The Need for a Post-Secondary Transition Program in Alternative Schools

A Literature Review

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Abstract

School counselors have the opportunity to impact the educational experience of students who are at-risk and students diagnosed with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD). Often the influence of school counselors is related to understanding the needs of the student population, creating programming to meet the identified needs, and determining the setting that will provide the highest level of success. This paper will provide an overview of students in alternative schools, students with EBD, and the benefits of implementing a post-secondary transition program in alternative schools. Also included are the implications for school counselors: the components of the post-secondary transition program, and Adlerian approaches that would be beneficial to use with students who are at-risk and students with EBD.
Table of Contents

Abstract............................................................................................................................ 2

Table of Contents............................................................................................................. 3

Introduction...................................................................................................................... 4-5

Students in Alternative Schools..................................................................................... 5-13
  Structure of Alternative Schools................................................................................... 6
  Demographic of Students in Alternative Schools....................................................... 8
  Needs of Students in Alternative Schools.................................................................... 10

Students with EBD.......................................................................................................... 12-22
  Students with EBD....................................................................................................... 12
  Current Interventions for Students with EBD............................................................. 16
  Adjustments to Current EBD Curriculum.................................................................... 19

Implementing a Post-Secondary Transition Program in Alternative School Curriculum... 22-26
  Why Use in Alternative Schools?................................................................................. 22
  Goal of Curriculum.................................................................................................... 23
  Benefits of Using Curriculum.................................................................................... 24

Implications for School Counselors.............................................................................. 26-32
  Post-secondary Transition Program............................................................................ 26
  Psychology of Alfred Adler....................................................................................... 29

Conclusion....................................................................................................................... 31

References....................................................................................................................... 33
The Need for a Post-Secondary Transition Program in Alternative Schools

In as early as 1975 researchers began to identify the need for alternative approaches to education. “The traditional, academically-oriented high school has left many youngsters uninspired and lacking in motivation resulting in a dropout rate which is disturbing to educators and parents alike” (Shaw et. al., 1975, p. 28). Over the last thirty years, the same fact remains: not all students’ needs are being met by a traditional high school education. According to a 2001 report from the U.S. Department of Education students with Emotional Behavioral Disorders (EBD) have a mere 41.9% high school graduation rate. Zweig (2003) identified that there are a number of influences that cause students to disconnect and leave the education system: poverty, a poor start to education, community stress, racial/ethnic/language barriers, lack of adult supervision, mentors, and community support, family stress and responsibilities, learning disabilities and related conditions. Many of these disconnected students, at-risk and high-functioning special education students, are entering alternative learning settings as a result of not having their needs met.

According to a 2010 Minnesota Department of Education report, as of the 2009-10 school year, 17% of Minnesota public school students accessed alternative education on a part-time or full-time basis. To put in perspective, that means that approximately 150,000 students accessed alternative education at one of over 300 programs in Minnesota. While alternative schools are generally a more positive environment for students at-risk and students with special education needs they lack essential programming that prepares students to successfully tackle post-secondary life.
Students with EBD often do not adopt effective coping skills for transitioning into post-secondary life. In addition, students in alternative schools have similar struggles with transitioning to post-secondary life effectively. Identifying the areas of concern related to transitioning to post-secondary life would allow students with EBD and students in alternative school to reframe their experiences and become a greater contributor to society. A way for schools to respond to the needs of this population is to evaluate the curriculum they are currently using with students with EBD and students who are at-risk. This paper seeks to identify what curriculum could be added to alternative school programming to equip at-risk and special education students, particularly students with EBD, so they have the skills necessary to transition successfully to post-secondary life.

First, this paper will review the literature related to alternative schools – their structure, the demographics of the population of the schools, and the needs of students who attend alternative schools. Second, a review of literature related to students with EBD will follow – who students with EBD are (the definition of their diagnosis, their demographics, etc.), current interventions used with students with EBD, and programming that would meet the needs of students with EBD. Third, a review of literature related to the benefits of implementing a post-secondary transition program in alternative schools. Lastly, there will be summary of the elements of a post-secondary transition program, its implications for school counselors, and how the approaches of Alfred Adler can be incorporated into the program.

**Students in Alternative Schools**

A growing need in the school system today is how to reach students who are on the brink of walking away from their education. A solution that many districts have adopted is creating alternative settings for those students who have been identified as at-risk to learn and succeed in
(Zweig, 2003; Gilson, 2006). It is important to first understand the structure and purpose of alternative schools, the population of students who enter these alternative programs, and the needs that are prevalent within the alternative school population.

**Structure of Alternative Schools**

Alternative schools offer a different setting for students to learn and, generally, take a different approach with students than traditional high schools. While alternative schools generally operate outside of the traditional high school setting, they are regulated similarly to traditional high schools. For example, in Minnesota, alternative schools are subject to the expectations of the Minnesota Department of Education just as traditional high school. Based on the standards set by the Minnesota Department of Education (2010), alternative schools are required to include three major provisions: academic, school-to-work, and personal support services. Within those provisions, students in alternative schools may experience an approach that differs greatly from their previous encounters with the education system. They can receive education that is tailored to their learning style, applicable to their lifestyle, independent in nature, and preventive.

