Research-Based Practice

"But I've Never Had to Study or Get Help Before!": Supporting High School Students in Accelerated Courses

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Abstract

Although Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate (AP/IB) students may not be the most obvious group of adolescents in need of extra supports, this population has salient and unique risk factors in need of specialized services, such as elevated perceived stress levels. The heightened academic demands placed on these students is an inescapable byproduct of the curriculum. To further examine the variability in student outcomes and determine what intrapersonal and environmental features promote positive outcomes among AP/IB students, the research team examined a large, diverse sample of 1,150 students in AP classes (from 10 schools) and more than 1,200 students from IB programs (from 10 schools; Suldo et al., in press). In this cross-sectional study, data were collected from self-report measures and school records from a total of 2,379 AP/IB students in grades 9-12. The authors examined five student outcomes in two domains: mental health (life satisfaction, psychopathology, school burnout) and academic (GPA, AP/IB exam scores). The sizable percentages of students with low emotional well-being as seen on measures of life satisfaction, mental health problems, or academic burnout, and/or academic challenges as reflected in end-of-year performance that is below AP/IB program standards, illustrate that students in accelerated curricula need supports despite their history of academic success that led to enrollment in AP/IB classes. In this article, the authors discuss the specific needs of this underserved group and outline strategies to consider in universal and targeted supports tailored to the specific risk and protective factors that research has identified are particularly relevant to AP/IB students.

"But I've Never Had to Study or Get Help Before!": Supporting High School Students in Accelerated Courses

Implementing a full continuum of school-based mental health services includes the provision of universal supports for all students, as well as tiered supports for students at risk for academic or emotional decline; however, some students may be overlooked due to their high academic achievement, compliant classroom behavior, or positive features of their home life, such as economic wealth and family resources. One such group includes high school students enrolled in Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate (AP/IB) courses. These youths are typically achieving well enough to maintain enrollment in these courses, but the potential emotional toll stemming from this rigorous coursework may go unnoticed or misunderstood. Students in AP/IB self-report higher levels of stress compared to general education students (Suldo & Shaunessy-Dedrick, 2013a), which is primarily due to their academic demands (Suldo et al., 2009). Students in AP/IB report juggling multiple academic demands (a heavy academic workload), high teacher expectations, and difficulty managing time (Taylor & Porath, 2006). The heightened academic demands placed on these students is an inescapable byproduct of the curriculum. As one IB teacher told us recently:

> Students simply have unrealistic expectations. Many come in believing they can put in the same amount of work into their classes as they did in middle school and produce the same grade, but that's not reality. We require students to go deeper with the material—you need to know the material and not just the answers.

Unfortunately, as students' stress levels increase, their risk for internalizing and externalizing symptoms and reduced life satisfaction also increases (Suldo, Shaunessy, Thalji, Michalowski, & Shaffer, 2009).

Students in AP/IB have unique risk factors and academic stress, but they also have many strengths, such as the historically high academic achievement and college-bound goals that led them to pursue AP/IB classes. Existing supports for general education students may not target the most important skills for success in accelerated curricula. Our research has centered on this service delivery gap, first by identifying the factors that predict academic and emotional success among high school students in AP/IB classes (Suldo, Shaunessy-Dedrick, Ferron, & Dedrick, in press), and then by developing and testing a multitiered system of support for 9th grade students in AP/IB that targets empirically identified predictors of success that are assumed to be malleable (i.e., amenable to improvement following interventions to foster skills and competencies; in progress). In this article, we discuss the specific needs of this underserved group and outline strategies to consider in universal and targeted supports tailored to the specific risk and protective factors that research has identified are particularly relevant to AP/IB students.

