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## ***Response to Accountability Policies by Principals and Teachers of Alternative Education: A Cross Case Analysis***

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National and state education policies continue to reflect a growing concern for educating the student at risk of dropping out of school. With the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001, it was expected that all public schools be held accountable in addressing remedies and preventative measures for dropouts. Since, 2001, backed by policy in thirty-three states, local education agencies have turned to alternative educational programs to decrease dropout and increase graduation rates (Jobs for the Future (JFF), 2009). While state policy, in general, gives districts latitude to develop these programs, it is often left to alternative school educators to provide meaningful learning experiences to at-risk students (Ruiz de Velasco et al., 2008). On one hand, NCLB's challenge for educators to "develop and execute plans of action they believe will effectively address achievement gaps" (Evans, 2009; pg. 64), resonates with the flexibility and concentrated best practices found in alternative education. However, questions arise when alternative school teachers and principals are expected to follow increasingly stringent accountability policies.

By all accounts, teachers and principals are expected to administer and comply with district, state, and federal policies and laws affecting schools. Implementing any policy may simply be a part of the legal and political context in which teachers and principals do their work (Gardiner, Canfield-Davis, & Anderson, 2009). At the same time, these educators are being required to negotiate and put in place policies amidst diverse knowledge and skill bases (Cohen & Ball, 1990; Darling-Hammond, 1990; Madsen, 1994; Shin, Gerard, & Bowyer, 2010). As Hope and Pigford (2002) point out, "...policies that compete or conflict with the pedagogical beliefs of educators are more likely to experience delayed implementation or suffer from superficial implementation" (p. 44).

As pressures mount to ensure equitable educational opportunities, alternative school teachers and principals face even greater challenges to comply with increasingly greater accountability policies. Knowing that educators must negotiate reform efforts and policy directives framed within their own context, experience, knowledge and skill base (Cohen and Ball, 1990; Darling-Hammond, 1990), important questions arise surrounding how teachers and principals in alternative education schools interpret and implement accountability policy and in what ways they define success for their students. This study, therefore, considers how seven principals and fifteen teachers at five alternative education schools in California and Texas administer accountability policies.

### **Background**

Schools that seek to re-engage the out-of-school student and/or reconnect the student who is at risk of dropping out of school through nontraditional means and strategies, i.e., alternative schools, are growing in importance (Aron, 2006) and numbers (Lehr, Moreau, Lange, &

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Lanners, 2004) as more and more students become disenfranchised and drop out of school (Kim & Taylor, 2008). It is not unusual for students attending alternative education settings to have experienced physical or emotional abuse, neglect, or abandonment; live under the poverty line; have fewer support systems; earn poor grades; and live in high-crime neighborhoods (Miller, 2004). They enroll in alternative schools because of poor grades, truancy, disruptive behavior, suspension, pregnancy, and other similar factors associated with an early departure from high school (Paglin & Fager, 1997). In addition, these students are more likely than their peers at the traditional high school to have higher mobility, live in foster care or with a relative other than a parent, be dependent on alcohol or drugs, and experience violence and victimization (Ruiz de Velasco et al., 2008). These risk factors taken separately or together suggest that these students experience a great deal of turbulence in their lives, making them more vulnerable and susceptible to dropping out of school.

As suggested by Phillips (2011), it is vital that our educational system takes into consideration all possible measures to prevent and recover dropouts as well as “capitalize on the knowledge and positive experiences that contribute to the academic success of at-risk youth” (p. 669). One such measure is the use of alternative schools to graduate students who are vulnerable and susceptible to dropping out of school. Successful alternative schools transform the educational experience of the at-risk student by focusing on and responding to the individual students’ academic and social needs (Hemmer, Madsen, & Torres, 2013). To meet these needs, alternative schools have adopted critical design attributes that are different than comprehensive high schools (Beken, Williams, Combs, & Slate, 2010). These critical attributes include smaller class sizes, self-paced instruction, personalized instructional practices, defined relationships and connectedness among students and their teachers, crisis/behavioral intervention, remedial and accelerated instruction (Aron, 2006; Carver, Lewis, & Tice (NCES), 2010; McClure, Yonezawa, & Jones, 2010; Raywid, 1994, 1999). In addition, many alternative schools use computer-based instruction allowing alternative schools more use control and flexibility for customized lessons, projects, and assessments, and progress tracking (Watson & Watson, 2011). For many, by addressing the physical, social, emotional, and cognitive development along a continuum of services that increase academic success, the alternative school setting provides an avenue for at-risk students to remain in school long enough to graduate (Hemmer, 2011; Sturgis & Patrick, 2010).

