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**The Voices of Leaders: A Qualitative Examination of Urban Principals' Perspectives
Regarding the Reintegrating of Students with an Emotional Disturbance
Back into the School Community**

by

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The Voices of Leaders: A Qualitative Examination of Urban Principals' Perspective Regarding the Reintegrating Students With an Emotional Disturbance Back Into the School Community

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to understand the perceptions and lived experiences of principals as it relates to the reintegration of students with an emotional disturbance from an alternative placement back to their neighborhood school. Reintegrating students back into their school communities have always been a major challenge for schools. As a result, students face significant challenges when they return; thus the study examined how participants' perceptions influenced planning or the lack thereof, and support for students that return. The study also identified current practices and essential components for the development of a transition program. Findings revealed that participants felt that adequate resources, additional teachers and training are needed from central office to appropriately support students with an ED that return.

Aim

The aim of this research brief is to provide insight into the perceptions of high school principals related to the reintegration of students with an emotional disturbance. The study sought to understand and identify effective practices for inclusive reintegration, and barriers to transition planning for returning students in order to create a transition program and implement best practices in an urban setting.

Problem or Issue

Students with an emotional disturbance (ED) who return to their neighborhood school from an alternative placement such as approved private schools, juvenile facilities, or residential treatment facilities are more likely than their peers to experience significant challenges that result in severe academic and behavior regression (Trout, Tyler, Stewart, & Epstein, 2012). These challenges include limited emotional or mental health support at the receiving school, insufficient or no transition plan, and inadequate academic knowledge and skills (Trout et al., 2012). These students also have approximately 75% higher rate of suspension or expulsion, poor attendance, recidivism, and dropping out (Wagner, Kutash, Duthnowski, Epstein, and Sumi, 2006).

A study in urban districts found that students with emotional disabilities are more likely to be minorities, and are overrepresented in school discipline (Losen & Martinez, 2013; Losen & Gillespe, 2012). In addition, the recidivist rate is 4.5 times higher for this population (Losen, 2012). Research also shows that these challenges have long lasting effects that span beyond the school walls. According to Courtney & Dworsky (2006), ED students have an increased chance of involvement in the criminal justice system. They also have higher rates of unemployment and economic challenges (Bernstein, 2000; Courtney & Dworsky, 2006). Despite these dismal and alarming facts, schools do not plan for students' transition back to their neighborhood school. It is imperative that school districts seek out and implement best practices or specific programs to help students successfully reintegrate back into a less restrictive environment.

Questions/ Methods

Data for this study was collected through one-on-one semi-structured interviews, reflective journals, and observations. The interviews allowed the participants to provide invaluable insight and share their experiences and perspectives of reintegrating students with an emotional disturbance back into the school community. Observation through field notes allowed the researcher to record non-verbal communication that was not noted during the interview. In addition, the principals recorded their experiences as it relates to the reintegration of students ED from an alternative placement in a reflective journal. The study was comprised of six principals from an urban district that participated in an interview and completed a journal. The phenomenological research design allowed the researcher to gain a deeper understanding into the lived experiences of the principals as students with an emotional disturbance reintegrate back into their schools.

The research questions that guided this study are:

1. What factors (i.e events, circumstances and conditions) influence school principals' willingness to accept and support students with an emotional disturbance, who have returned to school from an alternative placement?
2. How do principals provide support for students with an emotional disturbance when they return from an alternative placement to a less restrictive environment?
3. What are the challenges and barriers that principals identify as a hindrance to support students with an emotional disturbance when they return?
4. What supports do principals identify as essential to successfully reintegrate students with emotional disturbance upon their return from an alternative placement?
5. What supports do principals believe are necessary to help them feel confident in developing and implementing a transition program at an urban school district?

Conclusion/ Discussion

The study uncovered four themes: (a) administrative challenges impacting student reintegration, (b) needed district support, (c) school-based internal support, and (d) program development for successful reintegration. During the interviews, participants explained that there are factors that influence their willingness to accept and support students with an emotional disturbance that return to their school. These factors include: support from central office, lack of resources, lack of training, and additional staff. The research also revealed that internal supports are in place in their schools, but they would like to improve such systems with mental health and therapeutic supports and a de-escalation space. They also identified essential supports to successful reintegration as: improved communication between central office and the receiving school, a formal transition process, mandatory and scheduled intake meetings, and a step-down transition program to help students slowly transition back into a regular education setting. Lastly, principals felt that they would feel more confident supporting students with an emotional disturbance that return if appropriate supports were available, and specific emotional support and trauma informed care training was provided to support the students.

Research Implications

Based on the findings and themes that emerged from this study, in order to improve practices and ensure success for students with an emotional disturbance that reintegrate back into the school community school districts and schools should 1) establish a formal transition process with a specific protocol to implement when students transition back from an alternative placement, 2) provide students with additional mental health and therapeutic supports on-site, 3) create a short term transition program to help students slowly re-acclimate to a less restrictive environment, 4) provide additional teacher training that specifically address supporting ED students that transition from alternative placements.

In the future, it would be beneficial to understand the perceptions and lived experiences of students with an emotional disturbance that transition back to their neighborhood schools. Giving the students a voice to share their perceptions and recommendations would help to further advance the development of a sound transition program that would increase student buy-in and improve student success. Additionally,

it will also be important to conduct a comparative case study to examine student achievement and progress with and without transition supports.

Author Biography

Charlotte Brickhouse is a Special Education Director in the School District of Philadelphia. In this role she has had the opportunity to work with administrators, special education directors, and school teams to improve special education programs for students with disabilities. More recently she has spearheaded a new specialized full-time emotional support program in the district with a therapeutic focus. She has also served as Special Education Discipline Coordinator and a Special Education Liaison for a number of years where she established a co-teaching program and a transition workshop for parents to assist families in post-secondary planning. As a special educator, she taught students with special needs for over a decade. Charlotte has also taught student teachers at Lincoln University. She holds two master degrees in Instructional Leadership, and Special Education. Currently, she is pursuing a Doctorate degree in Educational Leadership and Management at Drexel University in the Urban Special Education Leaders of Tomorrow program (USELT).

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