

Dropped Out or Pushed Out: A Case Study

On Why Students Drop Out

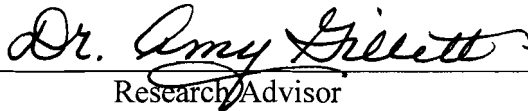
by

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A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Dr. Amy Gillett". The signature is written in a cursive style and is positioned above a horizontal line.

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the factors involved in why students drop out of school. It proposes that students don't just decide one day that they are tired of school and stop attending, and that instead, there is a series of events that occur long before the student makes the announcement that he/she is planning to drop out. Through the review of literature and interviews with people who have had the experience of dropping out of school it seeks to discover what the common threads are for those who drop out of school. This study looks at potential causes such as family issues, negative interactions with teachers and other school staff, and the feeling students have of not being connected to school. It provides accounts of personal experiences and literature on these issues and combines this information in an attempt to identify what happens in the educational experiences of students to cause them to drop out of school.

After looking at the possible causes of why students decide to drop out of school, this study offers recommendations for educators to assist in alleviating these causes. It concentrates on the difficulties of adolescent youth in middle school which is where this researcher believes the drop out process is likely to begin. It offers ideas to identify the “at risk” students and possibilities to stop the process while in its early stages or to prevent it from starting.

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Chapter I: Introduction

According to the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) statistics, there has not been a significant change in the high school dropout rate in Wisconsin since the 1970's. In the 1969-1970 school year, the dropout rate was 4.68%. In the 2002-2003 school year it was at 8.17%. It has fluctuated over the years but the best school year for Wisconsin in terms of the least amount of dropouts was the 1970-1971 when the dropout rate was 3.67%. Although the most recent data shows slight improvement, the worst years were 1998- 2002 when the dropout rate averaged 10%. During those school years, that equated to 26,412 students not finishing high school (Department of Public Instruction Website, 2002-2003, n.p.).

Wisconsin State Statute 118.15 (n.d., n.p.) is the compulsory school attendance law and it states:

(1)(a) Except as provided under pars. (b) to (d) and sub. (4), unless the child is excused under sub. (3) or has graduated from high school, any person having under control a child who is between the ages of 6 and 18 years shall cause the child to attend school regularly during the full period and hours, religious holidays excepted, that the public or private school in which the child should be enrolled is in session until the end of the school term, quarter or semester of the school year in which the child becomes 18 years of age.

The exceptions mentioned are those agreements between the parents and the school that the child will attend an alternative program to obtain an equivalent degree to

the high school diploma. Just as there is a law specifying that all children must receive an education, there is also a section of that statute that describes the consequences to the children and the parents of children who violate this law. They are as follows in Wisconsin State Statute 118.15 (5) (n.d., n.p.)

(a.) For the first offense, by a fine of not more than \$500 or imprisonment for not more than 30 days or both. b. For a 2nd or subsequent offense, by a fine of not more than \$1,000 or imprisonment for not more than 90 days or both. 2. The court may require a person who is subject to sub d. 1. to perform community service work for a public agency or a nonprofit charitable organization in lieu of the penalties specified under sub d. 1. Any organization or agency to which a defendant is assigned pursuant to an order under this subdivision acting in good faith has immunity from any civil liability in excess of \$25,000 for any act or omission by or impacting on the defendant. (am) The court may order any person who violates this section to participate in counseling at the person's own expense or to attend school with his or her child, or both.

This appears to send a pretty clear indicator that schools and the courts have the authority and jurisdiction to ensure that students are not able to drop out, yet in the 2002-2003 school year 5,626 students did (Department of Public Instruction, 2003-2003, n.p.).

There has been a fair amount of study done on what causes a child to drop out. It is theorized that there are five major factors that are demographically significant to the dropout rate. They are, poverty, race or ethnicity, configuration of family, parental education, limited proficiency in English (Nowicki, Duke, Sisney, Stricker, & Tyler, 2004). Teen pregnancy is also considered a high risk factor (Wassef, Ingham, Lassiter

Collins, & Mason, 1995) as well as grade retention (Jimerson & Kaufman, 2003). Some proactive programs have been developed to address youth at risk of dropping out, but most of what is available seems to be limited to academic function, involvement in extracurricular activities, and drug and alcohol use. For example, there are documented studies that participation in school extra-curricular activities reduced the risk of a student dropping out particularly during the early high school years. This positive effect was especially found in lower income blue collar families and males (Barber, Eccles, Hunt, & Stone, 2003). There is also evidence that students who don't participate in extra-curricular activities are at greater risk of dropping out (Quiroz, 2000). These studies don't address why students may not be involved in the activities that could reduce their risk or how to encourage and assist these youth to become involved. Other studies link the use of drugs and alcohol to student dropout (Wassef et al., 1995). The message is clear, but there is little that addresses or attempts to identify why there is non-participation in extra-curricular activities or the possible reasons for drug and alcohol use with these youth or ways to alleviate them. The key, then, to prevent school dropouts is to gain an understanding as to why students drop out of school. Because it is affected by direct as well as indirect factors, more research needs to be done with respect to individual dropouts and their perceptions as to what went wrong in their school experience. It is a complex undertaking that includes examining the influences such as family, school, and community. Dropping out of school should be viewed as a process rather than an event that happens over a long period of time therefore intervention and prevention strategies must be developed to address the problem on multiple levels (Stanard, 2003).

Statement of the Problem

The purpose of this study is to document the personal stories of adults who have dropped out of high school and the commonalities shared. Data will be collected through interviews conducted in the spring of 2006 in Western Wisconsin. The questions will be asked and recorded by this researcher.

Research questions

The questions that will be addressed will be what were their relationships with peers, family situation, academic standing, and behaviors during the time described. Also included in this study will be questions pertaining to their perceptions of school staff support including teachers, counselors, and administration. Other questions that will need to be asked to conduct this study will address participants' perceptions as to when they emotionally began dropping out and what was going on in their personal, social, and academic life at that time. Was there anything they feel that could have prevented their leaving school and, if so, was it within the school's capabilities to provide that service or support? What do they feel is the primary reason they left and the circumstances that led up to it? This study will also cover self esteem issues at that time and if there were any adults within the school setting who helped or hindered them. Since the participants will be adults who have been out of the school setting for at least one year, they will be asked to reflect on what they now think may have changed the outcome for them, if anything. And finally, are they still satisfied with their decision.

Method of Research

Interviewees will be volunteers willing to share personal experiences and information regarding many aspects of their life at the time before and during their decision to drop out of school. Participants will be sought out in the community and will

not be eligible for any other reason than having dropped out of high school. Interviews will be conducted in a private setting of the interviewee's choice.

The skills required for this method are the interviewer's ability to listen and accurately record information given by the participants. It is also important that the instrument created provides enough relevant information to gain a clear picture of what the dropouts themselves feel led to the demise of furthering their education.

