ABOLISHING ZERO TOLERANCE POLICIES IN OUR EDUCATION SYSTEM: ALTERNATIVES TO REDUCING DELINQUENCY AMONG SPECIAL EDUCATION STUDENTS

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Abstract

Zero tolerance policies once promoted as a solution to youth violence have created a school to prison pipeline. Widespread discipline practices of suspension, expulsion, and arrest for school behavior problems are turning kids in conflict into criminal offenders [1]. Research shows that school discipline and school-based arrests may serve as a negative turning point for youth and contribute to increased odds of arrest over time. Students with disabilities (SWD) have been reported to be disproportionately suspended from U.S. schools and so more likely to experience the “school-to-prison pipeline” through suspension’s associations with lower academic achievement, dropout, juvenile delinquency, and adult criminality.

No data exist to show that out-of-school suspensions and expulsions as well as school-based arrests reduce disruption or improve school climate. One of the more consistent findings when looking at school discipline has been a high degree of racial disparity in school suspension and expulsion. In the United States, Black students are consistently suspended at rates two to three times higher than those for other students, and are similarly overrepresented in office referrals, expulsions, and corporal punishment.

This paper presents findings from a qualitative analysis of special education youth who attended school at a recreation center in Brooklyn New York. The analysis helps provide an understanding of the relationship between alternative high school education and offending. This study focuses on youth who were at risk for offending due to poor academic performance and previous delinquent involvement. Prior to attending school at this facility, the individuals were previously exposed to an environment that put them at risk for delinquency. According to Wang and Fredericks [2], interventions that aim to improve school engagement may promote positive youth development, including reducing involvement in problem behaviors even among special education students. Research also shows that behavioral and emotional engagement in school can promote academic development and also function as protective factors in buffering against delinquency. The young men in this sample engaged in specific activities that they would not normally take part in at a traditional special education program. The presence of learning disabilities by itself does not increase the risk for delinquency; however, youths’ limited knowledge, skills, and expectations may make them less able to avoid misconduct and acting out behaviors. This paper provides support for preventative measures to youth conflict and delinquency by placing special education students in an environment that promotes pro-social behavior. The current paper also looks at the role of neighborhood institutions and its impact on alternative high school education. Lastly, findings from this research provide viable alternatives to zero tolerance policies that disproportionately impact minority students and students with learning disabilities.

Keywords: zero tolerance, special education, delinquency prevention, school to prison pipeline.

1 INTRODUCTION

Students with disabilities (SWD) have been reported to be disproportionately suspended from U.S. schools and so more likely to experience the “school-to-prison pipeline” through suspension’s associations with lower academic achievement, dropout, juvenile delinquency, and adult criminality [3]. The current study looks at the role of neighborhood institutions and its impact on alternative high school education. The research conducted for this investigation took place at a neighborhood institution in a disorganized Brooklyn, N.Y. community.

According to Lange and Sletten [4] many, if not most, students enrolled in alternative programs have difficulty in the traditional school environment. Many have dropped out of school or contemplated such an action. Some have been placed in alternatives due to extreme behaviors unacceptable in the traditional school and others are special education students who have violated discipline rules. Students enrolled in alternative education programs are at risk for school failure, dropping out, delinquency and
violence. Given the number of students who are dropping out of or being expelled from traditional educational programs, the need for alternative education programs is clear [5].

Successful programs have a clear focus on academic learning that combines high academic standards with engaging and creative instruction and a culture of high expectations for all students. Applied learning is an important component in academic program. Instructors in successful alternative programs choose to be part of the program, routinely employ positive discipline techniques, and establish rapport with student peers [4, 6]. Small class sizes with low student/teacher ratios that encourage caring relationships between youth and adults are also believed to be beneficial to students in alternative education programs [4, 5, 6].

Alternative education programs should not serve as dumping grounds for disruptive students or ineffective teachers (Tobin & Sprague, 2000). In addition to having problems adapting to the traditional school environment, those enrolled in alternative education programs may face health and safety issues. Again, special education youth are at risk for delinquency. According to Burrell and Warboys [7] significant proportions of youth in the juvenile justice system have education related disabilities and are eligible for special education services. Although the special education system imposes significant duties on the juvenile justice system, it offers substantial resources to professionals working throughout that system. The purpose of this study is to learn exactly how enrollment in an alternative program results in positive youth development and pro-social behavior. In other words, there is an examination of what is taking place in the classrooms between teachers and students.

