

What are school-related factors that cause high school students to drop-out of school?

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High school dropout is a serious educational and social problem. By 2010, 8.5% of young people aged 20 to 24 had not obtained their high school diploma (Statistics Canada, 2010). This means that in a school of 2,000 students, 167 students are dropping out of school. Many educators and researchers have looked at the issue of high school dropout. They are unanimous in that no single reason exists for students dropping out of high school; a collection of factors contribute to this *crisis* (Bridgeland et al., 2006). What is important to note is that teachers' perspective of why students drop out of school differed from why students actually drop out (Bridgeland et al., 2009). Most teachers pointed to lack of parental involvement and support as the core problem of high school dropout; however, contrary to teachers' predictions, the most frequently identified causes for dropouts were school-related factors (Bridgeland et al., 2006, 2009). High school students identified boredom, absenteeism, problems with teachers and peers, and lack of counseling support as main causes of their dropouts (Bridgeland et al., 2006; Tas et al., 2013). My focus in this inquiry is to seek school-related factors that teachers can make possible change in; while some may argue, I believe teachers have less capability to fix students' socio-economic or family-related problems. Therefore, the purpose of the inquiry is to: 1) research the school-associated causes of student dropouts, 2) look at the issue of dropout in students' perspective, 3) reflect on my previous experience with students, and 4) possibly prevent students from dropping out in my future teaching career.

Introduction

I am a teacher candidate at University of British Columbia, currently taking Bachelor of Education- Secondary level. During my short practicum, I noticed a boy named *Tyler*¹. Tyler was in the Accelerated Credit Enrollment Industry Training² (ACE-IT) program, but had dropped out of the program since it was too challenging for him. Few weeks into the year, he enrolled into Marketing 11, which was the subject my School Advisor was teaching. Over the two weeks of my short practicum, I only saw Tyler once in class. In Marketing 11 class, 30% of student grade comes from their participation at the school store. Tyler was getting 0% in participation since he had never shown up for his shifts at the school store. My School Advisor gave him opportunities to make up for his missing shifts, but Tyler did not show up to those make-up shifts either.

I wondered why Tyler was so unmotivated at school. I wondered if it was just Marketing 11 class he was not interested in or other classes as well. I wondered if he was discouraged from ACE-IT program, and did not want to try anymore in school. I wondered if he had difficulty catching up to the course as he enrolled few weeks into the year.

I later found out that he had problems with drugs. He had been skipping classes and was seriously behind in all courses. I also found out that he had failed most of the courses in term 1, and would most likely not be able to graduate Grade 11. When I was in high school, my good friend dropped out of school in Grade 11 after becoming addicted to drugs. It started with skipping few classes in a week to only coming to few classes a week, then to dropping out of school. I worried that Tyler, too, will drop out of school and wondered what I can do to help students like Tyler.

1 This is not the real name of the student. For the student's confidentiality, I have made-up a different name.

2 The ACE IT program is a partnership between ITA and the BC Ministry of Education. It allows high school students to take first level technical training that gives them dual credit for high school courses and apprenticeship or industry training programs.
<http://www.itabc.ca/youth-educators/ace-it-program>

I, however, know from personal experience that it is not just students addicted to drugs who are dropping out of school. My cousin also dropped out of school in Korea due to serious conflict with her peers at school. I anticipate that researching on high school dropout will aid me to better comprehend the perspective of high school students. Through conducting this inquiry research, I hope to sight school-related causes for dropouts, and encounter effective measures to prevent dropouts. I expect that the two major reasons for high school dropouts are: conflict with peers, and apathy in learning. My focus in this inquiry is to seek school-related factors that teachers can make possible change in; while some may argue, I believe teachers have less capability to fix students' socio-economic or family-related problems. Therefore, the purpose of the inquiry is to research the school-associated causes of student dropouts, look at the issue of dropout in students' perspective, reflect on my previous experience with students, and possibly prevent students from dropping out in my future teaching career.

