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Abstract

Dropping out of high school has long been viewed as a serious educational and social problem, especially for minorities (Jordan, Lara, & McPartland, 1996). By leaving high school prior to completion, most dropouts have serious educational deficiencies that severely limit their economic and social well being throughout their adult lives.

MINORITY DROPOUT AND PREVENTION

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Dropping out of high school has long been viewed as a serious educational and social problem, especially for minorities (Jordan, Lara, & McPartland, 1996). By leaving high school prior to completion, most dropouts have serious educational deficiencies that severely limit their economic and social well being throughout their adult lives.

The dropout problem has been one of the most difficult and ongoing problems in education (Dorn, 1993). Currently researchers are attempting to discover why minority students in particular drop out of school. According to Egyed, Bull, and McIntosh (1998), minority students are leaving schools for a variety of reasons, including boredom, frustration, pregnancy, need to support a spouse or child, medical problems, emotional problems, a desire to earn money, a desire to get away from home, disciplinary action, and lack of academic success.

As a whole, the dropout rate is significant, but is especially prevalent among minority youth. Some researchers such as Dorn (1993) believe there is a correlation between minorities dropping out of school and lower socio-economic status. Others believe that each student is given an equal opportunity to advance his or her education (Johnson, 1995). Regardless of social beliefs, Dorn (1993) notes that there is a continuing problem involving minorities and their dropout issues.

There is no single answer as to why minority children and adolescents are dropping out of school. Is it because of poor parenting, or maybe because of a poor educational system? It is also possible that it can be a compilation of many things such

as parenting, the educational system (teachers, administration, government), and most importantly, the students. Just as there are a variety of causes behind a student's decision to drop out of school, many different strategies exist to prevent this from occurring.

This review of literature will examine some of the major considerations involved in trying to understand the complex educational issue of minority dropout. Included will be the definition of the problem, its major causes, and the guidance counselor's role in the implementation of a comprehensive minority dropout prevention program.

Background on the Dropout Problem and Prevention

To better understand dropout and dropout prevention, it is important to understand the definition of dropout. Researchers have attempted to define the term dropout and how it relates to society. According to Vitro, Brendgen, and Tremblay (1999), the majority of people living in this country generally attend school by age six, have their first job by their early twenties, and retire from full-time work by age seventy or seventy-five. To some extent, these experiences create a level of expectations. People who fail to meet these expectations at some point will be labeled dropouts and will have difficulties in their future success. They will be classified by society as unintelligent, uneducated, and below average (Vitro, Brendgen, & Tremblay, 1999).

To some extent, dropout prevention has been a great concern for the school counseling profession for many years. A prime example would be a presentation at the First National Guidance Convention in 1913 where a report was given on the high school dropout rate (Schreiber & Kaplan, 1984). This report not only discussed the growing need for additional support for possible dropouts students and their families, but it also

addressed why students were becoming at risk for dropping out. However, it was not until the 1960's "that the schools began to explicitly recognize that these potential dropouts had to be provided with tailored educational programs if they were to succeed and stay in school" (Jordan, Lara, & McPartland, 1999, p.66).

Schreiber and Kaplan (1984) noted that minority students are at risk for dropping out for many reasons. Some young females become pregnant, or immigrants traveling from other countries may have problems understanding English, thus increasing the likelihood of them dropping out. Students with family issues such as single parent households, blended families, and socioeconomic status are also at risk for dropping out of school.

According to Johnson (1995), schools in the past took minimal to very little responsibility for the minority dropout problem. Most of the blame is placed on the students or their families. Many schools around the country are now beginning to take a more proactive approach to decreasing the minority dropout rate and implementing prevention strategies to meet the needs of these students. In some cases administrators have taken on a majority of the work to decrease the minority dropout rate.

Administrators essentially have begun to believe that it is their responsibility to reduce this increasing problem (U.S. Department of Education, 1995). Now it is time for administrators to work collectively with school guidance counselors to exert strong leadership efforts to identify potential minority dropouts and provide strong preventative and remedial measures to keep these students in school. The guidance counselor is in an

excellent position to become involved in the implementation of an effective comprehensive minority dropout prevention program.

