Walden University

College of Social and Behavioral Sciences

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Abstract

Teachers' Perceptions and Efficacy for Addressing the Mental Health Needs of Students

by

Loren F. Dittmar

MSEd, Saint Bonaventure University, 2005

BA, State University of New York, College at Fredonia, 2001

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

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Abstract

Although children's mental health has received considerable attention in educational research, offering valuable insights and interventions for educators, a gap remains between research and professional practice. To gain insight into this problem, the perceptions of educators towards the mental health needs of their students were examined within the framework of Bandura's social cognitive theory. The research questions addressed the types of student mental health needs identified by educators, professional roles in addressing these needs, comparisons between newer and veteran teachers, and the barriers to supporting student mental health needs. The Mental Health Needs and Practices in Schools online survey instrument was used with 278 public PK-12 educators in a coastal Georgia community. Several findings emerged through descriptive analysis. The top mental health concerns reported were overt behaviors (66-81%); whereas anxiety (32%) and depression (20%) were among the lowest ranked concerns. Most educators reported deficiencies in knowledge (59%), skills (57%), and resources (69-71%) to support the mental health needs of their students effectively. No statistically significant differences were found between knowledge and skills ratings of newer teachers compared to veteran teachers. School counselors were considered the lead professionals for implementing interventions, trainings, and consultations. Major barriers to supporting the mental health needs of students were identified. Further study is needed concerning educators' perceptions of school mental health at different stages of their careers and of the integration of evidence-based practices. This study contributes to social change by identifying the need for teachers to receive appropriate mental health training and encouraging the implementation of evidence-based school mental health programs.

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Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to God and my family, for without their support I never would have overcome such an arduous conquest. Our lives are filled with trials and tribulations, but when we rise above and achieve something magnificent, it is undeniable that we are not alone in such triumph. My father, Warren, has been a tremendous source of wisdom in my life, sharing his expertise in education and genuine care for students. His passion has been infectious, particularly through the overwhelming positive impact he has had on so many people's lives. My mother, Pauline, has always believed in me and said that I was destined for greatness. Her love and support have always given me strength to push myself to higher levels. My daughters, Karma, Sahara, and Tecoa, are living reminders of why I am here on this earth—to serve. They inspire me to become the best father imaginable, most especially through modeling a life of value, integrity, education, and faith. My dear wife, Cami, is truly God's greatest gift in my life. I am forever grateful for her unending encouragement, relentless belief in me, and unconditional love. She has held me through my tears, encouraged me with bribes, kicked me when I needed it, and never let me give up hope. She has given me strength when I felt completely drained. She has truly loved me beyond measure every single moment through this journey. It is through these special people in my life and God's grace that I have achieved this goal.

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dark. Careers in education are so much more than employment. They are a passion that instills value, significance, and hope in all areas of life.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

"Those who govern, having much business on their hands, do not generally like to take the trouble of considering and carrying into execution new projects. The best public measures are therefore seldom adopted from previous wisdom, but forced by the occasion." – Benjamin Franklin

The United States of America was established with the foundation of freedom, and the essential aspect of this freedom is education of its citizens. The people of the nation need to be well educated to ensure that the ideals of the founding fathers are maintained through literacy, morality, intelligent election of democratic leaders, and further development of national industry. For over 200 years, this country has continued to thrive on the essence and dream of individual freedom and success. In this new millennium, the people of the United States may still have their freedom, but the flattening of the world's economy and the competitiveness of the job market require U.S. citizens to be better educated and more equipped to maintain leadership in the world (Darling-Hammond, 2010b). While there are very successful people within the United States, there are also many who live in a constant struggle to obtain even the most basic ideals of freedom, including a quality education and a stable job to provide for themselves and their families. With an economy of increased unemployment and the highest poverty rates among children of industrialized nations (Darling-Hammond, 2010b), more youth in the United States are suffering from a lack of a positive, supportive upbringing to provide them with the necessary skills to create a change in their

