

Education and Day Treatment Opportunities in Schools: Strategies That Work

Anne Fitzsimons Hughes and Beatrice Adera

ABSTRACT: In recent years, the number of alternative schools has continued to grow and an increasingly large number of students at-risk for school failure have been enrolled in alternative settings. Critics blame this increase on the fact that the school-aged population has become increasingly diverse, presenting a broad range of issues that the schools have not been able to effectively address. Furthermore, with the renewed push for accountability and the mounting challenge of serving students who exhibit emotional and behavioral problems, schools have had little choice but to resort to enrolling these students in alternative educational settings. Federal legislation emphasizes that educational programs serving students at-risk for school failure should use strategies and procedures for which there is empirical support regarding their efficacy (F. A. Hughes, P. Baker, A. Criste, J. Huff, M. Link, C. Piripavel, et al., 2006). C. A. Lehr and C. M. Lange (2003) argued that although it is clear that students with disabilities are attending alternative schools, the extent to which these students are being educated and the nature and quality of these educational programs is still unclear. In this article, the authors will provide an overview of strategies and practices that work in effective alternative and day treatment programs. The authors will examine research and pedagogical literature relevant to the aforementioned core characteristics and discuss practical recommendations for integrating these core characteristics into daily practices using specific examples from model programs.

KEY WORDS: *alternative settings, at-risk, day treatment, EBD, effective practices*

THE NATIONAL CENTER FOR Educational Statistics (2001) states that 10,900 alternative schools nationwide are serving an estimated 613,000 students daily. The prevalence of alternative schools has shown a threefold increase since 1997–1998. In 2001, the United States Office of Special Education Programs funded a University of Minnesota study that examined the extent to which alternative schools nationwide were serving students with disabilities (Lehr, 2004). Preliminary findings of that study indicated that an estimated 12% of students being served in alternative schools are students with disabilities, typically students

with learning disabilities (LD) or emotional or behavioral disabilities (EBD; Lehr, 2004).

With the growth of alternative schools in many states, it is clear that students with disabilities are attending these schools; however, questions remain about the characteristics of these programs, how the students are being educated, and the extent to which students' needs are being served in varying alternative settings across the nation (Lehr & Lange, 2003). In a survey of state directors of special education nationwide, Lehr (2004) found that students with EBD were the most common group of students with disabilities served in alternative settings. According to the US Department of Education (2001), despite the movement towards inclusion of all students with disabilities, students with EBD continue to be placed in segregated, self-contained settings, including day treatment educational centers.

Given the large numbers of students with EBD served in alternative settings, it is critical that programs being offered in these settings be of the highest quality. Some recent efforts to improve programs focused on attempting to define components and strategies essential to providing quality alternative programs. A set of six cornerstones of effective alternative education programs were identified (Dugger & Dugger, 1998; Gregg, 1999; Hawes, Dillard, Brewer, Cobb, & Neenan, 2000; Hughes et al., 2006) including: (a) provision of a comprehensive student referral system and procedures that identify the target student population whose needs can best be met in alternative settings (b) provision of coursework and educational activities relevant to students'

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real-world experiences and goals that include a variety of nontraditional curriculum as well as use of effective and efficient instructional strategies; (c) provision of effective programming that facilitates students' social, emotional, and behavioral growth, that establishes a safe, positive, non-punitive environment, and that creates a sense of belonging, empowerment, and value for students and their families; (d) provision of initial and ongoing relevant staff development, training opportunities, and support; (e) use of policies, procedures, and practices that effectively support students in their transition from the alternative setting to a mainstream campus, employment, or third-level educational setting; and (f) use of ongoing program evaluation and data-driven decision making as a cornerstone of the program.

We will expand upon characteristics of issues (b), (c), and (f) and provide an overview of the research and pedagogical literature relevant to these core characteristics. We will also offer practical recommendations and specific examples of how to integrate these core characteristics into daily practices.

