

## THROUGH NEW LENS: YOUNG ADOLESCENT GIRLS' PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR SCHOOL EXPERIENCE IN AN ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION PROGRAM

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*The purposes of this study were to investigate female juvenile delinquents and at-risk girls' perceptions of their new school experience at a residential alternative education program in Singapore. Participants' views about the three key components of the alternative school are presented. Student characteristics and services offered at the school are also included. Implications and suggestions are made for the planning and implementation of effective programs and services for girls engaged in delinquent behaviors.*

There are always multiple perspectives and viewpoints involved in defining and identifying what is *best practice* in terms of interventions for youths engaged in delinquent behaviors. Some intervention programs have focused on addressing academic issues, some have an emphasis on building stronger bonds between the community and the young offenders, while others help girls leave prostitution (Northwest Regional Educational Lab, 1998). Many services for youth offenders also include development of vocational skills promoting the capacity of adolescences to sustain independence and self-reliance. Perhaps the most promising success is the reports of alternative educational programs and services which provide school systems an alternative to expelling or suspending youths in trouble, and help them avoid future delinquent behavior.

Indeed, in recent years, alternative educational services have become increasingly popular in the U. S. and other countries. They have grown because it has been recognized that helping youths develop educational skills can be one of the most effective approaches to the prevention and intervention of delinquency (e.g., Chesney-Lind & Shelden, 2004; Kentucky Center for School Safety, n.d.). School difficulties and negative attitudes toward school, as evidenced by anti-social behavior, failing grades, truancy, and dropping out, both reflect and contribute to at-risk behavior. Therefore, services that support academic performance and remove barriers to the young offenders' success in school are essential components of intervention programs.

In recent years, another noteworthy phenomenon is the rapid increase in criminal behavior by young women and girls which has made them the fastest growing segment of the juvenile justice system (American Bar Association and National Bar Association, 2001). As the increase in female juvenile delinquency shows, there is an urgent need to address the challenges facing at-risk young women and girls. Yet, appropriate attention to intervention, supervision, and ongoing care of at-risk and delinquent young women and girls has been lacking (Chesney-Lind & Shelden, 2004; Northwest Regional Educational Lab, 1998). In addition, research on effects of alternative education for girls has received relatively little attention from investigators.

In order to make educational services and programs more responsive to the specific needs of girls engaged in delinquent behaviors, the first step involves examination of student perceptions and views. In light of the literature review, this study was designed to investigate female juvenile delinquent and at-risk girls' perceptions of their new school experience at a residential alternative education program in Singapore. Responses from the participants are illustrative of their needs and suggest intervention strategies that are valued by the students. Implications of this study will be valuable for alternative programs and services for youths in the context of best practice.

In this study, the term *young adolescents* is operationally defined as young persons between childhood and adulthood, i.e., those who are in the 12 to 19 age range. This term is used interchangeably with *teens*, *adolescents*, and *youths*. *Perception* refers to view, opinion, attitude, and perspective.

### **Method**

#### *Setting*

The research site was an alternative education program for at-risk girls and female juvenile delinquents in Singapore. It was designed and implemented as a gender-responsive diversion program. Its commitment was to give girls in trouble a second chance to pursue academic studies and to provide them a temporary residential *home away from home*. Currently, it served an average population of 60, grades 6 through 12, from various regions of Singapore. The following sections delineate the services offered at the home.

To meet the educational needs of juvenile delinquents and at-risk girls, an experiential learning program was established at the research site in 2004. In addition to the learning program, two other pillar elements, i.e., the personal development programs and mentoring services and support group were also created to further address the concerns and conflicts young girls experience and help them in their journey of learning and growth. This intense level of academic, emotional, and social support for students at AG Home were designed to foster a pastoral environment among students at the home. The following sections will briefly describe each of the three key programs.

*Experiential learning program.* AG Home offers each resident the opportunity to catch up with their studies through the provision of the General Certificate of Education (GCE) N Level and O Level academic courses. The current student-teacher ratio was 1:10. With a strong emphasis on visual and experiential learning, corners dedicated to aquatic studies, botany and pet care were also set up. Interested students also had opportunities to go on periodic visits to pet farms, beauty salons, and various art studios. These specialized departments and experiential learning opportunities were introduced to engage the students so that there is little idle time and their day is more interesting and busier. The link between the experience and vocational training/employment was also another emphasis as it was believed at the home that an orientation toward the future can serve as a protective factor by allowing girls to look beyond immediate life circumstances.