Sadly, alternative schools were created out of a response to the number of students who were not successfully participating in the traditional high school setting. Older research pointed to the fact that alternative schools began to focus their approach with students based on the needs of the students and the school district. According to Rayle (1998) alternative schools fall into three different types:

Type I are schools that students participate in by choice, and they tend to resemble magnet schools, in that they adhere to a particular pedagogical method or emphasize a subject area. Type II schools are typically ‘last chance’ programs for students about to be
expelled from the system. These schools are more concerned with discipline than academics and are structured accordingly. Type III programs are remedial programs for academic and social skills. (p. 244)

It is easy to see that alternative schools are geared towards students who often get lost in the mix at other schools. Even those students who have behavior issues have a place at alternative schools. While alternative schools are not a cure-all for problem students, they are a setting in which students can find a place that fits their needs.

“Generally, alternative education comes from a recognition that all people can be educated” (Gilson, 2006, p. 50). While many traditional high schools hold the same educational beliefs, the reality is that not all students fit the mold of those who can be successful in a traditional high school setting. A major difference between traditional high schools and alternative high schools is that alternative schools purposely take a different approach with students than traditional high schools. The different approach focuses largely on the structure of the school.

Alternative schools have a unique structure that can draw in students who have given up on learning in a traditional setting. Gilson (2006) contends that successful alternative schools are small and continually maintain a small teacher to student ratio; they take their character, theme, or emphasis from the strengths and interest of the teachers within the school; and teachers choose the school, and subsequent staff are selected with the input of current teachers. The major indicator of a successful alternative school is the “buy in” that teachers, staff, and students have to the program. Overall, it is easy to see based on Gilson’s description that alternative high schools create an intimacy that is not typically present in the traditional high school setting.
While alternative schools were created as a solution to a problem, there are areas where alternative schools are failing to meet the needs to students. “Most school systems have only one alternative school, even though the students who are at-risk present a wide variety of issues. This ‘one size fits all’ approach to alternative schools often fails to address particular types of student problems” (Rayle, 1988, p. 244). The needs of the students should be the driving force when thinking about the structure and programming present in alternative schools. It is important for schools to understand the population of students who are being placed in alternative schools. Often the demographics of an alternative school can reveal the areas where additional programming would be beneficial.

**Demographics of Students in Alternative Schools**

Based on the structure of alternative schools, it is easy to begin to see the type of students who are generally drawn to these schools. Zweig (2003) writes that “many alternative school settings attempt to reach youth who are outside the regular education system, whether they left the mainstream by choice or through punishment strategies” (p. 10). Alternative schools are often a last resort for many students who are at risk of leaving the education system. Dropouts, students with disabilities, and students participating in health risk behaviors, such as drug use or unprotected sex, tend to be the students who populate alternative schools (Lang & Sletten, 2002). Every student who is in the classroom of an alternative school is there because they require special attention – whether encouragement, individualized programming, or education related to healthy decision making. Each student presents as an individual puzzle that requires specific pieces to complete the picture.

A majority of the population of alternative schools is comprised of at-risk youth who have been transferred due to reasons such as possession, distribution or use of drugs; physical
attacks; chronic truancy; continual academic failure; possession or use of a weapon other than a firearm; disruptive verbal behavior; possession or use of a firearm; and pregnancy/parenthood or mental health needs (Kleiner, Porch, & Farris, 2002). Students in alternative schools have to overcome a myriad of serious issues before they are ready to be successful in the classroom. With the variety of issues present, it is important for alternative schools to better prepare their students to be successful in life after secondary school.

Older research has pointed to the fact that students in alternative schools fall into a particular population: students who have given up on getting an education for many different reasons. According to McWhirter (1999) alternative schools provide students who are at-risk with a final opportunity to complete high school before leaving the educational environment entirely. Adolescents in this setting often experience a combination of difficulties that impact their performance, such as previous exposure to abuse, alcohol and drugs, economic despair, anomie, and social skills deficits. (p. 223)

Students in alternative schools are often giving up on school because they do not see how capable they are or how competent they can be in a classroom. Much of the research points to students struggling with personal issues such as addiction, pregnancy, and behavior issues (Zweig, 2003). Students are also struggling with being a product of their environment. Students are not just overcoming personal difficulties, but are overcoming issues that are beyond their control as well. “A student can be thought of as at risk if he is subject to inadequate parenting, illiterate, comes from low-income homes, suffers from a ‘cultural mismatch’ between home and school, or lacks necessary life experience to participate successfully in school” (Rayle, 1998, p. 244). How can we identify programming that can meet the vast array of problems that students in
alternative schools struggle with? Looking at the needs of students can direct educators to topics and subjects that can change the life of an at-risk youth because it brings a solution to a problem that the student was unable to solve on their own.