Students in Accelerated Courses

Many accelerated curricular options are available to high school students in American schools. Students in accelerated curricula typically are high-achieving, and may include gifted and non-gifted youth. Our research focuses on youth in two common but different accelerated academic programs in high school—Advanced Placement (AP) classes or International Baccalaureate (IB) programs. Designed to give high school students an opportunity to challenge themselves with college-level coursework, AP classes have been offered to high school students since 1956 (College Board, 2013). Offered in a "cafeteria-like" approach, students who take AP classes are typically not required to take a prescribed number of AP classes, but can choose

based on their school's course offerings and personal interests. The IB Diploma Programme became an option for high school juniors and seniors in the late 1960s (International Baccalaureate Organization [IBO], 2017). The IB Diploma Programme offers rigorous academic curricula for high school students and focuses on global issues, interpersonal and communication skills, and community service. Before students enter the IB Diploma Programme in their junior year, schools can offer the IB Middle Years Programme or a pre-IB curriculum for freshmen and sophomores to prepare students for skills needed in the Diploma Programme. A difference between IB and AP classes is that students achieving the IB Diploma must follow specific program requirements, such as completing a series of classes and associated end-of-course exams, completing an independent research project, and participating in different experiences outside of school. Regardless of the accelerated program selected, students may earn college credit for their performance, dependent on university guidelines.

The number and diversity of high schools offering accelerated curricular options has increased in line with government programs to expand AP and IB courses, such as the 2006 American Competitive Initiative, which emphasized math and science and included a provision for funding low-income students to participate in this coursework and exams. In a 10-year period, the rate of AP exams administered doubled from 2.3 million in 2006 to 4.7 million in 2016 (College Board, 2017); likewise, the number of IB programs increased internationally by 39.3% from 2012 to 2017 (IBO, 2017). The demographic makeup of this growing population is also changing, reflecting more AP and IB students from traditionally underrepresented ethnic groups in accelerated courses, such as Black/African American, Hispanic/Latino, and American Indian/Alaska Native students (The College Board, 2014).

Participation in AP/IB classes is associated with many benefits. Students who participate in accelerated courses are more likely to receive higher scores on the American College Test (ACT; Warne, Larsen, Anderson & Odasso, 2015) and Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT; McKillip & Rawls, 2013), and are more likely to attend college (Chajewski, Mattern, & Shaw, 2011). Students who have completed accelerated courses in high school often experience higher college GPAs (Murphy & Dodd, 2009) and save money based on course credits earned for their AP/IB exam performance (Dougherty, Mellor, & Jian, 2006). For Hispanic and African American students or students from low-SES backgrounds, enrollment in AP classes, particularly before 11th grade, also relates to higher high school graduation rates (Long, Conger, & Iatarola, 2012).

Unique Needs of High School Students in Accelerated Courses

Although AP/IB students may not be the most obvious group of adolescents in need of extra supports, this population has salient and unique risk factors in need of specialized services, such as elevated perceived stress levels. Compared to their peers in general education, multiple studies with different samples have documented that AP/IB high school students report significantly higher levels of stress than their peers in general education at the same schools, even after taking into account between-group differences in personality features (Suldo & Shaunessy-Dedrick, 2013a). Heightened stress is a concerning risk factor for AP/IB youth, as higher stress levels for youth in accelerated curricula are associated with less life satisfaction (Feld & Shusterman, 2015), more frequent school absences, and lower grades (Suldo, Dedrick, Shaunessy-Dedrick, Roth, & Ferron, 2015).

In spite of the documented elevations in academic stress experienced by AP/IB students, initial studies suggest that their emotional well-being is on par with levels of positive and negative indicators of mental health observed in students in general education, and that AP/IB students' academic outcomes are superior to general education students with regard to GPA,

