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Student Perspective of Alternative Education Characteristics Implemented by Public School Social Workers

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Abstract

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School Social Workers

by

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MSW, Widener University, 2009

BA, Lebanon Valley College, 2001

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Social Work

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Abstract

Public schools are facing increased challenges to address the needs of students with significant behavioral issues. In response, Alternative education (AE) programs are used to reengage students in learning and enhance personal development, through a combination of academic and therapeutic strategies. AE placement is intended to be short-term, with the goal of returning students to public school. However, the differences between these two settings make it difficult for students to sustain achievements made in AE upon reentry. The purpose of this qualitative research was to use the student perspective to identify the social-emotional characteristics of AE that have influenced change, which can be implemented by social workers in the structure of public schools. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory was used in this study to acknowledge systematic influences on development and how these shape the lived experiences and perspectives of at-risk youth. Interviews were conducted with 14 AE students in a program located in Pennsylvania, to obtain information about their experiences in both AE and public school. Thematic coding produced four themes from the research. The findings include seven strategies that school social workers can implement for returning AE students. Without these efforts, students face an increased risk of failure during reentry. This information is meaningful to public school staff to more adequately support at-risk youth and prevent additional school failure.

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Dedication

I dedicate this project to the participants and staff of the research site. Thank you for trusting me, believing in my vision, and helping to shape the future for other students.

I also dedicate this project to my favorite people, Kelly, Dan, Carey, Jim, Mom, and Lance, who have supported me throughout this journey. Kelly, you are the definition of a true bestie. Dan, I was blessed with the greatest big brother a girl could ask for. Carey, I am so proud to have you as my sister. Jim, thank you for stepping up and loving me as your own. Mom, you are the best person I know, your influence on my life is immeasurable. And to my husband, Lance, you are my perfect match, thank you for loving all of me.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Introduction

Student behavior is a problem facing public schools, with increasing numbers of students who lack motivation, struggle academically, have low attendance, show disengagement, or demonstrate defiance (Maillet, 2017). This not only creates a challenge for staff, but it can impede upon the education of peers and leads to gaps in student achievement (Farrelly & Daniels, 2014). In response, school administrative staff have historically implemented uniform disciplinary sanctions, including verbal reprimands, detention, in-school suspension, and out-of-school suspension (Maillet, 2017). These strategies are often counterproductive as they stigmatize students who are already struggling in the academic environment. The result can be an increase in negative behaviors and greater gaps in student achievement (Allman & Slate, 2011). Aside from punitive practices, public schools also use social workers to provide social-emotional interventions which include counseling services, assessing for academic or personal needs, teaching life skills, and addressing individual student barriers. These interventions are used to change negative behaviors and promote learning. While the majority of students respond positively to traditional discipline protocols or alternative interventions offered within public schools, others require a more structured and personalized approach. For students who are unresponsive to these strategies, or those committing higher-level acts, including repetitive disregard for school authority, policy violations, violent behavior, possession/use of substances or weapons on school property, or other criminal acts, public schools use off-campus alternative education (AE) programs

(Education.gov, 2020). This setting differs in that the administrators focus on the underlying impact of life experiences on poor school performance, in an effort to correct individual challenges.

In this chapter, I provide a background of AE programs and the increasing demand for this differentiated structure. I identify the gap in current literature, the purpose of the study, and the research question. I also discuss the theoretical framework and an overview of the research design. Finally, in this chapter I discuss the definitions of common terminologies, limitations, and delimitations of the study.

Background

AE programs were first founded in the 1960s, with the primary intent to prevent academic failure (Wilkinson et al., 2020). Since this time, public schools have shifted to using AE for students exhibiting significant challenges. Accountability standards mandated by the United States Department of Education have drawn increased attention to students deemed as at-risk. These are students who are unable to be successful in the public school setting due to poor grades, decreased attendance, behavioral challenges, or other problems that impact their education (Langana-Riordan et al., 2011). As a result, the demand for AE has grown substantially since its inception in the 1960s. In 1993, there were 2,093 AE programs in the United States, which increased to 10,900 by 2001 (Lagana-Riordan et al. 2011). This differentiated type of educational environment combines personalized learning with increased therapeutic services, specific to individual academic and behavioral needs. The structure more effectively promotes change for this challenged population of students. The unique strategies of AE are used to reengage

students in the academic setting, with the goal of returning to regular education. AE programs are intended to be a short-term, intensive placement, lasting 30 to 45 school days (Allman & Slate, 2011). This setting is often viewed as a final opportunity for at-risk students who have faced educational failure, to address and improve underlying issues related to school and external systems (Flower et al., 2011). Attributing factors for students to be classified as at-risk include learning disabilities, ethnicity, poverty, and mental health (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011). Previous research documents that many of these students are able to experience success within the dynamics of AE (Farrelly and Daniels, 2014; Flower et al., 2011; Maillet, 2017; Plows et al., 2017; and Zolkokski, et al., 2016). Yet maintaining their achievements is often difficult when returning back to public education, a setting where they previously faced failure. Current research on successful AE is largely composed of administrative information related to the type of structure and overall effectiveness of these programs. Common attributes include smaller class sizes, more intensive counseling services, greater accountability to standards, positive behavior incentives, mentorships, a life skills curriculum, and the involvement of family in the process (Flower et al., 2011; Maillet, 2017). Through the implementation of these general characteristics, AE students are provided with a detailed education and behavioral plan that is tailored to address their unique needs.

Combining both the administrative and student perspectives, Lagana-Riordan et al. (2011) studied AE using a mixed methods approach that included student interviews. Lagana-Riordan et al. (2011) focused on the value of both viewpoints for the development of school policy, educational reform, and more adequately meeting the

educational needs of at-risk youth. Further supporting the need for student involvement in AE research, Farrelly and Daniels (2014) incorporated student interviews in their mixed methods evaluation of AE. Farrelly and Daniels (2014) influenced my research because they recommended that more information is needed to establish how behavioral changes can be sustained once students are removed from the structure of AE.

What is lacking from prior research is the intentional alignment of AE and public schools, as the goal is to reengage and return each student. The effectiveness of AE is well-documented. Yet there is an absence of information, particularly from the student perspective, to identify the social-emotional characteristics of AE that positively impact behavioral change. Furthermore, there is no research on how these strategies can be implemented by public school social workers as students return from AE, to sustain their achievements. This linkage is imperative to develop practices that are student-centered for long-term success.

In this study, I used student perspectives to identify social-emotional characteristics of AE that have influenced change and that can be implemented by social workers into the structure of public schools. This study fills a gap in current literature regarding how student feedback can be incorporated within the structure of public schools, to maintain success during the transition from AE placement.

Problem Statement

Research is needed to understand how social workers can effectively transition students from AE programs back to public schools. Since AE began in the 1960s, the demand for this type of programming has increased significantly due to the behaviors

exhibited by youth in public schools. Because of the structure of AE, at-risk students make positive changes with the goal of returning back to the public-school setting. To sustain this personal change, students need adequate support within this more traditional structure.

Increasing numbers of students who exhibit significant behavioral issues in the public-school setting are being referred to AE programs, which offer a differentiated structure aimed at re-engaging these individuals. Effective attributes of AE have been described and defined in prior research, such as Farrelly and Daniels (2014), Flower et al. (2011), Maillet (2017), Plows et al. (2016), and Zolkokski et al. (2016). AE includes strategies that are used to directly address the academic, behavioral, and mental health needs of students. What is not known about AE is how to maintain the success made in these programs as students transition back to public school. Wilkinson et al. (2020) recommended that a comprehensive transitional plan be developed at the onset of AE placement. This plan should include the student, staff, and the family to proactively address reentry. Wilkinson et al. (2020) stated that without appropriate planning, students who lack adequate support will not sustain progress made in AE. This research influenced my approach to the current research.

Sherman (2016) documented the history of school-based social workers and stated that these individuals play a vital role in the link between the unique systems of school, home, and the community for students. The mission of the social work profession is to empower individuals to promote overall well-being within society by considering and addressing the factors that influence their conditions of living (National Association of

Social Workers, 2017). In relation to individual empowerment, Lubbe et al. (2020) studied the inclusion of student voice in the development of educational curriculum, to validate the lived experiences and insight offered from students. The research by Lubbe et al. (2020) supported the use of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory in my research by focusing on the individual and authenticating the many factors that shaped their overall development. Behavioral challenges of students can be correlated to unaddressed negative life experiences, which impact their ability to be successful in the academic setting (Sherman, 2016). Sherman (2016) argued that school-based social workers have the skills to address gaps between academics and social-emotional welfare for at-risk students. Validating youth by eliciting feedback directly from their perspective and incorporating it through the use of skilled public school social workers increases their ability to achieve a successful education.

Previous researchers did not identify the social-emotional characteristics of AE that influenced success from the student perspective and how these can be implemented when returning to the public-school setting. Students placed in AE are at a higher risk of dropping out of school, which can lead to significant longer-term consequences, including increased mental health issues, drug or alcohol abuse, gang involvement, engagement in violent acts, and unemployment or underemployment (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011). Educators and social workers can use the findings from this study to avoid potential failure. This study may alter the negative path of at-risk youth by promoting the positive achievements of these students for long-term success.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to obtain the perspectives of students about social-emotional characteristics within the AE setting that influenced personal change and could be implemented by social workers into public schools. Public schools can use the findings from this study to promote long-term success.

In this study, I explored student's perspectives of the social-emotional characteristics of AE that influenced change. By incorporating student perspectives, researchers can gain an understanding of their needs, assess their overall well-being, and establish efficient strategies, while increasing student efficacy and engagement (Halliday, et al., 2019).

Research Question

I used the following question to guide this study: What do students identify as the social-emotional characteristics of AE that influence positive behavioral changes in this setting, which can be incorporated by social workers during re-entry to the structure of public schools, to maintain achieved success?

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework that I used in this study was Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory. This theory includes a holistic view in which the development of a child can be understood by placing the individual at the center of a cyclical model and exploring the interactions of the microsystem, exosystem mesosystem, and macrosystem components (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). All of the exchanges within these systems have an impact on the child's physical and mental growth. By considering the

interactional factors within the structure of these layers, challenging student behaviors exhibited in schools can be understood and addressed from a more informed foundation. I interviewed students to explore the social-emotional characteristics of AE that influenced their change. Students provided valuable information for public schools to develop more adequate supports.

I used the ecological systems theory to understand the personal experiences of AE students, which have been shaped by their unique lived experiences. I gained a deeper and more realistic understanding of why students experience failure in public schools, their ability to respond to social-emotional interventions, and how to maintain individual changes.

Nature of Study

I conducted this qualitative study using generic qualitative inquiry. I interviewed students placed in AE and analyzed their responses to identify characteristics that they perceive to have shaped their personal success. Prior qualitative researchers who investigated AE programs focused highly on the administrative view and not on the student perspective. Studies that included the student perspective did not include an assessment of how this information could be connected back to the available supports in public schools. I used student perspectives to identify the social-emotional characteristics of AE that have influenced change and that can be implemented by social workers during reentry into public schools.

Public schools may be able to use the findings from this study to maintain the success of returning AE students. Public schools are where students previously faced

failure and were unresponsive to more traditional discipline and/or intervention strategies. Transitional planning is essential because AE is intended to be short-term. Without the presence of appropriate supports, students will not sustain progress made in AE (Wilkinson, et al., 2020).

I conducted this study at an AE program located in Pennsylvania, which is a private institution approved by the Pennsylvania Department of Education (Pennsylvania Department of Education, n.d.). I selected this specific program based on my personal work experiences. Although there are nine campuses that span five counties, I used geographic proximity to determine the use of two campuses to conduct interviews. The enrollment of each campus averages 30 students, consisting of male and female students in Grades 1 through 12 at three of the campuses, and Grades 6 through 12 at the remaining six campuses. Referrals for this program are made by local contracted school districts, therefore encompassing a diverse population of students in relation to race, socio-economic status, and religious beliefs, at any given time. In this study, I included students in Grades 9 through 12 only, in order to focus on the transition of these students back to the high school setting. I did not gather any other demographic data. I invited all students in these grades at the two selected campuses to participate. I predetermined that any student previously enrolled at the district where I am employed would not be eligible for participation. Due to this group being classified as a vulnerable population, I collected both a parent consent form and student assent form for each participant.

