PERCEPTIONS OF POSTSECONDARY EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES OF GRADUATES OF AN ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL SETTING

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Abstract: Alternative educational settings are designed to meet the needs of students who are at risk of dropping out, who have already dropped out, or who are engaging in conduct severe enough to warrant removal from the mainstream setting. Alternative programs fall into one of two categories: a program that emphasizes disciplinary action or remediation commonly referred to as a Disciplinary Alternative Education Program or a program with an academic emphasis that is designed to address students' academic needs and deficiencies. The focus of this study was on alternative education programs focused on the academic performance of at risk students. This study sought to understand the advantages and disadvantages of being in an alternative school in terms of students' plans immediately following graduation by understanding their perceptions of their preparedness to face the challenges of postsecondary education after they graduate from the alternative school. This study explored the perceptions of entering college for students identified as at-risk who were expected to graduate from an alternative school. The findings revealed three major themes that describe students' perceptions of postsecondary opportunities and plans. These three themes included factors leading to postsecondary plans, progress made toward postsecondary plans, and perceptions of preparedness regarding postsecondary plans

Keywords: alternative education, at-risk student, graduation, college preparedness, student drop out, alternative school

1. Introduction

State governments and local districts have expanded the realm of education by introducing alternative educational settings. Alternative educational settings are designed to meet the needs of students at risk of dropping out, or who have already dropped out (Carver, Lewis, & Tice, 2010). These programs were implemented to address the increasing dropout rates and demand for global competitiveness in education (Lehr, Lanners, & Lange, 2003). According to Foley (2009), alternative education programs are "individualized opportunities designed to meet the educational needs for youth identified as at risk for school failure" (p. 9). Foley (2009) noted that alternative programs fall into one of two categories: programs that emphasize disciplinary action and remediation, commonly

referred to as Disciplinary Alternative Education Programs (DAEP), and programs that emphasize academics designed to address students' academic needs and deficiencies. Programs in both categories are designed to meet one of two outcomes: a successful return to the traditional school setting or completion of the high school graduation requirements (Carver et al., 2010; Foley, 2009; Lehr et al., 2003). The focus of this study was on alternative education programs that emphasized student academic performance.

Alternative education programs that emphasize student academic performance can encompass a variety of educational settings, both within and outside the public school setting, and they can use various instructional delivery methods. These programs may also vary greatly from state to state as well as from district to district. Academic alternative education programs are not disciplinary programs nor are they punitive in nature; rather, they are based strictly on students' academic needs (Carver et al., 2010; Lehr et al., 2003).Additionally, alternative education programs can be delivered in several formats. For example, some programs are entirely computer-based, some entirely classroom-based, and some a hybrid of online and classroom learning. In addition, some programs focus only on students' academic lives while others take on a more holistic approach and integrate other aspects, including social services and community-based learning (Lehr et al., 2003). Successful alternative programs should result in decreased dropout and increased graduation rates (Carver et al., 2010; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). However, several conflicting variables exist when trying to gauge graduation rates; notably, defining high school graduates. Many reporting agencies consider both a high school diploma and a general equivalency diploma (GED) to be sufficient, while others consider only a high school diploma to be satisfactory (Tyler&Lofstrom, 2009). For the purpose of this research, only students who received their high school diplomas were considered high school graduates. This study examined at-risk students in an alternative school to reveal their perceptions of postsecondary opportunities and the factors that influenced their decisions.

2.   Statement of the Problem

High school graduation rates are an increasing concern within the public school system, and many students who are identified as at risk are not graduating high school with their diplomas. Three prevailing themes have emerged in terms of developing solutions to the dropout crisis: change the student, change the program, or change the system (Lehr et al., 2003; Raywid, 1998). Ideally, changing the program would inherently change the student, would be long lasting, and would be life changing. Alternative schools were created to change programs and allow students who were at risk of dropping out or who had already dropped out of high school the opportunity to graduate with their high school diplomas in an alternative school setting. Historically, the success or failure of these programs has been based solely on the graduation rates of at-risk students enrolled in alternative education. However, this study sought to take the research a step further and measure the success of alternative schools based on students' perceptions of their postsecondary educational opportunities. Over the past decade, alternative schools of choice have become increasingly popular, especially in situations where a student is in danger of or has already dropped out of high school. The purpose of the American public school system is to create lifelong learners who will be productive, contributing members of society. However, debate is ongoing as to whether the current educational system is effective in fulfilling this purpose for all segments of society. Numerous studies exist on the effects of alternative education programs in terms of factors related to successful programs and high school graduation rates. However, limited research has examined the postsecondary education plans of the population served by alternative schools, specifically students who are identified as at-risk. Thus, this research sought to address the gap in literature, which involves a lack of investigation into whether alternative educational

programs are as effective in preparing this growing number of students for postsecondary educational opportunities as are traditional high schools.

