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Necessity of Classroom Community for the Academic Success of Students in an Alternative Education Program

Abstract
Principals and teachers recommend students for alternative placements based on failure or perceived future issues in a general education setting in the hopes that the student will be more academically successful. Removing students from a setting in which they are failing seems like a logical choice, but do the students perceive it as a good thing? Studies have shown that students in alternative education programs tend to be more academically successful for two reasons. Students feel that teachers and staff in an alternative setting are more invested in their education, which gives students motivation to do well. Secondly, alternative programs are known for small class sizes, which allow students to receive more individualized instruction.

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Necessity of Classroom Community for the Academic Success of Students in an Alternative Education Program

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Abstract

Principals and teachers recommend students for alternative placements based on failure or perceived future issues in a general education setting in the hopes that the student will be more academically successful. Removing students from a setting in which they are failing seems like a logical choice, but do the students perceive it as a good thing? Studies have shown that students in alternative education programs tend to be more academically successful for two reasons. Students feel that teachers and staff in an alternative setting are more invested in their education, which gives students motivation to do well. Secondly, alternative programs are known for small class sizes, which allow students to receive more individualized instruction.
Necessity of Classroom Community for the Academic Success of Students in an Alternative Education Program

Community is a critical component of education. This paper discusses the importance of “classroom community” in the success of students in alternative education by comparing this setting to that of a traditional public school. In this paper, classroom community is defined by three main components: diversity, structure, and genuine relationships. Classroom community is accomplished by ensuring that all students feel respected and engaged in learning. This concept is important for students’ self-esteem and motivation. If a student demonstrates those two elements, then it is likely that he or she will be more successful academically. Success in this paper is defined by academic progress.

Academic success for students in an alternative program is critical because they have already experienced failure in their home school. Alternative education serves a diverse population of students. Most of the students in the program have been placed in an alternative program due to some form of difference from their peers in the traditional school setting. Foley and Pang (2006) define alternative education as “individualized opportunities designed to meet the educational needs for youth identified at-risk for school failure” (p. 11). This means differentiated instruction for students who have experienced previous academic failure. Owens and Konkol (2004) used a similar definition stating that “the idea behind alternative school settings was that students were individuals, and to better serve them, smaller classroom sizes and a more personalized approach were needed” (p. 173). By using a more individualized approach, students will better be able to relate to the content. When students can relate to the content, they have a better chance at comprehension and retention.
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This paper presents research supporting the use of classroom community to increase academic success of students in an alternative education setting. The research conducted will take into consideration students’ beliefs on their own academic success. The students will be asked to compare their experiences at their home school and in their alternative placement. They will provide insight into the variables that were most helpful in their success. Most of the students from the research have been labeled at-risk based on their lack of success in a traditional setting. Alternative education programs provide a more community based atmosphere due to the structure and diversity of the model, which allows students to be successful.

Theoretical Framework

One critical issue in the topic of diversity, as it relates to alternative education, is circulation of power. Rex and Schiller (2009) define circulation power, noting “power moves among speakers as they engage learning” (p. 36), meaning that, power is passed from teacher to student and from student to student all in the name of learning. The theory supports the idea that “learners’ power in support of their learning may be thought of as independence, ownership, and self-efficacy” (Rex & Schiller, 2009, p. 42). The ability of a student to have control of their learning provides them with a reason to engage in a lesson. A sense of autonomy in the classroom allows students to form an identity in the classroom and to feel as though they have a stake in what they are learning (Rex & Schiller, 2009).

The movement of power in a classroom is especially important in an alternative education setting. Students in this type of setting typically have emotional or behavioral issues that can make it difficult for them to stay engaged (Foley & Pang, 2006). Teachers need to ensure that lessons are interactive. By giving students a sense of power in their own learning,
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instruction becomes meaningful and purposeful (Rex & Schiller, 2009). Under the theory of circulation of power, students in an alternative setting will build classroom community, by recognizing it is not always the teacher doing the teaching.

A second critical issue in the topic of diversity as it relates to alternative education is the power of culture in learning. In the theory culture as a disability, culture is defined as “different kinds of people living in their various ways, each kind separated from the other by a particular version of coherence, a particular way of making sense and meaning” (McDermott & Varenne, 1995, p. 325). Students in an alternative education setting are a part of a culture of their own because they have been removed from a traditional school setting; however, they also belong to their own individual culture based on their own beliefs. Students in this type of setting have been grouped together based on a location, which creates a disability. Since these students are not a part of the culture that holds power, their voices are not heard in the general education population (McDermott & Varenne, 1995).

