

Change the Game, Change the Culture: An Approach to Alternative Education

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Abstract

This paper explored the nature of alternative education in Texas public schools. Within these learning environments addressing both academic and social literacy is of utmost importance and can be achieved through individualized instruction and attention to goal-setting. The recommendations of this paper were specific to the experiences of an English language arts and reading teacher who served 11th and 12th grade at-risk students within an alternative high school in the Texas Panhandle. The purpose of this paper was to indicate how attending to these aspects of alternative education helps encourage student success that leads to graduation.

Keywords: *alternative education, individualized learning, goal-setting*

Introduction

According to P. David Pearson, “No Child Left Behind has done a credible job of helping educators make...all students have basic literacy skills, [but] it hasn’t given us the type of thoughtful and critical readers and writers we need” (as cited in Strauss, 2012). As Pearson pointed out, the main law for K-12 public education was ineffective in creating students who are literate academically. Moreover, lack of attention to social literacy has resulted in a great number of students experiencing difficulty with achieving academic success during the school years, particularly the high school years.

Social literacy skills are defined as soft skills that an individual uses to communicate with a diverse population in varied situations effectively. Social literacy involves the connection and exchange of ideas through

interactions with others. Grafwallner (2016) emphasized the need for teachers to address social literacy during instruction by stating, “Creating lesson plans where the skills are rooted in prereading, during reading and after reading strategies is no longer just a good idea. Rather, helping students navigate confidently in the world has become essential.” Without social literacy, a student may be unable to function within the context of a simple work environment. Teachers must help their students learn how to communicate their needs by building relationships with them. In doing so, schools cultivate learning environments that promote both academic and social literacy among all students.

Literature Review

As with any customer service industry, knowledge of a school’s customer base, or

clientele, in the classroom is essential. Before teachers plan and implement instruction, they must have a foundational understanding of their clientele. The Public Education Information Management System (PEIMS) available through the Texas Education Agency maintains a wide range of student data, including information regarding personal health and socioeconomic status (Texas Education Agency, 2018). Within PEIMS, a classification of “at-risk” results for varied reasons, including failing grades, pregnancy, drug/crime-related issues, mental health diagnoses, homelessness, and/or foster care. Schools strive to address specific needs among students who are at-risk so that they become high school graduates rather than high school dropouts. These efforts require effective communication skills as students and teachers work together to bridge academic and social gaps.

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) describe traumatic events that an individual has experienced, such as abuse (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2016). Felitti et al. (1998) recognized that exposure to ACEs has a powerful effect on an individual that may lead to dysfunction, obesity, and even death. Teachers can employ practices to help students develop resiliency. Students are less affected by an ACE when they have well-developed resiliency, which includes protective factors. This is especially important among students who are categorized as at-risk within PEIMS. For these students, school may be the only place that fosters resiliency.

Other factors, such as substance abuse and antisocial peer influences, affect social and academic literacy among students. Patte, Quain, and Leatherdale (2017) noted adolescents who affiliate with peer groups that engage in “an anti-conventional lifestyle,” such as binge drinking, are more likely to have poor academic engagement and performance (p. 311). Many teachers who serve students placed in alternative education have found that the student population in these classrooms are largely represented by

students affiliated with unconventional peer groups. With this in mind, alternative education teachers must understand the importance of student connectivity with curricular content, as well as student-teacher relationships.

Two Effective Techniques

I have three years of experience as an alternative education teacher at a high school in the Texas Panhandle. The high school functions as an at-pace/student-directed learning environment for 11th and 12th grade at-risk students. When I began teaching at this school, I quickly discovered that students did not care what a teacher knows until they knew that the teacher cared. Therefore, I individualized the curriculum in my English classroom to address the learning needs of each student and promoted goal-setting among my students. In my experiences, these alternative education techniques have been highly effective.

Individualized Instruction

Individualized instruction creates a helpful class environment (Conner & Lagares, 2008). The practice of individualized instruction requires thorough knowledge about each student and their individual learning needs. By employing a variety of individualized techniques, teachers are able to reinforce student engagement and accommodate learners during content learning.

