

Featured

(1) Are we over-pathologizing young people's mental health?

(2) Do Students Disengage – then, Dropout?

And, as always, you will find

(3) Links to more resources

**This community of practice Practitioner is designed
for a screen bigger than an iPhone.**

For discussion and interchange

>Are we over-pathologizing young people's mental health?

Obviously some students have significant problems that require referral for special assistance and even special education identification and services. However, care must be exercised to avoid **mislabeling and over-pathologizing** such problems. The symptom criteria relied on for a valid diagnosis are often common behaviors found among children in subcultures and vary significantly with development. The instability of symptom patterns and the many problems related to reliability and validity of current assessment procedures are well recognized. Also well discussed are the inequities and biases related to race, ethnicity, and primary language.

In a paper on the *Normalization and Popularization of Mental Illness*, a student working with our Center related a conversation with friend about being diagnosed.

“My interest in the effects of mental illness normalization and popularization began in talks with my very close friend, Sam, who had been diagnosed with clinical depression and put on medication during high school. He told me that during the period when his depression was at its worst, he felt that what he was experiencing was not the same as the ‘depression’ he was hearing about and seeing among his peers. He noticed that the word was used loosely to describe feelings that did not reflect what he was experiencing. His perception was that many of his peers casually described normal negative emotions as depression. This caused him to feel his struggles with depression were being delegitimized, and this made him want to separate himself from those he felt were misappropriating mental illness.”

Here are some excerpts from a recent editorial in *Child and Adolescent Mental Health*.

>From: *The debate around over-pathologizing young people's mental health*

“...Are we creating an artificial mental health crisis for young people when there is no real increase in mental illness? Or are we simply giving a name – albeit a diagnostic label – to problems that young people experience and need help with?...

Two questions:

- >How can we increase awareness, reduce stigma, and support mental health at an early enough stage in the community without over-pathologizing young people's experiences and needs?
- >How can we offer timely diagnosis and evidence-based treatments to young people who need them in resource-strapped communities and care services? ...

Five potential solutions.

First, we need to tighten diagnostic criteria to prevent inflated prevalence of mental health conditions and mis-attribution of ordinary experiences to diagnostic entities.

Second, investment in effective interventions, highly skilled personnel, and health and social care

services should be prioritized over general public initiatives around awareness so that we prevent the adverse effects of self-diagnosis and labeling without follow-on provision of help.

Third, mental health literacy and de-stigmatization initiatives need to be re-purposed to incorporate a normalizing perspective and focus on positive behaviors and strengths-based approaches.

Fourth, health services should collaborate with other sectors (employment, housing, and social care) to address the social determinants of mental health: drug use, abuse, violence, neglect, poverty, exploitation, isolation, and bullying, both in the physical and digital world, which are strongly associated with diagnosable mental health problems.

Finally, we need to work together with young people, their families, and the communities who look after them when we design initiatives, interventions, services, and research projects to get the balance right between protecting and supporting young people's mental health without misinterpreting and mislabeling as 'mental illness' those feelings and behaviors that are common and expected in response to challenging and changing life circumstances."

Here are some more ways to avoid over-pathologizing students.

>From: *There are no bad kids: How educators can protect students against harmful diagnoses*

"...Contextualize student behavior.

>Before labeling a child oppositional, ask:

Are they facing hunger, housing instability or bullying?

Are they reacting to discrimination or past trauma?

>Building strong relationships with students and families helps uncover the full story.

>Support, don't punish. Because they address the root causes of distress, behavioral interventions that teach emotional regulation and restorative practices that repair relationships can be more effective than exclusion....

>Be skeptical of mental health referrals.

Referrals don't guarantee unbiased care. Psychiatrists, psychologists and therapists aren't required to account for racism or the school-to-prison pipeline...

>By questioning bias and shifting from labels to solutions, schools can ensure every child gets the support they need to thrive....

There are no bad kids. There are only systems that fail them. Let's lift them up, not push them out."

For links to more about this matter, go to the Center's Quick Find on *Misdiagnosis*.

Are you depressed?



No, I'm just not interested.

For discussion and interchange

>Do Students Disengage – then, Dropout?

