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Bret Range
University of Wyoming

Mary Alice Bruce
University of Wyoming

Suzanne Young
University of Wyoming

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School Counselors' Perceptions about Interventions for At-Risk Students Including Grade Retention: Implications for School Leaders

Bret Range¹
University of Wyoming

Mary Alice Bruce
University of Wyoming

Suzanne Young
University of Wyoming

The term *at-risk* is used by educators and policymakers to describe a wide variety of students who struggle in schools (Kronholz, 2011). Factors associated with labeling students at-risk include minority status, poverty, language difficulties, low school attendance, and poor family support (Reglin, Akpo-Sanni, Losike-Sedimo, 2012; Stockard, 2010). For many at-risk students, reading at a proficient level is a primary concern for school leaders and teachers (Allington, 2011; McAlenney & Coyne, 2011), especially with increased accountability including school sanctions for not closing reading achievement gaps (Chappell, Nunnery, Pribesh, & Hager, 2011). Although a plethora of interventions have been proposed to assist at-risk students, requiring students to repeat a grade continues to be used as a threat for students who are not proficient, despite evidence that suggests grade retention is detrimental to students on various outcomes (Battistin & Schizzerotto, 2012; Webley, 2012).

As researchers study educators' perceptions about interventions for at-risk students, they typically focus on school leaders and teachers, those directly responsible for planning interventions and allocating instructional resources (Kronholz, 2011; Lane, Pierson, Robertson, & Little, 2004). Not to be overlooked, school counselors are instrumental in supporting at-risk students (ASCA National Model®, 2012; Ryan, Kaffenberger, & Carroll, 2011; White & Kelly, 2010) and measuring their perceptions about interventions for low performing students is an important research endeavor. Because school principals are charged with creating intervention frameworks to support at-risk students (Johnson & Perkins, 2009), it makes sense for school principals to engage school counselors in this process as they are instrumental in fostering the academic and social needs of all students. The first step in this process is for school principals to understand how school counselors perceive various interventions for at-risk students. As a result, the purpose of this study is to ascertain school counselors' perceptions about interventions for at-risk students, including retention.

Research Design and Methods

This study used an online survey to measure school counselors' perceptions and was designed to answer the research question: What are school counselors' perceptions about possible

¹ Dr. Bret Range can be reached at brange.uwyo.edu.

interventions for at-risk students? The survey was sent to a random sample (N=2929) of members of the American School Counseling Association (ASCA) who were practicing school counselors across the United States, and 338 counselors responded to the survey, a response rate of 12%. Participants average years of school counseling experience was 11.35 years. Additionally, 173 were secondary counselors (middle, junior high, or high school) and 157 respondents were elementary counselors.

The online survey was created by the researchers and asked school counselors to select interventions they believed benefitted at-risk students. At-risk student characteristics included: (a) emotionally immaturity, (b) physical development delayed in comparison to peers, (c) social, emotional, and or behavior difficulties, (d) poor academic performance, (e) lack of motivation, and (f) English Language Learner (ELL) linguistic difficulties. To ensure interventions included on the survey were reliable and credible, the researchers relied on expert reviewers who were knowledgeable and experienced regarding interventions counselors might recommend for at-risk students. Interventions on the survey included: (a) retain, (b) involve parents, (c) refer to special education, (d) provide counseling, (e) refer to administrator, and (f) recommend summer school. The survey concluded with one open-ended question that asked school counselors to describe supports in place for retained students.

Findings

Counselors were asked to select interventions they believed were appropriate for various types of at-risk students. Table 1 displays the interventions selected by counselors for each type of at-risk student at either the elementary or secondary level.

Table 1***Counselors' Perceptions about Intervention for At-Risk Students***

At-Risk Characteristic	Interventions											
	Retain		involve parents		Special education		Provide counseling		Refer to admin		Summer school	
	E	S	E	S	E	S	E	S	E	S	E	S
Emotionally immature	25	23	153	156	8	7	132	140	19	16	33	33
Physical developmental delay	4	9	105	107	37	36	40	62	19	11	10	13
Social difficulties	5	2	148	151	14	19	151	160	25	33	11	9
Poor academic performance	45	67	154	157	88	79	90	116	47	49	122	128
Poor attendance	14	28	151	158	2	4	105	112	119	120	71	87
Lack of motivation	4	12	156	157	15	21	148	157	60	64	46	58
ELL issues	6	4	141	135	18	24	41	66	44	53	90	82
TOTAL	103	145	1008	1021	182	190	707	813	333	346	383	410

Note: E=elementary counselor; S=secondary counselor; respondents could select more than one type of intervention for each characteristic

Overwhelmingly, both elementary and secondary counselors selected parent involvement as the most appropriate intervention for all types of students at both levels (elementary n=1008; secondary n=1021) and selected parent involvement as the most appropriate intervention for six of the seven types of student characteristics (emotionally immature; physical development delay; poor academic performance, poor attendance, lack of motivation, and ELL issues). For students who had social difficulties, elementary counselors (n=151) and secondary counselors (n=160) believed individual counseling was the most appropriate intervention. Conversely, both elementary and secondary counselors selected grade retention as the least appropriate intervention for at-risk students (elementary n=103; secondary n=145).

