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Matthew Hoge[1] & Eliane Rubinstein-Avila[2]

1) Departmentof Special Education & Literacy Studies, Western Michigan University, United States of America
2) Department of Teaching, Learning & Sociocultural Studies, University of Arizona, United States of America

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Out of Sight, Out of Mind: A Case Study of an Alternative School for Students with Emotional Disturbance (ED)

Matthew Hoge
Western Michigan University

Eliane Rubinstein-Avila
University of Arizona

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Abstract

When the 'least restrictive' educational environment is deemed unsuccessful for students labeled as having emotional disabilities (ED), they are often placed in either self-contained classrooms (when available) or alternative schools. Despite these schools' growing numbers, little is known about them and their students, who are segregated from the mainstream student population. This qualitative case study focuses on the perspectives of staff (i.e., the principal, school psychologist, teachers, and aids) in one such alternative school for students with ED. Based on interviews, findings revealed staff's frustration with the: (1) school's reputation within, and isolation from, the larger school district; (2) lack of follow up and communication with 'sending schools'; (3) lack of professional development; and (4) lack of oversight from school district administration. The paper also conveys staff's vision for addressing some of the challenges. These findings may contribute to the largely unsuccessful fulfillment of the school's original intention—to return its students to their original schools (i.e., the 'least restrictive' educational environment). The authors argue that in-depth inquiry into such schools is a social justice issue.

Keywords: special education, emotional disturbance (ED), social justice, alternative schools, qualitative case study

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The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1990 (subsequently amended in 1997 and 2004) ensures that students with exceptional needs are provided special education services to maximize their opportunity for success in school. Emotional disturbance (ED), one of 13 disability categories protected under IDEA, is a condition that cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory, or other health factors, but still hinders a student's ability to learn (IDEA, 2004). Students who have been labeled as having ED may have difficulty building interpersonal relationships, struggle to perform appropriate behaviors under regular circumstances, encounter pervasive unhappiness or depression, and/or develop physical symptoms or fears related to personal or school-based problems (IDEA, 2004). They may exhibit both externalizing (aggression, non-compliance, acting-out) and/or internalizing behaviors (depression, anxiety, feelings of physical illness) that adversely affect their educational performance (Walker, Ramsey, & Gresham, 2004). These behaviors contribute to common negative experiencesassociated with students with ED, including academic difficulty (Coleman & Vaughn, 2000; Kauffman & Landrum, 2013), high incidence of school suspension and expulsion (Bradley, Henderson, & Monroe, 2004), lower graduation rates (Kauffman & Landrum, 2013), and poor post-school outcomes, including high rates of unemployment and incarceration (Sitlington & Neubert, 2004, Wagner, Kutash, Duchnowski, Epstein, & Sumi, 2005).

Complexities around identification of students with ED and the appropriateness of their educational placements abound. While the identification rate for students with ED hovers around 1-2%, some researchers suggest that 3-6% is a more realistic prevalence rate (Kauffmann & Landrum, 2013). Students with ED are more likely to be placed in non-traditional educational settings when compared to all students in special education (Becker et al., 2011; Landrum, Katsiyannis, & Archwamety, 2004). The determination of ED, heavily reliant upon evaluator judgment and social context, has been brought into question, specifically due to the disability not being identified equally across ethnic groups and genders, both in its labeling of students with the disability and its segregation of labeled students into restrictive educational settings (Anastasiou, Gardner, & Michail, 2011; Osher, Cartledge, Oswald, Artiles, & Coutinho, 2004; Skiba, et al., 2008). Students who are African American, male, economically disadvantaged, and from single-parent homes, foster

care or alternative home environments tend to be overrepresented in the category (Fierros & Conroy, 2002; Wagner, et al., 2005).

IDEA protects the rights of students with disabilities by providing a free, appropriate public education, an individualized education program (IEP), and placement in the least restrictive educational environment (LRE) (IDEA, 2004). Furthermore, IDEA ensures that schools provide a continuum of educational placements (i.e. general education classroom, self-contained classroom, alternative school) and that students with disabilities must be educated in the least restrictive environment possible (IDEA, 2004). Students with ED are placed in settings outside of the general education classroom—removed from the 'least restrictive' educational environment and placed into more restrictive ones—at one of the highest rates across all special education categories (Bradley, Henderson & Monfore, 2004; Sitlington & Neubert, 2004).