destined way of life. The number of young people dropping out of school and involved in criminal activity has increased over the last 10 years. Miller, Fitch, and Marshall (1999) reported that 25% of all students drop out of high school, with an increase to 50% in poor urban high schools, and that 3 million students and teachers are victims of crime each month. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), these rates have not improved significantly. The NCES (2013a) reported that although the overall dropout rate decreased from 12% in 1990 to 7% in 2010, the average freshman graduation rate (AFGR) throughout the nation in 2009 was only 75.5%, which was a slight rise from 73.7% in 1990 (NCES, 2013b). Granello and Hanna (2003) reported increases in the incarceration and criminal activity of youth, which cost society between 1.7-2.3 million dollars for each adolescent over a lifetime. These statistics support the need for positive and effective interventions to assist at-risk youth throughout the nation with finding alternatives to a life of poverty and crime.

The term *at-risk* has been defined as applying to youth who come from single-parent homes, who show signs of emotional or behavioral problems, and who lack the support to navigate developmental tasks successfully (Keating, Tomishima, Foster, & Alessandri, 2002). Henderson-Sparks, Paredes, and Gonzalez (2002) recently defined *at-risk youth* through review of literature as youth having such characteristics as a "short attention span, patterns of behavior problems, poor self-image, low socioeconomic status, language impairment, cultural deprivation, and discipline problems, as well as second language learners, and non-achievers" (p. 80). While these definitions are broad and encompass a large number of children throughout the nation, it is valuable to

acknowledge the diverse afflictions that negatively impact the trajectory of this nation's youth. The focus of this study was the mental health aspect of at-risk youth, which will be further described in Chapter 2.

The consequences of students dropping out of school are very costly, not only to the students, but to society as well. High school dropouts are more likely to obtain low-skilled, low-paying jobs, experience health problems, and engage in criminal activities (Martin, Tobin, & Sugai, 2002). Without a high school education, their opportunities are restricted and their ability to move up the ladder of success is limited. With increased health problems while on lower paying jobs, the likelihood of obtaining proper health care is diminished as well. It is a cyclical pattern of poverty and unhealthy living that eventually leads to higher costs for the national economy. The consequences of criminal activity include legal ramifications, which may involve lawyer fees, costs for imprisonment, and healthcare costs of inmates. All of these consequences ultimately fall on the shoulders of the average taxpayer because dropouts are much more likely to become dependent on welfare, Medicaid, and other government programs (Martin et al., 2002).

Although the number of at-risk youth continues to climb, there has been a plethora of research conducted on this population that has been beneficial for understanding the current issues these youth face and promoting resilience to their damaging environments. Researchers have shown that children and adolescents who maintain positive expectations for the future and engage in future planning are less likely to experience psychological and social problems later in life than those who do not

(McCabe & Barnett, 2000). The challenge for professionals who work with at-risk youth is to discover and implement effective methodologies that will promote positive growth and development so that they can lead productive, healthy lives in society. According to Sprague, Walker, Stieber, Simonsen, and Nishioka (2001), "it is important that decisions about which type of prevention programs and interventions are most needed and which children and youth should be targeted for services, be based on empirical data rather on unfounded opinions or historical practices" (p. 197). There are numerous empirically-based programs and interventions available to professionals working with at-risk youth, which will be described in more detail in Chapter 2; however, the extent to which American teachers are aware of this research and how confident they are in working with at-risk students is currently unknown.

Problem Statement

Although there has been extensive empirical research focusing on mental health care for school-aged children within the past couple of decades informing the educational profession about fostering resiliency among youth at risk of mental health diagnoses, there is a gap between research and professional practice (Schaeffer et al., 2005). The prevalence of mental health problems among children under 18 years old is estimated to be 20% or one in five (World Health Organization, 2011), and only a small percentage of youth who are diagnosed are being served (Schaeffer et al., 2005). With the persistent high dropout rates and increased criminal activity among America's youth (Bridgeland, Dilulo, & Morison, 2006), it is critical to determine whether or not teachers are well informed about the current empirical data and effective teaching methods with youth at

