Title: "The Relationship of High School Students in Inclusive Settings: Emotional Health and Academic Achievement"

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Publication Date: December, 2010

Abstract:

Academic success has become increasingly important in determining future quality of life. Many educational programs and institutions at various levels stress the need for students to score well on standardized tests and other methods of evaluation, in order to demonstrate their knowledge of various concepts and skills. The relationship between emotional health and academic achievement focuses on how the emotional well being of students directly relates to the how well a student performs in school, while also addressing numerous challenges.

In particular, this study focused on students with learning disabilities in an urban setting and the daily challenges that they encounter while striving to live and succeed both personally and academically. Students come to school often carrying more than just their backpacks. Issues stemming from violence in their homes or communities, as well as the threat of harm in route to, from, and during school are a regular occurrence. The heightened state of arousal common to youth who grow up around various types of violence and the threat of violence may experience difficulty in cultivating relationships and suffer from lower self-esteem.

Introduction

Prior research has shown an increase in the importance of academic success and achievement in determining future earning potential, job attainment, and overall quality of life. Educational programs and institutions at the primary, secondary, and collegiate levels increasingly focus on some form of grading and stress the need for students to score well on standardized tests and other methods of evaluation in order to demonstrate their knowledge of academic concepts and skills.

The importance of performance and proving student ability is most prevalent in the high school and setting, which is where college acceptance reviews generally obtain the necessary data for selecting incoming students (Andrews, 2010). The effect of emotional health on the academic achievement of high school students in Inclusive Settings focuses on how the emotional wellbeing of students directly impacts their performance in the academic setting, in addition to how well a student with disabilities performs in school, while also addressing the numerous challenges associated with the adolescent experience and the existence of some level of disability.

Young people in general, journey through a myriad of emotional, physical, and intellectual growth during the years they spend in both primary and secondary school. Students who have disabilities must deal with the same challenges of adolescence as their general education peers, in addition to those that impact their ability to learn, create, and maintain friendships whether inside or outside of the school setting (Andrews, 2010).

Students with disabilities often experience shame and fear related to performing in the self-contained setting, where they are judged by peers with similar levels of skill and ability, but when placed in inclusive settings, where they feel that they are required to work through their specific social, emotional, and academic obstacles in the presence of students who are perceive as having a higher level of academic ability than they have, the feelings of inadequacy can increase significantly (Carver, 2000). Students with disabilities also respond to the attitudes and treatment of teachers in the academic setting. Many acknowledge experiencing feelings of inadequacy due to the awareness that all general education teachers who would not otherwise be responsible for teaching, are in fact opposed to the overall idea of inclusion (DeCuir-Gunby, 2009).

Many students with disabilities tend to act out when faced with uncomfortable scenarios, while others simply withdraw from the experience, into what may be referred to as a sort of shell. Whatever the coping style or mechanism chosen, it can become cause for concern. Whether the student opts to act out in an inappropriate or disruptive fashion, or withdraw from the academic experience overall, it may be costly, in that the student misses out on valuable instructional time and information presented or causes classmates to lose instruction as well (Stallard, 2002).

The federal government of the United States has taken steps to assist students in the form of special programs, designed to help students with disabilities, it must be at least mentioned that The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) passed in 2001, was designed and implemented with the purpose of closing the achievement gap with regard to accountability, flexibility, and choices, so that no child is left behind academically. It mandates that each state develop basic skills assessments for all students, to be administered on specific grade levels in order to obtain funding for public schools (Dowdy, 2004). Students with disabilities are often at higher risk of developing depression and suffering from performance related anxiety. Either condition may be present regardless of the setting. The Individuals with Disabilities Act, known as IDEA is responsible for providing all students with what is considered free and appropriate education in the least restrictive environment (LRE) (Dowdy, 2004).

The least restrictive environment is an academic placement that is as close as possible to the general or regular classroom setting. It allows the learning disabled student to receive the maximum educational benefit possible while providing the opportunity to learn in the same overall style of academic environment as students enrolled in school without disabilities (Dowdy, 2004).To counter the effects of emotional adjustment and development in the academic setting, various styles of academic delivery include: concepts known as Collaboration-Consultation, Co-Teaching, Inclusion, and Pull-Out are integrated into school schedules. Co-Teaching is a cooperative teaching style in which two or more teachers with like credentials work together in a single classroom and simultaneously provide instruction to groups of students containing both special education students and general education students in a coordinated and meaningful fashion. Inclusion provides that students attend schools in their home district with like aged and grade level peers, and not be isolated in special classes or wings with the school building. Pull-Out, as the name suggests; involves physically removing students from the general education classroom setting for brief sessions to address specific academic needs individually (Dowdy, 2004).