I collected data via interviews with AE students using a semistructured, standardized open-ended strategy, through a predesigned instrument tool. I asked the

same questions of each participant and used follow-up probes to evoke individualized

responses (Johansson, 2019; Turner III, 2010). I used thematic analysis to extrapolate the

themes that emerged from the interviews.

Definitions

The following terms are relevant to understanding the research question and

content of this study.

Alternative Education: provides a combination of intense, individual academic

instruction and behavior modification counseling in an alternative setting to assist

students in returning successfully to their regular classroom (Pennsylvania Department of

Education, 2020).

Re-Entry/Return from AE: Transition of a student from the AE setting back to the

public-school environment, as the goal of AE is to "assist students in successfully

returning to their regular classroom" (Pennsylvania Department of Education, n.d.).

*Social-Emotional Characteristics***:** strategies for individualized learning in a

setting that promotes changes in mindset and behaviors, and creates supportive

relationships (Farrelly & Daniels, 2014).

Social Workers (in Public Schools): staff members responsible for leading

prevention and intervention strategies to address a variety of student needs that are

impeding upon academics or obtaining a meaningful education, serve as liaison for

connection between school, home and community (Sherman, 2016).

Success (within AE): When a student is determined to have met their individual

educational goals (Pennsylvania Department of Education, n.d.).

Assumptions

I used student perspectives to identify the social-emotional characteristics of AE that have influenced change. I assumed that students would be honest in their responses. I also assumed that students would not feel pressured to provide only positive accounts of their AE experience. Finally, I assumed that each participant would be self-aware and able to express their viewpoints, by reporting on the varying social-emotional characteristics of the AE setting based on their own experiences and perceptions.

Scope and Delimitations

I identified student participants placed at an AE program located in Pennsylvania. In this state, private AE programs are contracted with local school districts to address the higher needs of at-risk youth. In the 2021–2022 school year, 225 Pennsylvania public school districts used these AE programs, with a total of 2,440 referred students (Pennsylvania Department of Education, n.d.). The AE program that I selected has nine campuses that span five counties and I used two campuses for data collection. I invited students in Grades 9 through 12 to participate in this study. I chose this age group to focus on the transition of these students back to the high school setting. I excluded students who were previously enrolled at the district where I am employed.

Although I conducted this research at two campuses of an AE program, the study could be replicated in another Pennsylvania AE program. All private AE programs in this state are mandated by the guidelines of the Pennsylvania Department of Education. If this study were replicated in a different Pennsylvania AE program, I anticipate that the findings would be similar.

Limitations

I selected only one AE program based on my employment. I chose two of nine campuses on which to conduct research. I invited all students in Grades 9 through 12 and enrolled at the two AE campuses to participate.

All private AE programs in Pennsylvania are mandated by the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) to ensure that the daily operations follow federal, state, PDE, and public-school code laws, policies, and procedures (PDE, n.d.). As these programs are required to function in a specific manner, the findings of this study can be generalized to other AE programs within the state of Pennsylvania.

At the time I conducted this research, COVID-19 safety protocols impacted schools in regard to closures, virtual learning, and safety practices. During the recruitment and data collection process, both campuses were experiencing high rates of absenteeism and closures. To ensure equity as a limitation, no research was conducted until all eligible students were invited to participate and had time to return the necessary forms.

Significance

In this research, I built on and extended the positive applications of AE. I filled a gap in knowledge by using student perspectives to identify attributes of AE that created personal change and how successes can be maintained when returning to the public-school setting. Social workers can use the findings of this study to improve the transition to public school and to sustain student progress. Maillet (2017) identified the main structural practices of AE programs that promote student success, including the type of

instruction, mentoring opportunities between staff and students, inclusion of service

learning, individualized planning, and the use of external individuals for additional

support. Previous researchers provided a generalized guide to current-day AE programs;

however, previous research lacks personalized accounts of how these alter

behaviors. Farrelly and Daniels (2014) evaluated AE via a mixed methods approach to

determine its overall effectiveness. The findings concluded that this perspective is

essential in the assessment of AE to determine what engages students and what inhibits

their success. The results further indicated that additional information is needed to

determine how behavioral changes can be sustained once they are removed from this

structure (Farrelly & Daniels, 2014). In this study, I filled the gap identified by Farrelly

and Daniels (2014), extending upon the foundation of prior research, to explore

successful social-emotional characteristics of AE via students who have direct experience

in this program. The practical application of this research will be by school social

workers, who can incorporate identified strategies into the structure of public education.

The findings of this study may be used by school-based social workers to more

effectively facilitate a meaningful education for students who exhibit challenging

behaviors in the public education setting. Walden University defines social change as "a

deliberate process of creating and applying ideas, strategies, and actions to promote the

worth, dignity, and development of individuals, communities, organizations, institutions,

cultures, and societies. Positive social change results in the improvement of human and

social conditions" (Walden University, n.d., para. 1). This definition directly aligns with

the NASW Code of Ethics, which indicates that a "defining feature of Social Work is the

profession's focus on individual well-being in a social context and the well-being of society" (NASW, 2017, para. 1), and furthermore to "promote social justice and social change with and on behalf of clients" (NASW, 2017, para. 2). In correlation to the noted definition of social change by Walden University, and the alignment to the standards of the social work profession, my goal was to assist students who are challenged in the realm of education to improve the course of their lives (Flower, McDaniel & Jolivette, 2011), and therefore facilitate a greater positive impact upon society (Hosley et al., 2009).

Summary

The purpose of this study was to gain student perspectives about the social-emotional characteristics of AE that influenced change and can be implemented by social workers during reentry into public schools. I interviewed AE students regarding their experiences in AE.

In Chapter 2, I provide a discussion of the literature related to this study. I discuss how AE programs have been proven to be effective to address the needs of at-risk youth. I also discuss the methodology of this study and discuss literature related to the gap in research. I also discuss my use of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory in this study.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

There is a lack of research on student perspectives about the social-emotional characteristics of AE that influence change and that can be implemented by social workers during reentry into the structure of public schools. The findings of this research can be used by social workers in public schools to promote the long-term success of students, through the incorporation of social-emotional characteristics used in AE. My goal for this research was to explore the social-emotional characteristics of AE that have influenced change, solely through the perspective of students. As noted, AE alters challenging behavior to return students back to public school. By qualitatively including the student voice in this research, the findings can be used by public schools to more effectively meet the needs of students during this transition, to maintain the success they have achieved in AE.

This chapter includes an overview of the literature search strategy and the theoretical framework of the research study. The literature is organized into the following topical areas: theoretical foundation, the need for alternative education, significance of student feedback in the research of alternative education, and implementation of AE characteristics into public school by social workers. This literature review familiarizes readers with the state of the information of AE and how the empirical knowledge base has evolved.

Literature Search Strategy

I retrieved the literature for this study through databases available via the Walden University Library. This included Education Source, Eric, and Ebscohost. References from retrieved articles provided additional scholarly sources and were searched using these databases. Externally, Google Scholar was used and cross-referenced with the Walden Library to obtain full-text articles. At the onset of research, I explored literature within the last 15 years, to provide a historic foundation to supports the research problem. I then narrowed the search to literature within the last five years, to validate a current need for this research and serve as new content to the area of study.

Key search engines terms included, solely and in various combinations: *alternative education, student behaviors, student behavioral challenges, public school, public education, at-risk youth, school-based discipline practices, school-based discipline interventions, school-based social-emotional interventions, social-emotional learning, student voice in research, student perspective in research, student engagement in research, value of student feedback, re-entry in school, transitions in school, student disengagement, student reengagement, history of school social workers, strengths based approach, Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory,* and *empowerment theory.* Searching these terms resulted in scholarly information that confirms the history and effectiveness of AE programs and how this contrasts with experiences students have in public schools. This search produced literature from the administrative perspective of AE, yet also contained research that included students in AE programs. The search produced research that validates the role of social workers in the education setting and

their professional ability to effectively intervene with at-risk students. The search of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory includes documentation on how the unique relationships within a person's system influence their development. This theory supports the current research as it can account for how a student's system has shaped their path to AE, the manner in which they respond to interventions, and how changes made in AE can be realistically sustained.

Theoretical Foundation

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory includes a model for understanding the development of an individual through the influence and interconnectivity of subsystems, which include the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). The challenging behaviors of students can be understood and addressed from a more informed foundation, when personal factors of each level are considered. The microsystem is comprised of components most directly correlated to an individual, which includes both family and school, and is therefore the most significant subsystem in this research. The mesosystem is the transactional influences between the parts of the microsystem. The exosystem includes components less connected, yet still relevant to an individual, which include extended family, parental work, the media, and government. The macrosystem is the development of values, norms, and expectations. Collectively, these systems play a substantial role in the holistic growth of a person. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory is applicable to this research as it places focus on the student, their lived experiences, and personal perspective. By acknowledging and accepting that every student is influenced by, and is an active part of numerous

systematic relationships, obtaining their individualized feedback can provide significant information for more adequate school programming.

The microsystem of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory can be used to understand the connection between home and school in this research. This is significant in regard to parent influence upon a child's development. Parental monitoring, as defined by Darling (2007), is the manner in which parents attempt to gain an understanding of their child's behavior. Darling (2007) studied decades of work related to Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory in connection to parental monitoring, and how this can impact or predict the behaviors of children. This research documented that a decreased level of parent monitoring leads to increased involvement with high-risk peers, substance abuse, and anti-social behaviors. A similar correlation was found regarding academic achievement. For students living in households with both biological parents or with single mothers with higher levels of education, academic success was improved. In general, greater resources, in any context of a child's life, were found to be linked to the likelihood of positive outcomes. These findings can be correlated to students referred to AE programs, as to how their microsystem has influenced school engagement. These youth have struggled academically and/or behaviorally and have been unresponsive to the traditional intervention or disciplinary strategies of the public-school setting. Additionally, many AE youth display more challenging behaviors, including repetitive disregard for school authority, policy violations, violent behaviors, possession/use of substances or weapons on school property, or other criminal acts (PDE, n.d.). Darling (2007) further discussed the autonomy that children naturally seek during adolescence,

the desire to be their own individual, and the correlation to parental monitoring. This is significant to the current research because the participants were adolescents in Grades 9 through 12. At this stage, children are less likely to openly share with their parents. In response, parental monitoring changes to parental knowledge, in which parents must intentionally seek out the details of their child's life. The impact of the presence, or lack of, remains consistent, in that higher knowledge and involvement equals better child outcomes.

The presence of rules within a family has similar results. Darling (2007) explained a shift in the role of parenting that began in the 1960s, due to changes in family composition, work, and enhanced technology, regarding the additional roles each play in child development. In correlation, Lagana-Riordan et al. (2011) documented that the 1960s is also when AE programs emerged as a way to avoid academic failure, and have significantly increased to the present day. Darling (2007) outlined a foundation for how parenting structure plays a primary role in the development of child academics and behavior. For students struggling in the public-school setting, this knowledge substantiates the need for strategies and interventions that not only improve academics, but address underlying behavioral issues of a student. Within the structure of AE, it has been documented that the differentiated practices have the ability to alter negative actions. Darling (2007) suggested that schools should align with external systems of a student, as greater resources lead to better outcomes. Founded on Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, the current research explored the student perspective based upon their lived experiences, which have been impacted by the type of parenting they

have received. Their qualitative feedback provides realistic ways to support their individualized educational needs.

AE programs offer a differentiated set of resources to reengage challenged students in their education. Although this includes academic supports, there is a greater focus on the social-emotional interventions. Davis-Kean (2005) studied the level of parent education and income, in connection to their beliefs and behaviors regarding academic expectations and achievement for their children. Data was utilized from a 1997 cross-sectional study of children, the Child Development Supplement of Panel Study of Income Dynamics, and included information on 868 children aged 8 through 12. A positive correlation was found regarding higher parental educational attainment and increased socioeconomic status to enhanced academic achievement of children. While significant, Davis-Kean (2005) determined that the engagement processes within the home is more impactful. A main finding of this research was that children from impoverished families can achieve high levels of success when there is a presence of parental warmth in an emotionally stable and stimulating home (Davis-Kean, 2005). These findings validate the application of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory to this current research, as it addresses the development of children from the existence or absence of influential factors. Schools cannot alter the parent educational demographics that Davis-Kean (2005) identified, yet they have the ability to provide essential supports as a component of the microsystem, those that may be lacking in other areas of a student's life.