Effective Educational Practices and Instructional Strategies

What Does the Research Say?

The critical link between educational achievement, learning, and behavior is one that has traditionally been overlooked in many alternative settings. Given that one of the most common criteria for referral to an alternative program is that students are exhibiting academic problems, it is of paramount importance that academic achievement no longer be overlooked. Even the most adamant critics of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB; 2001) concede that if nothing else, it has focused much needed attention on academic achievement levels of students with disabilities. Research has consistently demonstrated that one of the most effective deterrents against inappropriate student behavior is active, engaging, and relevant academic instruction. Students who are actively engaged in learning, who are working on instructional materials that are aligned with their functioning level and of interest to them, are significantly less likely to engage in disruptive, antisocial behaviors. Effective alternative programs have to place priority on providing effective instruction using meaningful and engaging curriculum.

In their seminal study, examining practices in programs for students with EBD nationwide, Knitzer, Steinberg, and Fleisch (1990) used the term curriculum bleakness to describe the curricular and instructional approaches they observed. Knitzer et al. noted that students with EBD in alternative settings were sitting at desks for extended periods of time with packets of individualized worksheets to complete. Limited direct instruction approaches, classroom discussions, and instructional engagement between teachers and students were observed. Almost a decade later, the Center for Effective Collaboration and Practice (1999) stating similar concerns said that, "many special education programs for students with

emotional and behavioral problems target behavioral change, but place less emphasis on academic achievement" (p. 252).

Anne Fitzsimons Hughes, the senior author and principal of an alternative setting for students with EBD, has encountered similar situations over the last five years where several professionals have discussed the fact that they feel the students are in the alternative setting to work on behavior not academics. While I concur that providing behavioral support and facilitating behavioral change represent key goals in alternative day treatment settings, I would also argue that improving students' academic competence and reigniting their desire to learn and interest in school are of utmost importance. We are alarmed to see the limited amount of research available describing effective academic interventions for students with EBD, especially when 25–97% of students with EBD have serious academic deficits. Gunter and Denny (1998) reported that emotional and behavioral problems of students are often exacerbated due to ineffective instructional practices. Though some evidence also exists documenting an inverse relationship between increases in academic performance and occurrence of inappropriate student behaviors (Kern, Bambara, & Fogt, 2002).

Recent legislative reforms have begun to place the spotlight on academic practices for students with EBD. The 1997 and 2004 reauthorizations of the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) both refer to the fact that educators must not only consider the link between learning and behavior, but must act on it. The positive behavioral support movement emphasizes the critical roles that effective instruction and meaningful curriculum play in effectively preventing or intervening in behavioral problems in our schools. Research has begun to identify some curricular and instructional approaches that are effective with students who have EBD. These approaches include: (a) more time spent engaging students in the classroom, rather than relying on packets of individualized worksheets; (b) direct instruction in learning strategies, organizational skills, and study skills; (c) instructional activities that incorporate experiential approaches, hands-on tasks, projects, and higher order thinking skills; (d) curriculum and instruction that are culturally relevant, developmentally, appropriate, and have some connection to students' interests and the world they live in; (e) curriculum-based measurement, ongoing evaluation of students' academic progress; (f) direct instruction in and opportunity for real world practice of social skills, conflict resolution, anger management, and problem solving techniques (Bos & Vaughn, 2002; Johns, Crowley, & Guetzloe, 2002; Schloss, Smith, & Schloss, 2001).

From Research to Practice

Successful alternative school-based day treatment programs incorporate the effective curricular and instructional elements listed above. Centennial School in Bethlehem,

Pennsylvania, is acknowledged by many as a model day-treatment educational program for students with EBD and exemplifies many of these practices. Centennial staff is trained to use research-based effective teaching practices that incorporate matching curriculum to a student's functioning level, systematic analysis of student error patterns, ongoing curriculum-based measurement using AIMSWEB system, frequent feedback, high rates of active engagement, and mastery of learning principles. Specific instructional approaches used include direct instruction, making connections between students' learning and their worlds, and hands-on, active learning approaches (Hughes et al., 2006).