attendance, and in-school behavior (Suldo & Shaunessy-Dedrick, 2013a). To further examine the variability in student outcomes and determine what intrapersonal and environmental features promote positive outcomes among AP/IB students, our research team examined a large, diverse sample of 1,150 students in AP classes (from 10 schools) and more than 1,200 students from IB programs (from 10 schools; Suldo et al., in press). In this cross-sectional study, data were collected from self-report measures and school records from a total of 2,379 AP/IB students in grades 9–12. We examined five student outcomes in two domains: mental health (life satisfaction, psychopathology, school burnout) and academic (GPA, AP/IB exam scores). As is likely the case for any group of teenagers, we saw considerable variability within AP/IB students' academic and mental health outcomes. With regard to the mental health outcomes, average levels of life satisfaction and psychopathology symptoms in the AP/IB sample were comparable to average scores yielded in prior work with teenagers from all academic tracks. About two thirds of AP/IB students reported life satisfaction in the positive range, while 15% reported psychopathology symptoms in the range of elevated risk for having or developing a behavioral or emotional problem. Perhaps unique to high school students in accelerated curricula, 71% of the sample endorsed symptoms of school burnout on a measure that examined cynicism toward the meaning of school, sense of inadequacy at school, and feelings of exhaustion due to schoolwork. With regard to academic outcomes, the average semester GPA was 3.29 on an unweighted scale (max = 4.0), with over three quarters of AP/IB students having a mean GPA at or above the "B" range (≥ 3.0). The average pass rate on end-of-course AP exams (number of AP exams with score ≥ 3 / number of AP exams taken) was 49%, which is comparable to the 2016 state and national pass rates (51% and 57% students earned a score ≥ 3, respectively; College Board, 2016a and 2016b). Finally, about 75% of 12th grade IB students in our sample earned the IB diploma, which is on par with other schools in the state from which the sample was drawn. The sizable percentages of students with low emotional well-being as seen on measures of life satisfaction, mental health problems, or academic burnout, and/or academic challenges as reflected in end-of-year performance that is below AP/IB program standards, illustrate that students in accelerated curricula need supports despite their history of academic success that led to enrollment in AP/IB classes.

A primary goal of our team's research agenda was to identify potentially malleable within-student and environmental factors that could be targeted with existing or newly developed interventions that focused on the skills and competencies most relevant to AP/IB student success. Findings from multivariate analyses, using the sample of 2,379 AP/IB students in grades 9–12, indicated that better outcomes in both academic and emotional domains were associated with higher levels of achievement motivation and cognitive engagement (Suldo et al., in press). Furthermore, positive mental health outcomes were predicted by higher levels of affective engagement (positive student–teacher relationships and pride in one's school and AP/IB program), authoritative parenting (perceived closeness, support, and autonomy promotion), and students' frequency of coping with academic stress through problem-focused strategies (i.e., time and task management, seeking academic support, turning to family, thinking positively, relaxing, and turning to spirituality). Positive academic outcomes were predicted by higher levels of achievement in middle school, family SES, and student eustress.

On the other hand, diminished academic and mental health outcomes were associated with coping strategies that involved avoidance or handling problems alone, as well as higher levels of parent–child conflict and stress from major life events. Considering which predictors

are most likely to be malleable, findings from this study underscore the salience of coping, engagement, and authoritative parenting practices to AP/IB student success.

Multitiered System of Support for Youth in Accelerated Courses

The aforementioned research findings show that AP/IB students tend to experience elevated levels of stress in tandem with academic success. Due to the shared and unique academic stressors inherent to these accelerated classes, and the varying levels of performance among students in AP/IB classes, services for these promising students should be provided in a multitiered system to match student need to service intensity. Below we provide universal and targeted strategies that school psychologists and other mental health professionals can use when supporting AP/IB youth.

Universal supports. Students in accelerated curricula experience a significant increase in perceived stress as they transition from middle school into their first AP/IB classes in their freshman year; after only one semester of 9th grade, students in an IB program reported higher perceived stress levels compared to same-age peers not in an IB program (Suldo & Shaunessy-Dedrick, 2013b). Therefore, designing universal supports for students as early as their freshman year of high school may be key to promoting their academic and emotional success. Even the most talented and hard-working students in middle school typically need to revise their study habits, time management, and help-seeking strategies to successfully acclimate to the AP/IB course load in high school. For instance, when our research group interviewed AP/IB high school students in the course of an ongoing project, one 9th grade female student shared:

> For me in middle school, the work wasn't that hard. Now when I'm in my AP classes, the teachers have these high expectations for you to excel in their class and to think like a college student ... and it's hard. AP teachers expect you to be independent, work hard, and have good time management skills.