**Needs of Students in Alternative Schools**

Many of the needs that students in alternative schools have relate to the set-up and structure of the alternative school. More often than not alternative schools have particular characteristics present meant to aid students towards successfully completing their secondary education. The characteristics of a successful alternative school often include a small teacher to student ratio, various sources of referral to determine if admittance to the school is appropriate, creative and experienced teachers, classes should be held in close proximity to each other, counseling services, and incorporation of work experiences (D’Angelo & Zemanick, 2009). Students in alternative schools need these opportunities for connection and relationship building. Small classes, a large support system, intimate environment, etc. can create those opportunities.

De La Ossa (2005) reiterates the need for connection and found that alternative schools addressed the needs of students who are at-risk by providing them opportunities for connection through a smaller school size, and smaller class sizes. The researcher also showed that personal attention and stronger relationships allowed students to feel a sense of community, and helped them disregard the negative perceptions they felt from the general public. Often it is the feelings of belonging that can prolong the alternative school student’s stay in the education system. De La Ossa points to an additional issue that students in alternative schools need to overcome: the negative impression that others often have of them. Most students in alternative schools spend years hearing discouraging messages in the traditional school setting. The abundance of negative messages points to an area of weakness in the traditional school setting. “It is clear that
mainstream education and public systems are not adequately meeting the needs of all high-risk youth, and the difficulties vulnerable youth have in regular schools may exacerbate the disconnections” (Zwieg, 2003, p.10). Within the walls of the alternative school the student can feel acceptance that many not have been present in their previous school experiences.

Alternative schools have the potential to provide students who are at-risk with the skills necessary to be successful in school and subsequently successful in post-secondary life as well. With high potential for keeping students in school, it is important that programming focuses on the skills necessary to sustain the positive momentum that students experience. According to Rayle (1998), programming should focus on social skills development with students in alternative schools because the social conditions of students’ lives can create barriers to their academic success. Teaching students coping skills to adapt to these conditions is essential to academic effectiveness. Research supports the major idea that students in alternative schools need connection, positive relationships, and feelings of belonging (Zweig, 2003). Skills related to developing positive connections are what can make or break the education process for students in alternative schools. May & Copeland (1998) found that “both the encouraging relationship with the teacher and an active teaching style were noted within the qualitative responses to play a vital role in helping students to maintain attendance” (p. 199). Again, above all else, the opportunity for connection needs to be top priority in any alternative school program.

Older research reveals that for at least the last 40 years alternative schools have had the ability to change the lives of students who are at-risk – Shaw, Tomcala, Middleton, Rudee, Jones, & Smith (1975) found that alternative schools are having a positive effect on students, and could be influential in holding some students in school, and at the same time make the educational experience more rewarding for the students. Students who have struggled through
the education system, alternative schools can be a place where they can finally experience success. For students who are at-risk, identifying a place where positive experiences can occur is priceless. To reiterate the major need identified in the research of this section, students in alternative schools need positive connection and positive experiences.

Alternative schools were created out of necessity – they are a place where students can experience a second chance in regards to their education. With a positive environment identified, it is important to identify and reach out to other students who are feeling discouraged and frustrated. Students with EBD may be an additional population of students that could benefit from programming that focuses on practical skills, academic support, and work/career training.

**Students with EBD**

Students with EBD are similar students who attend alternative schools, or they are even identified as being the students in alternative schools. Understanding how these two groups of students are alike, can help to reveal the impact of effective programming for this population of at-risk youth. In this section is a brief overview of students with EBD, current approaches taken with students with EBD, and changes that would benefit the programming in place for the EBD population.

Describing disorders is not as easy as one may think. Often different practitioners will focus on different symptoms to help clarify what a disorder entails. Describing EBD is no different. Landrum, Tankersley, & Kauffman (2003) highlight the most common attributes of students with EBD in their three-fold definition: 1) students with EBD tend to display disproportionately higher rates of inappropriate behavior and, conversely, low rates of positive behavior; 2) they tend to experience academic difficulties that are related to their behavioral excesses and deficits; and 3) students with EBD typically have social difficulty relating to both
peers and adults. The authors present a fairly casual description of EBD, but their definition points to the difficulties that may be present when working with students who have EBD, namely behavior issues, academic difficulties, and social deficits.

A slightly different definition for EBD was offered by the Council for Children with Behavioral Disorders (CCBD) in 1993 to describe EBD as being characterized by emotional or behavioral responses in school so different from appropriate age, culture, or ethnic norms that is impacts the education performance of the students, including academic, personal/social and vocational skills. The definition goes on to state that often inappropriate responses need to be exhibited in two different settings, and the student needs to be unresponsive to direct intervention in general education.

Based on the two definitions presented, the major characteristics and commonalities of defining EBD point to the fact that students with EBD generally have learning issues, social difficulties, and struggle to succeed in general education setting because of their emotional and/or behavioral responses. With a clear definition in place for EBD, it is necessary to understand the demographics of students diagnosed with this disorder. Knowing what type of student is diagnosed with EBD can help broaden the understanding of how to meet the needs of the population.

