

# Alternative Education and Individual Psychology

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Alternative education programs for teenagers are becoming increasingly popular throughout the county. These programs are for the most part providing a service to two populations of teenagers: 1) those teenagers who have highly achieved in school and are now granted the option of participating in an alternative program, and 2) those teenagers who have dropped out of school and are unable to benefit in a formal school setting due to behavioral difficulties. This program described deals with the latter population and may offer a model for those involved in alternative education.

## **Philosophy**

The program's staff was trained to deal with students in line with the belief that individuals operate according to private beliefs and views, therefore differing in their methods of handling educational and social tasks. Although individuals are unique in this sense, all individuals are similar in that people strive to gain a sense of belonging, to find one's place. Each student is then, in his or her particular approach to life attempting to find their place. If a student exhibits misbehavior or is unproductive, this individual has simply developed mistaken ideas and methods regarding how one is to gain a sense of belonging. Therefore, purposiveness of behavior is of paramount importance and is taken into consideration regarding a student's educational and social functioning.

The program also places a high priority upon encouragement, for students who exhibit consistent misbehavior have been discouraged in their

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attempts of finding their place through productive means. The student's inappropriate behavior has served to fulfill the student's purpose of finding one's place in a mistaken manner. Building upon a student's positive characteristics is emphasized as a major factor in promoting appropriate behaviors.

The fact that individuals strive towards a common goal in a manner that is unique to each individual, and that positive movement needs to be encouraged rather than criticising the negative, is the fundamental philosophy of this program.

## **Description and Purpose**

The Alternative Learning Center was established to meet the educational and social needs of teenagers who were unable to benefit from participation in a formal school setting. The teenagers range in age from 14 to 17 years of age, and primarily had a truancy and/or behavioral difficulty in school. The Center's long range goal is that of aiding these teenagers in becoming responsible and contributing community members. Three program components; basic education, career education, and counseling were developed to meet the individual needs of the teenagers, the program's goal, and to reflect the basic premises of Individual Psychology.

Teenagers participating at the Center may have been referred by school principals, a community agency, the probation department, or self referral. All teenagers volunteered to attend the Center and were not mandated to participate in the program.

The Alternative Learning Center is comprised of six staff members and approximately thirty-five students, allowing for a 6/1 ratio. The staff members are: a program coordinator, counselor, two street counselors, a basic education teacher, and a career education teacher. The program coordinator and counselor have received training in Individual Psychology and conducted training sessions for the other staff members in the theory and application of Individual Psychology.

## **Program Components**

While each student is asked to participate in all program components, participation is not rigidly structured but is formed to meet individuals' needs and interests.

*Basic Education.* Specific course work for each student is developed in the academic areas of mathematics, English, science, and social studies. The course work for each student is mutually developed between the student and teacher. Therefore, no two students have the same course work. The

established course work for each student coincides with the student's needs, interests, and ability levels.

All academic work by students is conducted by programmed texts, allowing students to work at their own pace with the provision for immediate feedback. The lack of classroom lectures eliminates the possibility of grouping students incorrectly. Students progress through the programmed texts by the attainment of 75% accuracy on the unit tests and final examinations built into the educational material. If a student is having difficulty achieving the 75% accuracy for advancement, individualized tutoring is conducted by the basic education teacher.

The Center is open for students Monday through Friday, between the hours of 8:00 a.m. and 3:00 p.m. The exact number of hours and days that a student spends performing their academic work is mutually agreed upon between the student and teacher. Therefore, students have the opportunity of establishing their schedule of attendance at the Center, so long as the arranged schedule is workable for both the student's needs and Center's needs. This allows students to assume the major responsibility of determining their academic activities, which aids in promoting a cooperative working relationship.

The two primary academic goals are: 1) to assist teenagers in returning to high school, or 2) to obtain a high school equivalency diploma. The academic goal is established by the student's personal choice.

*Career Education.* Career education provides students with a variety of learning experiences in the world of work. These experiences are developed to give practical knowledge about job seeking, job employment, and career awareness.

Students are oriented to the world of work through use of career pamphlets and audio-visual programs which cover topics of job preparation and occupational opportunities. These materials are available to students throughout the day, at their option. Members of the community are also invited to speak on employment opportunities and specific job skills. All students are encouraged to participate in the job preparation program which consists of seven, one hour sessions. The activities for each session utilizes instructional material which can be worked through either on an individual or small group basis. Completion of the job preparation program is required before the career education teacher assists students in finding employment. This criteria was established to allow the career education teacher time for observation, and to learn about the students' abilities and interests. The primary career education goals are: 1) to assist teenagers in gaining job readiness skills, 2) to obtain employment, or 3) enter into a vocational training program.