Educational setting, a decision included in a student's Individualized Education Program (IEP), serves to meet the specific needs of the student as it relates to their disability. Therefore, non-traditional educational placements (i.e. alternative schools) should employ evidenced based practices for the population they serve, demonstrate fidelity in their implementation, and individualize those practices to meet the specific needs of each student (Cook & Schirmer, 2003). However, while a change of placement to a more segregated setting should be a data-based decision made according to a student's specific educational needs, removal is often based on subjective variables (Kauffman & Landrum, 2013). The expectation is the placement into the more restrictive setting will produce positive outcomes for the student (Hayling, Cook, Gresham, State, & Kern, 2008). Yet, as we are reminded by Connor and Gabel (2013),"Although special education ensures a free and appropriate education for students and youth with disabilities, in many cases it falls short of the equality of opportunity assured within federal laws" (p.101).

Research on alternative schools for students with ED is limited (Tobin & Sprague, 1999). Therefore, we selected Hinton—an alternative school for students with ED—serving a large school district in a mid-size southwestern city, for our case study. The case study contributes to the intersection of social justice and special education by exploring the role of an alternative school (for students labeled ED) from the staff's point of view regarding: (1) the role of the school within the larger school district;

(2) the program's goal and (3) their own effectiveness in helping reach that goal. Interviews with six participants (a cross-segment of the staff), revealed feelings of frustration and disconnectedness from the larger school district. In general, participants felt that the school operated primarily as a sanctuary (or dumping ground) for students who are deemed *undesirable* by 'sending schools.'

Special Education From a Social Justice Lens

We chose a social justice framework to inform this work because we affirm that "… social justice bridges the transitional space between the realities that exist and those that are possible" (McNulty & Roseboro, 2009, p. 413).

Alternative Schools for Students with ED: A Brief Overview of the Literature

Despite the existence of studies examining the attitudes or perceptions of special education teachers, few studies have focused on those working in alternative schools (Emery & Vandenberg, 2010)—especially schools serving students with ED. In fact, research on segregated programs for students with ED has focused mainly on residential placements and juvenile correctional facilities (Houchins, et al, 2010; Lakin, Leon & Miller, 2008). The few studies that have examined schools for students with ED have compared students placed in alternative schools with students placed in self-contained classrooms (Lane, Wehby, Little, & Cooley, 2005a; Lane, Wehby, Little, & Cooley, 2005b; Mattison, 2011). Other studies have evaluated programs' effectiveness (Mattison & Schneider, 2009), explored placement considerations into and out of alternative programs (Hoge, Liaupsin, Umbreit, & Ferro, 2012), and examined the effectiveness of targeted behavioral interventions within such schools (Turton, Umbreit, & Mather, 2011).

It is essential to bring to light the national profile of teachers who serve students with ED. Billingsley, Fall and Williams (2006) conducted a national study to compare teachers of students with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD) with non-EBD special educators, focusing on individuals' characteristics and readiness to teach. The authors found that teachers serving students with EBD had significantly fewer years of

teaching experience, were less likely to be certified (with a small proportion holding certification in core academic domains), and were more likely to have acquired their teaching positions through alternative programs compared to other special educators (Billingsley et al., 2006).

Alternative schools date back to the 1960s (Kim & Taylor, 2008; Quinn, Poirier, Faller, Gable, & Tonelson, 2006) and have recently proliferated (special and regular education sectors). In fact, their numbers grow with the increase of "disenfranchised" students (i.e., dropouts and push-outs) (Kim & Taylor, 2008). These schools have operated under a high degree of autonomy and limited scrutiny (Lange & Sletten, 2002; Lehr & Lange, 2003b) and school districts struggle with these schools' negative stigmas as dumping grounds for students who have fallen behind and are considered "at-risk" (Kim & Taylor, 2008). Some scholars express concern at the rapid increase in these programs despite limited evidence of their efficacy (Tobin & Sprague, 1999). Consequently, little is known about students with disabilities attending these programs (Lehr, Tan, & Ysseldyke, 2009). This contributes to the difficulty to formulate a research agenda across programs (Ahearn, 2004; Quinn et al., 2006).