risk of mental health diagnoses. It is not known whether the research is being transferred effectively and what is preventing these methods from being implemented in current practice. Therefore, it is necessary to gather data directly from teachers about their level of academic preparedness and sense of competency in working with this population. If the research is not being effectively transferred to teachers, there are major implications for educational reform.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research was to examine public school teachers' perceptions of current mental health needs at the primary through secondary school levels. The focus was three-fold: (a) to evaluate teachers' attitudes and perceptions of the mental health needs in their schools, (b) to assess teachers' knowledge, training, and experience for supporting the mental health needs of their students, and (c) to identify the barriers to addressing these needs within the school environment. In addition, part of this investigation was an examination of teachers' perceptions of their roles versus those of other professionals within the school to address the mental health needs of students. A final area of inquiry for this investigation involved comparing the responses of teachers with differing levels of experience and education to determine whether there has been a trend in recent teacher education toward increased mental health knowledge and skills. While there is an abundance of research on the subject matter of at-risk youth and effective interventions, high dropout rates and increased criminal behavior among the nation's youth continue (Bridgeland, Dilulio, Streeter, & Mason, 2006). This study was designed to investigate the disconnection between educational research and professional

practice in schools based on the reports of in-service teachers, comparing the variables of (a) mental health needs and practices in schools; (b) knowledge, skills, and training; (c) barriers to supporting mental health needs; and (d) roles of school personnel. With the increased national focus on mental health, it was expected that teachers would report that schools should be involved in addressing the mental health needs of students, but the roles of teachers might be considered quite limited and other professionals (such as school psychologists and counselors) would be identified as the primary respondents for these issues.

Nature of the Study

An online cross-sectional survey was used for this study. As indicated by Creswell (2003), "a survey design provides a quantitative or numeric description of trends, attitudes, or opinions of a population by studying a sample of that population" (p. 145). This study examined the perceptions of teachers regarding issues of school mental health using the Mental Health Needs and Practices in Schools Survey (Reinke, Stormont, Herman, Puri, & Goal 2011). The findings from this sample add to the literature concerning the gap between research and professional practice within the scope of school mental health. The survey method was the most practical and economical means for data collection for this study, especially given the rapid turnaround and quick functionality of the online format. This quantitative procedure was appropriate for gathering the type of data needed to assess teacher attitudes and perceptions, which were effectively summarized using statistical analysis. Specifically, the types of mental health concerns identified by teachers, teacher knowledge, training, and experience supporting

mental health, areas of need of additional training, and barriers to services were provided descriptively. Participants' perceptions of various roles for managing the mental health needs of students were illustrated through descriptive analysis. Paired *t* tests were conducted to compare the knowledge and training of veteran versus newer teachers.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

The following research questions and hypotheses have been derived from the review of existing literature in the area of school mental health and teacher preparation. There will be a more detailed discussion of the nature of the study in Chapter 3.

Research Question 1: How will public school teachers identify and rank major mental health concerns and services in their schools?

Null H_1: Teachers will report low percentages of major mental health concerns and services in their schools, as measured by the Mental Health Needs and Practices in Schools Survey.

Alternative H_1: Teachers will report high percentages of major mental health concerns and services in their schools, as measured by the Mental Health Needs and Practices in Schools Survey.

Answered through Survey Questions 3, 4, 14, 17, and 18.

Research Question 2: What are teachers' perceptions about their roles in addressing the mental health needs of their students versus the roles other professionals in their schools?

Null H_2: There is no difference between teachers' views of their roles and their views of other professionals' roles (e.g., social workers, school counselors, school

psychologists) in addressing mental health needs, as measured by the Mental Health

Needs and Practices in Schools Survey.

Alternative H2: There is a significant difference between teachers' views of their

roles and their views of other professionals' roles (e.g., social workers, school counselors,

school psychologists) in addressing mental health needs, as measured by the Mental

Health Needs and Practices in Schools Survey.

Answered through Survey Questions 8, 12, 13, 19, and 24-29.

Research Question 3: What is the nature of the relationship between teacher

experience and education and their reported roles and levels of competence addressing

the mental health needs of students?

Null H3: There is no difference between teachers' reported roles and levels of

competence managing the mental health needs of students, when comparing their levels

of experience and education, as measured by the Mental Health Needs and Practices in

Schools Survey.

