

Technical Appendix to the Full Data Set [March 2014]

Note: This Technical Appendix describes aspects of our research that span two distinct phases of the *Washington Student Oral Histories Project*. In Phase I we completed 29 interviews of youth who had dropped out of school. These interviews were conducted at two sites in the Seattle area serving youth disconnected from school and work. At the end of Phase I, we produced a series of reports called *Pathways to Dropping Out*. A separate technical appendix accompanies this report series.

In Phase II we conducted an additional 24 interviews at three new sites outside the Seattle metropolitan area, including two sites serving rural youth. Subsequently these new interviews were incorporated into our data set for a total of 53 interviews. The new interviews were coded and analyzed according to a previously established scheme. Findings from this second phase are reported in a 2014 report entitled *I'm No Good In Math: Student Perspectives on Math Struggles and Dropping Out*. An additional report based on analysis of the full interview set and related to student perspectives on reading will also be released in 2014.

This appendix is divided into two parts. **Part A** describes study methodology. Since the general approach to data collection and analysis remained constant across the two phases, this first section's description is quite similar to the description originally presented in Phase I. The main difference is that in Phase II we expanded the number of sites included in the study, further diversifying the sample. **Part B** provides a summary of participant characteristics across the full data set of 53 participants.

A: Study Methodology

Overview of Study Design

In order to maximize the potential for candid conversations with the youth, we recruited and interviewed young people, ages 16-22, at five youth-serving organizations in Western Washington. Most youth had already been receiving some sort of service from the organization, so the interview setting was familiar to them. With the assistance of these partnering agencies, our team of three conducted in-depth, face-to-face interviews with a diverse set of 53 youth volunteers who had dropped out or had a history of serious truancy. We used a semi-structured interview protocol that focused on youths' school experiences and their perceptions of how they came to leave school. We chose this study method because it allowed us to capture detailed portraits of these struggling students' lives—a novel research approach to exploring the student disengagement process. After completing interviews, we used sophisticated data analysis software to code and analyze the digitally recorded and transcribed interviews.

Recruitment of Participants

In order to reach youth with a history of dropping out, the study employed a purposeful, site-based sampling approach, which emphasized in-depth understanding through the examination of information-rich cases (Patton, 2002). Initially, seven sites providing education or education plus other services to out-of-school youth, were approached about participating in the project. All sites served significant numbers of youth who had dropped out, and five of these sites expressed interest in partnering with the study. We subsequently developed partnering agreements with these five sites, which served distinctly different populations of youth.

Partnering Sites

The five partnering sites included the following organizations:

- An urban multi-service site providing GED, career and job training services to homeless youth. (14 interviews)
- An urban multi-service site providing GED, career and job training services primarily to low-income youth. (10 interviews)
- A suburban alternative school primarily serving area youth ages 15-19, many of whom had dropped out or been expelled and were interested in obtaining a diploma. (15 interviews)
- A rural re-engagement program offering GED-Plus services to youth ages 16-21. (10 interviews)
- A rural alternative school serving students who had not been successful in the area's comprehensive high school. (4 interviews)

Participant Recruitment Process

The recruitment process at each site was tailored to fit the different organizational structures, processes and populations served. At some sites interviewers first made an in-person informational presentation to small groups of interested youth, then invited youth to sign up for an interview. At other sites, a lead staff member at the site was thoroughly briefed by the researcher and given study informational materials. This lead person then described the study to interested youth at the site and coordinated the interview process.

The sites did not pressure or require youth to participate; only a small percentage of eligible youth at each site participated in the study. Almost all seemed genuinely interested in sharing their stories at length with interviewers, but these stories reflected the perceptions and experiences of those who were self-selected into the study, not all youth participants at the site.