Statistics and Characteristics of Minority Dropouts

Statistics

Although there is considerable concern about the proportion of young adults who have not completed high school, there has been little effort to explore in detail how schools define dropouts and how they arrive at rates of completion (Jordan, Lara, & McPartland, 1996). Because definitions of dropout differ, and because there is no nationwide standard for computing dropout rates, estimates vary on the number of minority dropouts in the United States. For the purpose of this paper, the following definition of dropout will apply: “a student leaving school for reasons except death, without meeting the requirements of graduation or transferring to another school” (Jordan, Lara, & McPartland, 1996, p. 63).

According to the U.S. Department of Education (McMillen, P. Kaufman & Shitener, 1999), data confirms findings that report a strong association between race/ethnicity and the likelihood of dropping out of school. The U.S. Department of Education (1999) noted that five out of every 100 young adults did not successfully complete a high school program. This report also states Hispanic and Black students were more likely than White students to leave school before completing a high school program. In 1999, 28.6 percent of Hispanic students, 12.6 percent Black students, and

4.3 percent of Asian students were dropouts, compared with 7.3 percent of White students.

According to the Bureau of the Census (1999), students in a lower socio-economic status are more likely to drop out of school. In 1999, young adults living in families with incomes in the lowest 20 percent of all family incomes were five times as likely to drop out as their peers from families in the top 20 percent of the income distribution. These statistics also stated that although dropouts were highest among students age 19 or older, about two-thirds of the current dropouts were ages 15 through 18.

Characteristics

No one really knows what causes minority students to drop out of high school. Dropouts themselves report a number of different reasons for leaving school. Almost one half of all dropouts and more than half of Hispanic and Black males cited school-related reasons, such as disliking school, being expelled, getting suspended, not getting along with teachers, not getting along with others students, and not feeling safe as reasons for dropping out (U. S. Department of Education, 1995). According to Egyed, McIntosh, and Bull (1998), socioeconomic factors, family factors, social adjustment, and academic performance are contributors to the dropout problem. Understanding these reasons is critical in developing effective policies and practices for encouraging minority students to stay in school.

Socio-economic factors. The socio-economic status of the family often has a tremendous effect on a student's decisions about whether or not to stay in school. According to Wehlage (1991), income is only one of a number of closely linked factors that may be related to a minority student's decision to drop out of school. In 1999, 11.0 percent of students from families in the lowest 20 percent of the income distribution dropped out of high school. This figure compared to 5.0 percent in the middle 60 percent of the income distribution who dropped out, as compared to 2.1 percent of students from families with incomes in the top 20 percent.

Dropouts often live in homes where love is lacking, according to Trusty (1996). These families often have poor communications skills and cannot afford to provide the extra stimulants to insure intellectual development. Rumberger (1987) stated that the most important years of a child's life are during early adolescence. If both parents work in order for the family to survive, these young adolescents will lack the parental support necessary for personal and social development, which has the potential to be a major factor in minority dropout.

It is possible that family factors play an important role in students' academic success. Not only do socio-economic factors place stress on families, but the family system also places additional stress on students who are trying to attain education success. Parents out of necessity may force their children to leave school to obtain employment to help bring income into the home (Jordan, Lara, & McPartland, 1996).

Family factors. Poor relationships with family and friends, sibling rivalry, or single child families may play a key role in determining the minority dropout issue.

According to Egyed, McIntosh, and Bull (1998), the primary characteristic of minority high school dropouts is an unsatisfactory relationship with their family. If there is tension between students and parents, they may displace their anger onto the school. At this point, lack of respect may develop between parents and children that may result in defiant behavior. This may influence the students' decision not to attend class, causing them to dropout of school. This may also lead to criminal behavior and criminal mischief.

There are other issues related to the family system that may cause an increase in the minority dropout rate. Dorn (1993) found that among family factors affecting students' education or likelihood of dropping out are family care, family attitudes and values towards school, family tensions, parental role-modeling and guidance, and family economic status. Dorn (1993) also noted that the dropout's families are less solid, less influenced by a father figure, and more often from a low socio-economic status.

