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From Diapers to Diplomas: Supporting At-Risk Students and Reducing the Dropout Rate

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Abstract

Supportive adults wield great influence over adolescent decision-making practices. Counselors, teachers, and administrators who appear caring and accessible are important factors in the retention rates of at-risk students in the P–12 educational system. In this article, the dropout rate, risk factors, theoretical implications, and specific strategies that school counselors, teachers, and administrators can use to decrease dropout rates among at-risk students are discussed.

Keywords: at-risk students, dropout rate, school counseling

Seven percent of students drop out of high school each year, and rates are higher for students of color (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2014). This is concerning for the 7.3% of students categorized as African American and 11.7% of students categorized as Hispanic since a positive correlation exists between educational attainment (diplomas/degrees/certification earned) and income (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2014). Students who leave school prior to completion at any level stand to make less money than those who persist to completion. These students also have lower rates of employment compared to their contemporaries (U.S. Department of Labor, 2012). For example, individuals between the ages of 25–34 not completing high school had a median annual income that was \$6,400 less and were employed at a rate 13% lower than those who completed high school (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2014; U.S. Department of Labor, 2012). This trend is also true for individuals who begin college and leave prior to obtaining a degree (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2014; U.S. Department of Labor, 2012). School counselors are on the front lines when combating the dropout rate and need strategies to guide their practice. In this article, risk factors for students who drop out of high school will be discussed. These risk factors include factors such as grade repetition, limited English proficiency, criminal delinquency, and homelessness. We continue the article with theoretical considerations and strategies for school counselors to employ in assisting these students.

Risk Factors

Researchers have discussed factors that impact a student's odds of graduating high school (e.g., Allensworth, 2004; House, 1989; Jimerson, 2001; Reynolds & Ou, 2010; Roderick & Nagaoka, 2005). For example, students with a history of academic failure are at higher risk for leaving the P–12 educational system without a diploma (Allensworth, 2004; Jimerson, 2001; House, 1998; Roderick & Nagaoka, 2005). Likewise, students who have limited English proficiency, problematic behaviors exhibited at school, or non-traditional living conditions struggle with academic success (Fabelo et al., 2011; Rumberger & Lim, 2008; Whitbeck, Crawford, & Johnson, 2009).

Academic Non-Promotion

Retention, “flunking,” “being held back a year,” or other forms of non-promotion have a negative effect on the educational resilience, socioemotional health, and future economic advancement of students (Jimerson, 1999, 2004; Ou & Reynolds, 2010; Reynolds & Ou, 2010). Moreover, researchers suggest that retained students experience few academic advantages as a result of mandated extra time in the same grade. Instead, these students grow restless with the educational environment and become disruptive, unengaged, and inattentive (Jimerson, 2001; Martin, 2009, 2011; Pagani, Tremblay, Vitaro, Boulerice, & McDuff, 2001; Scott, Rock, Pollack, & Ingels, 1995; Temple, Reynolds, & Ou, 2004). Overwhelmingly, students who experience mandated retention come from economic backgrounds that are on the lower end of the socioeconomic status spectrum and are considered racial or ethnic minorities (Bali, Anagnostopoulos, & Roberts, 2005; Blau, 2003; Blau, Moller, & Jones, 2002; Orfield, Losen, Wald, & Swanson, 2004).

English Language Learners

Additionally, students with limited English proficiency are at a heightened risk for dropping out (Rumbaut, 1995; Rumberger & Lim, 2008). According to the National Council of Teachers of English (2008), an English language learner is defined as an “active learner of the English language who may benefit from various types of language support programs” (p. 2.). Approximately 4.4 million students are considered English language learners (Ross et al., 2012) and, despite an increased focus on integrating students classified as English Language Learners, students with this designation continue to exhibit trouble assimilating to the culture within the educational system (Bartolomé, 2003; Fry, 2003; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 1995; Velasco, 2007). Some students who are considered undocumented immigrants have added legal stressors and inherent issues with making future plans (Andrews, 2013). Moreover, students who are in pursuit of English proficiency tend to struggle academically (Boyson & Short, 2003; S. Flores, Batalova, & Fix, 2012).

