

Students at Risk for School Dropout: Supporting Their Persistence

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ABSTRACT: A critical need exists for research on high school dropout that goes beyond individual student characteristics to include the influence of school factors on students' educational decisions. In this article, the author summarizes the findings of a qualitative case study of a group of high school students at risk for dropping out but still attending school. Analysis focused on understanding the students' persistence within the context of their school. Four factors emerged as critical to supporting student persistence: (a) listening to students, (b) communicating caring, (c) the school's role in dropout prevention, and (d) students' role in dropout prevention.

KEYWORDS: *dropout, high school, intervention, motivation*

STAYING IN SCHOOL IS VERY DIFFICULT for some students. Beyond the academic demands of homework and tests, it takes all the energy some students have just to go to school each morning. As one teacher interviewed in this study described, students must function in a climate where "they think about everything that is bad about themselves, this building represents that." However, they come to school. They may fight, struggle, and get angry, but they remain focused on their goal of earning a high school diploma. These students should be celebrated; instead, they are often ignored or asked to leave (Fine, 1991; Gallagher, 2002). In this article, I summarize the findings of a qualitative case study of a group of high school students at risk for dropping out but managing to persist in school. Four factors emerged as critical for supporting student persistence: (a) listening to students, (b) communicating caring, (c) the school's role in dropout prevention, and (d) students' role in dropout prevention.

Understanding the problem of high school dropout requires looking beyond the limited scope of individual student characteristics to include school factors in students' decisions to stay in or leave school. Attention needs to be given to the influence that schools, their organization, leadership, and teachers may have on a student's decision to stay in or drop out of school (Rumberger, 1987). Educators must

look at factors within the schools and the possible interactions between schools and students. A sole focus on internal student characteristics may allow schools to escape having to confront the dropout issue. For this reason, it is important to look at how student persistence can be supported in a comprehensive school setting (Kronick & Hargis, 1990).

In her ethnographic case study of an urban high school, Fine (1991) described an environment that frequently pushed students out rather than attempting to keep them in school. Student-teacher interactions, disciplinary procedures, curricula, and even the district policy designed to keep students in school contributed to the school's estimated annual dropout rate of 40–60%. Altenbaugh, Engel, and Martin (1995) interviewed 100 students who dropped out but then returned to an alternative program to earn their diplomas. A number of the students felt overwhelmed by their school, specifically by its size and climate. Students perceived teachers as uncaring and not invested in their learning. School counselors were described as busy, overloaded, and unable to provide personal attention or support.

In contrast, Wehlage and colleagues' (Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko, & Fernandez, 1989; Wehlage, Rutter, & Turnbaugh, 1986) studies of alternative school settings describe the important influence of caring school communities. Students' behavior often changes when they feel like a part of a community at school. First, a sense of belonging increases the likelihood that students will accept school rules and policy. As they become important and valued members of their school's network of peers and adults, students become more invested in school. Second, students are more likely to take educational risks when they feel safe in

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their school environment. Wehlage (1991) argued that the most effective means of serving students at risk for dropping out is through the development of alternative school settings. He contended that these settings are better able to keep students in school because the culture of the alternative school—administration and organization, teacher culture, student culture, and curriculum—is focused on meeting the needs of individual students (Wehlage et al., 1986). The school provides a community of caring that may not exist for many students in more traditional high schools.

Although many at-risk students choose to leave school prior to graduation, there are also many students who choose to stay. One possible reason for some students' staying until graduation is a sense of belonging in a school community (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Goode-now, 1993). This is an important perspective to consider: If schools have the ability to contribute to students' early school leaving, then schools also have the potential to contribute to students' persistence.

Researchers of high school dropout have provided numerous descriptions of the students who leave school early, and recent studies have broadened the knowledge base by considering how schools effect students' educational decisions (Altenbaugh et al., 1995; Fine, 1991). There is a growing understanding of the school's role in students' decisions to drop out of comprehensive high schools and to persist in alternative schools (Wehlage, 1991; Wehlage et al., 1989). Less is known about why students persist in comprehensive high schools and the school's role in supporting their persistence. Accordingly, in the present study I sought to gain a greater understanding of at-risk students' experiences in a comprehensive high school and of how these experiences influenced their decision to persist in school.