Egyed, McIntosh, and Bull (1998) found a positive relationship between stable homes and high achievement and unstable homes and low achievement. This may be a result of parental support. If parents do not pay enough attention to their children's academic affairs then they may begin to believe that mediocre work is acceptable, therefore causing them to lose interest in their studies. This may then cause lack of interest in school altogether, increasing the minority dropout rate.

With stable homes being an important determinant to school success, it is possible to assume that the high divorce rate is an important factor in minority students' success.

The U.S. divorce rate is about 2,300,000 per year, leaving approximately 24 percent of all children under 18 living in single parent homes (London, 1995). Having an absent parent as a result of divorce, and the other parent gone due to employment, the home loses important support for academic success.

London (1995) added that dropouts often come from homes where there is only one parent and often that parent also failed to graduate from high school. Reiterating London's views, research done by the U.S. Department of Education (1999) also showed that children from single-parent families do worse in school and are more likely to drop out than children from two-parent families. The U.S. Department of Education (1999) report also stated that children living in a single-parent home decreased the likelihood of completing high school by 13 percent for minorities. Obviously, considerable research has been conducted on the family conditions of the dropout, and most of the studies reiterated that non-supportive family conditions have a negative affect on staying in school (Dorn, 1993).

Social adjustment. Students experiencing difficulty negotiating the personal and social adjustments of adolescence are more likely to drop out of school. According to McMillen and Kaufman (1993), students who are rebellious, delinquent, or chronically truant drop out of school at higher rates than those who are not. In a study based on Hiawatha High School in Kirkland, Illinois, Jancek (1991) found that academics accounted for only 36 percent of the minority dropout rate. Personal, affective, or social interrelationships made up the remaining 64 percent.

Truancy and getting in trouble in school frequently foreshadowed dropping out of school. Among minority high schoolers ages 15-18, chronic truants are 67.3 percent more likely to drop out of high school than students who regularly attend school. Egyed, McIntosh, and Bull (1998) believed that one reason minority students disliked coming to school is fear. Some minority youth are not ready or willing to face the pressures that schools can create. This fear is often related to fear of failing or rejection from friends and teachers. The researchers also found juvenile crime as an additional factor that can place a minority student at risk for dropping out.

Academic performance. If students become failures at an early age, it is possible they will begin to believe they are failures. Once they start the downward trend they may never realize their true potential in academic success. It is important to remember that young minds are very influential and lack of continued success may result in continuous failure.

There are many academic reasons that can contribute to minority dropout rates. According to Egyed, McIntosh, and Bull (1998), the four most frequently cited reasons for minorities leaving school were lack of interest, failing grades, dissatisfaction with teachers or principals, and unhappy school experiences. As a result of those factors, behavior problems often develop. At least 25 percent of all minority dropouts are suspended before teachers had labeled them as behavior problems (Hahn, 1995).

Another issue involving academic success is the use of standardized tests. Many schools are beginning to emphasize the results of standardized tests as a determining factor to student learning. When this is done, minority students who do not perform well

on these tests begin to believe they are incompetent students, which increases the likelihood they will engage in self-downing. Consequently, their interest in school decreases. Hahn (1995) noted that over 50 percent of all minority dropouts had a basic skills score in the bottom 20 percent of the score distribution. Sixteen to 17-year-olds with basic skills test scores in the bottom 20th percentile rank were 14 times more likely to drop out of school than those in the upper 20th percentile rank.

Another educational factor is the language barrier. Students who lack the ability to communicate effectively with teachers are likely to have greater problems increasing their probability of dropping out (Hahn, 1995). The ability to communicate with teachers and other students is an important factor in school success. Students who do not speak English well, which is a factor for some minority groups, are limited in their ability to establish successful social and educational relationships. Therefore, Hahn (1995) states school districts with a high number of immigrants from non-English speaking areas or large groups of non-native-English speaking students are likely to have greater problems with student dropout.

Academic success is one of the most important factors in addressing the minority dropout issue. If minority students believe that they can and will have success in education it will increase their performance and decrease the dropout rate. With the proper support given by parents, minority students will work to achieve high academic standards that may help to reduce minority dropout issues. Families, districts, administrators, teachers and students must work collectively to resolve this issue.