3. Purpose of the Study

The researcher sought to understand the advantages and disadvantages of attending an alternative school in terms of students' plans immediately following graduation.Specifically, the focus of this study was to understand factors leading to decisions made regarding postsecondary life, and students' perceptions of their preparedness to face the challenges of postsecondary education after they graduated from the alternative school. For the purpose of this research, only students who were working toward or had obtained a high school diploma were included.

4. Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

1. What plans do students graduating from an alternative school have immediately after graduation?

2. What factors influence the decisions of students graduating from an alternative school in terms of enrolling in college or obtaining employment immediately after graduation?

3. What are the perceptions of students graduating from an alternative school of how their current academic program prepared them for postsecondary education?

5. Significance of the Study

This research is significant to the field of education because of its specificity in scope and a lack of current research on the postsecondary education attendance plans of at-risk students who completed high school in an alternative educational setting. Considerable research on alternative schools and at-risk students focuses on the effects of alternative schools on high school completion rates; however, the research appears to end there. A primary goal of education is to create lifelong learners who will be productive, contributing members of society. Therefore, this study attempted to determine whether alternative schools contribute to that goal. The findings from this study provide students, parents, teachers, and administrators a unique and detailed perspective of factors that influence graduates of an alternative school in making decisions regarding postsecondary opportunities. The insights derived from this study may generate new ideas to emphasize or revise within existing alternative education programs. Furthermore, the findings may provide a better understanding of the effectiveness of such programs in preparing students for entrance into college as well as factors that influence graduates of alternative schools to pursue postsecondary education.

6. Method of Procedure

The researcher used a qualitative descriptive research design to gather the perceptions of graduating students from alternative schools using a face-to-face semi-structured interview protocol developed for this study. Participants were asked a series of open-ended questions regarding their perspectives on the pursuit of postsecondary education. The researcher analyzed the data through content analysis. Specifically, the researcher used a phenomenological qualitative descriptive approach that focused on participants' responses to semi-structured interview questions (Merriam, 2009) that aimed to identify their perceptions on how the policies, programs, and activities in the alternative school prepared them for college opportunities immediately following graduation. The semi-structured interview sessions were conducted with graduating students currently enrolled in an alternative school. The information gathered from the interviews included demographic characteristics, students 'immediate plans following graduation, and their perceived preparedness for postsecondary education. The interview method is one of the most commonly used data collection techniques to gather information in participants' own words (Leedy&Ormrod, 2010). The information gathered from the interviews was used to develop themes generated

through content analysis. The researcher chose a descriptive study, as opposed to other qualitative inquiries, because the focus was to describe participants' perceptions rather than to provide meaning to life experiences or to generate a theory regarding a phenomenon (Merriam, 2009). The focus of the study was alternative school students' perceptions of their educational experiences and their levels of preparedness to pursue postsecondary education. Thus, a qualitative descriptive study was deemed most appropriate for this study.

6.1 Selection of Sample

The target population was graduating students from an alternative school located in Southeast Texas. Participants were scheduled to graduate during the 2014-2015 academic year with their high school diplomas. Selected participants were at least 18 years of age and had been enrolled in the alternative school for at least one full semester, which give them sufficient exposure to the alternative school program to address the research questions. The researcher used convenience sampling to select the sample population. Students were invited to participate in the study through a formal invitation letter. Prospective participants were briefed on the research topic and given the opportunity to decide to participate in the research. Those who agreed to participate in the interview sessions were required to sign an informed consent form prior to scheduling their interview sessions. Twelve participants of varying genders and ethnicities were interviewed.

6.2 Collection of Data

Upon obtaining informed consent from the participants, the researcher scheduled the interviews, which occurred after school hours. Each interview session was conducted individually, face-to-face, in a private room. Interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes. The researcher developed the semi-structured interview questions to ensure that participant responses provided valuable insight into the research questions.

6.3 Treatment of the Data

Based on participants' responses to the interview questions, the researcher identified thematic categories using the qualitative data analysis software NVivo 8.0 (QSR International, 2014).NVivo 8.0 is qualitative data analysis software wherein participants' responses are used as inputs. The qualitative data gathered from the semi-structured interviews were transcribed and input into NVivo 8.0 for processing. The software identifies common words and phrases and outputs a count for each word or phrase to identify common responses. From the common responses, the researcher identified themes to establish response categories. The thematic categories were used to answer the research questions. The researcher undertook this process to identify participants' characteristics, behaviors, thoughts, perceptions, and experiences, which became the foundation of the analyses (Cozby, 2009).