In researching the characteristics of students with EBD, the easiest information to obtain was related to the consequences of their disorder. A sad reality becomes evident in this section – the reality that students with EBD have a bleak future. “Relative to their peers without disabilities, students with EBD… experience elevated dropout rates, diminished rates of participation in postsecondary education, higher levels of unemployment and underemployment, lower rates of civic and community participation, and higher rates of incarceration” (Lane,
Carter, Pierson, & Glaser, 2006, p.108). It seems evident, based on the negative experiences after secondary school, that students with EBD struggle once they leave the secondary school setting.

Research has reinforced that students with EBD, while high functioning compared to other students who receive special education, struggle more. Wagner et al. (2005) found that:

Youth with ED had the lowest grades of all disability groups, with three fourths of students failing one or more grades. More than half of the youth who left school did so by dropping out (55%), a rate more than twice that of students in general education. (p. 26)

The social disconnect and fear that is common to students with EBD often leads to the logical consequence of dropping out of school. While an understandable outcome, the disheartening piece is that “three to five years after departing high school, these youth were less likely than youth in the general population to have achieved residential independence, and 58% had been arrested” (Wagner et al., 2005, p. 26). Not only are students with EBD leaving the education system uneducated, they are leaving unprepared for the realities of living independently as well.

There are also other, more basic needs that are prevalent to students with EBD. “The percentages of school-age children and youth classified with ED who are living in poverty are significantly greater than the percentages among their general population peers and among children and youth with other disabilities” (Wagner et al., 2005, p. 85). Not only are students struggling to understand the subjects and content in school, they are also struggling to come to school prepared to learn in general.

Cullinan & Sabornie (2004) report that the most numerous age group of students with EBD is 15-year-olds. While mid-adolescence is young in the grand scheme of an individual’s life, mid-adolescence is fairly late to be diagnosed – a student will have already been in the school system for ten years, likely ten years of struggling, before they are actually diagnosed
with their disorder. Amongst those who are diagnosed, often they are not kept part of the general population of the school. Cullinan & Sabonie (2004) also found that adolescents diagnosed with EBD primarily receive their education apart from their peers without disabilities, meaning not in regular public schools, or in regular schools but out of the general education classes more than 60% of the day. In comparing the characteristics and demographics of students with EBD, it is evident that often there is a self-defeating cycle present: students with EBD have behavioral issues that get them removed from the classroom and eventually from the school. This removal hinders their academic performance, feeds into the fear or anxiety associated with school that is synonymous with students with EBD, and limits the support that the school is able to provide the student.

There are many challenges and factors that arise when teaching students with EBD. A major factor related to the challenges of teaching students with EBD is the attitude that others have towards the EBD population. “Students labeled as having an EBD are often judged by others to be disruptive, insolent, disobedient, and engaging in behaviors that interfere with the educational progress and impede learning” (Fitzpatrick & Knowlton, 2009, p. 253). In other words, students with EBD can be seen as a disturbance in the classroom. As mentioned previously, students with EBD can get in a self-defeating cycle where their behavior keeps them from learning, but what they would be learning if they were in class could help their behavior. Additionally, students with EBD require more support than typical students in the classroom. Regan (2009) writes that

Often, students with EBD are reluctant to perform independently of the teacher. This reluctance is a reflection of limited academic achievement across all areas of instruction
and again, a reflection of such students’ irrational beliefs – for example, “I will not succeed at this math test because I am horrible at math.” (p.63)

Fear and anxiety around school is a weakness that can make building skills around autonomy difficult. Dependence on teachers and staff perpetuates the idea that students with EBD are a plague on the classroom.

Other research points to a major contributor to the difficulty many teachers have in reaching students with EBD. Wagner et al. (2005) reveal that there is approximately a two year gap between onset of problems and the initiation of special education services for student who have EBD. “Students with EBD are not typically identified at an early age, when their problems are more amenable to treatment, but much later in their development, when problems are predictably severe and intractable” (Landrum et al., 2003, p. 148). If students are not diagnosed early, when symptoms are beginning to present, it greatly impacts the ability of teachers and staff to teach techniques and methods to cope with having an EBD. In an attempt to alleviate some of the challenges related to teaching students with EBD, interventions have been put in place to teach coping skills and modify problem behavior. The following section presents common interventions used with students with EBD.

**Current Interventions for Students with EBD**

When a student presents with an EBD, it means that they have access to special education services during their time in school. Teachers in special education departments are specifically trained in using interventions with students to help teach coping skills related to behavior or academic success skills depending on the needs of the specific student. Often the term “intervention” is used because a specific technique is implemented to redirect a behavior or the thought process of the student towards a more productive outcome. When students with EBD are
in the general education classes, however, they are taught by teachers who have not undergone specific training in working with this special population.

Traditionally, when a student with EBD experiences an intervention in the school setting, they experience a functional assessment performed by their special education teacher. Maag (2005) describes functional assessment as a five step process. First, describing the problem behavior; second, identifying events/situations/times that predict when the problem behavior will and will not occur; third, identifying consequences that maintain the problem behavior; fourth, developing a hypotheses that describes the behavior, when it occurs, and what reinforces/maintains it; and fifth, collecting direct observation data that supports the hypotheses. Within this process, students with EBD can build skills to recognize problem behavior, and begin to predict when and why that behavior may be triggered, and respond accordingly.