Individuality of each student is a focus in the AE setting. Although there are a set of reasons a student is referred to this type of educational program, each story is unique. The set of interventions offered in AE has been proven to be effective for at-risk youth. Maillet (2017) reviewed AE programming from an administrative perspective and classified practices that promote student reengagement and provide a genuine educational opportunity. This information was written by an administrator, based upon his research on AE and student reengagement. The documented practices of Maillet are designed to help leaders of AE improve programming to promote positive outcomes. The six identified practices include: provide active and creative instruction, integrate service-learning opportunities into all aspects of the program, accelerate student learning, build time into the schedule to connect with kids, have a plan B (and C) for every student/every day, and use college students and community members. In contrast to the structure of public schools, by providing these strategies there is greater focus on the individuality of each student. By applying Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory to the current research, the educational individuality of each student can be more thoroughly addressed, based on their lived experiences.

Zolkokski, et al. (2016) studied AE post-education, interviewing students who had successfully graduated from these programs. This research documented harmful traits that were present in the lives of participants, which included low birth weight, medical defects, parental drug addition, poverty, diminished community and home supports, racial injustice, and inadequate education (Zolkokski, et al., 2016). To adequately compensate for these challenges, an individual must have protective factors that counteract the

effects. This can be individually driven, such as personality attributes, or via positive characteristics within a system, including home, school, and the community (Zolkokski, et al., 2016). Through the framework of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory to this research, each student's unique set of risk and protective factors is acknowledged, along with the positive or negative impact they can have on their educational experience. This also validates the qualitative nature of the current research, gaining feedback from students on the social-emotional strategies of AE that influenced their change.

The feeling of belonging is essential in the educational process for students. This can be defined as the "extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school social environment" (El Zaatari & Maalouf, 2022, p.2). For at-risk youth referred to AE, this is often lacking. The strategies within AE provide unique and necessary supports, opportunities, and praise, which lend to a sense of belonging. El Zaatari and Maalouf (2022) studied the link of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory to belonging, based on the interactions of a developing individual's process, person, context, and time. The results indicated that school climate, the learning environment, teacher-student relationships, safety, extra-curricular activities, peer interactions, and parent involvement, were essential components to establishing a sense of belonging. These findings correlate to those of this current research study on AE and the qualitative feedback obtained directly from students enrolled in an AE program.

The ecological model of practice has been used by social work professionals since the early 1900s (Sherman, 2016). Even in these early days, the work of social work

professionals has been a liaison between the various systems identified in

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory. Sherman (2016) explored the role that social

workers play within the educational system, serving as a connection between the school

and home environment. Although the role of school social workers has changed since

inception in the 1900s, the main goal has always been to address barriers to education.

Validated by the work of Bronfenbrenner, these are individual to each student. Sherman

(2016) argued that school social workers possess the skills to assist in creating

educational initiatives that are ecologically driven, to have a greater impact on behavior

and learning for all types of students. The current research identifies strategies, based on

the qualitative feedback from AE students, on how public-school social workers can

assist in maintaining the success of returning AE students.

Literature Review

The literature review is organized into three categories. First, I will review the

Need for Alternative Education, to provide the history of this programming and its unique

structure. Second, I will review the Significance of Student Feedback in the Research on

Alternative Education, to include the history of this programming and its unique

structure. Last, I will review the Implementation of Alternative Education Characteristics

into Public School by Social Workers, to support the rationale for how the research

findings will be utilized. Collectively, these categories validate the purpose of this

research.

Need for Alternative Education

Behavioral issues within schools is not a new trend, yet the traditional strategies aimed to correct these acts needs to be reevaluated. Traditional responses including verbal warnings, detention, in-school-suspension, and out-of-school suspension, do not address the underlying reasons for negative actions. Allman and Slate (2011) conducted a literature review of historical and current student behaviors, and the corresponding disciplinary consequences that are utilized in the public education setting. For students who repeatedly misbehave or have more significant violations, these inadequate discipline practices can increase the occurrence of poor actions and have a damaging impact on upon academics, particularly when students are removed from the classroom setting. Allman and Slate (2011), argued for the use of AE by public schools for the most difficult students, or those with major policy violations, including drug or alcohol use, threats, and weapon possession. AE programs differ from public school to provide a learning environment that simultaneously addresses challenging behavior (Allman & Slate, 2011). The information from this study is significant to the current research on maintaining student success after AE, as placement in this type of program is intended to be short-term, with the goal of altering behavior and returning to public school.

In addition to addressing problematic behavior, the concept of AE was developed to reduce academic failure and provide a meaningful education to all students. Historically, AE programs alter the initial concerns through a structure of individualized academic, behavioral, and mental health strategies. Wilkinson et al. (2020) documented the history of AE in the United States, detailing how students are placed in AE from

public schools and the general characteristics of this type of programming. The U.S.

Department of Education defines AE as a "public elementary/secondary school that (a)

addresses the needs of students who typically cannot be met in a regular school; (b)

provides non-traditional education; (c) serves as an adjunct to a regular school; or (d) fall

outside the categories of regular education, special education, or career/technical

education" (Wilkinson et al., 2020). The review of AE by Wilkinson et al. (2020)

recommended that a five-step transitional plan begin for each student at the onset of AE

placement. This includes: (1) development of a transition plan, (2) determine criteria for

transition, (3) transition with supports), (4) monitor progress, and (5) communicate

regularly. This is a reciprocal plan that involves the student, staff, and family, throughout

the process. This recommendation supports the use of Bronfenbrenner's ecological

systems theory to the current research by addressing the needs of students more

holistically through the collaboration of various systems. The findings of Wilkinson et al.

(2020) align to the current research to show how social workers can be used as a support

for returning AE students.

Academic gaps amongst student populations are a significant concern to public

schools. At-risk students often fail to meet educational standards, which can result in

referrals to AE programming (Farrelly & Daniels, 2014). Using a mixed methods design,

Farrelly and Daniels (2014) aimed to "document, describe, and analyze the student

experience at alternative school," to determine the efficacy of these programs. The study

was conducted at an AE program in the southwestern United States. Quantitative

information from school records was used to determine demographical information

including race, gender, special education, English as a second language, and socio-economic status of the population. Additional quantitative information was obtained via 183 student surveys, to ask about their feelings towards the school, learning, and instruction. Qualitatively, two students were selected to participate in several one-on-one interviews over a six-month period. The school records provided a snapshot of the type of students enrolled in the program. The surveys and interviews determined the "lived educational experiences" of these individuals (Farrelly & Daniels, 2014). Findings from this research determined that students have positive experiences based on the structure of AE. For students who failed in the public-school environment, academically or behaviorally, AE is an opportunity for change by providing individualized attention, creating personal value and belief in education, and offering opportunities to build relationships with staff (Farrelly & Daniels, 2014). Through these avenues, achievement gaps amongst students can be closed.

For students exhibiting the school challenges noted above, AE is often considered as a last opportunity to obtain a successful education, which supports the need for the identification and implementation of the most effective practices. Flower et al. (2011) completed a literature review of 39 articles to identify successful AE practices that create positive change for at-risk youth. The findings of this research documented nine academic and social-emotional attributes of AE programming, which include: (1) low student to teacher ratio, (2) highly structured classrooms with behavioral management, (3) positive methods to increase appropriate behavior, (4) school-based adult mentors, (5) functional behavior assessments, (6) social skills instruction, (7) effective academic

instruction, (8) parent involvement, and (9) positive behavioral interventions and supports. Students referred to AE have significant histories of difficult behavior and a lack of success in the educational environment. Including these nine practices can alter this negative path (Flower et al., 2011). This research suggested that future studies examine how the frequency and exact application of these strategies have the ability to produce positive student changes, to further advance AE programming. The information from this study is significant to the current research in two ways. First, it acknowledges that AE is often the final opportunity for reengagement in the educational process for students. Second, the research includes social-emotional strategies of AE, not just academic, which is the focus of the current research, and how success can be maintained for AE students.

It is evident that the strategies of AE provide necessary supports to at-risk youth to alter their educational journey. In comparison to the more traditional criteria of public schools, AE offers a broader range of standards to define individual success and offers more personally adapted educational and therapeutic strategies (Plows et al., 2017). In Australia, AE is classified as a Flexible Learning Program (FLP) and serves approximately 70,000 students annually. Similar to the United States, the FLP is often considered to be a last resort for education, or a "counter-space" to traditional public education (Plows et al., 2017). This research was a comprehensive evaluation of an FLP to determine the value of outcomes and how individual success is measured in this setting. The research was conducted at two sites in Australia. Data was collected through classroom observations, a review of program documents, and interviews with staff

members, current students, and graduates. Similar to findings of Allman and Slate (2011), Farrelly and Daniels (2014), Flower et al. (2011), Plows et al. (2017), and Wilkinson et al. (2020), the results indicated that the characteristics of FLP/AE programs alter the challenging behaviors of the most at-risk students. The staff described physical changes in the students, including "walking taller, making eye contact, using fewer drugs, looking after more vulnerable students, making friends, engaging in public performances of music or art, and being proud to share their academic achievements" (Plows et al., 2017). Students reflected on their success in AE in two ways. Tangibly, they recognized the ability to improve their grades, obtain certificates, get accepted into other academic programs, or obtain employment. On a personal level, students acknowledged a newfound ability to build connections, which they attribute to the supportive AE staff, who served as role models for engagement and provided a safe space. One student described her experience in AE by stating, "we get treated in a whole new different way", which contrasted a description of her prior educational experience, "like normally mainstream schools we do one bad thing and they hate us and they always despise us" (Plows et al., 2017). Staff and students agree that the biggest changes made in AE are improvements to self-esteem and learning life skills. Positive change occurs in AE because programming more effectively addresses the individual needs of students. The findings of Plows et al. (2017) validate the need for public schools to acknowledge the constructive strategies of AE that provide positive outcomes.

Significance of Student Feedback in the Research on AE

Van de Ridder et al. (2015) examined how positive or negative framing of

research can impact participant responses. This study used first-year medical students to determine how the "packaging" of qualitative research can influence responses when asked about to satisfaction, self-efficacy, and performance (Van de Ridder et. al. 2015). Positively-framed questioning or feedback focuses on information that is good, versus negative-framing that addresses things that could be improved. The 74 participants were students from a medical program in the Netherlands. Segregated into two groups, each was required to complete a medical task and were then provided with positive or negative feedback. The research was conducted on several occasions for comparison purposes of satisfaction, self-efficacy and performance, as reported by participants. The findings indicated that the group who received positively framed feedback generated more optimistic responses, increased personal accountability, and enhanced learning (Van de Ridder et al., 2015). This study is significant to the current research for two reasons. The method validates the need to include individuals in research who are closely aligned to an area of study. Their responses provide the personal perspective to subsequently improve program development (Van de Ridder et al., 2015). Additionally, the current research focuses on attributes that were beneficial to students in AE, from their perspective. The positively framed research tool questions were written to evoke genuine and optimistic responses from the AE participants.

Including youth in research can be particularly beneficial to program development. Faithfull et al. (2019) examined the significance of incorporating youth in mental health research, to promote meaningful interventions and improve engagement. Qualitative interviews were conducted with staff and students at a mental health facility

to gain an "insider view" on including youth in mental health research. The findings aligned to those of Van de Ridder et al. (2015), emphasizing the significance of including individuals most closely related to an area of study. Faithfull et al. (2019) indicated that youth in particular are able, willing, and feel validated when included in mental health research related to program development. These findings support the method of the current research on AE, by including youth enrolled in an AE program.

