

THEory into ACTion

A Bulletin of New Developments in Community Psychology Practice

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Community Practice and Capacity Building in Alternative Education

Jennifer Renick
Pitzer College

Alternative education is a blanket term for the various different pedagogical approaches that can exist beyond a traditional school setting, sometimes encompassing home schools and charter schools. One particular variety of alternative education is public, state run alternative schools that serve as educational placements for students who have been removed from a traditional setting due to behavioral issues. My particular focus in the past year has been in an Opportunity Program, a district run school for students who have been expelled from a school site, but not an entire district. Often, at these schools there is a focus on rehabilitating the student so they can return to a traditional school setting. While there is variety in this sub category of alternative education, many shared challenges exist. In my reflections on my time there, I began to explore the potential for implementing strategies from community practice as a way to build capacity.

I joined the El Monte City School District's Opportunity Program staff in May of 2015, having previously completed counseling and programming internships at high-risk high schools in nearby LA County. When I received the job, one of my supervisors warned me, "The kids over there aren't like the ones you've worked here... it's a whole other level". Such words were echoed from various individuals, each cautioning me against the work. These interactions alerted me to one of the major challenges I would encounter working in

alternative education, which is the stigma. There is an extreme stigma against the students, which often overshadows any of the other issues at play within alternative education. It is easy for the focus to fall solely on the specific students and their actions, rather than looking at alternative education from a collective and community approach, addressing systems level challenges and root causes, core tenants of community practice.

El Monte's Opportunity Program has existed for many years, but rarely looked the same, due to frequent turnover of administrative staff, each who brought new content and approaches to the program. It should be noted that while there are key areas of growth within alternative education, it is not for lack of effort on the staff I encountered. All those involved were dedicated and passionate, but the work is incredibly difficult and often unsupported, hence the need for critical reflection and change. When I began work in El Monte, I went to explore what previous iterations of the program had looked like and found that unlike the previous, non alternative, public schools I had worked at, there was almost no record keeping. This was my first peek into one major difficulty among alternative education- given the lack of staff, there was no consistent data collection or tracking on how students were doing, what the outcomes were for them in the program, or even program practices. These were of course things we were seeking to remedy now by developing and maintaining such practices in ways that could work with our smaller staff. In addition to the lack of district kept data, there is also a lack of substantive research on such programs. A 2003 Survey and Analysis of Alternative Education Programs in Pennsylvania found "Research regarding the practices in AE (alternative education) settings remains limited, and no research on Pennsylvania programs is readily available." (Hosley, 2003) A similar study in New Jersey in 2009 found "The only national study to

date examining alternative schools and programs for at-risk students in grades pre-kindergarten through twelve was conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics, U. S. Department of Education.” (DeNobile, 2009) This current lack of record keeping is unsurprising given how under-staffed alternative education programs are, and how focused the schools are on individual student needs, but it would be impossible to make systems level change to alternative education, without accurate research and data keeping.

Lack of data and analysis are one hurdle for alternative education programs that lead into a larger problem: there is a lack of widely tested and supported successful program models for alternative schools. As of now, there is no standardized model these programs use, largely because no such model exists that is widely considered to work. As mentioned earlier, the El Monte Opportunity Program had looked different over the years depending on the administrator in charge, ranging from a boot camp to the more therapeutic model in place during my time there. We utilized the Boys Town Teaching Social Skills in Schools model, while a neighboring program in South El Monte had a completely different approach. In other such schools across LA County and beyond, there is this same lack of consistency. Hosley’s report found that alternative schools could often be categorized into the following three groups: academic, discipline, and therapeutic, but that the distinctions between these categories are “not rigid”. Again, it is not surprising that this theme emerges, as it speaks to the lack of support and the focus on the individual, rather than the systemic. A potential remedy going forward would be to create a culture of sharing best practices among alternative schools, another community practice. This could

be sustainable and autonomous, led by the schools using existing resources, and help to increase consistency, while research and testing still grow.

Without a consistent model, understanding effectiveness can be difficult to impossible, especially given the lack of data collection already occurring. During my time in El Monte, I was supporting the transition to a more therapeutic approach, one focused on social and emotional needs of students. This meant structuring the school day differently, so that mornings focused on academics, and afternoons focused on social emotional development. I developed and implemented social emotional skill groups, led by social work interns on topics like anger management and bullying. We also began therapeutic activities like art, gardening, yoga, team sports, and even visits from therapy dogs. We started monthly family breakfasts, to increase positive interactions between parents, their children, and the school. We supported nearly all of students in starting therapy, which could occur on site during the school day. We also developed curriculum on issues relevant to their lives like gang violence and drugs, and brought guest speakers in to discuss these topics with our students, as a way to try to address the root causes of many of these students' behaviors.

Teachers and observers of the program certainly noted a difference in outcomes in response to us creating such programs. Additionally, through evaluative work I implemented, we did see more students exiting our program and successfully returning to traditional school. In this way, our program was more effective than it had been previously, though still not necessarily what one could call an "effective" program. In a year, only about 25% of our students would successfully return to their home school site.

While we were happy with the increase, the results showed there would still be room to grow

Our struggle to evaluate the effectiveness of our program and determine a successful model was not unique. Gauging effectiveness is difficult for alternative programs for a number of reasons. The first is that there isn't necessarily a standard of what each school considers their goals. Alternative education programs operate differently and as such, have different priorities. Our program was working to help students return to a traditional school setting, while other programs have completely different goals. This is part of a larger trend of alternative programs proving successful as a way to address acute issues, but proving unsuccessful in producing long term change in outcomes for youth involved. Hosley's report in Pennsylvania found that teachers and administrators did find alternative education effective in reducing disruptive behaviors and changing target behaviors, but that it found they were less effective in increasing interest in school activities or developing career interests (Hosley, 2003) This echoes the struggle I witnessed in El Monte; alternative programs work well to address student's individual behaviors, but struggle to create lasting change in a student's school career. This again can be linked back to the individual versus system approach.

This is of course only a small sampling of the reality of alternative education. In my experience in El Monte, I saw a hard working, dedicated staff that was constantly seeking to evolve their program to meet students' needs. I also saw a large amount of obstacles that stood in their way, not just within the students, but within the system itself. The culture of focusing on only the individual, and not being able to also explore the systemic, creates many challenges to improvement. Opening spaces to share best practices and create strong

working models, having time for data, analysis, and reflection, and thoughtfully gauging effectiveness are all potential ways to address these challenges. As practitioners exploring bridging the academic and practical, alternative education presents a unique opportunity to bring community practice to communities of need that often may be disconnected from it, and challenge us to continue to expand the real world implications and potential from community practice.

References

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Hosley, Nathaniel S. "Survey and Analysis of Alternative Education Programs" (2003). Center for Rural Pennsylvania. Paper 3.

This is one of a series of bulletins highlighting the use of community psychology in practice. Comments, suggestions, and questions are welcome. Please direct them to Tabitha Underwood at underwoodtabitha@gmail.com.