DROPOUT PREVENTION PROGRAMS THAT WORK IN HIGH SCHOOLS AND THE COMMON THREAD BETWEEN THEM

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Abstract

The purpose of this literature review was to find effective dropout prevention strategies used in a rural high school classroom and to find the common thread among them. The literature reviewed included qualitative and quantitative longitudinal studies of students from high schools and universities. Results and conclusions from the studies indicated the common theme from effective dropout prevention programs was building relationships between students and staff members. Recommendations for improving the effectiveness of dropout prevention strategies include studies from smaller more rural areas to get a wider range of data to analyze.
Chapter One: Introduction

Research Problem

High school dropouts are a prevalent problem in schools across the world. Some student dropout risk factors traced back to early elementary school (Hickman, Bartholomew, & Mathwig, 2008). Absenteeism (25.8%), a low grade point average (115.9%), low socio-economic status (75%), and behavior risk (77.5%) increase the risk of dropping out. The student’s decision, on whether he/she plans on coming back to school the next year, is the most reliable predictor for high school dropouts (Suh & Suh, 2007). A high school student drops out of school every nine seconds (Lehr, 2003). Are dropout intervention and prevention tactics in high school too late?

Graduating high school is not necessarily a natural goal for some students. Different factors lead different students to make the decision to drop out of high school. Some of the reasons students drop out of school are poor attendance, the thought that obtaining a General Educational Development (GED) is easier, feeling alienated at school, having poor relationships with students or teachers, need to work to support their family, dislike of school, failing grades, and failure to keep up with the rigorous work. Research on the characteristics of dropouts is plentiful, but a lack of research exists detailing what actually influences the dropouts’ final decision to leave school (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). Research on why students drop out of high school is conducted through post-dropout surveys. The students are not very detailed in their answers and the answers cover a wide range. Intervention programs might focus on preventing a specific drop out cause, leaving the other reasons untouched (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009).
Students who do not complete high school do not only affect themselves; he/she also has a large negative impact on society as well. During the lifetime of a dropout, he/she will cost the nation $260,000 (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2009). High school dropouts are more likely to be on welfare, have poorer health, have reduced intergenerational mobility, become teenage parents, unemployed, depressed, have substance abuse problems, engage in violent behaviors, and end up incarcerated (Neumann 1991, Franklin, Streeter, Kim, & Tripodi, 2007; Sinclair, Christenson, & Thurlow, 2005). Communities that have many dropouts need to spend more funds on social costs than anything else. If dropouts are considered a problem for schools and the community, then should not the community also play a role in dropout prevention programs?

When dropout prevention programs are deemed effective, what is the common thread between them?

**Research Question**

*What are the most effective dropout prevention strategies for rural high school students and what is the common thread among those strategies?*

Counselors, teachers, psychologists, and even politicians have tried many different intervention and prevention programs to help retain students in high school to complete graduation requirements. If a highly effective dropout program were introduced to the nation, everyone would benefit from high schools graduating more people. The graduates would benefit from earning a higher salary and living a more financially secure life. The nation would benefit from the extra income with bringing in more money from taxes, and an increased level of work productivity.
Interventions used in high school include, but are not limited to student engagement through relationship building and change of setting. The majority of the intervention programs tend to focus on some type of relationship building, whether the relationship is with school personnel, the community, or simply family members. Another flourishing approach to intervention is for the teachers and counselors to spotlight the positive future, not the negative actions in students past. Four components to a successful program pinpointing dropout issues and useful in alleviating them, students experiencing success, positive relationships within the school environment, relevant school work to their everyday life, and a counselor to help with personal problems (Bowen 2009). The successful intervention strategies would support schools across the nation.

When dropout prevention strategies do not work, the students have a higher propensity to accompany negative impacts in society. Several of the negative factors follow along with high school dropouts include lower income, criminal behavior, reliance on public aid, drug and alcohol abuse, and incarceration. Many studies have focused on the relationship between characteristics of dropouts and dropout intervention programs. These studies were based on good quality ideas and purpose. The majority of the studies are based on the developmental processes that lead an individual to remove themselves completely from the school setting (Finn, 1989).
Purpose of Study

The past four years I have taught in an alternative high school. Our high school is populated with generally “at risk” students. The majority of the students have had many unsuccessful school experiences and some even become high school dropouts. I would like to research effective dropout interventions to use in our school to help retain students to finish their high school graduation requirements. Our school is considered a failing school because we have not made adequate yearly progress (AYP) by Michigan’s standards for five years. When a school is labeled failing many opportunities arise to help schools become successful. We have been a part of a group called Michigan Principal Fellowship (MPF) and through MPF group we had an opportunity to dissect our Rigor, Relevance, and relationships within our building. We find relationships with the students are most beneficial in students’ future academic success. When looking at effective dropout prevention strategies the communality of relationship building is quite prevalent.