*Personal development program.* Many of the girls at the home got into trouble due to the bad choices they made. Indeed it is one's core belief and values that motivates one to make good choices and do what is right (Calhoun, 2004). In fact, many successful prevention initiatives are driven by deeply held moral or religious beliefs (Calhoun). At the home, the personal development program was developed with the recognition of the link between physical and moral, spiritual well-being and students' readiness to learn and achieve. It adopted a Christian perspective and considered the challenges and issues young girls face as they mature.

This program was also created to help the girls to look at life's priorities and assess their personal foundations. With this in mind, a series of workshops about personal, social, and health education (PSHE) had been developed and conducted. From these workshops girls learned about healthy diets and life styles, issues of morality and sexuality, parenting skills, as well as assertiveness skills, communication and many other social skills. The PSHE curriculum also promoted the belief that delaying sexual activity offers girls a protective factor against trauma, unwanted pregnancy, and other risks that could lead to delinquency. The level of personal practice, discourses of Christianity and feminism were interwoven in a way that was specifically intended to address the girls' concerns about sexual relationships and gender roles. For example, in the PSHE program, girls not only had opportunities to talk about love, beauty, and chastity, they also learned that their worth and value are not found in the image the media portray, but in the *fearful and wonderful* way that God made them, and are, therefore, infinitely valuable. In addition, PSHE was also an integral part of school life of which many aspects also contribute to the PSHE of the students. All students underwent one hour of instruction, reflection and coaching from Monday to Friday in this area.

*Mentoring services and support groups.* These were the two other methods the research site used to provide emotional and social growth opportunities for girls at the home. To help girls make a positive transition to womanhood and prevent future delinquency, social support from others is essential (Northwest Regional Educational Lab, 1998). Unfortunately, many of the girls came from broken families and were left to their own devices since they were young. These girls missed positive female role models at home, discipline and guidance, and the absence of an authority figure who can help them with reason to make the value choices which so often confront and confuse them.

#### *Participants*

The current total population of the facility was 93% Chinese, 4% Indians, 3% Malay and others. Residents at the research site are typically referred by the Juvenile Court of Singapore, agencies (e.g., family centers), schools, the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports, or churches. All students (N=53) at the home were invited to participate in the study as volunteers. They were assured that their information is safe and that all information derived from this study would be reported in terms of numbers and group findings, never in terms of real names. Fifty students agreed to participate, representing 94% of students enrolled at the home.

Participants ranged in age from 12 to 19 years old and were in grades six through eleven. Due to the fact that currently there is no consensual definition of E/BD or standard and reliable screening instrument for children and youth at different ages in Singapore (Chen & Tan, 2006), students at the home did not have a formal diagnosis of emotional/behavioral difficulties (E/BD). However, school records of the participants indicated that girls at the home had a history of significant behavioral,

emotional, social, and school related problems at their home campuses. Offences committed by the girls range from status offence to property crime, dealing with drugs, and rioting.

The research method of this study was straightforward. With the aim of investigating female juvenile delinquent and at-risk girls' new school experience at the home, an interview protocol was constructed for the study. The interview questions were raised to elicit responses to the learning program, the personal development program, and the mentoring services and support groups. The author and two research assistants conducted structured interviews with each of the participants. At stage 1, all sets of data were analyzed using coding analysis of similar comments to facilitate the grouping of like-responses. Statements and comments made by the girls were then categorized with regard to their perceptions of their school experience. At the last stage of data analysis, findings were analyzed and presented in three parts, each part describes the participants' responses to each of the three key components at the home.