In an investigation of alternative schools, Gorney and Ysseldyke (1993) found that students with emotional and behavioral disorders were overrepresented in these programs. In a national survey conducted with state directors of special education, Lehr and Lange (2003a) found that many of the respondents did not have accurate data on the number of students with disabilities served in their alternative programs. The authors also identified several concerns related to the use of alternative programs nationally, including: (1) their rapid growth; (2) student placement; (3) educating students with severe needs; (4) enrolling students as a consequence of disciplinary issues in mainstream schools; and (5) an overall lack of oversight and accountability (Lehr & Lange, 2003a).

Given the paucity of research on alternative schools for students with ED, several domains have been identified as ripe for further inquiry (Atkins, Bullis, & Todis, 2005). Domains that are in need of further examination include: a) accurate identification of the number of students served by these programs; b) rationales for placement into, and out of, programs; c) appropriateness and quality of special education services; d) outcomes to be monitored, and e) issues surrounding the measurement of such outcomes (Hoge et al., 2012; Lehr& Lange, 2003a; Lehr& Lange,

2003b). Researchers continue to express concern as to the effectiveness of these programs and their ability to successfully transition students back to less restrictive educational settings (Hoge et al., 2012; McNulty & Roseboro; 2009).

Methods

This exploratory, qualitative case study (Stake, 2000) relied on individual interviews, conducted one-on-one, by the 1st author. The school psychologist was the first to be contacted, because of her direct access, engagement and collaboration with the entire staff, and implemented a snowball sampling to broaden the pool of participants. This technique relied on individuals' recommendations of plausible participants for the study, who would in turn refer others and so on (Marshall & Rossman, 2010). Total participants (6) included the school psychologist and the school principal, two classroom teachers (high school and elementary), an intervention technician (teaching assistant), and a transition liaison. Pseudonyms were used throughout the paper to preserve the anonymity of the district, the school, and case study participants.

Hinton Alternative School: The Setting

The case study was conducted in a southwestern state, which has experienced a rapid growth in alternative schools for students with ED during the past few years. The Hinton School was an alternative school—specifically serving students labeled as having ED—in one of the largest local districts in the area, which was the main reason the site was selected. Once special education teams identified that a student's specific needs could not be met in his/her regular education classroom or in a self-contained classroom within their school, students were placed at Hinton. The mission of the school, as outlined by the state's Department of Education, was to prepare students to be transitioned back to a less restrictive educational environment over a period of time.

Hinton included one elementary, two middle, and three high school classrooms, with a total enrollment of approximately 75 students (at the time data was collected). Hinton was the least inclusive educational setting for students with ED offered by the district; students at Hinton had no

access to non-disabled peers. As part of their placement at Hinton, students were to receive instruction specific to the needs outlined in their Individualized Education Program (IEP). Often times, students who had been unsuccessful in previous settings due to extreme behavioral problems were placed into this setting by their home school, also referred throughout the paper as the 'sending school.'

Hinton offered a small, controlled environment, behavioral and social skills instruction, flexible academic approach, and a full time school counselor who provided a therapeutic component to support students. Classrooms at Hinton were capped at 12 students and offered a four-to-one ratio of students to adult. The ethnic composition of the students mirrored that of the school district as a whole. Thus, minority students were not overrepresented at Hinton. As to gender, the population served was almost entirely male. Each classroom was staffed with one lead teacher and two intervention technicians (teacher's aide or paraprofessional). Although the intervention technicians served similar roles to teacher aides, at Hinton they focused mainly on monitoring and supporting the behavioral needs of students. Unlike other schools in the district, the setting allowed for the use of behavioral methods not typically implemented by staff in other settings, which included a program-specific restraint procedure and a seclusion-based 'time out' environment.

