Advancing Social Justice Through Primary Prevention

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A commitment to social justice is integral to being an effective school psychologist. While social justice is a term that is not easily defined, professionals in school psychology have characterized it as the idea that all students are entitled to be treated with fairness and respect (North, 2006; Shriberg, et al., 2008). Though individual conceptions of social justice may vary, a recent study revealed a preference for a definition that highlights equal protection of rights and opportunities for all students (Shriberg et al.).

Social inequities permeate our nation's schools; therefore, school psychologists should be encouraged to respond as advocates. This is a familiar mission of school psychologists, but less is known about exactly how to advocate for social justice within the schools (Rogers & O'Bryon, 2008). One way that school psychologists can aspire toward a commitment to social justice is by implementing school-wide primary preventions that support all children.

Inspired by the mission of the NASP Social Justice Interest Group, faculty and students at Northeastern University began to infuse social justice in the school psychology program's curriculum. A social justice group consisting of school psychology faculty and students was formed to facilitate learning about social justice concerns within the schools. As a product of this group's work, the focus of the current paper is to provide useful information for practicing school psychologists by highlighting specific research-based primary prevention approaches for several groups who face social injustice. It is crucial to employ strategies that are culturally sensitive and appropriately recognize students' physical and mental health needs. Moreover, school psychologists must advocate for social justice at every level, specifically in children's home, school, and community environments (Li & Vazquez-Nuttall, 2009).

This paper will review primary prevention approaches that are culturally sensitive and geared toward all aspects of the children's environment. Specifically, it will explore research-based primary prevention strategies for groups facing the following issues: (a) human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), (b) gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (GLBTQ) harassment, (c) homelessness, and (d) online social aggression. Finally, a discussion will address how school psychologists can meet the needs of all students in their school and home communities.

Primary Prevention for HIV Positive Students

Despite the myth that HIV is a disease that only infects homosexual males and intravenous drug users, it has become a medical, psychoeducational, and psychosocial concern among school-age children and adolescents (Chenneville, 2007; Wodrich, Swerdlik, Chenneville, & Landau, 1999). Consequently, school psychologists must be knowledgeable and prepared to serve this unique group. Primary prevention techniques supported in the literature include policy formation, developmentally appropriate education, sexual education, and staff training (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2004; Chenneville; National Association of State Boards of Education [NASBE], 2001; Walsh & Bibace, 1990; Wodrich et al.).

Policy Formation. Policy formation under primary prevention will likely preclude any controversial arguments or debates within a community and school system; consequently, NASBE (2001) encourages every state and school district to engage in policy formation to address the serious issues raised by HIV infection. In doing so, NASBE (2001) suggests that local education agencies actively communicate and engage in dialogue with their communities about HIV-related school policies and procedures, in an effort to ensure that they coincide with community values. Nonetheless, NASBE (2001) explicitly warns that policy makers and educators should not feel that their roles are complete with the establishment of policy, as new challenges will likely emerge.

Developmentally Appropriate Education. HIV education at the primary prevention level has two main purposes: to decrease the spread of HIV and to reduce discrimination against and enhance tolerance of infected children (Wodrich et al., 1999). Walsh & Bibace (1990) argue for a developmentally appropriate HIV education approach that tailors lessons to children in different developmental stages. Lessons for younger children should be designed to allay excessive fears of the virus and infection (CDC, 2004; Walsh & Bibace, 1990). Lessons for intermediate children are controversial, as some call for a focus on general strategies for health and prevention of illness, while others suggest incorporating direct HIV information (CDC, 2004; Walsh & Bibace, 1990). Finally, for older children, HIV education should focus on strategies to prevent the contagion of HIV (CDC, 2004; Walsh & Bibace, 1990).

Sexuality Education. Sexuality education efforts should be made at the primary prevention level. The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP; NASP, 2005) position statement supports comprehensive sexual education to prevent the spread of HIV infection. However, issues around this topic are controversial.

Some communities subscribe to abstinence programs, which research suggests have been ineffective in comparison to comprehensive programs that teach contraceptive use (Chenneville, 2007). Nevertheless, school districts should look to their community values to help guide sexuality education curricula. In either case—abstinence only or comprehensive sexuality education—research suggests that sexuality education booster sessions may be necessary, as education and intervention seem to attenuate over time (Coyle et al., 2006).

Staff Training. Finally, research and anecdotal evidence suggests that school teachers and administrators possess discriminatory attitudes toward individuals with HIV; therefore, staff training should be delivered to bring these attitudes to an end (Chenneville, 2007). Most negative attitudes are based on fear of contagion, but with increased education many may realize that they have unrealistic fears about the spread of HIV. Moreover, research suggests an "inverse relationship between knowledge and fear whereby individuals who are knowledgeable about HIV are less fearful" (Chenneville, 2007, p. 7). For more information related to this topic, see Mulé (2009).

