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Curricular, Instructional, and Co-curricular Factors Perceived to Influence Students Dropping Out

Kimberly Jones, Ed.D.

Problem

Due to the long-term effects on students and society caused by dropouts, there has been a surge in identifying factors prompting dropouts and dropout prevention efforts. A research gap exists with the practice of identifying specific curricular, instructional, and co-curricular factors that contribute to high school dropouts or the effectiveness of interventions adopted to curtail dropouts.

Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative, descriptive case study was to collect and analyze perceptions of principals', teachers', and counselors' regarding curricular, instructional, and co-curricular factors that can influence students' disengagement and decisions to drop out of high school

Significance

- The significance of the study includes providing
- Research data for district-level policymakers, curriculum and instructional specialists, principals, teachers, and counselors to help them create or modify interventions that are designed to keep students in school and to increase their potential for more successful college or career outcomes.
 - Information that would make it possible to plan curricular support, instructional engagement, and other co-curricular supports to help students choose to finish school.
 - Stakeholders internal and external to the school system specific academic-related factors that have the potential to keep at-risk students engaged in classrooms.

Social Change Implications

The findings of this study may contribute to positive social change by providing educators with learner-centered strategies through a collaborative, flexible blended-learning PD aimed at identifying and assisting at-risk students, resulting in an increase in graduation rates and reduce in dropouts.

Framework

The conceptual framework that guided this study is based on the academic mediation theory posed by (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000) with an added emphasis on student-centered learning,

Relevant Scholarship

Factors relevant to students dropping out include:

- Understanding who drops out and why is essential to identifying factors leading to students being unsuccessful in completing high school and is essential in assisting researchers to identify preventive measures to address the dropout phenomena (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Zuilkowski et al., 2016).
- Poor academic achievement has been shown to be a major contributor to students dropping out (Fan & Walters, 2014; Parr & Bonitz, 2015).
- Knesting-Lund et al. (2013) identified lack of extracurricular participation, curriculum irrelevant to students, and negative influence from peers as dominant dropout factors.
- Each of the five theories posed by Battin-Pearson et al. (2000) have unique factors that lead to students dropping out while collectively attributing dropouts to some aspect of poor academic performance.
- Designing preventive programs requires an understanding of how student achievement and dropouts will allow educators to identify students at risk of dropping out (Zuilkowski et al., 2016).
- Student-centered classrooms support the tenets that actively involving secondary students with planning their education may increase academic achievement and chances of graduating (Cavendish, 2013).

Research Questions

RQ1: How do high school principals, teachers, and counselors identify and monitor at-risk students who are in danger of dropping out due to poor academic achievement?

RQ2: What are high school principals, teachers, and counselors' perceptions of the effectiveness of the curricular, instructional, and/or co-curricular mediations/supports currently implemented or planned to address at-risk students' needs?

RQ3: What do high school principals, teachers, and counselors perceive could be improved curriculum and instruction to further engage and encourage students to stay in school?

RQ4: What co-curricular innovations do high school principals, teachers, and counselors perceive are needed to encourage students to stay in school?

Participants

Purposeful sampling was used to select 2 principals, 5 teachers, and 2 counselors from five high schools in an urban Mississippi school district. The individuals were required to meet the following criteria:

- A member of the districts' Dropout Prevention Team
- A member of the districts Curriculum team
- Employed in the district for five or more years
- Worked as a principal, teacher, or counselor in one of the districts' high schools in the past two years

Procedures

Data Collection entailed the following:

- Qualitative data collection procedure using multiple sources of data
- A sequential data collection approach
- Publicly available district documents related to teaching and learning practices
- Self-developed screening questionnaire to capture demographic data and aid in participant selection
- Semi-structured, one-on-one interviews using self-developed interview protocols with open-ended questions and probing to aid in answering the research questions. Interviews lasted 30-60 minutes
- Classroom observations were conducted using a self-developed observation instrument developed using guidelines by Lodici, Spaulding, and Voegtli (2010). Included descriptive and reflective notes.

Analysis

Data was organized, transcribed, analyzed, and interpreted using inductive reasoning.

- A sequential method was used to analyze and code screening questionnaire data, which was recorded in an Excel spreadsheet for review.
- Microsoft Word was used to initially transcribe interview transcripts and classroom observations. The data was copied into Excel with the responses for each interview question in one column for analysis. Similar words and phrases were coded using different colored text.
- Text segment coding was used to review district documents.
- Thematic analysis was used to identify and categorize emerging themes.

Findings

Four themes emerged that reflected the following findings: a need for building cohesive learning communities and forging collaborative relationships, providing guidance and support for students, being more engaged with students, and providing effective and targeted professional development for educators.

Interpretation

Professional development (PD) is a key mechanism for effecting change in education. Student learning is enriched as teachers are provided effective PD. When teachers and other educational leaders engage in PD together, there is an opportunity to foster knowledge and share information, exchange ideas and develop a team culture. Collaborative professional learning fused with strategies aimed at increasing awareness of at-risk students and providing learner-centered classrooms can effect student achievement; thereby, decreasing dropouts.

Limitations

Possible limitations may include the following: Professional development cannot exclude the mandates for state testing
Being able to maximize participation of parents and community partners
Sample size of the study - did not reflect voices from educators at all seven high schools

Recommendations

Possible recommendations for alternative approaches:

- Embed targeted professional learning opportunities in the schedule throughout the school year with a specific amount of professional development being required for all staff each year.
- Conduct a study to identify non-academic related factors prompting students to drop out. Gather perspectives from parents and former dropouts.

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