Key terms/definitions:

For the purpose of the paper, alterable variables are defined as settings a student or school can change to create a new school environment. Personal affective is focus on interpersonal relations (Christenson & Thurlow, 2004) “At risk” defines students whose “status is based on a student’s probability for dropping out of high school.” A dropout is an individual who stops attending school, whether or not he or she reenters later (Finn, 1989). The factors include, but are not limited to, have failed two or more classes, have been held back from a grade level, are pregnant or teen parents, are homeless, eligible for free lunch, have failed a state mandated test, in a family crisis or a parent is incarcerated (Lesley, 2008)
Check and Connect is a program with continuous checking on students’ engagement with school and making sure each individual student is connected to the curriculum (Sinclair, Christenson, & Thurlow, 2005). Student engagement is defined as “positive student behaviors such as attendance, paying attention, and participating in class, as well as the psychological experience of identification with school and feeling one is cared for, respected, and part of the school environment” (Anderson et al., 2004). Student engagement is also defined “as a concept that requires psychological connect is within the academic environment (e.g., positive relationships between adults and students and among peers) in addition to active student behavior (e.g., attendance, effort prosocial behavior)” (Furlong & Christenson, 2008). Disengagement is when students have “feelings of alienation, a poor sense of belonging, and a general dislike for school” (Christen & Thurlow, 2004).

Social Skills Rating System (SSRS) is a standardized test that tests on three areas of social behavior, academic and social competence and problem behavior. A solution-building school – a school that has the following characteristics 1) build student strengths, 2) attention given to individual relationships, 3) emphasize the students choices, 4) student commitment to hard work, 5) focus on future instead of past troubles, 6) trust students evaluations, 7) celebrate small steps to success, and 8) rely on goal setting activities.

Model

The goal of the literature review is to highlight successful prevention programs and/or strategies to help retain students in a rural high through graduation and to find the common thread among the effective programs. The research covers a wide range of strategies which include positive formation of relationships to change the school setting. It is the hope that one
day our nation can create a prevention program that will have as its outcome ALL students graduate from high school.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

Interventions

To make the decision to drop out does not happen overnight. Many variables play a role in a student’s decision. Five critical considerations when designing a dropout prevention program include the process of dropping out, the role of context, alterable variables, a focus on student engagement, and the importance of empirical evidence. A few characteristics of schools that are able to retain “at risk” students are small class sizes (Chalker & Stelsel, 2009), teachers that care (Knesting, 2008) and hold high expectations, fair discipline policies, and chances for student involvement within the school (Christenson & Thurlow, 2004).

Research on dropout prevention programs fall into three different categories personal-affective, academic focus, and alterable variables. The literature review focuses on the two different types of prevention programs, personal-affective and alterable variables. Successful interventions tend to increase attendance rates and help students and their families form a bond with the school community. One challenge with intervention programs is student mobility. If students move out of district or frequently move from school to school, to make connections and complete an intervention program is difficult (Christenson & Thurlow, 2004). The literature review also focuses on a study of undergraduate college students and the association with students’ academic success (GPA) and their involvement in their learning process, relationships with faculty and peers, age, and gender. The statistical analysis from the article connects students’ academic success and the common thread of the effective dropout prevention strategies (Ullah & Wilson, 2007).
**Personal – Affective: Counseling**

One basic type of dropout prevention is the personal-affective approach. Personal-affective focuses on creating trusting relationships with students and staff or peers. The research article focuses not on what causes students to drop out of high school, but on students and their success. The importance of a guiding adult relationship to help “at risk” youth finish high school was the focus for Scheel, Madabhushi and Backhaus (2009). Scheel *et al.* conducted a qualitative study to learn about students in danger of becoming high school dropouts. The center of the study is individual student academic motivation and each student’s journey through the counseling program. The counseling program provided an arena for the students to build a trusting relationship with an adult (Scheel *et al.*, 2009).

The experiment took place in a large urban Midwestern school considered underperforming. Included in the study were 20 ninth-grade students, 11 males, and 9 females, who were recommended by their middle school counselors because of low achievement and wavering attendance. Of the 20 students, 15 were Western European, 1 American Indian, 2 Latino, and 2 African-American. The 20 freshmen students were put into a class together for group discussions and individual and group counseling sessions. At the end of the semester, students were interviewed about their motivation, experiences, school influences from home life and peers, and engagement in school (Scheel *et al.*, 2009).

Through Moustaka’s method of analysis (1994) the research led by Scheel *et al.* provided six units with related meanings (2009). The six themes are self-efficacy, purpose of school, family influences, relationships in school, counselor influence, and school structures and activities (Scheel *et al.*, 2009). Self-efficacy was evident when students showed signs of
increased optimism and greater self-awareness. The students became aware of their small successes in the classes they attended. Purpose of school was shown by the students’ awareness of future goals and understood their purpose for completing assignments, showing up to class, and doing well. Students also used past family educational failures as motivation to achieve more. Some students chose not to follow a parents’ example, to obtain a better job, or to follow in a siblings footsteps, because they were able to succeed. Positive relationships created at school with students or peers helps keep the students on track with a positive outcome. When students are aware they spent too much time with a bad influence, they can see their outcome will change for the worse. The relationship with the counselor provided a trusting adult a student could confide in. The counselor helped encourage the students to continue in their endeavors and helped monitor their progress. The last of the units contain school structures and activities. The school provided an academic center, which served as a homework lab for students. The center gave students an opportunity to complete assignments they did not have the time to complete. In addition, students that participated in extra-curricular activities used the required academic standings as an achievement goal to continue to participate in their specific activity (Scheel et al., 2009).