Interventions, both academic and behavior related, draw from a variety of resources, and attempt to approach the student in a multitude of ways. Academic interventions have relied on the availability of individuals within the school to assist in teaching students with EBD. Ryan, Reid, & Epstein (2004) explain that current academic interventions fall into three categories: child-mediated, teacher-mediated, and peer-mediated. Child-mediated interventions place the responsibility of utilizing the intervention on the student. Teacher-mediated interventions require that the teacher utilize consequences to maintain responsibility for treatment. Peer-mediated interventions require that peers are responsible for instruction. With a variety of individuals involved in the academic intervention, students can identify the approach that is most effective for their needs, allowing for the highest probability of retaining information.

Similar to the previously mentioned functional assessment, when a student with EBD leaves the classroom because of problem behavior a behavioral intervention is used (Landrum,
Tankersley, & Kauffman, 2003). First, special education teachers and students with EBD identify environmental cues, or antecedents, and set the occasion in which problem behavior occurs. Second, students with EBD and teachers describe the behavior that was exhibited in the occasion. Finally, consequences are identified. Interventions related to behavior have relied on the students ability to learn to recognize inappropriate actions, stop utilizing the behavior, and refrain from relying on their behavior in future situations.

With established interventions in place to address behavior, and similar interventions present to address academic needs, it is important to establish whether the current interventions have been effective for students with EBD. Before beginning research, this researcher believed that it was the interventions that were failing students with EBD. Upon further review, however, there were many limitations that impacted the effectiveness of the interventions.

Research has pointed to the more concerning problem related to why current interventions have not been as effective with students with EBD as they could be. Present in the education system today is a disconnect between research and the implication of the research on current interventions. Fitzpatrick & Knowlton (2009) write that “the research-to-practice gap continues to hinder student outcomes, has major negative implications, and presents significant obstacles for students with an EBD” (p. 254). Research is what drives the development of relevant interventions that are usable and effective in reaching students with EBD. Research is meaningless if it is not applied practically to the subject that was investigated.

For teachers, interventions should be an everyday tool in their repertoire. But for many teachers their ignorance prevents the effective use of methods. “Attention to the complex array of needs of adolescents with EBD is critical if [the students] are to learn to make decisions that reflect an understanding of their own abilities, limitations, and preferences; creative problem-
solving; and effective self-advocacy” (Wagner & Davis, 2006, p. 87). In essence, students with EBD are ill-equipped when it comes to being able to identify what they need, and how to get it because their teachers are in the same position: lacking essential information.

Teachers and students with EBD are faced with trying to understand the impulsivity of the disease, the misunderstanding that coincides with poor choices in behavior, and negative consequences that result because of the behavior (removal from the classroom, transfers to another school, etc.). Wagner et al. (2006) explain that EBD students have to cope with changes in their physiology, emotional needs and social environments. It is those changes that cause difficulties for EBD students because of their difficulty adjusting to school transitions. The authors also point to many challenges that were unknown before the National Longitudinal study conducted in 2005. Prior to the study there was little research on how students with emotional disorders were fairing in their transition to the post-secondary world. The findings of the National Longitudinal study were disheartening, to say the least, because it confirmed that students with EBD are struggling to gain the necessary skills that the education process is supposed to be conveying (Wagner et al., 2005). Taking into consideration the limitations, how can schools move forward in their approach towards students with EBD?

**Adjustments to Current EBD Curriculum**

Students with EBD need interventions that are specific to the symptoms that are common with their disorder. Among the symptoms that are necessary to address is the disconnected feelings that students with EBD often experience towards their school environment. Wagner & Davis (2006) found that relationships provide a way to promote connection at school. The authors identify that reducing school or class size, forming small learning communities, and providing mentoring programs at school can promote the likelihood of positive bonds at school.
Also according to the authors, including supportive services such as social skills or anger management training can help with relationship formation as well. A necessary change to the current school climate is the need for students with EBD to feel connected and valued in their classroom: In other words, create opportunities for relationship formation. By changing the feelings students with EBD have about school environment, their investment in school changes because they see that school can be a positive place.

As a supplement to relationship building techniques, students with EBD need to be challenged to take their skills to the next level and work towards transitioning to life after secondary school. According to Wagner & Davis (2006) “these young people need access to programs that teach workplace behaviors, occupational skills, and career awareness and that provide work exploration opportunities to help them identify career interests and proclivities and develop skills critical to a successful transition” (p. 87). In addition to feeling connected to school by relationships, students with EBD need to understand that school is a means to achieving success in their post-secondary life. Broadening the current view, which does not always value career development, can help students with EBD understand that what they are learning today impacts their life tomorrow. Similar research reiterates the need for enhancing current career development curriculum. Carter & Wehby (2003) found that secondary education, as it relates to career success, needs to include programming that offers training in skills that are critical to job success (e.g. timeliness, conflict resolution, etc.), as a way of helping students obtain a variety of skill-sets applicable to their job setting, and must offer programming in a non-judgmental manner. Not only is career development important to the success of students with EBD, but it provides an opportunity for relationship development in addition to exploring future
jobs. Students with EBD can experience skill building that can be easy applied to their professional life, personal life, and academic life.