Method

Setting

Washington High School is a medium-sized, comprehensive high school for students in the 9th through 12th grades. The school was selected as a "purposive sample" (Stake, 2000, p. 446) because of the author's familiarity with its at-risk students, as well as the seeming contradiction in the school's reputation among these students and within the community. At-risk students attending the school talked among themselves frequently about the school's "skyrocketing" dropout rate. According to one student, 25% of the previous year's freshman class had dropped out by spring semester. Although that figure is questionable, students' perception that many students were leaving school without graduating was interesting. In contrast, within the local community, the school had a positive reputation. Several people voiced concern that it would not be a good site to study retention issues because of the low dropout rate.

Participants

Teachers were asked to identify participants in the present study because dropout is only weakly predicted by risk factors (Dynarski & Gleason, 2002). A network selection process (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993) was used with the principal identifying teachers who worked with at-risk students who, in turn, identified students they considered to be at risk for dropout. Seventeen students participated: 10 males and 7 females; 13 White and 4 African American. Participants were one 9th grader, six 10th graders, three 11th graders, and seven 12th graders, ranging from 15 to 19 years of age. Eight of the 17 students had been retained in elementary or middle school. Three of the students had dropped out and then returned to school, 1 spent a year at an alternative school instead of dropping out, and 1 had previously been expelled from school. At the end of the spring semester when the research was conducted, 2 of the sample students had dropped out, 1 student was expelled, 7 students graduated, and 8 finished the school year with the stated intention of returning in the fall.

Procedure

Interviews. I conducted semistructured interviews with students and school faculty to gain a better understanding "without imposing any a priori categorization that may limit the field of inquiry" (Fontana & Frey, 2000, p. 653). Interviews took place with the 17 students during the school day and varied in length from 30 to 60 min. Interviews began with a brief review of the purpose of the research, an assurance of confidentiality, and description of participant rights. To obtain some understanding of the context of the school, interviews were conducted with the school principal, vice principal, two deans, four guidance counselors, and the past and present social worker. Seven teachers who were identified in student interviews as either supportive or unsupportive of persistence were also interviewed. Faculty members were asked open-ended questions about services for at-risk students and the supports for students considering dropping out. Interviews with school officials lasted between 45 and 60 min.

All interviews were audiotaped, transcribed, and returned to participants for feedback and clarification. To ensure confidentiality, I used pseudonyms for all participants. To help ensure understanding of interviewee responses, during the interviews I repeated answers and used probing questions to seek clarification. Student interviews took place from February through April. During April and May, the interview transcripts were returned to students and follow-up questions were asked. Interviews with school officials took place during April.

Observations. In interviews, students were asked for names of teachers who could be observed to better understand what students said about their classroom experiences. From

February through May, I conducted open-ended, narrative observations in 22 classes, during passing periods, and before and after school. With qualitative research methods, internal reliability of observations is evaluated by determining if “what the observer has seen and recorded is being viewed identically or at least consistently” (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993, p. 339) by the subject of the observations. In the present study, detailed notes were taken during all observations, with field notes written immediately afterward. Field notes were returned to all teachers, and positive feedback was provided regarding the accuracy and detail of the write-ups. Observational data were triangulated through multiple classroom observations and by students’ descriptions. Triangulation provided “a process of using multiple perceptions to clarify meaning, verifying the repeatability of an observation or interpretation” (Stake, 2000, p. 443).

Data Analysis

Data analysis first revealed instances or units as they were found in interviews and observations. Individual units were read and reread, and through comparisons of each unit with other units, categories were developed. Units were continually compared with each other until groups or categories of units were formed that had face validity. Once a category contained several units, descriptions of the categories were written, outlining rules for membership and nonmembership in the group (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As themes were identified, other sources of information, primarily classroom observations and faculty interviews, were analyzed for evidence supportive versus unsupportive of the developing themes. Next, I generated hypotheses regarding relations between the themes, focusing on understanding how they gave meaning to students’ persistence in school. Data analysis procedures meet Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klingner, Pugach, and Richardson’s (2005) standards for qualitative data analysis: systematic and meaningful sorting and coding of data, sufficiency of the rationale for data reported, documentation of methods to establish trustworthiness and credibility, and conclusions substantiated by sufficient quotations.