Students’ academic motivation comes more easily when a relationship within the school environment is present. Positive relationships in school, such as with a counselor, increase academic motivation in students. A relationship with a counselor provides the student with the information he/she needs to see school as an important success tool. The counselors act as a non-judgmental adults help guide the student toward academic achievement and to better understand themselves or self-efficacy.
Four critical factors to help students persist through school were found in a similar study by Knesting (2008). The four factors are student roles and school roles in the dropout process, being open to students and listening to them, and also showing students someone cares. The study found the more ownership students have in school; they are more compliant and willing to take risks. Knesting used a purposive sample with a semi-structured interview with students and faculty at Washington High School. The high school is of medium size and contains grades 9 – 12. The principal had teachers, who work with “at risk” students, recommend students for the interview. The student interviews consisted of 17 students in a variety of grade levels, 10 males and 7 females with 13 White and 4 African Americans. Washington High School did not have a specific dropout prevention program, but counselors, teachers and an academic support program helped monitor the “at risk” students (Knesting, 2008).

Through interviews with students, a few important characteristics of successful teachers that worked with “at risk” students were highlighted. Teachers need to understand students’ behavior, accept the students for who they are, show they believe in them, and have the conviction that all students can succeed. Students also created a list of characteristics they believed uncaring teachers illustrate. If teachers did not mind when students left the room, did not question their missing assignments, did not ask students clarifying questions to check if they understood the material, did not have good classroom management, and were not genuinely excited about the material they taught the students saw these characteristics as evidence of teachers not caring (Knesting, 2008). In essence, students need someone to genuinely listen to them, care about them, and make them feel wanted at school.
Check & Connect is an early intervention program for students considered “at risk”. The early intervention focuses on students who showed signs of “at risk” behaviors in elementary school, middle school, or high school. The intervention focuses on student engagement in school through relationship building, problem solving techniques and persistence shown by the student mentors (Anderson et al., 2004). The Check & Connect process has been researched with different settings and a replication study focused on the model with urban high school students with behavioral or emotional disabilities (Sinclair, 2005).

Check & Connect is a dropout prevention program appropriate at any grade level because of the engagement piece. Dropping out is a process of withdrawal, or disengagement, over a period of time, not an erratic decision. The check component refers to the monitors checking on the students’ levels of engagement in school. Engagement has been cited as a critical aspect of students’ school experience when dropout causes are looked at. The student is evaluated and assessed weekly. The monitor logs all attendance, behavior, grade, and credit issues to assure a timely response or intervention. The Connect component refers to the connections made between the student, monitor, family, and school. The monitor needs to show persistence, continuity over time, and consistency. A trusting relationship forms when these three characteristics are translucent to the student (Anderson et al., 2004; Sinclair, 2005).

The purpose of Check & Connect was to see if a relationship’s qualities varied directly with the student’s engagement in school. Behavior, social, and academic engagement were assessed in the process (Anderson et al., 2004; Sinclair, 2005). The high school version of Check & Connect was a longitudinal study with a random control group. The study took place in a very large school district with behavior and emotional disabilities prevalent amongst the youth. The
population was very diverse ethnically, linguistically, and economically. From the class of 2000, 14% of the students received special education accommodations, 38% of the students dropped out of school, 11% moved out of the district, less than one half graduated in four years, and 8% were still enrolled in high school. The participants were chosen because of their behavior and/or emotional disabilities. Throughout the study were 164 steady participations, which included the 85 treatment students and 79 control students.

Core elements that guided staff were monitoring students’ progress, applying timely interventions when appropriate, building relationships with the students, showing students persistence, sticking with students, teaching students how to problem solve, and promoting positive aspects of school. Monitoring the students’ engagement levels is the check component, which includes absences, school behavior issues and earned or lost credit in classes. Basic interventions are given to all students occasionally. Depending on the situations, some students received intensive interventions designed to realign students with their connection goals. Relationship building was the key part to the mentor’s components. Check & Connect is based upon strong, personalized relationships between students, families, schools, and mentors. Persistence helps the students keep their eyes on the prize. Even if the students move to a different school, mentors persisted to follow students to their new school. Helped students find new ways to problem solve and deal with issues instead of shifting the blame creates a feeling of independency instead of always relying on somebody else to solve their problems. Lastly, the promotion of involvement in school activities helped students feel more connected and part of the school.
High School Check & Connect outcomes were separated into four different variables; cohort dropout, patterns of attendance, student mobility, and cohort school completion rate. The cohort dropout was looked at in one-year intervals. The school considered dropping out when students are absent for 15 or more consecutive days. If students were enrolled in a GED program, he/she was still viewed as enrolled in school. The treatment group showed 38% were less likely to drop out compared to the control group of 58% and the district of 51%.

Patterns of attendance were separated into four different categories, persisters, forced persisters, interrupters and those who were not in school all year. Persisters are students with no periods of dropping out. Forced persisters were forced in school because commitment to a correctional or treatment facility. Interrupters are students in school, but dropped out at least once within the school year. Lastly, out all year were not in school at all throughout the school year. The treatment group was more likely to have persistent attendance and less likely out of school all year. Student mobility is the number of schools the student attends throughout his/her four-year high school career. Only 15 of the 68 students stayed in the same school for the full four years. The treatment group was more likely to remain in one school for longer periods of time over successive years, as effect size increases from year to year (Year 1 = .17, Year 4 = .35, and Year 5 = .52). Even though the students might have been mobile throughout the four years, the treatment group showed more persistent attendance over the control group.

