Alternative Education Behavior and Academic Guidebook

Bradley Allen Lavite
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Dr. Carol Huang
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Purpose:

The Alternative Education Behavior and Academic Guidebook is designed to help teachers who teach in a self-contained alternative education environment. Its intent is to examine the characteristics of an Alternative Education Program, to assess program procedures and goals, and to suggest some innovative approaches to promote positive student behavior while increasing academic performance.

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History of Alternative Education Programs

   Alternative education programs have become very popular throughout the United States since their emergence in the 1970's. Beginning in the early 1970's, educators began focusing on alternative programs to educate students who often slipped through the cracks of our educational system. The programs that were developed and implemented have focused primarily on assisting disruptive students, who cannot be motivated, controlled, or educated within a regular classroom environment. These problems are further compounded by poor school attendance. Over the past few decades, many school districts have established their own alternative education programs to provide at-risk students with appropriate educational services. Since many of these programs have had positive affects on at-risk student achievement, many states now mandate schools to offer these modified instructional programs. The modified instructional programs include a variety of grant funded services such as the creation of Individual Alternative Education Plans for students admitted into the program as well as numerous other counseling related services. Although schools are mandated by law to provide alternative services, many schools are not prepared to diagnose students, establish standards, and implement Individual Alternative Education Plans. The main problem is lack of funding required to create and maintain an additional program. In addition to the lack of monetary resources, educators and staff in charge of many of these programs are not adequately trained to deal with the numerous demands placed on them within this type of educational environment. These factors ultimately contribute to a high turnover percentage among alternative education teachers and staff.

Alternative Education Student Profiles

Starting at a very early age the majority of students in Alternative Education are labeled as having a conduct disorder. These students often learn their aggressive behaviors in primarily two settings; their homes and the streets on which they roam. Often these unstructured environments and experiences carry over into the classroom and cause conduct to deteriorate. Early experience with aggressiveness leads to peer rejection and social isolation. This is deemed unacceptable within our society and school environment. These experiences cause them to behave in an antisocial manner. These inadequate skill developments place these students in the category of being at-risk. By obtaining such a label they ultimately end up in some type of counseling or alternative educational environment. For students labeled at-risk, such placement does not necessarily assist them in developing pro-social skills. The primary reason why such programs do not assist at-risk students in the short term is because they are often placed in an environment with other at-risk students who have similar conduct disorders. Many of these behaviors stem from the child's inability to listen, deal positively with constructive criticism, handle social and peer rejection, and walk away from an aggressive situation. These factors tend to make at-risk student more physical and they tend to feel that they must exert their dominance on others around them. This in turn causes others in the environment to accept the challenge, which only adds more fuel to an already explosive situation. Therefore, these aggressive tendencies become an everyday event which inevitability affects their academic performance as well as their emotional and physical well-being. Ultimately these students become labeled as underprivileged,

educationally disadvantaged, and socially deprived. In the long run it is these students

who are often labeled as dropouts and unproductive members of our society.

There are numerous behavior profiles that these students are classified. Although

these profiles are not all-inclusive they do represent a large percentage of an alternative

student population. Listed below are the most common behaviors and effects they have

on the overall classroom environment. Some of the behaviors and effects may appear

more then once on numerous profiles. Alternative education teachers should used these

profiles to assist them in determining the primary or underlying cause of the behavior and

take steps to assist students in correcting their behaviors.

The Instigator

Behaviors:

The instigator tries to cause as much trouble as possible and appears delighted
when it achieves his or her goal. This type of student tries to persuade others to do or say
things that they are unwilling or afraid to do themselves. Usually it is this student that
stirs up old controversies and then sits back and enjoys while everyone argues and fights.
The instigator often pulls others into their game by starting rumors, telling on someone,
or physically tormenting someone until they lash out.

Effects:

The effects of having this type of student, ranges from the entire class being in a
continuous uproar, including the teacher, because everyone fears that they maybe the next
one that this student wants to cause trouble for. These effects have a profound impact on
the learning experience and often place everyone in the environment with tension and a
negative frame of mind. If such a student is allowed to continue instigating within this
environment, the teacher's creditability could be jeopardized and others may soon follow
along because they see it as a form of manipulation and control.