“...The status dropout rate represents the percentage of 16- to 24-year-olds who are not enrolled in school and have not earned a high school credential (either a diploma or an equivalency credential such as a GED certificate). In 2022, there were 2.1 million status dropouts between the ages of 16 and 24....” *Conditions of Education 2024*

Dropping out is "more of a process than an event ... and there are a lot of telltale signs along the way. It means there are a lot of places in the child's school career where we could intervene to help. It really is going to take some systemic change. Anything short of that is not going to be that successful." Russell Rumberger

It is a given that a strong academic program is the foundation from which all other school interventions must operate. But as a school board member recently stressed, "... priorities of academic achievement and equity come into conflict." He notes that the prevailing trend is "to prioritize academic achievement and the fixation around data and dashboards, and test scores." This leads to a marginalization of efforts to transform how schools address barriers to learning and teaching.

The marginalization is widespread – and it's a mistake. Academic achievement cannot be separated from addressing barriers to learning and teaching. This seems evident when one analyzes students who become so disengaged from schooling that they dropout.

We regularly hear policy makers and education leaders commitment to preventing school dropouts. We suggest that they will continue to have too little success as long as schools don't have a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student/learning supports and ensure that students are regularly and productively engaged in classroom instruction.

Here are some excerpts from recent articles:

>From: *Examining High School Student Engagement and Critical Factors in Dropout Prevention*

"The degree to which high school students engage in school and the instructional activities therein is arguably one of the most important factors influencing the academic and behavior outcomes of students. Copious research indicates high levels of engagement are generally associated with high levels of academic achievement and reduced instances of dropout. When compared with other factors, the evidence in support of increasing student engagement as a useful mechanism for dropout prevention is considerably stronger than any other recommended practice. In fact, increasing student engagement is the only practice that currently meets or exceeds the What Works Clearinghouse standard of "Strong Evidence" with regard to the impact on dropout prevention...."

>From: *What Works Clearinghouse Practice Guide: Preventing dropout in secondary school*

"...Students are engaged in school when they are interested in their classes and see them as important to their future, and when they feel they belong in school. Engaged students have good attendance, come to class prepared, and are able to navigate daily challenges in and out of school. These behaviors, in turn, improve course pass rates and help students establish positive relationships with teachers and peers, reinforcing students' sense of belonging in school. Programs and curricula targeted at increasing the relevance of school, building supportive relationships, and helping students manage challenges can help prevent disengagement. This recommendation can be implemented both as a pro-active, school-wide approach and as an intervention for students already showing signs of low engagement in school...."

>From : *The Effectiveness of Dropout Intervention Programs Among K-12 Students*

“...Over the past decades, various dropout intervention programs aimed at reducing dropout rates have been implemented. Intervention programs is defined as programs that provide specific support to either general students or students who are at risk of dropping out, with the aim of increasing school completion. Many programs concentrate on improving academic performance, reducing absence and improving attendance rates, boosting school engagement, or alleviating behavioral problems...

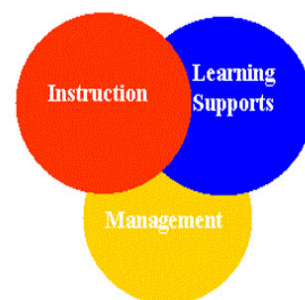
School dropout comes at the end of a gradual process of disengagement from the school... Students may leave school for several reasons, such as lack of motivation and interest, poor attendance, disciplinary and behavioral issues, negative family dynamics, and academic difficulties. These reasons are multidimensional and complex. Therefore, behavioral and multi-component interventions that tackle these fundamental issues could have larger effect sizes than academic interventions alone.

The research provides compelling evidence that behavioral and multi-component interventions are the most effective ways to help students stay on track toward graduation.... Since behavioral strategy emerged as the most significant factor, program developers could consider adding behavioral components when designing the intervention programs, such as emotional support, positive social relationships....”

Go to the Center’s Quick Find on [Dropout Prevention](#) for links to many more resources and articles.

Center Comment: Policy makers are revisiting the problem of preventing school dropouts. Ultimately, as with so many problems in our society, decreasing the rate of dropouts could be tremendously aided by reducing generational poverty. For the immediate future, however, the best opportunity to do something on a large-scale is to **transform how schools address barriers to learning and teaching and reengage disconnected students.**

It’s time to end the marginalization of student/learning supports!