Primary Prevention for Sexual Minority Students
Discrimination and harassment against sexual minority students, including GLBTQ students, perpetuates an unsafe school climate that inhibits academic or social achievement (NASP, 1999). It is important that schools develop policy to reduce discrimination and harassment that GLBTQ students face in order to advance social justice. A primary prevention and intervention approach simultaneously reduces discrimination and provides services to GLBTQ students within school systems through implementing school-wide programs and updating school policy.

School-Wide Programs. There are several school-wide programs reported in the research literature that have been proven effective in "addressing harassment of [GLBTQ] youth in schools" (Henning-Stout, James, & Macintosh, 2000, p. 183). Notably, Washington's Safe Schools Project and Project 10 have proven successful in making schools safe for GLBTQ students within a primary prevention framework.

Washington's Safe Schools Project advocates for schools to document incidences of harassment as they implement policy and programs in schools in order to measure efficacy. After instituting a harassment-prevention curriculum and strategies for responding to harassment, the project compiles data to assist in decision making regarding whether or not policy makers should modify the program (Henning-Stout et al., 2000). This program stands as an important model for simultaneously implementing policy and evaluating program efficacy. It allows us to quickly and efficiently adjust policy that will benefit social justice initiatives for GLBTQ youth.

Dr. Virginia Uribe in the Los Angeles Unified School District instituted Project 10 in 1984. This program arose out of response to elevated dropout rates, alcohol/substance abuse, and the risk of HIV among GLBTQ students (Henning-Stout et al., 2000). This program consists of educational workshops, tolerance counseling, and support groups for all students within the school district (Henning-Stout et al., 2000). Support groups strive to improve self-esteem, provide affirmation for stigmatized students, encourage abstinence for substance use and high-risk sexual behaviors, and improve student retention. This program measures GLBTQ students' attendance rates, academic performance, and relationships with family and friends in order to determine program efficacy (Henning-Stout et al.).

Uribe (1994) believes that while Project 10 consists of several important elements, it can be adapted to fit specific needs of school districts across the nation. Important elements include a central location for GLBTQ resources, ongoing educational workshops on GLBTQ issues, and school policy on harassment and discrimination of GLBTQ youth (Henning-Stout et al., 2000; Uribe).

School Policy. Schools need to establish and enforce nondiscrimination policies that apply to all students within a school district (NASP, 1999). All students and staff need to be aware of the school's policy, and violations should be enforced consistently. Students and staff must be educated about relevant research, current statistics, risk factors, and effective strategies for addressing harassment in order to improve school climate and dispel misconceptions about sexual orientation and gender identity (NASP, 1999). By disseminating this information, educators can help decrease the isolation GLBTQ student's experience (NASP, 1999). Finally, schools should highlight community attitudes and behaviors that affirm the dignity and rights of GLBTQ students within educational environments (NASP, 1999). Specifically, school psychologists should model appropriate language, tolerance, and attitudes that are nondiscriminatory and inclusive so that students and staff understand the importance of celebrating diversity and maintaining a healthy environment (NASP, 1999). For more information related to this topic, see Lippus (2009).

Primary Prevention for Homeless Students
Homelessness is defined as "individuals who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence" according to the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (2002). This includes children who are living in shared housing, motels, and camping grounds; awaiting foster care placement; have nighttime residences not normally used for sleeping; or migratory children (McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act). Recent estimates indicate that there are approximately 1.35 million children who experience homelessness in a given year (National Coalition for the Homeless, 2007). Given the current economic climate in the United States, it is plausible that school officials may see an increase in these numbers. In order to ensure the protection of the rights and opportunities for homeless students within a social justice framework, school psychologists should use a preventative approach to provide the appropriate level of supports through policy formation, staff training, and resource distribution.

Policy Formation. Policy formation is one important way school psychologists can advocate for stronger family support services for the homeless (Swick & Williams, 2006). For example, schools should develop a clear attendance policy that does not penalize homeless students for tardiness or absence, in order to encourage teacher vigilance in recognizing and resolving transportation difficulties (Mizerek & Hinz, 2004). In addition, school districts should adapt policies on transportation, food provision, and tutoring to support the needs of homeless students (Duffield & Lovell, 2008). Finally, schools should appoint a liaison to identify children and youth experiencing homelessness. Liaisons should ensure that homeless students are enrolled in school, have opportunities for success, and improve communication between the family and community support organizations (Duffield & Lovell, 2008).