The Troublemaker

Behavior:

Students who fit into the profile of being the class troublemaker share similar characteristics to the instigator but they tend to be more open with displaying their behavior. Like the instigator, this student is constantly looking to stir up trouble. Some of the tactics include always crying foul or that the rules are unfair. This is done in an attempt to get other classmates to begin to complain and act in a negative manner. Troublemakers make scenes and complain more when punished in front of peers; they may even make statements to the class such as "I told you guys".

Effects:

A troublemaker tends to create a general mood of discontent within everyone in classroom. Other students may begin to believe that the teacher is unfair, therefore causing them to lose trust and become further endangered. If the behavior is allowed to progress to this level, other students may begin to complain about being treated unfairly and after awhile the entire classroom may begin to develop the "I don't care" attitude toward the teacher, class, and school.

The Blurter and Disrupter

Behavior:

It is the main goal of this student to interrupt and disrupt the natural flow of the classroom. They tend to want control and do so by speaking out during lectures and instructions. They act very compulsively and appear to be very anxious all of the time. The blurter/disrupter has no respect for others and lacks basic conversational skills and when speaking tends to jump from one subject to the next. This is most likely a learned behavior because this student has conditioned himself or herself to constantly be speaking. When behavior is pointed out this student often reverts to other tactics such as dropping books, laughing, sighing, making strange noises, and mumbling.

Effects:

The effect of this student tends to be more attention centered and the teacher may constantly find himself or herself battling for airtime. Once the blurter/disrupter has captured the classroom from the teacher it is very difficult to recapture the interest of the students and get them back on track. As a result of trying to muscle for airtime with this student, valuable teaching time is wasted, lesson plans are often ruined or students are left clueless regarding the point of the lesson. If the behavior goes unchecked students may

begin to concentrate more on this student in-turn causing the teacher to doubt their teaching and management capabilities.

The Bully

Behavior:

Anyone who has attended school has known a bully. This student can be found in every school in America. The bully often verbally and physically assaults others in the school or classroom. If the bully's behaviors are pointed out they may issue threats in order to protect their perceived image. Generally, this student enjoys victimizing its prey by degrading or humiliating them in front of others.

Effects:

The effects of having a school or class bully causes others in the environment to become frightened. When this student is around, a climate of fear is created and confrontations are usually guaranteed to take place. The bully affects student and teacher performance because a bullying episode stops the learning process and at times may seem that all control is lost.

The Exploder

Behavior:

Having a student who fits into the profile of the exploder can be a very trying experience. The exploder may completely lose control over a small incident and blow up. This student's behavior is very unpredictable and can even explode while trying to do a simple academic problem. Other students in the class are quite aware of this student's problem and may fear being around them. Once the exploder has an episode he or she tends to be embarrassed and tries to reconcile the situation by simply apologizing. This student often needs counseling or an anger management plan to help reduce the likelihood of an explosive situation from re-occurring.

Effects:

The effect of having an exploder in the classroom makes everyone extremely uncomfortable. Teachers may feel that this student cannot be controlled and that someone may get hurt or injured while trying to resolve an explosive incident. Pinpointing the cause of this student's problem is difficult because it is often petty or minor things that set this student off.

The Fighter

Behavior:

The fighter can usually be distinguished from other profiles by its competitive attitude. This student has a deep desire to be the first, the best, and the strongest. If he or she cannot compete then this student will complain about the rules or fairness. It is this student's competitive drive that causes his or her adrenaline to rise and the fighting mentality is turned on. Therefore, this student often acts irrationally by hurting others to make themselves feel better or a winner.

Effects:

The effects of a fighter may at first seem harmless because many tend to pass it off as merely horseplay. The behavior usually starts off as horseplay, but then can quickly turn violent. This student has a tendency to fight his or her way out of problematic situation by overreacting to an easily resolved situation. The student's extreme competitiveness forces teachers to enact very restrictive rules that violate the freedoms of everyone in the class. When a fighter engages and physically assaults another, he or she often feels remorse, but still believes that fighting is the only was to solve a problem.

The Negative Group

Behavior:

The negative group is created when students who display similar behavioral traits are placed together in the same educational setting. Usually the students in the negative group stick together and rally behind one or two recognized leaders who perpetuate the negative attitudes of all the group members. These students together can be uncooperative when it comes to conduct and academics. Students in the group range from high to low academic achievement. They also tend to fit neatly into one or more of the behavioral profiles. As a group, they believe that no other individual exists in the school and if one group member is threatened it may be considered an attack against them all.