Alongside alternative school expansion (Carver, Lewis, & Tice, 2010), there has been a shift towards stringent accountability policies to ensure educational access and opportunity for members of ethnic minority groups, students who experience acute academic failure and children who live in poverty (Suh, Suh, & Houston, 2007). However, amidst high-stakes testing and greater academic standards, controversy and unresolved issues continue for these students and the schools that serve them. For instance, state policy allows local education agencies leeway to package alternative education programs as unique solutions to improve the quality of education for at-risk students and help reduce the number of students dropping out (Hoyle & Collier, 2006). However, alternative education programs have inconsistently been required to adhere to measurements set for other schools (Hemmer & Shepperson, 2012; JFF, 2009; Lehr, Tan, & Ysseldyke, 2009).

For example, states typically use a standards-based accountability system that emphasizes student achievement benchmarks measured by key assessments that include exams for high school graduation, scores on ACT or other college entrance exams, and completion of rigorous

academic coursework (Aron, 2006; Cavanagh, 2011; Grady, Bielick, & Aud, 2010; Hemmer & Shepperson, 2012). However, some states also have alternative accountability procedures for their alternative schools. For instance, California alternative schools may use the Alternative School Accountability Model (ASAM) that allows the school to self-select three out of 14 indicators to assess a school's ability to serve high-risk students (California Department of Education, 2011). The indicators used in this accountability model measure change in a student's readiness, engagement, and educational goal attainment. Texas alternative schools may use the Alternative Education Accountability (AEA) procedures that allow the school to choose either an absolute performance standard or designate degrees of improvement for state achievement tests, school completion measures, and annual dropout rates (Texas Education agency, 2011).

While several significant differences set these alternative school assessment reports apart from traditional school assessments, these schools must still adhere to NCLB expectations and report adequate yearly progress. Most concerning is whether the standards-based accountability standards reflected in NCLB requirements conflict with how alternative schools' success has been previously calculated. Historically, alternative school success has often been calculated by improved attendance, recovery of missing course credits, passing grades, and various routes to a high school diploma (Aron, 2006; Hemmer, 2012; Raywid, 1999).

With the intersection of accountability and alternative schools, it is important to understand how alternative school educators work to administer accountability policies while at the same time provide meaningful learning experiences to the least successful students (Ruiz de Velasco, et al., 2008). The pervasive influence of accountability may be redefining how school leaders and teachers approach providing meaningful learning experiences and facilitating high achievement (Crum & Sherman, 2008; Rutledge, Harris, & Ingle, 2010; Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002). Spillane (2002) found with the advent of more stringent accountability procedures, there has been a push to change how teacher teach, what they should teach, and how they determine acceptable levels of student mastery. As evident from Hemmer's (2012) study that examined teachers' enactment of equity in the alternative education settings, accountability policy procedures reduced alternative school teachers' pedagogical choices to computer-based programs, self-paced programs, and accelerated curriculum to ensure students' quick graduation. With these choices, district and teacher decisions further limited students' opportunity for acquiring a high quality education as intended by NCLB by excluding at-risk students from a common, more rigorous curriculum available to students at traditional schools. Complicating matters for alternative school educators is that they are under increasing pressure to create and sustain innovative strategies and practices to keep the struggling student engaged long enough to graduate from high school.

### **Theoretical Frame**

A policy implementation frame is presented to be able to draw comparisons between policy initiatives and individual actions (Cohen, Moffit, & Goldin, 2007; Madsen, 1994; Pressman & Wildavsky, 1973; Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002). It is often left to local education agencies to decode the federal and state broad policy strokes defining accountability policies. Local education agencies decode policy text in context to show how it relates to their community and pass it on to those charged with the implementation, as in this case alternative school principals and teachers (Spillane, 2008). Thus, while policymakers may view the school accountability

movement as necessary (Moe, 2003), there is much reliance on an educator to assume the role as a policy actor.

From a theoretical perspective, a distinct yet untested factor of compliance may impact how alternative school teachers and principals administer accountability policy. First, policy design ordinarily relies heavily on the authoritative nature of law that compels people to comply (Vago, 2003). Previous studies suggested that those charged with making and enforcing public school policy base their interpretation and implementation of such policies against the legal and authoritative backdrop of law.

A second factor, the social constructs surrounding policy compliance, perhaps plays a more pivotal role when implementing a mandated policy (Schepple, 1994; Stone, 1964). For instance, teachers and principals may interpret policy through what they consider a lens that is morally correct, feasible and intellectually a defensible course of action as opposed to their compliance as governed by policy rules (Rein and Rabinovitz, 1978).