Problematic Behavior

Likewise, students with previous exposure to disciplinary actions via the school code of conduct or the criminal justice system (e.g., suspension, expulsion, probation, etc.) are more likely to leave the P–12 educational system without having a diploma or other sign of successful completion (Fabelo et al., 2011; Texas Education Agency, n.d.). Fabelo et al. (2011) found that 83% of African American male students, 70% of African American female students, 74% of Hispanic male students, and 58% of Hispanic female students had at least one disciplinary action for a discretionary violation. Their research results indicated that 31% of all students who were expelled or suspended repeated a grade at least once and were considered at risk of dropping out compared to those with no exposure to the discretionary discipline system.

Non-Traditional Living Conditions

Homelessness during adolescence also has profound and detrimental effects on the academic development and achievement of youth (Aratani & Cooper, 2015; Rubin et al., 1996; Whitbeck, Crawford, & Johnson, 2009; Zima, Bussing, Forness, & Benjamin, 1997). The *McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act* defines homeless youth as those who do not have a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence. Additionally, this definition includes youth who share housing with others, or “double up”, as well as those who live in a private or public space that is not designed for, or used as, regular accommodations for human beings (U. S. Department of Education, 2002). As a result, homeless youth may also include runaways.

Students in the juvenile justice system are said to have educational deficits prior to their entry (Southern Education Foundation, 2014). Additionally, students entering the juvenile justice system tend to have significant academic challenges, struggle with learning delays as a result of learning disabilities, and often present with psychological or emotional problems (Southern Education Foundation, 2014). In a recent survey conducted by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, (as cited in Southern Education Foundation, 2014), 38% of students entering the juvenile justice system were diagnosed with a learning disability, 25% repeated a grade, nearly 50% were below grade level in learning, and over 60% were suspended or expelled from school.

There should be no surprise that only 9% of students in the juvenile justice system were granted GED certification or a high school diploma and that only 2% of students were either enrolled or accepted into postsecondary education programs.

Theoretical Connections

Maslow's (1954) hierarchy of basic needs is a well-known, clearly established framework for understanding human motivational needs. When integrated with Miller's (1976) relational cultural theory, an explanation evolves encompassing how humans interact socially to meet basic needs. In the following section, we apply concepts from both theories to assist school counselors in gaining a better understanding of the students they serve.

Hierarchy of Basic Needs

Abraham Maslow (1954) asserted that human activity is best understood through meeting basic needs. He proposed a hierarchy of basic needs ranging from foundational (physiological) to symbolic (self-actualization). He further proposed that the more complete the satisfaction a person has at a level, the more likely he or she is to desire higher order needs. Maslow referred to his view of basic human needs as physiological needs (encompassing the need for sleep, food, to breathe, and homeostasis of bodily functions); safety needs (involving the need for safety within the physical environment, emotional and psychological environment, income or finances, health, and stability and routine); love and belonging needs (including the need for affection, friendships, romantic relationships, and connection); esteem (consisting of the need for self-respect, self-worth, respect of others, prestige, and achievement); and self-actualization needs (involving the need for creativity, the ability to problem solve, and fulfilling one's perceived purpose). Abraham Maslow (1954) referred to self-actualization as "What a (wo)man can be (s)he must be" (p. 382).

Implications for students. The academic achievement of students is linked to the status of their mental and emotional state, and students experiencing emotional distress or non-academic cognitive challenges thus tend to fall short of their academic and educational potential (Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan, 1991; Knitzer, 1999; Roeser et al., 1998; Short, Gradisar, Lack, Wright, & Dohnt, 2013; Sznitman, Reisel, & Romer, 2011). Students from impoverished neighborhoods struggle to meet basic needs far more than those in the population at large (Coleman-Jensen, Nord, & Singh, 2013; Patel, Grandner, Xie, Branas, & Gooneratne, 2010; Wright, Chau, & Aratani, 2014). This struggle allows little time for hierarchical advancement beyond the basics.

Physiological and safety need deprivation. Coleman-Jensen et al. (2013) found that of the 49 million Americans living with food insecurity, 15.9 million are children under the age of 18. Approximately 16 million students live in families who struggle with poverty and food insecurity and, of those, 44% experience some form of energy insecurity (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2013; Wright et al., 2014). Further, 1.6 million students experience some form of homelessness each year (National Center on Family Homelessness, 2009). Students who are exposed to the challenging reality of an impoverished home environment can find themselves sleep deprived (Patel et al., 2010). Additionally, students who are homeless are at an increased risk for exposure to and

involvement in acts of violence (Crawford, Whitbeck, & Hoyt, 2011; Gaetz, 2004; Kipke, Montgomery, Simon, & Iverson, 1997; Tyler & Johnson, 2004).

