Reconnecting Youth: Promoting emotional competence and social support to improve academic achievement

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**A B S T R A C T**
Previous research indicates that students who drop out of high school are at risk for a number of negative outcomes. Both ecological and individual risk factors contribute to students’ propensity for dropout. This study examined the effectiveness of a targeted dropout prevention program at improving academic achievement and investigated whether improved social support and emotional competencies partially mediated the association between intervention participation and student outcomes. A sample of 110 middle and high school students (55 intervention participants and 55 students in a matched control group) completed surveys investigating their social-emotional assets and schools provided academic data for participants. Structural equation modeling revealed that students who participated in the program had higher academic achievement compared to the control group. Prior levels of academic achievement moderated the effectiveness of the program with students with low initial levels of academic achievement benefiting more. Emotional competencies and social support did not mediate the relationship between participation and achievement. The intervention was related to improved academic achievement among participants; however, the means by which it was effective was unclear. Given the evidence that the program was more effective for some students than others, targeting interventions to meet specific needs of students may be advantageous.

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1. Introduction
High school dropout is a major problem in the United States. In 2012, the national status dropout rate - the percentage of 16- through 24-year-olds who were not enrolled in school and had not earned a high school credential - was 7%, and the percentage of students graduating high school in four years was 81% (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). Dropout rates are concerning because lack of high school completion is associated with unemployment (Rotermund, 2007), low-income levels (Rumberger & Rotermund, 2008), substance use (Esch et al., 2014), delinquency (Chavez, Oetting, & Swaim, 1994), and internalizing disorders (Esch et al., 2014). Controlling for prior risk factors, research also indicates that individuals who drop out of high school are at increased risk for sickness and disability (De Ridder et al., 2013). Given the negative impact of high school dropout on the developmental trajectories of adolescents, early identification of and intervention with students at risk for dropout is essential.

This study adopts the theoretical lens of Rumberger and Rotermund (2012) who developed a conceptual model of school dropout that explains student dropout as a byproduct of interactions between various environmental contexts and individual characteristics. Rumberger and Rotermund (2012) integrated theories of dropout with Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological model. Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological model stresses the importance of environmental systems, such as schools, families, and neighborhoods, in the development of individuals while also acknowledging the role of individual characteristics in influencing the way youths interact with the world and modify their environmental contexts (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Similarly, Rumberger and Rotermund (2012) theorized that there are four types of individual factors that influence student dropout: background factors (i.e., demographics, health, prior educational performance, and past experiences); attitudes (i.e., goals, values, and self-perceptions); behaviors (i.e., engagement, coursework, deviance, peers, and employment); and performance (i.e., achievement, persistence, and attainment). They also highlighted the importance of three types of contextual influences: families, schools, and communities. They argued that all of these domains are interrelated, and students with risk factors in one domain are likely to have risk factors in other domains as well. Students with a large number of risk factors are at an increased risk of high school dropout.

Empirical research supports the saliency of the individual and environmental factors discussed by Rumberger and Rotermund. In a recent review of the literature on school dropout, De Witte, Cabus, Thyssen, Groot, and van den Brink (2013) found evidence that numerous family
and school factors have protective effects on the likelihood of students dropping out of high school, including two-parent, biological families; warm, supportive families; schools with ample resources; schools with positive climates; and experienced, supportive, high-quality teachers. Empirical studies consistently show that having positive social connections with teachers and peers at school is linked with a lower propensity for dropout (Doren, Murray, & Gau, 2014; Reschly & Christenson, 2006). In addition, community influences also impact a student’s propensity for dropout. For example, previous research has documented that there are higher dropout rates in poor neighborhoods (Harding, 2003; Rendón, 2014) and in neighborhoods with high rates of violence (Burdick-Will et al., 2011; Harding, 2010).

Research has also identified a plethora of individual characteristics associated with increased risk of high school dropout, including using controlled substances at young ages (Esch et al., 2014), associating with deviant friends (Vitaro, Laracque, Janosz, & Tremblay, 2001), and disengaging in class or at school (Reschly & Christenson, 2006). In one study, using latent profile analysis Orpinas, Raczynski, Peters, Coleman, and Bandalos (2014) found teachers’ ratings of students’ externalizing problems, internalizing problems, and social skills predicted later school dropout. Students who belonged to groups characterized by social skills deficits or high levels of internalizing and externalizing problems were more likely to drop out than their peers. One of the best measures of students’ trajectories towards high school dropout is their current level of academic performance. Research suggests one of the strongest and most reliable predictors of high school dropout is poor academic achievement (Bowers, 2010). Thus, changes in academic achievement can be used as an indicator of whether a student is on a trajectory towards dropout or school completion. As such, academic achievement is being used as the outcome of interest in the current study since it is an accurate predictor of a student’s likelihood of dropping out and it can be measured before students drop out while they are still in school and, therefore, still available for school-based interventions.