Background Information

High school dropout is a serious problem. Statistics Canada (2010) calculates a drop-out rate defined as “the share of 20 to 24 year olds who are not attending school and who have not graduated from high school.” In 1991, nearly 16.6% of young people aged 20 to 24, or one out of every six, had not obtained a high school diploma and were not enrolled in school (Statistics Canada, 2010). Since then, dropout rates have been falling; in 10 years, dropout rate decreased from one in six (16.6%) to one in nine (11.1%) young people dropping out of high school (Statistics Canada, 2010). Media emphasize this decline in dropouts with articles such as “High school dropout rates plummet” and “High-school dropout rates down by half over 20 years.” The media is not so active in highlighting how gradually dropout rates have decreased after the

millennium. Compare to large decline in dropout rates in 1990s, the rate has been declining in much slower rate in recent years. By 2010, 8.5% of young people aged 20 to 24 had not obtained their high school diploma (Statistics Canada, 2010). This means that in a school of 2,000 students, 167 students are dropping out of school.

One can make solid prediction about the future of a child who drops out of high school; the child will have a life marred by occasional bouts of unemployment and poverty (Richards, 2011). The consequences of dropping out of high school will be severe for most dropout students. School teaches many essential skills beyond academics, such as critical-thinking and decision-making skills, and socialization. Youth who do not complete high school are far more susceptible to health, economic, and social problems (Lewit, 1992). Although a high school certificate is at the lower end of education spectrum, it is the crucial one for an individual to have reasonable employment prospects. In the United States, compared to high school graduates without further education, dropout individuals are twice more likely to have incomes below the federal poverty level (Lewit, 1992). In Canada, average employment rate for individuals without a high school certificate is under 40 %, while the rate is 25 % higher for those with high school certificates (Richards & Scott, 2009).

Out of the ten provinces and three territories, Quebec has the highest dropout rate in Canada (*Montreal Gazette*, 22 November 2013) and BC has the lowest dropout percentage (6.3%) in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2010). As of 2009, twenty-five percent of Quebecers do not have a high school diploma at the age of 20, and 40% of Quebec parents fear their children will not finish high school (*Montreal Gazette*, 22 November 2013). In a survey conducted by Vision Critical (2013), 53% of Canadians reported that they see the country's dropout rates more

problematic than it is portrayed, 89 % stated that Canada should make high school graduation a national priority, and 74 % identified insufficient education as the major cause of poverty.

New Findings

Many have looked at the issue of high school dropout. No single reason exists for students dropping out of high school; a collection of factors contribute to this national and global problem. Teachers' perspective of why students drop out of school differ from students' responses to why they dropped out (Bridgeland et al., 2009). Most teachers pointed to lack of parental involvement and support as the core problem of high school dropout (Bridgeland et al., 2009). However, contrary to teachers' predictions, the most frequently identified causes for dropouts were school-related factors. High school students identified boredom, absenteeism, problems with teachers and peers, and lack of counseling support as main causes of their dropouts (Brigeland et al., 2006; Tas et al., 2013).

Boredom

Teachers' perspective of why students drop out of school differed from why students actually drop out. Only 25% of teachers felt boredom was a cause in student dropouts, and 42% of teachers felt students, who said they dropped out because school was uninteresting, were just making excuses (Bridgeland et al., 2009). However, in a research conducted to gain perspectives of dropout students, nearly half of the students said that boredom was a major reason for their decision to drop out of school (Bridgeland et al., 2006). The research shows nearly half of students leaving school, because they find it uninteresting and do not see the relevance of school to real life. Also, in the research, it was discovered that once students leave school, most of them

are unwilling to return to school. Most of participants stated that they are happy that they left school, because, to them, school is boring. Contrary to many teachers' beliefs, if the school bores the individual, then he or she tends to drop out.

To prevent dropouts, schools should provide different learning options for students, such as a curriculum that connects classroom learning with real life experiences, smaller and more individualized classrooms, and specialized programs (Bridgeland, 2009). Students have stated that they don't see how school learning relates to real life. To address this issue, connections should be made between classroom learning and real jobs in the workforce; this can be done through job shadowing, internships, and work-study programs. ACE-IT program is a great example of alternate learning that can engage students, who plan on going straight into trades after graduation. What is more important, however, is providing on-going support to students in alternative learning environment. Without support, students like Tyler, who find the specialized programs challenging, will only go back to being at risk of dropping out.

Absenteeism

Forty-five percent of teachers identified absenteeism as one of the early warning signs of high school dropout (Bridgeland, 2009). So, why are students not coming to classes? Researches show that intensive curriculum and grade repetition leads to absenteeism, and eventually to dropout (Tas et al., 2013).

