

Academic Skills Enhancement

School is one of the primary institutions in which adolescents learn socially appropriate behavior, develop cognitive skills, and establish patterns of early career development. While schools labor to aid every student in developing these skills, problems inevitably arise for some students. One of the most visible problems for students is academic difficulty. Academic problems, by themselves, can thwart educational aspirations, but academic problems can also be a precursor to more serious behavior problems. Academic failure is often viewed as a gateway to delinquency (Maguin and Loeber 1996). In fact, research demonstrates that academic problems place juveniles at significant risk for later serious and violent offending (Catalano, Loeber, and McKinney 1999; Maguin et al. 1995). The research is less clear when examining specific subgroups. Some research indicates that the association is stronger for males than females, stronger for Caucasians than African Americans, and independent of socioeconomic status (Maguin and Loeber 1996). Other studies indicate that the relationship is stronger for females (Hawkins et al. 2000) and African Americans (Voelkl, Welste, and Wieczorek 1999).

Academic problems, however, must be examined within the broader context of youth development. It is important to consider not only the behavior itself but also whether the behavior has previously occurred, in multiple settings and with what frequency, duration, and intensity (Kelly et al. 1997). For example, a fourth grader who frequently fails examinations in multiple subjects over the course of an academic year and is consistently reprimanded for poor conduct is of more concern than a second grader who gets a bad grade on a test or two. In other words, a certain degree of misbehavior, experimentation, or independence-seeking is common among youth (Kelly et al. 1997). In fact, some researchers suggest that the onset of oppositional behavior in adolescence is due to the normal process of individuation (American Psychiatric Association 1994). But youths who persistently and progressively engage in problem behaviors with significant impairment in personal development, social functioning, academic achievement, and vocational preparation are of a much greater risk for later serious violent behavior.

Conversely, students who experience high academic achievement (Henggeler 1989; Elliot and Voss 1974; Hawkins and Lam 1987; Gottfredson 1988) and actively engage in and feel attached to their school (Johnson, Crosnoe, and Elder 2001) are less likely to engage in problem behaviors and delinquency. Moreover, interventions that immerse students into the rich fabric educational resources have been shown to reduce delinquency (Maguin and Loeber 1996). These students are bolstered by various protective factors such as high expectations for youth by the community, positive bonds with parents and family, effective parenting, opportunities for participation in the school and community, and involvement with positive peers and peer-group activities.

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Theoretical Foundation

The link between educational experiences and delinquency uses various theoretical frameworks, including both control theory (Hirschi 1969) and strain theory (Cloward and Olin 1960; Elliot, Huizinga, and Ageton 1985). Strain theory suggests that the delinquency associated with academic failure results from an unfulfilled desire to achieve conventional goals (e.g., academic success). Control theory, by contrast, proposes that delinquency results from the failure of adolescents to internalize conventional norms or a breakdown of the bonds between the individual and society. According to this perspective, the school acts as a socializing agent by introducing and endearing adolescents to conventional norms and values. Unfortunately, poor academic performance may inhibit the attachment to conventional norms and thus break the bond with society, separating individuals from the internal controls that discourage delinquent behavior.

The underlying point of both theoretical frameworks is that for some students, academic failure produces frustration and poor study habits. This, in turn, can initiate a chain of events that lead to a withdrawal from and rejection of participation in classroom activities, prompting some youths to become disruptive in class or even drop out of school. If left unchecked, this behavior can eventually lead to delinquency and other serious problem behaviors (Elliot and Voss 1974).

Outcome Evidence

The research findings indicating a positive association between academic failure and future delinquency have led some practitioners to design prevention strategies that promote the acquisition of practical academic skills.

One of the strategies specifically designed to increase academic skills for at-risk populations is alternative schools. Alternative schools are essentially specialized educational environments that place great emphasis on small classrooms, less structured classrooms, high teacher-to-student ratios, individualized instruction, and noncompetitive performance assessments (Raywid 1983). The purpose of these schools is to provide academic instruction to students expelled or suspended for disruptive behavior or weapons possession, or who are unable to succeed in the mainstream school environment (Ingersoll and LeBoeuf 1997).