Alternative H3: There is a significant difference between teachers' reported roles

and levels of competence managing the mental health needs of students, when comparing

their levels of experience and education, as measured by the Mental Health Needs and

Practices in Schools Survey.

Answered through Survey Questions 5, 6, 7, 9, 10, 11, 12, 19, 20, and 24-29.

Research Question 4: What barriers to supporting mental health needs in their

schools do teachers report?

Null H$_4$: There are no barriers identified by teachers to supporting mental health needs in their schools.

Alternative H$_4$: There are barriers identified by teachers to supporting mental health needs in their schools.

Answered through Survey Questions 15, 16, 17, 18, and 20.

Theoretical Constructs

This study used Bandura's social cognitive theory (SCT) as the theoretical construct. SCT "adopts an agentic perspective to human development, adaptation, and change" (Bandura, 2002, p. 269), which includes the interactions between personal agency, proxy agency, and collective agency that vary cross-culturally. Bandura explained, "to be an agent is to influence intentionally one's functioning and life circumstances" (p. 270). In other words, human development is influenced by the various factors that interplay in one's life, including personal intentions, environmental factors, and group processes. Central to this theory is the concept of personal efficacy (described later), which is also key to understanding the role of teachers' attitudes and perceptions as they relate to students at risk. Bandura (1993) explained, "teachers' beliefs in their personal efficacy to motivate and promote learning affect the types of learning environments they create and the level of academic progress their students achieve" (p. 117). Furthermore, Bandura's theory focuses on the interdependence among individuals, not only within a localized social and cultural context, but also from the perspective of globalization. This is particularly important for educational professionals. This study

focused on school mental health needs as perceived by teachers, which is why SCT was a suitable theoretical construct.

Definition of Terms

At risk: The term *at risk* has been defined as applying to youth who come from single-parent homes, who show signs of emotional or behavioral problems, and who lack the support to navigate developmental tasks successfully (Keating, Tomishima, Foster, & Alessandri, 2002). Henderson-Sparks, Paredes, and Gonzalez (2002) recently defined *at-risk youth* through review of literature as youth having such characteristics as "short attention span, patterns of behavior problems, poor self-image, low socioeconomic status, language impairment, cultural deprivation, and discipline problems, as well as second language learners, and non-achievers" (p. 80). Resnick (2000) provided a comprehensive definition of *adolescents at-risk* as the following: "a segment of the population that under current conditions has a low probability of growing into responsible, high-functioning adulthood" (p. 159). For the purposes of this study, the term *at risk* encompasses all of these definitions, with the specific added component of having a clinical diagnosis of a mental health disorder (i.e., ADHD, depression, conduct disorder, bipolar disorder, etc.) or being at risk of developing a mental health disorder.

Teacher efficacy: Teacher efficacy (TE) is a form of self-efficacy, as described by Bandura's social cognitive theory (Bandura, 2002). TE is "an individual teacher's expectation that he or she will be able to bring about student learning" (Ross, Cousins, & Gadalla, 1996, p. 386).

Resiliency: Thompkins and Schwartz (2009) offered the following definition: "Resilience is a complex phenomenon that refers to the process of constructive human growth and development emerging from successful adaptability and healthy coping skills" (p. 35).

Assumptions

This study was predicated on the assumptions that the sample of certified educators asked to complete the survey would (a) agree willingly to participate; (b) answer the questions honestly, frankly, and to the best of their knowledge; (c) complete all questions of the survey; and (d) be representative of certified educators throughout southeast Georgia.

Limitations and Delimitations

A limitation of this study was the use of self-administered questionnaires to measure teacher perceptions, training, and knowledge of mental health concerns in schools. A more accurate reading of these relationships might have been obtained by interviewing teachers using open-ended probes. In addition, this study involved sampling from one state, particularly from one small district within the state of Georgia. This convenience sampling method is a threat to external validity. Many of the teachers who completed this survey were likely trained by teacher education programs within Georgia. Therefore, the results may not generalize to educators throughout the nation. However, the findings add to the research initiated by Reinke et al. (2011), offering further analysis of teachers' perceptions of school mental health. In particular, I investigated responses from all grade levels, whereas Reike et al. only surveyed preschool and elementary level