Although, the Check & Connect model did not influence the four-year school completion rate, the other results were significant. One-third of the treatment group remained in school for the fifth year, compared to zero from the control group. The treatment group was five times more likely to finish high school in the fifth year compared to the control group. Students who were a
part of the high school Check & Connect were more likely to remain in school, have an updated IEP with transition goals, participate in extra-curricular activities, and have persistent attendance (Sinclair, 2005). The findings also included the following for female and male treatment and control participants accordingly:

- Female treatment students were more likely to have articulated IEP goals
  - Jobs and job training: 73% vs. 20%
  - Postsecondary education: 82% vs. 33%
  - Community participation: 73% vs. 13%
  - Home living: 46% vs. 7%

- Male treatment
  - More likely to persist in school: 38% vs. 29%
  - Less likely out of school all year: 20% vs. 47%
  - More likely to remain in one setting for 4 years: 60% vs. 47% (Sinclair, 2005)

Check & Connect and the Counseling Program focused on building relationships between students and staff. The next study focuses on how to use proper language and self control to form and define the status of relationships. Ballard High School in Louisville, Kentucky developed the Effective Learning Program (ELP) to decrease the dropout rate. The ELP is designed with two core targets; “locus of control” and how students can relate to others. The “locus of control” is the basics of how students view the world. The “locus of control” has two possibilities of internal and external control. Internal control would allow for change in the world and the external control does not allow for any changes. The second target, student relationships, is the focus because strong relationships in school help students feel they are welcome and belong. ELP’s
mission is to show students they have control over every aspect in their life, especially relationships (Nowicki, Duke, Sisney, Stricker, & Tyler, 2004).

To start the program, students were introduced to common relationship language. The interpersonal language comes from the circumplex model. The circumplex model focuses on two orthogonal dimensions, status and affiliation. From these two dimensions comes four different interpersonal styles, friendly-dominant (FD), friendly-submissive (FS), hostile-dominant (HD) and hostile-submissive (HS). The students were taught what type of reaction to expect when you approach someone with a specific interpersonal style. For example, if you approach someone friendly-dominant, the expected reaction would be friendly, where as if you approached someone hostile that is the expected reaction. The ultimate outcome is students understand how to manage relationship reciprocation. Not only did the ELP focus on a common relationship language, but also non-verbal communication. Being able to understand nonverbal communication is just as important as understanding the difference between a friendly and hostile demeanor.

The ELP has many of the same characteristics as the alternative schools had, yet the location is within a larger high school. The ELP has about 90 “at risk” students a year participate in a three-hour block of math, English, social studies, and humanities with a student to teacher ratio of 15:1. Students were grouped together in a three-hour block allows close relationships to form. The students are recommended by parents and teachers, have a GPA less than 2.0, and have absences of more than 15 days in the past school year. The ELP staff includes six teachers with one additional teacher fundraised to cover the extra costs accrued because of the small class sizes (Nowicki, Duke, Sisney, Stricker, & Tyler, 2004).
The three-hour block of academic courses is allocated to the four subjects taught, and the teachers focus on the common language and nonverbal communication with the students. The teachers previously received materials for lectures and attended workshops to instruct them how to teach the specific standards. When students used a friendly or hostile demeanor towards others, the behavior was pointed out to assure the students understood the difference and importance of how they interacted with others. Teachers kept in contact with parents and counselors kept an updated profile on students’ progress.

Participants in the treatment and control groups held comparable characteristics. The treatment group was formed by a stratified random sample that broke students into categories by grade, race, and sex. The treatment group was one-third of the ELP population or 38 students. Two control groups were used in the study. One control group consisted of \( n = 36 \) students also in the ELP with corresponding characteristics of the control group. The second control group \( n = 50 \) was from the general education classes, students with a GPA greater than 2.0 and had been absent less than 15 days the past year.

To profile students at the beginning of the 2-year ELP intervention, students were given a battery of three tests to find their “locus of control”, preferred interpersonal style, and their ability to read nonverbal communication appropriately. The three tests used were the Children’s Nowicki-Strickland Internal-External Locus of Control Inventory (CNSIE), the Interpersonal Adjective Scale (IAS), and the Diagnostic Analysis of Nonverbal Accuracy (DANVA). The CNSIE measures how people take responsibility for his/her actions. If the person perceives himself as the victim, then he/she is “external”. If the person takes responsibility for his/her action he/she are considered “internal”. The IAS is a measurement tool on how the person
primarily interacted with others used FD, FS, HD, or HS. Four types of the DANVA were given in the study. Receptive facial expressions and tone of voice for adult and child were given. The facial expression tests consisted of pictures shown with various emotions and the tone of voice had sentences read aloud in different tones. Construct validity is available for all four forms of the DANVA test. The ELP intervention data was collected on students’ graduated or dropout status, GPA, standardized achievement scores from the state of Kansas (KIRIS), and the number of absences. The students participated in the three pre-post tests at the beginning of year one and at the end of year two.

The results for the pre-test show a relationship between locus of control orientation with academic achievement and nonverbal performance of all three groups. The correlations for the total group are as follows: GPA, \( r(85) = .37, p < .01 \), the KIRIS, \( r(85) = .44, p < .01 \); and the DANVA total error score, \( r(85) = -.45, p < .01 \). In essence, students who were considered internal were able to read nonverbal cues more efficiently and received higher GPAs. ANOVAs and planned comparisons revealed no difference between expectations and the pre-test group scores. For locus of control, the general education students are more internal than the ELP groups, \( F(2, 48) = 6.76, p < .05, d = 0.33 \). The regular education group had less errors on the DANVA test compared to the ELP treatment and control group, \( F(2, 48) = 7.76, p < .05, d = 0.39 \). Status scores showed the ELP treatment and control group were more likely dominant compared to the regular education students, \( F(2, 48) = 5.13, p < .05, d = 0.31 \). Only the ELP treatment group was significantly more hostile than the two control groups, \( F(2, 48) = 4.34, p < .05, d = 0.30 \). The outcome of the tests showed the predictions true. The ELP students were more
externally controlled, less likely to understand nonverbal communication, and held interpersonal styles that were more likely to dominate and hostile compared to his/hers non-ELP peers.

