Defining Alternative as More Than At-Risk: Youth Defined Outcomes and Emerging Identities in Alternative Schools

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Abstract: In tackling the challenge of re-engaging youth in school, youth are often ascribed deficit labels, such as "at-risk". This poster explores ways to redefine youth on the margins of education by looking at why youth enrolled in the alternative high schools and definitions of success in those schools. Findings include that youth sought and found opportunities to explore their identities and have an authentic impact on others.

Major issues addressed

In tackling major challenges, such as dropout rates or student disengagement and disaffiliation in school (Rumberger, 2011), students are often ascribed deficit narratives, labeling them as "at-risk", "unmotivated", or "lacking skills" (Lee, 2009; te Riele, 2007). Doing so positions youth in relation to conventional schooling and definitions of success in those institutions (Eckert, 1989). Historically, alternative schools have been developed as an intervention or option for youth who are designated "at-risk" of dropping out (Tierney, in press). While many alternative schools cater to youth designated "at-risk", this is not always the case and never a simple story. Because of the complicated history many youths have with schooling and the labels that have been assigned to them, the work of alternative schools is equal parts academics and identity development (Tierney, in press). As such, it is important to understand a) the reasons that youth are leaving conventional schools and enrolling in alternative schools and b) how success is defined and supported in alternative schools.

Potential significance

In thinking about the ways that public scholarship can help educate diverse democracies, it is important to a) learn from the stories of those on the margins of education, both the youth and the schools, b) to critique the, often unintended, negative labels and narratives that are given to youth who do not fit into the normative definitions of success, and c) to create new narratives of success within public education. While this submission does not focus on technology or the digital age, it looks specifically at how the learning sciences can continue to rethink learning and definitions of education. This paper focused squarely on expanding definitions of learning and education to include youth and contexts on the margins of public education.

Theoretical and methodological approaches

In this study, identity development is viewed as a dynamic process that is social in nature, developing in and across contexts and communities (Dreier, 2009; Nasir, 2012; Wenger, 1998). Additionally, I consider how educational structures help produce youth identities, defining and framing success and failure for students, and promoting certain practices and identities and marginalizing others (McDermott, Goldman, and Varenne, 2006). These studies show how the definitions of success and identity development are embedded in the contexts, structures, and communities of the schools in which they exist.

Data for this analysis was taken from a larger ethnographic longitudinal study of youth attending two alternative high schools over the course of one academic year. All incoming transfer (10^{th}-12^{th} grade) students were invited to participate in the study. All consented youth participated in surveys and initial interviews (N=31). Case study youth were selected by observing their participation during orientation, their responses on a survey, and their initial interview. Cases were chosen because they were representative of the youth in the study in terms of survey responses and class participation. Case study youth were observed and interviewed in multiple classes, school activities, and out-of-school contexts. Additional relevant participants (e.g., teachers, mentors, other students) were also interviewed in each context. To explore youth processes of identity development and resources for identity development in the alternative schools, analysis consisted of qualitative coding of 50 hours of interviews and 70 hours of observational notes.

Major findings

Results from this study indicate that students choose to attend alternative schools for multiple, complex, and interwoven and often included aspects unseen by adults in their former schools. One youth, DJ (all names are pseudonyms), discussed that, while he was a good student in school, after school hours he was getting in trouble, drinking, and smoking marijuana on a daily basis. He chose to enroll in the alternative school to

distance himself from his friends at his former school. Another youth, Penelope, described how she felt both invisible and anxious at her former school – that the anxiety and social pressures of the school made her physically sick. However, she still earned high grades and did not arouse the concerns of adults at the school. In addition, contrary to narratives of at-risk youth, most of the youth in the study connected to one or more teachers in their former school. Further, a number of the youth had adult mentors outside of school. However, despite these adult connections, youth in the study felt constrained and unsuccessful in the structure of their former schools. For example, Penelope discussed her former school, saying: "It was very hard to feel individual when you're just mushed into this area with thousands of other students" (Penelope Interview, 10/8/14). In her interviews, Penelope made a connection between the lack of choices and her perceived lack of individuality. In this way, the school confined the space in which Penelope could explore her identity. These narratives seem to indicate that re-engagement in school may require more than adults who care, but that youth also need opportunities for agency, individuality, and to explore their identities.

In contrast to their former schools, where nearly every youth in the study defined by high grades, success within the alternative school included academic achievement, but focused primarily on personal development, personal expression, and community membership and participation. These definitions of success were framed by the teachers at the school and reified by students. At one of the alternative programs, youth reflected on their leadership style and identity as a leader as they mentored sixth graders. At the other school, most school projects were creative acts, where older students modeled that practice and possibilities for newer students. These definitions of success were bi-directional – not just given to student, such as earning grades – in the alternative schools, youth success impacted the youth, but also impacted the schools. DJ described his goals a leader, "What I really want from my kids is I want to inspire them so that they become leaders of themselves and their schools or whatever they want to do… I'm not here for myself." (DJ Interview, 2/2/15). Interwoven with the definitions of success, both alternative schools provided youth agency in the valued practices of the school. This extends the concept of putting oneself into practice (Nasir, 2012), since youth not only had the agency for self-expression, but they felt their personalized actions had actual impact and significance.

At both school sites, youth left their former schools to have new and greater opportunities to explore and redefine their identities. Connected with these motivations were desires to attend a school where their individual presence mattered. By broadening definitions of success and providing youth with agency of choice and impact, the alternative schools support youth to positively develop their academic identities. This work contributes to literature on dropout prevention (Rumberger, 2011), by examining the ways in which normative definitions of success may constrain opportunities for identity development, contributing to disengagement in school. In addition, this study adds to literature on identity development, by examining the interplay of school communities (Wenger, 1998), definitions of success (McDermott et al., 2006), and authentic youth roles (Nasir, 2012) linked to those definitions of success. Finally, this work contributes to the design of alternative school learning environments by a) identifying practices that support youth re-engagement, identity development, and academic success and b) disrupting the stereotypical narratives of youth in alternative schools (te Riele, 2007).

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