Credibility and Trustworthiness of Data

I took several steps to ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the data (Brantlinger et al., 2005; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). First, data were collected over a period of approximately 5 months. Second, the use of different data-collection methods (interviews, observations, and data analysis) and different sources of information (talking with multiple informants and observing at different times across classrooms) allowed me to triangulate data and look for evidence of confirmation and disconfirmation. A third step was the frequent conducting of member checks, or going back to students and teachers to clarify the accuracy of

my understanding and representation of their experiences. There were also regular interactions with a peer debriefer, someone with whom interpretations and hypotheses could be discussed. Last, throughout the course of the study I kept a personal reflective journal, in which I recorded and considered initial reactions, new questions, and possible hypotheses. This provided a means of exploring and clarifying assumptions and biases regarding the research, along with their effect on data interpretation.

Results

Washington High School

Washington High School did not have a well-defined, stand-alone dropout prevention program. Instead, dropout prevention was a secondary purpose of other support systems, primarily the school’s counseling services and an academic support program supporting at-risk 9th- and 10th-grade students through the transition from middle to high school. When asked about the school’s graduation rate over the past several years, most teachers said that they did not know but guessed it had either stayed the same or increased. In fact, during the 5 years prior to data collection, the school’s graduation rate dropped from 88% to 71.5%. Many students talked about friends who had dropped out of school or the conversations they had with friends, family, or teachers about dropping out. The group of students in this study appeared to know more about high school dropout than did many of the school’s teachers and administrators.

The school’s principal was committed to raising the school’s high academic standards. One example of this was a new requirement that students achieve specified competencies in English and mathematics before being promoted in those areas. Students not earning at least a B in these classes would have to retake the classes. Emphasizing that the school was taking a mastery approach to learning and reteaching students who did not meet standards rather than failing them, the principal acknowledged that some students might leave school rather than continue repeating classes.

Teachers at Washington

Committed and caring teachers were more important to the students’ school persistence than were academic support or counseling programs designed to support at-risk students. Teachers who sought to understand students’ behavior, believed in students’ ability to succeed, and accepted them “as is” were especially able to help at-risk students stay in school. Many teachers who worked with at-risk students seemed able to see school from the students’ perspective. One teacher said: “I think kids, rightly or wrongly . . . feel that they don’t matter. . . . It’s very frightening as a teacher because when I get kids in this class, I want kids to feel that this is a place where they can

come.” Acceptance of students’ worldviews, whether or not they believed them to be valid, helped teachers better understand their students’ behavior at school. Because they recognized how students’ feelings of being powerless and unimportant at school could contribute to their decision to drop out, these teachers put effort into creating classrooms where students felt they belonged.

Another important characteristic of the teachers who worked with at-risk students was their belief that all students could succeed at school. The best example of this was seen in a teacher’s classroom where high expectations, academic challenges, safety, and respect were the norm. Students were active and, when appropriate, equal participants in learning. The teacher expected all students to be successful, regardless of ability level or future plans, and worked hard to communicate this belief to the students. The teacher said, “I think it’s having very high expectations for all students. I think it’s personalizing, caring about their life. I think it’s looking for the good. Try to ignore the bad. Let them know you’re on their side.” Every student in the classroom was important to the teacher, and she made a point of showing this respect and worth not only to each particular student but also to the rest of the class. For several of the students, this climate of acceptance made the classroom a supportive haven at school. Karl’s description of his relationship with this teacher was similar to that of other students:

She does a lot of stuff that actually makes you think, like about things that are important. . . . I don’t always get my work done in her class and I’m always worried about offending her. I know she cares so much and I just feel so guilty because I haven’t done anything.