The comparison for initial data and end data showed significant results. For each variable, attendance, DANVA errors, GPA, and affiliation scores, a 2(phases) x 3 (type of student group) repeated measures ANOVA was calculated to compare the differences from Time 1 to Time 2. Tukey’s honestly significant difference (HSD) test exposed the ELP group had significantly fewer absences at Time 2. The ELP treatment group showed internal at Time 2 and comparably internal than the ELP control group. ELP students also had less DANVA errors at time 2. Significant differences for affiliation, but not status, was shown by ANOVA. The ELP students were less hostile at Time 2 compared to Time 1. The most significant of the outcomes from the ELP was the graduation rate compared to the ELP control group. The graduation rate of ELP members was 98% compared to ELP control students (38%), $X^2(1, N=48) = 10.43, p < .01$, and significantly greater than the regular education students (74%), $X^2 (1, N=49) = 4.10, p < .05$ (Nowicki et al., 2004).

The ELP tested and was able to show that when focus was on teaching positive interpersonal strategies, locus of control, working in team setting with small class sizes truly affects student outcome in a positive way.

The personal-affective approach on dropout interventions focuses on the affects of building personal relationships. Positive relationships in school increase academic motivation in students (Scheel et al., 2009). Student engagement is enhanced when a sense of belonging is present. When adults care and will listen, students have a better sense of attachment to the school environment (Knesting, 2008). Persistence shown from a caring adult is a key component to
building a strong relationship with a student. Check & Connect showed a strong adult/student relationship can result in a decrease in student absenteeism and an increase in school engagement (Sinclair, 2005). The ELP’s focus on common relationship language and nonverbal communication skills showed a vast improvement in students’ communication skills. The students that participated in ELP learned to be more internal and less hostile towards others (Nowicki et al., 2004). Positive adult/student relationships are a constructive and dependable form of dropout intervention.

**Alterable Variables: Solution Focused Alternative Schools (SFAS)**

Dropout intervention programs are also based around alterable variables or changing the setting. Changing the setting of the school might include the alteration of one or more of the following characteristics, the location, class schedule flexibility, class sizes, student to teacher ratio, and individualization of curriculum. Several of the studies that focus on changing the setting focus on creating a school at a mall, a school within a school, or a separate alternative high school. The articles focused on alterable variables have very similar outcomes.

Looking at how public alternative high schools help with the dropout prevention and retrieval process Franklin, Street, Kim and Tripodi (2007) focused on a quasi-experimental approach to find the effectiveness of a solution-focused public alternative school. The study was done to test the effectiveness of an alternative school that uses a solution-focused brief therapy (SFBT) framework to prevent dropouts. The solution-focused alternative school (SFAS) is a public alternative high school in Austin, Texas. The high school adopted solution building within their curriculum. Solution building schools have eight characteristics. The characteristics include
the focus on student strengths, relationships, progress, choices, responsibility, commitment to work, future successes, goal setting activities, and trusting in students’ choices.

The experimental group was created by convenience and purposive sampling procedures and consisted of 46 selected students from SFAS who have attended one of the three major high schools in the area prior to enrollment. They used 39 public school students as the control group. These students held similar attendance, credit, and cultural backgrounds as the students in the experimental group. The outcome measures for the study were credits earned compared to credits attempted, days attended compared to actual calendar days, and rates of students that graduated compared to students who could have graduated that year. Ethnicity was very similar with 25 white students in the SFAS group and 28 students in the control group. The SFAS group consisted of twice as many Hispanic students, one African American student and two Asian American students. Both groups, had a two-thirds ratio of females to males. The majority of the students from both groups were 16- and 17-year-old students. The SFAS group had a larger population of 18- and 19-year-old students and students who were eligible for free or reduced lunch.

To check the group’s demographic characteristics compatibility; Franklin et al. (2007) used a chi-square analysis, which led to positive results. After completion of the repeated measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) they found within subjects the proportion of credits earned over time\[F(3,237) = 2 - .357, p < .001\] (2007). The statistical information shows the students from both schools improved their number of credits earned. The SFAS group had lower attendance records than the control group. The correlation between attendance and credit earned for the experimental group is low, but for the control group the correlation is high. The SFAS is
based on self-paced curriculum leaving the graduation date open for the students. The open graduation date allows students to graduate when they have completed the necessary work. Graduation rate for the experimental group was 62% by the spring semester. Another batch of students graduated one semester later and brought the graduation rate to 81% compared to the control group’s graduation rate of 90%.