The theory of culture as a disability can also be applied to students in alternative education based on the discourses they use. Discourses are ways individuals interact/communicate with one another. Most people have multiple discourses and the most appropriate is used based on the circumstance (Rex & Schiller, 2009). For example, a discourse a student may use in the classroom may be different than the one they use at home. Students who are in alternative education programs are typically educated in a different location from their home school and attend classes with students from multiple districts (Foley & Pang, 2006). The students may have different discourses than their peers and their teacher simply because they are being educated in a different community than their own (Rex & Schiller, 2009). Phrases, accents, and definitions may be unique to specific communities or school districts. For example,
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teachers in one school may be more lenient with students’ use of vulgar language in the classroom than others. This may cause a disability for students who do not use the same discourse as other students or as the teacher (McDermott & Varenne, 1995).

Research Question

Based on the theoretical framework and the issues of diversity in alternative education programs, the following research question has emerged: How does “classroom community” impact the academic success of students in alternative education?

Literature Review

Classroom community is a critical component of education. Research about the importance of classroom community to the success of students in an alternative education setting is one sided. Lagana-Riordan et al. (2011), McCall (2003), Owens and Konkol (2004), Tobin and Sprague (2000), and Rawid (1994) agree that if the components of a classroom community are positive, then majority of students will be successful. Themes that were common throughout research included diversity of the population in an alternative education setting, the need for small class sizes in an alternative education classroom, and the supportive design of an alternative education program.

Diversity of the Population in an Alternative Education Setting

Students

The first theme I found was diversity of the population in alternative education settings. Students, teachers, and support staff make up the majority of the population in this type of setting and it is critical that they work together to create a classroom community. The population of students who attend alternative schools is diverse and the reasons for being placed in the program vary greatly. Students, who have been placed in an alternative setting, typically have
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been referred because of poor behavior or failing academics. Lagana-Riordan et al. (2011) and McCall (2003) both cite more specific reasons including family or social issues or high frequency of absence. It is the home school’s decision if and when to refer a student. Due to what little control the alternative school has on student placement, the population in this setting can change week to week. The overall student population varies with age and culture. Most programs have a total population of 90 students (Foley & Pang, 2006). These students are broken up into classes based on their current academic grade level for each content class. In a typical alternative education class, there are about 12 students for every teacher (McCall, 2003). A small class allows more one on one attention for each student, which can lead to a strong classroom community. The most common labels students in an alternative education program may have include behavioral or emotional disorders (Foley & Pang, 2006). Due to the challenging nature of this population, the establishment of classroom community is crucial for a student’s academic success. The concept of community is typically what is lacking in the traditional setting, and what has led to an alternative placement for these students.

In a demographical study of 50 alternative education schools, conducted by Foley and Pang (2006), it was found that there was a great deal of diversity throughout the programs. The average population of males in any given program was about 60% and the average population of females was about 40%. The study also showed that Caucasian and African Americans were the most commonly represented ethnic groups, but there were also Hispanic, Native American, and Asian students who were served (Foley & Pang). In addition, Guerin and Denti (1999) reported that the majority of students served in alternative education programs were poor and from minority groups. Ethnic and gender differences contribute to the diversity that is necessary for a successful classroom community. Diversity contributes to the tolerance of others and is
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necessary for student success in an alternative education program. In a study conducted by McCall (2003), it was found that after completion of an alternative education program and the return to a traditional school, students in minority groups were more likely to drop out because of lack of feeling of acceptance.

Teachers

Teachers are a key component when building classroom community in an alternative education setting. Most teachers in alternative education programs hold a general education certificate (Foley & Pang, 2006). Meaning that, they are qualified to teach students without disabilities. It is typical for an alternative school to be “staffed by at least one English teacher, one math teacher, one social studies teacher, and one science teacher” (Duke & Griesdorn, 1999, p. 90). The core content area courses are the main focus in an alternative school very much like in a traditional setting. Although it is not a requirement of the program for students to have a disability, teachers may also have a special education certification (Foley & Pang, 2006). Special educators may be able to aid in the framing of students with behavior issues who make up the majority of the student population.