During classroom observations, this teacher interacted similarly with all students. Her behavior communicated that everyone had something to contribute and every contribution was important. The students knew that she cared and that she would be upset and angry if they left school prior to graduation, which may have influenced their decision to stay in school.

At-Risk Students’ Perceptions of Washington High School

Students suggested that there was something about the school that contributed to their persistence. When asked what she liked about school, Heather, a senior who planned on going to college after graduating, said, “I’d probably tell you that some of the curriculum is good. Some of the classes can be good if you have a good teacher.” Brian also emphasized the quality of academics available at Washington, along with the extracurricular options: “It’s a very good school as far as academics goes. . . . If you like band, this is a good school to come to. . . . Sports are okay, except they tend to favor sports more than other activities.” The students agreed with Karl that good teachers were key to their positive experiences at school: “It’s not a bad school. I enjoy

coming here. Like, every year, I’ve had a few good teachers that I still go to talk to, and [I] made some good friends.”

When talking about the quality of the education they were receiving, most students seemed satisfied that they were being well prepared to meet their future goals. When talking about the general school environment, however, the students were much more critical.

For the students, Washington High School was a stressful and sometimes unsupportive place. As Russell said, “It’s basically all you can do to bear the place. It’s really stressful. It’s all I can handle.” When explaining how she would describe Washington to a student who was new, Tamika said, “This school . . . okay, I think it’s a nice learning environment. But sometimes I feel as though this school is more concerned about the discipline than education. . . . They ain’t worried about teaching, you know.” Tamika and several other students described a setting that emphasized discipline and conformity over education, rather than a caring and supportive environment with high expectations for everyone’s success. Tyler offered a similar description: “It just seems like they’re trying too hard to control the kids and not focusing enough on teaching them. . . . A lot of teachers do care, but there’s always going to be a handful who don’t.” His portrayal reflects the ambiguity expressed by many of the students. On one level, they were aware of and acknowledged the good things the school offered them, yet they also struggled with a sense that their learning and future plans were not at the top of the school’s list of priorities.

Although there is evidence that Washington supported at-risk students at the school, there also was an undercurrent of apology by the school’s administration. The sense that only certain students were valued at Washington was also felt by the students. Maya explained: “Like, it’s like if you do sports or are a cheerleader . . . that’s having Husky spirit. And I’m a Husky. Just because I’m not playing volleyball or cheerleading that doesn’t make me any less important.” Students’ feelings of not being valued participants at their school extended to feeling that some teachers did not care about them or their graduation from high school.

When talking about what they did not like at school, students frequently mentioned teachers who were only there “to get their paycheck, whether we’re listening or not. Some teachers just don’t care.” As Anthony described, “For some of them this is a job. This is making the money, so it don’t matter if a kid gets kicked out of school. It don’t matter how many Fs they put on their grade books.” Students described various behaviors that indicated to them that a teacher did not care about them. These were teachers who did not mind when students left the room, did not ask where homework was when it was not turned in, assumed that students understood the material when they did not ask questions rather than calling on specific students, did not have control over their classrooms, and did not seem excited about the material

they were presenting. Students interpreted these actions to mean that the teachers did not care about their learning in class and did not care whether they stayed in school. There was a perception among students that school personnel valued other students more than them and tried to limit their participation in school. Kelly explained, "You have all kinds of things you can't get into. . . . You want to do yearbook, but you're not allowed to do it unless you have a grade point of like three or something, 3.0 or something." Other students complained that their opinions were not respected by teachers and that some teachers allowed only one right answer to an opinion question: their own. The feeling among some students that they were unwelcome at school was so strong that they felt school personnel were attempting to force them to drop out. Russel said, "Several of my friends have just been kicked out. It just depends who you are and if they like you. . . . They don't want you infecting other students with any rebellious ideas."