Supports should be matched to the identified need (i.e., academic stress, as opposed to stress that stems predominantly from other sources such as economic concerns or social struggles) and target the development of skills and competencies most relevant to success among AP/IB students. A proactive or preventive approach involves providing universal supports for all AP/IB students. In line with research by Suldo and colleagues (in press), AP/IB students would likely benefit from learning specific ways to respond to academic stress, including time and task management strategies (e.g., organization, planning, prioritizing), positive thinking techniques (e.g., focusing on the long term benefits, finding the silver lining), relaxation exercises (e.g., deep breathing, mindfulness practices), and how to utilize people within their web of support such as family members, teachers, peers, and others in the community. These strategies can be the focus of class-wide lessons, after-school workshops, or summer "boot camps" for students scheduled to take AP/IB classes.

Identifying at-risk AP/IB students. In line with best practices in universal screening, schools should utilize a multimethod, multisource procedure to identify AP/IB students with early signs of academic or emotional problems who may benefit from extra support aimed at increasing their retention and success in AP/IB. An initial screening interval might occur at the end of a grading period, such as the first 9 weeks or semester of classes. A review of students' first quarter/semester grades in AP/IB classes, and perhaps GPA, would help identify students who are not attaining desired academic benchmarks. Beyond objective indicators of academic progress, school personnel might examine student status on variables that predict academic or

emotional risk; namely, elevated perceived stress (possibly reflective of challenges coping effectively with academic demands) or low student engagement (low school belongingness, limited involvement in extracurricular activities). Student self-report on brief, validated measures of stress, school belongingness, or affect at school may be most feasible and appropriate given adolescents' own insights into their emotional states. Teacher nominations might also serve as a useful tool to identify students who display behaviors consistent with emotional or academic risk, such as failing to turn in assignments, appearing disengaged during class discussions, being socially isolated, or expressing significant worry about academic performance. School teams can review data provided by students, teachers, and school records to identify and triage AP/IB students for Tier 2 services.

***Individualized supports for AP/IB students with signs of risk*.** It is likely that a sizeable proportion of AP/IB students who receive universal instruction addressing effective coping and student engagement will still experience a high level of stress or academic decline in their accelerated coursework. One 9th grade AP Human Geography teacher explained this trend:

> By the time some students get the fundamentals of how to be successful in an AP class, like managing their time and studying every night, it can sometimes take until 3rd quarter. By this point in time, they are so far behind and can't pull their grade up.

An IB student shared a similar sentiment about what it takes to succeed in the program:

> Doing well in IB is not even a measure of intellect, it's a measure of learning new things and being able to apply those things. A huge reoccurring thing for students in IB is thinking that they're not smart because they're not understanding the material instantly and they actually have to work for it. The top students may not necessarily be the smartest, but they're just the ones who work the hardest.

As can be illustrated by these two quotes, the specific academic and emotional supports for these youths differ from traditional selective school-based interventions. Allensworth, Nomi, Montgomery, and Lee (2009) examined 9th grade students taking college-prep courses and found that students who failed the course were not lacking academic skills to effectively learn the information (as evidenced by their high middle school grades); rather, these youths displayed ineffective behaviors that precluded them from learning the content. Specifically, students who failed the AP course had poor attendance and low levels of engagement in class. This suggests that selective interventions for struggling AP/IB students should focus on healthy stress management, which can include further development of effective coping skills to use when overwhelmed, such as how to use quick relaxation strategies or how to seek support from people at school. Likewise, students would benefit from learning how to increase their engagement at school by thinking through how their long-term academic goals align with the class content.