2 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Data for this investigation came from a broader study of youth involvement in neighborhood organizations. Qualitative interviews were conducted with young men and women at a Brownsville Brooklyn Recreation Center (BRC). The BRC has been serving the Brownsville community since 1964. This facility has been responsible for helping the community by running an array of programs and services out of the facility. These programs including food banks, programs for senior citizens, homework help for adolescents, and computer and sports programs for younger members [8]. Because the Department of Education collaborated with the BRC, the center was home to an alternative education program for young men. Research suggests that effective alternative learning programs are in clean and well maintained buildings, not necessarily a traditional schoolhouse [4].

A total of 10 students were enrolled in the alternative education program. Thus the program at BRC fits the traditional framework of existing alternative education classrooms. Small class sizes have been recommended for success, and are believed to be beneficial for students enrolled in such programs [5,4]. Therefore a purposive sample of 10 respondents was included in this analysis.

The interview began with asking for basic demographic information, including place of residence, family structure, racial and ethnic background, and school attended. Respondents were next asked about their relationships with social control agents in their lives including, parents, teachers and law enforcement. Lastly, respondents were asked to report about their engagement in deviant and illegal behavior. To do this, the researcher obtained the list of “personal questions” from the Internationalization of Legal Values Inventory instrument [9]. This instrument provides an extensive list of questions about delinquent offenses. If the respondent answered “yes” to the offense, the researcher inquired about the nature of the incident, if the respondent had been arrested, and if he/she had served time in a juvenile facility.

Grounded theory methods were applied for the data analysis; themes were systematically generated from the interview data [10]. Themes were compared and contrasted; as a result key positive influences from school personnel believed to promote pro-social behavior were distinguished.

3 RESEARCH FINDINGS

3.1 Alternative Education Youth

At the time of the interview alternative education respondents were between the ages of 17 and 20 years old. Students were allowed to take part the program until they are 21 years of age. Alternative programs tend to be separated by gender therefore all individuals in the sample were male. Each of the men identified themselves as African American or of Caribbean origin. In regards to the family structure living
with extended family members was common. Most of these young men resided with their grandmother. For one young man his aunt and uncle were his primary guardians.

Each of these young men transferred from other alternative high schools in Brooklyn, where they exhibited either low school attendance or had withdrawn from school for an extended period of time. They were either in their third or forth years of high school when they began attending school at the BRC. When they began the BRC education program some were functionally illiterate performing far below their grade, while others performed at grade level when they left their other high schools. Two had a history of delinquency and served time in juvenile detention facilities. These characteristics placed these young men at risk for school failure and delinquency.

3.2 Work-Study Program

The students in this sample took part in a work-study curriculum where half their day was spent learning traditional academics while the other half they obtained hands on work experience. The first portion of the day is spent performing janitorial services and the remainder of the day is spent taking math and reading classes. Educational learning took place in a study room where tables were set up for group learning. The room consisted of books and computers, however the students did not utilize the computers. Each of the young men in the sample was at risk for school failure and delinquency. Therefore it is important that the school curriculum address these needs. Again, the curriculum at the BRC was consistent with the literature on alternative education programs, small class sizes that allowed individual attention. There were two teachers responsible for educating this classroom of young men. According to Lange and Sletten [4] instructors in successful alternative programs choose to be part of the program, routinely employ positive discipline techniques, and establish rapport with student peers. The work-study program created a structured environment for these students. The narratives in the following section will provide illustrations of this.

Students enrolled in this curriculum took part in the janitorial maintenance program, where they obtained hands on experience guided by a custodial worker who is employed at the BRC. Taking part in this program helped these young men transition into a formal state funded job-training program once they complete high school. Students who attend school at the center have chosen a path in janitorial maintenance. When they reach their senior year, their resume (which includes skills obtained at the center) is sent to the state and they can enroll in a formal job-training program where they can qualify for state certification. These young men will later have the option of working in many different venues including hospitals, schools or even the BRC.

In addition to education and training taking place at the BRC, twice a week students meet at the local library to continue their instruction. Here they listen to different genres of music and make use of the computers. Every week at the library these young men also meet with a psychologist. This psychological assessment aids in the development of the individualized education plan cultivated for each student that reflects his specific needs and abilities. Tobin and Sprague [5] recommended that interventions be based on functional assessments for individual students with serious behavior problems. Therefore having an additional professional involved in the education and pro-social development of these students was beneficial.

The following section identifies the main themes that emerged from the interview data. Overall, the youth in the sample expressed concerns regarding their personal safety, development, as well as involvement in delinquent behavior. The stories here explain how attending school at BRC helped them cope with these problems.