Minimal research on educational planning is available from the student perspective and therefore "assumptions are frequently made about what is best for student well-being, with little input from the students themselves" (Halliday et al., 2019). Halliday et al. (2019) utilized a mixed methods study that included 10 youth as participants, who promoted positive educational practices within their school. Throughout one school year, the areas of student well-being, self-efficacy, autonomy, and social/emotional assets were examined through this group (Halliday et al., 2019). The findings indicated a more genuine understanding of student needs and how they could be met. Being involved in this educational research had a significant impact on the participants. Consistent with the pro youth-inclusion findings of Faithfull et al. (2019), one participant optimistically stated, "We had a say, an opinion and a voice" (Halliday et al., 2019). Another participant noted the relationships that were formed throughout the process within the participant group. "(The study) helped you to realize what the other students thought, and whether you shared an opinion and then you had a closer bond, and then you'd get to talking, so yeah, definitely bringing students together" (Halliday et al., 2019). This supports the findings of Plows et al. (2017), which encouraged youth in the

study of AE, by highlighting how this promotes relationships and relationship building. Halliday et al. (2019) concluded that "student involvement significantly enriched the quality and depth of findings, as youth have a more intimate knowledge of the adolescent world than adults."

Specifically including the student voice in evaluation of AE allows individuals to reflect upon their journey and accomplishments (Reimer & Pangrazio, 2018). Similar to Plows et al. (2017). To more adequately understand the efficacy of AE practices and what meets the high-level needs of the students, Reimer and Pangrazio (2018) conducted research at an AE program in Australia, where approximately 70,00 youth are educated annually. A mixed methods approach was used to study *Out Teach*, a student-centered, trauma-informed educational program in Australia that operates out of a van. Students in this program are all involved with the juvenile justice system, have significant histories of poor school engagement, and traumatic home lives (Reimer & Pangrazio, 2018). A primary focus of this study was the inclusion of the student perspective via interviews, to determine how and why *Out Teach* impacts individuals and supports their needs. Four best practices emerged from this research that align to the previously documented research by Flowers et al. (2011), and include: (1) individually tailored support, (2) meaningful activities, (3) a relevant and different school environment, and (4) staff who are skilled at teaching and relationship building. Differing from prior or the current research on AE, *Out Teach* is not intended to send students back to their original school, and focuses on reducing recidivism in juvenile criminal offenses. Despite these

differences, the findings are significant as they validate the qualitative inclusion of AE students, to identify effective practices that adequately support their individual needs.

As noted, the growing need for AE, closing achievement gaps, identifying student needs, and responding adequately, all support the inclusion of youth in research on AE (Allman and Slate, 2011; Faithfull et al., 2019; Flower et al., 2011; Halliday et al., 2019; Plows et al., 2017; Reimer & Pangrazio, 2018; Van de Ridder, et al., 2015; Wilkinson et al., 2020). Lagana-Riordan et al. (2011) specifically identified a lack of qualitative AE research with youth. In this study, interviews were conducted with students at a selected AE site. The findings indicated that students offer significant and valuable feedback regarding their overall educational experience both in the public and AE settings. Students reported positive changes made within AE that they believed would not have occurred without the structure and practices unique to AE. Lagana-Riordan (2011) further documented the growing need for interventions that adequately address at-risk students, and recommended that including their feedback is essential in all related research. Without appropriate supports, students are more likely to drop-out of school, which creates greater personal and social implications, with increased rates of drug and alcohol use, mental health, gang involvement, and incarcerations (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011).

Implementation of AE Characteristics into Public Schools by Social Workers

In the early 1900s, school-based social workers integrated themselves in the homes of troubled students to provide interventions for academic and family challenges. Sherman (2016) studied the work of social workers within the public school system from a historical perspective and how this role is used in today's schools. Sherman (2016)

advocated for schools to use the strengths-based attributes that social workers possess, which are founded on an ecological perspective, to bridge the gap between education and student challenges. Sherman (2016) encouraged a collaboration between school social workers and administrators to create policies and interventions that can provide a meaningful education for all types of students. This work links to the current research on AE, as it validates the unique skills of school social workers to create greater change if used appropriately. These individuals have the ability to implement appropriate strategies in order to maintain the success of returning AE students.

AE students have a history of academic and behavioral challenges (Frey & George-Nichols, 2003). For school administrators, this is a concern in relation to increasing achievement gaps (Farrelly & Daniels, 2014) and appropriate behavior management (Allman & Slate, 2011). Frey and George-Nichols (2003) completed a meta-analysis of studies published in the late 1970s through early 1980s, to evaluate school practices that adequately address students with increased needs. Their findings documented that school-based social workers are in a role to facilitate interventions for students with high-level needs. They recommend the use of these professionals who can serve as a constant individual for at-risk youth, ensure learning opportunities, provide positive reinforcement, and to promote individualized skills (Frey & George-Nichols, 2003).

The professional abilities of social workers align to the recommendations of Wilkinson, et al. (2020) in relation to when students achieve their AE goals and transition back to public school. As noted above, Wilkinson et al. (2020) documented the history of

AE, with a focus on transition planning for enhanced success. This research recommended that students should immediately be assigned one-on-one to a professional and be provided with supports such as social skills, anger management, and academic assistance (Wilkinson, et al., 2020). The role of the school social worker can be used to maintain the success that students have achieved in AE and avoid further academic failure.

All AE students have faced failure in the educational setting. It is well documented that the practices of AE create positive change within these individuals and reengage them academically (Allman & Slate, 2011; Farrelly & Daniels, 2014; Flower et al., 2011; Plows et al. 2017; Wilkinson et al., 2020). Maintaining the success that students have achieved in AE is essential. McCall (2003) studied the risk of students dropping out of public school after returning from AE placement. Following re-entry, McCall (2003) found that the risk for dropping-out increased for students with lower academic ability, those who feel less connected to the school, and individuals with limited social interactions. The findings indicated that the main factor for a successful return from AE was the establishment of a positive connection with staff (Allman & Slate, 2011; Farrelly & Daniels, 2014; Flower et al., 2011; McCall, 2003; Plows et al. 2017; Wilkinson et al., 2020). This promotes a more individualized, student-school relationship, which aligns to the practices in the AE setting. These relationships create a sense of belonging in school, which is essential to the overall success of students, and is defined as the "extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school social environment" (El Zaatari & Maalouf, 2022). The research by McCall

(2003) is important as it specifically addresses the challenge of returning to public school, a setting where students previously faced failure and a lack of belonging. Social workers can be the personal connection for returning AE students to avoid drop-out risk, as recommended by McCall (2003).

Some AE programs are used as a true last resort for educational obtainment, without the goal of returning to public school. Zolkokski, et al. (2016) explored the longevity of success achieved in AE via graduates of this type of programming. In contrast to other research, these students graduated directly from AE. Although this provides a comparison to the above referenced AE research, the findings are similar. Through interviews with post AE young adults, three key findings emerged regarding resiliency and the impact that AE had upon their lives after graduation. First, participants recognized the impact of connections with teachers, which influenced their ability to build positive, trusting relationships in adulthood. Second, the smaller staff-to-student ratio was deemed as highly influential, which allowed for individual academic and behavioral needs to be thoroughly addressed to create deeper, longer change. Lastly, discipline practices are applied from a positive approach in AE, versus the traditional punitive acts of public-school strategies, which generated greater investment in student reengagement. This information is significant as it addresses the long-term impact of AE and how essential it is to maintain the success that students are able to achieve in this program. The findings of Zolkokski et al. (2016); connection to staff, one-on-one support, and positive responses to discipline, are influential for consideration when students are returning from AE.

Summary and Conclusions

What is known from the scholarly literature on the need for AE, documents the challenge public schools face in addressing student behaviors, which has resulted in a growing demand for AE programs. The structure and practices of AE offer more individualized educational and social-emotional strategies, versus the traditional model of public schools. Outcomes of AE indicate that these programs alter problematic behaviors, reengage youth, and decrease achievement gaps amongst students. What is known from the scholarly literature on the significance of including students in programmatic research documents the strengths of soliciting their feedback, as they are directly connected and impacted by the area of study. Youth, even if classified as at-risk, offer a valuable perspective based on their unique lived experiences. By including them in research, this generates a sense of empowerment, improves self-esteem, and allows for personal reflection on their achievement journey.

The implementation of AE characteristics in public school by social workers documents the need to for adequate supports during re-entry from AE. Without this, students face further school failure, and are at risk for dropping out. Public schools employ social workers who possess the skills needed to assist returning students. Founded on all of the above information, the current research creates a framework for social workers to implement the feedback obtained from AE students, to maintain their success during transition and facilitate longer-term success.

In Chapter 3, I will detail the qualitative research process utilized to understand the social-emotional strategies of AE that have influenced change in students. I will

include a review of the research design, interview process, and data analysis.

Additionally, I will address issues of trustworthiness and ethical considerations.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to obtain the perspectives of students about social-emotional characteristics within the AE setting that influenced personal change and could be implemented by social workers into public schools. Public schools can use the findings from this study to promote long-term success. This chapter includes rationale for the overall research design and process. The procedures for recruitment and data collection are also described. It then addresses the trustworthiness of the research, via the areas of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Finally, ethical concerns are discussed.

Research Design and Rationale

This research answers the question: What do students identify as the social-emotional characteristics of AE that influence positive behavioral changes in this setting, which can be incorporated by social workers during re-entry to the structure of public schools, to maintain achieved success? The goal of this research study was to use the student perspective to self-describe strategies of AE that have influenced personal change. A qualitative research design was applied, specifically a generic qualitative inquiry. This method was selected in order to obtain feedback from those most connected to the area of study. The findings describe the participant's experiences and can serve as a model for public schools to more adequately maintain the success of returning AE students, specifically via the role of a social worker.

Role of the Researcher

This qualitative research used interviews with students placed in an AE program in Pennsylvania. I conducted interviews, transcribed, and coded the data. Participants included 14 students, placed at two campus locations of this program. The research site was chosen based on my professional knowledge. This AE program has contracts with local school districts, including the district where I am employed. I have not served in a supervisory nor instructional role with any of the students or staff at this AE program, therefore there were no power relationships to address. To avoid a potential pre-determined bias, any student who had previously attended my school district of employment was not eligible to participate.

As the researcher, a main bias I had to overcome was knowledge from working with this AE program, versus the reported information from participants. As students answered the interview questions, it was difficult not to ask questions that were not included in the research instrument. Some students were talkative, while others gave one-word or short-phrased answers. Another bias I had stems from knowing the operations of this program and my personal beliefs on why AE is effective for students. To address this bias, I was careful to utilize active listening during the interviews. I chose to manually transcribe and code the data in an effort to authentically hear what the students shared. The last bias I considered is my professional role as a public-school social worker and passion for conducting this research, to better help at-risk youth.

Methodology

Participant Selection Logic

The site for the research was an AE program located in Pennsylvania, which is an approved private institution through the Pennsylvania Department of Education (Pennsylvania Department of Education, n.d.). This specific program was selected based on my personal experience with this program through my employment. There are nine campuses within five counties, and two were selected for the recruitment of participants. Enrollment of each campus is approximately 30 to 45 students, consisting of male and female students in kindergarten through 12th grade. Referrals for this program are made by local contracted school districts, including the district where I am employed as a social worker. This referral base encompasses a diverse population of students in relation to gender, race, socio-economic status, and religious beliefs.

All students in Grade 9 through 12 who attend the two campuses were invited to participate. Flyers were posted to advertise the research. Parental consent forms and assent forms were distributed to eligible participants via the staff and/or this researcher. On two occasions, I spoke directly with students about the research study. The campus directors assisted in following up with students to remind them about the research and requirements. Interviews did not begin until confirmation was received from the campus directors that all eligible students received the information and had adequate time to return the forms. Nonprobability sampling was selected to gain an understanding of the AE student perceptive of their educational experiences. The grade range of 9 through 12

was chosen to focus on the transition of these students back to the public high school setting, where the findings can be incorporated by social workers.

Fourteen students initially returned the required paperwork between the two campuses. I had originally set a goal of at least 17 interviews, however, the IRB recommended that the sample size be scaled back to a minimum of 12 participants. This was influenced based on the available number of students at each location, and the IRB indicated that only 10% typically agree to participate. A total of 14 students were involved in the study. Saturation was met at 12 participants.

