of these necessary environmental characteristics include a nonthreatening, safe, trusting, secure atmosphere of acceptance and an abundance of positive regard, nonpossessive warmth, and accurate empathic understanding. These conditions tend to encourage and improve self-esteem among counseling clients.

Successful alternative high schools provide nothing less for their students. The core conditions for counseling are the environmental characteristics that encourage the actualizing tendency. They are virtually the same environmental characteristics that encourage meaningful learning, and as they do for counseling clients, they tend to encourage and improve self-esteem among students. Following this analogy, it is clear that interrelationships among all members of the school community are of primary importance. "Research shows that the quality of human relationships in schools . . . may be more influential than the specific techniques or interventions employed" (Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern, 1990, p. 58). On this point, Morley (1991) wrote:

> Personal attention is the key to student success in alternative schools. Small size, the expectaton of teachers to serve as counselors, . . . and the goals of establishing a family environment are three main ingredients in the environments of alternative schools that make them emotionally supportive for students. (p. 19)

It also follows that decisions should be made at the lowest possible levels;

education should be student-centered. Students should be involved in selecting course content.

Self-Esteem Immersion

Alternative high schools that provide these facilitative environmental characteristics help at-risk students overcome the obstacles that had been inhibiting their academic progress. School and learning then become important components of students' quality worlds. Their self-esteems improve (thus satisfying lower order deficiency needs) and higher order self-actualizing activities (such as learning and understanding) naturally move from ground to figure. Students then assume responsibility for their own educations, and meaningful learning results.

We can improve self-esteem, reduce the dropout rate, and increase productivity by providing these facilitative environmental characteristics: this special school climate. Students are more likely to stay in school and commit to genuine effort and concentration when they feel good about being in school and experience school as a nonthreatening, pleasant place to learn concepts and principles relevant to their lives. When students experience school as an esteem- building place that helps them enhance the positive aspects of their lives, a place they can identify with and belong to, they can develop the determination needed for success. We encourage the development of such attitudes and values by respecting students, accepting them as worthy individuals, and communicating with them (sharing thoughts, feelings, and perspectives). "Dialogue in a nonthreatening, friendly atmosphere contributes to changes in perception, an important ingredient in attitude development and change" (Hamby, 1989, p. 24).

Alternative schools that deliberately nurture self-esteem tend to be "more

successful academically as well as in developing healthy self-esteem" (California Task Force to Promote Self-Esteem and Personal and Social Responsibility, 1990, p. 5). Improving self-esteem among students may lead to increased academic success which may improve self-esteem, the effect of each on the other resulting in an upward spiral. An analysis of research and scholarly literature by Walz (1991) suggests that high school students with high self-esteems are less likely to become pregnant, abuse drugs, or engage in violent behaviors. They are also more likely to achieve academically. (p. 2)

Consummate Teacher Traits

Teacher modeling of appropriate and effective behaviors is another very important component of successful alternative high schools. Students learn by observing teachers as they persist in generating options and solving problems, communicating effectively with a diversity of people, and using resources and materials as tools to guide thinking and learning. Rogers (1983) indicated that we should concentrate less on teaching, instructing, or imparting knowledge and more on the facilitation of learning. We become educated when we learn how to learn, enjoy learning, and practice learning on a daily basis. As facilitators of learning, our objectives should be to free curiosity, unleashing that inherent sense of inquiry, to encourage the pursuit of interests, and to help our students develop the confidence to ask questions, observe, explore, experiment, interpret, consider ideas, and experience feelings.