3.3 Starting Over: A New Environment

Again each of the young men in the sample transferred from other alternative high schools. Therefore the first theme discussed refers to the importance of changing their learning environment. Lange and Sletten [4] pointed out the importance of an alternative learning program housed in a building that is attractive, inviting and fosters emotional well-being, and a sense of pride and safety. The BRC appealed to the young men in the sample because it was not housed in a traditional school building. Nick shared:

\[ In my other school kids were running the halls, talking back. I use to cut class. I never went to school and they got a medal detector. I don't like when people check me, checking my sneakers and all of that. \]

\[ I like this building. I can show any ID and walk around and move around like a man is suppose to. You feel me. You see, the school and the principal was making me feel like a \]
little kid. I'm trying to grow up. Since I came here they don't baby you. You HAVE to be a man.

The BRC provided an environment that was more conducive to learning by creating structure. Participants reported previously being in settings where the controls made them feel more like a criminal than a student. Nick reported that it was difficult for him to thrive in school because more emphasis was placed on discipline than education. The BRC gave him an opportunity to function more like a traditional student by becoming responsible for his schoolwork. Youth are trusted to enter the building and the likelihood of confrontation is minimal. Being able to do this creates a sense of belonging and safety for these young men, a feeling they were not able to experience in other settings.

3.4 Conflict Avoidance Strategies

Another theme that emerged was conflict avoidance strategies. Tobin and Sprague [5] pointed to the importance of alternative education possessing social skills instruction, especially in the areas of empathy, anger management, and conflict resolution.

Respondents expressed concern for dealing with confrontation and hostility from some of their peers. In the past at other schools, these confrontations escalated into physical altercations, which resulted in formal sanctions by the police. This issue was common among the alternative high school youth. Prior to attending school at the BRC, several of the juvenile participants were in school settings where physical fights were the norm and the students did not know how to stay out of fights. At the BRC, they are shown how to avoid conflict and fights with other students.

James explained:

My boy right there, Mr. G., without him, and Ms. F, I wouldn’t be like this. I’d be locked up I swear to God. They always tell me to control my anger. I’m not gonna front, I use to fight before I came here. If people pick on me, and I don’t like when I’m talking calm to someone and they start yelling at me.

I talk to Mr. G. like I got into an argument with one of the guys and he told me I should leave it alone and he tells me not to pay attention to negativity.

The relationships the students have with the BRC teachers seem to help them deal with adversity. It is apparent that the BRC teachers advise these youths on various ways to resolve disputes and talk out their anger. Therefore, the center also offers a safer environment because the students become reluctant to fight with one another. The students appeared to respect their teachers and were willing to take their advice on how to manage stressful situations.

3.5 Educational Improvement

A number of factors played a role in educational improvement for these young men. The participants reported increases in academic success when they began attending school at the BRC. This was attributed to the change in environment, small class sizes and individualized attention for the teachers. While attending other alternative schools, they reported that they were assigned little to no homework and were given assignments far below their reading and math levels. The following examples show that academic performance improved at the center. Robert explained:

Back then in ’07 I didn't do well in school, I sucked back then in math and English. I was focused on the ladies back then. When I came here I started to do better in math and English. Because I respect the man Mr. G, they treat me so well here and he tells me I can be promoted.

Academic improvement appeared to be related to having a close caring adult who had taken an interest in the wellbeing of these young men. Encouragement and motivation from BRC teachers seem to be related to student success. Academic achievement has been shown to serve as a protective factor to help neutralize past negative experiences. This is important for youth who have a history of delinquent behavior, particularly some of the young men in this group. Archwamety and Katsiyannis [11] reported that successful academic remediation and school success results in reduced rates of recidivism with juvenile delinquents, and regular school attendance is an important element of academic improvement. Young men in this group reported negative experiences in previous alternative high schools including stringent disciplinary rules and a hostile environment. As a result, even when these young men attended school they didn’t remain in the building long once they arrived, leaving immediately after the first morning class. However, because of the supportive environment and academic improvement achieved
at the BRC, students are now willing to attend school on a daily basis, and thus they were able to move beyond past school failures.

### 3.6 Motivation to Succeed

Research on alternative education suggests that maintaining self-esteem is important to students. In previous schools attendance was low, conflict was high, and there weren’t any opportunities to discuss future goals. Being enrolled in the work-study program at the BRC gave young men a solid plan for success after graduation. Sheldon explained how inspired he was by the program.

