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Assessing the Social, Emotional, and Mental Health Needs in Urban High Schools to Support Academic Achievement

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ABSTRACT

The ability for students in K-12 academic settings to learn can be significantly impacted by their overall social, emotional, and mental health needs. Needs assessments must be conducted to better determine and understand the social, emotional, and mental health needs of students in academic settings. Using a survey-based approach, this study examined the social, emotional, and mental health needs of high school age students in an urban school setting. Survey design and item development were informed by prior research. The results of this study showed discrepancies between what students identified as areas of need versus teachers' observations of the needs of the students. Implications for practice are discussed to further support the importance of assessing the social, emotional, and mental health needs of students in urban school settings.

Keywords: urban school settings, needs assessments, social and emotional health, mental health

Introduction

- An investment in assessing related needs, prevention strategies, and intervention services can help with students' overall development and personal well-being to make them productive members within the community and beyond.
- The literature suggests that addressing social, emotional, and mental health concerns in a school setting can have a significant impact on academic achievement (Reback, 2010; Whiston, Tai, Rahardja, & Eder, 2011).
- Before addressing the social, emotional, and mental health needs of students, however, a thorough assessment must be completed to determine what the needs are so that programming can be designed to address those needs.
- Unique needs in urban school settings that students, teachers, and administrators face must also be taken into consideration. (Act for Libraries, 2017).
 - Schools in urban settings often deal with a lack of funding
 - Limited number of experienced teachers and support staff
 - Challenges with parental engagement
 - Overall, hardships that students face due to their environment
- This study assessed the needs in an urban setting at the high school level.

Approaches & Assessments

For this study, the researchers used data from a needs assessment that was modified from the Positive Behavioral Interventions and Support School Climate Survey (La Salle, McIntosh, & Eliason, 2016). The survey included questions pertaining to social, emotional, and mental health needs, as well as the school climate needs, of students and teachers. The students were asked to number their top five concerns pertaining to school, and the teachers were asked to do the same based on their observations. The students were also asked about suicidal ideation and traumatic experiences that they had in the past academic year.

Results

Ranking	9th Grade Concerns	10th Grade Concerns	11th Grade Concerns	12th Grade Concerns	Teacher/Staff Identified Concerns
1	Bullying	Dealing with anger	Grief over the loss of a friend or loved one	Bullying	Conflict management
2	Dealing with anger	Bullying	Peer pressure	Dealing with anger	Dealing with anger
3	Personal safety	Personal safety	Dealing with anger	Conflict management	Grief over the loss of a friend or loved one

Analysis & Results

The chart above shows the top three areas of concern identified by students and teachers/staff in an urban setting. The students also answered questions pertaining to traumatic experiences they had witnessed in the past 12 months and suicidal ideation. The study showed that 22% of the 9th graders, 14% of the 10th graders, 17% of the 11th graders, and 10% of the 12th graders reported having suicidal thoughts. The students were asked about their traumatic experiences since they started high school. Findings revealed that 54% of the 9th graders, 59% of the 10th, 72% of the 11th graders, and 71% of the 12th graders had experienced at least one traumatic event throughout their high school career.

Discussion and Implications for Practice

Researchers have discussed the importance of mental health services for students within the academic setting and the impact that services can have on students academically, socially, and emotionally (e.g., Reback, 2010; Whiston et al., 2011). Assessing the social, emotional, and mental health needs of students and implementing strategies to support those needs can have a significant impact on academic achievement. This study explored the social, emotional, and mental health needs of high school age students in an urban setting. The study found that students at all grade levels were concerned about dealing with their anger. The second most commonly identified need was bullying. Other identified needs were grief and loss of loved ones, peer pressure, personal safety, and conflict management. The main area of concern identified by teachers/staff was conflict management, which was only identified as a top-three need by one other group: 12th graders. Even though the students and teachers identified several similar concerns, the rankings of the concerns per group differed. These differences must be taken into consideration when designing programming for students and professional development for teachers and staff. In addition, this study found that over half of the student body had suffered a traumatic event, and many students reporting having suicidal thoughts at some point during their high school career.

Following are implications based on results from the study that can be implemented to support students in urban settings socially, emotionally, and mentally.

- Assess the social, emotional, and mental health needs of students in urban settings.
- Screen specifically for suicide ideation and discuss resources available to support students in crisis.
- Develop and implement professional development opportunities for teachers, administrators, and staff based on the findings of the student assessment.
- Inform parents/guardians about the social, emotional, and mental health needs of students in urban settings.
- Identify social, emotional, and mental health resources that are available in the school and community and provide a list of those resources to stakeholders (students, parents/caregivers, teachers, staff, and administrators).
- Teach social skills to students that will support them academically, socially, emotionally, and mentally.

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