>**Links to a few other relevant shared resources**

- > [Why America medicates sadness](#)
- > [Declining public school enrollment](#)
- > [How Large and Small Districts Develop Their Principals](#)
- > [School Mental Health Services: A Source of Hope, Currently Under Threat](#)
- > [School finance reforms and racial disparities in funding](#)
- > [Drugs and Mental Health Don’t Mix](#)
- > [How Much Freedom Do Teachers Have in the Classroom? In 2025, It’s Complicated](#)
- > [State Strategies for Sustained Investment in Kids: A Landscape of Dedicated Funding](#)
- > [State Child Abuse & Neglect Policies Database](#)

A Few Upcoming Webinars

For links to the following and for more webinars, go to the Center's Links to Upcoming/Archived Webcasts/Podcasts
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/webcast.htm>

10/8 System change: A schoolwide comprehensive model
10/8 Reframing student-teacher relationships
10/8 Tools to manage conflict
10/9 Assistant principals as instructional leaders
10/9 Creating conditions for healthy disagreement
10/9 Boosting attendance
10/10 How states can inspire student civic engagement
10/13 De-escalating children in distress
10/14 Empowering students: a strengths based approach
10/15 Empowering Leaders, Empowering Classrooms
10/16 Supporting English learners
10/16 Meeting facilitation skills
10/16 Strategies for staff wellness
10/21 Understanding loneliness and building social connections
10/22 Addressing challenging behaviors
10/23 Addressing bullying in the Individual Education Plan
10/28 National Training, Education and Workforce Survey
10/28 Promoting self-confidence and self-esteem
10/29 Mental health and mental illness: what's the difference?
10/30 Understanding social anxiety
11/5 Evaluation of mental health in IEP
11/12 Addressing suspensions and early dismissal for students with disabilities
11/13 School leaders supporting instruction
11/13 Support for homeless youth
11/13 Principals supporting teachers in classroom instruction
11/13 The power of protective factors in social development
12/2 Reducing risk for youth substance misuse

How Learning Happens (Edutopia's series of videos explores guiding all students, regardless of their developmental starting points, to become engaged learners).

Unpacking the Impacts of Structural Racism on Youth (Webinar recording)

Given tightening school budgets and scarce extramural support, the tendency is to further marginalize student/learning supports. Such a tendency certainly won't help schools address the needs of an increasing number of students experiencing learning, behavior, and emotional problems.

And it is a recipe for undermining efforts to close the achievement and opportunity gaps.

National Initiative for Transforming Student and Learning Supports
<https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/newinitiative.html>

Our Center emphasizes the opportunity to start now to transform how schools address barriers to learning and teaching and reengage disconnected students.

RELEASED for 2025-2026

**An Agenda for Improving Student/Learning Supports:
A Month-by-Month Guide for Systemic Change with Existing Resources**

Let Us Know about what ideas are being proposed for moving in new directions for transforming how schools address barriers to learning and teaching.

And if anyone is thinking about increasing the capacity of a district or school with respect to developing a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student/learning supports, we can help. Send all info to ltaylor@ucla.edu

To Listserv Participants

- Please share this resource with others. (Everyone has a stake in the future of public education and this is a critical time for action.)
- Let us know what's going on to improve how schools address barriers to learning & teaching and reengage disconnected students and families. (We can share the info with the over 140,000 on our listserv.)

For those who have been forwarded this and want to receive resources directly, send an email to Ltaylor@ucla.edu

Looking for information? (We usually can help.)

Have a suggestion for improving our efforts? (We welcome your feedback.)

We look forward to hearing from you! **Contact:** ltaylor@ucla.edu

**THE MORE FOLKS SHARE, THE MORE USEFUL AND
INTERESTING THIS RESOURCE BECOMES!**

For new sign-ups – email Ltaylor@ucla.edu

**Also send resources ideas, requests, comments,
and experiences for sharing.**

THIS IS THE END OF THIS ISSUE OF THE PRACTITIONER

Who Are We? Our national Center was established in 1995 under the auspices of the School Mental Health Project (which was established in 1986). We are part of the Department of Psychology at UCLA. The Center is co-directed by Howard Adelman and Linda Taylor.