*When I got here, I was introduced to Mr. G, Millie and Seth, and I learned that students graduated and got diplomas from here and later get trade license. I want to follow in their footsteps.*

*Like, all the things Mr. G be telling me about the program is making me feel proud about myself because I really want to do that stuff, to get the money, get my diploma. I want a state certificate and go to college after. I know we in Special Ed and stuff but I can still go to college.*

Trevor also shared a similar belief:

*Everyday I come to school and try to do better than what I was doing. I’m trying to graduate next year so I can work. Then I go to JDC and go get a certificate and probably work. Ms. Millie says she’ll hire me here after I get my certificate. Mr. G told me that I’m a top student. At the other site, no one told me I was the best student.*

It was important that these individuals knew the important steps needed to move on to the next stage of their lives. In their previous environment, these young men did not see their peers succeeding in school. They were also not familiar with what employment or further schooling options were available to them. Having this type of involvement made it possible to formulate plans and responsible decisions for the future.

Sheldon explained that although he is in special education, he is not deterred from getting ahead in life. This is mostly due to the encouragement he obtained from his teacher at the BRC. Two young men, Sheldon and Trevor spoke about how their teacher encouraged them to succeed by simply offering praise for their performance in school. As a result, respondents developed a sense of confidence in their future. Students saw the possibility of fulltime employment at the center or another facility once they obtained their diplomas and certification.

### 4 IMPLICATIONS

Alternative high school students discussed the difficulties they faced when it came to in-school performance in the past. However, because of staff members at the center, educational success became possible. Through relationships built with teachers and staff members at the BRC, respondents also acquired work experience, social capital and were exposed to life outside of Brownsville. These experiences helped build their self-esteem and learn strategies to avoid personal conflicts. Youth reported that their needs for acceptance, motivation, and support were met at the BRC. Venting frustrations and reaching an understanding of issues also appeared to be helpful. This was achieved through the relationships with close, caring adults, in this case their teachers and staff members.

This in turn reduced school alienation, which is believed to be predictors of school dropout. Earlier research suggests that school dropouts have more negative police contact and delinquent behavior than individuals who graduate from neighborhoods throughout Brooklyn [12, 13].

Alternative high school students began to experience a safe and structured environment, smaller class sizes, limited school violence and conflict that made learning more conducive.

The fact that they were alternative education students did not appear to discourage them from setting goals to obtain more education. These aspirations are due to the relationships developed with individuals at the center who served as role models to them.

Although these students are enrolled in an alternative education program they are provided with encouragement and believe themselves to be conventional students. It has been shown that learning difficulties and low self-esteem as a learner may cause frustration and may be expressed through aggressive behavior. These problems lower the school motivation and may lead to exclusion or even
complete disengagement [14]. The teacher at the center clearly has demonstrated a number of ways to keep youth motivated so they want to attend school.

BRC involvement while attending school helped respondents redeem themselves from past negative experiences that put them at risk for delinquent behavior. It provided them with another incentive to complete high school. They were exposed to additional caring adult role models; they obtained work experience and learned ways to earn income. Conforming was essential to educational improvement and increasing one’s chances of legitimate employment opportunities and meeting requirements for graduation. Conformity took place when individuals had a chance at succeeding.

The presence of learning disabilities by itself does not increase the risk for delinquency; however, youths’ limited knowledge, skills, and expectations may have made them less able to avoid misconduct and acting out behaviors [15, 16, 17]. The fact that these young men were special education students did not appear to discourage them from setting goals to obtain more education. These aspirations were due to the relationships developed with the teachers and workers at the BRC center. These adults served as role models to them. Having someone to look up to is critical for African American youths’ development [18].

5 LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The sample size for this investigation was small mainly due to the nature of alternative education programs. Most classrooms house a limited number of students. Because this research was exploratory in nature, only one alternative high school program was included in this analysis. However, it did provide an in depth look at the experiences of students attending this program and the relationships formed with teachers and staff members.

Although only one program was included, it laid the groundwork for future research on how alternative education programs operate particularly in disadvantaged communities. The students in this analysis were not successful in previous alternative programs, however the respondents indicated that enrollment in the BRC’s alternative education program benefitted them all. Future research may include an analysis of different cohorts who attend school at the BRC or possibly follow up research with former students. Learning the attributes of other successful alternative programs can be useful in addressing the needs for at risk youth. Lastly, because the programs are separated by gender, a comparison of alternative programs dealing with young women would be beneficial to the research.

REFERENCES


