

Listen to the Children: Students At Risk For Academic Failure Speak Out

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ABSTRACT

Currently, professional educators continue to use methods and strategies that have been, and continue to be, ineffective for many of today's students. While at risk students have been identified by several common characteristics, the programs generally in place for these students have often failed to demonstrate promising results or easy replicability. Before educators can assess those problems associated with being at risk, an understanding of what is occurring in the daily lives of these students is necessary. In order to better understand and assist, the relationship between what is going on in these students' lives and how school activities interfere with these conditions must be examined by educators. This study focused on the

processes in the lives of students identified as being at risk in urban schools. The student responses in this study and their perceptions were recorded and analyzed in a qualitative manner.

In education, it seems that we continue to use methods and strategies that have and continue to be ineffective (Deming, 1993; Dobyns & Crawford-Mason, 1994; Glasser, 1990). Despite the significant, ongoing dropout problem among students who exhibit characteristics that place them at risk and the various potential remedies employed, numbers fail to be amenable to reduction (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2001). Farrell, Peguero, Lindsey, and White (1988) point out that in an attempt to meet the needs of these students at risk for failure, educational institutions have tried a myriad of different programs without significant success.

In order to better understand the underlying factors that contribute to this problem, a process to get a first-hand view of what was occurring in the lives of these students was undertaken. This study encompassed one school year of teaching, observing, and talking with these students. Information for this study came directly from the verbalizations of the students involved. According to Farrell, et al. (1988), in order to better understand and offer assistance to the at-risk population, it will be necessary to gain an understanding which goes beyond just using records in student folders or test scores. It is necessary to inquire into the lives of these students in order to develop effective intervention programs. In essence, only a holistic, non-reductionist approach to the issue of risk can lead to a clear delineation of student needs. In order to know what is going on in their lives, students must be given a voice.

The theoretical framework for this study was based on research by Rumberger (1987), which found that dropping out of school is part of a long, systematic process that varies from individual to individual. Finn (1989) stated that when a student leaves school before graduation, it might be only one event in a long chain that could have its beginnings years earlier.

The recent concern for the dropout problem is focused on the fact that when students dropout before graduation, it not only has an adverse effect on the individual, but it also adversely affects society (Rumberger, 1987). These students will face a much more difficult future than other students who finish high school or college. They will experience lower earnings and greater degrees of unemployment than high school and college graduates (National Center for Education Statistics, 1993). Because the workplace of the future will require increased literacy, more education, and more advanced technological skills, it is imperative that educators find more satisfactory ways of instilling a desire for lifelong learning.

In order to address these issues, this study focused on the process in the life of each student identified, which has led to a state of being at risk of dropping out of school. Student observations, informal interviews, document analysis, and journal entries were employed to address these questions. Students were observed closely over the course of the school year with regard to changes in behavior, attitude, and academics. This study involved 15 students in an elementary class for students at risk of dropping out of school. Student comments on home environment, school environment, and other factors affecting

their lives were recorded and analyzed in a qualitative manner. Journal entries were also utilized.

Students in the study expressed many concerns related to both school and home environments. These concerns often revolved around perceived inequities and differential perceptions about the values of the schools as opposed to their community/ home environment.

Students consistently complained about the inconsistency of the school rules. They felt there was a double standard as far as they and the teachers were concerned. While they received tardies, several teachers repeatedly came in late.

Another area of inconsistency was raised by students in the area of eating and drinking in class. While they are not allowed to do this, teachers often ate and drank in the classroom on a daily basis. This also applied to the no-gum chewing rule. While students were disciplined for chewing gum, teachers could be seen chewing gum or eating candy daily. This perception of students and teachers was an area of recurring concern. Students feel double standards exist in many areas of school.

Students also voiced the concern that they were never given a say in anything at school. From the rules on down to social activities, student voices are never acknowledged. According to the students, no one at the school listens to them. Administrators, teachers, and counselors seemed to make all the rules and decisions and student concerns were not acknowledged. Students felt it did no good to say anything because no one at the school seemed to care to hear their opinions. Teachers and administrators are always wanting to know what is wrong and what can be done to improve schools for the students, yet the students involved are never given any voice in what will directly affect them.

Because of the fact that students felt they had no say, they rebelled against all the rules and authority in general. Such students had the opinion that they cannot be made to do anything they do not want to do. Authority means nothing to them and there is very little respect for anyone in positions of authority. One student expressed this by saying:

We're going to do what we want to anyway and they (the school) can't stop us.
We'll do what we want to do. They won't listen to us and we won't listen to them.