Definition of Terms

For better understanding and clarity of the issues, the following terms are defined.

Abuse defined in Wisconsin State Statute 48.02 (1) (n.d., n.p.) as: (a) Physical injury inflicted on a child by other than accidental means. **(14g)** "Physical injury" includes but is not limited to lacerations, fractured bones, burns, internal injuries, severe or frequent bruising or great bodily harm.

Dropout for the purpose of this paper the term dropout will be the definition as set forth by Wisconsin State Statute 118.153 (n.d, n.p.) (b) which reads: "Dropout" means a child who ceased to attend school, does not attend a public or private school, technical college or home-based private educational program on a full-time basis, has not graduated from high school and does not have an acceptable excuse under s. 118.15 (1) (b) to (d) or (3).

Neglect defined in Wisconsin State Statute 48.13 (10) (n.d, n.p.): Whose parent, guardian or legal custodian neglects, refuses or is unable for reasons other than poverty to provide necessary care, food, clothing, medical or dental care or shelter so as to seriously endanger the physical health of the child.

Assumptions

It is the assumption of this case study that all of the risk factors identified in current research are accurate and useful information in recognizing a student at risk of becoming a dropout. The prime assumption, however, is that identifying risk factors and trying to alleviate them is not enough to reduce the dropout rate. There are many other issues that can only come from those who had the experience that need to be considered and addressed if we are going to create meaningful interventions for those students at risk. These ex-students can provide information such as support, or lack thereof, from teachers, counselors, administration, and others in the school who could have had an impact on their decision or could have made a difference in their decision

Limitations

There are several limitations which are apparent in this research. First, the instrument being used has no measure of reliability or validity established because it was designed for this study. There are few participants so such a small sample may not be reflective of the population as a whole. And finally, this study is reliant on the honesty of the individual, with no means to document the accuracy of the statements given.

Chapter II: Literature Review

The consequences for a student who drops out of high school can be severe and can have lasting individual and social effects. High school dropouts overwhelmingly tend to work at low paying jobs earning less than \$13,000 per year (Smith, 1997). The high cost of high school dropouts is not just the problem of the individual. The cost of social services, lost wages and taxes alone is \$250 million in the United States. Fifty-three percent of welfare recipients, 82% of the prison population, and 85% of juvenile justice cases are high school dropouts (Stanard, 2003). Involvement in drugs and alcohol plays a major role in the dropout rate and in the effects of dropping out. The problem of substance abuse is a major factor in the dropout rate, but it is also believed the unfulfilling standard of living one faces after becoming a dropout, contributes to substance abuse and the cycle continues. In San Diego it was indicated that 3 out of every 4 arrests involved drugs and alcohol in adults and youth. In Wisconsin, 80% of the 5,000 inmates released from prison in 1998 were addicted to drugs or alcohol (Reilly & Cassell 2002).

Despite all the so called progress the school system had been making, there are still thousands of students who drop out each year in Wisconsin. While Wisconsin's statistics on high school dropout rate are not impressive, they are better than the national rate. In 1998 the national graduation rate was only 86%, while Wisconsin's was about 91% (second highest in the nation). In that same year, however, Wisconsin was one of only six states that graduated less than half of its African American students. The four states with the highest graduation rate of white students, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Nebraska, and Iowa, also shared in common that they had the lowest rate of graduating

minority students. It was suggested because these are all predominantly rural white states with concentrated smaller minority and urban populations, that the problem with low graduation rates is really an urban problem (Stanard, 2003). Studies continue to show that drop out rates in urban areas are disproportionately higher to that of the national average (Smith, 1997). “This is especially true in America's public inner city schools where the numbers of students graduating from high school vs. the number of students dropping out of high school are, at best, one to one” (Campbell Dec2003-Jan2004). None of the studies found during the research for this paper addressed or even theorized why this is. Holding at least a high school diploma increases a worker’s chances of earning more money and increases the impact of holding a high non traditional job (Mastracci, 2003).

Many studies and statistics are available on dropout rates throughout the nation but not many of them ask the reasons for students dropping out. “The nationwide graduation rate for 1998 was 74%” (Stanard, 2003). Another study indicates that the dropout rate for students ages 16 to 24 is 11% (Smith, 1997). Although these were conducted by different people using different methods, it does indicate that the dropout rate has increased nationally since 1997. Both statistics provided were fairly consistent with what the Department of Public Instruction reports. Campbell, (2003) contends that while the United States Department of Education is claiming the dropout rate is decreasing, it is actually increasing and this discrepancy can be attributed to the way reporting is now done that may slant the data in favor of a decreased rate.

At the end of many statistical studies there are calls for more research to be done and for schools to be open to new ideas to improve the school system but not much exists. (Stanard, 2003). “Systemic interventions reduce the dropout rate on a large scale

by improving the environmental factors in families, schools, and communities that contribute to the problem. Counselors, serving as advocates for students, can play a leadership role in bringing about these systemic changes (Stanard, 2003). Looking at the problem through a systems approach is imperative to alleviating the problem but it is my belief that we need to focus on other areas of risk factors other than the standard ones that always seem to be the main focus. There are several variables involved in why students drop out. One is “school connectedness.”

“Students who feel connected in their educational environment are less likely to have substance abuse issues or interpersonal conflicts with their peers, exhibit violent behaviors, be truant from school, or engage in risky sexual behavior. They are ultimately less likely to drop out. Conversely, students who feel alienated in their school environment are more likely to exhibit these problems, as well as academic failure, strained relationships in their social and home settings, and deviant peer bonding” (Cho, Hallfors, & Sanchez, 2005).

If that is the case, what then, makes a student feel connected and what are the variables that can change an unconnected student to a connected one?

Cho, Hallfors, and Sanchez (2005), conducted a study on the theory that if at risk students and students considered deviant were placed in groups and assisted in social skills, academics, key life skills, and behavior modification, they would become more involved in their school and with other peers and thus, improve their at risk status. The students were placed in special classrooms which provided a positive environment with the group leader, teacher, fostering a positive peer group culture. This was accomplished by the group leader consistently demonstrating care and concern in interactions with the

group members and each student. The premise for this positive group culture was that it is believed social support would be the motivating factor in positive behavior change. Group members learn to care about each other and establish a climate of trust, which would lead to motivation to change. There were 10- 12 students per class and the class ran for one semester with 55 core lessons and 24 booster lessons. There were 36 designated classes in nine schools in two districts. The outcome was expected to be that the students would decrease school deviance, decrease drug involvement, and increase mood management, which would bring a feeling of connectedness and improved prognosis for graduation achievement.