In the research conducted by Tas, Bora, Selvitopu, & Demirkaya (2013), youth stated that they are reluctant to attend school because of having to repeat grades. The adolescents emphasized that they do not want to be in the same class with younger grade students. This is a

psychological situation; students feel embarrassed to repeat grades with younger students (Glodsmidt & Wang, 1999). This embarrassment causes students to skip school, and eventually dropout. In the research, more than one-third of dropout students (35%) reported leaving school because they were failing. So, why are students failing and repeating grades? If repeating grades causes embarrassment for students and leads to absenteeism, shouldn't school provide support for these students so that they can pass their grades?

In the research, 62% of teachers stated that students being academically unprepared for high school as a factor in some dropout cases, and 45% dropout students admitted that previous schooling had not prepared them for high school. This inadequate preparation makes high school curriculum challenging for some students. To these students, high school curriculum is too intensive and cannot catch up to their peers; they eventually fail courses and have to repeat grades. Repeating grades discourages and embarrasses them, and they stop trying; they start by skipping couple of classes a week to only coming to school once or twice a week. When they do come to school, because they have been absent, the course content becomes even more challenging. These students realize they are going to fail another year, and decide to leave school permanently.

Children are dropping out because the curriculum is too challenging for them; they cannot pass grades and are embarrassed to repeat grades with younger students. It is shown that some children coming into high school have been inadequately prepared for secondary curriculum. Teachers and administration need to provide academic support for these children. For students to be successful, they first need to have appropriate literary skills. Literary skills are essential for students' academic achievement (Green & Riddell, 2007). Also, literacy skills play a

fundamental role in obtaining better employment and higher level of well-being (Green & Riddell, 2007). Forty-two percent of Canadians are semi-illiterate, but for the past 15 years there has been minimal improvement in Canada's literacy rate (*The National*, 24 May 2006). Forty percent of high school youth in Canada have insufficient reading ability (Toronto Dominion Report, 2007). What these statistics show is that many students are struggling with their coursework, falling behind, and eventually dropping out. Schools need to support and promote ongoing literacy programs for these youth to develop appropriate literary skills and be successful in school.

Relationship with Teachers

As mentioned above, 89 % of Canadians stated that Canada should make high school graduation a national priority, and 74 % of Canadians identified insufficient education as the major cause of poverty (Vision Critical, 2013). Contrary to the public, however, only 11% of teachers identified the dropout problem as a crisis, and 35% of teachers saw it as only a minor problem or no problem at all (Bridgeland, 2009).

In the research conducted by Bridgeland, Dilulio & Balfanz (2009), most teachers identified lack of parental involvement and support as the core problem. Seventy-four percent of teachers felt parents bore all or most of the responsibility for their children's dropouts. Again, contrary to teachers' predictions, most participants stated that their families were not the reason of their dropouts; the participants stated that their families showed concern for them in their school life. Students' families supported them in every way possible, and tried to prevent them from dropping out. One of the reasons these students dropped out despite their families' efforts to

prevent them was their conflict with teachers (Tas et al., 2013). Teachers have to realize that their attitudes and behaviors play major roles during the process of dropping out (Tas et al., 2013).

Most students think that the teachers are unfair to them and have low competence in teaching (Tas et al., 2013). Many researches highlight the importance of being fair to students (Tas et al., 2013). Curwin (2008) defines fairness as treating students not in the same way. Recently, on his blog, he wrote:

“But what is fair? Many define it as treating everyone the same, but I would argue that doing so is the most unfair way to treat students. Students are not the same. They have different motivations for their choices, different needs, different causes for misbehavior and different goals.”

As I have pointed out above, 62% of teachers identified academic unpreparedness for high school as a factor in at least some dropout cases. Being fair isn't about giving students equal amount of work and having equal amount of expectations; it is about knowing your students and the different academic level different students are at, and making adjustments for those students at the lower end of spectrum.

Only 13% of teachers saw themselves responsible for their students' dropouts (Bridgeland, 2009). Teachers were more likely to place responsibility on the school system, or broader society; they regarded elected officials as responsible as they were for students' dropouts (Bridgeland, 2009). If students are leaving school, because of teacher unfairness or other problems with teachers, teachers are responsible for students' dropouts. Teachers need to take on more

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responsibility, treat their students fairly, and enhance communications with their students in order to prevent adolescents from leaving school.