Participants

The six participants in this case study were Caucasians and comprised 20% of total school staff. The participation of the school psychologist and the principal were deemed essential, because their roles required frequent communication with other study participants and with other schools in the district. Mrs. Robbins, the principal of Hinton, had served in her current position for the past three years. From her perspective, her primary responsibilities included maintaining a safe and orderly environment, promoting academic achievement for students, and evaluating the school's nearly 30 staff members. Mrs. April, the school's psychologist, divided her time between Hinton and other schools in the district. As a former teacher at the school, Mrs. April reported she had a positive rapport established with staff and felt she had personal knowledge of day-to-day activities of the program. While her primary emphasis was ensuring the school

complied with special education requirements, her position required frequent engagement with teachers and intervention technicians and working one-on-one to develop and implement strategies for students.

Mr. Ayers, a 9th grade high school teacher, had worked at the school for 15 years. His responsibilities included teaching all core subjects to students (i.e. Math, Science, Social Studies, and English) as well as managing each student's IEP. He gained experience working with students with ED early in his life as a camp counselor. Mrs. Bennett, the other participating teacher, taught 10th grade high school and was entering her second year at Hinton. With a primary background in Speech and Hearing, she acknowledged that most of her training for the population at Hinton was received "on the job." Like Mr. Ayers, Mrs. Bennett was responsible for providing instruction across core academic subjects as well as managing students' IEPs. With little, if any, background in working with students with ED, Mrs. Bennett shared that she received support from a mentor provided by the school district, participated in district training opportunities, when those were available, and actively sought out staff advice.

Mrs. Ryan was the intervention technician (teacher's aide) in a high school classroom. Previously she was a teacher assistant in a self-contained classroom for students with ED. Her duties included recording data on student behavioral performance, prompting desirable behaviors, providing one-on-one and small group instruction, and intervening when undesirable behaviors occurred. To support her lack of an academic background in special education, she attended district trainings, asked for feedback from her classroom teacher, and relied on personal experiences as a foster parent to guide her practice.

Mr. Albertson, a veteran of the school of 20+ years, worked as a transition liaison. The position, created by the school, supported students returning from Hinton back to a less restrictive educational setting, often a self-contained classroom. He began working as a campus monitor and later served as an intervention technician. In addition to use duties as transition liaison, Mr. Albertson was responsible for managing student behavior data for all classrooms, communicating with parents when behaviors required higher levels of interventions on campus (restraints or seclusion), and providing support in classrooms when additional personnel were needed. With no formal academic training in emotional disturbance and behavioral

disorders, Mr. Albertson relied on his years of experience working at the school to foster his personal relationships with students and promote positive communication.

Data Collection & Analysis

This exploratory qualitative case study (Stake, 2000), relied on one-on-one interviews with educators and staff members, including the school principal and the school psychologist, to examine the perceptions and lived experiences of participants. The study focused on how participants perceived: (1) the role of the school within the larger school district; (2) the goals of their program/school; (3) their effectiveness in reaching those goals, and ultimately, the quality of the services the staff felt they were able to provide. Data collection (an adaptation of Seidman's 2006 three-phase interviews) occurred during the 2011-2012 school year and involved two semi-structured interviews with each participant across a two-month period.

First and second interviews, for each participant, were conducted within two weeks of each other (Merriam, 1988). The interviewees selected the setting for the interviews; sessions lasted between 30 to 60 minutes, and all interviews were audio recorded (Marshall & Rossman, 2010). Taking Seidman's (2006) lead, the first semi-structured interview sought to elicit (a) participants' perspectives regarding the purpose for the school, (b) a description of participants' professional duties and expectations for their position, and (c) their understanding of the reason students attended the school. The second interview focused more on interviewees' reflection regarding: how the school met the students' special educational needs and how to ameliorate the program for this vulnerable student population. During the second interview participants were also asked to reflect on emerging themes (in the first interview), which the 1st author found after an initial analysis (Seidman, 2006). Following each interview, the recording was transcribed verbatim and a copy of the transcription was sent to each respective participant to validate the accuracy of the transcript (Marshall & Rossman, 2010).