As an overall program, focusing on the transition from secondary school to post-secondary life can be a way to encompass all the areas of need that are present with students with EBD. Wagner & Davis (2006) explain that:

Transition planning should be goal-driven and involve drawing on and coordinating community resources… Transition planning is to begin early specify goals that reflect a student’s strengths, preferences, and interests; and identify a course of study and post-school service needs that support those goals. Best practices in transition planning call for it to be ‘person-centered,’ encompass all relevant transition domains (i.e., employment, education, living situation, and community life adjustment), involve community-based experiences and resources, and provide for service coordination. (p. 87-88)

A comprehensive program that features the characteristics highlighted by Wagner & Davis (2006) would allow for skill building around relationships, would foster connection to the students with EBD school environment and outside community, would create purpose and focus for a future that is individualized and, inevitably, push the students with EBD to address issues around behavior, academics, and their personal life.

What makes students with EBD unique is that their diagnosis impacts almost every facet of their life: their personal interactions, their academic performance, their behavior, their internal thinking process, etc. A post-secondary transition program that incorporates current interventions would help to address the wide breadth of needs that students with EBD have. The following section seeks to highlight the contents of the post-secondary transition program, and flesh out
how both students in alternative schools and students with EBD can benefit from the use of this program.

**Implementing a Post-Secondary Transition Program in Alternative School Curriculum**

Creating a post-secondary transition program meets the most apparent needs that students with EBD have, but does it meet the needs of students in alternative schools? The following section will highlight the benefits of implementing the program in alternative schools, the goal of the program, and the benefits of executing the transition program.

**Why Use in Alternative Schools?**

Creating a post-secondary transition program, and utilizing the program in an alternative school, can make alternative schools that much more effective in reaching and impacting the students who populate their halls. Alternative schools, as mentioned previously, have the potential to be an environment where at-risk youth can experience education in a new, more effective way. D’Angelo & Zemanick (2009) reported that “high quality, well-staffed alternative programs decrease truancy, act as deterrents to poor behavior in traditional school environments, minimize suspensions and expulsions, and enhance academic achievement” (p. 211). Alternative schools are unique in that they have the ability to be preventive in their services, while at the same time reactive to the ever-changing needs of students who are at-risk. When alternative schools are run well, they change the lives of the students who attend them.

Many who have worked in alternative schools know how truly unique the setting can be, and within the last ten years, others have begun to recognize the benefits of utilizing alternative learning centers. Gilson (2006) found that alternative programs and philosophies were adopted by districts by the thousands in an attempt to provide a positive atmosphere conducive to learning for all. Obviously, alternative schools are filling a void that is present within the
education system today. More and more students need a school setting that is more supportive and more conducive to their needs.

While a post-secondary transition program will only add to the current curriculum used in alternative schools, the reality is that the at-risk youth that are present in the alternative school setting are the population that needs the program. In the previous section on students with EBD, it was established that many students with EBD are removed from the traditional high school setting. Those students are often moved to alternative schools. According to Kleiner, Porch, & Farris (2002) “Overall, 12 percent of all students in alternative schools and programs for students who are at-risk were special education students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs)” (p. iv). While the percentage is small, the number of special education students in alternative schools is comparable to the population found in traditional high schools. Rather than singling out the special education population in the school to provide a post-secondary transition program, why not implement the program school-wide so others can benefit as well? Overall, the setting and atmosphere is the strongest reason to use alternative schools as the venue for implementing a post-secondary program - The peripheral benefits such as reaching out to special education students who are already present only supports alternative schools that much more.

The focus of the program must consider the needs of alternative students and students with EBD. The section that follows will identify the major goals of using a post-secondary transition program in alternative schools.

Goal of Curriculum

The variety of needs of both students in alternative schools and students with can be summarized into the need to feel connected and supported by a community, and the need to learn skills related to transitioning to post-secondary life. According to the Zweig (2003) “Youth
without adequate skills will lack the ability to successfully transition to independent adulthood and to maintain secure employment. They advocate that as a society we must recognize that school failure translates into life failure” (p. 17). The overall goal of the post-secondary transition program, and its implementation in alternative schools, is to capitalize on the intimacy that is already present in alternative schools and administer a skill building program that equips students who are at-risk with the necessary skills to be successful community members after they leave secondary school.

**Benefits of Using Curriculum**

While new techniques and programs can foster excitement and energy in schools, if those techniques are not sustainable, meaning maintained and utilized over a long period of time, they lose their effectiveness. For “Youth with EBD in public schools, generic and occupationally specific career and technical education and on-the-job-training have been related to lower dropout rates…[and] to higher post-school earnings” (Gagnon, Barber, Van Loan, & Leone, 2009, p. 687). Connecting students with EBD to practical skills, particularly those related to career development, can reinstate purpose where it was once lost. As established earlier, both students in alternative schools and students with EBD struggle with feeling discouraged in school, and making the connection between what they are learning now and its application to their post-secondary life. Creating a work/career element to curriculum can help to bridge the gap.

