



The impact of comprehensive student support on teachers: Knowledge of the whole child, classroom practice, and Teacher Support



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H I G H L I G H T S

- Out-of-school barriers due to poverty can impede children's success and thriving in school.
- Comprehensive interventions such as City Connects have been found to improve student achievement.
- Teachers report having a better understanding of the whole child when City Connects is implemented in a school.
- Teachers feel supported when this comprehensive support intervention is in place.

A R T I C L E I N F O

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A B S T R A C T

Comprehensive, school-based student support interventions are an approach to addressing out-of-school factors that may interfere with students' achievement and thriving. The effect of these approaches on teachers has not been extensively studied, although the literature points to potential benefits. This paper explores the impact of student support on teachers through a case study of City Connects, which collaborates with every teacher in a school to tailor services for students. A mixed-methods study finds that teachers report new awareness of students' out-of-school lives, develop classroom management strategies, and feel more supported. Implications for teacher education and holistic student support are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Teachers recognize that what happens in a student's life outside of the school day matters in the classroom. A 2015 Scholastic-sponsored survey asked award-winning "Teachers of the Year" what barriers to learning most affect their students' success. The top responses included family stress (cited by 76% of teachers) and poverty (62%), followed by learning and psychological problems (52%). If these teachers could choose where to focus education funding in order to have the highest impact on student learning, their top priorities would include anti-poverty initiatives and

reducing barriers to learning through "wraparound" services such as healthcare (Worrell, 2015).

Research confirms that what teachers recognize as poverty-related barriers can have a major impact on students' academic achievement. Several studies have documented negative effects of poverty, including poor academic achievement (Hair, Hanson, Wolfe, & Pollak, 2015), family chaos (Evans, Gonnella, Marcynyszyn, Gentile, & Salpekar, 2005), parents' mental health challenges (Engle, 2009), food insecurity (Winicki & Jemison, 2003), homelessness (Herbers et al., 2012), obesity (Taras & Potts-Datema, 2005), and a lack of after-school supervision (Mahoney, Lord, & Carryl, 2005). Students' non-academic needs, often associated with or intensified by poverty, can manifest as externalizing behaviors or disengagement in the classroom and hinder achievement (Berliner, 2013). Effective instruction is perhaps the most important purpose of schooling, but this task is made more difficult

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for teachers when their students face these external challenges.

While schools have a long history of attempting to address out-of-school challenges through the work of school nurses, psychologists, and social workers, there is growing momentum to expand and systematize student support as a core function of schools. Over the past decade, districts have also turned to the surrounding community, where a wide range of services and enrichments may be available. Researchers have called for moving student support from the margins of schools to a central position (Adelman & Taylor, 2011), and for implementing a systematic practice with measurable outcomes. In the United States, momentum to address out-of-school factors is growing. Recently, an in-depth review of current trends in student support not only identified many organizations across the country that integrate school, district, and community supports in a systematic manner, but also reported that some of these approaches have demonstrated effectiveness in promoting student outcomes (Moore et al., 2014).

A study of efforts across the United States to consolidate resources in support of educational outcomes revealed 182 cross-sector collaborations in a wide range of locations (Henig, Riehl, Houston, Rebell, & Wolff, 2016). Places where systematic student support is being implemented in the United States include New York City, which recently began creating 100 new “community schools” aimed at meeting the needs of children and families through access to social services, health and mental health resources. Similarly, Cincinnati is developing infrastructure to coordinate service delivery to high-need children (Blank, 2015). This trend has also occurred internationally, with community schools and community learning centers in Canada (Salm, Caswell, Storey, & Nunn, 2016), Belgium (Blaton & Van Avermaet, 2016), the Netherlands (Heers, Ghysels, Groot, & van den Brink, 2015), and the United Kingdom (Dyson, Kerr, Heath, & Hodson, 2016). A broad range of efforts to support learning through comprehensive services, out-of-school learning enrichments, and/or addressing individual educational needs is underway in Scotland, Brazil, Finland, Canada, and the United Kingdom (Peterson, 2016). Importantly, the trend toward systematizing an approach to addressing out-of-school barriers to learning aligns with contextual theories of child development, which identify the family, school, and community as important settings that influence a child’s development (Bronfenbrenner, 1986).