Instrumentation

The study included interviews with students at an AE program. The format followed that described by Turner III (2010), using a semistructured, standardized, open-ended strategy, which asks the same questions of each participant, yet allows for follow-up probes. I developed the data collection tool through courses required for the Walden University doctoral curricula. The literature review process was also used to guide the development of the research instrument. Each interview question aligns to a part of the research question. I pilot-tested a preliminary draft of the interview questions through three mock interviews. This resulted in several alterations to ensure alignment with the research question, added follow-up probes, and changed the language to ensure that it was easily understandable for the participant population. I chose to conduct the interviews in-person, via a narrative format. I selected this format based on the more intimate nature, versus email, telephone, or other non-direct methods. All of the

interviews were held at the two AE program sites and were audio-recorded for accurate transcription.

The interview tool consists of the following questions. Note that the wording "nonacademic" is used instead of "socio-emotional", as students may be less familiar with the latter term.

- Question 1: How would you describe the environment here at (AE Program site name)?

    o Probe: Can you give me an example of a typical day here at (AE Program site name)?

- Question 2: How would you describe the environment at your previous school?

    o Probe: Can you give me an example of a typical day at your previous school?

- Question 3: How would you describe the non-academic help available at (AE Program site name)?

    o Probe: Can you offer a specific example?

- Question 4: How would you describe the non-academic help available at your previous school?

    o Probe: Can you offer a specific example?

- Question 5: To what extent do you feel that the non-academic help at (AE Program site name) has impacted your behavior?

    o Probe: (if they indicate improvement): Can you give me an example of how it has helped you to improve your behavior?

- o Probe: What did that experience mean to you?

- o Probe: (if they have not helped to improve): How would you change the

  non-academic help at (AE Program site name) to improve your behavior?

- Question 6: To what extent do you feel that the non-academic help you described

  can be

  used if you return to your previous school?

- Question 7: To what extent are you willing to work with staff at your previous

  school to continue the strategies that you have described as helpful or

  those you

  suggested?

- o Probe: Can you describe other non-academic strategies that would help

  you if returning to your previous school?

- Wrap-up Question: "Is there anything else that you would like to add about non-

  academic help that has not yet been addressed?"

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

All students in Grades 9 through 12 at the selected campuses of an AE program in

Pennsylvania were invited to participate. This was done via distribution of study

information by administration and myself, face-to-face presentations by myself, and

posters at the research sites. Students were responsible for sharing the information with

their parent/guardians. The data were collected at two of the program campuses. I

conducted qualitative interviews with 14 students. These occurred in private conference

rooms at each AE site to ensure confidentiality of participants. Interviews were audio-

recorded for transcription. If the recruitment process did not yield enough participants or if saturation had not occurred, additional campuses of this program were slated for use.

Data Analysis Plan

The questions of the instrument are used to answer the research question: What do students identify as the social-emotional characteristics of AE that influence positive behavioral changes in this setting, which can be incorporated by social workers during re-entry to the structure of public schools, to maintain achieved success? The interviews were transcribed and coded via thematic data analysis. I chose to transcribe and code manually, versus the use of software. This process consisted of six phases (Braun & Clarke, 2006: (a) familiarizing yourself with your data, (b) generating initial codes, (c) searching for themes, (d) reviewing themes, (e) defining and naming themes, and (f) producing the report. The coding was inductive and developed based on the narratives of the data.

Issues of Trustworthiness

In qualitative research, trustworthiness defines the confidence in the rigor of a study. Trustworthiness is obtained based on specific criteria and related strategies to ensure each is accounted for. These include credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Korstjens & Moser, 2017).

Credibility ensures that the research outcomes are an accurate representation of the participant's accounts (Korstjens & Moser, 2017). This research used saturation as the primary method to establish credibility. All students attending the selected AE program site in Grades 9 through 12 were invited to participate. The guidance provided from the

literature review, IRB, and Walden University staff pre-established a minimum of 12 interviews to evaluate for saturation. This research consisted of 14 interviews. At the completion of all 14 interviews, it was determined that saturation had occurred and no further recruitment was needed.

Transferability refers to the assurance that the findings would be the same if applied in a similar situation (Korstjens & Moser, 2017). This was ensured through thick description, which is documented throughout this research study. This details the exact research procedures and process, which can be correlated to similar settings. If this study were replicated, predominantly in Pennsylvania, it is anticipated that the findings would be similar.

Dependability is the consistency of the research process (Korstjens & Moser, 2017). For this research, dependability was ensured through an audit trail, documenting the steps of the research process from the beginning until the final report. I followed all of the requirements of the Walden University dissertation process and IRB requirements, to ensure for the dependability of the study.

Confirmability is the degree to which the findings are a valid representation of the data. For this research, potential researcher bias was addressed during the recruitment, data collection, and data analysis phases. Through this, the findings are neutral and accurately reflect the narratives shared by student participants.

Ethical Procedures

Participants of this research study were students in Grades 9 through 12, enrolled at the selected campuses of an AE program located in Pennsylvania. I selected this

research site based on my employment with a local school district that contacts with this AE program. As per IRB, at least two campus locations were required to ensure that participants were fully unrecognizable. To promote the principle of justice, all students within the determined grade range were invited to participate in the study. Due to the age and minor status of these individuals, parent consent and assent forms were required. I worked with the staff at the AE program to distribute research information. Details about the intent of the study, the value of student feedback, data collection method, data storage, and maintaining confidentiality were communicated to the participants and their parent/guardians. I was permitted to visit each campus location to speak with eligible students about the study. This was in the form of a brief, group conversation. I offered no incentives for participation and no consequences were imposed for lack of participation.

The consent paperwork was requested to be returned via email or regular mail to myself, or to a designated secretary at each campus location. This secretarial staff position was chosen because the role has no power or influence over student participation, as per IRB requirements. The returned paperwork was stored in a safe location and all materials remained confidential to ensure that other staff were not aware of who had agreed to participate or not. The designated secretary assisted me on the data collection dates to bring students to a private conference room. As required by IRB, participants did not miss instructional time for the research interview. Each participant was assigned a number at the time of the interview (P1, P2, etc.). Other than the student's name, no other demographic or identifying information was provided to me. Before the start of each interview, I had each student sign the assent form. I followed by verbally

reading the opening statement, which restated the purpose of the research, allowed for questions, requested permission to audio-record, and shared that the interview could be ended at any time. I read a closing statement at the commencement of the interview, providing contact information for myself and thanking each student for participation.

As per IRB requirements, I will store all audio-recordings, transcriptions, consent and assent forms, in a secure location for a period of five years. Access to this research documentation will only be granted to members of my research committee. After the period of five years, in November 2026, these materials will be permanently destroyed in an ethical manner.

Summary

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to assist students in maintaining success they achieved in AE programs, by answering the question: What do students identify as the social-emotional characteristics of AE that influence positive behavioral changes in this setting, which can be incorporated by social workers during re-entry to the structure of public schools, to maintain achieved success? The chosen research design, methodology, data collection instrument, data analysis plan, assurance of trustworthiness and ethical considerations, are aligned to the purpose and the ability to adequately answer the research question. These steps are informed by the literature review, which serves as a foundation and validates the need to expand upon available information. The scholarly community can benefit from the findings of this research to avoid further student failure. The implication for social change of this research is to alter the path of at-risk students by ensuring their achievements for long-term success.

Fourteen students were interviewed regarding their experience in AE. The participants shared the strategies unique to the structure of AE that were personally beneficial. A manual, six-step coding process (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was applied to this data. In Chapter 4, I will review how the coding was conducted to extrapolate themes and the findings of the study.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

The goal of this qualitative research was to use the student perspective to identify the social-emotional characteristics of AE that have influenced change, which can be implemented by social workers during reentry into the structure of public schools. The participants in this study were students in Grades 9 through 12, from an AE program located in Pennsylvania. Through semistructured interviews, students shared their perspective on the experiences in both public school and AE. The responses were analyzed to answer the research question: What do students identify as the social-emotional characteristics of AE that influence positive behavioral changes in this setting, which can be incorporated by social workers during re-entry to the structure of public schools, to maintain achieved success? This chapter presents the results of 14 student interviews. A description of the research setting and demographic information is shared. Data collection and analysis procedures are detailed. This chapter will conclude with the four emerged themes to answer the research question.

Setting

The research study was conducted at an AE program located in Pennsylvania. This program is licensed by the PDE to provide regular, special, and AE services to students of all grade levels. Students attending this program have been referred from surrounding school districts based on PDE placement criteria, which includes repetitive disregard for school authority, policy violations, violent behavior, possession/use of substances or weapons on school property, or other criminal acts, public schools use off-

campus AE (PDE, n.d). AE is often used by public school districts as the final intervention for students with high academic and behavioral challenges. The selected research program consists of nine campuses that span five counties and offer specific services. Two campuses were selected based on geographic location to myself. These sites offer Alternative Education for Disruptive Youth (AEDY), a term designated by PDE. This type of programming "provides a combination of intensive, individual academic instruction and behavior modification counseling in an alternative setting to assist students in returning successfully to their regular classroom" (PDE, n.d.). If necessary, two additional campuses were identified and approved for research.

I was assisted by administration at each campus to recruit participants by distributing study information to eligible students and parents, and allowing me to talk with potential students about the anticipated research. Because of the state of the COVID-19 pandemic at the time of the research, the AE program research sites experienced increased student and staff absenteeism, and campus closures. In response, I worked with administration to ensure that all students in Grades 9 through 12 were provided with a written invitation to participate in this study. As noted, some students also received a verbal invitation by myself, if they were in attendance on presentation dates. I did not conduct any research until all eligible students were invited to ensure the equity of participants.

Demographics

All students in Grades 9 through 12 at each research campus were invited to participate in this study. This grade range was selected to elicit feedback and define

strategies specific to high-school age students, to be incorporated by social workers in the public-school setting. This study did not focus on how additional criteria could impact the answer to the research question, therefore outside of the grade-level requirement, no other demographical information was collected. In addition, Walden University IRB requested confirmation that the "study reports will not share age, race, ethnicity, gender, or other interviewee details that could identify the interviewees to readers (including the school staff)."

Data Collection

Fourteen students elected to participate in this qualitative research, seven from each of the two campuses. The use of the two additional identified campuses was not needed, as saturation was achieved through the 14 interviews. Data collection occurred at both campuses on two occasions. To ensure participant confidentiality and adhere to IRB requirements, one secretary from each campus retrieved the consent forms and assisted with the interview process. Interviews were conducted in a closed-door conference room, not visible to staff or students.

An opening statement was read to each student, thanking them for their participation, indicating the purpose of the research, asking if they had any questions, confirming approval for audio-recording, and informing them of their ability to stop the interview at any time. The interview tool consisted of seven questions with probes, and a wrap-up question. The interviews were audio taped using a handheld recorder. Each concluded with a closing statement, thanking them for participation, and providing my contact information for potential follow-up questions.

As noted in the study limitations, no student would be invited to participate that was referred to the AE program by my school district of employment. This was not applicable at the time I conducted the research.

Data Analysis

I hand-transcribed the audio recordings of the 14 interviews with the assistance of Google Translate. The transcripts were reviewed multiple times for accuracy. After conducting the interviews, listening to the stories of the students, and hand-transcription, coding software was not utilized. As noted by Elliot (2018), how data is coded, manual or via software, is a decision-making process based on the overall context of the research. I elected to manually, inductively, and thematically analyze the data using in vivo codes.

Thematic data analysis consists of six phases (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The following depicts the actions of each phase taken myself.

Phase 1: Familiarizing yourself with your data. This includes the transcription, review of the data, and preliminary interpretations. As noted, this researcher utilized Google Translate for transcription. Audio tapes were listened to and transcripts were read multiple times to gain a foundational understanding of the data.

Phase 2: Generating initial codes. For this research, each question on the interview tool was separated and verbatim answers were listed using Microsoft Word. Answers to the questions were then shortened into words or a brief phrase. Refer to Table 1 for the initial research codes.