Alternative education teachers need to be equipped with skills that general educators may not have. In a Virginia study, it was found that in order to have a successful alternative education program teachers must be well versed in community and language (Guerin & Denti, 1999). In order to incorporate community and language into the classroom teachers need to be accepting and promote diversity. They can achieve classroom community by incorporating different cultural celebrations, service learning, and family involvement (Guerin & Denti, 1999). Exposure to and incorporation of a variety of cultures will help students to feel accepted within the classroom community and will help to build self-esteem. McCall (2003) provides similar
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findings stating that “research shows that successful teachers of students at risk have two unique competencies: the ability to connect to kids who fear or dislike teachers and the ability to exact success from students who have experienced failure” (p.117). The two mentioned qualities are exceptionally important in alternative education because of the population of students who are being served (McCall, 2003). All of the students have experienced failure at their home school and, to be successful, need teachers to be understanding and supportive.

Support staff

Educational support staff is critical to the success and building of the school community. In a study conducted by Foley and Pang (2006), it was found that the most common support staff consisted of social workers, counselors, paraprofessionals, school nurses, school psychologists, and vocational educators. Many of the mentioned support staff are in and out of classrooms or setting up times to meet with students one on one. They are important for the academic success of students. Owens and Konkol (2004) found a trend in student surveys about traditional schools. Most students reported that in a traditional high school setting, they had no one that they could go to if they needed help, whether it was social or academic. One student from the study expressed his need for a counselor in stating that “‘If I am acting up, I go to a counselor here [at the alternative school] and they calm me down, talk about it, and I go back to the classroom and I’m all cool’” (Owens & Konkol, p. 175). The use of a counselor in an alternative education setting allows students to get the help they need and to return to class quickly. Spending as much time in class as possible gives students the opportunity to be successful because they are not being removed from their classes for long periods of time.

Parents
Parent involvement in a student’s education, especially at an alternative school, is crucial to their success. Due to the fact that most alternative schools are in a location outside of a student’s home district, frequent communication between parents and staff is necessary (Tobin & Sprague, 2000). If teachers and parents are on the same page it will make the academic success of the student more likely. A study conducted by McCall (2003) supports the necessity of communication between parents and teachers. Parents in the study felt that they had a better relationship with the staff at the alternative education setting as opposed to the staff at their student’s home school, which in turn helped with their student’s academic success (McCall, 2003).

**Need for Small Class Sizes in an Alternative Education Classroom**

**Relationships**

The second theme I found was the need for small class sizes in an alternative education classroom. Small teacher-to-student ratios helped students build better relationships and to receive more individualized instruction, which are two key components of academic success. Relationships between students and teachers were noted in multiple studies as the reason why students did not drop-out. In a study by Owens and Konkol (2004), students felt as though they did not have authentic relationships with their teachers in a traditional setting because there were too many students in each class. Students in this study were broken up into two groups, one of which remained in the alternative program and were successful and the other where students transitioned back to their home school and were not successful. The commonalities between the two groups were that they both desired a positive relationship with their teachers, which was achieved by a smaller class size in the alternative program. Students stated that the reason they were successful in the alternative school was that “Teachers show that they care about you here
and when I see that I’m being cared about and respected, then I will respect you and say that I care about the certain situation’” (Owens & Konkol, 2004, p. 175). This type of student response shows the necessity of teachers caring about their students in building a classroom community. Students recognize whether or not a teacher cares and it is important to them. In a similar study conducted by McCall (2003), students reported that in a traditional setting they “didn’t feel teachers cared if they stayed in school; this also was the highest rated reason for dropping out” (p. 115). Students value teacher’s opinions, so much so that they did not feel that they could be successful in school. Lack of caring from a teacher can cause a lack of caring from a student and overall a diminished classroom community. Students in this study also reported that they were treated poorly by their home school teachers. When the students were asked what could have kept them from dropping out of school they stated, “keep me in the alternative program” (McCall, 2003, p. 116). Students felt that the relationships they had formed in the alternative program were what had helped to make them successful. In a similar study conducted by Lagana-Riordan et al. (2011), students reported feeling disrespected by their teachers in general education. One student stated, “most kids don’t get respect. They treat you like sheep that need to be herded. Everyone has to fit into the box” (p. 109). Students thought that it was unjust for teachers to act disrespectfully towards them because they did not fit their mold. Raywid (1994) reported that the greatest difference between alternative education and general education was student interaction. She also stated that the “staff roles are broadened” (p. 29). Extended roles include aiding with the social growth of students. Teachers in successful alternative schools are not only responsible for instruction, but responsible for the social development of students.

