

The Pathways to Dropping Out: A Brief Literature Review (Rev. January 2012)

Background

In the U.S. roughly one million students drop out of school every year; only about 70 percent of students graduate on time (Monrad, 2007). For African American and Hispanic students the on-time graduation rates are especially dismal, with approximately 55 and 57 percent graduating, respectively (Swanson, 2009). Washington State has a similarly low on-time graduation rate, with many sub-populations graduating less than two-thirds of students on time (Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, 2012). High dropout rates have ominous implications for the long-term social, economic and civic health of our country (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2009; Ravitch, 2010; Swanson, 2009; Wise, 2007). Dropping out also can have dire consequences for individual youth and their families. In the last three decades, as the general level of national educational attainment has risen, workers lacking a high school diploma have become increasingly marginalized economically. Fewer and fewer non-graduates are able to participate successfully in the workforce, and those that do participate are now largely concentrated in jobs offering below-poverty wages (Swanson, 2009). These economic trends signal increasing social and economic disparities among racial and geographic sub-populations, based on their differential graduation rates.

Research Context

In recent years the literature on student engagement has expanded our understanding of factors contributing to alarmingly high dropout rates nationwide. The antecedents leading to dropping out are complex and intertwined, encompassing a range of factors. Pianta and Allen (2008), for example, stress the importance of *classroom factors* in building teacher-student relationships and positively impacting adolescent engagement and motivation in school. Other factors associated with dropping out include *individual and peer group factors* (Flores-Gonzalez, 2002; Lee & Burkam, 2003; Rumberger, 2008), *family factors* (Bridgeland, Dilulio & Morrison, 2006; National Research Council, 2003); and *school factors* (Bridges et al., 2008; Croninger & Lee, 2001; Lee & Burkam, 2003).

While research has explored individual student and school characteristics associated with truancy and dropping out, less attention has been devoted to analyzing complex causal factors influencing student behaviors (National Research Council, 2003; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). Moreover, relatively little research has been devoted to studying dropout behavior from the student's point of view. Most of the research tapping student opinion has relied on structured surveys and focus group discussion (see, for example, Bridgeland et al., 2006, and Bridges et al., 2008). These approaches do not allow for an in-depth exploration of individual student experience.

WSOHP's current study addresses an important knowledge gap regarding the *specific and cumulative educational experiences* that influence the individual student's decision to stay in or leave school. Through the use of in-depth interviews with youth, it seeks to develop a nuanced understanding of the complex interplay between the *individual student* and the various educational *settings* (Tseng & Seidman 2007) the student experiences over time, starting in early elementary. The study focuses particularly on classroom interactions and institutional arrangements that may influence a student's identity and development as a learner and the motivation to stay in school. In their 2004 review of research on engagement, Fredricks, Blumenfeld and Paris stress that school contexts not only *influence*, but also *interact* with the individual student in synergistic ways; motivation may operate as an antecedent, a mediating variable, and an outcome. This study hopes to capture some of the complexities of these interactions to better understand the specific pathways that lead to dropping out.

Variables of Interest

Specifically, we are examining school organizational and structural variables that previous research has found to be associated with the probability of being truant or dropping out (Bridges et al., 2008; Croninger & Lee, 2001; Kerr & Letgers, 2004; Lee & Burkam, 2003; Neild, 2009). These variables include school size and type (Crosnoe, Johnson & Elder, 2004; Howley & Howley, 2006) instructional approach (Pianta & Allen, 2008; Pianta & Hamre, 2009) and school policies/requirements (Skiba & Peterson, 1999). For

example, studies suggest that certain policies related to high-stakes testing (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009) may increase the dropout rate, especially for low-performing students. Additionally, since students who have repeated a grade, lack basic skills, or have special needs are more likely to drop out than students who perform at grade level (Neild, 2009), the study explores through student narratives various school policies and practices related to remediation, credit retrieval, and special education services. The student-teacher relationship is also of central interest because student interactions with teachers and their classroom practices can play a pivotal role in motivating students academically (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Pianta & Hamre, 2009). Motivation, in turn, is closely connected to attendance, academic performance and, ultimately, staying in school (Schmakel, 2008). Finally, we probe students' "theory of Intelligence" and their self concepts as a learners (Dweck, 2000), again looking to see how their concepts shape, and in turn, are shaped through school experiences.

Conceptual Frameworks

Our research model is informed by three main concepts: First is the notion that school environment, policies, and practices are particularly influential on student attitudes and behavior (Fredricks et al., 2004; Lee & Smith, 2001; Neild, 2009; Schmakel, 2008; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). Second, ongoing interactions between school and student create new realities for both student and teacher, acting in a synergistic way to influence motivation and shape the student's identity as a learner (Dweck, 2000; Fredricks et al., 2004). These interactions are worth exploring for very pragmatic reasons: They may reveal conditions and events that educators have the power to influence—both through policy intervention and classroom practice. Finally, we treat dropping out not as an event, but as a process that unfolds over time (Rumberger, 2008) and seek to identify common elements and patterns that define this process, including key initiating and tipping points.

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