One such modality that is showing promise as a brief, school-based intervention technique is motivational interviewing (Rollnick, Kaplan, & Rutschman, 2016). School-based applications of motivational interviewing with adolescents have been shown to be a promising brief intervention for youth in need of additional coaching on academic goals (Strait, McQuillin, Smith, & Englund, 2012). During these one-on-one meetings, the school psychologist or "coach" serves as a guide who mindfully listens to the student's concerns while also providing expertise in healthy habits and behavior change when needed. The goal of these meetings is for the coach

to enhance a student's inner motivation to change his or her behavior and increase commitment to make a change by bringing to light discrepancies between the student's current and desired behaviors, and collaboratively planning the action steps the student will take to reach his or her personal long-term goals.

Key Considerations for School Psychologists Supporting AP/IB Students

Based on the research discussed in this article, including several studies we have conducted and the work we have in progress, we conclude with the following recommendations for educators who are interested in addressing the needs of AP/IB students.

Prepare students for the transition from middle to high school. Ninth grade is a particularly challenging year for students choosing to take accelerated curricula, but with appropriate scaffolding, students can develop skills to manage the heavy workload. School psychologists can assist AP/IB teachers and administrators by developing a multitude of supports for incoming freshman. This can include introductory workshops, perhaps offered before high school or at the start of the year, about the academic expectations and rigor associated with AP/IB. Schools can also pair incoming 9th grade AP/IB students with successful 10th, 11th, or 12th grade students to help them get acclimated to the school and their coursework.

Educate students on the signs, symptoms, and consequences of heightened stress. Students may not be aware of the way stress can manifest physiologically and psychologically, especially if they have experienced a limited number of stressors thus far in their lives. School psychologists can provide information to AP/IB youth so that they become more cognizant of their body's reaction to stressors and know when to take purposeful actions to manage distress.

Teach students coping strategies they can use to effectively deal with academic stress. How students manage academic stressors may be considered a reactive factor related to academic and emotional demands. Oftentimes, AP/IB students rely on ineffective tactics (such as withdrawing from others or reducing effort) as a way to deal with their higher workload. School psychologists can teach students how to use a multitude of effective coping strategies, such as time and task management, seeking academic support, turning to family, thinking positively, relaxing, and turning to spirituality.

Help students become more engaged in their schooling experience. An important component of student engagement is feeling connected through relationships inside of school, particularly with teachers of AP/IB classes. In addition to developing positive feelings about teachers, students can establish relationships with classmates, counselors, coaches, administrators, or other school personnel. Relationships at school are important but do not always just happen on their own. As such, school psychologists can work with struggling students to increase their skills in initiating positive relationships with those at school as well as maintaining these connections should conflicts arise.

Offer supports to students who are struggling academically or emotionally. School psychologists can offer AP/IB students who show signs of academic and emotional risk a continuum of care. For students with few stressors aside from school and sufficient social and academic supports, brief individual meetings or counseling groups targeting effective coping and engagement strategies will likely provide students with the skills needed for them to succeed. However, the high academic demands and expectations coupled with external stressors may lead a small portion of AP/IB students to show signs of significant distress, which signals that they would benefit from more intense clinical interventions. It is important that school psychologists consult with AP/IB teachers and administrators at the school to proactively identify these students and direct needed services toward them.

Conclusion

A growing number of universal and selective mental health programs and practices are available for elementary-age school students as well as for youth with well-understood or blatant risk factors, such as trauma, pregnancy, and community violence. The needs of adolescents with chronic stress that stems from an arguably less egregious source—accelerated coursework—are not often recognized or prioritized in practice or research. However, students in accelerated courses merit specialized supports (as described in this article) to improve their chances of succeeding academically and emotionally throughout high school and beyond. Such effort directed toward high-achieving students is consistent with the intention of positive psychology to help all individuals to thrive and reach a more fulfilling existence, rather than reserving attention for just those who suffer (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

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