According to Ball (1993), educators, in general, first conceptualize policy based on their own history, experiences, skills, resources, and context. And then, they apply a subjective moral or ethical judgment that might bypass the letter of the law in the interest of the spirit of the law (Bronfenbrenner, 1973; Gans, 1973; Jones-Wilson, 1986; Konvitz, 1973). This may prove to be even more troublesome for alternative school teachers and principals. Because people attach different meaning to concepts of fairness and justice (Harvey & Klein, 1985), the alternative school teachers and principals, in addition to contending with their own subjective realities that construct, filter, mediate, and shape their educational practice (Smit, 2005), may also be influenced by their students' experiences and histories concerning risk.

## **Methodology**

This research was designed as a qualitative cross case study focusing on a unit of similar groups of people within a specified phenomenon, event, or program based on certain characteristics (Merriam, 1998) and the notion of a bounded system (Smith, 1978). Specifically, this cross case study (Yin, 2003) focused on teachers and principals of alternative schools to provide insight as to how accountability policy is administered for at-risk students. This study utilized two data analysis techniques. First, from a macro-level perspective, a qualitative thematic analysis (Morse & Richards, 2002) was used to first categorize and make judgments about the interpretation of the data. These patterns were then compared with patterns that emerged and were identified through a microanalysis utilizing critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1989, 1992, 1995). Coupling thematic and discourse analysis allowed for a holistic picture of the inter-connections between patterns of cultural norms and naturalized practices (Fairclough, 1992) with policy texts and broader political change as found with education reformation (Jacobs, 2006).

**Data Sources.** Seven principals and fifteen teachers in five school districts located in California and Texas participated in this study. These two states were chosen because they continue to redefine policies that serve students who are at risk of dropping out of school as well as offer important similarities of student demographics. The five schools were situated in diverse demographic contexts ranging from less than 50 students to over 300, all with a similar mission, to serve a student population identified as predominantly at risk for school failure. All schools, but one, were majority minority. Two of the schools had a large Hispanic population (83% and

96%) with most students economically disadvantaged (70% and 89%, respectively). The other three schools had semi-equal differentiated demographics among African American, Hispanic, and White populations.

Of the administrators and teachers who participated, critical variation occurred across gender, ethnicity, and experience. For instance, four administrators were female and three were male, one African American, two Hispanics, and four White. All but one administrator had more than 15 years' experience of cumulative administrative experience. Eleven of the teachers were female and four were male. Furthermore, of the 15 teachers, two were African American, two Hispanic, nine White, and the ethnicity of the remaining two teachers was classified as *Other*. The teaching experiences and courses taught by these participants varied as well.

**Data Collection.** Data collected included (a) governmental artifacts of state policies addressing at-risk students, district policy pertaining to dropout prevention/recovery, state/federal accountability measures for alternative education, campus/district accountability documents, student academic progress templates, school brochures, school websites, and newsletters/newspaper articles; (b) school observations consisting of various scenarios of administrator/teacher/student interaction (office, classroom, before school, after school, transition periods, community meetings), faculty meetings, and when available school/community socials; and (c) interviews conducted with all participants.

**Data Analysis.** A discourse analysis process became the unit of coding wherein the participants' interviews became the primary unit of analysis. Policy text and observations became the secondary unit. The interviews were analyzed in a number of phases. A discursive logic following Kenway (1990), Taylor, Rizvi, Lingard, and Henry (1997), and Gale (1999) mapped the interconnectedness between policy as text—the “what”; policy as ideology—the “why”; and policy as discourse—the “how.” By utilizing a discourse analysis methodology, assumptions and motivations of judgments of policy expressed by teachers and principals were revealed. This method is appropriate to studying how educators construct and eventually enact meaning from accountability policy.

## Findings

A number of themes emerged from this study, however, the discussion of this article is restricted to the ways alternative education teachers and principals administer accountability policy. Consistent with McDonnell and Elmore (1983) theorizing about external pressures to comply with policy directives, the researchers equally applied Schepple's (1994) and Stone's (1964) theories relating to how compliance may be socially constructed because of the participants' beliefs, motivations and perceptions of the policy at hand. The themes that emerged from the data included responding to accountability pressures and defining student success. From the literature, we know that the conventional notion of policy implementation may rest on the authoritative nature of policy design that includes mandates, forbid actions or even create incentives for policy actors to comply (Cohen *et al.*, 2007; Vago, 2003). Yet, serious dilemmas for alternative school teachers and principals take place when their beliefs about their students and how best to serve them in an era of accountability are included in the policy process.

**Responding to accountability pressures.** Previous studies (e.g. Hoy & Miskel, 2001) suggest that coping mechanisms are employed to protect and/or insulate schools from external activities

such as federal/state/local policy initiatives. As evidenced through the data, both the teachers and principals in this study worked, albeit in different ways, to minimize the connection between policy and their practice.