Role of the Counselor

Minority Dropout Prevention

Dropout prevention is a key to decreasing the minority dropout rate. What can schools do collectively to reclaim the students who are at risk for dropping? This is a question that has many possible answers and solutions. But what is more important and continues to be a challenge for school districts is how to provide educational opportunities that offer a positive experience to alter the lives of minority students before they drop out of school. If it is possible for students to have a positive experience in the educational system maybe it would increase the likelihood that they would continue to participate in school activities. With this in mind, it is important to decrease or eliminate reasons that may encourage students to drop out and provide activities that will make staying in school more appealing. According to Duckenfield, Hamby, and Smink (1990), a comprehensive solution is far better than a sole program implemented at one single level because a comprehensive model addresses the needs of multiple students.

A comprehensive model is also important because it addresses multiple needs for a diverse population of students. According to Duckenfield, et al. (1990), areas in a good dropout prevention program are as follows: mentoring, parent involvement, involvement in school experiences, career counseling, organization/ administration, and individual and group counseling.

Mentoring

One of the most effective strategies for helping a potential minority dropout is one-to-one involvement with a significant other such as a mentor (Sandling, 1999).

Mentoring is a practice of developing and maintaining positive and helpful relationships (Smink, 1999). A caring, supportive relationship between a mentor and the mentee is based on trust and companionship. The mentor is simply a wise and trusted friend with a commitment to provide guidance and support for mentees to develop their fullest potential regarding their vision for their future. According to Smink (1999), this relationship occurs in many different formats including the traditional one-to-one relationship and one-to-group relationship.

Mentoring programs are being initiated as school dropout prevention programs in many schools and communities throughout the country (Smink, 1999). Although mentoring program objectives will vary, they normally address issues such as academic achievement, school discipline, teen pregnancy, substance abuse, illiteracy, job retention, or job advancement. While mentoring meets the needs of nearly all students in a dropout situation, four major tasks for which mentors are particularly valuable include establishing a positive personal relationship, developing life skills, assisting in case management of families, and increasing abilities of youth to interact with other social and cultural groups (United Way of America, 1994).

Sandling (1999) stated that mentoring could offer a powerful antidote to the problems that plague minority youth. A mentor can serve as a role model, guide them into new experiences, and provide the necessary adult attention and support that will encourage minority students to finish school and plan for the future.

Mentoring activities can be business or community oriented, use school personal, or focus on work and careers. Furthermore, since most potential dropouts are nearly

always deficient in academic subjects, a mentor can provide extra help in subjects and reinforce study skills that will be helpful in other school activities (Moore, 1994).

According to Sandling (1999), mentoring can help minority students reduce their disruptive behavior. Mentoring can also increase school attendance, increase bonding to school, improve school achievement and likelihood of graduation, increase personal growth and self-confidence, and increase awareness of the world of work and future career requirements. The guidance counselor plays an instrumental role in coordinating the program, selecting the participants, and providing in-service to mentors interested in volunteering in the program.

Parent Involvement

Parent involvement is a key component in student academic success. But according to Gordan (1993), few parents, perhaps 20 percent know how to help their children in this area. Although the desire to see their children succeed is strong among disadvantaged parents, they often do not have the skills or knowledge related to getting help for their children (Gordon, 1993). The guidance counselor can play a significant role in providing assistance and in connecting parents more with the school. The counselor can increase participation of parents in school by offering parent education workshops with training in parenting skills. Counselors can send out school newsletters as well as allow parents access to videotapes to learn new parenting skills. Special programs can be offered to allow parents to serve as tutors for their children and other children of the community. Allowing parents to be involved in learning may give their children the encouragement necessary for them to stay in school.

When parents are involved there are many expected benefits. The children benefit with achievement and self-esteem increases (Edmondson & White, 1998). Obviously students will value school more if they see how highly their parents value it. The schools also benefit with the open support and communication between parents and teachers which leads to improving common goals.

Involvement in School Experiences

Student involvement in school experiences is linked to decreasing the minority dropout rate. According to McNeal (1995), findings indicated that participation in certain extracurricular activities such as music, athletics, fine arts, and academic clubs reduce the minority dropout rate. McNeal (1995) noted that the more students are involved in school, the less likely they are to withdraw or drop out of school. Involvement gives students something to work for because it offers a sense of pride and positive self-image which is important to the development of children and adolescents.