Due to the eight characteristics of solution building, the study of SFAS appears successful for the students who attend for graduation. For example, by focus being placed on students’ future success instead of past difficulties the students seemed more apt to try new things and work harder to accomplish something positive. When students looked toward the positive future it gave the students a fresh start. When students focused on celebrations of small steps toward success, the students knew any move in the right direction is better than negative movement. SFAS creates a positive atmosphere for these students to grow and feel comfortable. The study cannot claim the school’s tactics had a positive outcome for all students, but the study does show the school was able to provide an opportunity for students to improve on their academic endeavors. Schools may possess a stronger connection to students’ lives outside and inside of the school system than suspected. The study suggests the school’s program deserves further research (Franklin et al., 2007).

Alterable Variables: Mall

A few studies that focus on alterable variables include creating an alternative school in a mall setting, creating a second chance program, and creating a school within a school. These schools focus on changing the school environment because students could not succeed in a traditional school. Students frustrated with the traditional school setting are able to experience
school in a more comfortable setting, the mall. Education Resource Centers (ERC) in collaboration with Simon Youth Foundation (SYF), communities and other school districts form alternative schools that give youth a second chance to complete high school. SYF is an independent non-profit organization established in 1997 to aid “at risk” students in high school completion. The school program’s focus lies with student ideas and responsibility along with supervision from trusting staff members. Various learning styles and study preferences are all relevant in the program. The curriculum is aligned with the district, and opportunities for internships and post-secondary education are also present (Chalker & Stelsel, 2009).

Alternative schools are just that, an alternative approach. Traditional settings and expectations do not allow all students success, so an alternative is put into place. Through alternative schools students tend to see smaller class sizes (Christenson & Thurlow, 2004), individualized lessons, on-line learning, shorter class days, and even community activity participation. Just as the personal-affect studies relied on forming relationships with adults, the smaller class sizes allow stronger relationships to form. With technology, students can participate in on-line learning that is self-paced and provides automatic feedback (Chalker & Stelsel, 2009).

Indiana University Center for Evaluation and Education Policy (CEEP) conducted a study to evaluate the effectiveness of the ERC program in 2005. Several methodologies were used to collect data, interviews and focus groups accounted for 240 formal interviews. Not only were students interviewed but also parents, teachers, community partners and mall managers participated in the study. CEEP provided a list that, according to the interviewees, contributes to the success of ERC. The list included all of the characteristics the program is based on, including
small class sizes, flexible schedules, online learning, caring teachers, pro-social behavior, and having a respectful climate that limits traditional educational setting distractions.

The High School Survey of Student Engagement (HSSSE) was another tool used to assess the students. The HSSSE is administered annually on a national level by CEEP. The students’ results were compared to 300,000 high-school students from 29 states. Students were asked whether they agreed with the following statements, the percentages below show the percentage difference above the national outcome:

- 16.3% “cared about their school”
- 10.5% “put forth a great effort when doing school work”
- 19.5% “excited about their classes”
- 10% felt more supported and respected by school staff

The HSSSE also surveyed students on their personal growth areas. The use of a Likert Scale gave the ERC students a survey outcome on personal growth of 2.92 compared to the national outcome of 2.62. The personal growth areas covered employability skills, communication, progress of values, solving real-world problems, and other factors. ERC’s school environment is set up more on an independent scale than a traditional high school. Parents see the key difference between ERC and traditional high schools as ERC is to “learn and graduate” while traditional high schools attendance is for socialization with peers.

The ERC has been open for 10 years with an amazing graduation rate of 90% compared to the national rate of 70%. Approximately 2,500 students attend ERC each year and about 5,000 ERC former “at risk” students have earned their diploma (Chalker & Stelsel, 2009).
Alterable Variables: 2nd Chance Pilot Program

Colorado tried to reduce the dropout dilemma by creating Colorado’s Second Chance Pilot Program. The program was designed to reduce the number of dropouts by the promotion of Second Chance centers to attract dropouts to their diploma or equivalent certificate. On July 1, 1986, The Second Chance Pilot Program, article 52 of Colorado’s Educational Quality Act (H.B. 1383) went into effect. The statute was built to give dropouts a second chance to earn their diploma, no matter their location, and school districts had to share in how to fund the program (Neumann, 1991).

Colorado set up guidelines for who could participate in the Second Chance Programs. Public school districts with dropout rates above state average and their adjacent districts could take part in the Second Chance program. Schools that offer vocational, technical or adult education programs, and any students between the ages of 16 and 21 with dropout status could also participate in the program (Neumann, 1991). The program was the first to promote choice in Colorado’s education system. The program relied on other school districts to stay financially sound. Inevitably, finances and transportation were two of the main issues.

The Second Chance Center’s structure was very similar to that of our SFAS and the Mall school. The students were able to use self-paced learning, use of online instructional tools, flexible class schedules, day-care services, and shared responsibility by students and staff for the organization of the school (Neumann, 1991; Chalker & Stelsel, 2009; Franklin et al., 2007). To monitor the program a statewide survey was given. The results for the statewide survey were 86% satisfied or very satisfied with the program and with the faculty (n=44) 93% satisfied or very satisfied working at their centers. Some program problems for the students include a
waiting list because of the small enrollment allowed, gaining district approval, and limited resources. The program retained 9% of Colorado’s dropouts in 1989 (Neumann, 1991).

One alterable variable in schools is the environment. Several studies of dropout interventions focus on the change of the school environment to help retain students through high school graduation. SFAS, SYF, and the Second Chance Pilot Program created a small and flexible learning environment for their students. Each program used the different environment as an advantage with nontraditional students. The smaller environment allowed strong relationships and a sense of belonging to form for the students. These programs increased students’ self-efficacy, respect for the education system, and future opportunities.