Rogers (1983) applied his theory of counseling and psychotherapy to education when he explained that "the facilitation of significant learning rests upon certain attitudinal qualities that exist in the personal relationship between the facilitator

and the learner" (p. 121). The qualities or characteristics of the "learning facilitator," or teacher, that encourage the development of this relationship include a genuine respect and unconditional positive regard for students, acceptance and empathy fostering feelings of belonging, and a noncoercive style of management. High expectations and acknowledgement of students' responsibilities for their own educations, warm encouragement, and an emphasis on quality learning, esteem building, and the total development of the whole student as a person are also essential. The teacher must demonstrate a belief in each student's natural tendency to self-actualize, adopt a policy of success for all students, and provide for flexibility in all aspects of each student's program. Rogers (1983) said:

> When the teacher has the ability to understand the student's reactions from the inside, has a sensitive awareness of the way the process of education and learning seems to the student, then . . . the likelihood of significant learning is increased. . . [and] the reaction in the learner follows something of this pattern, 'at last someone understands how it feels and seems to be me without wanting to analyze me or judge me. Now I can blossom and grow and learn.' (p. 125)

In order to be effective in building esteem, these teacher attitudes must be demonstrated to students. Discussing expectations with students and making clear the expectation that students will actively engage in quality learning and evaluate their own work demonstrates the teacher's faith in students' abilities and values. Specific expectations should be simple and clear thus ensuring that student and teacher have the same understanding of what is to be accomplished in order to earn each unit of high school credit. It is essential that each student's program of education specifically addresses that particular student's current needs. In his

research report on alternative education for the National Dropout Prevention Center, Morley (1991) said we must "allow for students' own needs to learn certain subject material, allow learning to be more natural, meaningful and pleasant" (p. 15). At the high school level, it is the student's responsibility to decide what subjects to study, what materials to use, when to study, when to ask for help, and how to learn. The role of the teacher is to encourage, suggest, and stimulate. Working in collaboration with the student to design that student's own unique program of education, the teacher demonstrates respect for the student's interests and trust in the student's ability to take responsibility for his/her own education. Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko, & Fernandez (1989) observed that successful teachers in alternative high schools for students at risk

> accept responsibility for helping each student overcome impediments to success. . . . They are willing to do more than impart the subject matter. . . . [They are] less quickly offended by student behavior that their colleagues in more traditional schools might see as personally insulting or challenging to their authority. . . . [They recognize] in their students' undesirable behavior, not so much evidence of defective character but rather the expression of accumulated frustrations and disadvantaged backgrounds . . . [calling] not for retribution, but rather for understanding, guidance in appropriate behaviors and a chance to succeed where failure had dominated. (pp. 135-137)

Wehlage et al. (1989) believe that "the right kind of environment and opportunities . . . [can] stimulate the innate potential buried within each [student]." These teachers build on students' strengths rather than focusing on their weaknesses. (pp. 137-138) Appropriate attitudes, decisions, behaviors, and techniques should be

modeled by the teacher for the students - not just as a formal demonstration, but as a consistent personality or way of being. As the National Association of Secondary School Principals' newsletter: The Practitioner (1988) points out:

> Research studies have shown that one of the most important aspects of successful dropout prevention programs is the quality of the school staff members. Teachers and paraprofessionals must have not only strong subject matter skills but a genuine regard for students and a strong belief that these students can learn. Teachers must be excited and enthusiastic about the program. They must have a commitment to a student-centered approach that actively involves students in the learning process in innovative ways. (p. 3)

Teachers must remember that talking to students should never be considered to be more important than listening to students. Frymier (1987) said:

> In the best high schools, teachers have developed skill . . . in listening to each individual student. . . . [They have become] more sensitive to students' interests and abilities and needs: more aware of . . . students' motivations, previous experiences, problems, and the like. . . . [Students] want and need opportunities to pursue their own agendas, to cultivate their own interests, to follow their own leads. (pp. 98-99)

Teachers such as these rely on and nurture the kind of intrinsic motivation that keeps students learning, self-actualizing, and generating quality work for the rest of their lives.

