An Analysis of Alternative Education Programs Designed to Engage the Anti-School Subculture

by Kristine Dubois-Vandale

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The purpose of this research project is to examine the relational aspects of alternative education programs which serve students of the anti-school subculture, which is an identifiable group of marginalized youth and who have not been successful in regular high schools. This study will focus on members of this anti-school subculture termed the Anti-School Kids by the researcher.

One of the core questions of this study is: How can learning be a focus at school when survival is such an integral part of a marginalized student's life? How can educators help an Anti-School Kid graduate when that student is doing everything s/he can to prevent that from occurring?

The research instruments are designed to help identify what works in school division affiliated alternative and non-school division affiliated alternative programs which would help marginalized youth learn, some of which may be transferable to mainstream institutions. The resulting data may reveal practical applications from those alternative programs that can be used in the traditional high school classrooms to increase these students’ chance of graduation.

This study is particularly concerned with how teachers can help students to cope with the daily challenges that come with being a marginalized youth, through alternative programming or an alternative approach within a mainstream institution.

What is marginalization of youth? "The systematic marginalization of young people is marked by the disintegration of connections with mainstream social institutions such as school and work, and a tenuous search for meaning in an uncaring and unforgiving world” (Barakett & Cleghorn, 2000, p. 21)

Who are the marginalized youth in our schools today? They can be members of any of these current groups identified by the researcher: foster kids; anti-school kids; fighters; emos; welfare kids; gutterpunks; cutters; gamblers; gays; skaters; freaks or scene. Again, this study focuses on the Anti-School Kids, providing details of their characteristics and behaviours as they relate to school success and failure.

Economically & Socially Marginalized Youth

By exposing the personal challenges faced by marginalized youth and the anti-school subcultures to which they belong, the researcher hopes to promote better understanding of their needs as learners and to show that they deserve an education despite their different and difficult behaviours, values, norms, beliefs and rituals. The behaviours identified interfere with the mechanics of the classroom — the flow of communication between one adult and several youth and therefore impede the learning process.
A student termed economically marginalized may have some of the following family circumstances:
- Her parents or caregivers do not own a home, but instead rents or lives in government-subsidized housing;
- Her family's main source of income is social assistance;
- Her parents' education attainment levels are below high school; and
- Her family lives under the poverty line, or more accurately, the LICO (low income cut off).

The second set of characteristics or circumstances are termed social marginalization, meaning this student is not a member of the dominant culture group in her high school. She does not share their "ways of perceiving, thinking, believing and behaving" (Barakett and Cleghorn, 2000, p. 4). She does not share their ethnic background, social mores, language and dress. Along with other identity markers, these combine to label her as socially marginalized.

"To marginalize is to place someone or something on the fringes, on the margins of power. To be marginalized is to be made to feel less. Sometimes teachers marginalize specific groups of students" (Wink, 2000, p. 62).

Marginalized youth can be identified by using the following definition of marginalization, summarized by the researcher: When a member of a specific and identifiable group of people demonstrate in an observable way that they have less access or are denied access to ____________, then they are termed marginalized. This blank could be money, knowledge, power, status — any number of commodities of value available in our society.

Barakett and Cleghorn (2000) remind us that one of the overt functions of school is to “transmit the society’s existing culture, which is defined as the ways of perceiving, thinking, believing, and behaving that characterize the members of a particular social group.” Students who do not exhibit these ways are marginalized, or live outside of the main social groups within their school. Of course, “the culture that is being transmitted in school reflects the values and attitudes of the so-called dominant group” ( p. 4). The unintended function of school, therefore, is to separate students into groups, marginalizing some and mainstreaming others. The researcher believes this is a critical observation derived from the Literature Review.

In the article Redefining Creativity for At-Risk Children and Youth, Lamoureux (2006) points out that the benefit of labeling a student at-risk comes only if the “at-risk terminology is a call to action; an indicator that someone needs help.” This definition frames this study, in that it urges educators to action in the face of frustrating anti-school behaviours that require patient, creative problem solving. This means that you need to do something differently than what you are doing right now as an educator, to help at-risk (marginalized) youth learn.

I am also at a place in my research where I have found the most heartbreaking damage done to marginalized youth/Anti-School Kids is being denied access to developing their full potential. I have also seen evidence both through this research and in my own teaching career that shows learning is an intricate juncture. There are many
roads that lead to the place where the student is able to be engaged or teachable (whether she chooses to or not) that are both out of her control and out of the educators’ control. But what we can do is choose how to treat her at that junction — foremost as a human being — and this may determine where her road leads next.