The study failed to document positive changes. Students showed little improvement in deviance, which was measured in terms of truancy and grade point average improvement, and little difference in anger or other mood management. There was also no significant change in substance involvement or feelings of being connected to their peers or school. Although it appeared as though the study failed in its intent, it provided other very valuable information to help assist in beginning to understand the dropout culture. The students did not bond with others outside their groups to feel connected to the school, they became connected to their groups and continued to feed off one another. It showed that putting like minded individuals together, no matter what the environment, they will encourage in one another the behaviors they are accustomed to. It also showed that “connectedness” is a major variable, but can’t be driven to change by those outside the group (Cho, Hallfors, and Sanchez, 2005).

This study provides a good deal of helpful information in that even though the change expected did not occur, the authors were on the right track in terms of working

toward making students feel connected in the school. If an intervention can help the group as a whole feel connected, then the logical outcome is that the individuals will feel connected and experience more success. Perhaps asking the students what made them feel unconnected and working from that perspective would make a difference. This should not be exclusive to the school environment, but also to the curriculum. “When instruction is unconnected to the students’ interests and ambitions, the students do not perceive a tie to employment or higher education. Because of this, learning is impaired and students lose interest in schooling, eventually becoming labeled as “lazy” or “recalcitrant” (Pena, 1996).

There are those who believe that it is the way children are taught that contributes to why they drop out. The way it usually is in classrooms, is they are set up with a teacher, being the authority figure, and the dutiful students taking in information and completing assignments of reading, writing, arithmetic, and all the areas of general study. The curriculum had been determined by the teachers and the standards creators designed to teach the students what they, the adults, want them to know. There is a feeling among some of the curriculum theorists that learning had become mundane and is not compatible to those with deeper questions or even a desire to know why things are the way they are. Many classrooms are geared with the philosophy that “this is the way it is and don’t ask why, just learn it and accept it.” This, is feared by some, to be a contributor to some of the problems experienced by students, especially those who are already having difficulty. Students need to feel that their opinions and questions matter.

Coming from incredibly diverse backgrounds, with a wide range of knowledge and experience in the world, children enter the still-19th-century institution of

school and immediately become “students” who are handed the menu, not the feast of real learning. Eager at first to acquire more control of adult ways of knowing the world, far too many of them end up like the dropouts, bored with what adults think they ought to know. Because so little of what they learn outside the school has any place *inside* the classroom.”

If this theory has validity, it would explain why children are so enthusiastic in elementary school and lose interest in middle and high school. Without other factors to keep students interested, such as being connected to their school or future goals, there is no reason for them to stay. To truly explore this theory, education curriculum would warrant a second look.

Another factor that has been considered is children who have been held back for low academic achievement. By 1998 Wisconsin was one of the few states that called for the abolishment of social promotion (Jimerson & Kaufman, 2003). Social promotion is not making a student meet grade level performance to move on to the next grade. This was a damaging practice and left many graduates completely illiterate and unable to function independently after high school. Some would say we have moved too far in the other direction and we are retaining too many students without providing the assistance to ensure the future success of the student. This is an issue which warrants further exploration. Jimerson and Kaufman’s study suggests students who were retained were 2 to 11 times more likely to drop out of high school than those of similar academic performance but promoted. It identified grade retention as an early predictor variable and, in fact, the single most significant predictor of a student dropping out later in high school (2003). This is in accordance with the idea that no student wishes to continue with high

school after their peer group has left because of embarrassment and loneliness and an overall feeling of disconnectedness.

Research conducted by Barber, Eccles, Hunt, and Stone supports the theory that students have a greater chance of graduating if they are involved in extracurricular activities (2003). Reilly and Cassel (2000) believe competitive sports, band and chorus, art, student government, and other activities foster honesty, sense of fairness, emotional maturity, leadership development and the sense of belonging and connectedness that has been a common theme throughout this research. It is suggested that students involved in these activities are not only less likely to drop out of school but are less prone to criminal and high risk behavior. They have an increased grade point average, interpersonal competence, self confidence, school engagement, and educational aspirations (Barber, Eccles, Hunt, & Stone, 2003). Students who are involved in extracurricular activities are much less likely to engage in activities that are detrimental to their future education, less likely to dropout (Smith, 1997).

Sports participation has been linked to lower likelihood of school dropout and higher rates of college attendance especially in lower income blue collar athletes (Barber, Eccles, Hunt, & Stone, 2003). Student centered high schools will focus on directing the potential problem student to extracurricular activities before the student becomes officially at risk. These activities consist of competitive sports, school spirit, activities to develop team membership to experience a feeling of honesty, belonging, and fair play. School activities should not be for the select few but a part of everyone's high school experience (Cassel & Reilly, 2000).

Having a sufficient amount of support is another factor that is a good predictor of whether a student will continue his or her education. Wassef, Collins, Ingram, and Mason, (1995) indicated social support and resources are factors that affect the health and well being of students and those who experience support have better social interactions and rates of success especially in the educational setting.

One disturbing prediction is the fallout of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) initiative. Due to the difficulty of the testing and keeping up it is feared by Mathis that students may opt to leave school rather than have to measure up to the new standards (2003). Although it is too early to determine, some studies have indicated that those students subjected to eighth grade testing are more likely to drop out by tenth grade. There is also some anecdotal evidence suggesting that due to the strict criteria for the schools, schools may want to increase the minimum scores to encourage (or provide subtle incentives for) a student to drop out. In effect, “the more intense the consequences to get high results, the more likely the system is to game the rules to show better results” (Mathis, 2003 p. 157). Simply teaching children will have little effect if they return to bad neighborhoods, home environment, foster care, inadequate health care, and general lack of support. We can’t expect students to meet such high standards without other support systems in place. This may cause more problems and higher risk of failure for the at risk student.

Many of the factors presented were that of researchers studying groups of individuals based on the circumstances of the individual and on their own observations, perceptions, and interpretations into this problem. Some are the outcome of researching others’ work and conclusions reached by the author’s readings. There was one, however,

Quiroz (2000), who did what this thesis will do and that was ask the dropout directly what happened. The dropouts interviewed addressed and identified other issues not mentioned in other studies. Bad grades and family matters were both at about 39%, of the reasons for dropping out, while being over 18 was at 33% (this could have resulted from being retained), 29% indicated work responsibilities, and 24% stated teacher problems. When asked the best things about school, they indicated socialization, teachers, counselors, and sports. The worst things about schools were gang violence, boring and uncaring teachers and overcrowded classrooms. Over 99% thought learning was important (Quiroz, 2000).

The direct interview research is quite different from the other studies. Teachers are never a factor in the studies mentioned previously, but are both the best and worst factors for the dropouts interviewed. It also indicated the setting and operation of the schools were important factors for dropouts, yet it was not addressed in the other studies. Literature on the subject seems to be indicating that if we are going to try and alleviate this problem, there needs to be attention to both bodies of information and attempt to combine them into the information to be used to formulate a plan.