Although relationships between teachers and students are important, equally important are relationships between students. In order to create a classroom community, students need to
feel accepted by their peers. In a study by Owens and Konkol (2004), students reported that they felt included by their peers in the alternative setting. Being included by peers is important for a student’s self esteem and also aids in the development of a classroom community. Similarly, McCall (2003) and Lagana-Riordan et al. (2011) found that students who returned to their home schools after being in an alternative setting did not feel accepted by other students. At their home schools students reported feeling “judged and alienated by student cliques” (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011, p. 109). Lack of acceptance could be because the student never fit in with his/her peers or because of the time spent away in an alternative setting. Raywid (1994) describes alternative schools as “membership institutions,” meaning places students want to be a part of (p. 29). Students are drawn to alternative settings because of the strong sense of community that exists there. A student stated in the same study by Owens and Konkol (2004) that “I know I could do a nice job at my other school, it’s just that I feel comfortable here. I don’t want to leave [here]” (p. 176). Comfort is critical to student’s academic engagement. The lack of comfort in a classroom setting could be the difference between a student graduating and dropping out.

**Individualized instruction**

Tobin and Sprague (2000) argue that “while the debate about the value of smaller classes in general education continues, smaller classes are, no doubt, better for student with emotional, social, or behavior problems” (p. 179). Students who have been placed in an alternative education setting tend to have some of the issues listed above, which is why smaller classes are necessary. McCall (2003), Owens and Konkol (2004), Tobin and Sprague (2000), and Raywid (1994) all reported that students were successful in alternative education settings because of individualized instruction and supportive teachers, made possible by smaller class sizes. McCall
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(2003) went on to report that students who completed the alternative education program and then later dropped out after their return to their home school felt that the most positive aspect of the alternative school was individualized attention. Individualized attention allows students to relate to the content and to feel engaged in the lesson. Tobin and Sprague (2000) similarly found that students were more successful with the low ratio of students to teachers because they had more time to build relationships and to deliver more differentiated instruction.

Supportive Design of an Alternative Education Program

Location and setting

Foley and Pang (2006) and Duke and Griesdorn (1999) both reported that the most successful alternative education programs are located in a location separate from a student’s home district. A separate location can lead to a more individualized community because it is physically separate from the student’s home school. An individualized community may be important for students in an alternative program because they may have already been academically unsuccessful in their home schools due to lack of community. It may be crucial for these students to join a new type of community. Foley and Pang (2006) went on state that the difference in location caused students to have limited access to some resources. These include physical education, libraries, and science labs. Although 80% of the 50 schools that were studied were in separate locations, meaning that they had limited access to the above resources, 58% of administration reported that the location was good or excellent based on the success of students (Foley & Pang, 2006). Although students are in a separate location and may have limited resources, they are still more successful than in their home schools. To build classroom community, Duke and Griesdorn (1999) stated that all alternative schools should have a place where the entire school can gather for meetings or assemblies.
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Instruction and management

The instructional design of alternative schools is differentiated across districts, depending on the population that is being served (Duke & Griesdorn, 1999). A commonality among alternative schools is that the structure of the classroom itself should be stable, but flexible. In a highly structured classroom, Tobin and Sprague (2000) reported that students achieved more academically, were able to be in a least restrictive environment, and to develop management skills. Students in this study felt that they were successful because “expectations, rules, and schedules are clearly defined, specified, explained, and enforced” (Tobin & Sprague, 2000, p. 179). Even though most alternative schools are flexible, it is necessary to maintain some constants. Consistencies give students something to count on and to expect. Owens and Konkol (2004) reported that students in their study who had transitioned back to their home school were unsuccessful because there were no clear rules. Students need to know what to expect so that they can weigh the consequences of their actions when making a decision. Discipline in alternative education should have clear guidelines, but should also be handled with discretion and not with the zero tolerance policy most public schools maintain (Duke & Griesdorn, 1999).

Research by Lagana-Riordan et al. (2011) similarly noted that “Taking student circumstance into account when giving consequences for rule violation can help at-risk students feel supported, even when they have made mistakes” (p. 109). This type of flexibility can help students to learn from their mistakes rather than simply receiving a punishment.