7. Thematic Analysis

By combining Attride-Stirling's (2001) theory of text breakdown and analysis, and the steps set forth by Ryan and Bernard (2003), the researcher reduced and explored the text from the interview transcriptions to discover themes and sub-themes, and linked these themes to the research questions posed at the onset of the study. Three major themes were found, two of which contained sub-themes that provided further insight into participants' perceptions. The themes identified included (a) factors leading to postsecondary plans, (b) progress made toward postsecondary plans, and (c) perceptions of the preparation for postsecondary life provided by the alternative program.

7.1 Factors Leading to Postsecondary Plans

The majority of students interviewed (10 of 12) planned to pursue postsecondary education and other vocational programs to obtain the knowledge or certifications necessary for their intended careers. Two respondents did not plan to enroll in postsecondary education following high school graduation. The researcher found that factors

leading to postsecondary plans, whether to enroll in higher education or to pursue employment, were based on the characteristics and unique life experiences of the respondents, rather than on characteristics of the educational setting in which they were enrolled. Ryan and Bernard (2003) note that repetition was one of the simplest ways to identify themes and sub-themes within qualitative research. Therefore, the researcher identified sub-themes by grouping the most oft repeated factors of participants' postsecondary decisions. The sub-themes identified were personal responsibilities, influence of family and friends, and presence of industry in the community.

7.11 Progress Made Toward Post-Secondary Plans

Although 10 participants planned to attend college following graduation, only one, Participant #6, had been recruited by the local industrial plant and had started the application process to pursue postsecondary education. Most participants were nearing their high school completion dates. In response to questions regarding financing postsecondary education, these students stated that they would seek financial aid; however, the majority had not explored their financial options for college even if they had immediate plans following high school.

7.12 Perceptions of the Preparation for Postsecondary Life

The third major theme identified was the perceptions of students graduating from an alternative school regarding how their academic program prepared them for postsecondary education. The majority of participants responded that they were prepared for postsecondary life, and they believed that the alternative program had prepared them for postsecondary education well. However, a sub-theme emerged when respondents were probed for examples of this preparation. A second sub-theme emerged as a number of participants indicated that the program focused solely on completing the requirements for high school graduation and included preparation for making and obtaining postsecondary goals.

7.2 Perceptions of preparedness. Nine of the 12 participants indicated the belief that the alternative school had prepared them for their lives after graduation. However, few could provide explanations of how or why.

7.3 Lack of preparedness. Several participants communicated that they felt the main priority of the alternative program was to obtain a diploma, and it stopped there. When asked about the ability of the program to prepare students for life after graduation, several participants responded that they believed the program focus ended at graduation. Participant #4 perceived that the only focus of his school was to get students to graduate.

8.   Research Question Findings

The researcher used the identified themes and subthemes to answer each research question.

8.1 Research Question 1

Research Question 1 was, "What plans do students graduating from an alternative school have immediately after graduation?" Ten participants communicated a desire to enroll in some form of postsecondary education following graduation. These programs ranged from industrial certification programs at the local college, general studies at the local college, and entrance into 4-year institutions.

8.2 Research Question 2

Research Question 2 was, "What factors influence the decisions of students graduating from an alternative school in terms of enrolling in college or obtaining employment immediately after graduation?" When analyzing the theme corresponding to this research question, three sub-themes emerged: (a) personal responsibilities, (b) influence of family and friends, and (c) presence of local industry in the community. Participants expressed wanting to provide a better life for their children and supporting their immediate families as a primary motivating factor in the decision making process. The researcher also found that both life experiences and encouragement from family and friends exerted a great deal of influence on participants' decisions regarding postsecondary

opportunities. Several participants described the paths of friends and family members that they wanted to follow because of their perceived successes and the encouragement they had received from these individuals. Additionally, several participants identified the presence of several major petro-chemical production plants and their integration within community and educational institutions as a factor. Several participants planned to obtain the certifications necessary to gain employment at one of the local plants, and one participant was already enrolled in a certification program sponsored by this industry.