With the open-ended items, the primary objective in coding items was to utilize frequency analysis to determine themes commonly held in school counselors' responses. Coding was done individually by each researcher and then collaboratively until agreement was reached about common themes. *Communicating with Parents* and *Tailoring Strategies for Individual Students* were the themes that emerged related to interventions for at-risk students.

Communicating with Parents

Counselors consistently referred to the crucial need to communicate with parents as soon as their child's struggles begin. Counselors purported that parents can be helpful to find specific aids for a student, and parents need to be involved early in the problem solving process as educators discuss ways to support a struggling student. According to one counselor "underlying issues contribute to unsuccessful academic performance" and communication with parents can offer understanding of pertinent information and circumstances. Too often a teacher may visit extensively with other educators in the building before contacting parents to alert them as to a worrisome situation and explore helpful ideas together. Other counselors agreed, noting that "If parents do not support a decision for their child, then it will be unsuccessful." Numerous counselors purported that early elementary school may be an appropriate time for parents and educators to make any retention decision rather than wait until the later school years.

Meanwhile, high school counselors consistently emphasized the unlikely occurrence of retention for their students. Many stated, "We do not retain in our high school." The reality is that students fail and repeat classes, as compared to any type of purposeful retention decision with parents that moves a student back an entire grade level. Several high school counselors exclaimed that grade retention chosen in high school "...is a mistake." One counselor illustrated the point by saying "I have seen that 19 year old juniors do not tend to graduate. Counselors need to find the root of the problem and involve the student and parents in the solution." Another representative comment was, "The older the child is when retained, the more likely for behavior problems to follow academic problems." Another counselor noted, "The stigma of being held back never goes away." Finally, other counselors commented that "The kids lose motivation," and

“...retention is highly correlated with dropping out.” Clearly, counselors do not support the idea of grade retention at the secondary level.

Acknowledgement of extenuating family conditions emerged from the counselors' ideas of wraparound services that could help meet children's basic needs such as food, shelter and medical issues. Counselors suggested a variety of “outside community agencies” and “social services” to provide “home-based intervention” to help families and “socially and economically disadvantaged children.” As one counselor wrote, “Providing more support at home can often alleviate issues at school.” At the same time, another counselor suggested, “Parents should be held accountable for excessive absences of their children in the early grades,” and “mandatory parent involvement” should be required. Parenting skills classes that assist parents in taking responsibility were also mentioned. Overall, counselors seemed to believe that once the basic needs of parents and children have been met, the focus can move to the child's academic and social/emotional health.

Counselors identified district policies as a means to set the foundation for respectful communication and expectations among stakeholders, including parents. While some counselors stated that parents should be members of the decision making team early in the process, others believed that parents should have absolute veto power related to the final retention decision. In general, counselors desired broad policies that would allow retention decisions to be tailored by a collaborative team to individual children and families rather than following a process dictated by rigid, narrow district or school policies.

Tailoring Strategies for Individual Students

Once a retention decision has been made, counselors offered a variety of ideas to support the student. The great majority of respondents asserted the need to tailor ongoing strategies to fit the individual student's needs and circumstances. Top priority was gathering together everyone who might be helpful in creating a comprehensive, specific plan of support for the student. Initially, some kind of “health screening or medical check with a pediatrician or eye doctor can be part of the solution,” commented one counselor.

Meanwhile, a few counselors offered the reminder that sometimes a student could be lagging due to an array of developmental issues, thus very early retention in preschool or kindergarten could provide a fresh start academically without social/emotional stigma or need for significant follow-up. Retention in the very early years often yields students who then, noted one counselor, “are on target with their new peers” and need little monitoring. “There isn't always a plan,” concluded another counselor. On the other hand, many counselors were firm in their perspective that students retained after the early elementary years struggle and need careful “monitoring of academic and social/emotional progress” to optimize a retention decision. Numerous counselors stated that they never or rarely retained students at their school after the early years and instead took action with specific, targeted interventions as part of student services such as required tutoring with the Title I staff members, Response to Intervention (RTI) Tier I or II procedures, and Credit

Recovery programs. Another suggested the idea of “5th year seniors on a very limited basis,” in keeping with several other counselors’ comments. Counselors working in private schools, magnet schools, and Career Vocational Schools overwhelmingly commented that retention does not happen since those situations are taken care of with academic probation or a student leaving school.

As far as possibilities in control of the school itself, counselors proposed mentoring programs with significant adults and other students to create social engagement and peer-bonding. Other ideas mentioned were rewards, attendance contracts, peer buddies, guided reading groups, support study halls, and time in the learning center. Also available may be opportunities through the school’s RTI process that may support modifications in the regular classroom including differentiated instruction and positive behavior supports. More the half the counselors cited before and after school activities as providing valuable academic assistance as well as, according to one counselor, “social/emotional growth” opportunities. Suggested programs encompassed: homework assistance, individual tutoring, study skills groups, social skills training, positive peer connections via interest clubs, Gear Up, ELL accommodations, and supervised recreation.