Recent evaluations (Kemple and Snipes 2000; Cox 1999; Cox, Davison, and Bynum 1995) suggest that alternative schools have some positive effects. A meta-analysis of 57 alternative school programs found that alternative schools have a positive effect on school performance, attitudes toward school, and self-esteem but no effect on delinquency (Cox, Davison, and Bynum 1995). The study also found that alternative schools targeting at-risk youths produced larger effects than other programs and that the more successful programs tend to have a curriculum and structure centered on the needs of the designated population. These effects, however, may be short term. Using an experimental design with a 1-year follow-up of a single alternative school, Cox (1999) found that these positive effects were not observed 1 year later. Consequently, the type of follow-up support given to students in alternative schools may be important in achieving the long-term goals of the program. Finally, a 5-year evaluation of the career academy concept (the OJJDP alternative school model) covering nine schools and 1,900 students found that, compared with their counterparts who did not attend, at-risk students enrolled in career academies were 1) one third less likely to drop out of school; 2) more likely to attend school, complete academic and vocational courses, and apply to college; and 3) provided with more opportunities to set goals and reach academic and professional objectives (Kemple and Snipes 2000).

While few other academic skill-building interventions have evaluated the specific impact of academic success on delinquency, several studies have examined the educational impact of the programs. In fact,

a rigorous review of hundreds of such programs by the American Youth Policy Forum recently identified 20 academic skills programs that produce significant gains in academic achievement. An overall analysis of these programs found that in comparison with peers or their own past academic performance, the adolescents involved in these 20 programs have higher test scores, graduate from school in higher numbers, and matriculate and remain in college in higher numbers (Jurich and Estes 2000).

Specifically, one of the programs included in the analysis was the Boys and Girls Club of America. BGCA initiated an afterschool program for public housing youths in 1996. The program includes activities such as essay writing, homework sessions, leisure reading, and educational games. It was evaluated with a nonrandomized comparison and control group design. The comparison and control groups were identical in age, gender, and ethnic/racial background. Some of the youths in the comparison and control group received tutoring but did not attend the structured program. The evaluation found that between the pre-test and 18-month follow-up, program youths had made statistically significant improvements in the average grades for mathematics, English, writing, science, social studies, and an overall grade. The school attendance rates of program youths also increased (Schinke, Cole, and Poulin 2000).

Finally, a qualitative analysis of these 20 programs found that each shares common features that American Youth Policy Forum mapped into five strategies of successful programs (Jurich and Estes 2000). These common features include the following:

High Expectations for Youths, Program, and Staff

This program feature reflects concepts such as academically challenging programmatic content; the expectation that all students have the ability to succeed; clear, well-defined education goals; ongoing staff training; and rigorous program evaluation.

Personalized Attention

This program feature emphasizes a concern for the youth as a student and as a person. The programmatic features include an adoption of small learning environments, the use of individual help and support, and a concern for the youth who may need extra services and support. Other personalized activities include homework and college application assistance, referral to health care and social services, career counseling, and assistance with strengthening the youth's family. Innovation is key in meeting ambitious educational goals.

Innovative Structure/Organization

This program feature concentrates on using traditional styles of program structure and organization to raise academic skills. The specific feature included in this category are research-focused programming, flexible hours of operation, extending the school year, using summer months and afterschool hours, changes in teacher and administrator roles, team teaching and teacher involvement in program design, and family, business, and community involvement.

Experiential Learning

Innovative educational environments sometimes require experiential learning to make academic instruction exciting and meaningful. Multicultural awareness, community services, internships, project-based learning, contextual learning, and career focus/planning are components of this program feature.

Long-Term Support

This feature is crucial to the success of academic skills programs, as study habits and critical thinking are not tasks to be learned overnight. Programs should run for 1 to 5 years and continue from grades 9 through 12 with an emphasis on academic transitions and post-graduation support.

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