Career Counseling

Polansky, Horan, and Hanish (1993) noted that vocational education is a critical ingredient in the school's ability to keep young minority students in the system and train those who have dropped out. In and of itself, vocational education cannot solve the minority dropout problem. Polansky, Horan, and Hanish (1993) believe that for vocational education to be most effective in minority dropout prevention it must be embedded in a system that includes a broad range of other critical elements.

The guidance counselor can play a significant role in career counseling by first restructuring the program to emphasize career guidance for finding jobs as well as for

post-secondary education. Secondly, career guidance needs to begin early in the primary grades. Also, the guidance counselor can provide professional counseling for minority students individually and in groups that can help them with personal problems and give them direction for academic and career choices (Denti & Guerin, 1999).

Organization/Administration

The key to a successful minority dropout program is administration. In order to decrease the minority dropout rate, the administration must take a more proactive role in working with students and families to increase their involvement in the education system. A structured minority dropout plan with a low student/teacher ratio has been found to benefit students particularly well. According to Drygoos (1990), minority dropout prevention includes many programs such as instructional leadership by the principal, fair but compromising discipline programs, flexible programming and scheduling, role models from the community, and working relationships between high schools and colleges.

The way in which a school or program is set up and administered has been found to impact the retention rate of minority students and the dropout rate. According to Asche (1993), administrators must work collectively with guidance counselors to increase services to decrease the minority dropout rate. Some elements of a successful program include administration of programs by agencies outside of school, school-based management, flexible programming and scheduling, and transition programs (Smink, 1999).

Individual and Group Counseling

Individual and small group counseling has the potential to decrease the current minority dropout rate. A 1996 study on dropouts, published by the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), found that minority dropout prevention programs must address many different needs. This study provided information that stated that not only is there a need for physical care such as family systems and educational involvement, but there is also a need for a students' psychological needs. Trusty (1996) noted that counseling, whether it is done individually or small group settings, meets the needs of students on a more personal level. Trusty (1996) also notes that many potential minority dropouts benefit from being able to talk over problems and seek guidance from counselors, peers, and adults.

Counselors can combine academic counseling with cognitive-behavioral strategies for improving students' academic self-concepts, thereby improving academic achievement (Sapp, 1990). Counselors can also help work to improve anger management skills, coping skills, building positive self-image, assist with goal setting, and increase effective study skills.

Not only is there a need for individual and group counseling, but adult role models may also play an important role of helping deal with minority dropout. At many elementary, middle, and high schools, advisor/advisee programs have been implemented to teachers with a group of students, to teach life skills as well as provide academic counseling.

Conclusion

According to research, there is a lot known about minority dropout and dropout prevention programs (Trusty, 1996). Many researchers believe that the best way to approach this issue is by implementing a comprehensive minority dropout prevention program (Egyed, McIntosh, & Bull, 1998). As one can see, the most important factors in any comprehensive minority dropout prevention program are to provide students with as many success experiences as possible. As mentioned, consistent failure in academic success has much to do with a student's decision to quit school. Personal and vocational guidance from empathetic counselors also plays a major role in minority dropout prevention (Trusty, 1996). Trusty (1996) also stated that for a prevention program to be effective it must be staffed with committed, empathetic adults who understand the nature of child development and have high expectation for themselves and students.

A minority dropout prevention program has the potential to meet the needs of students who are at risk of dropping out of school. A comprehensive plan also has the ability to increase the number of positive experiences that minority students have. Characteristics of the dropout and prevention components that can be used within or in cooperation with dropout prevention programs are important to ensure that all students receive a high school diploma.

It is easy to realize that reducing the current minority dropout rate will not be an easy task. School districts must revamp their current prevention plan in order to implement a new program. For this to work they must alter an existing strained budget to

implement a creative minority dropout prevention program. Other school districts have to search for the best plan to implement in their community. In order for this to work it must be pro-active, involve a number of individuals such as family, student, community, administration, and teachers, and be properly administered. The guidance counselor plays an integral part in laying the groundwork for an effective comprehensive minority dropout prevention program.

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