The Challenge Program in Sanger, Texas also bases its curriculum and instructional approaches on research-identified best practices. These practices include using a diagnostic-prescriptive approach to generate students' learning objectives, using direct instructional approaches, and incorporating students' interests into learning activities. Specific programs that have been successfully used by the program include (a) the Read Naturally program to build fluency and reading comprehension skills in struggling readers (n.d.); (b) *Science Today* and *Current Events* periodicals to link science and social studies lessons to today's world and the world of our students (n.d.); (c) United Streaming technological resources published by Discovery Learning (n.d.); (d) the History Alive program, developed by the Teacher's Curriculum Institute (TCI), which promotes an engaging and motivating approaches to teaching students social studies (n.d.); (e) experiential games, group building activities, and journals with other varying resources located at www.fundoing.com; (f) using games to make learning fun and engage students including social studies, science, math, or language arts *Jeopardy*, Bingo, *Wheel of Fortune*, Math Basketball, and others (n.d.).

Focusing on effective instructional and curricular practices for students with EBD being served in alternative settings is positive and needs to be continually built upon. Students with EBD must be guaranteed some level of academic competence if they are to be successful in their futures. The power of relevant, engaging instruction as a deterrent to antisocial behavior has been repeatedly established and alternative settings that focus solely on improving students' social, emotional, and behavioral functioning are doing their students a huge disservice that will have lifelong negative ramifications.

Programming That Facilitates Students' Emotional, Social, and Behavioral Growth

What Does the Research Say?

Students' social, emotional, and behavioral growth constitute critical areas that need to be effectively addressed in alternative, day treatment settings. Intelligence levels and academic functioning capabilities alone have not been found to be the key factors determining whether or not students are successful in society, outside of school. Students'

social skills, interpersonal skills, and social-emotional characteristics have been found to play an important role in students' success in society (Hartas & Donahue, 1997; Maag, 1995; Salend, 1999; Schloss et al., 2001). Deficits in social competence have also been consistently identified as risk factors for substance abuse, mental health issues, delinquency, and low self-concept (Johns et al., 2002). Critical criterion for being identified as a student with EBD are deficits in social emotional functioning. Therefore, it is important that day treatment alternative centers working with students with EBD develop programs that directly foster and address students' social competence levels.

From Research to Practice

Effective programming and interventions that facilitate the emotional, social, and behavioral growth of students are critical in effective alternative day treatment settings. These programs and interventions must be research-validated and evidence-based and reflect a positive behavioral support philosophy that builds upon student's and their family's strengths. Effective alternative schools provide courses relevant to students' real-world experiences that include life skills, anger management, and individual and group counseling (Coreyman, 2000). Typically, an increased focus on wellness, fostering of knowledge, skills, behaviors, and attitudes necessary for social competence and adult independence has been seen (Klopovic, Vasu, & Yearwood, 2003).

The Centennial School at Lehigh University in Pennsylvania is a model alternative setting where educators incorporate problem-solving and social skills instruction as integral aspects of the curriculum designed to teach students school survival skills and life skills. The Centennial School incorporates the teaching and assessment of social skills that constitutes an ongoing process integrated into all daily activities and that uses a school-wide positive behavioral support system alongside the Second Step violence prevention curriculum (Committee for Children, 2002). Other approaches have also been used to facilitate students' emotional, social, and behavioral growth and to establish a safe, positive, non-punitive environment that creates a sense of belonging, empowerment, and value for students and their families (Hughes et al., 2006).

The Positive Education Program (PEP) in Cleveland, Ohio helps students grow emotionally, behaviorally, and socially by providing intensive interventions. PEP is a model program grounded on the re-education of emotionally disturbed children philosophy (Re-ED) developed by Dr. Nicholas Hobbs in the 1960s and has been continuously refined since then. The program blends quality education and mental health services in partnership with families, schools and communities.

