

Problematic Educational Policies:
Struggles of a River Valley Clinician

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Abstract

Due to recent educational policies there has been an increased focus on standardized education. As a result of these policies, teachers and schools feel the need to continually teach to the standardize test material, to prove to the federal administration they are reaching the “standards.” This phenomenon leads to less social emotional education within the classroom and more difficulties for mental health professionals when trying to get children (clients) out of class for mental health psychotherapy services.

Keywords: Elementary and Secondary Education Act, No Child Left Behind Act, Every Student Succeeds Act, Common Core State Standards, accountability,

Since the fall semester I have been interning at River Valley Counseling Center as a school-based clinician. I provide individual psychotherapy to middle and high school aged children. Even though the therapy that I provide is considered outpatient therapy, it is provided to the students within the schools during school hours. This structure of support allows the agency to better service school aged children. Due to the fact that therapy is provided during school hours many different challenges arise compared to providing therapy in a clinical setting.

One major issue that impacts the clients that I service is the way school and education is now structured. Many of the students that I provide therapy to have social emotional issues and teachers struggle to handle their needs. This leads to poor academic achievement especially in underfunded schools. According to Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA, most teachers focus on the content that the students need to learn and skills that need to be acquired during instructional time in class. In addition, teachers often focus only a small amount of attention on engaging the student into the class. This works fine in some schools where students come each day ready and able to deal with what the teacher is ready to teach. However that is not the case for all schools or all students (Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA, 2015). These issues have been on an upwards trend since the creation of The Common Core State Standards Initiative of 2009 and Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015. Teaching topics such as math and history are important; however teaching social emotional skills (self awareness, self management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making) are essential for future success in school, work and life. If a student has adequate social emotional skills it reduces their emotional tension so they can be open to new content and material within the class room (5 Keys to Successful Social and Emotional Learning, 2013).

In addition to the lack of support for clients with social emotional issues due to current educational policies and teacher's lack of training, another problem that I often encounter is scheduling problems. Due to the fact that the clients that I provide services to cannot be pulled out of Science, English, or Math classes and often times the students that I see on a regular basis have two Math and/or two Science classes a day makes it difficult to fit therapy into their schedule. When you have multiple children from the same school within the same grade this leads to having a very limited amount of classes to pull from and this causes major issues. Even though I have only been at River Valley since the start of the school year I have seen an upward trend in difficulty of pulling children out of classes. I believe that this upward trend is occurring due to the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) testing and the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) testing (for middle school age children in Massachusetts).

To understand the current policy and why that policy was created you have to understand the history of both the problem at hand and the creation of policy. In 1965 President Johnson signed the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) that tied together multiple educational initiatives which occurred before ESEA was created. ESEA ensured equal access to a quality education for all students, especially those living in poverty, while emphasizing high academic standards and accountability in public schools. In addition, the act provided federal funds for schools to train teachers, promote parent involvement, and increased teaching material (Hanna, 2005).

The movement towards standards-based education and assessment began with the Improving America's Schools Act of 1994 (IASA). IASA reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA). ESEA has raised the academic achievement of

millions of underprivileged children. With the creation of the IASA, the ESEA for the first time focused on the needs of all students instead of just the impoverished students. Research showed that for all children to learn, the whole school had to be focused on the education of all students. Over the next six years there was a lot of discussion in the government about meanings of content standards and procedures for setting performance standards (Jorgensen and Hoffmann, 2003).

In 2001, President Bush signed into law the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), which redesigned ESEA. NCLB brought clarity to the use and importance of standardized testing of students in kindergarten through high school. With NCLB, “a new era began where accountability, local control, parental involvement, and funding what works became the cornerstones of the nation’s education system. If our children are not learning, the law requires that we find out why. If our schools are not performing, options and help will be made available” (Jorgensen and Hoffmann, 2003).

NCLB was intended to establish high standards of learning and accountability for all students in public schools. However, the policy was seriously flawed and severely underfunded. This policy quickly turned into making sure that all children could "pass" the standardized tests, and if a student could not pass, this became a contributing factor to increased school drop-out rates. Many of the problems of NCLB pertain to diverse youth, such as the need to focus on standardized testing which leaves no room for learning relevant information relating to cultural diversity, sexual diversity, or gender diversity (Jorgensen and Hoffmann, 2003).