The need for quality instruction comes from the fact that “most students in alternative education will need extra academic support” (Tobin & Sprague, 2000, p. 178). Students in alternative programs have already experienced failure in their home schools and need supportive teachers to help them get out of that hole. High quality academic instruction is differentiated and
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integrates variations of interactive learning such as group work and questioning (Tobin & Sprague). Guerin and Denti (1999) similarly reported that differentiated curriculum is essential in an alternative education setting. Along with differentiated curriculum should come alternative assessments. Successful schools found that portfolios were the most beneficial form of assessment for the population of students. It is also recommended that teachers use short units and sub units to break up their instruction. Courses such as electives and vocational training are also offered to break up core instruction (Guerin & Denti, 1999). The traditional school system has failed for the students in alternative education programs and they need something different. Although the way the content is presented is different, “they are entitled to the same level of rigor and instructional commitment as is evidenced through the regular classrooms in the district” (Anastos, 2003, p.25). Once students have experienced positive support from teachers in alternative education, they need to be pushed to their potential. Teachers should not have low expectations of these students because they were not successful in their home schools. To make sure the curriculum is appropriate, staff in alternative settings should be involved in curriculum development at the home schools (Anastos). Raywid (1994) pointed out that curriculum should be “compelling, challenging, and inviting” (p. 29). Challenging students who have been given up on by other teachers can build respect between the teacher and student. The student will recognize that the teacher believes in them and will strive for success.

Methods

Context

The study took place in an alternative middle and high school in a rural community in upstate New York. This school was chosen because I had access to the participants and teachers who were willing to aid in the process.
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Participants

There were 50 students who participated in the study. The participants of the study were students in grades seven through twelve (refer to Figure 1). The age range was from twelve to twenty years old (refer to Figure 2). The participants have been attending school in an alternative placement between less than a year and up to six years (refer to Figure 3). Most students in the study did not have any specific disabilities. The students in the study that have a disability are categorized as having a learning disability and have either a 504 plan or an IEP. All of the students in the study have a need for more individualized instruction. They are all currently receiving education in an alternative placement.

![Age](image)

Figure 1: Shows the number of participants between the ages of 12-16. The unknown category was for students who did not fill out that portion of the survey.
Figure 2: Shows the number of participants in each grade level in the alternative program. The unknown category was for students who did not fill out that portion of the survey.

Figure 3: Shows the number of full years that the participants have been attending the alternative program instead of their home school. The unknown category was for students who did not fill out that portion of the survey.
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Research stance

In this study my role is an observer. I administered surveys to the students in eighth grade and to one section of ninth and eleventh grade. I am a certified biology teacher in both middle and high school. I am working in an alternative school teaching intermediate, Life, and Earth science. I am working towards earning a Master’s of Science in special education.

Method

The purpose of the study is to compare the academic success of students at their home school and at an alternative school. The goal is to determine if students feel they are more successful in an alternative placement. To accomplish this students answered opinion based questions about characteristics that are unique to alternative schools, such as small class sizes.

I was first an observer in this study when deciding which questions to ask the participants. I then distributed surveys to the teachers that had agreed to administer them to their classes. Surveys were distributed to each class, at each grade level. The teachers were instructed to remind students not to put their name on the survey and to read the directions to the students. I administered the survey to three of the ten classes. The teachers who gave the survey were instructed to return the completed surveys to the envelope provided, seal the envelope, and return them to me directly. The survey consisted of nine opinion-based questions where the participants were required to answer using the Likert scale. Each question had room for comments. See “Appendix A” for the full survey.

Informed consent and protecting the rights of the participants

The participants in the study had an understanding of their rights as they were read to them by the administrator and were printed on the survey. See “Appendix B” for participant rights. The students understood that they were consenting to participate by completing the
survey. All participants were instructed not to include their names on the survey, keeping the results anonymous.

**Data collection**

Data was collected using surveys. Each question on the survey was answered using the Likert scale and participants were given room for comments. The rate of response to the survey was measured using the equation, \( \text{Rate of response} = \frac{\#\text{Responding}}{\#\text{Sampled}} \). The rate of response to this study was one.