Staff Training. Teachers, counselors, secretaries, and other staff directly working with children should be made aware of potential signs of homelessness so that they can quickly identify students who may need assistance (Duffield & Lovell, 2008). For example, homeless students may exhibit chronic hunger and fatigue, erratic attendance and tardiness, poor personal hygiene, a consistent lack of preparation for school (e.g., coming in without books, supplies, homework completed, or papers signed), extremes in behavior (e.g., withdrawal, extreme shyness, nervousness, aggression, anger), or resistance to parting with personal possessions (e.g., putting coat in locker; Opening Doors, n.d.).

Once a staff member has identified a student as homeless, teachers should be trained to provide specific supports within the classroom in order to promote equal access to education and to reduce stigma. For example, teachers can work to maintain the child's privacy (e.g., discuss his or her homework situation away from other classmates and distribute school supplies in private); assign a "buddy" to help the homeless child acclimate; help the child participate in field trips, school activities, and class projects; give the child a special job within the classroom; and off er encouragement, understanding, and recognition of the child's talents and accomplishments (Opening Doors, n.d.).

Resource Distribution. Schools should make available various resources to all families in order to ensure accessibility of information and available services. In order to dispel stigma or shame in seeking out information, schools should distribute pamphlets outlining the criteria of homelessness and the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act of 2002 (Duffield & Lovell, 2008). Similarly, schools should make this information available to staff because many school personnel are unaware of the breadth of the federal definition of homelessness or the provisions of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act of 2002 (Duffield & Lovell). Finally, schools can establish a clothing and food closet within the school to meet the needs of homeless children (Duffield & Lovell). For more information related to this topic, see Cicala (2009).

Primary Prevention for Victims of Cyberbullying

Online social aggression (cyberbullying) is the relatively new phenomenon that affects many students through the use of vindictive electronic communication. Creating preventive strategies aimed toward reducing the incidence of cyberbullying will advance social justice within school systems. Formal preventions to address cyberbullying need to promote acceptance and respect through training, policy formation, and resource distribution (Porter, Plog, Epstein, & Jens, 2008).

Training and Policy Formation. Schools can educate students, families, and staff about cyberbullying. Information distributed should include the definition of cyberbullying, different types, unique features, and consequences. Training should also provide cyberbullying terms and common online abbreviations and lingo with which parents and staff may be unfamiliar (Hinduja & Patchin, 2008). Clear school policies addressing the consequences of bullying should be created or updated to include cyberbullying, both during and after school hours, indicating that online harassment will not be tolerated (Chibbaro, 2007).

Resource Distribution. Students and families can be provided with materials about acceptable and appropriate online communication, online safety, online etiquette, and steps to take if cyberbullying is experienced or witnessed (Porter et al., 2008). Staff should encourage families to sign contracts with their children regarding technology use at home. The promotion of social justice can be achieved by employing conflict resolution programs, such as the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program (McGuinness, 2007).

Increasing awareness of cyberbullying with students, families, and staff is vital when attempting to decrease incidence of the problem. It is necessary to be proactive, by creating a school climate with clear policies promoting positive forms of communication and acceptance of differences, to combat cyberbullying. For more information related to this topic, see Cataldo (2009).

Advancing Social Justice for All Minority Populations

In order for the aforementioned primary preventions to work effectively, it is important that students feel comfortable and accepted in their home and school communities. When students in a school feel accepted, they will be comfortable accessing school services when faced with social justice concerns.

One way to accomplish this is through the development of diversity curricula. Developing a diversity-focused curriculum will allow students from all cultures to be visible within the learning environment (Hoskins, 2003), which in turn will help students feel connected to school and therefore more likely to access services. It is necessary, however, that students also feel accepted in their home communities. Studies of home- school relationships suggest that family and school both contribute significantly to children's learning and educational outcomes (Cox, 2005). With this in mind, the primary preventions discussed above are only one component of promoting a safe place for all students. Another important component is school, home, and community collaboration. Such collaboration may help to make the school, home, and community more welcoming and accepting environments for all children. Consequently, a decrease in discrimination will be achieved. For more information, see Smith (2009).

School-based health centers (SBHCs) are another way that schools can advance social justice by meeting the growing health demands of underserved children, especially low-income and minority students who cannot obtain needed care due to systemic barriers. Because SBHCs bring services to school, they can provide physical and mental health care that is accessible to all students. For more information, see Santora (2009).

Conclusion

Social justice concerns permeate our nation's schools. School psychologists are in a unique position to advance social justice for children who face social injustice. One way to promote social justice is to implement school wide primary preventions that support all children. This article highlights a few school-wide evidence-based primary preventions for several groups facing discrimination, including HIV positive, GLBTQ, homeless, and victims of cyberbullying. It can be used as a resource by practicing school psychologists who want to advance social justice through primary prevention.

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