In addition to the many factors already mentioned as to possible reasons students drop out, authors of these studies offer many others that were not explored as in depth but were thought important enough to mention. Those factors are students living in urban areas (Standard, 2003), truancy and delinquency (Cho, Hallfors, & Sanchez, 2005), emotional distress and behavior problems (Wassef et al, 1995), minority status and single parent family (Nowicki et al, 2005), and low socioeconomic status of the family, level of

schooling of same gender parent, and teen pregnancy (Dunn, Chambers, & Rabren, 2004).

While there are conflicting factors, there are also similarities to draw from to continue to investigate causes and work out solutions. One aspect that is true to both is that all factors found to be present in dropouts are not one time events or quitting on the spur of the moment, but processes that occurred and built over time. As stated by Stanard (2003), “dropping out should be viewed as a process not an event”. With more time and attention paid to students over the course of their career in school, the problem could be alleviated as none of the reasons left students with only the choice of dropping out. It seems more that these students went unchecked for some time.

Chapter III: Case Studies

The following are case studies of four individuals who have dropped out of high school for various reasons. They were interviewed by this researcher to find commonalities of their experiences before and during the time of their dropping out. They were volunteers found in the community who were willing to share their stories in the interest of possibly gaining more in depth, specific information to gain a better understanding of factors explaining why students drop out. They were all asked the same questions in their interviews and given opportunity to answer whatever topics they felt comfortable. The participants chosen were between the ages of 19 and 27 to get a variation of ages, but close enough so the information provided would not be outdated. Their names have been changed for confidentiality purposes.

Interview with "James"

James is a 26 year-old who is currently working as a security person for an automated teller machine company. He has been enrolled in four colleges and says he has almost enough credits to have a math degree of some kind and definitely has his generals done, but only so many credits will transfer. James is considering enrolling in school again and feels now that he is older and settled down, he will be more likely to succeed. His only problem right now is that he doesn't know what he wants to be. He wants to be several things, yet nothing. He has the aptitude and motivation, but can't narrow it down or find anything that really interests him. He owes thousands of dollars in student loans that his mother continues to pay. He is considering becoming a math teacher, but doesn't want to deal with the kids today. He says although he had his issues,

he would never have gotten into a teacher's face like they do today. He said, "we were just potheads, we weren't deadbeats that they are today."

James' overall experience with school was positive. He attended a parochial school from kindergarten through 8th grade and although it was very strict, he enjoyed it. Right up until the time he dropped out, he had exceptional relationships with his peers. James said he got along with everyone and even in the short time he attended high school, he remembers that all the students in his class seemed to get along. He never felt he wasn't "part of the group." James reported that he had some difficulty when he first went to a public school as a freshman. He was way ahead of the other students and became bored. He was tested and put into classes with juniors and felt out of place for awhile. After they quit teasing him, the "druggies" explained to him they needed someone to sell marijuana to the other freshmen and to fit in, he agreed to be that person. While selling it he began to use it himself.

This was a difficult time in James' life. His father had committed suicide two years prior to his attending public school and hadn't dealt with that. The suicide occurred at home and his brother had found him. The family had never even really talked about it and his mother had a great deal of guilt over the life they now had and tried to compensate for what they were missing by never disciplining them. James had no guidance from home but for the two years prior, he was at the parochial school where, as James put it, "they won't let you fail." The public school didn't seem to care what he did, so he did as he pleased. James came from a small town, so everyone at the school knew what he had been through, but no one ever spoke about it with him. He said he didn't see the counselor unless he was in the class or when he eventually dropped out.

James had no physical acting out behaviors while in school. He had respect for adults and their authority. He admits he had times when he got angry with teachers and would be verbally aggressive, but never used profanity. For the most part, James was a sarcastic student who liked to perform for the other students, which is something the teachers didn't always appreciate. By the time he dropped out, he owed over 400 hours of detention.

There were no staff people who James feels made a positive impact. He is quite neutral about all of the teachers and didn't either really like or dislike any of them except one, his biology teacher. James had personal issues with her due in part to personal family conflicts with one another and his sarcastic nature. These conflicts were eventually the first in the series of events that brought him to the decision to drop out. According to James in his sophomore year, there was a very important project of leaf collection and identification that was assigned. He was ill (with a Dr.'s note) and missed the due date. The project was to be a major portion of the grade and failing that caused him to receive a failing grade in the class. James admits he was not working to his ability in that class and relied too heavily on that project. He also believes her story would differ from his and the truth is most likely somewhere in the middle, but says this is how he perceived it. The failing of this class made him ineligible to continue to play basketball which was devastating to him.

Basketball was very important to him, he was very much part a of the team and it was his connection to the school. After being suspended from playing, James began to use marijuana more and more frequently. He loved playing and it was the only thing that was keeping him in school up to that point. To add to his frustration, he and his mother

took the issue and the doctor's note to the administration at the school and he felt as though they were just looking for an excuse to get rid of him and said that although he was ill, he still had plenty of time to do the project and turn it in on time. After that James began smoking marijuana on a daily basis. He was also increasing his selling of it and skipping school. He would attend about one or two classes a day and the detentions began accumulating. He refused to serve the detentions and received in-school suspensions. He left the public school and went back to a parochial school for his junior year.

Going to a new school did not solve James' desire to "be free" from the confines of the classroom. He believed they were trying to get rid of him from the day he started and that they saw him as an "undesirable" and didn't try to hide that fact. He was very uncomfortable there and although he did very well for about three months, he quit trying to, as he puts it, "impress the unimpressable" and started the same behaviors he had at the public school. He started using and selling marijuana and skipping school on a daily basis. When he failed his first class, the school reminded him that they have a no fail policy and therefore he would no longer be attending that school. This occurred about half-way through the year, so James took the rest of the year off. He had never felt comfortable enough to try out for that basketball team, so he didn't really care when he couldn't go to school there.

The next year was his senior year and he tried to return to the public school. He wanted to try again and took the ACT over the summer. He received a score of 28 and felt he should return and try to take it more seriously. He found he couldn't. He quickly became bored with it and began his old behaviors again. At this time, he started getting

into cocaine and used it weekly. He continued using marijuana on a daily basis, but had little interest in alcohol. After a short time he spoke with the school counselor. The counselor told him it would take him two years of serious school to graduate or he could attend the Technical Institute and get a High School Equivalency Diploma (HSED). To James, this was an easy decision, so he left high school and did what he wanted to do: hang out.

After James turned 18 he considered the consequences of his lifestyle and the realization of going to prison for using and selling drugs became his motivation to quit. After the drugs stopped, he went and earned his HSED. He is still on recreational softball, basketball, and football teams.