**Results**

The results of the study are categorized based on participants answering the same question about their home school and their alternative school. There are a few things to note when looking at the data. One participant answered strongly disagree for every question and did not leave any comments. Another participant did not answer question eight. Lastly, a student answered strongly disagree for question four; however, the comment that they left contradicts that answer. All of the data collected from the survey can be seen in Table 1.

**Academic success**

Students were asked two questions about where they felt academically successful. Of the 50 students who were surveyed, 40% strongly disagreed and 32% disagreed when asked if they felt academically successful in their home schools. When the same question was asked about their alternative school, 40% students strongly agreed and 48% agreed that they felt academically successful. There were eleven students that did not answer with majority for each question and nine that remained neutral.

**Positive relationships with staff**
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The participants were asked two questions about positive relationships with staff at both their home school and their alternative placement. Thirty two percent of participants strongly disagreed that they had positive relationships with staff at their home schools and 30% of participants disagreed. There were a large number of participants that felt neutral about their relationships with the staff. When asked about positive relationships with staff in their alternative placement, an overwhelming 86% of participants strongly agreed or agreed.

One-on-one instruction and small class sizes

Participants were asked where they received the most one-on-one instruction and whether or not they felt that they academically benefited from small class sizes. When asked about their home school, 86% of students felt that they did not get one-on-one instruction. The survey results showed that 76% of students felt as though they receive one-on-one instruction at the alternative school. The majority of students also strongly agreed or agreed that small class sizes were necessary for their academic success.

Discipline and rules

The final question that students were asked was whether or not they had a clear understanding of the discipline and rules at the schools they have attended. The majority of students either agreed or responded neutral that they grasped the rules at their home school. The majority of students answered that they comprehend the rules that their alternative school has.
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Discussion and Findings

It is important that students are academically successful, whether they are in their home school or an alternative placement. The findings of this study show that students feel as though they are more academically successful in an alternative placement than at their home school and it is important to understand why. Participant 31 commented that “home school doesn’t fit a kind of kid like me,” meaning that the student could not fit the mold of a traditional school setting. Student 42 stated “I couldn’t keep up with the class,” at their home school. The students who reported being successful in alternative education were in agreement that their success was due to more individualized instruction. Student 28 commented “I understand lessons here better and I get help when I need it.” Students 20 and 30 who participated in the survey felt that they were academically successful in their home schools as well as in alternative education. Students 17 and 39 pointed out that their poor attendance was the cause of their academic difficulty.

Small class size
One theme that carried throughout the results of the survey was the necessity for small class sizes in order to achieve academic success. Two elements that come out of having small class sizes include better relationships with teachers and staff as well as more individualized instruction. Students need to feel as though they are cared about by their teachers, which will allow students to feel comfortable in the classroom. In addition to comfort, not all students learn the same way. Instruction must be differentiated for students so that they have the greatest opportunity to learn. Both of these components are more easily achieved in a class with a smaller number of students.

Students reported having positive relationships with staff at both their home and alternative schools. The majority of the students felt that their home schools were lacking positive relationships with staff. Student 42 reported “none of the home school teachers liked me because of my attitude.” Owens and Konkol (2004) reported similar findings of students not having positive relationships with staff in a traditional setting because the class sizes were too big. McCall (2003) also stated that students felt that teachers at their home school did not care about them. Other students contradicted this statement saying that they had good relationships with some, if not all of their teachers. The bulk of students felt that they had positive relationships with teachers in alternative education. They feel that teachers are easy to talk to, have patience, and understand the students. Student 17 commented, “they don’t push you to snap.” Student 28 said, “I am able to talk to them about everything.” Students felt as though they were being judged more at their home schools. Tobin and Sprague (2000) agree that smaller class sizes are better for behavior. It is necessary for all teachers to take the time to get to know their students and it is easier to achieve, on a more personal level, when class sizes are smaller.
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Individualized instruction is much easier to implement when classes are smaller in size, and instruction that is student specific makes academic success for that student more achievable. Students reported that their traditional classes at their home schools were too big for one-on-one instruction. Most students stated that they had little if any individualized instruction at their home schools. When asked about alternative education, the majority of students reported that the smaller classes allow for more differentiated instruction. Student 12 commented, “Here, at Alt Ed, There are five students in my class at most, I get more one on one attention.” Student 17 said, “if I ask for help I get it.” Student 2 pointed out that if you attend school in your home district, students are able to get help after school if needed, which is not an option in alternative education due to transportation restraints. Similarly to the results of this study, McCall (2003), Owens and Konkol (2004), Raywid (1994), and Tobin and Sprague (2000) all acknowledge that individualized instruction is necessary for academic success.