The Individualized Education Program (IEP) is a key element of the special education process and is required by law, specifically the passing of public law 94-142, which is also known as PL94-142. The frequency, nature, and setting of services provided to a student, must be listed in and prescribed according to the Individual students IEP. According to The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), An IEP must be composed based on information collected during a comprehensive assessment created by a group of professionals and others knowledgeable of the student being discussed. When referring to students who have reached the age sixteen years or older, the IEP must also provide an appropriate transition plan, outlining the student's plans and options for life beyond the secondary school period. Parental involvement is also mandatory until the student reaches the age of eighteen years, which is also known as the age of majority, at which point, he or she may become legally responsible for themselves and capable of making relevant decisions independently (Dowdy, 2004).

According to IDEA 2004, Collaboration-Consultation is a model that consists of close working relationships between both general and special educators. Specifically, they work to design a sequence of goal oriented tasks, focused on improving the working relationship that exists between colleagues. The model can be initiated by either an individual or group. The use of Consultation and Collaboration in an Instructional environment refers to the relationship and communication that exists between the various education professionals who provide both direct and indirect services to a student, and the regularly shared exchanges between these professionals and in use with older students, the student contributes and participates, relative to a variety of issues, including, but not limited to; academic performance, grades, behavior, and student concerns (Stallard, 2002).

Collaboration has become increasingly common in special education due to its use of group effort in working with students to diagnose and effectively solve problems related to disabilities as well as providing greater success in dealing with students who have both learning and behavior problems. It encourages planning evaluation, and modification to success in placements relative to transition; enables general education classrooms to be more compatible with the needs of students with special needs; provides personal and professional supports to education professionals; facilitates professional growth helps teachers to identify ways of accessing knowledge, expertise, and skills of other teachers.

Advantages to Collaboration and Consultation include, collective effort in helping students to become successful, enhanced professional relationships, learning to identify the strengths of others, combining skills to create increased accessibility to students with disabilities, working to ensure that transition planning is effective for students, and facilitates communication between all parties involved. The specialized settings and methods used within those class settings provide an acceptable degree of social, emotional, and academic support to students who find it difficult to function in either of the settings for any reason. The guidelines set forth in IDEA 2004 provide a means of coping that is beneficial to all students involved, as well as a means for teachers to address the wide range of needs that are generally present when providing the unique services necessary for the success of any child, particularly those who have been diagnosed with learning disabilities (Stallard, 2002) .

The impact that students with learning disabilities have on the overall academic environment is often riddled with references to behaviors that negatively affect the school and classroom atmosphere, as well as the quality of education received therein. However, the reality is that many disabled students lack the knowledge, skill, and self-control necessary to succeed without proper supports (Andrews, 2010). It is often not that the student means to be disruptive, or cause problems for other students, or the teachers, but rather, that they are unaware how to get their needs met and resort to actions aimed at relieving stress and providing an escape (Andrews, 2010).

Statement of the Problem

The Effect of Emotional Health on the Academic Achievement of High School Students in Inclusive Settings focuses on students with learning disabilities in an urban setting and the daily challenges that they encounter while striving to live and succeed both personally and academically.   In particular, the emotional health and maturity of the students and it the effects that it has on their academic performance are under investigation. Students come to school often carrying more than just their backpacks.

Issues stemming from violence in their homes or communities, as well as the threat of harm in route to, from, and during school are a regular occurrence. The heightened state of arousal common to youth who grow up in and around various types of violence and the threat of violence may experience difficulty in cultivating relationships and suffer from lower self-esteem, all of which has the potential to greatly impact their ability to learn and perform effectively.

The likelihood of students with emotional and behavioral disabilities being placed in general education classrooms to receive instruction is high, however, they are known to regularly pose problems for the teachers who encounter them. Among the major problems related to students with emotional and behavior disabilities in the academic setting is the affect that they tend to have on the overall learning environment. They not only inhibit their own academic success in many ways, but may also negatively impact the ability of others to learn as well. Accessibility to appropriate services is in large part influenced by the way in which school faculty and staff responds to students with these types of disabilities.