James does not feel the school failed him in any way except when no one assisted him with the biology teacher. He feels if someone would have showed some faith in him, it may have made a difference, but he also says it may not have worked because of his stubbornness and boredom with school. Basketball was a big motivator for him, but he assumes responsibility for his behavior. He believes it is the parents' responsibility to keep their kids in school, not the school's. He doesn't blame his mother either, however, he was too strong willed and took advantage of the family situation and his mother's guilt and was uncontrollable. She still supports any decision he makes and helps him financially.

When asked what he would tell someone who was contemplating quitting school, he said he would try to talk them out of it and let them know that no good comes of it. He did indicate, however, that he wouldn't try too hard because when kids gets an idea in their head, they don't listen to anyone. He certainly wouldn't have. If he had it to do over

again and have the knowledge he has now, he would stay in school and become valedictorian. His children will go to a parochial school and will not be allowed to get behind in the first place and if at all possible, will be in extracurricular activities.

Interview with "Braxton"

Braxton is a 23 year old who currently works in construction. He drives the vehicles, buries cable, and does some heavy machine operation. He likes the money, but is worried that it is not enough to support a family and it is back breaking work that one can't do forever without having problems later on in life. He has a child and wants to be able to make enough to have a decent life. Braxton has hope that he will be able to attend a technical college in the near future, but his girlfriend is attending one and one of them has to maintain employment to support them. He feels he will make more money if he could get more education. He also has to live with the fear that his employer will find out he was a high school drop out. His employer believes he graduated from high school and he is afraid he would be fired if he found out. When he gets an associate degree, having a high school diploma will no longer be an issue.

For as long as Braxton can remember, he loved school. He enjoyed the sports, his peers, and everything about it. He thought it was just plain fun. He had great friends who were, as he put it, amazing and stuck by him through everything. He had a close knit class and, for the most part, everyone seemed to get along.

Braxton had a very difficult family life from a young age. He has never met his father and he witnessed his step father abusing his mother from first grade through seventh. He watched her get black eyes, broken bones, and even hospitalizations for internal injuries. They were also alcoholics and drug abusers, so they never had enough

money, even though his mother always had at least two jobs. She worked all the time and when she was home, she was drunk and getting beaten up. After his mother finally divorced him, Braxton thought life would get better, but his mother's "party girl" lifestyle made life difficult in a whole new way. He then has to get used to boyfriends coming and going all the time and getting confused as to who was who. There was no more abuse to witness, but he never got the mom he wanted or needed. His mother had another son by one of her boyfriends and he had a lot of emotional problems that added to the chaos in the family. Even now, Braxton's mother is out a lot and has problems with relationships and therefore can't offer him any assistance with his life.

Because of the chaos at home, Braxton had some issues at school. He was an average student, but had somewhat of an attitude problem. He didn't like authority and had difficulty not speaking his mind about everything. He was never physically aggressive. After watching his mother being so badly abused, he decided to never hit another person and hasn't. He was sent to the principal's office often and one teacher would not allow him into the classroom. He had a desk in the hall and the teacher would bring his assignments out to him to avoid having him start a verbal confrontation in the presence of the other students. He was allowed in the class about once a week. Oddly enough, this was the teacher he liked the most. He wouldn't tolerate Braxton's behaviors. Braxton thought he was a cool guy who actually cared about him. They talked after class and he would help Braxton any time he needed it.

The teacher who he liked the least was his U.S. History teacher. This teacher had no idea how to teach and only managed to confuse Braxton and didn't offer any help to those who weren't succeeding in his class. There was also a teacher who had a very

negative impact on him. She belittled him in front of the class when he asked a question out of turn and she turned to him and yelled, “put your head down, I’m not going to call on you and I never will!” This was a memorable moment for Braxton that still makes him uneasy when he talks about it.

He had other teachers who would tolerate his behavior and his lack of motivation and, to some extent, his ability, by passing him even though they maybe shouldn’t have. One of these teachers was also his football coach. Braxton was an important player on the team and they didn’t want to lose him. The coach had told him if he could keep his mouth shut, he would pass him. In the end, this was not helpful to him at all. This occurred when he was in ninth grade and he ended up failing classes later on that may not have happened if more would have been expected of him earlier in his education.

The school counselor was the staff member who made the most positive impact on him. The counselor made him feel important and always had time for him. His health teacher also took extra time with him and offered extra help when he needed it. There were teachers and other staff who had both positive and negative effects on Braxton. Both types of effects made a lasting impression with him. These were the people he looked to for guidance and acceptance because there was not much of that at home for him.

He used marijuana and alcohol about 2-3 times per week, but didn’t skip school much and cut way back during football and basketball season because he didn’t want to take any chances. In his junior year, he was caught using alcohol and was suspended from football. He was so upset, he took it to the school board and won. There was a flaw in the wording of the code that said a student would be suspended if caught using any

drugs or alcohol within six months of playing. He told them this was his understanding and since it was out of the six month period that he actually obtained the underage drinking ticket, he was not suspended, but they changed the code because of it. This is how much football meant to him. After that he knew there would be no tolerance for him so he cut way back on his use of alcohol and drugs and used them about every two or three months.

Braxton stayed involved in football, basketball, and track until he failed U.S. History his senior year and not only was he ineligible to play, he learned he was not going to graduate. He was devastated and there was nothing he could do. He had no warning that this was coming and felt blindsided by this news. He had planned to finish up the season, had hopes for playing college football, and did not want to leave school, but he knew he couldn't stay in school another semester because he had to start supporting himself. He had broken, and still holds many school records. He dropped out. He found out later there are correspondence studies students can do to graduate if they are only short a few credits. He would have been more than willing to do this and was disappointed that no one in the school had looked into this to help him. Although he is angry with himself, he is disappointed with many of the school staff who he thought had really cared, but evidently didn't. Even today he can hardly watch his school's football team because of the loss he feels he suffered. He feels he not only lost out on his last year of high school, football, and prom, but a possible college education and the self confidence that could have provided, not to mention, the life he would have now.

If a person he cared about were contemplating dropping out, he would tell them it would be the biggest mistake of his/her life. He truly regrets it and wishes he had it to do

over. If he could go back, he would apply himself more and make sure he paid attention to his grades and not worry so much about having fun. He truly regrets his attitude of just getting by to remain in sports when he could have done so much better and it ended up failing him. He would even just stay the extra semester, no matter how inconvenient it would be, it would be more than worth it.

Interview with "Lisa"

Lisa is a 21 year-old who is currently an assistant manager of a small motel. She has had no formal training for this position, but has worked her way up to it. She started as a waitress in the small café attached to the motel when she was sixteen years old. She has been dating her manager since she started working for him. She has no desire to finish school and is hoping to marry her 45 year-old boyfriend. The motel owners live out of town and her responsibilities are to make everything run smoothly at the motel and do the housekeeping. During the busy season she hires another housekeeper to assist her. Lisa is satisfied with her life and feels if she had finished school she would have wasted two years that were spent making a life for herself.