Two steps were followed to establish the validity of the interviews: member checks and peer examination (Marshall & Rossman, 2010; Merriam, 1988). Peer examinations were completed through collaboration with special education colleagues reviewing the transcripts and initial

coding of data (Merriam, 1998), vis-a-vis the research objectives previously stated. Further analysis of data followed several steps (Marshall & Rossman, 2010). The systematic collection, organization, open-coding of the data, and interpretation directly addressed the study's initial research statements (Merriam, 1988).

Findings

Although Hinton is expected to fulfill the important—yet complicated—duty of educating students with ED for a large urban school district and ensure that students transition back to their original schools, our findings unveiled significant programmatic challenges. We organized the findings into 3 major themes: (1) Isolation; Hinton's relationship with the schools in the district was perceived by staff as disconnected, and, in some ways contentious; (2) Limited investment in student outcomes by 'sending schools' once placed at Hinton; (3) Hinton lacked the resources (qualified staff and district support and oversight) needed to be effective. The fourth theme, one that did not address our initial research inquiry, but was loud and clear across the data, was: (4) Staff's views toward future solutions for some of the current problems

Isolation: Staff's Perception of Hinton's Place Within the Larger District

Collectively, the participants pointed out that most educators in their district were likely to be unaware of the existence of Hinton unless someone in the district was directly involved in the placement of a student at the school. As the transition liaison affirmed: "There are so many in other schools that don't even know we exist. They have no clue. They have no idea."Perhaps the limited knowledge about Hinton (and its purpose) outside its walls contributed to its ominous reputation across the district. Participants shared that those who knew of Hinton had negative reactions towards the school. The behavior interventionist again: "They [referring to educators outside of their school] cringe when they hear the name of our school." In fact, participants voiced that since Hinton was primarily known for the students placed there, the program's identity was more closely aligned with the negative reputation of its students than its actual purpose (to provide

educational services for students with a disability). Mrs. Robbins, the principal, shared that individuals within the school district perceived her students [as] "criminals—scary. More about the students being bad people." For example, the school psychologist claimed that the program (being placed at Hinton) was often presented as consequence, not educational accommodation, for students performing inappropriate behaviors. She shared that "… you will have specific administrators at other schools use us as a threat, to say to the student that '*if you don't stop whatever behavior, you will be going to Hinton*'."

The participants, however, did not share the same perceptions of their own students. In fact, their positive attitudes toward their students, and their belief in them, may have contributed to their personal reasons to continue working at Hinton despite its reputation. Mrs. Bennett, the classroom teacher, took pride in the students who were entrusted to her care. "I personally really enjoy my job. I know a lot of people look at me and think I'm crazy, but once you get to know these kids, and you build that relationship, they are great kids." Other participants shared similar sentiments. As one of the behavior interventionists affirmed: "For the most part, these kids are amazing. This is their last chance. So here, we try to step up, to where, we can move them back." A clear oversight on our part (the authors) was not to probe deeper into what was meant, in this case, by "to step up." However, the teacher did describe the effort she invested in her teaching, and her frustration with the lack of recognition she received from colleagues outside of the school.

> It is hard when you are putting in so much of your time and effort. And I put so much into my classroom. I'm not here just 8 to 3:30. I take stuff home. I'm always thinking about different ways [to instruct]. And putting in so much of my own time and it's kind of sad to think nobody knows what I am doing here.

The principal reflected on the impact of having a program like Hinton for the school district:

> I think that these students are not at a regular school, causing a disturbance, being aggressive, endangering other students, and [making sure] that other students can learn. I really do see that it's about the other students being able to learn because these students

> have been removed from that environment. We are successful because of what our students don't do at the other schools.

In most scenarios, Hinton lacked the authority to reject the placement of a student into their program. Situations arose when teachers at Hinton asked why a specific student was to be placed at their school. Mrs. Ryan, the intervention technician, questioned the appropriateness of some students' placement at Hinton and whether they were given a chance to succeed at their former school: "In a lot of cases, we get some kids that we are wondering, 'Why are you here?' There are some kids that come here really quickly." Despite this, participating staff accepted the duties of working with all students placed into their program. However, participants did not find that their open arms approach was reciprocated when Hinton determined a student was prepared to return back to a less restrictive setting. Another participant described her disappointment when one of her successful students returned back to Hinton after being transitioned to their home school only a short time earlier. "Smart kid, and they sent him back in a week… After talking to them, I feel, they didn't try anything. How can they send you guys [them] back and say that you can't make it when, on their end, I feel like they are not holding up their part, at all."