**Sociological Framework**

The sociological concept of grouping plays a critical role in both the problem and the proposed solutions, to be reported in Chapter 4 & 5. This is also tied to the theory of the social bond (to school); the formation of youth’s social identity, formed through their associations. The researcher also relies on the theory of social capital to help explain the distribution of power within the high school groups. Also, I am attempting to map out a representative sample of the social landscape of a mainstream high school.

What has come through loud and clear is the role that a youth’s identity has in also forming behaviours that facilitate school success and failure.

Of course, this brings one of the big questions of the thesis forward — how can educators work with the identity of Anti-School Kids to still see them graduate high school, as we see happening in alternative programing? Varied points of view were explored in the Literature Review as to what works for students who demonstrate anti-school behaviour; the methodology which appears to be successful at reaching them is making connections — the learning is occurring because of interpersonal relationships rather than content. Also, how both students and teachers operate on a daily basis is definitely affected by institutional factors such as the structure.

**Tough Questions**

What exactly is the problem with anti-school behaviour? Is it the behaviour which prevents the Anti-School Kids from graduating? How else does it harm them or others? This study will look at the extent of the damage such behaviours cause. Also at the peer relationships and associations which interfere with the learning process.

It may be that educators have to dig further, past the behaviours and deal with the source. Or maybe teachers have to accept these behaviours as part of these students’ identities — can they deal with that?

Davis and Guppy (2006) have clearly identified behaviours demonstrated by Anti-School Kids trying to establish their identity. “Among males, this rebellion was epitomized by: fighting, confrontations with authority figures (teachers), smoking and drinking, sexual bravado, street drugs. …Among females, rebellion was marked by a flaunting of their physical maturity and emerging sexuality and by a disengagement from academic matters in favour of a preoccupation with romance” (p. 208).

This brings up a deeper question about this behaviour: what comes first, the behaviours or the reactions? Do members of this anti-school subculture come into the school already practicing anti-school behaviours which place them in conflict with school expectations? Or are they victims of some form of discrimination due to their marginalized status and institutional structures, which they then rebel against by demonstrating anti-school behaviour?

One of the main questions that has come through the Literature Review and discussions with those trying to engage the anti-school subculture, is the very question
of choice. When I began this project, one aspect of the research concerned looking at the choices marginalized youth make to engage in delinquent anti-school behaviour, which in turn prevents their successful graduation.

The researcher takes the position that due to institutional factors, family situation, socioeconomic status and other environmental factors, the youth is not freely nor consciously choosing this negative path. Though adults, particularly those who work in schools, seem to want to blame the youth, this is not helping to resolve the situation. Their behaviours are inextricably rooted in their social identity, rendering them incapable of demonstrating pro-school behaviours. This position has only been strengthened with the data results.

The researcher also used the research instruments and the Literature Review to look at what role schools play in creating groups in the margins and maintaining them. Once the reader reviews the results, s/he may agree that indeed schools create groups, hence creating insiders and outsiders.

**Research Instruments**

The research instruments are designed to help identify what works in these particular environments to help youth learn, some of which may be transferable to help marginalized youth within mainstream institutions. The resulting data may reveal practical applications from those alternative programs that can be used in the traditional high school classrooms to increase these students’ chance of graduation.

The interview questions are framed around the following:

A. Contextual Dimension: personal and then program-specific

B. Structural Dimension: organizational/institutional factors

C. Professional Dimension: in terms of roles and societal expectations

D. Interpersonal Dimension: individual factors, as in our human capacity

A. Contextual: personal and then program-specific

1. What is your story? How did you end up here, in this role, doing what you do? Can you provide me with some of your personal and professional background?

2. Can you introduce me to the types of youth you serve here, without being too specific or naming names — in terms of the circumstances that brought them to your program? How did being part of the program change their behaviour or circumstances?

3. What are some specific life skills that youth learn here? How have marginalized youth responded to what your organization has had to offer them? What do you do with that feedback?

4. What do you as a teacher/mentor/guardian have to bargain with in your program, or do you need to bargain at all with your kids? Are there situations where you have to force compliance? What are some of the forms that their defiance takes? Are there situations where someone is asked to leave the program/premises? Under what conditions can s/he return?

5. How important is being on time here? Or, how important is the amount of time spent here, learning? How do you handle the mechanics of attendance in your program?
6. If someone you are trying to help through your program won’t or can’t stay, what happens to him/her? Where would someone go from here? What would happen to them?