Eligibility Criteria

Eligibility criteria for study participants included three conditions:

- (1) Potential participants had to currently be 16 to 22 years old
- (2) Speak and understand English
- (3) Have previously dropped out of school or skipped significant blocks of school

Prior to being interviewed, all youth had to read and sign a consent form approved by the University of Washington Human Subjects Division. If youth had difficulty reading and understanding the consent form, an interviewer paraphrased the consent form provisions and answered questions with that youth, one-on-one. In addition, youth under 18 years had to obtain a parent's or guardian's consent.

Study Definition of "Dropped Out"

Since the measurement focus at the national and state levels has shifted to reporting whether a student has graduated "on time," there is relatively little guidance in policy or in the research literature as to how best to define "dropping out." We wanted to capture the perspectives of youth who had recently made the decision to quit, as well those who had been away from school for longer periods. We also wanted to talk with those who had dropped out and had returned at some point to learn more about their motivations behind this decision and how they experienced their return. Therefore, for this study, we considered anyone who elected to stay out of school for more than a month to have "dropped out." This definition is somewhat arbitrary, but allowed us to have a chronological anchor for exploring the dropping out process with these different groups of students.

Incentives Offered

As part of the recruitment process, youth were offered a \$15 gift card from a local store such as Target, Fred Meyer or Walmart. Youth were given the gift card at the end of the interview.

Major Research Questions

Below are the major research questions we planned to address in the initial study:

- How have dropout youth experienced their elementary, middle and high school settings? What salient patterns or commonalities emerge across individual histories in terms of initiating events and tipping points?
- How have classroom interactions shaped the individual student's identity as a learner? What specific kinds of interactions do students point to as nurturing or failing to nurture their sense of self-efficacy as a learner?
- What specific institutional characteristics do youth perceive to have been most influential in encouraging/discouraging their engagement in school and commitment to graduate?
- How have learning difficulties and school responses to those difficulties impacted student attitudes and behaviors?

- What specific actions can schools and individual classroom teachers take to divert paths toward disengagement and dropping out?

Narrative Inquiry Method

We chose to use a qualitative approach that builds on existing research, articulates an *a priori* conceptual framework and identifies critical areas of inquiry. We utilized a narrative inquiry perspective that emphasizes analyzing and presenting data in a manner that conveys the story of phenomena and participants in context (Chase, 2005). This perspective is important to understanding people and events (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000); narratives provide coherence to qualitative data and play a central role in communicating with others (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998). This narrative inquiry was structured using case study methodology (Yin, 2003), exploring multiple cases across a range of settings. Semi-structured interviews (Patton, 2002) of truant and dropped-out youth allowed for in-depth examination of themes within and across cases and promoted an informal and conversation-like atmosphere for participants.

The Interview

The semi-structured interview protocol specified general content areas to be investigated and provided sample probes for each area, but interviewers had the flexibility and freedom to improvise follow-up questions and jointly construct and clarify meaning through layered exchanges with the interviewee (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Mishler, 1986). A copy of the interview protocol is contained in **separate technical appendix** accompanying the Project's four-part report *Pathways to Dropping Out*. After the first several interviews were completed, we made minor revisions to the protocol, such as adding a new probe or changing the wording of a probe, but the general content areas covered in the protocol remained the same across all interviews.

Three researchers who were experienced interviewers conducted the individual interviews and debriefed with each other after completing interviewing sessions. The confidential interview took place at the site with which the individual youth was affiliated and was digitally recorded, with the youth's permission. Project team members worked with site liaisons to identify appropriate interviewing rooms ahead of time. Rooms were required to be on site and afford auditory privacy so that interviewees were assured that others could not overhear their conversation. In interviewing rooms that contained windows, interviewees were seated with their backs to the windows or away from windows in order to minimize visual distractions from passers-by in hallways.