Lisa enjoyed school very much as a child and did very well. Her parents were divorced when she was eight and she lived with her mother. Her father took off for awhile, but came back into her life when she was 13 years-old. She remembers enjoying elementary school and doesn't have one bad memory of those years at school. Her teachers always told her mother that she was not living up to her potential, but never really spoke with her about it. In 6th grade things changed for her. She had a teacher who she developed a crush on and tried to do well in his classes and look her best. Her family was poor very poor; her mother only had a high school education and when she worked,

which wasn't often, they were minimum wage jobs. She didn't have the nice clothes that her friends and the other kids at her school did. Lisa remembers the hardest part for her at that time was that when her parents were married, they had some money and when her dad left, they stayed in the nice neighborhood, but were the poorest in it.

Lisa remembers falling behind in school in about 5th grade. She was just unable to concentrate on school because her home life was so bad. Her mother blamed her for the divorce and said her dad left Lisa because he hated her and got a new daughter.

Everything started to go downhill and one day while in "Mr. Wonderful's" class he began talking about kids who get into trouble in 7th and 8th grade and how he could tell already who the trouble makers were going to be. He made no attempt to hide it from her or the rest of the class that he was referring to her. She was crushed. She knew he favored the well dressed, popular kids, but never knew he felt so negatively about her. Shortly after this incident she wrote very derogatory remarks about him on the walls in the girl's bathroom and didn't spare any of the profanity she had been learning. This was the first in a long line of trouble Lisa would experience. She was always bothered by the fact that no one really noticed how she went from such a good student to such a bad one in a short period of time. She was in a small personal school during her K-5th grade years and went to a large school where many schools were combined for middle school. She remembers feeling lost, but also having a sense of knowing she could get away with a great deal more there than at her old school.

Lisa's home life became much worse at this time as well. Her mother had no idea Lisa was doing so poorly at school and Lisa feels she wouldn't really have cared anyway. She may have gotten grounded a few more times, but her mother wouldn't have done

anything to help her, she couldn't, she had her own troubles. Her mother began dating different men who seemed to want nothing but sex. She was hanging out in taverns, spending money on clothes for herself, and changing her hair color monthly. Lisa said there were times she didn't even recognize her. By the time Lisa was in 7th grade, her mother was no longer able to keep their home and they lived in an old run down apartment in the downtown area. It was small and the walls were quite thin. Lisa remembers hearing her mother and her mother's boyfriends having sex and would pound on the wall to get them to be quiet, but it never worked. Finally in 8th grade her mother bought her a loud stereo that she would turn up to drown out the noise. She was not doing well in school, but she was told by her counselor she was a candidate for the Work Experience and Career Exploration Program (WECEP). She got so excited and felt this would be the answer to her problems. She would get money to help get the things she needed and the motivation to keep up with school if she only had to attend her core classes. Unfortunately she was chosen as an alternate and therefore would only get a job and the help she needed if someone else flunked out. Because she knew this was a rare occurrence, she quit trying, failed a few classes, and was removed from the alternate list.

Lisa had many friends and was quite popular. She had the nice clothes she always wanted because she discovered shoplifting. She also discovered marijuana and alcohol around this time and used it on the weekends and occasionally during the week. Lisa had never been good at sports, but in her 8th grade year she found she had a real talent for basketball. Her gym teacher was also the girls coach and kept asking her to join the team. Lisa wanted to, but her friends would never have accepted it. She even thought she might want to get on the team and start associating with the "jocks" and turn things around, but

knew that her mother would never be able to get her the jersey, shoes, etc. that she would need. Even if that weren't a problem, due to shoplifting, she had no way to get to practice or games. Lisa gave up on the idea and when the gym teacher would ask her, she would just laugh at her in front of her friends and act as though she had no interest. She was smoking cigarettes on a regular basis as well.

Lisa still can't emphasize enough how much she disliked her teachers at her middle school. She said, "The ones that weren't outrightly mean were just cold and uncaring." No one ever pulled her aside and asked why she was doing so poorly or even acknowledged her existence. She had never been disrespectful, she was too scared, but one teacher who had not said one word to her during her entire 8th grade year told her he had never been happier to see anyone leave his class. Her math teacher had just made rude comments all year and embarrassed her in front of the class almost weekly. Most of her problems with her teachers were simply that she never had her work done and didn't know the answers to questions so they would keep asking and then make comments like, "well then, why are you even here?" or "why don't you just go out in the hall and pick a fight so you can get expelled and save us all some time?" Lisa had truly had it and the only reason she attended was because there was no where else to go. Her father had limited involvement in her life because she and her mother did not want him to know how poorly she was doing. He offered that she come live with him, he didn't know about the boyfriends or he would have insisted, but Lisa declined the offer. Things were bad with her mother, but she could do whatever she wanted whenever she wanted and wasn't about to give that up to live with someone who would actually parent her.

Lisa's mother moved her again, only this time to a new school for her freshman year. She thought she could start over and still wanted to do well. She fell into the same type of crowd right away and although she wanted to try out for the basketball team, she was afraid she wouldn't make it because she was so far behind. She eased off the drugs and alcohol a bit and associated with some good students, but eventually the noise at home got to her and she was skipping school and not doing school work. Her mother had been with the same man for almost a year, but he started making inappropriate comments to her sexually and when Lisa told her mother, she told Lisa to get a sense of humor, that he was only kidding. Lisa stayed away from home as much as possible after that. Lisa always had somewhere else she could be. She was older now and had many friends, many who drove and she dated older boys. She didn't have any problems with teachers at this school, which made her feel somewhat better. They just failed her quietly. Lisa earned only 1.5 credits her freshman year.

For her sophomore year, Lisa's mom moved her to yet another school district in yet another run down apartment. Lisa said she didn't even unpack because she knew they would be evicted soon. They had moved three times that year, but stayed in the same school district. This time it was another new school. This was the year Lisa really began using marijuana. She used it daily and she used alcohol at least three times per week. She didn't attend any classes her first quarter. Once the truancy issue caught up with her, she began attending classes regularly and realized she had some great teachers. She began doing homework and trying in class and to her amazement got a "B" in science and history and nothing lower than a "C-." Lisa's history and science teachers told her she was smart and they talked to her like they liked her; she was amazed and really happy.

Her happiness was short lived because when she realized she would never graduate with her class due to her major shortage of credits, she knew it was over for her. Her mother already refused to buy her anything but food, which was minimal, and shelter.

Everything else was her responsibility and she was going to have to pay rent or get out at 18. She couldn't afford that without going an extra year. She resumed her partying and gave up on school.

During the summer after her sophomore year, Lisa went to Wisconsin Dells with a friend because she heard there was money to be made there. She got the job as a waitress and met her current boyfriend. When the summer was over she decided to stay and to avoid getting into trouble, her mother told the school she was moving to be with her dad, moved to another apartment, and that was the end of Lisa's education. She began living with her boyfriend and her mother gave her blessing on that as well.