Washington's Commitment to At-Risk Students

Washington High School posed a series of seeming contradictions. There were clear expectations for student achievement, with changes being made to help ensure that students reach these standards, or at least some students. There were highly qualified and caring teachers who expressed a commitment to engaging in best practices in learning and instruction. Yet there also was the statement by the principal that higher standards may influence some students to leave school before graduation. Also, the vice principal indicated that he counseled some students to drop out of school rather than stay in and earn a diploma:

I'm not afraid to say to somebody, "You can go, and this place is not for you." . . . I think for some kids it's better that they are out. If we are really looking at what is in their best interest, I think it's better that some kids are out.

Despite their efforts at dropout prevention, administrators did not appear to fully expect or want all students to graduate. Although it is somewhat speculative, it appeared that some school officials believed that students with too many problems or "too much baggage" got in the way of higher standards. This belief let down those students who believed that an education was important for everyone.

Discussion

Listening to Students

Students in this study had much to contribute to the discussion on keeping students in school; they just needed someone to listen to them. During the last decade, various authors have used the metaphor of *unheard voices* to describe the experiences of disenfranchised groups within a majority culture (hooks, 1993; Nieto, 1996; Stevenson & Ellsworth, 1993). Within a larger cultural dialogue, such as politics or litera-

ture, it is argued that some groups do not play a substantial enough role or do not have a loud enough voice. The metaphor accurately depicts the experiences of students at risk for dropping out of high school. When it comes to the topic of high school dropouts, there is a cacophony of voices participating in the conversation. There are teachers, administrators, school board members, and district superintendents. There are parents, politicians, school counselors, and researchers. However, students are seldom involved in the conversation, especially students who either have dropped out of school or are thinking about leaving (Gallagher, 2002).

As Brian argued, having their opinions heard and valued was important to these students: "If they just listened to what we had to say, even though they're going to go ahead with the policy we disagree with, it would make a big difference." Students wanted to be heard, and they were fortunate to have teachers and administrators who wanted to listen, crediting these adults as the ones who helped them to stay in school. One of the deans realized the importance of being heard to the success of at-risk students: "They just need somebody to talk to. They need to express how they feel." She walked through the halls before and after school and during passing periods, asking students if things were going okay and if they were doing their work. One teacher took it a step further, emphasizing that as much as students needed someone to talk to, they also needed someone who would listen to what they were saying: "I think the thing about getting respect from any student is that you listen to them. And you can't fake it. What they say is important." Eliciting student participation was not always an easy task, however, because in addition to quiet voices, these students also had distrustful ones. Some of the students at Washington not only felt outside the conversation; they also were skeptical of adults who told them that they wanted to listen.

It is not enough to talk of the importance of including students' voices; their voices must be actively recruited. School personnel need to seek out students who are struggling to stay in school; ask them questions about their experiences, why they want to leave, and what would help them stay; and listen to their answers. This group of students at Washington wanted to talk about their school experiences, and they wanted someone at school to listen to them. Before they would share of themselves, however, they had to feel safe and respected. They made clear what it was about the school environment that made it so difficult to come to school, as well as articulating what teachers did to help them stay in school. The students did not only complain about school. They accepted responsibility for the times they got themselves in trouble and clearly appreciated those teachers who expected them to put forth effort and participate in their education.

These students at Washington said that the teachers and administrators at the school did make a difference in their

educational decisions to drop out or to stay. Not only do comprehensive high schools play a role in students' decisions to drop out (Altenbaugh et al., 1995; Fine, 1991), they also play a role in their decision to stay (Croninger & Lee, 2001). The stories reveal that seemingly small actions on the part of adults, such as stopping students from taunting each other or asking about life outside school, sometimes have an immense impact on students' school experiences and reinforce the strength of their desire to share their stories with adults who communicate a willingness to listen. Listening forces a conversation about dropping out, which schools too often try to avoid (Fine). Schools cannot say they do not have a problem with dropouts; they do. Talking to the students opens the door to finding solutions.

Communicating Caring

As more attention is given to students' perspectives of dropping out, the importance of a caring school environment has become a recurrent theme (Fredricks et al., 2004). Like other students who have talked about their school experiences (Zuba, 1995), this group of students identified the significance of feeling respected and cared for to their decision to stay in school. Their biggest complaint about school was uncaring and disrespectful teachers and administrators. At the same time, one of the most critical components of their persistence was the support they received from teachers who cared about their success in school.