The Georgia Psycho-educational Network (GPN) is another model program that provides comprehensive community-

based services that focus on the emotional, social, and behavioral growth of students. GPN incorporates a variety of programs such as (a) the life space crisis intervention techniques, (b) developmental therapy and developmental teaching approaches, and (c) the student achievement model developed through Boys Town (Hughes et al., 2006). These community-based programs are examples of proven educational approaches that meet the requirements of IDELA (2004) and the NCLB Act (2001).

Data-Driven Decision Making and Program Evaluation

What Does the Research Say?

The NCLB Act (2001) mandated that accountability standards and data-drive decision practices constitute the underlying principles driving educational programming. IDELA (2004) also made reference to the NCLB Act stating that all children with disabilities must be included in all general, state, and district-wide assessment programs with appropriate modifications and alternate assessments where necessary and where indicated in the respective student Individualized Education Plans (IEPs). The NCLB Act also expanded requirements for reporting and added guidelines regarding alternate assessments requiring them to be aligned with the state’s academic content standards and the students’ academic achievement standards.

Many educators in alternative educational settings have been vocal in their criticisms of the move towards accountability because in the past, they were able to avoid the accountability scrutiny techniques that general education is mandated to uphold. The time has come, however, when alternative settings must be accountable for their students’ achievement levels, and the question to be asked is not whether or not our students’ achievement should be measured but what the most appropriate measure is (Hughes et al., 2006).

From Research to Practice

Prior to the passing of the NCLB Act (2001) and the IDELA (2004), each of the model alternative programs used systematic program evaluation and self-monitoring procedures. These alternative programs are committed to ongoing program evaluation and data-driven decision making and use the results of these efforts to identify program specific strengths and deficits in an effort to improve the quality of services provided. Program evaluations constitute an essential element of effective alternative programs. Table 1 provides examples of the levels of outcome measures used by some of these model programs and how these outcomes are measured.

Conclusion

The number of students served in alternative schools has risen in recent years and the quality of services and supports

TABLE 1. Examples of Possible Outcomes Measures

Outcomes	Examples of possible measures
Immediate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students’ achievement performance on curriculum-based measures (e.g., AIMSWeb) and progress reports • Students’ progress toward mastery of IEP objectives • Students’ growth in emotional, social, and behavioral functioning measured by direct observations, behavioral incidents, progress on level system, and more • Decrease in in-school suspension rates • Decrease in out-of-school suspension rates
Intermediate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transition rates to less restrictive settings • Results of state testing and standardized academic tests • Growth in emotional, behavioral, and social functioning
Long-term impact	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase in school graduation rates • Decrease in school drop-out rates • Decrease in incarceration rates • Increase in employment rates • Decrease in mental health hospitalization rates

Note. From Hughes et al. (2006). “Effective practices in meeting the needs of student with emotional and behavioral disorders in alternative settings.” In L. M. Bullock, R. A. Gable, & K. Melloy (Series Eds.), *Sixth CCBBD Mini-library series: Making a difference in the lives of children and youth with learning and behavioral problems—Proven practices for prevention/intervention in the school, home, and community*. Arlington, VA: Council for Children with Behavioral Disorders. Reprinted with permission of the author.

provided in these settings has improved significantly and continues to evolve. Alternative, self-contained programs continue to serve thousands of students at risk for school failure (Hughes et al., 2006) and quality alternative schools may be an option in the provision of educational opportunities that will foster successful postschool outcomes for students at risk for school failure (Lehr, 2004). It is imperative that alternative education programs develop effective programs and practices that incorporate research-based effective educational activities and evidence-based instructional

strategies, with the goal of facilitating students' emotional, social, and behavioral growth. These alternative education programs should incorporate data-driven decision-making practices and program evaluation as key components to facilitate their growth and development. These efforts will enable educators to effectively serve students who are at risk for school failure as well as their families.

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