Certain techniques for reaching students with EBD can be applied to current curriculum. Wagner et al. (2006) found that students with ED experienced benefits more frequently with the following interventions:
A structured teaching environment, including the provision of explicit, systematic, and highly interactive direct instruction delivered in learner-friendly, memorable ways, independent learning strategies, opportunities for peer-mediated learning, including class wide and reciprocal peer tutoring as well as cooperative learning, and teachers with a strong repertoire of behavior-management skills to decrease inappropriate behaviors and increase pro-social behaviors. (pp. 13-14)

Teachers can begin to utilize these techniques immediately in the classroom. Students with EBD respond to clear directions, opportunities to connect and learn from their peers, and they respond to strong leaders – teachers who are trained to utilize these techniques. When thinking of the method for implementing effective post-secondary transition programming, the above characteristics need to be present in the teachers and staff that interact with the students.

Overall, the benefit of implementing a post-secondary transition program in alternative schools is two-fold: a reduction in negative outcomes for students with EBD, and the ability to reach students who are at-risk who may not have had the ability or opportunity to experience a transition program in their traditional school setting.

Implementing a post-secondary transition program in an alternative school setting not only benefits the special education students in the school, but also the students who are at-risk who struggle with gaining the necessary skills to move forward towards a healthy adulthood. Positive relationships and a supportive environment are the two main characteristic of alternative schools that would enhance the effectiveness of a post-secondary transition program. The overall goal of the transition program would be to equip students with the skills related to life after secondary school, and provide them with a safe place to practice skills so they can have a successful future. The major benefits of the transition program would be a reduction in the
negative outcomes that are generally associated with EBD and students who are at-risk. With clear goals and benefits discussed, the structure of the post-secondary programs needs to be fleshed out.

**Implications for School Counselors**

In schools today, even alternative schools, teachers often do not have enough time to develop and implement new programs. School counselors have the ability, and the training, to create programs that meet the needs of the student population. The American School Counseling Association (ASCA) (2005) created the ASCA National Model which acts as a framework for school counseling programs. The following section will discuss the post-secondary transition program and its structure based on ASCA’s guidelines. Included, as well, in this section is the psychology of Alfred Adler, and the concepts that will enhance the transition program.

**Post-secondary Transition Program**

Effective programs utilize multiple methods of delivery. The post-secondary transition program for EBD and at-risk youth is no different. ASCA states that all activities included in a school counseling program fit into one of four areas of the delivery system: school guidance curriculum, individual student planning, responsive services, and system support (2005).

School guidance curriculum is defined by ASCA (2005) as “a written instructional program that is comprehensive in scope, preventative and proactive, developmental in design, coordinated by school counselors and delivered, as appropriate, by school counselors and other educators” (p. 40). The whole point of creating a post-secondary transition program is to be preventive and proactive with a population that is used to only receiving one category of the delivery system. Within the post-secondary transition programming there will need to be elements that address the whole student: the personal/social, academic, and career needs.
Personal/social needs will be addressed through discussions, individually and in small groups, about the student’s ability to cope with the difficult transition that happens between secondary and post-secondary life. Classroom lessons focusing on organizational skills and studying techniques will help address the academic needs of the student. Career needs will be discussed in small groups and classroom guidance lessons and will focus on “career exploration, confronting barriers to employment, the job search process, selecting post secondary training, applying to college, self-advocacy, and other transition challenges” (McEachern & Kenny, 2007, p. 166).

The major method of delivery for the post-secondary transition program is through school guidance curriculum. The focus mentioned by McEachern & Kenny and Wagner & Davis (in the adjustments to current EBD curriculum section) are the tenants of the program – career exploration, barriers to employment, etc. Helping at-risk and students with EBD understand that transitioning to post-secondary life takes skills and training is important. Creating classroom lessons, small group lessons, and individual meetings around the essential skills necessary to transition smoothly will alleviate the poor outcomes the EBD and at-risk population is experiencing.

Individual student planning pushes school counselors to design ongoing activities that help students establish personal goals, develop future plans, monitor and manage their own learning as well as meet competencies in the areas of academic, career, and personal/social development (ASCA, 2005). A benefit of alternative schools, mentioned previously in the structure of alternative schools, is that the population of the school is small. Individual student planning can be more effective in an alternative school because the intimacy and potential for meaningful connection is greater. The post-secondary transition program will contain an element of individual planning because at-risk and students with EBD need to have an education that is
tailored to their needs and their life goals. Individual meetings with students, in the post-secondary transition program, will happen several times throughout the year and will focus on identifying areas of weakness and growth related to the areas of personal/social, academic, and career.