Lack of Involvement from 'Sending School' once Students were Placed at Hinton

One of the most common sentiments expressed was that once a school placed a student at Hinton, the previous school "washed their hands clean of them" and were no longer involved or interested in their outcomes. Mr. Ayers, the veteran classroom teacher, expressed his view toward the attention from 'sending schools': "Nothing. If I get a kid from a school—nothing. No follow up. Nothing—not even a letter. *How is my former student?* There is no ownership—Zero." As expressed by the school psychologist: "I've only had two instances over the past four years where the psychologist [from the 'sending school'] emails me … to say: '*How is the student doing?*'"

Both classroom teachers noted that in their opinion, the 'sending schools' did not view Hinton as a transition school. Voicing the 'sending schools', Mr. Ayers made this observation: "Once you [Hinton] have them*:*

Thank you; *I can relieve myself of the burden of that student*." Mr. Albertson, the intervention specialist, also claimed that in his twenty years at Hinton, he had found that most commonly Hinton was used as a means for 'sending schools' to rid themselves of 'problem students.' Other participants echoed this sentiment. According to several, being known as a Hinton student had a tremendously negative impact on a student's status. On the rare event in which a student transitioned back to the home school, the principal noted how the student's prior association with Hinton continued to impact their identity.

Throughout interviews, a common theme among staff was centered on whether or not the program's actual purpose was to be a transition school. This most often arose during discussions of the placement process for a new student into their program. The school psychologist, who attended all new student intake meetings, in which the IEP is updated for the new educational setting, claimed that the main goal of such meetings appeared to be more about *getting the student out* of the home school than preparing the student for success at Hinton:

> I don't think they [the home school] come readily with information that is important for a student. Unless we ask the question, no one comes with transfer grades for that student. So, I guess when you talk about the relationships, it is more of our initiating, our digging, our getting what we need, than others being thoughtful, mindful, and, I guess, supporting the transition from the sending end.

Participants seemed resigned to the fact that once a school placed a student at their site, nobody was likely to check back, to monitor how the student was progressing. Reiterating, and in some way summarizing what we heard from the other participants, Mrs. April, the school psychologist said the following: "I think they [the 'sending schools'] see it as 'getting rid of a student'. As far as what happens to the student, they don't really care that much."

The participants appeared to struggle with identifying clear expectations for their program based on the limited involvement of 'sending schools'. All participants were aware of the broad state guidelines set for the operation of schools like Hinton: to address the behavioral needs of students with ED and transition them back to their home schools. However,

the expectations communicated to them by 'sending schools', even if implicitly, seemed very different to the participants. The absence of agreed upon expectations for the school, as perceived by the staff, seemed to be a major hindrance to defining program effectiveness. An underlying question many faced was: How does a school achieve goals that do not exist in an explicit manner?

Low Expectations? A Program Under-Prepared and Under-Supported by the District

Each individual interviewed struggled to answer the questions: "How is success defined for this school?" and "How do you know if you did a good job at the end of the day?" For several participants, success was defined by the absence of trouble. While not proudly, most participants reported that if parents were not complaining and students were not restrained or put into seclusion, then they had a successful day.

For others, the two teachers most notably, an effective day meant the support staff (i.e., behavior interventionists) showed up on time to work and exhibited positive attitudes while doing their job. As the topic of program effectiveness was explored, few responses related to students' academic outcomes, achievement of behavior goals, social skills development or transition to less restrictive educational environments. Two staff members noted that since Hinton was not *under the [district's] radar*, its academic program suffered. Specifically, the school psychologist described what she perceived as low fidelity in implementing students' IEPs. Mrs. April shared the following:

> I don't know if [the teachers] take them [IEPs] as seriously as maybe other special education teachers, in terms of actual goal writing. What they are actually working on. Progress monitoring. Checking in on those things. And partly it is because they are working with these students with extreme behaviors. They don't have as much time for some of those daily progress-monitoring activities… I think a lot of the paperwork, the procedures… They don't necessarily follow through with their basic requirements of paperwork.

