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Strengthening Student Engagement in Alternative Schools through Research

Alisha Robinson, Dr. Erin Brown, Dr. Jamie Cage

Abstract

In the United States public school system students who attend alternative high schools (AHS) are identified as the most socially and academically marginalized group of individuals. AHS last chance and remedial programs are used as a behavioral remediation intervention to serve students who have been expelled or suspended from their traditional school. Reasons that contribute to students attending AHS include poor grades, negative behavior, truancy, and involvement with the juvenile justice system. As AHS are intended to promote a positive learning environment with beneficial resources, the outcomes of past enrolled students are alarming. Dropout rates have continually risen within the AHS student population. As well, students are being sent to juvenile detention centers at an increased rate. Students' experiences in the alternative learning environment affect their perception of school, how they engage within the environment, and their overall educational outcome. Therefore, this project sought to find effective interventions that would promote behavior, academics and attendance for students in alternative school settings.

Introduction

The community engagement research fellowship provided me an opportunity to work alongside ASPIRE Faculty Fellows on their community engagement service project involving Mid Atlantic Alternative School. Mid Atlantic Alternative school is an alternative school for students who have been expelled or suspended long-term from their home school due to academic and/or behavioral concerns. The overarching goal of this research was to identify ways in which alternative school settings can provide effective intervention mechanisms promoting positive outcomes for youth by improving school engagement and school experiences. The information collected would then be utilized to create a manualized intervention program that would enhance student engagement and reduce the rates of drop out.

Methodology

The research methodology for this project consisted of several sight observations where I could learn about the formality of the school, the student population, and their everyday experiences. Sight observations were conducted during full school days in each of the high school classrooms. In addition, several meetings were held with key stakeholders of the school including the principal and administration. Informal focus groups were facilitated with students to build rapport and to acquire knowledge about how student engagement or the lack thereof affects their overall school experience.

Results/ Discussion

Despite the initial research being halted, ample time was still spent in the school environment to build rapport with students and staff. Throughout the fellowship, research shifted to lessons learned about conducting community-engaged research. I found that conducting research with vulnerable populations requires an established rapport that may not be fully made throughout the timeframe of the research project. In addition, community engagement research cannot be conducted without the input of the community. There must be a sense of humility from researchers as community research is conducted. The mindset must be to understand the community rather than to fix. Lastly, I found that one must be flexible in conducting research within systematic institutions as interactions within the school were based on their availability and timeframe.

Conclusion

Alternative schools have constructed both positive and negative outcomes for youth throughout their school years and beyond. As alternative schools continue to be used as an intervention to enhance behavior and academic attainment, one must continue to focus on increasing student engagement and creating a positive learning environment. Although this initial research sought to address the issue of student engagement, due to the needs of the school the research was shifted. However, these key findings of lessons learned from community engagement research serve as a foundation for any research involving vulnerable populations and communities

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Acknowledgements

Thank you to Dr. Erin Brown and Dr. Jamie Cage for their assistance on the creation of this project.