Table 1

Participant Response Codes

Interview Question	Participant Response Codes * Indicates duplication of the response
Q1	School
	Respect for staff & children*
	Amazing
	I don't know/No idea
	Relaxed
	Easy
	Teachers are nice*
	Smaller, teachers help more*
	Pretty good environment
	Not that bad*
	Chill
	Go in and out, just do your work
	Safe
	Staff are pretty great to be honest
	Not as harsh as public school
	Crazy depending on students
	Toxic based on who you're around
	Really friendly
	More respectful
	Supportive
	Good*
	Nice
Probe	Classes*
	Go outside if possible (ex. Gym, free-time)
	Smaller, less students*
	Get my work done*
	Fun, pretty smooth
	Do you work and you have more free time
	Take your temperature, get wanded, take off sweatshirt, out on mask, take your phone*
	Snack cart with tickets from good behavior*
	Classes on computer*
	Can graduate early
	No violence
	More people who are similar to each other
	Breaks during the day*
Q2 & Probe	Did not like*
	Did not respect staff*

Interview Question	Participant Response Codes * Indicates duplication of the response
	Restraints Disrespected children Less help* Put my head down One positive teacher Trash Students were depressed, had anxiety, mental health issues Transitions were rough because of student conflicts Chaotic Move around more than here Bathrooms are better there No wanding Can't remember
Q3 & Probe	If you look sad/mad they ask why* Will not let you sleep/Wake you to do work Pretty good* Help you get through things General talking, talking to a friend not a therapist Way better* More relaxed, less tense Don't interrogate you Totally different (like) Hanging with family Community service opportunities More MH help* More personal/less students* Better connections* Communication* Try to motivate you Regroup & Reconnect Room* Walks* Always staff to talk to A lot of support Fields trips (earned)
Q4 & Probe	None More strict Did not ask about your feelings Let you sleep/Missed work Didn't help Poor staff No mental health help* More independent/less help*

Interview Question	Participant Response Codes * Indicates duplication of the response
	Counselors were too busy
	Going to a different room was seen as bad
Q5 & Probes	Yes*
	Don't talk back to staff anymore
	Behave better here
	(used to) Throw tables, flip desk/chairs, hit people
	Pretty good
	More mature
	Grown as a person
	Better attitude towards staff/school
	Have changed with all of the help
	Like it better than public school
	Somewhat
	Positively*
	Gave me opportunity to graduate early
Q6	Yes*
	Definitely*
	Just do better
	Positive*
	Good experience*
	A whole lot – I do not build connections easily
	Did not care about anything when I came here
	Poor experience with school in general before I came here
	Stop doing stupid stuff
	Heard it was a bad place, but teachers were cool, relaxed, joke around
	More mature
	Good*
	Can get work done here*
	Be good
	How to transition between classes
	Teachers can be supportive
Q7 & Probe	Yes*
	Help me more
	Of course
	When kids shutdown
	Social Skills
	Communication skills*
	Way I carry myself
	Have a guard
	More one-on-one interactions
	Allow students to leave the room if needed (not punished)

Interview Question	Participant Response Codes * Indicates duplication of the response
	Yes, but I might not need one
Wrap-up Question	No*
	Amazing place – I love it here
	Better than public school
	More clinical setting (public), like a science, here they treat it with emotions
	Treat you like they would their best friend
	Friends rather than higher-ups (despite authority and keep you in-check)
	Staff communicates = students communicate
	Apply social skills to real scenarios
	Chill place
	Not too much problems/drama
	Controlled, hard to get in trouble
	Only had a good experience here
	Go outside more often, play basketball

Phase 3: Searching for themes. The identified words and phrases for each question were then reviewed for exact replication, indicated on this table with an *, and grouped by similarities, to be used as categories. Although each interview question was related to a specific aspect of their experience in AE or public school, the responses were not exclusive to that question. This overlap was the foundation for emerging themes.

Phase 4: Reviewing themes. For this step, I reviewed the research question: What do students identify as the social-emotional characteristics of AE that influence positive behavioral changes in this setting, which can be incorporated by social workers during re-entry to the structure of public schools, to maintain achieved success? I then correlated the codes and categories to ensure alignment of potential themes.

Phase 5: Defining and naming themes. The coding process for this research ultimately produced four themes of the research: predictable and safe environment,

inclusion and emphasis on social-emotional strategies, influences on behavior and emotions, and strategies to transition. These themes summarize the words of the students interviewed to establish the meaning of their experiences in this AE program. Refer to Table 2 for the research themes.

Table 2

Themes

Categories	Theme
Staff - respect for students, friendly, nice, teachers care about students, feel like family, students respect staff, motivate students with personal issues, more supportive of our needs	Predictable and Safe Environment
Smaller classes, teachers help students more with work, work completion, (staff) motivate students academically	
Relaxed, chill, easy, fun, good environment, not as harsh, amazing, smooth class changes	
Safe, we always know what will happen, no violence, security check-ins	
Rewards earned during the day, breaks during the day, listen to music, go outside	

Categories	Theme
Staff - ask about you, help you through things, talk through your problems, provide more help for mental health, take walks with students, don't interrogate students, communicate with students	Inclusion and Emphasis on Social-Emotional Strategies
Community service opportunities, reward system	
More personal for each student	
Regroup and Reconnect Room	
Emotionally focused	
Learned social skills	

Categories	Theme
More respect for staff, better attitude towards staff, better relationship with staff	Influences on Behavior and Emotions
More mature, grown as a person	
Changed because of the help offered	
Opportunity to change	

Categories	Theme
Communication with staff	Strategies to Transition
Build connections	
How to carry myself	
Social skills	

Phase 6: Producing the report. The data analysis process produced the results of this research, as described in detail below, answering the research question using the words of the 14 students interviewed.

There were no major discrepant cases to address in the research. Although some interviewees responded with one-word or short-phrase answers despite the inclusion of probes, they were appropriate to the question asked on the interview tool and therefore had no significant impact on the data analysis.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Credibility is the assurance that the outcomes and assessment of the research are an accurate representation of the participants or area of study (Korstjens & Moser, 2017). For this research, saturation was used to ensure that the findings are credible. Based on the literature review and advisement of Walden University staff, I set a goal of 12 student interviews to evaluate for saturation. Fourteen consent forms were initially returned and all of these students were interviewed. On day one of data collection, ten interviews were completed and it was my belief that saturation had occurred. The other four interviews were conducted on subsequent days, to confirm saturation and to honor participation for all students who had returned permission forms. After transcription of all 14 interviews, this researcher reviewed the documents and audio recordings multiple times, determining that saturation had occurred, as responses were repetitive.

Transferability is the assurance that the research findings would be the same if applied in a similar situation (Korstjens & Moser, 2017). The history of AE programming has been detailed to provide a rationale for the need of this type of educational setting,

documenting 10,900 AE programs in the United States in 2001 (Lagana-Riordan, et al., 2011). This demonstrates a large number of potential sites for this research to be replicated. The findings of this study do not include the name of the AE program, exact location, or student demographics other than grade range, to maintain confidentiality. The primary reason for not providing this information was based on Walden University IRB, which required confirmation that the "study reports will not share age, race, ethnicity, gender, or other interviewee details that could identify the interviewees to readers (including the school staff)." In addition, this research did not seek to answer how demographical information could impact the results, which future research could explore.

Dependability relates to the consistency demonstrated by the researcher throughout the research process (Korstjens & Moser, 2017). I addressed consistency by maintaining an audit trail of notes and materials throughout all stages of the research. Documentation of this includes personal logs, correspondences with the research site, consent and assent forms, audio recordings, supporting scholarly information, and resources provided by Walden University advisory staff. This research has been reviewed and approved via all of the appropriate Walden University processes. Disclosure of the data collection and analysis process was detailed, demonstrating how the results were attained. Through the transparency of this process, this study could be replicated by other researchers.

Confirmability is the degree to which the findings are a valid representation of the data (Korstjens & Moser, 2017). This is demonstrated in this research through the documentation of exact in vivo responses from the student interviewees, which formed

the results. The results were further supported by including direct quotes from

participants. These actions contribute to the neutrality throughout the process and lack of

researcher bias in data analysis.

Results

The research question of this study is: What do students identify as the social-

emotional characteristics of AE that influence positive behavioral changes in this setting,

which can be incorporated by social workers during re-entry to the structure of public

schools, to maintain achieved success*?* Interviews with 14 youth placed in an AE

program were conducted to obtain information about their experience in this setting. See

Table 3 for a summary of the themes and definitions.

Table 3

Definitions of Identified Themes

Theme	Definition
Predictable and Safe Environment	The AE setting encompasses a specific set of rules that define daily practices and expectations.
Inclusion and Emphasis on Social-Emotional Strategies	AE services that alter and sustain the positive social-emotional welfare of students.
Influences on Behavior and Emotions	What students attribute to positive personal changes.
Strategies to Transition	How students maintain the success they achieved in AE as they transition back to public education.

Theme 1: Predictable and Safe Environment

The first theme that emerged from the data is a predictable and safe environment,

defined as, the AE setting encompasses a specific set of rules that define daily practices

and expectations. This theme provides an understanding of how students view and interpret the organizational structure of AE.

Students described their routine from arrival to departure. It was apparent that the interviewees know the daily expectations, which include security measures at the start of the day, the process of completing coursework, availability of the staff for academic or emotional needs, rewards for adhering to daily guidelines, and consequences if rules are not followed. Based on the PDE criteria for placement in AE, which includes higher-level behavior issues outlined in Chapter 1, the rules and practices are stricter than in public schools. Several of these were noted by participants in their responses. P7 noted that upon arrival, "you must take off your hooded sweatshirt." This same student followed by sharing, "they (staff) wand us down and pat us down." This security action was also noted by P11, who added that students must turn in their cell phones. As they progress throughout the day, three students commented on the smooth transition from class-to-class. In comparison to their experience in public school, one student noted that it was previously "chaotic", while another stated, "transitioning was always rough because a lot of students had conflicts." The predictability of AE structure further attributes to a sense of safety for students in this AE program. P7 specifically stated, "this is a safe environment", which was reinforced by P9, commenting that "there's never really violence." P12, who reports coming from a school with high behavioral issues, stated, "I haven't seen one fight."

Despite the more structured rules and practices of AE, student responses indicated that they view the environment as positive. No negative feedback was shared in this area.

Five participants described the environment as "good," while others used affirmative words, including "relaxed," "chill," "easy," "fun," "not as harsh," and "amazing." P4 reported, "you don't feel tense."

A key piece of the positive environmental feedback included a high regard that students have for the staff. This is important to this environment as these individuals are responsible for all daily functions of this small educational program. At arrival they complete the safety protocols, which include pat-downs and use of a handheld metal detector, ensuring appropriate attire, and collecting cell phones. These individuals are also the teachers and administrators whom interact academically with students throughout their day, as well as maintaining that rules are followed and imposing consequences accordingly. Participants described the staff as nice, caring, and that they "feel like family." Three participants used the word "friendly" to describe the staff, yet P4 commented that this does not mean there is no leadership. "They generally act like friends rather than higher-ups. Of course, they can have authority and they keep you in check, but it's a lot more relaxed, it's not uptight like most schools." Although AE offers smaller class sizes which allows for more individualized attention, interactions in general are viewed as more intimate than in the public-school setting. Students believe that staff members want to work with them and continually provide motivation, which was highlighted by P13 in stating "I want to learn more because I have the support of teachers." P2 commented that staff also model a high level of respect through their actions and personalized attention to student needs, "if I look sad or upset, they'd be like hey (name) are you okay, how are you doing, did you have a rough night last night?"

Similarly, P13 shared that in this setting, "teachers take more of an interest in what is going on in our lives."

Although the majority of the responses about the AE environment were positive, two participants commented on how other students can impact the daily process. P9 indicated, "(The environment) it's not bad. It can be a little toxic, depending on your group, the students", which was supported by P9 in stating, "(the environment) sometimes crazy but mostly good, depends on who's in the classroom that day, the kids." Despite these remarks, the same students shared positive comments in regards to how staff actions address these issues effectively.

To contrast with the environment at their prior school, two participants highlighted areas that AE lacks. P6 discussed that public schools offer more opportunities for participation in a variety of activities. P5 shared that the facilities of public school are in better condition, and there is more flexibility throughout the day. Despite these statements, both participants expressed a personal change based on the structure and support they have received in this AE program.

Theme 2: Inclusion and Emphasis on Social-Emotional Strategies

The second theme that emerged from the data is the inclusion and emphasis on social-emotional strategies, defined as, AE services that promote and sustain the positive social-emotional welfare of students. This theme provides an understanding of how students view supports that are specific to the AE setting.