## Results

### *Girls' Perceptions of Their New School Experience at the home*

*Experiential learning program.* Participants were first asked how they felt about studying at the learning program, as compared to studying in regular schools/their former schools. Responses showed that the learning program was helpful. With regard to the learning environment at the program, 84% of the participants indicated that they had sufficient time to complete the syllabus and course materials. Most participants reported that at the program, there were suitable places to study after school (88%) and that they have been able to relate to what was being taught (86%). Most participants (75%) also appreciated the space and freedom they had at the program. Comments from students included: *the learning program is more flexible than other schools; it allows me to learn at my own pace; the environment is quieter and less crowded which help me to concentrate and sizes of the classes were very small.* Though in general, the participants were satisfied with the learning program, there was also a smaller percentage students reported that there was a lack of technology and multimedia resources (12%) as well as personal items and stationeries (10%).

When participants were asked what were the things they liked about the learning program, they listed the helpful teachers (60%), the flexible school structure (50%) and the small class size (44%). About 24% of the students mentioned that they liked the learning program because it was an alternative school and that it was *conducive* and that individualized instruction was provided. About 15% of the participants indicated that while they were in their former schools, their creativities were often misinterpreted and abilities overlooked, but the learning program here gave them opportunities to discover and develop their strengths and potentials. Participants also indicated that the convenient location of the learning program was another advantage. Since the learning program was located at the home, students could save time from travelling and be more focused. In addition, they could no longer run away from school or hang out with their *bad* friends from outside. Though many of the participants' comments about the learning program were positive, there was a smaller percentage of students (20%) reported that the learning program was the same as the regular schools. A minority of students (10%) indicated they did not benefit from the teaching offered at the learning program, and two (4%) others reported that it was difficult to cope at the learning program as it was not as well-structured as the regular schools.

In terms of interactions with the teachers, about 74% of the students reported that teachers were *accessible*, and they could typically reach them by walk-in office visit (36%), phone call (22%), and email (6%). Some participants (N=20) also mentioned that they appreciated the teachers here because they were friendlier and more approachable, and did not treat them as *probationers* nor show favoritism like many teachers in the regular school did. When asked how the teachers had helped them, a fair number of students (35%) mentioned that teachers at the learning program talked to them nicely, motivated them and had expectations for them. About 23% of the participants reported that their teachers often guided them patiently and with understanding.

Most of the students described their teachers as *accommodating* (96%) and *willing to assist when they had academic or personal problems* (60%). More than half of the students (52%) reported that their teachers were generally caring and supportive and 28% mentioned that teachers were sensitive to their academic needs and paid more attention to them than their teachers in the regular school. Overall, participants enjoyed their teachers and were thankful that they were very willing to go the extra mile with them by helping them with homework, giving after-lesson tutorials, and advising and encouraging them when they did not believe themselves.

*Personal development program.* According to the responses, the personal development services they benefited most from were the Teen Pregnancy Unit (72%), followed by the Home Enterprise (32%),

the Rehabilitation Programs (32%), and the Crisis and Child Protection Center (30%). About 27% of the girls commented that it was the passion and commitment they had developed through their participation in the program that help make better choices in life and become better persons. Five percent of the participants indicated that their new faith in God had helped them make their efforts succeed. Many of the students (54%) also indicated that pastors and counselors were also very helpful when they encountered difficulties in their studies.

Participants were also asked what services they would like to have in addition to what were currently offered. Nearly half of the participants (46%) expressed interest in having a home economics class that teaches them homemaking skills, and 24% would like to attend a leadership development program. A fair number of students (16%) indicated that they hoped the home could set up a service learning program. There were also a few others mentioned that they could benefit from programs such as a full fledged vocational training center (14%) and weekly Bible studies (12%).

*Mentoring services and support groups.* Responses from the majority of the participants (55%) showed that their mentors were supportive and showed genuine concerns to them. Twelve percent of the participants reported that their mentors were not only *nice*, they also confronted them when necessary, and worked hard to help them solve their personal problems.

About half of the participants (51%) commented that because of their concerns about confidentiality, they were reluctant to discuss sensitive issues such as sex and relationship with their families, and yet they were able to trust and to openly communicate these matters with their mentors. Interviews with the girls also indicated that the time they spent with their mentors had helped them clarify their understanding about personal issues (45%), and they were able to ask for personal advice when facing challenges (45%). When asked what their mentors did for them besides meeting them on a regular basis, many of them (35%) said that they enjoyed journaling with a mentor who read and replied to their concerns and issues. Sending messages through cell phone Short Messaging Service (SMS) to the mentors and being able to receive responses right away also made many of the girls (47%) feel being important. Interestingly, when asked what were the areas they would like to get more guidance from their mentors, education was listed by the participants as a priority (58%), followed by social life (46%), relationships (42%), bad habits (38%), future career (18%), and religion faith (12%).