There is new recognition that student support should be individualized and tailored, aligning with current trends toward individualizing learning (Zmuda, 2015). For example, in a school with systematic student support, a child who is underperforming academically might receive school-based tutoring, as well as interventions to address other domains of development that may be impeding achievement (e.g. behavioral or health-related services). For a child with behavior challenges, a systematic review of both needs and strengths might lead a school to understand and address the root cause of the behavior; this could result in providing support for a family-related need or connecting the student to enrichments that match his/her areas of interest.

This paper explores the impact of comprehensive student support on teachers. Our core research question is: how does comprehensive, systematic student support impact teachers’ professional practices and understanding of the lives of their students? We approached this question through a case study of City Connects, an example of a student support intervention in which a full-time City Connects Coordinator conducts annual conversations with every teacher in a school and develops for each student a tailored plan of supports and enrichments from the school and community. The research reported here mined findings from an annual survey of all teachers in schools implementing City Connects in one of its eight cities (Boston, Massachusetts). A mixed-methods research

approach was employed to study alignment of survey results with literature on the impact of student support on teachers.

2. Conceptual framework

In order to inform predictions about how a comprehensive student support intervention might impact teachers’ experiences, we sought to establish a conceptual framework grounded in the literature on areas of teachers’ work that are theoretically related to students’ non-academic needs. A review of research on student support and its relationship to the work of teachers uncovered two key categories of findings. First, a wide set of mental health, social, behavioral, and other non-academic needs has been increasingly acknowledged by schools. During the time of this shift, teachers have recognized the importance of knowledge of the whole child, and this knowledge has impacted several areas of their work. Second, teachers are aware of the degree to which students’ non-academic needs go unmet, especially in under-resourced schools. Lacking the resources, time, and training to address these needs, teachers experience significant stress.

The research in these two categories of findings informs the conceptual framework for the study, and leads to identification of concrete ways in which systematic student support could theoretically impact the work of teachers and, in turn, impact students.

2.1. Whole-child perspective

Many researchers and practitioners over the past 25 years have acknowledged that the work of schools goes beyond curriculum and instruction. Basch (2011) asserts: “No matter how well teachers are prepared to teach, no matter what accountability measures are put in place, no matter what governing structures are established for schools, educational progress will be profoundly limited if students are not motivated and able to learn” (p. 593). In addition to addressing students’ academic needs, schools must address non-academic factors that impact learning, such as students’ mental health (Bond & Compas, 1989; Dryfoos, 1994). Although there has historically been much debate about the importance of addressing academic versus social-emotional needs, this is in fact a “false dichotomy;” decades of research demonstrates that academic and non-academic skills are interconnected, and, because academic and social-emotional skills develop and operate together, efforts to promote them should be designed to promote both simultaneously (Jones & Bouffard, 2012, p. 9). Teachers are central to this effort, and believe addressing students’ non-academic needs is part of their role, though they view it as challenging (Roeser & Midgley, 1997). Teachers both can and want to be involved as informants with respect to their students’ mental health needs and as partners in addressing these needs (Ford & Nikapota, 2000).

Over time, students’ non-academic needs have increasingly been viewed in the broader picture of the “whole child”. The Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) implemented a Whole Child Initiative in an effort to “change the conversation about education from a focus on narrowly defined academic achievement to one that promotes the long-term development and success of the whole child” (ASCD, 2014, p. 6). The initiative helps educators, families, community members, and policymakers progress toward sustainable and collaborative action. The “Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child” (WSCC) model, developed by the ASCD and the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), combines and builds on elements of the traditional school health approach and the whole child framework (ASCD, 2014, p. 6). With an ecological approach that is directed at the whole school, the overall aim of the model is to improve each child’s development across multiple domains.

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