More personalized relationships and individualized instruction are two positive outcomes of smaller class sizes, but are smaller classes necessary for academic success? Thirty-four students in this study believe that they are necessary. The most common theme was distraction. Students stated that they get distracted more easily by large classes, which make it harder to focus on their academics. Student 28 commented, “bigger classes were to distracting and I barly understood what I needed to do.” Another theme was that large classes can cause students to act inappropriately and either get kicked out or cause a distraction to others. Student 31 said “can’t do large classes makes me feel the need to show off.” Some students remained neutral, meaning that the size of the class does not matter to them and that they would do the same academically in either.

Management
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An important factor for being academically successful is being in class. The majority of students have been put in an alternative placement because of behavior issues at their home school. Student 30 stated that I had “no problems whatsoever with academics, just behavioral issues.” Student 40 responded similarly by saying “I got into too much trouble there [home school] and it effected my school work.”

In this study students were asked whether or not they understood the discipline and rules of their home and alternative schools. The majority of students reported that they understood the rules at their home school, but had a hard time following them. This means that the rules were not explicitly explained to the students or that they were not being enforced consistently. Student 17 commented, “It seemed like every day there was a new rule.” Adolescents require structure and clarity when it comes to what is expected of them. Tobin and Sprague (2000) agreed in their article stating that students in alternative education were successful because the rules were clearly defined. Students from this study agreed that they had an understanding of the rules in alternative education, but also that they were more lenient. This follows the comments made by Duke and Griesdorn (1999) that the zero tolerance policy followed by most traditional schools, may lead to academic failure. Students in this study felt that they were able to be more academically successful in the alternative environment because they were not so worried about the rules. Student 30 commented that it is “easier to follow the rules here when staff is more understanding of my feelings.” Student 43 stated that alternative education is “a lot more lenient makes for a less stressful work environment.”

Implications and Conclusion

Given what the research states about the importance of classroom community in the success of students’ alternative education, there are some evident implications. The first is that
students recognize the need for genuine relationships with their teachers. In order to build authentic relationships, teachers need to have respect for their students’ diverse cultures. Teachers need to be promoters of cultural diversity in the classroom. They can promote diversity by celebrating various holidays, inviting guest speakers, having students give presentations, or having a diversity fair. Teachers can also achieve a sense of diversity acceptance daily by making sure that all voices are heard in the class and that opinions are respected. Students need to know that what they say is important and that their participation in class is critical for their own learning and the learning of others. The task of building relationships with students and amongst students can be more easily accomplished in the small student-to-teacher ratio that alternative education models. More opportunities for one on one instruction as well as more intimate group discussions allow for the formation of authentic relationships.

A second implication is that students in an alternative education program are less likely to drop-out than in a traditional setting. Dropping out is less likely because of the small class sizes that are required by the model. Teachers are able to provide more individualized instruction for each student which makes learning a more meaningful experience. Lessons can be more easily related to a student’s culture or interests, which can make instruction more engaging. Having experience in special education may help with differentiating lessons to meet students’ needs and the overall building of classroom community. Special educators have training in building goals and individualized plans for students and may be able to provide general education teachers with insight.

Another implication is that staff in alternative education programs must work collaboratively if the program is going to be successful. Most programs have a teacher from each content area, administration, and support staff. All of these individuals are directly or
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indirectly involved in a student’s education. Everyone involved should be an advocate for students and should be involved in decision-making. Counselors play a critical role in some students’ education in alternative education and it is crucial that they are in constant contact with that student’s teachers. This way, if a student acts out in class or is refusing to do an assignment, teachers will be in the correct frame when determining what to do in the situation. Staff also needs to be more lenient in regards to rules and discipline. Students need to have a clear understanding of the appropriate behavior to follow in school, but the zero tolerance policy should not be used. Each situation a student is in is different and each repercussion should be handled on an individualized basis.

A final implication is that alternative education should not be an unpleasant experience for students. Most students are referred to the program because they have emotional or behavior issues, or because they have failing grades. Students referred to the program will have already experienced punitive measures from their home school and do not need further repercussions once they enter the program. Lack of a positive environment could lead students to regress or to not make any progress behaviorally or academically. Teachers, administration, and support staff should take every measure to make sure that each student feels welcome and that they are respected in the alternative placement.