Essential Elements of Success

Wehlage et al. (1989) identified three interdependent elements which comprise the successful alternative school culture: "educational entrepreneurship, self-

governance, and professional collegiality" (p. 138). Klausmeier (1985) encouraged teachers to help students explore their interests by providing opportunities for them to utilize their epistemic curiosity. We can, for example, allow students to choose the subjects they will study and the materials they will use. He also emphasized the importance of encouraging students to assume increasing responsibility for their own educations while helping them to reduce their anxieties to optimal levels. We can, for example, require students to set their own standards of achievement. He further indicated that we should help our students set effective goals and help them attain those goals by encouraging them to develop a deliberate intention to learn. Cuban (1989) offered four suggestions for keeping at-risk students in school, for increasing their desires to learn, for building their self -esteems, and for enhancing their academic performances. The first is to reduce class size to no more than 15 or 20 students and school size to no more than a few hundred. This tends to personalize schools, enhancing feelings of belonging and fostering the sort of student/teacher relationship that Rogers considers to be of paramount importance. The second is to select teachers for at-risk programs very carefully. Selected teachers must be committed to their students, having a genuine desire to work with them to help them overcome the obstacles to their academic successes. These teachers must be innovative risk-takers and they must have the active support of district administrators and school board members who assign priority to nurturing their alternative programs. Decisions regarding staff selection should be made by existing school faculty. Third is flexibility. "Time is restructured into schedules quite different from regular school." The same high school teacher may teach three or more subjects to the same students "for two or

even three years. . . . In-school learning is frequently mixed with out-of-school work. . . . These programs often coordinate an array of social services that the students need" (pp. 30-31). Finally, as Cuban observed:

> These programs avoid the conventional model of school, where the teacher's primary concern is academic achievement, where students remain anonymous or emotionally distant from the teacher, and where rewards and penalties dominate the relationship between teacher and students. Rather, these small, flexible programs . . . model . . . an extended family where achievement is important and so is caring for one another. Building a sense of belonging to a group - in effect, a supportive environment - is consciously sought as a means of increasing self-esteem and achievement. (p. 31)

Conclusion

By implementing these strategies, we can work toward establishing a punishment-free, learning-oriented, esteem-building school environment. Such an environment may help students at risk overcome the obstacles that had been inhibiting their academic progress.

This paper suggests that teachers in alternative high schools can positively impact at-risk students' self-esteem through facilitative environmental characteristics such as trust, respect, and cooperation. With all due respect to previous work in this area, further experimental research designed to test the hypothesis that alternative high schools emphasizing these facilitative environmental characteristics do enhance self-esteem among their at-risk students and the hypothesis that this enhanced self-esteem encourages and generates socially appropriate attitudes and the production of quality work is recommended.

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Table 1

The Costs of Dropping Out of School

Cost of Area	Magnitude of Cost	Studies
The loss of personal income and loss in state revenue	Loss of $170,000 to $340,000 personal income over a lifetime or reduction of at least 1/3 of potential income.	McDill, Natriello, and Pallas, 1987 Veale, 1990
	Loss of State revenue due to decreased tax payments because of lower wages. The loss is approximately 2.5 times what it would cost the state to educate students to the point of graduation.	Veale, 1990
The increase in welfare burden due to higher unemployment rates	The unemployment rate of dropouts is approximately double that of graduates resulting in increased welfare costs.	U.S. Bureau of Census, 1987
Increased risk of incarceration	Dropping out increases the chances of incarceration 3 to 9 times depending on the magnitude of dropping out and interaction with other social factors. Cost of incarceration is at least three times that of educating a student for a given year.	Veale, 1990
Deceleration in human growth and potential	Lower cognitive skill level, reduced options to economic progress, restricted social networks.	National Center for Educational Statistics, 1987 U. S. Department of Labor, 1989 Iowa Department of Education, 1990
Reduced sense of control over one's life	Projected external locus of control—feelings that things happen to them rather than them controlling their destiny (this affects all aspects of productive citizenship).	Wehlage & Rutter in Natriello (Ed.), 1987 Veale, 1990

Note. From Alternative Education (p. 26) by R. E. Morley, 1991, Clemson, SC: National Dropout Prevention Center.