

ABSTRACT

DISSERTATION: An analysis of the effects of an autonomy supportive teaching environment on adult alternative education students who have experienced trauma and their confidence in graduating from high school.

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Alternative education teachers (AETs) have the unique challenge of educating alternative education students who often have experienced suspensions, expulsions, extensive truancy issues, pregnancy, poor behavioral conduct, or involvement with the juvenile justice system (Atkins & Bartuska, 2010; Cable et al., 2009; Greer & Dunlap, 2020). Many alternative education students have experienced severe trauma which has prevented them from achieving academic success at the same rate as their general education peers, specifically graduating from high school. The purpose of this study is to understand alternative education students who have experienced trauma, and how building positive relationships with their teachers influences their confidence in graduating from high school. This study targeted a sample of adult alternative education (18 years or older) students who are enrolled in Indiana alternative education programs and schools at the high school level (grades 9-12). The ACE study (Felitti et al., 1998) and the Learning Climate Questionnaire (Black & Deci 2000) were both used to understand the extent of trauma and the influence of the teacher-student relationship in the alternative education classroom. Forty-seven percent of the students in the sample reported experiencing at least three

or more ACEs. Correlation and regression analyses indicated that there was a strong positive relationship between students who have experienced an autonomy-supportive teaching (AST) environment and high school graduation confidence, in spite of the extent of trauma. However, as the number of ACEs increased, the participant's confidence in graduating on time, with their intended cohort decreased. Consequently, having an AST environment can influence their confidence in their ability to eventually graduate from high school. These findings implicate a need for an extended-cohort graduation rate for alternative education students, a separate accountability system for alternative education programs and schools, and additional support and resources for ensuring alternative education teachers are providing an autonomy-supportive environment.

Keywords: alternative education, alternative education teachers, alternative education students, autonomy supportive teaching, adverse childhood experiences