Predictors for Academic Achievement

A Midwestern public University used data collected from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) to assess the connection between a student’s involvement in his/her education and different student relationships and the impact on his/her educational success. In previous studies, five predictors of student engagement were identified. The five engagement predictors include: enrollment in classes using technology, satisfaction with current grades, ability to manage working with other students, knowing what course objectives are, and class discussion format. NSSE randomly selected first year and senior students from the sample request made by the institution (Ullah & Wilson, 2007).

The NSEE used a three year longitudinal study administered in the spring semesters of 2003, 2004, and 2005 to collect their data. In 2003, 500 students from each group were randomly selected, 1,000 of each group in 2004, and 2,000 students of each group were randomly selected
in 2005. The study included 2,160 undergraduate students enrolled at the Midwestern public University. Throughout the three years 397 participated in 2003, 733 in 2004, and 1,030 in 2005. Females made up 68.2% of the population and males 31.8%. The mean age was 20.9 years with a range from 16 to 62 years. Of the participants, 88.6% were Caucasians, 5.4% were African-American, 2.3% were Hispanic, 1.9% Asian and the remaining 1.8% belonged to other ethnic categories. The age range and ethnicity make up of the survey were very similar to the characteristics of the entire campus population.

The NSSE created a purposeful quantitative survey of 29 Likert scale questions. The survey covered the students’ involvement in learning activities and the supportive learning environment. Some of the questions were about enrolled courses, peer and instructor relationships, reading and writing levels, and student activities. The information collected also included gender, ethnicity, enrollment status and his/her personal educational experience at the University. NSSE supports the validity of their survey as their results have been very consistent since first published in 2001.

NSSE looked at students GPA to measure success. The predictors analyzed were ACT scores, age, gender, whether or not the students answered questions and contributed to discussions in their classes, students’ relationships with faculty members, and students’ relationships with peers and specifically gender specific peer relationships. Single variable means were calculated for all three years. The mean cumulative for student GPA was 3.05±.062, mean of ACT score was 23.40±3.36 with a range of 13-35. From the NSSE items students participation in class was based on a four point Likert scale and the mean was 2.82±0.83, while the other two variables were based on a seven point Likert scale. The mean of quality of
students’ relationships with peers was 5.67±1.21 and the quality of relationship with faculty was 5.32±1.19. The correlation between variables showed each variable as good predictors of achievement. A statistically significant positive correlation was found between three sets of variables. The study found a significant positive correlation between GPA and ACT scores ($r=0.23$), students’ relationships with faculty ($r=0.16$), and students’ relationship with faculty and their age ($r=0.13$). Correlation between academic achievement and students age had a moderate positive correlation ($r = 0.46$).

Regression variable analysis showed variables having significant impact on students’ GPA. ACT scores had a significant impact on student GPA ($\beta=0.05$, $t=10.67$, $p<0.05$), students’ relationships with faculty also had a significant impact on student GPA ($\beta=0.06$, $t=4.66$, $p<0.05$). Students active participation in class had a positive effect on GPA ($\beta=0.06$, $t=3.35$, $p<0.05$), and students’ age in regards to their academic success ($\beta=0.02$, $t=2.35$, $p<0.05$). The gender analysis showed positive effects from female interactions with peers while male interactions with peers resulted in negative effects.

In conclusion to the study, students’ active involvement in the classroom shows the greatest predictor of academic success. ACT scores and gender were important predictors of students’ academic achievement. Relationships between students and faculty showed a 0.06 positive change in academic success when a 1.0 positive change in relationship with staff was present. The study helps show the strong positive correlation present between student and staff relationships and academic success. When a positive relationship is present students also will feel more comfortable posing questions and participating in classroom discussions, which showed the largest predictor in academic success (Ullah & Wilson, 2007).
Chapter Three: Results and Analysis Relative to the Problem

Effective dropout prevention strategies built around the personal-affective approach focus on building relationships between students and staff members. Research shows increased student motivation when positive relationships are present in his/her school environment (Scheel et al. 2009). Student surveys confirm adults showing interest, persistence, and sense of care keep students engaged at school (Knesting, 2008 & Anderson et al., 2004). The students considered “at-risk” may lack a sense of to belong if success in the classroom or in athletics does not come naturally for them. To have an adult present, care, and believe in a student provides the students the connection to become successful with academics. When relationships are absent students may not have anyone to check in with and leave them with no true sense of responsibility.

Researchers have also done studies on dropout prevention strategies built around the alterable variables approach. The alterable variables approach main focus is to change an integral setting from traditional schooling for second chance programs. The initial intent of the alterable variables is to change a location, class schedule flexibility, class sizes, student to teacher ratio, and/or individualize curriculum (Chalker & Stelsel, 2009 Franklin et al., 2007 Neumann, 1991). When any of the above situational variables are changed the new setting of the school leads to foster better relationships between the staff and students. Researchers have found a positive, comfortable setting with smaller class sizes helps engage and motivate students to finish high school. When positive relationships are present these attributes will follow. Although the intent of these specific strategies was to alter situational variables, they tend to lie under the same category as the first, personal-affective. The strategies reviewed were all considered effective
due to realigning the school settings led to opportunities to foster better relationships between students and staff members.