The lack of formal training to work with this particular student population, staff development and clear expectations from 'sending schools', seemed to convey to staff members that they had to rely on their own personal training and educational philosophies, rather than on research-based best practices. Mrs. Bennett, the classroom teacher, noted that although she had a master's degree in special education, she had "... very little [training] when it came to behavior." As for Mr. Ayers, the veteran teacher candidly shared, "I'm what you'd say, old school special ed. Just more of a counseling approach. I would be the least focused on academics. I've come a long way, but I just don't think it is that important. With that said, they [students at Hinton] are here to go to school. So, as much as you can get in, that is important."

One can only wonder in what ways the staff's perceptions of Hinton may impact the quality of services provided to students. One specific area to consider is Hinton's level system, measured using behavior point sheets, that served as an integral part of evaluating program effectiveness for students. The point sheets were used as the primary tool to assess and record student behavior and determined when students met performance expectations and whether they were prepared to transition to a less restrictive setting. Although used by the entire staff, the staff was not systematically trained to use them. They themselves realized that there was little—if any—inter-rater agreement in how they assess students' behavior using the tool. Mr. Albertson admitted: "Believe it or not, we are not trained on that [referring to the point system]. We talk about it all the time. There would be many times it would be way off." Mrs. Ryan, the aide, felt that the tool meant different things to different members of the staff: "We have tried to say let's be on the same page, but everybody, I think, has different priorities. We try to be across the board, but we are all different." Despite these issues, none of the participants had ever been questioned about the reliability of the behavior point sheet despite the schools emphasis on its use as a primary evaluation tool, further bringing into question program accountability.

Discouraged, Mrs. Robbins, the principal, reflected on the challenge she faced with staffing the program at Hinton. Given the reputation of the school and its students, very few people pursued a position there. Yet, the school was mandated to provide a specific staff to student ratio to meet

program requirements. This created a challenging power dynamic between the principal and her staff:

> I think some of our staff feels like, like it's an empowerment almost. Because they are working at this school and nobody else wants to do it… That they are never going to get fired, because who else is going to work with *these people*? Because they can say, *we don't have to do that. Our kids aren't going to do well on statewide tests*. So, I feel like, there is a kind of mental model that prevents people from going to their heightened level of educating the students.

Staff Question Hinton's True Purpose Within the School District

If schools placing students at Hinton truly expected a return back to a less restrictive setting, steps would be written into the IEP to map out a specific exit plan upon entry into the program. But according to the school psychologist, instances occurred where students, having met program goals, did not have a placement within the district to return. As a result, these students remained at Hinton until an opening became available. Multiple staff members reported an instance of a student qualifying for transition to a self-contained classroom (a less restrictive educational setting), but being stranded at Hinton because classroom space was not available in the district. This raises questions as to whether referring schools truly intend to receive students back. As one of the teachers put succinctly, it was a challenge to overcome the "out of sight, out of mind" attitude of the school district community (district administration and 'sending schools') toward Hinton.

Since Mrs. April was a school psychologist at multiple school sites across the district, she reflected on Hinton's unique existence: "That is just the way the school exists. There is just a different involvement of the district personnel [monitoring Hinton]." In regards to oversight, she posited that district-wide attentiveness was not occurring at Hinton to the same degree it did for other schools: "Being in the school [coming to Hinton], checking in, providing support. I just don't feel that it's given to this school."

One participant seemed to summarize a shared view of Hinton's role within the school district it served:

> I feel like, as long as this school is maintaining—as long as parents aren't filing complaints, as long as no one is getting injured to the point that it is going to cause media attention or a lawsuit—I feel we are sort of left alone. Good or bad, I feel that is the way the district sort of views this school. We exist because we need to. As long as things are kind of maintained, we are sort of left to be how we are.