According to Taylor (2015), teachers must first develop thorough understandings about their students and learning needs. Taylor highlighted specific instructional strategies for English classrooms that support individualized instruction, such as Role, Format, Audience, and Topic (RAFT). RAFT is a choice-based strategy that helps students organize their thoughts for writing. For example, a student may choose to take the perspective of a news anchor to compose text for a conservative news website. RAFT empowers students to learn how to write for specific audiences and adhere to specific writing formats.

Because aspects of reading and writing can often be challenging for my students, I regularly encourage student ownership. Ways I have encouraged student ownership include providing opportunities to select reading materials, writing topics, and analytical foci, as long as they adhere to given criteria. As an example, Mason was an at-risk student who entered my English classroom covered in negative and off-putting tattoos (i.e., profane language and drug-related themes/designs). He announced, “I got these for free. My uncle learned how to tattoo in prison.” I adapted this potentially negative situation by using it as an opportunity to individualize and differentiate an upcoming lesson to incorporate the industry of tattooing and artwork. During this lesson, students read about graffiti, the relationship between tagging and city law, and the Berlin Wall history. By building a learning environment of acceptance and care, Mason was able to read content about topics that already interested him.

The ultimate goal of my English class was to enable students to earn a passing score as a re-tester on the English I and English II State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness End of Course (STAAR EOC) exams, which are state mandated assessments in Texas required for graduation. My students had failed these assessments multiple times, and at this juncture in their education, most of them were convinced that they could not pass them. In order to overcome this mindset and prepare my students for these high-stakes assessments, I administered an interest survey at the beginning of the semester. Throughout the semester, I used survey data to design instruction on topics that they were interested in, develop understandings about challenges they encounter while reading and writing, as well as learn about their preferred learning styles. Thus, the initial focus of instruction was individualized to my students, rather than state assessment frameworks. Later during the semester, I provided my students with opportunities to apply learned concepts to simulated assessment contexts. These efforts

translated to success among several of my students. For example, at the end of the fall semester of 2017, approximately 71% of my students earned a passing score on the English I STAAR EOC assessment, and approximately 43% earned a passing score on the English II STAAR EOC assessment (Trela, 2018).

Goal-Setting

Gunn, Chorney, and Pulsen (2009) stated:

Poor relationships with teachers, feelings of isolation, behavioral disorders, and achievement-related factors [were] strong contributors to early school leaving . . . and dropout rates [were] diminished where there [was] a strong school-based commitment to address specific student needs categorized under the headings of home, community, peers, and school. (p. 18)

When students experience positive relationships with their teachers, teachers become invested in their students, and students have a stronger commitment to graduate.

My high school instituted a Student Goals program in 2017 that incorporated strategies to help students discover and communicate attainable classroom goals. Through this program, each teacher met with each student once every three weeks to review student-created goals. Together, a student and their teachers discussed whether the student was on track or required improvements towards achieving their self-created goals. These meetings also gave teachers the opportunity to catch up on each student’s personal life. By participating in these meetings as active stakeholders, students developed their interpersonal communication skills and enhanced their academic and social literacy. The Student Goals program created and sustained valuable relationships between students and teachers, promoted academic

progress, and endorsed student advocacy for personal success.

Prior to the inception of the Student Goals program, our high school reported that students had completed a total number of 146 core class credits during the fall semester of 2016 (Trela, 2018). After the Student Goals program was implemented, our students had completed a total number of 160 core class credits during the fall semester of 2017. This improvement was a noteworthy accomplishment, and our most recent graduation ceremony included our largest graduating class.

Conclusion

Teaching with students' individual interests in mind and involving students with goal-setting should be commonplace. Teachers must build sustained and invested relationships with their students that focus on developing their academic and social literacy skills. With a strong student-teacher relationship, students develop requisite communication skills and become comfortable enough to express their needs. Teachers who embrace individualized instruction and goal-setting among students create learning environments that help students realize their full potential.

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