

The Effects of Cognitive-Behavioral Interventions on Dropout for Youth with Disabilities

PURPOSE

Introduction

This practice-based systematic review summarizes the scientifically-based research studies that have been produced in the past two decades from three distinct perspectives: (a) cognitive-behavioral interventions, (b) dropout or dropout-related outcomes, and (c) samples of secondary-aged youth with disabilities. By *scientifically-based research studies* we mean reports of research studies that meet minimum standards of internal and external validity. These standards include, for example, explanations of how multi-group studies have assured minimal equality of groups (through randomization, matched sampling, or statistical use of covariates), clear explanations of the intervention, and some evidence of validity and reliability of the outcome measures. These studies may have employed group-based designs, single-participant designs, or qualitative designs, but they must report adequate evidence of these two sets of validity standards. By *cognitive-behavioral interventions* we mean these original research studies must have reported on the effects of implementing an intervention that had as its defining characteristics the use of:

... the greatest emphasis on the learning process and the influence of the contingencies and models in the environment while underscoring the centrality of the individual's mediating-information-processing style (Kendall, 1993, p. 235).

By *dropout or dropout-related outcomes* we mean studies that measured actual dropout from school, or powerful correlates of dropout such as persistence in therapy or program directly designed to assist preventing dropout, or violent verbal or physical aggression. Studies by

Cairns, Cairns, and Neckerman (1989), French and Conrad (2001), and Janosz, Le Blanc, Boulerice, and Tremblay (2000), for example, have consistently found that dropout in high school was predicted by aggressive behavior in middle and high school years. Finally, by *samples of secondary-aged youth with disabilities* we mean studies whose samples were either youth with disabilities or were, in part, youth with disabilities and outcome measures for those youth with disabilities were reported separately. These youth must have been enrolled in secondary school environments or, if in non-graded residential or day treatment facilities, the studies must have reported the ages of those youth with disabilities as ages 13-22 inclusive.

The conceptual framework we used to guide our philosophical orientation to this systematic review is grounded in the ecological model of social functioning to help answer “what works” questions for preventing dropout for youth with disabilities. An ecological framework provided the necessary conceptual structure to guide the scope, the methodology, and the development of this research synthesis. The question of “what works” can be translated by the classical ecological question posed by Wachs (1987): “Under what environments (situations, programs and settings) have what kinds of persons (the diverse characteristics of all youth with disabilities) changed in what kinds of behaviors (school and therapeutic persistence, violent behavior)?”

This ecological framework focuses on the transactional relationship among persons, environments and behaviors and was first introduced in 1936 by Karl Lewin. Since Lewin’s work, the application of the ecological framework has impacted much of the theoretical and implementation strategies associated with a wide range of human services and education. The ecological approach to understanding human behavior is well documented in the field of psychology (Barker, 1968; Moos, 1976; Bandura, 1971; Wicker, 1979).