Most teachers and schools strive to create a climate of respect, caring, and high expectations for their students. The breakdown in caring does not come in the area of wanting or not wanting to care, but rather in the area of how faculty members show students that they care. This is made difficult by the fact that teachers cannot always tell if there has been a breakdown in the communication of their caring. The stories of the students in this study make clear that students do not always embrace the possibility of an adult's caring, regardless of the adult's well-meaning intentions. Schools and teachers cannot assume that students know they care, especially those who are alienated and at risk for dropping out. The existence of an interactive caring relationship means that educators must consider how they communicate their caring to the students in their schools. A teacher at Washington commented that of course his students knew that he cared about them. This positive relationship seemed obvious to him, but the students described him as one of the teachers who was only working for the money. The school's principal realized the amount of work involved in building caring relationships: "Generally, kids don't see their principal as a caring person. . . . They don't know how much I care. And that will only surface as I slowly chip away at it one-on-one and word of mouth spreads the longer I'm here."

As others have contended (Altenbaugh et al., 1995; Wehlage et al., 1989) and these students at Washington con-

firmed, caring student-teacher relationships are an integral part of a student's school experience. The question is how educators can demonstrate their interest and caring to students and develop these relationships. At Washington High School there were numerous opportunities for recognizing students, such as National Honor Society or the Dean's List for students who excelled academically. Yet for a number of students, Washington was not a welcoming or caring place. Few teachers or administrators at the school seemed to be aware of the feelings of students identified as at risk for dropping out.

School's Role in Dropout Prevention

From the students' perspective, both students and teachers at Washington had the ability and the responsibility to do something to prevent students from dropping out. These students recognized that as much as factors at school made them want to drop out, there were also people who wanted to help them to stay in school. Despite numerous aversive experiences, the students believed something their school did not always believe: Its teachers and administrators could make a difference in students' ability to persist in school. Whereas some may doubt the school's role in dropout prevention (Finn, 1987), from these students' perspective, caring, supportive, and respectful teachers who believed in their ability to succeed in school had a significant impact on their lives.

What supportive teachers and administrators did to reinforce the persistence of at-risk students did not always require substantial amounts of money or time outside of the classroom. Instead, students found the sources of some of their most significant supports during day-to-day school activities. Students received support from teachers who were polite to them and demonstrated respect and acceptance of all students in their classrooms. They responded to teachers who asked for their opinions and then listened to their answers, and developed supportive relationships with those who maintained high expectations for them and then stayed on their backs as they worked to achieve their goals. In this context, students began to recognize that ultimately they would get something out of staying in school. They were empowered to believe that, although there were aspects of school they did not find supportive or respectful, they still had control over and thus could change their behaviors that acted as roadblocks to success. Comments about their future during class lessons, personal conversations before and after class, and smiles and eye contact in the hallways made a difference to students. Fine (1991) reflected that the "act of dropping out could be recast as a strategy for taking control of lives fundamentally out of control" (p. 4), yet at Washington the students found a way to take control through their staying in school. Washington played a vital role in sustaining its students in their persistence,

speaking persuasively to the potential holding power that schools have for students.

As discussed earlier, whereas the actions of these teachers and administrators seem straightforward, they can appear deceptively easy. A teacher frequently described by students as supportive and a reason for their not dropping out explained: "A kind of rebellious kid . . . brought in two different things that he had written to share with the class, on his own motivation. . . . You don't realize . . . what has gone into making that kid want to get up and do that."

Developing caring, supportive, and mutually respectful relationships with students in a large, comprehensive high school is not an easy task, but it is possible. Although it may be easier for a school to implement programmatic changes—such as taking away the driver's license of dropouts or changing the time at-risk students start school each morning, as suggested by other researchers (Baker & Sansone, 1990; Toby & Armor, 1992)—the most effective prevention strategies likely require changing attitudes and expectations (Dynarski & Gleason, 2002).

