Chapter 9
Interagency Collaboration to Improve School Outcomes for Students With Mental Health Challenges

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ABSTRACT

Students with significant emotional-behavioral concerns and mental illness tend to experience poor educational and social outcomes. This chapter describes some of the challenges facing schools that are responsible for educating students with and at-risk for mental health challenges. Although some students encounter numerous risks, thereby increasing the chances of developing mental illness and failing school, there are also protective factors that can be identified and harnessed to counterbalance such risks and promote higher levels of resilience. By examining relationships among factors such as poverty, mental well-being, family engagement, resiliency, and school performance, a school-focused, community-based framework is suggested for responding to and overcoming these challenges. This chapter provides practical guidelines for schools, community agencies, and families to work together to support and engage young people who are at-risk for school failure due to emotional-behavioral concerns and mental health challenges.

INTRODUCTION

Partnerships among families, schools, and communities can be created and harnessed to support academic achievement for students with mental health needs (e.g. Adelman, & Taylor, 2006a; Adelman & Taylor, 2006b; Anderson, 2002; Conwill, 2003). Practitioners and researchers alike are now calling for a broader focus on collaborative efforts in schools and children's social services that include

prevention, in addition to targeted early and intense interventions, across child-serving systems (e.g., education, health, child welfare, etc.) (Anderson & Cornell, 2015). The significance of this chapter is that it provides a practical orientation for schools and community agencies to work together, along with families, to successfully engage students, particularly young people who are at-risk for school failure due to emotional-behavioral concerns and mental health challenges. First, the chapter describes some of the challenges facing primary and secondary schools that are responsible for educating students with mental health challenges by examining the interconnected relationships among poverty, mental health, and school performance. The authors then argue that in this field, much of the research base examining academic failure has been limited by focusing on risk factors, often to the exclusion of critically important individual variation within subgroups of children with and at-risk for mental health challenges. While such research has uncovered important risks that correlate with school failure, our narrow attention on risks has reduced our ability to understand how resiliency influences academic and social development.

Once a better understanding of risk and resiliency has been established, the second goal of this chapter is to provide a practical guide for developing interagency prevention and intervention approaches, designed to bring together the entire community resource pool to reduce the number of students who fail in school due to unmet mental health needs. Interagency collaboration has been defined as "the process of agencies joining together for the purpose of interdependent problem-solving which focuses on improving services to children and families…" (Hodges, Hernandez, & Nesman, 2003, p. 292). Current policy implications supporting school-based interagency collaboration also are presented. It is further argued that by using resiliency within a collaborative model consisting of individual, family, community, and school assets, effective pedagogical and social approaches can be applied that allow young people with and at-risk for mental illness to succeed in and out of school. A number of well-known preventative and early intervention models are described. Finally, some specific steps for creating models of interagency collaboration are discussed.

BACKGROUND

Although the relationships between school functioning and mental health challenges are not fully understood (Epstein, Nelson, Trout, & Mooney, 2005), scholars have suggested wide-ranging interactions among school and non-school factors may be at fault, which can include clinical, familial, and environmental variables (Anderson, 2011). Explanations for the poor academic achievement for students with emotional challenges have included (1) poor grades leading to aggression; (2) aggression leading to poor grades; (3) a reciprocal relationship between poor grades and emotional challenges; and (4) other underlying factors that cause both poor grades and emotional challenges (Epstein et al., 2005; Barriga, Dorans, Newell, Morrison, Barbetti, & Robbins, 2002). Adelman and Taylor (2006a; b) described a continuum with causes from environmental factors, causes coming from within the person, and a transactional view caused by an interaction between the environment and the individual.

STUDENTS WITH MENTAL HEALTH RISKS

In the United States (U.S.), students with mental illness often have been labelled by the mental health community as having *serious emotional disturbances* and/or by schools as having *emotional disabilities*[1]

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