Collaboration is an important tool for making free and appropriate education accessible to all students with disabilities. In order to provide proper instruction to students with emotional and behavioral disabilities, teachers must collaborate in the development and implementation of appropriate lessons and proper intervention strategies as well. Consistency on the part of instructors and families are extremely important to the success of students with emotional and behavioral disabilities.

In addition, adaptation of the general education classroom, to accommodate students with emotional and behavior disabilities, versus the more restrictive alternative settings allows for equal access to education, with less expense, when compared to the separate and more restrictive alternative environment (Barrett, 2006).

Methodology

The study included thirty participants. Thirty students from an urban school district, attending the same school were selected based on homeroom teachers the assignments of students occurred prior to the beginning of the study and had no relationship to the researcher or

the study in any way. They were randomly placed into two groups, which were labeled Emotionally Stable/Healthy and Emotionally Unstable/Unhealthy. Students were given a researcher prepared survey during the first week of school and were advised to answer all questions truthfully. In addition, students received a letter informing parents of a pre-school year meeting that would assist students and parents in becoming acclimated to the new academic year and new policies governing the school.

Students were monitored during the fall semester and, with their grades collected for the first grading period, beginning with the first day of school through the start of the second marking period. Each student was placed into the inclusive classroom setting per their personal IEP, and was then monitored in the natural setting without any artificial controls employed for the sake of the study. The only alterations used were those relative to the function of the classroom and had no relation to the study or the researcher. The students were unaware that they were being studied based on their emotional state, but rather were under the impression that they, along with their parents, were expressing their satisfaction with the progress achieved during the first grading period. The overall goal of the study was to determine whether the emotional health of these students affected the performance and level of academic achievement obtained by study participants.

General student behaviors were observed and documented on a daily basis, using both teacher and researcher observations on an alternating basis. All behavioral infractions taking place on school grounds were also noted. In addition, any tragedy taking place within the community outside of the school building, which could have had a possible effect on student behavior, mood, attendance, or home, was noted. Any behaviors occurring immediately after or prior to an event was noted as well. Parents and students alike were encouraged to share any feelings that they desired to share, which they thought may have had an effect on academic performance at any given time.

The study participants all were in their junior year of school and lived in communities located near the school, and had experience with community and school violence either directly or indirectly. Study participants also had similar levels of parental involvement in their academic careers. Each of the students were receiving special education services through their school, but were enrolled in general education classes, with the use of accommodations and modifications outlined in their Individualized Education Plan (IEP). Due to legal limitations on information shared about the nature of a student's disabilities, the researcher was provided with little information about the students, other than, first name and grade level.

 Results

Study participants were given an initial survey on their feelings regarding the importance of education and academic achievement and what they thought was necessary to achieve academic success. Their responses reflected an overall sense that school and academic achievement was important to future success. They were given additional surveys on a bi-weekly basis and subjected to observations on a daily basis by either the researcher or teacher on an alternating basis, which was shown to have been influenced by conditions both within and outside of the school building. Students who were in some way directly related to violence in their communities, or those having notable family problems were more likely to be absent from

school and suffer mood swings indicative of depression. In addition, they needed more interventions from the school's guidance staff, and were also more likely to have behavioral problems, than those who were not directly related to violence and did not have any notable family problems. Students who have had a closer relationship with members of the community in vicinity of the school are more likely to be associated with violence. Those who lived outside of the immediate area tended to have a higher rate of emotional health and less negative behaviors that impacted academic performance and achievement.   It was also noted that relationships with parents and extended family members outside of the general school district had a more positive influence on students overall.

Conclusion

Students who were members of the community closest to the school were impacted in a more negative way and as a result suffered more challenges to their emotional health and stability then students who lived outside of the immediate school community. The students having the greatest negative affects to their school performance seemed to mirror those who were affected by violence in the home or overall community. Students with the most negative experiences according to responses on surveys and behavioral related disciplinary referrals were also more likely to skip classes or be absent from school.   In few cases, students who were exposed to negativity in the school and community were more persistent in their pursuit of academic success and worked harder to earn high scores and praise from teachers.

Implications for the larger student population suggests that students will show more negative responses to negative experiences and suffer more emotional impact when compared to peers with fewer challenges in areas of their lives having greater potential for causing emotional stress.

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