*Counseling.* The counseling component is designed to acquaint teenagers with the counseling process through the establishment of four initial one hour sessions. The purpose of these sessions are: 1) to explain the purpose of counseling, 2) to assist the teenager in the initial adjustment to the program, and 3) to provide the counselor with the opportunity to gather psycho-social information through the use of an Adlerian lifestyle assessment. At the end of the initial counseling sessions the teenager is given the choice of continuing in counseling. If the teenager chooses to continue, weekly sessions are scheduled for one hour time periods. The basic counseling goal is to improve the teenager's concept of self and others.

## **Socialization**

In establishing an alternative education program, emphasis must be placed upon the teenagers' development of responsibility and cooperation. The population which is dealt with in a program of this nature exhibits low levels of responsibility, cooperation with others, and usually possess an antagonistic view towards others. Enhancing one's abilities to positively relate with others is best approached through a group process, since this most closely represents reality. Individuals are social beings, striving to belong in a society which relies upon mutual cooperation. Therefore, group activities are organized on a major scale. A school council meeting is held weekly at a regularly scheduled time to discuss difficulties felt by both the staff and students, and for the planning of recreational activities. As an outgrowth of the school council other groups are formed. If a school dance is suggested, then a dance committee is formed to organize the activity and report back to the school council for its approval or recommendations. A student-staff role reversal day was also suggested and organized through the school council. This entailed the volunteering of students to assume the roles of the staff members to operate the program for a day. Another suggestion which evolved from the school council was the organization of a review committee to consistently monitor the progress of students, and to deal with any disciplinary action required. Weekly discussion groups were also established. These discussion groups were non-structured and open to any student who wished to participate. The group activity focused upon topics brought up by the students and was guided by the counselor, to allow for continuity of discussion.

An attempt has been made to handle all activities, from recreation to discipline, through a group process. This is due to the belief that the building of responsibility and cooperation can best be accomplished in this manner. Educational institutions are often overly concerned with academic achievement and minimize the emphasis placed on the teaching of life skills. Having academic credentials does not replace nor compensate for one's lack of social skills. An educational program needs to carefully integrate academic studies with basic skills in human relations.

## Conclusions

It has been found that utilizing Individual Psychology for understanding the various behaviors of the teenagers has been of great assistance. There are so many misbehaviors exhibited that it would be virtually impossible to try and deal with each behavior as a separate and unique entity. Understanding the purpose for a particular behavior, and in general, the teenager's mode of operation has allowed for a continuity in the corrective measures taken with each teenager. For the most part, keeping in mind the concept of purposive behavior has allowed the staff to avoid the pitfalls of reinforcing negative behaviors and of becoming confused when a teenager exhibited a different behavior than usual.

Specific principles used have been primarily logical consequences, natural consequences, action, doing the unexpected, and encouragement. At first, the teenagers found the use of logical consequences to be unacceptable. Making a choice in the behavior was not difficult, but if the teenager's chosen behavior required a consequence to be applied, the teenager would not readily accept the responsibility for the consequence. Consistent use of logical consequences over time did bring about understanding and acceptance of actions. The teenagers began to remind one another of the possible consequences of misbehaving, and did not hesitate to notify a staff member if he/she was breaking a regulation. From the observations, logical consequences when consistently applied have been effective with teenagers.

The teenagers enrolled in this program have usually not been encouraged in the past. Many of them were discouraged and lacked the courage to test out their abilities. This has truly hindered their social interactions and academic achievement. Any attempt made to initiate social activities or enter into a new academic area was met with encouragement by the staff. Whether a teenager was successful or failed at a task, encouragement was given for the effort. Many have improved their study habits and have learned information they felt was impossible to learn, because encouragement was given for the smallest steps taken. Besides direct encouragement postcards were sent home and phone calls were made regularly to parents giving a word of encouragement regarding their teenager's progress. This has been of great assistance in winning the cooperation and support of the parents. Typically, these parents have only been contacted by the school system for negative reports. Encouragement is simply a must if an individual's positive qualities are to be strengthened.

Positive outcomes have been accomplished through the use of Individual Psychology in this program. Teenagers who are considered unmanageable and lacking in motivation for academics need not be forgotten. Relating with teenagers in a firm, consistent, and respectful manner has increased cooperative behaviors and allowed for academic accomplishments in areas from which these teenagers have previously shied away.