Purpose and passion: The rationales of public alternative educators

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ABSTRACT

Alternative schools are popular interventions for marginalized students, including students with disabilities, but little research has focused on professionals in these settings. Today, close to 11,000 public alternative schools or programs are believed to exist in the United States education system (Foley & Pang, 2006) and as many as one million students are currently attending alternative learning programs in the United States (Lehr, Tan, & Ysseldyke, 2009). While public alternative schools can vary from one another in many ways, they exist to serve youth marginalized in traditional public settings.

In this study, we explore the ways teachers, administrators, and nurses in alternative settings collaborate to support mentally healthy school environments for marginalized student populations. Drawing on the process of rationale development (Hawley & Crowe, 2016; Hawley & Jordan, 2014; Shaver, 1977; Shaver & Strong, 1982) as rooted in social studies education, we explore the perceived purposes of these professionals as they work with some of the nation's most marginalized children. Through focus groups and one-on-one interviews, the data bridge social studies themes rooted in democracy and equity with special education themes of inclusiveness. This work offers insight into the rationales of teachers and professionals engaged in critical work, and provides a platform for helping professionals undergo the rationale development process.

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Introduction

When considering the educational crises of the modern era of schooling the issue of school dropout has garnered a great deal of attention and effort. School dropout is a theme that transverses the social studies and special education. While combating the dropout problem has primarily focused on supporting students from minority groups and students from families of lower socioeconomic status, less attention has been given to specifically addressing the dropout problem among students with disabilities. While the national graduation rate for all groups is around 80%, students with disabilities find themselves in a category with a much more grim statistic as their graduation rate is an alarming 63% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). Students with disabilities can frequently be found in alternative educational settings, and it is essential that professionals in alternative settings are equipped to address the intersecting academic and health needs that lead to dropout among student disabilities.

An understanding of school dropout requires an understanding of power, inequality, and marginalization. These themes are equally prevalent in the social studies and justice-oriented special education. While numerous interventions and programs exist to combat school dropout, one of the most significant approaches used by public school districts is the use of public alternative schools (Souza, 1999). Public alternative schools, however, are an under researched entity in American public education (Jones, 2014; Lange & Sletten, 2002). At this point, it seems that public alternative schools exist to serve students labeled by the system as "at-risk" for dropout (Souza, 1999) and to thus serve the often disadvantaged and struggling students, including many with disabilities, who find themselves on the fringe of the traditional educational system (Conley, 2002).

While little scholarly attention has been given to public alternative schools in general, even less attention has been given to the teachers and other professionals that educate in these settings. Alternative schools inherently serve students considered "disadvantaged," "marginal," or "at-risk" (Raywid, 1994, p. 26). Logic would suggest that practicing in these settings is a challenging undertaking. It appears that certain special education populations often labeled as challenging, such as students with emotional and behavioral differences, are served in higher proportions in alternative schools (Gorney & Ysseldyke, 1993). Therefore, an important part of the role of the professional in these settings is to re-engage students who are often disenfranchised from traditional settings.

The results of previous studies in alternative settings have suggested that re-engaging disenfranchised students is best done through the creation of a positive, mentally healthy school climate (Quinn, Poirier, Faller, Gable, & Tonelson, 2006). Mental health in this context refers to a state of mental and emotional well-being and not only an absence of psychiatric diagnoses (World Health Organization, 2011). Quinn et al. for example, stated that students in alternative schools succeed when they believe "their teachers, staff, and administrators care about and respect them, value their opinion, establish fair rules that they support, are flexible in trying to solve problems, and take a non-authoritarian approach to teaching" (p. 16). Building on the work of Quinn et al. we set out to explore the approaches of multiple professionals in alternative schools in a Southeastern state in the United States. In order to do this, two major research questions were explored through focus groups and one-on-one interviews. First, in what ways are professionals in alternative settings able to collaborate to produce mentally healthy school environments for a vulnerable population? Second, how do professionals in alternative schools envision their purpose as alternative educators?

In order to begin to answer these questions, we explored the ways in which an interdisciplinary group of alternative educators and health care professionals worked to create mentally healthy school environments. Our study focused on 26 alternative school teachers of varying subject area expertise, administrators, and school nurses. Through focus groups and one-on-one interviews, these professionals explained their self-perceived purposes for practicing in an alternative setting as well as the ways in which they go about promoting mentally healthy, student-focused school communities.

The data used in this study were derived from two focus groups consisting of 10 and six participants respectively, and 10 one-on-one semi-structured interviews. By using an open-coding method rooted in grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006) four clear themes emerged. The four themes were: *Caring as Purpose, Hope Matters, Empowering Citizens*, and *It's Not All Roses: Barriers to Mentally Healthy Schools*. These themes merge social studies themes rooted in democracy and equity with special education themes of inclusiveness. In this paper we explore these themes in depth while connecting democratic social studies and justice-oriented special education.

Literature review

Alternative schools

In order to discuss the complexities of educating in an alternative school, it is important to provide a brief overview of alternative education. Perhaps the largest obstacle to synthesizing the alternative school literature is the recognition that the field suffers from a definition problem. The alternative school terminology often takes on multiple meanings and is used differently by various scholars studying the field (Conley, 2002; Foley & Pang, 2006; Lehr & Lange, 2003; Raywid, 1990). At this point, however, it is clear that alternative schools exist primarily as a school system's attempt to curb student dropout rates (Souza, 1999) and to serve students who are simply not deemed successful in the traditional environment, usually for some combination of academic and behavioral issues (Lehr, Tan, & Ysseldyke, 2009).

Considering the definition problem, however, it is difficult to pinpoint a specific history of the emergence of alternative schools. Still, one major theme runs consistent through the literature. It seems that alternative schools emerged to satisfy either a want or a need for something other than the traditional model of schooling. Alternative schools, as we know them today, came to prominence in the 1960s. Considering the counterculture movement of the American 1960s, this seems appropriate. In the 1960s schools began to form, both public and private, that focused on offering an option to the traditional model. By mid 1970s, nearly 5000 alternative schools existed in the United States (Neumann, 2003). How these schools functioned and the purposes they served have as much variability as you would expect from a sample size of 5000 schools. Some schools likely followed A.S. Neill's (1960) free choice model such as the one followed at his Summerhill and some schools were focused more on public education reform. Raywid (1994) attempted to provide some structure to the multifaceted alternative school conversation by typifying alternative schools into one of three categories: "Popular Innovations," "Last-Chance Programs," and programs with a "Remedial Focus" (Raywid, 1994, p. 27). Perhaps, however Raywid (1999)