Responsive services, described by ASCA (2005) as activities that meet the students’ immediate needs and concerns, are necessary in alternative schools because of the high needs that the population. While responsive services are not necessarily an integral part of the post-secondary transition program, having responsive services present in the school counseling program is to the benefit of alternative school population. ASCA (2005) explains that responsive services require counseling, consultation, referral, peer facilitation or information. As referenced earlier in the techniques utilized with students with EBD, using multiple resources such as peers, and other support staff, can be a technique that reaches students more effectively than relying solely on teachers or school counselors. Referrals, consultation, and peer facilitation can be a way to reach every student in the alternative school.

An important part of the post-secondary transition program is the willingness of the adults in alternative schools to grow and learn just as the students are growing and learning. ASCA (2005) solution to the need for staff to continue learning is described in the last area of the delivery system:

System support consists of management activities that establish, maintain and enhance the total school counseling program. School counselors use their leadership and advocacy skills to promote systemic change by contributing in the following arenas: professional development; consultation, collaboration and teaming; and program management and operations. (p. 43)
One of the major components of the post-secondary transition program is the need for alternative school and students with EBD to feel supported and connected within their school, but also as they transition from one setting to another. School counselors who utilize outside resources, such as job-training programs, and organizations geared towards at-risk individuals can help the school counselor spread the work and avoid burn-out. Teaming with teachers and other staff regarding their passions related to post-secondary transitions can help create a more effective and well-rounded program as well. Supplementing the programming and curriculum present in alternative schools can create a comprehensive transition program.

**Psychology of Alfred Adler**

Adding elements of Adlerian Psychology to the post-secondary transition program can fill the gaps in the personal/social needs of at-risk and students with EBD. As mentioned previously, at-risk and students with EBD struggle with feeling discouraged, unwanted, incapable, and unconnected. Adler believed that for a child to develop in a healthy manner, there were necessary elements that needed to be present.

Encouragement is an element that Adler came back to frequently when describing the sources of poor mental health. Adler believed that educators played an important role in encouragement: their most important task, or “holy duty” as Adler called it, is to see that no child is discouraged at school, and that a child who enters school discouraged gains self-confidence through their teacher and school (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1964). Adler was describing at-risk and students with EBD in this quote – many enter the education system already discouraged by the circumstances of their life: poverty, absent parents, limited resources, etc. Educators, teachers and school counselors alike, can change the life of students in alternative schools by simply encouraging them. Changing the view that a student has, from incapable to capable, can
empower that student to succeed beyond the classroom. Any post-secondary transition program needs to include encouragement – particularly on that is helping students transition from one part of their life to another. Encouragement inspires confidence and feelings of being capable.

Belonging, particularly in alternative schools, is the reason that many students reported feeling more successful in school. Adler believed that the desire to belong was a basic need, and that so long as a child did not doubt their value and their place in their social group, the child is bound to cooperate and complete the task at hand, even if they do not like the task (Dreikurs, Grunwald, & Pepper, 1998). Compliance, which is an issue for both at-risk and students with EBD struggle, occurs more often when students feel they are an integral part of the classroom and the school. As with any person, our investment in a setting drastically impacts our ability to thrive and succeed in that setting. At-risk and students with EBD that feel they are important and a part of their school are better able to participate and cooperate with staff and teachers. A post-secondary transition program that helps students feel like they belong and are an important part of the program will be that much better at reaching students than a program that does not inspire belonging.

Social interest refers to the notion that individuals are social beings – the way a person interacts with other people is extremely important for psychological health – having social interest means feeling like a part of a family, group, couple, and the human community (Oberst & Stewart, 2005). While social interest is connected to belonging, it is different than belonging because it involves a give and take relationship. A student with social interest not only belongs to a community, but also contributes positively to that community as well. An important component of the post-secondary transition program is opening the eyes of at-risk and students with EBD to
see that they are an important part of society, and their success in life after secondary school contributes to their community.

School counselors are able to influence the culture and climate of a school. For at-risk and students in alternative schools, the influence that school counselors can have when using Adlerian concepts while implementing a post-secondary transition program could be life changing. Utilizing a variety of delivery methods can ensure that all student needs are met – met in areas the student is concerned about, based on the needs that student has, and in the method that is appropriate for their style of learning. Adlerian concepts can enhance the post-secondary program by addressing the common insecurities that students in alternative schools have: feeling incapable, like they do not belong, and that they are not important to their community. Overall, the components of the post-secondary program and the incorporation of Adlerian concepts ensure that at-risk and Students with EBD are successful in their transition to life after secondary school.

Conclusion

While no program is a cure-all for every at-risk and EBD student in the education system today, a post-secondary transition program is something that can help alleviate many of the issues that students in alternative schools have related to transitioning to life after secondary school. Both populations, EBD and at-risk, currently have a bleak future – a future that puts them in the criminal system, incapable of holding down steady employment, generally they are a negative contribution to society. Alternative schools have the potential to be a setting where at-risk and students with EBD can experience positive messages, messages that emphasize their value, their abilities, and the asset they are to their community and to society as a whole. If nothing else, the post-secondary transition program can help to change the negative view that
many have of at-risk and students with EBD. Students in alternative schools have great potential – they simply need support to apply practical skills and coping strategies to their everyday life.
References