Lisa still believes she did the only thing she could have under the circumstances. She does still wish she would have been able to play basketball and had teachers like the ones at her last school. She believes that given her circumstances and how far behind she got, continuing with school would have wasted her time and she wouldn't have gotten the valuable experience she did to get the job she has now. Looking back, her only regret is not trying harder in middle school, but then says she just couldn't have done better at that time. She would have liked to have been in a foster home or even with her dad, but she was too immature and liked the freedom at the time. As for the advice she would give to a potential dropout, Lisa says she would tell them to try to stay in school, but do what feels right because a person can do well even if they drop out as long as they work hard and set a goal.

At the time of the interview Lisa was content that she would keep her job until retirement and knew there was nothing more out there for a high school dropout. Three weeks after this interview she made the announcement that she had enrolled herself in a technical school to get her GED or HSED and possibly an associate degree in something. She said the interview made her remember that semester in school that she did well after not having done anything for a year. She remembered the sense of accomplishment and how good she felt when the teachers were proud of her and she was proud of herself. She is excited to see where it will take her. When asked if her advice to a potential dropout had changed, she replied, "Ask me next year."

Interview with "Moriah"

Moriah is a 20 year-old who recently obtained her HSED and is currently working full-time providing care for three persons with developmental disabilities. She has been doing this for over a year and enjoys it a great deal. She is getting pressure from her mother to further her education and was planning to go to college but feels she needs to wait until the time is right and is happy where she is at now. She says she is content with her life and doesn't have a need to change it now, but believes she will want to in time. Her job doesn't require any secondary school training and pays \$8.23 an hour. Moriah says this is not enough to sustain her long term and knows if she is to advance her career, she will need to either go to a Technical College or University. Her desire is to expand on what she is already doing, working with persons with developmental disabilities, or begin working with adolescents with Emotional Behavioral Disorder (EBD) who are in the court system. She is hoping to get her degree in Social Work so she would have the option of both. She is athletic and plays on recreational volleyball and basketball teams

which is a major accomplishment for her. Moriah has satisfying friendships that she describes as healthy and none of them were known to her in high school.

Moriah started out, as many do, excited about going to school and was eager to do well. She had many friends and remembers loving her teachers. When she was in 6th grade her mother decided to get her masters degree and they moved to Madison. Moriah took a little time to get acclimated into her new surroundings, but once she did, she adjusted well and found it to be as good, if not better, than her previous school. Although her school and friends situation was great, the move to Madison had a negative impact on her relationship with her father. She was only visiting him once a month, if she was lucky, and began having conflicts with her step mother and half-sister. Moriah's parents were never married and her father had a child, her half-sister, with her step mother around the same time she was born, so her half-sister was her age. This had not really been an issue for her until she and her mother moved to Madison. Moriah began exhibiting symptoms of depression around this time and doesn't know if it was her depression that caused the problems with her father and her step-family or if the problems contributed to the onset of the depression, but either way they fed into one another and she began having serious difficulties.

In the beginning of her 7th grade year she felt she was emotionally falling apart and the only positive aspects of her life were her school experiences and peer relationships. Moriah began "cutting." Cutting is the form of self-mutilation in which the sufferer uses sharp objects to cut themselves on various parts of the body. The purpose varies by individual, but for Moriah, it was to relieve the pressure and stress she was feeling. She preferred to cut on her arms, but would also cut on her legs to keep it a secret

from her mother. Unfortunately, her step-brother was the one to notice it first. He began calling her crazy, told her father and step-mother and they reacted badly. Instead of offering help, they further distanced themselves from her and everything that went wrong in their lives became her fault. What made matters worse was her half-sister was an excellent student, was very popular and was, in Moriah's terms, perfect. This started a rivalry between them that continues even now. Although Moriah's mother stood by her no matter what and offered unconditional love, the abandonment by her father at that time was what she focused on. Her cutting became very problematic and she had to wear long sleeves even in the summer. Up to this point, the end of 7th grade, no one at school had noticed a problem, although her grades had dropped significantly.

Moriah's fight with depression, cutting, and family issues began affecting her at school in 8th grade. It was not just that her problems were affecting her at school, but that negative experiences in school made the other issues worse. Her mother graduated and they were moving back to Eau Claire, but when she came back, she found things had changed. Her friends were no longer fun, carefree, and nice to be with as they were before she left. They had become consumed with their social status, clothes they wore, and who fit into what clique. Moriah's mother had just gotten her degree and they had been struggling financially for quite sometime, but it didn't seem to matter to her friends in Madison. In Eau Claire it mattered and she found herself not fitting in with her old friends. She had to start over, but to make matters worse, the people who meant so much to her just two years prior, were now treating her as though they never knew her.

During 8th grade Moriah began associating with the kids who got into trouble and began to hate having to go to school. Her mother was strict, so she couldn't really be with

them much, so she became a loner. Her grades were so bad she was put into WECEP. It is a program where students who are struggling can work outside of school and only attend their core general education classes. It is targeted to those who are in danger of getting so far behind they won't pass classes and not move on to high school. She worked at Burger King and enjoyed it very much and being that one of the stipulations of being in the program was that she had to pass all of her classes, she made sure she did.

With all that seemed to be going wrong for Moriah, one of the things that still affects her even now is the experience she had with how her eighth grade math teacher treated her. Moriah's facial expressions change as she describes how this teacher made her feel and how, especially at that age, it had a negative impact on her self-esteem and her confidence that she was capable of being successful in school. He talked down to her and favored the cute kids with the nice clothes on a regular basis. On one occasion he told her that he had given up on her and that she was not going to pass his class. The only good thing was that she did pass, even if only by a few points.

As a freshman, Moriah began skipping school and only had a few decent friends but even they were getting into trouble and doing things she didn't really want to be a participant in. She kept her job at Burger King, but was no longer in the WECEP program because it was not an option for freshmen. Moriah was in special classes and the friends she had were in the classes with her. She was not in special education classes, but classrooms set for students at risk of failing, but with no learning or other disabilities. She was athletic and had played softball and basketball in her younger years, but had not been able to in Madison due to her mother's schedule. She thought about trying out for softball her sophomore year and although she was quite competent at it, she decided not to

because she was scared, not of not being good enough, but that the other girls on the team wouldn't accept her and it would only make her more miserable and lonely.

