

The School Psychologist's Role in Promoting Social-Emotional Learning
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Educational Psychology & Foundations

UNI supports one of two school psychology training programs in Iowa. The UNI program offers a specialist degree (Ed.S), which is the minimum degree required for practice. The University of Iowa has a Ph.D. program that prepares graduates for positions in academia and clinical settings, as well as the schools. We are the three faculty members assigned primarily to the school psychology program, and together we have diverse practice and educational experiences working in traditional public schools, juvenile correctional facilities, detention centers, residential treatment centers and university-affiliated clinics.

School psychologists are trained to help children and youth who experience academic, behavioral, emotional, and social difficulties at school. School psychologists have extensive training in both education and psychology. We spend our days working with students, teachers, administrators and parents. We work within all systems of the school, from the individual level to the district-wide level. We provide assessment, intervention and consultation services for schools at each of these system levels, and because of this extensive role, we are in a unique position to comment on the challenges that teachers face in the classroom and how these challenges relate to teacher training.

Special education inclusion in the least restrictive environment and an emphasis on co-teaching bring a large number of our general education teachers in contact with students who experience behavior and mental health difficulties. Students who face these challenges have a diminished capacity to benefit from the educational curriculum (Rones & Hoagwood, 2000), and the number of students who suffer with social emotional challenges is growing. Approximately 20% of school-age students display the symptoms of a diagnosable mental health disorder, which is an increase from the 16% reported seven years earlier (Burns, Costello, Angold, Tweed, Stangl, Farmer, et al., 1995). Of these students, only 16% receive services to address their difficulties, and 70-80% who receive services do so in the schools (Burns & Hoagwood, 2002). These statistics represent the reality faced by teachers and school practitioners. For example, Nicki worked with a student (we will call him "Joe") who had episodes of depression and difficulties dealing with anger. Joe's family was poor and had few resources. He had no community-based mental health supports. Joe was in several fights during his eighth grade year, including one that ended with him punching through a bus window. He was identified as eligible for special education services due to significant behavior concerns. As part of his program he attended general education classes, where he was frequently frustrated with the work and his peers. Joe improved during the next school year, but only with supports from the school, including support from special education and the school psychologist and accommodations from his general education teachers. While he made improvement, he continued to direct angry outbursts towards teachers on occasion.

Violence towards teachers is more common than you might think. The results of a national survey of teachers conducted by the APA Classroom Violence Directed Against Teachers Task Force Report (2011) indicates that over half of their respondents reported being victimized (harassment, property offense, physical offense) during the 2008-2009 or 2009-2010 academic years. Almost half reported being victimized by a student and 21.4% reported being physically attacked. Violence and bullying towards students is also, unfortunately, a common occurrence. Fifty percent of Iowa students

responding to the 2010 Iowa Youth Survey indicated they had been the victim of bullying in the last 30 days. Only 48% indicated teachers or other adults “almost always” or “often” intervene to stop bullying ([Iowa Consortium for Substance Abuse Research and Evaluation, 2011](#)). Educators must acknowledge the complexity of the behavior and consider individual, family, peer, school, community and cultural factors (Swearer & Espelage, 2010). Addressing individual factors, including student mental health and classroom and school climate are necessary steps in eliminating bullying towards both teachers and students.

There is no doubt No Child Left Behind has had a significant impact on how schools “do business,” and focuses entirely on academics with no attention paid to social-emotional learning. As schools address changing demands, the social and emotional development of our students must remain a priority. In addition to improving social and emotional competencies, school-based social and emotional learning programs have a positive impact on attitudes, behavior, and academic performance (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011). For example, Stephanie worked with a 1st grade student (we’ll call her “Sara”) who experienced severe social emotional difficulties that severely impacted her ability to engage in learning activities. Stephanie worked with Sara in her classroom in order to increase generalization of skills to the setting in which Sara experienced the most difficulty. Stephanie taught Sara positive coping skills and also taught the teacher positive methods for working with Sara and other students like her. Sara’s behaviors related to quality academic work improved, and the teacher came away from the experience with skills she could use while working with Sara and future students with similar behavioral difficulties. Educators must have the knowledge and skill to address social and emotional development as well as academic competencies, and school psychologists can act as models for teachers when working with students who have serious social-emotional difficulties.

In order to meet teachers’ needs in today’s classrooms, which increasingly include students with severe behavior and mental health difficulties, we encourage our colleagues to engage us in conversations about how we can, as educators of school practitioners, best serve these students and teach our practitioners-in-training to serve them effectively. Some of our students come to school from various states of chaos and with needs that go beyond reading, writing and math. School practitioners must be prepared to attend to students’ social-emotional well-being as well as they are prepared to attend to students’ academic performance.

References

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