With few exceptions, interviewees were able to understand and respond to the interview questions posed and carry on in-depth conversations about their:

- Early school experiences
- The circumstances and events surrounding their disengagement from school
- Their truant behavior and adult responses to that behavior
- The tipping points they believed led to their decision to drop out

School Rating Exercise

At the beginning of each interview, the researcher first asked the youth to fill out a colorful and easy-to-read “school rating form.” The interviewees rated their overall experience of school across five different time periods: *early elementary* (K-2nd grade), *late elementary* (3rd-5th grade), *middle school* (6th-8th grade), *early high school* (9th-10th grade) and *late high school* (11th-12th grade). Youth generally had few problems providing a global rating on a five-point favorability scale for each of the time periods they attended school. This rating exercise helped youth reflect on their educational trajectory and appeared to prime them for substantive discussions about their experiences in each time period. Many youth kept the rating sheet in front of them during the interview and periodically referenced it in their conversations with us.

Interview Length

The average taped portion of the interview ran about 49 minutes in length. (Interviews in the second phase were slightly longer, on average, by about 4 minutes, than interviews conducted during the first phase.) The non-taped introduction and question and answer portion of the interview ran about five minutes, making the average total interview time about 54 minutes. Three out of the 53 interviews were exceptionally short, running about 28 minutes in total length; all other interviews were over 35 minutes long, and more than 70 percent were 45 minutes or longer.

Data Analysis

Youth interviews were transcribed in Microsoft Word format by a professional transcription company and uploaded into *Dedoose*, a web-based qualitative analysis software program. The software supported the development of a complex coding system whose features included frequent double and triple coding of interview segments, as well as hierarchical coding. Using an open coding process (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), the research team identified 11 major theme-based code categories containing 54 sub-categories. Coding choices were partially guided by a priori themes of importance derived from prior research, but the process was also open to unanticipated categories of meaning emerging from the narratives. Once the coding categories and hierarchy were finalized, we applied coded “tags” to the transcribed content of every interview, using *Dedoose*’s automated coding function. The assignment of tags then permitted multiple types of automated analyses of the content, including, word and theme searches, frequency counts, and cross tabulations. An iterative process of analysis led to the development of theoretical propositions (Miles & Huberman, 1994) exploring themes that had explanatory value. Codes remained constant across the two phases of the project.

Strengths and Limitations of the Data

The narrative inquiry approach used in this study taps an often neglected perspective—that of struggling and disengaged students. The systematic collection of detailed oral histories expands upon the very few survey and focus

group studies that have explored issues of student disengagement in the past two decades. The interview data provide a unique portrait of the disengagement process from the point of view of the youth who experienced this process first hand. Interviewees' stories about dropping out do not necessarily reflect reality as their parents or teachers would describe it. However, these perceptions are important because they help to elucidate the cognitions, motivations and decision-making that lie behind their school behaviors. The major strengths of this approach include:

- *An in-depth and systematic interviewing process that promoted student reflection and exploration of their dropping out process:* Almost all the interviewees appeared to take the challenge of examining their past experiences and state of mind seriously. The length and candor of the interviews are indicators of their commitment to understanding and explaining their actions.
- *A sample that reflected diverse participant backgrounds:* The five study sites from which the final sample was drawn served different types of youth with different educational trajectories. Two sites served younger youth who had dropped out but were currently committed to obtaining a high school diploma; two sites served older youth who were commencing or on a pathway to completing a GED program and or were seeking career planning, job search or job training assistance. Some of these older youth had been out of a school setting for three years or longer. A final site offered highly individualized re-engagement services to youth who had dropped out or were considered at high risk of dropping out. As described earlier, sites were also geographically diverse.
- *Analysis based on large number of individual cases:* For a qualitative study of this kind, we had a sizeable number of cases on which to base the analysis. The larger number of cases allowed us to see interesting patterns across subpopulations (e.g., pregnant teens) that might not have emerged with a smaller sample. Moreover, it increased our confidence in the meaningfulness of themes that emerged across numerous cases. In some instances, similar school experiences were reported by youth in case after case, increasing our confidence in the veracity, as well as in the significance of their reports.
- *Sophisticated software allowed for "quantification" of qualitative data:* We derived study findings through the application of a sophisticated system of hierarchical coding and automated analyses supported by the software used. Automation allowed us to identify and quantify major themes and attributes of participants and make judgments about the relative strength and importance of different themes.
- *Placement of findings within a larger research framework:* Many of the study findings complement, explain or expand upon previous, largely quantitative research. For example, correlative studies have long shown a strong connection between failure of a core subject in 9th grade and dropping out.