Support groups which consist of both mentors and peers were created to provide girls opportunities to discuss their frustrations and problem-solve issues in their lives with their peers under the guidance of adults. Some girls (25%) reported that they were able to consider new career paths and get much-needed economic knowledge through their support group discussions. Forty-five percent of the participants mentioned that the support group meetings also provide a positive way for them to spend free time and as a result established and strengthened supportive friendship.

### **Summary**

Student perceptions of their school experience are integral to program development, implementation, and evaluation, and examinations of these perceptions are proven tools in effective programming (Settles & Orwick, 2003). This study was set out to obtain their overall perceptions of their new school experience at the current alternative program. The value of this study lays in its ability listen to girls' views which provide insights into how alternative education can effectively meet their needs and make changes to improve their experience and performance at school. As it is with most other studies, this study had some limitations. Though up to 94% percent of the students at the program participated, due to the limited numbers of participants, there was a lack of generalizability of the study results. In addition, research is limited in effects of programs for girls and young women. Current information about the adequacy of alternative education services for girls engaged in delinquent behavior is also lacking.

While there are some flaws, this study did reveal a couple interesting finding. Student reported that they appreciated the convenient location, the optimal learning environment, and the space and freedom here at the program. However, what they liked most about the learning program were the helpful teachers.

Reports from the participants also showed that the personal development program and the mentoring and support groups were able to support their needs beyond the classroom. The personal development program had helped them to make good choices and obtain needed health and social services in the community, and the Teen Pregnancy Unit was the most beneficial program. Responses also indicated that girls would like to have courses that teach them home economics and leadership skills. With regard to the mentoring services and support groups, participants reported that they had enjoyed the meaningful relationships with their mentors and that they appreciated their guidance and counseling.

Education, social life, relationships, bad habits, future career and faith were areas they needed more guidance.

### Discussion and Suggestions

Seeing school experience from the students' perspectives provides insights into how alternative education can meet their needs and make changes to improve their experience and performance. Findings of the study indicated that in order to effectively respond to the unique needs of female juvenile delinquents and at risk girls, an intense level of academic, emotional, and social support and a pastoral environment that communicates a depth of caring are essential.

The girls' perceptions of their learning experience at the learning program also indicated that the small student-staff ratio and the experiential learning opportunities incorporated into the learning program model were effective. The learning program's focusing on the immediate needs of each student allowed for a learner-centered environment that encouraged the girls to take an active role in learning and relationship building. However, according to the responses, it is suggested that learning program should provide more learning resources and structure.

Meaningful relationships with staff at the program are also critical. Involvement with at least one significant positive adult or a positive peer group is essential in providing effective and lasting outcomes. Further, programming must help at-risk girls and juvenile female offenders develop and strengthen personal support networks, including positive peer group and mentors, in order to reconnect them into the community. An emphasis on the development of vocational and effective decision-making skills can also be helpful.

The heart of the success of alternative education is the teachers. Girls repeatedly stated that it was the *caring* and *helpful* teachers and mentors who made the difference. Girls appreciated the staff who helped them cope with negative attitudes toward the value of education and went the extra mile with them when they struggled with studies. The importance of having dedicated, caring teachers cannot be overestimated.

The quality of school experience and student characteristics can not be separated as the combination of both is essential to the student's success. Therefore, programming adapted to girls' developmental needs and holistic development is more likely to result in positive outcomes, including healthy attitudes, behaviors and lifestyles, as well as positive outlook of life.

Though our society has made progress in serving girls in trouble, many schools and communities are still unprepared to meet the needs of girls who are involved in or at-risk of becoming involved in the juvenile justice system. There is much to be done to effectively guide prevention and intervention efforts and fill gaps in service for young girls and young women. Examining perceptions of students in the alternative school helps to enhance the quality of programs. Further investigation in this area could contribute to enhancing quality of alternative education services.

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