Effects:

The negative group has a profound effect on the general atmosphere of the classroom and school. Students in this group are infected with negativism and this can be a contagious virus. Negativism is the powerful force that fuels this group into acting out and causing distractions within the classroom and school. Regular education students and teachers are often the targets of the negative group. Members easily intimidate others outside the group and teachers may even begin to look the other way due to the repercussions of correcting their behavior and negativism.

Alternative Education Referral and Placement

Referral of students classified as being at-risk involves a comprehensive review of student academic and behavior records by a student resource team. Resource teams are made up of administrators, counselors, social workers, teachers, and parents. Team and parental consent is required in order for a student to be placed in an alternative educational setting. Students are considered for review only after all possible means have been exhausted to keep them in a regular classroom environment. Referrals into the alternative program are based on nine primary indicators in order to make a proper assessment.

1. Student fails to participate in extra-curricular activities or physical education
2. History of poor school attendance
3. Student often experiences high and low emotional episodes
4. Failing required coursework
5. Drug and alcohol use
6. Retained one or more years
7. Received numerous suspensions from school
8. Verbally and physically aggressive and/or abusive
9. Truancy and/or probation involvement

Students displaying any of the various indicators listed above will be considered for placement. This is mainly students who show low motivation towards school and classroom activities or their presence in the classroom creates a negative learning environment for regular education students will be placed in the alternative setting. Once an assessment has been made for a student who is in deed at-risk and requires placement in alternative education environment instructional determinations are then put in place to measure progress and achievement while they are enrolled in the program.

Alternative Education Procedures and Program Goals

After a referral has been made into the alternative education program there are

still numerous guidelines and procedures to be followed. Procedures include the

development of an Individualized Alternative Education Plan. The main components of

an Individualized Plan include:

1. Biographical information
2. Assessed problem areas
3. Previous interventions
4. Achievement test scores and ability levels
5. Previous academic performance
6. Previous behavior characteristics
7. Written academic and behavior goals
8. Implementation timeline
9. Assessment of objectives and exit requirements

The main goal of an alternative education program is to assist at-risk students in learning

core subject areas with a strong emphasis on basic skills. The core subjects include

instruction in English, mathematics, social studies, science, health, and physical

education. Health and physical education are the only two core subjects that students are

not in a self-contained learning environment and are allowed to interact with student in

the regular educational setting. Instructional components of the program also include

teaching a variety of social skills to accent and reinforce shared cultural beliefs and

courtesies. Social skill development includes instruction in four basic behavior categories

(see Table 1). The social skill developmental courses have a main goal of teaching

students pro-social skills that can be utilized both in and out of the school setting. These

skills will hopefully assist at-risk students from making positive academic and behavior

modifications. Student behavior modification goals are often the most difficult to access

and formulate. They are more difficult because they often have to be intertwined with academic instruction due to the time constraints of the typical school day. Most programs set aside time for pro-social skill instruction, but many program teachers' lack the necessary training to make a proper student diagnosis, be effective instructors, and evaluators. The academic and behavior curriculums in most alternative education programs consist of a rigid, orderly program that is presented at the students' ability level (see Figure 1). In-depth reviews of curriculum and program effectiveness are important in teaching within this environment. Other procedures include exit requirements and remediation services such as mentoring, tutoring, or counseling. Exit requirements and expectations are outlined in the next chapter over management of the alternative program. Other goals include:

1. Reducing disaffection in school and learning
2. Improving attendance
3. Improving test scores
4. Reducing discipline referrals
5. Earning target grades for core courses
6. Drug and alcohol awareness
7. Promotion to higher grade
8. Successful transition back into regular classes

Alternative Student Behavior and Academic Management Program

A teacher in an alternative education environment has to have a straightforward behavior and academic management plan. Often this plan is very unique and different from those that might be found in the regular educational setting. Colleagues who teach in the regular educational setting may even ridicule alternative education teachers. This happens because alternative teachers often have to include daily, weekly, monthly, and quarterly rewards to academically motivate students and decrease the likelihood of