Relationship with Peers

Attitudes of peers play major role in the process of dropping out (Tas et al., 2013). Some of the students dropped out because they were having conflicts with their peers (Tas et al., 2013). As I have mentioned in introduction, my cousin, too, dropped out of school due to serious conflicts with her peers. While some participants mentioned conflicts with their peers, some participants emphasized their mistakes about choosing friends. Students admitted skipping classes frequently and eventually leaving school because of their friends (Bridgeland, 2006). Some students expressed their regret for choosing wrong people to be friends with (Bridgeland, 2006).

Lack of Counseling Support

In the dropout process, participants think it is unnecessary to talk with a counselor or go to guidance services (Tas et al., 2013). Some students thought it to be useless to talk with a counselor since they had already made up their mind to dropout (Tas et al., 2013). Some of them are even unaware of the guidance services provided in their schools, and those few students, who talked to a counselor and received guidance service, emphasized the poor communication between them and counselors (Tas et al., 2013). A shocking fact is that some schools did not even have counselors available for students. According to the answers of the participants, some stated that they had no counselors in their schools and were not able to receive any counseling service (Tas et al., 2013).

Because of unwillingness to continue school, most participants never tried to return to school; very small percentage of dropouts ever attempt to go back to school (Tas et al., 2013). Looking at this statistics, it is crucial that students do not leave school; once these students leave, they are most likely not coming back. Therefore, schools should actively engage teachers, students, and counselors in on-going dialogues. Teachers and counselors need to work together to provide struggling students with the necessary supports. Teachers and counselors also need to encourage students to become better self-advocates, and actively seek help from teachers and counselors whenever they need support.

Reflection

I started this inquiry wondering what I can do to help Tyler. I asked myself why Tyler was so unmotivated at school; whether it was just Marketing 11 class he was not interested in or other classes as well; whether he was discouraged from ACE-IT program, and did not want to try anymore in school; whether he had difficulty catching up to the course as he enrolled few weeks into the year.

As I conducted my inquiry, I started thinking about dropout in students' perspectives. I imagined myself in a boring class where I had no clue what I was learning, stuck with an unfair teacher who thinks I am a troubled student. I imagined myself going to counseling office to switch into another class, and how my counselor would not let me, saying that there is no other class, without even asking me why I wanted to switch into another class, without inviting me to have conversations with my teacher. If I was in the shoes of such student, I, too, would dread going to school.

Because I never had conversations with Tyler, I do not know why he was unmotivated in class and skipped school so many times. But, I do know now that drugs are not the only blame for his absence. Before this inquiry, I was hesitant to take on too much responsibility during my practicum; I worried that my lesson plans would not be as good if I take too much time with individual students. Through this inquiry, however, I realized that, with extra effort, I can prevent students like Tyler from dropping out and make a difference in their lives. I am now encouraged to take on responsibility and offer help to students like Tyler. I plan on partaking in on-going dialogues with my students, and offer after-school homework support to students who are falling behind.

Moreover, I learned that fairness is not about being equal. I plan on treating different students differently; in order to do so, I would have to invest time and effort to get to know individual students. Knowing Tyler's situation, I want to make adjustments for him, such as giving him extra time to finish homework or helping him finish his homework after class. Also, throughout teaching career, I want to continuously challenge myself to make my lessons interesting, engaging, and relevant to real life. I plan on asking my students what they want to get out of the course, and make my lessons correspond to their goals. I want to make sure that I am not the cause of any of my students' dropouts, and that I have taken every possible step I can to prevent them from dropping out of high school.

Conclusion

Why are so many students (one in 12) dropping out of school? What are the main causes of student dropouts? How can we prevent students from dropping out?

School-associated Causes of Dropout

Researchers and educators are unanimous in that no single reason exists for students dropping out of high school; a collection of factors contribute to this educational and social issue (Bridgeland et al., 2006). What is important to note is that teachers' perspective of why students drop out of school differed from why students actually drop out (Bridgeland et al., 2009). Boredom, absenteeism, problems with teachers and peers, and lack of counseling support are the main reasons for student dropouts (Brigeland et al., 2006, 2009; Tas et al., 2013). These reasons are all related to school and teachers. As for teachers, they need to think more in the perspectives of students, take on more responsibility for their student dropouts, make classes more related to real-life and engaging, display fairness to all students, and partake in ongoing conversations with individual students. As for administrators, they need to provide alternative learning environment for those who are struggling in regular classes, offer sufficient academic support, especially in acquiring appropriate literary skills, and publicize counseling services available in school.

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