8.3 Research Question 3

Research Question 3 was, "What are the perceptions of students graduating from an alternative school of how their current academic program prepared them for postsecondary education?" The theme and sub-themes of preparedness were representative of the research question and were supported in the form of direct quotes and summaries of participants' responses. Although the majority of participants indicated that they were prepared for postsecondary life and that they believed that the alternative program prepared them for postsecondary education, participants were unable to provide specific examples of this preparation. Several participants indicated that the program included preparation in making and obtaining postsecondary goals; however, it focused primarily on completing the requirements for high school graduation. This finding is illustrated by Participant #5's belief that the school had performed its job and provided students with adequate training and knowledge for college; however, he could not give examples. When further probed about the factors that led him to decide to attend college following graduation, he stated, "I done research on my own. I talked to some of my counselors at my school, and I got the confidence to go and do what I want to do." Several participants felt that the main priority of the alternative program was to obtain a diploma, and that the program lacked any substantial guidance regarding postsecondary opportunities. When asked about the ability of the program to prepare students for life after graduation, Participant #2 responded that his school seemed to have nothing to do with preparing them for life after high school: "This school has actually nothing to do with that." Participant #4 perceived that the only focus of his school was to get students to graduate.

9. Summary

The researcher gathered significant answers to address the research questions of the study by conducting a thematic analysis of transcriptions of the 12 face-to-face interviews. Three themes emerged from participants' responses: (a) factors leading to postsecondary plans, (b) progress made toward postsecondary plans, and (c) perceptions of the preparation for postsecondary life provided by the alternative program. The researcher presented the three major themes and subsequent sub-themes discovered through the data analysis. The research questions were answered based on the themes and sub-themes that emerged from the interviews. Chapter 5 includes further explanations and interpretations of the results and the conclusions.

10. Implications

The current findings showed that at risk students do plan to pursue a form of higher education immediately following graduation. Reasons for this path include better financial stability in the future and a desire to provide a better life for self and family.

Additionally, students in this study felt that their current alternative academic setting adequately prepared them for postsecondary education; however, they were unable to describe any specific school activities that did this. In addition to these themes, participants provided direct feedback related to how personal experiences shaped their perceptions and decisions regarding life after graduation. Despite these findings and the efforts of specialized, alternative settings to encourage students to do well academically, many students stop at a high school diploma

and do not proceed to college. A significant portion of the literature focuses on external factors that prevent at-risk students from enrolling in college upon high school graduation. It should be noted that the majority of studies, including the current study, define enrollment into a postsecondary institution as immediately upon graduation; therefore, it is possible that students who enroll later in life are not being represented accurately. The prevailing theme was that at risk students graduating from an alternative setting plan to pursue postsecondary education opportunities, either in the form of 2-year, 4-year, or workforce certification programs. Furthermore, the driving motivation behind their desire is related to the influence of family and friends and the desire to become financially stable. The researcher felt that the inconsistency between the stated themes and the corresponding actions are the most relevant findings in this study— all participants wanted or planned to go to college; however, only one had begun the application process, in spite of the quickly approaching graduation dates of these participants. Lacking the proper guidance and information about this process may be associated with lower postsecondary enrollment rates.

This finding strongly suggests a need within the alternative academic settings for structured information and guidance regarding the process of college selection, application, admittance, and financial options. The decision to seek out and enroll in a postsecondary institution may be related to the information and resources available to students at school, at home, or in the community. Students with access to various information sources (e.g., parents, teachers, guidance counselors) are more likely to attend postsecondary institutions than are those who do not have access to these sources (Horn&Chen, 1998). According to Ross and Kena (2012),informing students about the availability of financial aid and assisting them with the application process are activities associated with increased postsecondary enrollment rates and financial aid applications. Evidence also exists of a positive association between postsecondary enrollment and participating in college awareness programs that provide academic support, career development, financial aid resources, and opportunities to visit campuses (Cate&Schaefle, 2001).

11. Conclusions

The purpose of this qualitative descriptive study was to understand the perceptions of students graduating from an alternative school regarding postsecondary opportunities. In the process of conducting this qualitative study, themes emerged that described the perceptions of postsecondary opportunities and plans of the sample population. Three major themes were found, two of which contained sub-themes that provided further insight into respondents' perceptions. The themes were as follows: (a) factors leading to postsecondary plans, (b) progress made toward postsecondary plans, and (c) perceptions of the preparation for postsecondary life provided by the alternative program. In addition to these themes, participants provided direct feedback related to how their personal experiences shaped their perceptions and decisions regarding life after graduation. A primary goal of the national education system is to create lifelong learners who will be productive, contributing members to society. This goal extends to all students, and regardless of type of learning environment, all students should be exposed to the same information and be provided with the same opportunities to better themselves. To achieve this goal, a program design must exist within all academic settings that consists of structured information and guidance for students regarding the process of college selection, application, admittance, and financial options. This design must consider the unique burdens and obstacles within the student population, including retention history, family structure, financial burdens, and any other factors that place a student at risk. Until this happens, educators will be ignoring agrowing population who will find it more difficult to compete in an increasingly complex and interconnected world.

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