Students had constructive comments about their engagement with staff and discussed the high level of therapeutic treatment available within this AE program.

Participants noted that there is open communication, which provides a welcoming environment for students to feel comfortable sharing. Participants commented that staff are open, approachable, and available, which was highlighted by P9 in stating, "there's counselors, always people ready to talk to you." Students reported that the staff ask about their lives and provide an avenue to talk through problems. P5 commented, "the counselors are really good at helping me with my mental health", which was reinforced by P9, indicating that "they do much more to contain student mental health." Students noted that these interactions feel less systematic than typical counseling. P4 for example remarked that the counseling is "like general talking. It's not like talking to a therapist, it's like talking to a friend." P5 added that there is a psychiatrist who works on-site, in addition to the mental health services offered by regular staff.

In contrast, when students referenced the public-school setting, they noted a lack of mental health services. P3 said, "they didn't really help me at my previous school", which was similar to the responses of nine other students. Participants also reported that any mental health support they did receive in public school was less personalized. P9 disclosed, "I had a lot of trouble with counselors and what not in public school, just

because they were so busy in and out of themselves, and half the time they

wouldn't even remember my name so it's just a lot better here."

In addition to being able to talk-through personal issues, P8, P9, and P11 commented that staff are also available to take walks with students when they are having a bad day, need to take a break, "blow off steam" or "gather yourself." P9 compared this

to the experience at public school, in stating, "that was never offered there. You walk out of the room there and that's it, you're suspended."

Along with the open communication of this AE program, three students noted the teaching of social skills throughout structure of AE. P4 discussed this in regards to an increased ability to conversate, especially in groups of people. "It's definitely helped me with my communication skills and the way I carry myself." This same participant reported a belief that learning and applying social skills helps students to build connections and establish friendships. Other students discussed social skills in terms of behavior management. By learning how to vocalize their feelings and connecting to real-life situations, students were able to positively alter how they reacted to challenges.

Four other support strategies were highlighted through the interviews. One student discussed the availability of community service opportunities. P5 noted that this was used this to satisfy a personal legal requirement, yet students can also earn rewards from acts such as cleaning bathrooms or vacuuming at the AE campus. The reward system was noted by several interviewees. This is in the form of tickets, which are earned for various acts of good behavior. The tickets can be redeemed at a snack cart, to have free time, participate in outside activities, or take trips off-campus. A last strategy specific to this AE program is the Regroup & Reconnect room, mentioned by six of the participants. This is a space where students can go on their own, or be sent by a staff member, mainly used as a place to "cool off." P12 compared this to a similar room at their public school which was used punitively versus a therapeutic intervention. "It was a bad place that was private and only for suspensions."

Theme 3: Influences on Behavior and Emotions

The third theme that emerged from the data is influences on behavior and emotions, defined as, what students attribute to positive personal changes. This theme provides an understanding of how students individually define the impact of the supports they have identified within the AE setting.

"Originally I came in with a chip on my shoulder," declared P9. P5 shared, "before I came to (AE program name) I heard a lot about it, like it was a bad school. It was a horrible place to go." These statements correlate to information provided in Chapter 1, of how students are referred to AE. This is most likely a forced placement and not a choice, based on a high-level offense or a history of educational challenges in public schools. Despite the more structured AE setting, all fourteen participants indicated at least one aspect of AE that has had a positive impact on their behavior. And for P5, who shared their reservations prior to enrollment, stated "I haven't had any bad experiences here at (AE program name), all of my experiences have been pretty good."

Six attributes of the environment and social-emotional strategies of AE were identified by students as influential to creating positive change in their behavior and emotional health. These include rules, respect from staff, therapeutic support, one-on-one attention, inclusion of social skills, and a reward system. The following highlight an example of how each attribute created positive change for students.

P1 shared that through the rules of this program, they learned "not to talk back to staff" and "just do better" in school. This student provided details of the daily routine and expectations of AE, admitting that it was much more strict than public school. Yet

through this experience, they were able to realize the rationale for having rules and understand the benefits of structure. This student disclosed a strong desire to return to their prior school, and feels that learning how to follow rules has prepared them for success in that setting.

P2 emphasized the level of respect from staff and shared that this AE program "is a lot more relaxed and you can joke around with the teachers." This student disclosed being in many difficult educational settings in the past. They report that the respectful interactions with AE staff has resulted in a decrease in personal aggression. "When I was at my old school, I was like throwing tables, flipping desks and flip chairs, hit people. But here I have not done that." Throughout the interview, this student used the word "amazing" five times to describe the staff and how he has been treated.

P5 shared that the therapeutic support of AE has changed the way they carry themselves and ability to conversate better. P7 commented that the mental health services in AE focus on each student individually. This personalized approach helped this student to understand their past behavior issues to make improvements in themself. For P8, the use of the Regroup and Reconnect room is a positive way to self-regulate, versus a punitive act, which simply taught them "how to behave" more appropriately in the school setting. P9 shared that taking walks with staff provided the opportunity to learn how to build connections with these individuals. This student contrasted this to the experience of public school, where they perceived staff as too busy.

P6 reported how the one-on-one help provided in AE created engagement in school, which they lacked before. This relates to both academics and behavior,

proclaiming that there is "no more fooling around, no more messing around." This student shared that staff take the time to ensure that all students understand coursework or facilitate general conversations. When asked what this experience has meant to this student, they responded that they have become "more mature" as a result of the individualized supports of AE.

For P4, the inclusion of social skills taught them how to have "less tense interactions" with others. This student shared details of their past educational experiences and a lack of ability to interact appropriately with others. "I don't really build connections easily, it's very hard for me to just build a connection with anybody due to a lack of empathy in general. But when I came to this school I did not care about anything, I was completely aggravated." The teaching of social skills within AE "made me more mature, it's definitely helped me grow more as a person, not only with just general attitude and it's also definitely helped me with general relationships."

Participants discussed the AE reward system that includes earning tickets to purchase snacks, taking breaks outdoors, playing sports, and field trips. For P12, who self-reported being new to the program, stated they already learned by doing what was expected, they could earn flexibility and add fun activities into their school day. This was an unfamiliar concept to this student who reports a history of poor school experience. This provided motivation for their time in AE.

Theme 4: Strategies to Transition

The fourth theme that emerged from the data is strategies to transition, defined as, how students maintain the success they achieved in AE as they transition back to public

education. This theme provides an understanding of students' motivation to continue their success when returning to their prior school, and how AE strategies could be implemented in this setting.

As noted in Chapter 1, the goal of AE is to meet individual goals and return a student to their school of origin. Students were asked if they believe that strategies used in AE could be incorporated in their previous school. Students were also asked about their willingness to work with a school social worker, to ensure that their success continues. All 14 participants reported that they would want to continue utilizing what they have learned in AE, if and when they are permitted to return to public school. For P1 and P7, they simply want to continue following school rules. P6 shared a similar goal, yet a new ambition to "finish school." Multiple participants indicated that they want to take advantage of staff help and will be more willing to engage with them. P2, P9, P11 and P13, for example spoke about emotional regulation that they have learned in AE, and the need to continue this when returning to public school. P11 added that it will be important to communicate with staff about emotions more proactively. Additionally, P4 and P5 shared a desire to conversate more with both staff and their peers, as AE has increased these skills. P4 would like to continue the way in which they carry themself, with greater confidence. This student also wants to "continue applying learned social skills to real-life situations." P12 and P13 shared that they would seek out opportunities in ways they had not before. P12 spoke about this in terms of potential incentives offered within public school. P13 addressed this from the mental health perspective, and will take advantage of the resource room as a positive outlet when needed.

When asked about their willingness to work with a public-school social worker, 13 participants agreed, so that they could continue utilizing strategies learned in AE. The other student indicated they didn't feel as though they needed someone in this role. P5 responded to this question by stating, "I would definitely use the skills they are giving me here to help me in my regular school." P2, who shared a desire to continuing engaging with school staff, noted that the role and support offered by a social worker would be helpful "because when I'm in that moment I forget everything." P4, who spoke much about communications skills learned in AE, connected this to the social work role.

"I feel like if you had a social worker, somebody just in general, even just a counselor who can teach a kid how to just generally conversate, because a lot of them just shut down, they don't really talk to any staff, and try to keep your head down. But if you teach them how to communicate with other people even if they don't like it, that it building connections."

Summary

The data obtained via interviews with 14 AE students generated four themes to answer the research question: What do students identify as the social-emotional characteristics of AE that influence positive behavioral changes in this setting, which can be incorporated by social workers during re-entry to the structure of public schools, to maintain achieved success? The first theme, predictable and safe environment, addresses the student perspective of the overall AE setting, which includes the daily routine of this smaller educational setting, behavioral expectations, engagement with staff, and safety. The second research theme, inclusion and emphasis on social-emotional strategies, are

the identified strategies utilized in this setting, which may be different from those in public education. The third theme, positive influences on behavior and emotions, defines how the AE environment and social-emotional strategies have influenced positive behavioral change. The fourth theme, strategies to transition, identifies the desire of students to continue incorporating the positively identified attributes of AE when they return to public school and how this can be implemented by the role of a social worker.

In Chapter 5, I will detail how the four research themes not only align to answering the research question, but the practical application of how this information can be utilized. As students achieve success within AE, the feedback provided in this research is significant to consider when returning to the traditional structure of public school. The implication for social change of this research is alter the negative path of at-risk students, by promoting positive achievements of these students for enhanced long-term success.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to obtain the student perspective of social-emotional characteristics within the AE setting that have influenced personal change, which can be implemented by social workers in public schools. This qualitative study provides a detailed understanding of student experiences in both AE and public education. The findings can be used as a guide for public schools to promote the long-term success of students returning from placement in AE.

The results of this study show that students positively respond to the structure and strategies offered in AE. Participants shared traits of AE that promote a sense of predictability, safety, and individualized support, all of which resulted in personal growth and increased engagement in their education. This contrasts with the views of their experiences in public school, which was described as chaotic and less helpful. If returned to the public-school setting, all 14 student participants reported a desire to continue using the skills they have learned in AE, which have enhanced their ability to communicate, build relationships, and regulate their emotions. All but one participant indicated that they would be willing to work with a public-school social worker to assist them in maintaining these skills. Students indicated that the strategies of AE not only helped with their school performance, but they also learned how to interact with others, build meaningful connections, and increased their self-esteem. These findings are important to consider as students return to the public-school setting, where they had previously faced failure. Wilkinson et al. (2020) recommended that a transition plan be created early on to

document the supports that students will receive during reentry. Furthermore, Sherman (2016) advised for the collaboration between returning AE students and public-school social workers, stating that these individuals have the ability to play a vital role in the link between the unique systems of school, home, and the community for students.

Interpretation of the Findings

The current research found no differences related to the effectiveness of the environmental organization of AE that has been documented by prior studies. Participants described their experience in AE as a routine of positive interactions with staff and peers, a relaxed environment with a sense of safety, and increased assistance with academics. These findings align with those of Farrelly and Daniels (2014), Flower et al., (2011), Maillet (2007), Plows et al., (2017), and Zolkokski, et al., (2016). Together, these studies and the current research show how the structural characteristics of AE offer an atmosphere that allows students to feel comfortable and reengage in learning. This information is significant as the need for AE continues to grow based on the inability of at-risk students to be successful in the traditional, less flexible structure of public school (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011). As AE is often the last resort for these students, previously documented studies and this current research confirm environmental factors of AE that are effective at creating change.

In relation to social-emotional strategies offered within AE, the current research found no additional new or surprising information than documented in prior studies. Although AE reengages students academically, the success of these programs is based on the dual focus on education and social-emotional health (Allman & Slate, 2011). The

participants in the current research reported a higher level of personalized support in comparison to public school. This included formal and informal types of counseling with staff, and the opportunity to effectively work through emotional challenges without consequences. Students also shared an appreciation to learn social skills via curriculum and community service opportunities. These findings are consistent with those of prior research, which highlight the inclusion of social-emotional strategies in effective AE programs (Farrelly & Daniels, 2014; Flower et al., 2011; Maillet, 2017; Plows et al., 2017, Zolkokski, et al., 2016). These studies and the current research show how the social-emotional strategies of AE have the ability to alter the behaviors of at-risk students. These findings are important in relation to the sustainability of changes. As the goal is to address individual challenges and return students back to public school, previously documented studies and this current research confirm the efficacy of offering social-emotional supports in addition to academic interventions.