Love and belonging and esteem need deprivation. Students who feel ostracized and isolated by peers, teachers, or the overall school climate are more likely to struggle academically and act out (Hall-Lande, Eisenberg, Christensen, Neumark-Sztainer, 2007; McNeely & Falci, 2004). Twenty-eight percent of students in grades 6–12 have experienced bullying, and 20% of high school students in grades 9–12 have been victimized by bullying (DeVoe & Bauer, 2011; Gladden, Vivolo-Kantor, Hamburger, & Lumpkin, 2014; Kann et al., 2014). Between 8–15% of students have reported being the target of electronic aggression (Kann et al., 2014; Williams & Guerra, 2007), and approximately 7% of students have experienced intimidation as a result of their peers having a weapon on school campus (Kann et al., 2014). Additionally, an estimated 8% of students in the United States have been involved in a physical fight at school and around 7% of students have not gone to school because they were concerned about their safety (Kann et al., 2014).

Friendship variables also have a profound impact on academic achievement, school involvement, and esteem needs (Wentzel, Barry, & Caldwell, 2004; Wentzel & Caldwell, 1997). Children who lack positive peer interactions are at an increased risk for academic disengagement and isolation as a result of emotional distress (Kingery et al., 2011). Researchers (e.g., Berndt, 1999; Kingery, Erdley, & Marshall, 2011; Reynolds & Repetti, 2008) suggested that students who are not satisfying their esteem needs through peer respect struggle to produce academically. For example, in their study of 365 students, Kingery et al. (2011) found that peer variables accounted for up to 15% of the variance of academic achievement with peer acceptance being the most prominent variable.

Self-actualization deprivation. Students who struggle to meet their basic physiological needs tend to struggle with more advanced cognitive processes and exhibit impaired cognitive performances. These impaired cognitive performances include such facets as creativity, mental flexibility, and problem solving (Alhola & Polo-Kantola, 2007; Curcio, Ferrara, & De Gennaro, 2006; Horne, 1988). Additionally, students who struggle to find creative outlets at school tend to struggle to remain engaged and connected to the school environment (Whitlock, 2006). For example, in the analysis of student engagement, Whitlock (2006) found that students felt stronger school connectedness when they had an opportunity for meaningful input in school policies. In addition to advanced cognitive processes, self-actualization affects the morals that a person adheres to and identifies with (Maslow, 1954). Students who struggle to develop a sense of morals do so at the risk of isolating themselves from the school civic environment (Hardy, Walker, Olsen, Woodbury, & Hickman, 2014; Porter, 2013).

Relational Cultural Theory

Relational cultural theory (RCT) is grounded in feminist theory principles and was established by Jean Miller in 1976. The theory continued to develop at the Stone Institute through the work of Miller's colleagues (Jordan, Kaplan, Miller, Stiver, & Surrey, 1991). Numerous feminist theorists did not agree with the traditional theoretical focus of many approaches that promote self-sufficiency, separation, and individuation as the pillars of healthy psychological wellness and emotional development (Jordan et al.,

1991). Researchers of RCT stated that using the more traditional individualistic approaches to counseling, conceptualization, and assessments lead to numerous incorrect diagnoses and treatment plans for diverse collectivist populations (Jordan et al., 1991; Miller, 1976; Popadiuk & Arthur, 2014; Robb, 2006). RCT, therefore, takes into account individuals' interconnectedness with other people through familial, personal, romantic, and community relationships as well as other external factors associated with those relationships (Jordan, 2010).

One of the driving forces of RCT is the belief that mutual empathy is crucial in the development of healthy, growth-fostering relationships. These relationships encourage individuals to be more aware and open to new learning (Jordan, 2001, 2010). RCT suggests five outcomes associated with the presence of growth-fostering relationships, including: a sense of enthusiasm; enhanced self-understanding and understanding of others, and relationships; development of sense of worth; increased capacities towards productivity; and a stronger desire to be connected with people (Jordan, 2010; Miller & Stiver, 1997). When growth-fostering relationships are formed and sustained, individuals, through a relational context, are able to enter into the third level of Maslow's (1962) hierarchy of needs, which helps significantly reduce problematic behaviors like excessive need for control, suspicion, and aggression (Brammer & MacDonald, 2003).