For instance, many of the teachers attempted to disassociate themselves from policy by stating their indifference to accountability policy and/or their lack of knowledge concerning the intricacies of said policy. Most certainly, personal feelings regarding accountability emerged from the teacher interviews. It was not uncommon for teachers to share that they did not have a vested interest in the intent of accountability or give credit to accountability policies as a means that prompted any changes to their classroom practice.

One Texas teacher interpreted accountability to mean that test data are more readily available to disaggregate. She reflected on the purpose of disaggregating test data: "Well, we actually look at that data [state test scores] and try to figure out, OK, what were our strengths and weaknesses." But when asked if accountability policy was the driving force to initiate change in classroom practice, then she quickly responded, "No, I really don't think [accountability] is a driving force for those changes. I think that just education is a driving force. I mean it has to be done."

Another teacher, a special education teacher from California, was concerned at the beginning of the interview because, as she shared, "I just feel I don't know as much about [accountability]. When I think about [it], I just think about we have the [state test], the algebra requirement, and other than that I don't know the impact, I don't know."

Administrators on the other hand were far more direct in their responses. In all schools, they were quick to showcase maverick and/or symbolic gestures of resistance in having to include their students in detailed standardized accountability measures. However, interestingly enough, there was no consensus as to their interpretation of why their students had to be included in accountability policy. On one end of the spectrum, an administrator from Texas shared that she believed the policy aim of NCLB and its accountability procedures served as a catalyst to drive action and practice to ultimately achieve academic equity for disadvantaged students.

I have a real problem with not being held accountable, so I think we need to have an NCLB, does it need to be tweaked? Yes. But do we need to have expectation of what schools are able to do with kids? I think we do. Because, I remember when there wasn't [accountability standards] and so if you were poor, Hispanic or economically disadvantaged or lived in certain part of the country, it didn't matter what you learned, nobody cared. Maria

On the other end of the spectrum, at least two of the administrators from California put much effort into creating purposeful distance between their practice and policy.

And this is so educationally unprofessional, I couldn't give a rat's patootie about NCLB. I've been doing this a long, long time. What I think one of the biggest things missing in education is common sense. And you can give me all the NCLB's, all these acronyms, and blahs, blahs, blahs, blahs, blahs, blahs, blahs [melodic]. Sam

However, when examining the percentage of students testing proficient at this particular school, it is important to note that for Sam's school accountability report card, two elements stand out: (a) often the number of students testing per grade level, per subject was less than ten, thus too

small for statistical accuracy to be included and (b) when data were available, the majority minority (Hispanic) and children of poverty subgroups did not score at either the proficient or advanced for ELA, math and history.

**Defining success.** Another theme to emerge from the data was how success is defined for the at-risk student, specifically the measurements principals and teachers used to describe student success. Accountability policy provides standards by which to measure student success, e.g. student achievement measured by state assessments, graduation. However, for the participants, defining success for at-risk students proved to be less standardized and at times ambiguous. While each participant shared stories of individual students who had overcome social and/or personal obstacles, this did not translate to academic accomplishments nor necessarily mean that students had graduated. While these “success” stories were poignant examples derived from students overcoming or managing their “risk” conditions, they often included stories of students *showing up to school, not doing drugs, following the rules, completing so many credits in a given timeframe*. These measures of success became indiscriminate and yet accepted as the norm for the at-risk student. As evidenced from the school accountability report cards, an outcome of having these expectations is that there is no assurance that the students were provided with a set of academic skills.

This proved problematic for some principals and teachers as they attempted to reconcile their expectations of students with accountability standards. For example, one teacher shared:

If I have a kid that sits still for a day and actually reads and writes a little bit, and that is progress over the day before and weeks before, that’s measurement, but I don’t put a number on it.

The principal from the same school acknowledged,

The policy [NCLB] in my words is that each of them [student] is getting everything they need in their education. And then, they are supposed to be able to take these state tests, and pass them to graduate. But, that’s not happening. Students are not all graduating. They may finish their course work, but they can’t pass the state test.

## **Conclusion**

By examining accountability policy in conjunction with teacher and principal practice, helps to deconstruct what it means for a student to be at risk and enrolled in an alternative school. The findings from this study have demonstrated that situating policy implementation with teacher and principal, as policy actors, within a specific educational environment allowed the discourse of risk to emerge. In turn, how risk is defined, and addressed is evident in the themes of how teachers and principals respond to accountability policy as well as how success is defined. Traditional accountability indicators used to measure student success are quietly debated and eventually shadowed by an educator’s attempt to distance themselves, their school and their students from accountability policies. In turn, while the concept of risk is both defined and prominent in policy frameworks, the teachers and principals, in this study, drew on their own constructs of risk to reveal a narrow definition of equity for an already disadvantaged population of students.



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