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“I was treated like a person and not a lost cause” Young people’s experience of an alternative to school exclusion

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Introduction: Students with special educational needs (SEN) are diverse and mainstream schools are finding it challenging to include them successfully. Inclusive education is an approach that expects schools to adapt to students’ needs but students with Emotional Behavioural Disorder (EBD) may find themselves in alternative education outside of the formal compulsory education system.

Objectives: The purpose of the study was to gain an understanding of the experiences of young people when attending an alternative school that specialises in working with students with serious behavioural issues. The International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF) was used as a theoretical framework.

Method: A qualitative approach was used and ten interviews were taken with nine former students attending the school during the years of 2000-2010. Data collection lasted over a period of one year in 2015. Data analysis was supported by grounded theory processes of coding and identification of evolving themes.

Results: The participants’ experience of the alternative school was generally positive. However, sweet success was often preceded by blood, sweat and tears. The major finding was the impact environmental factors had on improvements in learning and behaviour of the former students and the importance of the integration of caring teacher/student relationships, appropriate teaching strategies and diverse curricula into the learning process.

Conclusion: There is a need for real alternative education for students with behavioural issues and it must be borne in mind that changes in student behaviour are likely to occur as a result from adaptations to the student’s environment.