Goicoechea, Wagner, Yahalom, and Medina (2014) reported that at-risk youth engaged in growth-fostering relationships are able to learn to group problem solve, increase their emotional vocabulary, experiment with communication styles, and have an increased sense of purpose. Researchers suggest growth-fostering relationships benefit everyone from the students themselves to their peers, family, mentors, and their surrounding communities (Banerjee & Yuill, 1999; Flouri & Buchanan, 2003; Gibson & Jefferson, 2006). These relationships lead to increases in student self-concept, psychological well-being, development and maintenance, and consequently, academic success and college readiness (Banerjee & Yuill, 1999; Flouri & Buchanan, 2003; Gibson & Jefferson, 2006).

Despite theoretical understanding on the importance of relationships, basic needs, and other factors, at-risk students need interventions using theoretical or research based premises. The intersection of the third level of Maslow's (1962) hierarchy of needs and the growth-fostering relationships discussed in RCT marks an important consideration for school counselors, educators, and administrators alike. When at-risk students have the relational connectedness of growth-fostering relationships, they have the tendency to experience greater levels of achievement in academic environments (Banerjee & Yuill, 1999; Flouri & Buchanan, 2003; Gibson & Jefferson, 2006; Goicoechea et al., 2014). By proactively incorporating programs and initiatives that are aimed at increasing meaningful growth-fostering relationships with at-risk or near at-risk students, a community can engender, develop, and maintain success.

Recommendations

Social support and belonging in the school system may be one of the most important factors involved in disadvantaged students' achievement motivation and engagement (Bowen, Richman, Brewster, & Bowen, 1998; Finn, 1989; Gutman &

Midgley, 2000; Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko, & Fernandez, 1989). Supportive adults who encourage students toward prosocial behaviors have the ability to influence the decision-making process of children and adolescents regarding a variety of things (L. Flores & Obasi, 2005; Khan, 2013; Wentzel 1998, 2002, 2009a; Wentzel et al., 2004; Wentzel & Caldwell, 1997). Students with supportive adults in their lives tend to be more academically engaged, civic minded, willing to persist through challenges, academic and otherwise, and more inclined towards prosocial behaviors (Spivak, & Farran, 2012; Wentzel, 1998, 2002, 2009a; Wentzel et al., 2004; Wentzel & Caldwell, 1997). Perceived support from adults has a negative effect on psychological distress, meaning the more connected to adults students feel, the lower their levels of distress (Wentzel, 1998, 2002, 2009a). As a result, school counselors can serve as supporting adults and bridge connections between students, teachers, parents, and peers.

One of the first things counselors can do to build internal motivation in students is to find out what each student values and communicate how the philosophy of the classroom and the school at large works with those values. Following are nine recommended and specific strategies school counselors, teachers, and administrators can use to build supportive relationships and decrease the dropout rate.

Meeting Physiological and Safety Needs

Teachers, administrators, and counselors can build programs to help students deal with needs for food and energy. For example, schools can provide or refer students for help in attaining snacks, laundry facilities, water, and other such items. This recommendation has the potential to meet basic physiological needs as described by Maslow (1954).

Since students are in need of a safe place to experience growth and development, teachers and counselors can build a sense of safety in the classroom by taking a culturally inclusive approach to classroom civility. For example, counselors can train teachers how to best meet the needs of students who have shifting values and may need additional support. Further, counselors can create a system to ensure that each student has at least three positive school-based adult mentors with whom they can interact. These positive interactions develop strong relationships with teachers and peers, thus enhancing feelings of safety and belonging (Deci et al., 1991; Knitzer, 1999; Roeser, Eccles, & Strobel, 1998; Short et al., 2013; Sznitman, Reisel, & Romer, 2011).

Meeting Love and Belonging and Esteem Needs

As a warm-up assignment to a guidance lesson, counselors could have each student write about what they value most in various situations. For example, a student might write, "I like that we get to choose the book we read in our literature class." These writings (with student permission) could be shared with faculty and choices implemented whenever possible within classroom environments. In this way, things worked on in one classroom can be transferred to others, meeting the esteem and self-actualizing needs through creativity and respect from others (Wentzel, 2002; Whitlock, 2006).

As a small group topic or guidance lesson, counselors can have students discuss how their values line up or conflict with classroom and school philosophies. Class discussions could ensue resulting in an understanding of what is/is not beneficial at school. For example, a student might write that he/she does not like that the dress code

does not allow cultural dress. A committee might then be formed between students, teachers, parents, and administrators to discuss allowing certain cultural aspects into the dress code. This action enhances student esteem and self-actualizing needs through the resulting respect that accompanies creative thought (Wentzel, 2002; Whitlock, 2006).