An effective dropout prevention program would also lessen the negative effects dropouts usually have on a community. Even though dropout prevention programs are considered effective, not all students will graduate. As stated in Chapter one, some negative side effects of dropouts in a community include lower income, criminal behavior, reliance on public aid, drug and alcohol abuse, and incarceration. If the prevention programs are not effective toward the aspect of high school graduation, does the prevention programs help lessen the negative effects dropouts generally have on the community? The studies reviewed did not specify any affects the prevention program had on life after high school graduation. More follow up research needs to be conducted after the students are through the program and what their future lives entail. Are the programs just set up to help the student maintain graduation status or do the programs generally help the students achieve more in their adult lives as well?

The strategies reviewed in Chapter two require specific staff members to participate in the prevention program with a specific role. What was the necessary preparation for each strategy? Did teachers participate in the intervention programs only if they were trained for the specific intervention style? When pre and post tests are given to students to test a specific strategy taught in the classroom, it is hard to analyze the data without the mention of what training or what specifically went on in the classroom. Is the strategy of focus really the predictor of the student’s success or was there other variables making a difference?
Even though the majority of the reviewed studies took place in larger urban areas, the results for the prevention strategies would be the same. If students do not feel a part of something because they have no connection, the results would be the same whether they live in an urban or a rural area. The third level of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs is about belonging and being accepted by others. When people do not feel acceptance or a connection they will leave easily. Extrapolation of urban student data to rural student data should not be an issue due to human nature of needing to belong.

Some predictors for undergraduate academic achievement at the University level are ACT scores, students’ age, students’ active participation in his/her education, and students’ relationships with staff members. It is reasonable to assume students from a rural high school would have same predictors of academic success as “at-risk” students at a Midwestern public University because the ethnic make-up is very similar to the rural school in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula. The study done by NSSE showed why the common thread of the effective dropout prevention strategies was relationships. ACT scores are the most significant predictor of undergraduate academic success. The ACT’s purpose is to determine how successful students will be at the collegiate level. The second most significant predictor from the study was the relationship with staff members at the University. The students’ actively engaged in classes and have relationships with staff members are more likely to be successful in their undergraduate studies. Relationship building was present in each strategy reviewed in Chapter two, but is relationship building enough to help “at-risk” students be successful after graduation?
Chapter Four: Recommendations and Conclusion

Recommendation

Check & Connect is based upon strong, personalized relationships between students, families, schools, and mentors. Check & Connect is highly recommended for any school to participate in to deter students from dropping out. Check & Connect is one example of an effective program focused on staff/student mentor program. Check & Connect has a manual prepared and is fairly easy to implement. Smaller schools tend to have a higher teacher to student ratio and would be easier to have enough mentors for the “at-risk” students. Also, to live in a small community may lead to more opportunities for volunteers because there are plenty of business men and women willing to donate time to the schools.

When students have an adult check on their academic progress, attendance at school and consistently being there to talk to, believe, and care about them will more than likely have the connection needed to continue in school and graduate. Rural schools tend to have a smaller population than urban schools and relationships should be easier to form due to the smaller community.

Areas for Further Research

Relationships are clearly the common thread between the dropout prevention strategies reviewed above. When students have a sense of belonging they are more likely to continue their education. The studies focused on having a particular mentor for each student. Further research should focus on rural students. The majority of the reviewed studies took place in larger urban
areas where large universities are present. A study on the impact of student/staff relationships in rural schools would help answer the research question posed.

The study would take place in two rural high schools that have similar characteristics which include size, town characteristics, economic status of students, and ethnicity. One high school, M High, would receive a mentor program for students considered “at-risk.” The other school would not receive a mentor program, O High. All of the “at-risk” students at M High would be placed into a mentor program. The mentor program would consist of volunteer community members to take responsibility to mentor an “at-risk” student. Prior to the initiation of the students in the mentor program at M High the students at both high schools would complete a Likert Scale survey. The survey would consist of questions based on relationships, commitment to graduation level, liking school, comfort level at school, support for school from home, ties to the community, engagement and motivation level, and future plans. The schools would also supply information on the students’ attendance, gender, ethnicity, and GPA.

M High will have the “at-risk” students meet with their mentor at least twice a week. The mentor will be available for the student at other times if needed. The mentor’s duties include checking on attendance, grades, and helping make connections to the school and town communities. If a student is showing attendance issues or missing assignments the mentor will communicate to his/her student to help sort out the situation.

The pre and post surveys will be analyzed by the use of standard statistical data analysis from the Likert Scale survey and student demographics. A focus would be placed on the correlation between relationships and all other data pieces collected. The two schools data can
then be compared to see how much impact the mentors had on the engagement and motivation for the participating students. The focus of this study was relationships in rural setting.

**Summary and Conclusion**

Various dropout intervention programs have been attempted and some have made a positive impact on students’ decision to stay in school. Students’ reasons for dropping out vary from student to student. Therefore dropout intervention programs will not work for all students. A successful dropout prevention program would focus on building positive relationships within the school environment. Positive student/staff relationships are a very effective approach to help motivate and engage students leading students to academic success.

The greater part of research done on dropout interventions continues to point in the same direction, relationships as dropout deterrence. If a dropout program was designed to have adults mentor the students or change the school setting by the schedule made more flexible or the classes smaller, the outcomes have been similar because when students are given attention and feel a part of something, they will want to succeed. Engagement in school typically follows once a solid relationship is formed. Students need to see they are wanted and cared for at school. Therefore, in order for dropout prevention to be successful the key element of positive relationships must be present.
References


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