From analysis of interviews we identified common patterns and experiences leading up to the 9th grade course failure.

Data Limitations

This is an exploratory study based on a non-random sample of youth who elected to participate when presented with the opportunity. Findings presented represent the youth's *perceptions* of their school experiences. We did not have access to the youth's individual school records and, therefore, had no means to verify the information they provided us on attendance, discipline and academic performance. Sometimes, it was obvious to the interviewer that the youth was providing an incomplete and/or inaccurate account. For example, occasionally youth provided contradictory information about their school performance, behavior or social experiences. In other instances, youth said they could not recall key details of an event or time period, so their personal histories contained certain gaps, as well as some contradictions. Other limitations of the data included the following:

- *Non-representative sample:* We did not establish recruitment quotas based on race, sex or age. As explained earlier, there were barriers to recruiting younger interviewees because of the parental consent requirement. As a result, the sample contained relatively few 16 and 17-year-old interviewees who had dropped out and re-engaged in an educational setting. In addition, the study sample does not necessarily reflect the ethnic, racial or gender make-up of the population of youth in Western Washington who have dropped out in any given year. (However, as shown in the tables below, youth of color were generally well represented in the sample; females were somewhat overrepresented at 37 percent.)
- *Reliance on fading memory:* Many youth had a difficult time recalling specific events or experiences related to their elementary school years, particularly early elementary. For example, some could not remember much about learning to read or about other learning activities. This inability to recall specifics from the elementary time period may have boosted their positive impressions of this time period, which appeared to be largely based on general memories of having a good time socially. In contrast, youth may have had clearer recollections of negative experiences (both social and academic) in middle and high school. In addition, those who were currently 21 or 22 years old and recalling their school experiences might not remember events as clearly as those who were currently 16 or 17.
- *Differing abilities to reflect upon and make sense of experiences:* Depending on age, gender and other personal factors, youth demonstrated varying levels of reflection and self-insight. Often those who were older and had some distance on their experiences appeared to delve more deeply into their own motivations and behaviors and were better able to articulate causal factors leading to their disengagement from school and subsequent truancy and dropping out.

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B: Participant Characteristics

Location	N	Percent
Rural	14	26%
Suburban	15	28%
Urban	24	45%
Grand Total	53	100%

Gender	N	Percent
Males	33	62%
Females	20	38%

Race/Ethn	N	Percent
Afr Am	13	25%
Asian	4	8%
Hisp	6	11%
Nat Am	4	8%
Other	3	6%
White	23	43%
Grand Total	53	100%

Age @ Interview	N	Percent
16	3	6%
17	3	6%
18	17	32%
19	7	13%
20	11	21%
21	6	11%
22	6	11%
Grand Total	53	100%

Age@1st Dropout	N	Percent
12 yrs	1	2%
13 yrs	2	4%
14 yrs	7	13%
15 yrs	7	13%
16 yrs	10	19%
17 yrs	9	17%
18 yrs	11	21%
19 yrs	3	6%
Unknown	3	6%
Grand Total	53	100%

Av age start skipping	14.5
Av age 1st dropout	16.1

Other Characteristics	N	Percent
Immigrant/Refugee	8	15%
Raised by single parent	36	68%
History of homelessness	19	36%
Serious delinquency	14	26%
Foster Care/ Removal	12	23%
History of behavior problems	33	62%
Early/frequent AOD	28	53%