In 2015, the ESEA was revised yet again by President Obama. Obama created the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) that replaced a majority of NCLB. ESSA includes provisions that will help to ensure success for students and schools within today’s educational system. One of

the main laws within the ESSA is, “advances equity by upholding critical protections for America's disadvantaged and high-need students.” In addition, the ESSA includes that all students in America will be taught to a high academic standard and will be prepared to succeed in college and/or careers. Another law within the act reports, “that there will be accountability and action to effect positive change in our lowest-performing schools, where groups of students are not making progress, and where graduation rates are low over extended periods of time” (U.S Department of Education).

Even though the Every Student Succeeds Act ended the No Child Left Behind era, which in fact left many children behind, it has many problems and flaws of its own. Many legislators thought that Obama would de-emphasize test scores, however the ESSA made them even more important for “accountability” purposes and teachers were being evaluated based on unreasonable evaluation systems (U.S Department of Education). This leaves teachers, especially teachers that teach Math and English, in a position to focus strongly on curriculum information instead of social emotional needs, which leaves many students, especially students that River Valley Counseling serves, lacking essential social emotional skills. If a student has the ability to identify their emotions (self awareness), self regulate (self management), embrace diversity (social awareness), work together (relationship skills), and evaluate consequences for various behaviors (responsible decision making) then there is a good chance they will be more willing to learn and be more successful in future endeavors. Social emotional learning promotes self-regulation and having the ability to manage thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. It has been found by numerous studies that the ability to self-regulate is correlated to positive school behavior and academic achievement (Vega, 2012).

Another issue with the ESSA is that it has heavy incentives for states to maintain Common Core State Standards (CCSS) of 2009. One of the requirements of the act is that each state must prove to the federal government that they have adopted standards that are defined as “college and career” standards. This requirement forces states into adopting Common Core as their standardized testing. Although the ESSA transferred accountability back from federal to state, this requirement of adopting “college and career” standards leaves states in a position to use the federal standardized test. For the forty-five states that have adopted the common core standardized test, the curriculum has become much different and much more intense. This leads to increased difficulty for clinicians when it comes to removing children from class, as the school-based clinicians from River Valley do (U.S Department of Education).

Last month the Choices in Education Act (CEA) of 2017 was introduced in the House of Representatives to repeal the ESEA of 1965 and certain nutritional standards. The Choices of Education Act of 2017 “distribute federal funds for elementary and secondary education in the form of vouchers for eligible students and to repeal a certain rule relating to nutrition standards in schools” (King, 2017). If this act passes, one can only wonder what this means for American education.

Currently, federal administration is focused on increasing academic achievement using the measurement of standardized testing. If American schools focused on social emotional skills in conjunction with academics, I believe that academic achievement would increase immensely. Even though some children can succeed with minimal focus on social emotional needs that is not true for all students because everyone is different. Many of the children that I serve are highly intelligent, however greatly underachieve do to the lack of social emotional support within the classroom.

Another change that needs to be addressed within educational policy is equality versus equity within schools. Currently our nation is focused on equality and placing all children into the same box. With the increase of standardization, all students are expected to succeed on the same test no matter their background, race, or religion. Many school administrators and teachers believe that keeping children within the classroom and not deviating from the curriculum will help the students succeed on the standardized test; however I believe that for many children receiving therapy and working on social emotional needs will help them increase their academic achievement.

I understand that policy change is a long process and does not happen overnight; however I think that it is important to continually advocate for the changes that you believe are best. As I talked about above I believe that advocating for increased social emotional learning within schools and a national shift in focusing on equity within schools instead of equality will be crucial for the future success of our nation's youth. In addition, I believe that it is important that social workers also work to eliminate specific requirements of the current educational policies, such as the incentives for states to use common core and actually place the responsibility on the states, as Every Student Succeeds Act claims it does. If this is done this could promote positive change within our nation's educational system because I believe if states are held responsible for school achievement there will be better services for those students in need.

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