

ABSTRACT

DISSERTATION: Addressing the needs of underserved high school students in alternative schools.

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DATE: JULY 2020

PAGES: 150

Graduation rates are used in state school accountability models to grade the effectiveness of school districts. Indiana politicians and educators have made suggestions on how school districts should best meet the needs of students. This dissertation focused on how school districts meet the needs of underserved students in alternative settings.

The Self-Determination Theory by Deci and Ryan (2016) was used as a lens to view student perspectives for this case study. Self-Determination Theory suggests that students need to feel autonomous, related to the school environment, and competent in achieving their goals. These three needs were the basis for which qualitative methods were used to collect data. Three students were interviewed and observed interacting with teachers and other students in one Indiana alternative school. Using a narrative inquiry approach, the goal was to understand how three students describe their experiences while attending an alternative school. To triangulate the data obtained through student interviews and observations, teachers were interviewed and school documents were analyzed. After analysis of the data, three themes emerged as important to students: teacher-student relationships, student experiences, and complexity of resources.

Students revealed that they valued the positive relationships, social experiences, and motivational interactions which made them feel a sense of belonging and confidence.

The findings and implications of this qualitative case study suggest ways schools and policy makers may investigate in the effort to provide the needs of students in alternative schools. The dissertation surfaces the student perceptions regarding their experiences.

Keywords: alternative education, underserved students, student perspective, Indiana

