Definitions of alternative education are as varied and multifarious like that of alternative programs (Holzman, 1997). This is attributable to the fact that alternative education is not really a new form of education but a variation only in terms of program and setting. Hegener and Hegener (1988) define the idea of alternative education as a deviation from the traditional form of education. This working definition, however, poses a problem as soon as questions on “what kind of deviation” and “how much deviation” are raised.

According to Foley (2009), alternative education programs can be defined as individualized opportunities designed to meet the educational needs for youth identified as at risk for school failure. In addition, alternative programs fall into one of two categories – a program with an emphasis on disciplinary action/remediation, commonly referred to as a DAEP, or a program with an academic emphasis, designed to address the academic needs and deficiencies of the student. Programs in both categories are designed to meet one of two outcomes – a successful return to the traditional school setting or completion of the high school graduation requirements (Lange & Sletten, 2002).

These programs can encompass a wide variety of educational settings, both within the public school setting and out, utilizing various instructional delivery methods. Some programs are entirely computer-based, some entirely classroom-based, and some a hybrid of online/classroom learning. Furthermore, some programs focus only on the academic life of a student, while others take on a more holistic approach and address other needs that a student might have – such as childcare, healthcare, and employment (Quinn, Poirier, Faller, Gable, & Tonelson, 2006).

Considering the concept of alternative education in its broadest sense, it must comprise all learning opportunities that are within the walls of the K-12 educational system (Aron, 2006). In other words, academically speaking, alternative education is a curriculum in itself because it consists of all the learning activities that students will get to undertake in the traditional form of education. These activities include schooling at home, GED preparatory programs, charter schools, special programs for gifted students, and others of similar nature.
On the negative side, Powell (2003) claimed that alternative education is the term used to label programs taken by at-risk students. It has a negative impact on the overall view of alternative education because seemingly it is designed for underachievers associated to the term “risk”. After all, if these students are good enough to succeed in the traditional setting, there is no need for an alternative setting. This means that alternative education has been linked to youth who failed in their schooling before (Katsiyannis & Williams, 1998).

The term “failing students” has really a negative impact on the integrity of alternative education. On the same note, Aron (2006) observed that many alternative education programs are viewed as systems with much poorer quality than the prevailing K-12 educational program. This observation is still aligned on the negative impact that unsuccessful students bring into the general perspective of alternative education.

On the positive side, however, alternative schools are challenged to improve unsuccessful students academically leading to innovative and creative alternative education programs. Because of the negative perception that alternative schooling is less desirable and that it yields less substantive outcome due to its association with unsuccessful and at-risk students, its proponents must be eager to develop a more viable approach that will address the needs of the students.

References
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