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Title: What happens when "bad" kids get "good" curriculum: a case study of an alternative education program for retained students

This postcritical ethnographic case study explores what occurred during and resulted from an alternative education program designed for students who had been retained in the seventh- or eighth-grade. Using discourse theory and the work of feminist curriculum theorists, the study sought to identify the ways in which the discourse of risk positioned program participants through the formal curriculum as well as how participants created counternarratives to such positionalities through the enacted curriculum.

This study addresses a gap in the research which exists at the intersections of retention, credit recovery, and alternative education. While a plethora of quantitative research details the deleterious effects of retention, few solutions to such problems are offered. Most research aimed at addressing the effects of retention focus on preventative programs or interventions, meaning that students who have already been retained are offered few if any programs to assist them in finding school success. Both credit recovery and alternative education are likely arenas for developing retroactive programming for retained students, but doing so requires revising current practices in those fields. This study offers one possibility for designing and enacting such programs.

An examination of program structures and parameters reveal the ways in which the discourse of risk shaped participants’ experiences and imposed specific positionalities. Interviews with program participants indicate that the experience held meaning for them in three arenas: academically as a student, emotionally as an individual, and collectively as members of an affinity group. Program participants stress the need for curriculum to address both their academic selves as well as their social-emotional selves, and as the lead teacher I explore how curricular or program design attempted to develop students’ agency in order to support both their academic and social-emotional growth.