Participant-Identified Changes to Improve Services to Students

The narratives provided by the staff at Hinton lead to questions such as: What measures should be taken to ensure that programs serving students with ED provide the most effective educational services? What can, and should, be done to increase the likelihood that students with ED in such settings are provided appropriate and effective services to increase the likelihood of a return to less restrictive settings? A similar question was posed to the participants and their insight and recommendations are worth disseminating. Their recommendations are centered on improved connectivity with the 'sending schools'. Mr. Ayers, the seasoned classroom teacher, identified one way to resolve the issue of students being 'abandoned' by their home schools:

> What a great idea that would be if the sending school, like [for] every student that comes here, actually had someone from the sending school constantly monitoring their progress. Talk to them. They would actually get a representative. What you would do is, really bridge a very significant gap between our school and the other school and make us more part of the community, as opposed to being a separate entity.

Mrs. Bennett, the other participating classroom teacher, echoed this sentiment, highlighting the importance of connectivity between schools and its impact on students' sense of self:

> I think if our students felt like their previous school and previous teachers, if they were still checking up on them, they may be like, "*Oh; they do care!*

In fact, since to 'bridge the gap' meant to improve the quality of communication and connectivity between programs by improving consistency across educational approaches (behavioral and academic), Hinton created their own position, transition liaison, to support students returning to a less restrictive setting after meeting their goals. Mrs. Bennett echoed the importance of this position, "[Transition] is scary. We wanted to know that the kids were doing well [after they left Hinton]… I think if we had a better relationship with other schools we would have smoother transitions for our students. Mr. Albertson, the transition liaison, shared the following about his role: "The purpose of the transition liaison is to make sure the student doesn't feel like we dropped them off and left them. To make sure they are comfortable there, with their teachers, their counselors, their principals, [and] their special education department."

Discussion

The primary goal of any special education intervention is to improve student outcomes in a specific domain. Changing a student's educational setting to a more restrictive one is one such intervention. Resulting from the growing expansion of school districts placing students with ED in alternative educational settings, researchers have identified effective practices to help guide policy within programs similar to Hinton (Bullock & Gable, 2006; Flower, McDaniel & Jolivette, 2011; Neel, Cessna, Borock, & Bechard, 2003; Simpson, Peterson & Smith, 2011). What has been especially absent in the research literature is the perspective of individuals who work within these programs, how collaboration (or lack thereof) with schools impacts their perception of their professional effectiveness, and how a fractured or inequitable relationship may negatively impact the students placed in these programs.

This qualitative case study, an investigation of program perceptions of an alternative school for students with ED, sought to explore such a school from its staff's point of view. We believe that a perceived indifference to student outcomes by the referring 'sending schools' contributed to an

overall feeling of frustration at Hinton. The isolation of working at a school like Hinton left many feeling disconnected from the district. This condition brings into question the efficacy of a program like Hinton, its potential ability to provide effective educational services for students with ED and ultimately return students to a less restrictive educational environment.

This case study highlighted that due to (1) an uncertainty in Hinton's purpose within the district, (2) a perceived absence of connectivity with 'sending schools', and (3) limited accountability and oversight, Hinton may have become a program operating against the principles that led to its original formation. Until further examinations of such programs and schools are conducted, we are unable to assess whether the perspectives of the participants in this case study are representative of staffs' perception across alternative schools for students with ED.

We acknowledge that the education of students with ED is challenging and complex. Still, we assert these findings warrant continued examination of schools serving students with ED, to ensure similar programs meet the individual needs of each student, rely on research-based and socially valid methods, and ultimately improve student outcomes. We believe it is essential to revisit the charge made by McNulty and Roseboro (2009) for "school officials to clarify the role of alternative schools in their district and ensure that those goals are indeed met, through whatever structure necessary" (p.424).

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Matthew Hoge is Assistant Professor at Deaprtment of Special Education and Literacy Studies at Western Michigan University, United States of America. ORCID id: 0000-0001-9036-0971

Eliane Rubinstein-Avila is associate Professor at the Department of Teaching, Learning & Sociocultural Studies at University of Arizon, United States of America. ORCID id: 0000-0003-3313-0875

Contact Address: Special Education & Literacy Studies, Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo, MI: United States of America. Email: matthewhoge@wmich.edu