Reiterating the idea of finding services to support parents and families, counselors cited social and service agencies in the community. With socio-economic family concerns as a cause for many student challenges, outside help for some families is critical. One counselor commented that the “LARGEST issues are attendance and apathy. Our staff goes to student homes and brings [the students] to school.” In summary, counselors accentuated the need for wraparound services to consider all possible intervention and prevention strategies for each student as a unique individual.

Discussion

Results of this study provide three important conclusions that are highlighted to frame our recommendations for school leaders. First, unlike other perceptual studies (Range, Holt, Pijanowski, & Young, 2012; Witner, Hoffman, & Nottis, 2004), elementary and secondary school counselors did not view grade retention as an appropriate intervention for at-risk students. In fact, grade retention was the least selected intervention to support at-risk students, indicating school counselors’ dissatisfaction with its use. However, in response to open ended items on the survey, elementary and secondary school counselors viewed grade retention slightly differently, because at the secondary level, at-risk students fail classes as opposed to being required to repeat an entire grade. As a result, some counselors in our study viewed early grade retention as less traumatic than retention in the later grades, a finding supported by other researchers (Siberglitt, Jimerson, Burns, & Appleton, 2006). However, this stance ignores longitudinal studies that attribute early grade retention to dropping out of school (Jimerson & Ferguson, 2007; Roderick & Nagaoka, 2006).

Second, school counselors believed parental involvement was the most appropriate intervention for all types of students, a finding that also aligns with other perceptual

studies (Johnson, 1997; Range, Yonke, & Young, 2011). We argue that parent involvement for at-risk students should be much more than parents simply attending parent/teacher conferences or volunteering in classrooms. Parent involvement in schools, especially for the parents of at-risk students, must be designed to mimic what Snow (2002) refers to as personal and cognitive involvement. That is, the school provides parents with the skill development to personally engage and support at-risk students' cognitive or emotional struggles. In addition, collaborative problem solving with educators and parents can alleviate student distress to provide optimal academic and social/emotional support.

Thirdly, school counselors recommended academic or behavioral interventions should be tailored to the individual deficits of each child with several counselors suggesting RTI as the primary framework to do this. Clearly, school counselors understand what others have postulated (Pearce, 2009; Sansosti, Noltemeyer, & Goss, 2010); early intervention coupled with a system of tiered interventions that are research based and implemented with fidelity, is the most systematic means by which to support at-risk students.

Recommendations for School Leaders

Based on our findings, we present two recommendations for school leaders. First, as current school reform initiatives advocate for principals to adopt a distributed leadership style (Spillane, 2005), it makes sense for principals to engage school counselors in creating intervention services for at-risk students. A challenge for principals as they engage counselors in this process is deterring them from thinking early grade retention is an appropriate intervention for at-risk students, as beliefs inform practice (Bonvin, Bless, & Schuepbach, 2008). Counselors in this study advocated for RTI as a promising initiative to assist at-risk students, and researchers argue RTI's expansion might reduce grade retention rates (Range & Yocum, 2012). As a result, principals should engage school counselors as key stakeholders in planning and monitoring interventions for at-risk students. For example, school counselors might: (a) serve as the point person in collecting progress-monitoring data on students receiving Tier 2 or Tier 3 interventions within RTI, (b) be involved in creating formal behavior intervention plans for at-risk students who require emotional support, (c) communicate with parents about the RTI process and how they can actively engage in the process, and (d) be involved in placing students in classes with teachers who will best support their learning styles (Ryan et al., 2011).

Secondly, in this study and others, school practitioners continue to view parent involvement as the most appropriate intervention for at-risk students and for students who might be retained (Range et al., 2012). Goodall (2012) argues that schools should focus less on parental involvement and more on parent engagement. To make this a priority, principals might create a two-part vision for what they believe parent engagement should look like in schools. Part one could include a plan for engaging parents in a meaningful manner while they are at schools and at home. Part two should include professional development for teachers about communicating and engaging parents, especially those

who have students who struggle (Fiore, 2011; Rapp & Duncan, 2012). We recommend this process begin by involving teachers in conversations about barriers parents face when attempting to engage in schools (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011). It is important for school leadership teams to understand that although some barriers are outside the schools' control (socioeconomic status, language, and ethnicity), barriers identified within schools can be overcome by educators who take ownership of the obstacles (Goodall, 2012). Additionally, principals might ask teachers why schools value parent engagement (Harris & Goodall, 2008) because teacher attitudes will greatly influence how parents perceive their own engagement in schools (LaRocque, Kleiman, & Darling, 2011). Clearly identifying why schools value parents and communicating this regularly increases the chances they will engage in their children's learning.

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