One area of alternative education that could be further researched is the social aspect. Students who are in alternative programs often miss out on school assemblies, pep rallies, sports, and extracurricular actives which leaves them disconnected from their peers in their communities. Based on the findings of this study and current research, it is unclear whether the lack of socialization with the peers in their community has an effect on a student’s academic success.
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Another area that could be researched further is if placing students with behavior issues together, in a school, secluded from students without behavior issues has any effect on student behavior. Students with minimal behavior issues or students with solely academic issues could develop more severe behavioral difficulties from being with students who already express these problems. This could lead to a decline in the student’s academic achievement. In that instance, it might be beneficial for the alternative program to remain in a classroom in the student’s home school, so that they have exposure to students without behavior issues.

To ensure success in an alternative education program, everyone involved needs to work towards achieving a positive classroom community. Students in the program may already feel as though they do not belong because they have been displaced from their home schools. It is for that reason that it is crucial that students feel respected in an alternative placement. Feelings of acceptance and positive support will give the students motivation to be successful academically. Classroom community is a concept that all schools should embrace, but it is especially important in alternative education. In an article written by Raywid (1994) she states “despite the lack of ‘institutional legitimacy,’ alternative schools can serve as models for any school that seeks innovative change” (p. 26).
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References


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Appendix

Appendix A

As a research participant you have the following rights:
1. Withdraw from participation at any time without penalty.
2. Refuse to answer a particular question without penalty.
3. Be informed of the results of the study.

All results of this research will remain confidential and all participants will remain anonymous.

Directions: Please answer the following questions regarding academic success. For the purpose of this survey academic success is defined as the achievement of your own academic goals.

Age _______________ Grade _______________

Number of years in alternative education _______________

1. Do you feel as though you were academically successful in your home school?
   Strongly agree O Agree O Neutral O Disagree O Strongly disagree O
   Comments: __________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________

2. Do you feel as though you are academically successful in alternative education?
   Strongly agree O Agree O Neutral O Disagree O Strongly disagree O
   Comments: __________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________

3. Do you feel that you had positive relationships with the staff at your home school?
   Strongly agree O Agree O Neutral O Disagree O Strongly disagree O
   Comments: __________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________

4. Do you feel that you have positive relationships with the staff in alternative education?
   Strongly agree O Agree O Neutral O Disagree O Strongly disagree O
   Comments: __________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________
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5. Do you feel like you got more one-on-one instruction at your home school?
   Strongly agree  Agree  Neutral  Disagree  Strongly disagree
   Comments:________________________________________________________
   _________________________________________________________________

6. Do you feel like you get more one-on-one instruction in alternative education?
   Strongly agree  Agree  Neutral  Disagree  Strongly disagree
   Comments:________________________________________________________
   _________________________________________________________________

7. Do you feel that small class sizes are necessary for your academic success?
   Strongly agree  Agree  Neutral  Disagree  Strongly disagree
   Comments:________________________________________________________
   _________________________________________________________________

8. Did you have a clear understanding of the rules and discipline at your home school?
   Strongly agree  Agree  Neutral  Disagree  Strongly disagree
   Comments:________________________________________________________
   _________________________________________________________________

9. Do you have a clear understanding of the rules and discipline in alternative education?
   Strongly agree  Agree  Neutral  Disagree  Strongly disagree
   Comments:________________________________________________________
   _________________________________________________________________
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Appendix B

The following was read to the participants by the survey administrator before the survey was distributed.

Before handing out the survey, please remind students not to put their name on them as they should be anonymous.

After the survey has been handed out, please read the information at the top of the page to the students regarding their rights in the research process. Please read the directions out loud as well.

After the survey is complete, please collect and place them and any extra copies in the envelope provided. Please seal the envelope and place it in my mail box or hand it to me directly.

Thank you again for taking the time to allow your students to participate.

Courtney Gates

The following was read to the participants by the survey administrator once each person had a survey. This information was located at the top of each survey.

As a research participant you have the following rights:

1. Withdraw from participation at any time without penalty.
2. Refuse to answer a particular question without penalty.
3. Be informed of the results of the study.

All results of this research will remain confidential and all participants will remain anonymous.