THE ESSENCE OF ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE LIVE EXPERIENCES OF AT-RISK ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

What do the lived experiences of at-risk high school students reveal about the essence of alternative education? This phenomenological study sought to reflectively examine the experiences of at-risk students who are being educated in a large, Type II, alternative school in South Carolina. The research participants are high school students--grades 9-12--who have spent at least one year in a traditional high school setting and at least one year in the County Alternative Program (CAP). The literature review highlighted the historical role of high schools in the United States, the role of high schools, high school redesign and the evolving role of alternative schools serving at-risk students. The review of literature also identified effective alternative school programs. The literature review helped the reader to understand the current state of affairs related to alternative education and how such affairs are connected to the socially constructed themes participants revealed in the study. The researcher used qualitative methodology such as individual interviews and focus group interviews to organize participant data into thematic statements that reveal the essence of alternative education. This study, based on student perspectives, is not meant to be a prescriptive fix for the ills associated with alternative education. It is meant to open streams of dialogue about alternative education. Through increased dialogue, those in educational leadership may be led to consider student experiences in addition to student behavior and academic performance as they make decisions about alternative education programs.