Chapter 75

A Second Chance:
Delinquency Prevention among Special Education Students

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ABSTRACT

A qualitative analysis of special education youth who attended school at a recreation center in Brooklyn NY helps provide an understanding of the relationship between alternative high school education and offending. According to Wang and Fredericks (2014), interventions that aim to improve school engagement may promote positive youth development, including reducing involvement in problem behaviors. 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. This investigation provides support for preventative measures to youth conflict and delinquency by placing them in an environment that promotes pro-social behavior.

INTRODUCTION

The current study looks at the role of neighborhood institutions and its impact on alternative high school education. The role of social institutions and the ability to solve chronic problems is seen in the early works of Shaw and McKay's (1969/1942) social disorganization theory. The theory refers to the inability of a community to realize common goals and solve chronic problems. According to the theory, poverty, residential mobility, ethnic heterogeneity, and weak social networks decrease a neighborhood's capacity to control the behavior of people in public, and hence increase the likelihood of crime (Shaw & McKay, 1969/1942). Social ties and informal control are believed to mediate the effects of poverty, residential mobility and ethnic heterogeneity on neighborhood crime (Bursik and Grasmick, 1993; Sampson et al., 1997).

Social ties exist in many forms; examples of social ties are local friendship networks, recreational activities between neighbors, and attendance at local community meetings. More recent models of so-

cial disorganization have recognized that social networks are critical in the distribution of and access to social capital and social support (Bursik, 1999). The current study highlights the importance of social capital and support for alternative high school youth who at risk for offending.

The research conducted for this investigation took place at a neighborhood institution in a disorganized Brooklyn, N.Y. community. Madyn (2011) argued that when a community is disorganized, access to resources might be unevenly distributed or less visible to too many individuals within the community. Madyn (2011) also argued that understanding the role of poverty is important because of its adverse impact on the ability to establish social ties and implement solutions to academic problems. As a result the author pointed out the importance of accounting for the quality of social ties when examining achievement outcomes in disadvantage neighborhoods (Madyn, 2011).

Neighborhoods vary in the degree to which a neighborhood-based institution can contribute effectively to neighborhood levels of social control (Shaw & McKay, 1942; Kornhauser, 1978). However Triplett, et al. (2003) drew on criminological and sociological literatures and identified four interrelated characteristics that define institutional strength: stability, resources, a clear delineation of rules and statuses, and interconnectedness. Stability in particular is necessary for effective social control because it aids the institution in its ability to guide behavior as well as provide social capital and social support within the institution (Triplett, et al 2003). These characteristics are believed to help sustain institutions even in disadvantaged communities. This current study examines how a neighborhood-based institution collaborated with local agencies to improve the educational situation for alternative high school youth.

ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION: AN OVERVIEW

According to Lange and Sletten (2002) 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 (Tobin & Sprague, 2000).

In the school environment, teachers, play an important role in teaching and supporting conventional norms of society and also serve as role models to students (Cernkovich a& Giordano, 1992; Crosnoe, Johnson, & Elder, 2004). The population to be discussed in this paper had difficulties in traditional as well as alternative schools. However a number of studies have identified characteristics of successful alternative education programs.

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 (Lange & Sletten, 2002; Aron, 2006). 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 (Tobin, and Sprague, 2000; Lange & Sletten, 2002; Aron, 2006).

An additional quality alternative education programs should possess is to be housed in a clean and well maintained building, not necessarily a traditional school house, that are attractive and inviting

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