Although it is documented that the structure and supports offered in AE create positive change for students, it is unclear how these personally impact students. Participant responses mirrored the findings of prior studies as to how they were influenced by their experience in AE and no differences were found with the current research. The manner in which students engage with AE staff creates a higher level of respect for adults (Farrelly & Daniels, 2014; Flower et al., 2011; Maillet, 2007; Plows et al., 2017, Zolkokski, et al., 2016). The inclusion of social skills teaches them how to appropriately interact with others and build relationships (Flower et al., 2011; Plows et al., 2017). Having the ability to work through emotional challenges without consequence

promotes emotional regulation (Farrelly & Daniels, 2014; Flower et al., 2011; Maillet, 2007; Plows et al., 2017; and Zolkokski, et al., 2016). The overall experience in AE improves the student's attitude toward education and their ability to be successful (Farrelly & Daniels, 2014; Flower et al., 2011; Maillet, 2017; Plows et al., 2017). These studies highlight how AE practices impact students, yet in contrast, public schools lack these individualized strategies. This information is significant to consider as students achieve success in AE and are required to return to the public-school setting. Without personal connections or with limited social interactions, McCall (2003) found that these students are at greater risk for dropping out of school. It is essential that educators acknowledge the feedback provided by students for adequate planning, as current practices are not responding to the true needs of these youth.

This study extends upon the above practices and addresses a gap in the literature, which is the return back to public school from the AE setting. The research question qualitatively responds to this gap by answering: What do students identify as the social-emotional characteristics of AE that influence positive behavioral changes in this setting, which can be incorporated by social workers during re-entry to the structure of public schools, to maintain achieved success? Unlike prior studies, the current research specifically asked AE students about their experiences and how these could align with their return to public school. Lagana-Riordan, et al. (2011) recommended that this type of research is needed, as the youth perspective could have significant implications for school policies and practices that address at-risk youth. Participants in the current study shared an overwhelming dislike for the public-school environment, staff, and a concern

for the mental state of students. In contrast, their views on AE were overwhelmingly positive. Wilkinson et al. (2020) suggested that proactive transition planning begin at the onset of AE placement. This would be a collaborative process between the public school, AE program, student, and their family. Sherman (2016) advocated for school systems to utilize the strengths-based approach of social workers to address student educational and personal barriers. All 14 participants reported a desire to continue working on the skills they have learned in AE, with 13 agreeing to the specific assistance of a school social worker. This demonstrates an achieved sense of pride as they recognize personal change in themselves. For many AE students this is new, as they historically have been classified for their inability to conform to the education system (Lagana-Riordan, et al., 2011). Participants specified four areas that they would like to maintain when returning to public school, which included: communication, connections, how they carry themselves, and social skills. These were in relation to the school environment and within their external systems. This aligns with the role of social work professionals, who use an ecological approach that focuses on an individual's experiences and system structure to adequately address challenges (Ball, 2020). When asked how public-school social workers could help implement these areas, students shared the following six strategies: one-on-one interactions, increased assistance with academics and mental health, help when shutting down, practicing and improving social skills, having the ability to process actions without punishment, and serving as a person to rely on. These six strategies serve as a foundation for interventions provided by school social workers to maintain the success of returning AE students.

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory was the foundation to this study, which provided a holistic view of physical and mental development based on the exchanges within an individual's systems. AE students are classified as at-risk, based on a variety of demographics founds within Bronfenbrenner's identified five subsystems: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. These serve as barriers to academic success and include family composition, socio-economic status, ethnicity, learning disabilities, mental health, pregnant youth, homelessness, gang-involvement, and significant behavioral issues (Lagana-Riordan, et al., 2011). The structure of AE programs more adequately responds to the needs of these individuals, which are a result of their systematic influences. This is done via a collaborative process with the student and their direct family. Students are acknowledged individually of receive the appropriate academic and social-emotional interventions. This process contrasts what is offered in the traditional structure of public schools. As a result, participants in the current research discussed personal changes that relate not only to their educational system but to how they are applied to other contexts. Students reported an increased ability to conversate, engage and connect with peers and adults, the manner in which they carry themselves, emotional regulation, self-reflection, and increased maturity. The structure of public education falls short in comparison to that of AE, which naturally acknowledges how the layers of a student's system can serve as a way to understand behavior, and how it can be adequately addressed. Although demographic information was not collected, this current research qualitatively responds to how appropriate interventions can positively impact various systems in a student's life. In

alignment with the role of social workers, these professionals naturally apply an ecological approach to solving challenges by acknowledging that experiences, problems, and structures are interrelated (Ball, 2020). In the school setting, social workers examine, address, and appropriately connect the various levels of each system to remove barriers and promote educational success. This research can be used as a guide for how this process can occur to maintain the systematic success of returning AE students.

Limitations of the Study

As documented in Chapter 1, one study limitation was the exclusion of any student who was referred to the AE program from my school district of employment. This was not applicable at the time of the research. Another noted limitation was the use of only one AE program in the state of Pennsylvania to conduct the research. All AE sites located in this state are mandated by guidelines of the Pennsylvania Department of Education. Therefore, it is anticipated that the findings would be similar if the study was replicated within this state. If conducted elsewhere, the student experience may be different and produce different results. Another previously noted limitation was the potential impact of COVID-19 at the time the research was conducted. Mitigation efforts were made to ensure equity for participation and therefore this had no influence on the research or findings.

Recommendations

If inadequately supported, returning AE students will be unsuccessful back in public school (Wilkinson, et al. 2016). This research includes qualitative information on how social workers can facilitate a more adequate transition. Participants reported a

desire to work with these professionals to focus on communication, connections, the way they carry themselves, and social skills, all of which they learned from AE. In response to the research question, students identified six social-emotional strategies for working with a social worker when returning to public school. These included: one-on-one interactions, increased assistance with academics and mental health, help when shutting down, practicing and improving social skills, the ability to process actions without punishment, and having a person to rely on. This research documents seven specific ways that school social workers can directly incorporate these strategies into practice. These are actions backed by the qualifications of school social workers as defined by the Pennsylvania Department of Public Education certification (PDE, n.d.). These strategies also align with the recommended transitional planning of Wilkinson et al. (2016), which acknowledges the needs of each student and implements appropriate systematic supports during reentry.

1. Social workers can provide designated time for students to address personal issues, academic or non-academic.

2. Social workers can refer students to school-based or external resources to address individual needs.

3. Social workers can include key individuals within a student's external systems for a more holistic approach.

4. Social workers can facilitate groups that evoke the engagement of students with peers.

5. Social workers can collaborate with administration and staff to facilitate a school climate that makes all students feel welcome, valued, and safe.

6. Social workers can provide training to administration and staff on the needs of students, prominent issues, how to engage with at-risk youth, how to appropriately interact with families, etc.

7. Social workers can continue to seek qualitative feedback from students for all areas of planning and goal setting.

Implications

Positive Social Change

This research promotes social change by utilizing social workers to facilitate a meaningful education for at-risk students who have previously been unsuccessful in the public-school setting. The NASW Code of Ethics indicates explicitly that professionals must "promote social justice and social change on behalf of clients" (NASW, 2017, para. 2). Prior research documents that returning AE students face failure without the appropriate supports (Wilkinson et al., 2016). The findings of this research can be used as a solution to this transition and a manner to promote social change for at-risk youth. Aligning to Walden University's definition of social change, the method of this study serves as a way to "promote the worth, dignity, and development of individuals" (Walden University, n.d., para.1), through the qualitative inclusion of students in the research on AE. This perspective not only provides valuable feedback, yet also empowers participants as they reflect on their journey (Halliday et al., 2019). By implementing the seven social-emotional strategies identified in this research, returning AE students are more likely to maintain their newfound educational success, which provides "positive

results in the improvement of human and social conditions" (Walden University, n.d., para.1).

School social work dates back to the 1900's, visiting the homes of youth and serving as a liaison between the school and home (Ball, 2020). This early work is a model for current day practices and aligns with Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, which places value on the systematic influences of an individual. AE programs were developed in response to a growing need to provide valuable education to students unable to be successful in the public education setting. As documented in prior research and the findings of this study, AE creates positive reform. Social work professionals can bridge the gap during reentry to public school to maintain success. Without appropriate supports, returning students are at greater risk of dropping out (McCall, 2003). The seven social-emotional practices from this research are necessary to assist at-risk youth obtain a meaningful education. These better equip school systems that are facing increasing challenges with behavior, engagement, discipline, and gaps in student achievement (Maillet, 2017).

Conclusion

The differentiated structure of AE programs alter challenging behaviors of the most at-risk youth and reengage them in education. With this reform comes the requirement to return a student back to public school, a setting where they were unsuccessful. This research includes findings based on qualitative interviews with 14 students in an AE program located in Pennsylvania. Students reported information categorized into four themes; Predicable and safe environment, inclusion and emphasis

on social-emotional strategies, Influences on behavior and emotions, and Strategies to transition. Participants echoed the findings of prior AE research, yet there is no documentation to detail how returning AE students can be supported to maintain their newfound success. School social workers naturally have a role to assist these students. These professionals address barriers via an ecological and strengths-based approach. This research identifies seven social-emotional actions that social workers can provide, based solely on the student perspective. This can be used as a guide for public schools to better support students with educational instability. As this goal of education is both current and long-term individual success, the findings support the Vision Statement of the Pennsylvania Department of Education, which declares "learners will be prepared for meaningful engagement in postsecondary education; in workforce training; in career pathways; and to be responsible, involved citizens" (PDE, n.d.).

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Interview study seeks (*AE Research Site Name*) students in grades 9-12 to share their experiences of this Alternative Education program

There is a new study called *"Student Perspective of Alternative Education Characteristics Implemented by Public School Social Workers"* that could assist public schools to maintain the success achieved at (*AE Research Site Name*), when students return from these placements. For this study, you are invited to describe your experiences at the (*Specific*) Campus of (*AE Research Site Name*).

This survey is part of the doctoral study for Jennifer Fields, a Ph.D. student at Walden University.

About the study:
- One 30-60 minute in-person interview. All participants will be asked the same series of questions.
- To protect your privacy, no names will be collected. Each participant will be assigned a number based on the order of interviews (i.e. Participant #1, #2, etc.).

Volunteers must meet these requirements:
- Students in grades 9-12, currently placed at the (*Specific)* Campus of (*AE Research Site Name)*
- Provide a signed parental consent form, which will be distributed by (*AE Research Site Name)* staff
- Provide a signed assent form, which will be distributed by (*AE Research Site Name)* staff

For additional information:
- **Contact Jennifer Fields, at jennifer.fields3@waldenu.edu or (717) 514-3013**

- **Contact Mr. (*Name*), Campus Director – (*AE Research Site Name*)**

Appendix B: Interview Tool

Question 1: How would you describe the environment here at (*AE Research Site Name)*?

   Probe: Can you give me an example of a typical day here at (*AE Research Site Name)*?

Question 2: How would you describe the environment at your previous school?

   Probe: Can you give me an example of a typical day at your previous school?

Question 3: How would you describe the non-academic help available at (*AE Research Site Name)*??

   Probe: Can you offer a specific example?

Question 4: How would you describe the non-academic help available at your previous school?

   Probe: Can you offer a specific example?

Question 5: Do you feel that the non-academic help at (*AE Research Site Name)* has impacted your behavior?

   Probe: (if they indicate improvement): Can you give me an example of how it has helped you to improve your behavior?

   Probe: What did that experience mean to you?

   Probe: (if they have not helped to improve): How would you change the non-academic help at (*AE Research Site Name)* to improve your behavior?

Question 6: To what extent do you feel that the non-academic help you described can be used if you return to your previous school?

Question 7: Are you willing to work with a staff member at your previous school to continue the strategies that you have described as helpful or those you suggested?

   Probe: Can you describe other non-academic strategies that would help you if returning to your previous school?

Wrap-up Question: "Is there anything else that you would like to add about non-academic help that has not yet been addressed?"