Students can provide valuable insight into improving the social and emotional learning environment. For example, selected students can participate in a lunch group to discuss the school climate alongside a sample of students from the entire school population. School counselors can then spend time with small groups of students to understand how needs are being met through the current instructional levels. These meetings can also glean understanding on the social interactions among students, teachers, counselors, and other school personnel. In giving students the opportunity to voice their opinions about the current school climate, counselors allow students the ability to meet their esteem needs while also developing mutual respect (Kingery et al., 2011; Wentzel, 2002, 2009a; Wentzel et al., 2004; Wentzel & Caldwell, 1997).

Mentoring can also be used to develop student success (Froeschle, Ray, & Castillo, 2010). For example, counselors can build a mentoring program whereby community members and people of strong character help students increase academic achievement and social and emotional development while decreasing antisocial behaviors. Further, counselors can work with teachers to identify high character students and build a program that allows older students to work with younger students to increase motivation (Kingery et al., 2011; Wentzel et al., 2004; Wentzel & Caldwell, 1997).

Since school interest and peer support are positively associated with prosocial goals, and students who feel connected to others at school have higher levels of student engagement, school counselors can encourage social interest leading to peer connections (Wentzel 1998, 2002, 2009a, 2009b). For example, students might be encouraged to assist younger students in academic areas, serve on committees offering suggestions to improve academic achievement and student engagement within the school, create tutoring Web sites, mentor younger children, or participate in a variety of other student selected projects. Students can meet their need for love and belonging, esteem, and self-actualization through exercises geared toward building relationships with others, opportunities to receive respect for and from others, and by being creative.

Teachers have the ability to influence levels of respect and connectedness in the classroom. When teachers set expectations and are consistent in that regard, students are more apt to feel safe. Modeling respectful behavior is especially important if youth are to learn the importance of and be able to offer reciprocal respect to the instructor. For this reason, the instructor should attempt to earn the respect of the students they serve (VanderStaay, Faxon, Meischen, Kolesnikov, & Ruppel, 2009). Adults in the educational system are responsible for creating an atmosphere of respect and equitable authority through consistent and fair practices (Jaureguizar, Ibabe, & Straus, 2013). When adults use their influence and powers justly, they create an environment built on respect for themselves as well as their students. Thus, they produce more engaged students in the classroom (Jaureguizar et al., 2013). School counselors must, therefore, encourage and facilitate positive relationships between teachers and students. Froeschle (2009) recommended encouraging teachers to list ways in which students are successful and build upon these successes to improve relationships in the classroom. School counselors use the strategies to demonstrate that teachers do notice inner strengths, positive

behaviors, and that they care about students. The result is a better relationship between teachers and students in the classroom and an actualization of students' love, belonging, and esteem needs.

Meeting Self-Actualizing Needs

Students can benefit from cooperative learning tasks and leadership exercises. Teachers and administrators can work to build opportunities for students to grow together, develop leadership, encourage a sense of morality, encourage flexibility and creativity, and develop a better sense of belonging (Hardy et al., 2014; Porter, 2013; Wentzel, 2002). One example of this form of leadership might occur through an imbedding of service learning activities into the curriculum. These opportunities might include developing a school beautification program, reading to younger children, starting an anti-bullying campaign, and a host of other student/teacher generated projects. This social interest has the ability to permeate the school culture creating a sense of social responsibility.

Another example of this form of leadership might occur through the formation of school groups/clubs. These groups/clubs might discuss values and positive/negative character traits as displayed by popular celebrities and everyday people. These clubs can discuss what is/is not helpful to student success and teach social, emotional, and leadership skills. Through these groups/clubs, counselors allow students to meet self-actualizing needs as they develop and exercise strong moral character in the educational environment (Hardy et al., 2014; Porter, 2013; Wentzel, 2002).

Conclusion

School counselors, teachers, and administrators can decrease the dropout rate and improve academic performance for at-risk students. Creating supportive environments, leadership initiatives, and service learning may be achieved through mentorships, specific assignments, supportive connections, and student-selected projects. Specific strategies that school counselors, teachers, and administrators can use to decrease dropout rates among at-risk students include classroom activities, school-based groups, mentorship, and teacher involvement and training. Implementing these concepts and recommendations can result in the creation of a school environment more conducive to addressing the specific needs of at-risk students. As a result, academic achievement can be impacted.

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Note: This paper is part of the annual VISTAS project sponsored by the American Counseling Association. Find more information on the project at: <http://www.counseling.org/knowledge-center/vistas>