B. Structural: organizational/institutional factors
7. In your own words, what is the mission or *raison d'être* of your organization? What do you think is the most important thing you do here?
8. Can you name some specific structural differences between your organization and a regular high school that might make it easier for marginalized students to be here?
9. In your opinion, what experiences did your kids have in mainstream school that contributed to their inability to continue and possibly find success there? On the other hand, are there specific experiences you know of that helped them find their way to an alternative program such as yours? If you could change one thing about the way schools operate, what would it be?

C. Professional: in terms of roles and societal expectations
10. Can you explain how you see your role and its effect on programming? What are some markers of progress with your students?
11. What is your opinion of some of the school-based alternative programs that are designed to help marginalized youth? Can you identify some strengths? Challenges?
12. Can you describe how you react to youth who demonstrate anti-social behaviour, language, lifestyle choices, dress and hygiene, those sorts of markers of marginalization that may require “fixing” or changing? Do you make any demands on your kids in terms of their outward identity; do they have to change who they are to succeed here?

D. Interpersonal: individual factors, as in our human capacity
13. Can you describe your relationship to these students in terms of being a teacher, a mentor, a guardian? What is the difference between you and the students’ parents?
14. Which personal experiences or which parts of your past and present personal life do you draw from to develop your interpersonal relationships with your students?
15. How do non-teachers like yourself interact differently with students than teachers? Are there some aspects to your relationship that you could pinpoint as being “touchstones” of success with marginalized youth?

**What's the Difference Between Mainstream & Alternative?**

**Mainstream High School - School Division Affiliated**
- 9 - 3:30, 5 regular periods, lunch 12:15 -1:15
- No repeater courses
- Attendance policy
- Curriculum-based, credit-driven
- Teacher to Student, up to 1-40

**School Division Affiliated Alternative Programs**
- On- and off-campus (downtown and neighbourhood based)
• Curriculum-based, credit-driven
• Hours 9 a.m. - 9 p.m.
• Flexible attendance policy and procedures
• Can be 1-1 student/teacher ratio

Non-School Division Affiliated Alternative Programs
• Off-Campus, neighbourhood-based
• Lifeskills-driven (not for formal credit)
• Hours can be 24/7/365
• Flexible attendance policy and procedures
• Can be 1-1 student/teacher ratio
• Progress is marked by living better (harm reduction), starting down a more positive path, toward additional education and employability.

Structure is one thing, but what is it that these programs do that sets them apart from mainstream high school? The only way to find out was to ask the people who run the programs; actually, the people are the program. The researcher will lay out the guts of the programs, those kernels of truth about what it is that attracts the Anti-School Subculture and what it is that holds them there while they learn. What gets them to a point where they are ready to move forward on their life path with positivity and hope. The guts of the programs are just this: the guts of the people who run them and those who participate — the inner fortitude, the strength, the courage, perseverance, love and intelligence of the people who make things happen in these programs are what make them work. And if the work is the guts, then the relationships that these people form with the Anti-School Kids is the heart that equates to success for both the youth it serves and the program itself. It then develops a reputation in institutional circles as well as carrying ‘street cred’ — the Anti-School Subculture trusts the people in the program and they spread the word.

**What Does the Data Say?**
The core question put to the study participants was basically, “What do you do to make it work?” The researcher derives this from the data: It is a mix of the personal characteristics (Interpersonal Dimension) of the people, both the adults and the youth, which results in the “inter-action”, which the researcher identifies as “The Guts of the Program” (Contextual Dimension). Then the researcher can apply the label of “the heart” being the connections between the cast of people (Professional Dimension) and those details provide the data on strategies for helping Anti-School Kids succeed. Lastly, the data provides the completion of the answers to the question of what makes it work by providing the mechanics such as the program content, goals and objectives, collected as the Structural Dimension with some overlap into the Professional Dimension. The crux of this entire thesis — according to the data — is the people, described through the details of characteristics of the Anti-School Kids today and the adults who teach them (the Interpersonal Dimension).
Implications of Study

This study may have implications for the way teachers and administrators plan and implement alternative programming in high schools. By revealing how non-school division alternative programs function in order to successfully move these young people along their life path, the researcher hopes such strategies can be applied by mainstream high school programs. Even if one teacher finds one effective strategy or fresh approach within these pages to help one lost youth find her way, this would be a valuable endeavour.

Also, this study has made clear that our job as teachers, as educators or directors of programming, is not to be the mentor, nor to necessarily be the one who provides the connection but to be the one who connects that youth up with the right mentor, the right teacher, the right program. You may not be what that Anti-School Kid needs but you should know someone who will be able to do the job. Once you have finished reading this thesis, it should become clear that marginalized youth need advocates, of which you may be one.

References