Schools must accept responsibility for making changes within their own structure or climate that can support student persistence and increase the likelihood that they will finish their education. As witnessed in many of the classrooms at Washington, significant changes in school climate can come about in relatively small ways. Teachers talking to students in the hallways between classes or soliciting their opinion on a topic up for debate changed students' attitudes toward school and their ability to stay in. Changes also came from teachers not allowing students to put each other down in their classrooms or reinforcing to them that they could be successful in school. Supporting students who are at risk for dropping out requires changes in schools' attitudes, along with their actions. This group of students at Washington believed that they were not as important to their school as the basketball players, straight-A students, or student council members. Gaining these students' trust and convincing them they could succeed took hard work, patience, and commitment from teachers.

Students' Role in Dropout Prevention

The outcomes of the present study argue strongly for giving more attention to the role of schools in dropout prevention. However, the students also share a responsibility in this, a responsibility that goes beyond providing a critique of their school experiences. As the momentum for looking at the school's role in prevention grows, voices of students such as these in Stevenson and Ellsworth's (1993) study of White working-class dropouts are being heard more frequently: "There were no sincere teachers, [was] no high level of respect . . . guidance counselors don't care . . . it felt like being in jail" (Stevenson & Ellsworth, p. 265). Researchers such as Altenbaugh et al. (1995), Fine (1991), Wehlage (1991; Wehlage et al., 1989; Wehlage et al. 1986), and Zuba

(1995) are gathering these important perspectives, but the research must move another step forward. As educators and policymakers seek to shift the focus of dropout research from looking at these students as "deviant, lazy, or inadequate" (Fine & Rosenberg, as cited in Stevenson & Ellsworth, p. 271), more must be considered than the school's role in prevention. The students' role must be included.

A school could have proven prevention programs, unlimited funding for these programs, and classrooms full of caring and committed teachers and still have unacceptably high dropout rates if students do not see a purpose to graduating or are unwilling to put forth effort. If students do not believe that they benefit from earning a diploma, and if they do not accept responsibility for doing their work and following school rules, then their attempts at persistence are unlikely to be successful. Both students and teachers at Washington were aware of this. Students frequently criticized other students who they perceived as lazy and without a future focus or those who did not want to follow rules or attempt to play the school's game as sharing in the blame for their own school failure. Teachers discussed students whose lack of purpose and effort limited the benefits they received from being in prevention programs, emphasizing that their support would still be there if and when the students chose to work with them instead of against them. Teachers continued offering support, but the students could not fully benefit from it until they decided to accept it.

Limitations

Three limitations of this study must be addressed. First, the research did not consider students' school experiences before high school, when students' risk for dropout likely is established (Roderick, 1993). I was unable to describe how persistence developed for a given student or why persistence developed for some students but not for others. Second, the research did not address the experiences of a group of students considered by some to be most at risk for school failure—students in special education (Kortering & Brazier, 1999)—and thus findings can not be generalized to this population. Third, some criticize qualitative research because its results cannot be generalized. In qualitative research, both the reader and the researcher are accountable for making generalizations. The researcher has the responsibility of providing enough detailed description that the reader can compare the research setting to his or her own situation. Readers absorb the descriptions and details embedded in qualitative research reports, enmeshing them with their own stories, questions, and problems (Erickson, 1986).

Conclusion

The mounting problem of high school dropouts poses numerous challenges. The number of students who fail to earn a diploma is unacceptably high (Prevatt & Kelly,

2003). Researchers and school personnel sometimes single out societal and student characteristics, such as poverty, single-parent families, teenage pregnancy, or gang violence, as factors that make it difficult for schools to impact students' decisions to stay in or drop out (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000). However, in the present study, the students and teachers at Washington High School would argue otherwise. Assuming their assertions are reasonably representative, there is good reason to listen more carefully to what students say about their school experiences. Despite the aversive nature of school experiences, the students in the present study used their involvement with supportive teachers or administrators, along with their determination to earn a high school diploma, to stay in school. These findings contribute to a modest body of literature that suggests that schools can positively influence students' ability to persist (Fredricks et al., 2004; Goodenow, 1993; Wehlage et al., 1989).

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