behaviors from occurring. These rewards or reinforcers are often different from regular classroom expending the typical piece of candy or pencil top eraser that most teachers use to create desired outcomes (see Table 2). Without these various unique academic rewards and behavior plans, alternative students could quickly gain control or perceive that they could take control of the classroom. Once control is lost or they perceive that it can be lost it takes a tremendous effort to regain it back. Therefore, the best piece of advice is to be prepared to be challenged and be prepared to change at the drop of a hat. With so many academic levels and behavior types in one class it is roller coaster ride of extreme highs to extreme lows. These students often lack the ability to monitor their own progress and judge when necessary corrections need to be made in order to succeed. Below alternative teachers will find a level based transition program developed to help maintain control while allowing students to monitor their academic progression and behaviors. The level based academic and behavior program is known as: <u>L</u>evel <u>I</u>ncentives <u>F</u>or <u>E</u>xcellence (LIFE). This system is broken into three sections that are presented, discussed, and reviewed with every student who is placed in the alternative education environment. The three sections of the program include the Academic and behavior checklist, Level expectation sheet, and the Transition incentives sheet.

The academic and behavior checklist (see Table 3) is used to keep track of and monitor student progress within the classroom. Five academic and behavior levels are represented on the checklist. Each level from one to five represents forward progress, with level one being the most restrictive and five being the least restrictive. As a student progresses through each academic and behavior level the chances of a student surviving

the program and making a successful transition back into the regular education setting is greatly increased. All levels have different academic and behavior objectives that must be maintained or completed prior to advancement into the next level. Outlined on the program expectation sheet figure (see Figure 2) are the general requirements for all levels and specific objectives for higher levels of progress. Once a student completes level two and they begin their progression into the levels three, four, and five they must complete the additional expectations outlined on the checklist that correspond to their particular level (see Figures 3, 4, and 5). Each level in the program is designed to motivate students and reduce their disaffection with learning. If these two goals can be accomplished by the time a student enters level five this student will achieve a higher percentage of academic success and will display less aggressive behaviors towards others, and school in general. To assist in motivating and establishing a positive student response to the academic and behavior system, incentives and reinforcers must be given at different times throughout the program. The incentives and reinforcers should be introduced at the beginning of the year, as well as, the rules by which they may be gained or lost. Students are issued a packet explaining the academic and behavior program incentives in detail so they can refer back to it whenever they have a question (see Figure 6). Alternative teachers should continue to explain and refer to program documents whenever a student has questions or attempts to trump the system. Repetition builds compliance and also helps prevent arguments regarding rules, procedures, and merits of the system. Compliance is also reinforced by having each student sign a contract (see Figure 7), which outlines the general and specific classroom rules (see Figure 8). This is a very important step in the

programs success because it forces students to take charge by turning their success over to them. The program just acts as a foundation of which they can build an achievable transition goal of returning to regular classes. By making alternative students aware and responsible for their academics and behaviors, some of the weight is lifted off of the teacher's shoulders allowing the focus to be spent on lesson development and implementation.

Short and Long Term Alternative Program Outcomes

Short-term positive outcomes of alternative programs are often difficult to access. Typically short-term assessments may be evaluated up to several years after students have exited the alternative program and returned to the regular educational setting. Alternative education teachers and program administrators can use a variety of items to make reliable assessments such as student test scores, discipline referrals, attendance reports, and academic grades. These assessment items can be compared with information that was obtained while the students were active or before they entered the program. Such comparisons will allow patterns to be revealed thus creating a more long-term snapshot of student and program effectiveness. Alternative education teachers can then use the information to assist them in future diagnosis of at-risk students as well as the restructuring and implementation of program developmental goals.

Long-term positive program outcomes are more readily available due to historical compiled data from more then seventy-eight state funded alternative projects (see Table 4). The seventy-eight state funded projects served 29,875 students in 1999. Out of the 29, 875 served more then 88% of the enrolled at-risk students achieved positive outcomes.

The positive outcomes with the greatest results were improved attendance rates with a success rate of 55% followed closely by a 45% student promotion rate into the next grade level. Based on state mandated program objectives alternative programs appear to be effective in meeting the individual needs of at-risk students. Over the course of a student's time in alternative programs, which ranges from one quarter up to 2 years, more than half of all individual student goals set forth in their Individual Alternative Education Plans were achieved by the time they exit the program. These few results are enough to merit the continued funding and support of alternative education programs throughout the state. Clearly, at-risk students benefit from being placed in such a program and their opportunity for continued growth is far greater then if they were not placed in the program to begin with. For many at-risk students, alternative programs are a last chance for them to clean up their act and get refocused on acquiring, valuing, and benefiting from an education.