Students also expressed this attitude toward authority when they discussed the use of drugs in their school. The students saw nothing wrong with marijuana and reported that use this as well as other drugs in the schools. They are of the opinion that this problem is beyond the reach of the schools to correct. One student reaction to this problem was:

I don't think it (drugs) affects student absences because people smoke it and then come to school.

Another student took a different view of the situation:

Marijuana is a major problem in our school mainly because teens today smoke this drug. They smoke it before school and after school. I don't believe that the

school could help because the students don't smoke it here. Teenagers turn to drugs mainly to get high and to feel good. Some turn to drugs because of the money.

Students also expressed their feelings regarding teenage pregnancy in the schools. Most did not see this as being a problem. As one student responded:

Today teenagers are more advanced than they used to be. Plus today you learn more things about sex and a lot of your friends are having sex. We make our own decisions. The best thing I can say is let people learn from their mistakes and sooner or later they will realize that there is more to life than just sex.

Finally, the most common concern of the respondents was the lack of parental support in their home environment. These responses range from both parents holding two or more jobs to provide for their families or homes with a single parent who was often absent due to multiple jobs (with parental duties/responsibilities transferred to older children, grandparents, etc.) to situations where students had not seen parents for months or years (due to incarceration or abandonment).

Students expressed concern over the pressures of both school and home environments being greater without parental guidance and support. Academics (especially in the areas of homework or studying for upcoming tests) was also cited as an issue by the respondents. The responses in this area affirmed the contention that a stable, loving, supportive, and disciplined home environment is a critical aspect of school success and social mental health.

If educators are to help students in our schools today, and instill in them a love for learning and the desire to succeed, we must first find better ways to interest them in behaving, responding to instruction, and completing school. Conflicting value systems, community reinforcers that are far stronger than those available in schools, and the developmental stages that revolve around establishing independence, breaking free of restraints, and striving for personal power all combine with specific aspects of schools to create an array of conditions for failure. Any suggestions designed to ameliorate the problems and concerns related to students at risk for academic failure must address the systemic nature of the problem. Recommendations related to the issues identified in this study include the following:

First, the major concerns among students with regard to their home environment was a lack of parenting and home support/guidance. Schools could bring in resource people from the community to help identify parents, guardians, caregivers, and students with those services necessary to meet their needs in this area. Parental workshops held at the school with community speakers to address parents, guardians, or caregivers, and students on parental responsibilities could offer information and assistance to both groups. Secondly, organizations such as Big Brothers, Big Sisters, and the YMCA/YWCA could work more directly through the school to assist and counsel these stakeholders to offer assistance.

While students felt they were not being taken seriously when they voiced their opinions in the school, they also expressed a general boredom with school. Therefore,

efforts should be made to get low-achieving and low-ability students involved in every aspect of school, in order to feel like they are a part of the school and have a vested interest in its success. Students at risk of dropping out should (as should all students) be included with other stakeholders (parents, teachers, community leaders, administrators) in discussions having an impact on school activities, policies, and procedures. Because the at-risk students are in greatest need of involvement, and yet are usually excluded, an improved plan for selection and participation must be implemented to insure that all students have a chance to voice opinions on matters of concern. Participative governance involving all stakeholders is a critical aspect of building a quality education system (Blackbourn, Payne, & Hamson, 1997; Glasser, 1991).

Many students were also concerned with pregnancy and drug use both in and out of school. Current programs concerning teen pregnancy and drugs attempt to address these problems, but up to now have had only a limited impact. Such programs should not be abandoned, but expanded and re-designed to be more directly relevant to at risk students. Students or former students who have had direct experience themselves, through a family member, or through a friend, could be used as speakers or peer-counselors for other students. Such individuals would be more readily listened to than an adult who is lecturing on these subjects.

In addition, in-school workshops on futures planning (Kiernan & Schalock, 1997) could be designed and implemented to direct students interest. The early development of possible career interests is a critical aspect of facilitating positive life outcomes. Community and business leaders could be included as speakers on career opportunities for the future. Career days could also be planned for younger students, as early as the lower elementary level, to develop personal interests in certain careers and post-secondary education.

Improvement of the education system must begin with those areas in which the greatest impact can be achieved most rapidly (Langford, 1992). Students who are at risk for academic failure offer great potential for schools to improve performance and outcomes. The use of feedback is a well established tool in the continuous improvement process (Deming, 1993). By giving those students at greatest risk an opportunity to voice their concerns through feedback and participation, those fundamental needs of these individuals will not only be known and address, but understood as well.

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