1.1. Interventions to prevent high school dropout

Given the serious repercussions of high school dropout, a number of programs have been developed to promote high school completion. These programs vary widely and range from mentorship programs to academic tutoring; research has not determined which types of programs are most effective. Prevatt and Kelly (2003) reviewed dropout prevention programs, and although they found that academically oriented or multifaceted programs were the most promising, they concluded that there was a lack of consistent or persuasive evidence to support any given program. More research is needed to establish which dropout prevention programs are most effective and what factors explain the success of these programs.

Reconnecting Youth (RY) is a dropout prevention program with promising research support that seeks to decrease substance use, increase school performance, and decrease emotional distress through skills training and social support (Eggert, Thompson, Herting, & Randell, 2001). Program developers hypothesize that by providing youth with a social support network and a place to learn decision-making, emotional regulation, and self-monitoring skills, youth will refocus efforts into school (Eggert et al., 2001). Thus, the two main goals of RY are to increase the amount of support that students experience in school and to help students build skills in emotion competence. In doing so, RY is theorized to prevent school dropout by helping students build both individual assets (i.e., emotional competence and self-regulation) and ecological assets (i.e., social support network) associated with school completion thereby addressing both the individual and environmental influences on dropout proposed by Rumberger and Rotermund (2012).

While there have been no studies to date that directly measure the impact of RY on school dropout, preliminary research using quasi-experimental designs conducted by the program developers indicate that RY is effective at reducing drug use (Eggert, Seyl, & Nicholas, 1990; Eggert, Thompson, Herting, & Nicholas, 1994); school deviance (Eggert et al., 1994); and depression and suicidal risk behaviors (Eggert et al., 1994; Thompson, Eggert, & Herting, 2000) in students from the Northwest. They also found evidence that RY improved student attendance and grade point averages (GPAs) relative to controls (Eggert et al., 1990). However, two more recent randomized control trials evaluating RY in large urban school districts in the Southwest and Pacific Coast failed to replicate these findings. Compared to controls, participants in RY experienced greater decreases in: GPA, conventional peer bonding, and school connectedness; additionally, RY participants’ substance use increased more than controls (Cho, Hallflors, & Sanchez, 2005; Sanchez et al., 2007). These findings suggest that RY might have iatrogenic effects for some students, indicating a dire need for more research examining the effects of RY. Despite the negative outcomes found in these more recent studies, RY is listed as an evidence-based intervention on SAMSHA’s National Registry of Evidence-Based Programs and Practices website. It continues to be implemented in schools across the county and internationally, and several states have acknowledged RY as an evidence-based program, recommending it to school districts and providing funding and training to support its adoption (SAMSHA, 2009). Given its widespread usage, it is important that more research is conducted to determine whether RY should continue to be promoted as an evidence-based program.

This study seeks to reconcile some of the contradictory evidence found in the literature by examining whether the differences in the effectiveness of RY found by previous researchers can be attributed to the sample populations. Specifically, this study examines whether RY is differentially effective for students based on their prior achievement performance. Given that RY was initially designed as an intervention for students with poor school performance, it is possible that RY may be harmful for students who do not demonstrate a clear academic need by exposing them to deviant peer influences. Previous research has failed to examine the possible interaction between student characteristics and the effectiveness of RY as an intervention.

1.2. This study

This study seeks to: (a) address contradictory findings in the literature regarding the effectiveness of RY on students’ academic achievement and (b) investigate the means by which RY produces positive student outcomes. Additionally, this study seeks to address whether the benefits of participating in RY are moderated by individual characteristics. Given that some of students are in middle school when they participate in RY, it would be impossible to determine RY’s impact on dropout rates for at least five years; thus, academic achievement was chosen as a more proximal outcome that is a reliable indicator of a student’s propensity to drop out. The study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. Do students who participate in RY improve in academic achievement more than peers from a matched control group?
2. Do increased ecological and individual assets (i.e., social support and emotional competence) mediate the relation between participation in RY and improved academic achievement?
3. Is the influence of RY moderated by prior levels of academic achievement?

It was hypothesized that RY participants, unlike their counterparts in the matched control group, would improve in academic achievement. Moreover, these gains were hypothesized to be partially mediated by improvements in students’ emotional competence and social support as these assets were theorized to be relevant ecological and individual predictors of achievement trajectories based on prior research findings (De Witte et al., 2013; Doren et al., 2014; Mega, Ronconi, & De Beni, 2014). Given that this program was initially designed for individuals...
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