Moriah was so disappointed when she would remember herself as a happy child in elementary school. At that time, she loved school and thought high school was going to be so wonderful. It was nothing like she had envisioned it would be. By the end of her sophomore year, she was cutting often and the cutting was not relieving the anxiety and pain as it had so, as many do, began to cut deeper and deeper, many times needing stitches. She was admitted into in-patient treatment in a psychiatric unit at least three times. She began taking medication, but it never seemed to help for a significant time. The problems with her father continued to escalate and although she was in counseling, nothing seemed to help and these problems went to school with her every day. She didn't get into trouble at school except for one fight with a male student who had been harassing her. One day she had enough and punched him in the face in the hallway at school. She was not disciplined for this. She was drinking about three times a week and would do shots of alcohol during lunch and return to school. She smoked marijuana when her friends had it and admits she would have smoked it more, but that it wasn't readily available to her due to her lack of money. She attended school because her mother wouldn't have had it any other way, but she said she was there, but she wasn't there. She was mentally checked out. Moriah barely passed classes her sophomore and junior years, so for her senior year, she was told she had to pass every class with only one study hall in order to graduate.

Moriah had a couple of teachers who she feels really made a difference, but by the time they came along it was too late for her to complete school, but they gave her the

confidence and drive to get her HSED after dropping out. One of these was her gym teacher. Moriah described him as a person who could tell when something was wrong and took the time to ask about it. He had a genuine interest in all the students and didn't favor anyone. She told him about some of her personal issues with friends and he tried to get her to go out for sports. Although she didn't then, it was his words that she feels gave her the confidence to get into the recreational sports teams she currently participating in. Her favorite teacher was her civics teacher. She did her best in that class and passed with an above average grade. This teacher took an interest in Moriah and would tutor her in other classes and was dedicated to helping Moriah graduate. Moriah believes if she had these teachers earlier, she may have tried harder, but by her senior year, she hated going to school so bad, she couldn't get it together. Part of the reason for this was that she was taken out of her special classes that she had been in since her sophomore year. She was, for reasons unknown to her, placed in classes with the general population after having been with the same group of kids and now was even more uncomfortable in class.

By the middle of her senior year, Moriah knew she had no desire to continue to work on graduating, but her counselor was of no help. She, the counselor, kept insisting that Moriah finish out the year and return to school the next year to finish her remaining credits. Moriah was devastated and knew she would never come back to school. The counselor had never really done anything to help her throughout her years at the school. Moriah said, "they were all too busy helping other students with college prep crap." Moriah's mother had to get an attorney to fight for what would be in Moriah's best interest. It was clear she would not graduate with her class and that she would never come back as the counselor and the principal were pushing for and wanted her to agree to

do. Her mother felt the school should provide an alternate education off campus at the local Technical College. She is not clear how it turned out, but she did not attend her high school anymore. She got her HSED some time later, after her class graduated.

Her half-sister graduated from high school with honors and is in college planning to attend graduate school. Moriah has no relationship with her or her father and has difficulty talking about what was the final blow to their relationship: her step-sister's high school graduation party. The party was elaborate and formal, and her father made it clear, at least from Moriah's perspective, that he didn't care what happened to her, but that anything her half-sister desired, she would get, especially her father's love. Once she decided this wasn't going to stop her, she was able to move past it, as much as one can, and move on with her life. She is currently in counseling, on medication, and maintaining her life without cutting, although it will always be a struggle. Her younger half-brother is now having difficulty in school and she talks to him often, trying to keep him in school. She tells him what she would tell anyone who is thinking of quitting: that he should do anything and everything he needs to do to graduate. She tries to show him through her story that it is never worth it to quit and that she would be doing even better than she is now if she had not given up and finished. She also says she would definitely be in sports and be more social if she had it to do over again. If she would have had the counseling and more support back then, she would have made an effort to make more friends. She was too self-conscious and recognizes it was not always everyone else's fault. She takes responsibility for not trying hard enough, even when there were people who supported her but feels if she would have been noticed sooner, she may not have felt so lost. Her mother had a graduation party for her.

Chapter IV: Conclusions and Recommendations

Introduction

This chapter will compare the literature reviewed with the information received from the interviews of the four participants in this study. The commonalities between the personal experiences will be explored and then those will be compared to the literature to determine the common links to students who drop out. Finally, recommendations are discussed for the alleviation of the causes that were most common.

Conclusions

There are many commonalities between the four case studies of the individuals in this study. The first is that all four had some kind of family trauma or difficulty either at the time they were making the decision to drop out of school or sometime before that had not been addressed. Braxton had witnesses the emotional and physical abuse of his mother by his step father for several years while he was quite young. Even after his mother and step father were divorced and the abuse stopped, his mother was not available to him and he was further confused by her many boyfriends who were coming and going in the home. There were times when he couldn't even remember their names. He knew his mother was out at night in the bars and she often didn't come home. For James it was the suicide of his father. That in itself being very traumatic, his mother didn't know how to deal with it, so she opted to ignore it and try to make up for her children's loss by never disciplining them and James had no consistency in his life. Lisa was forced to move often in a very chaotic lifestyle of financial difficulty that led to evictions from apartments and sometimes even having to move to different school districts. She also had

difficulty dealing with her mother's relationships with men. Moriah had been having conflicts with her father and step mother that affected her as well.

Another commonality between all of them was that each of them had a teacher at some point who had a negative impact on their self esteem. For James it was a teacher who wouldn't give him a chance to finish an assignment after being ill and an administration that wouldn't back him up. Braxton had a teacher who made him sit in the hallway for the majority of his time in his class. For Lisa and Moriah there were derogatory comments made to them directly that made it clear the authority figure did not like them. Some of these comments were made in front of their peers which to this day, affects them in a negative way when they talk about it.

All four of these individuals had experiences with drugs and/or alcohol which escalated before they made the decision to drop out. None of them had ever been adjudicated delinquents and were not violent or verbally aggressive toward teacher or their peers. Each of them did admit to having been at least somewhat disrespectful on rare occasions. This is with the exception of James, who was sarcastic and used humor to irritate his teachers. It is also interesting that all four claimed to only use alcohol socially and they all denied any drug use since turning 19. They each expressed a knowledge and concern about the seriousness of drug charges and this was a deterrent for them using them. It should be noted they were informed that all information provided by them was to remain confidential and therefore had no reason to fear being honest about drug use now or in the past and all freely admitted to past drug use.

James, Braxton, Lisa, and Moriah all expressed positive experiences in elementary school and had no bad memories of school or any teachers during that period

of time. All of them, in fact, described themselves as having loved school and looked forward to going there each day. Moriah, Lisa, and Braxton revealed they felt better at school than they did at home. They all did well and had no behavior problems. None of them reported having any feelings of disconnecting until they reached middle or high school.

Moriah was the only one who reported having difficulty with her peers and feeling left out by them. Lisa and Moriah were not in extracurricular activities, but both reported wanting to be at some point during their years at school. James and Braxton were involved in extracurricular activities and reported that it was being involved and close relationships with their peers that had kept them in school for as long as they were. James and Braxton said they gave up on school when the option of being in sports was taken away from them. They both said that if they had it to do over again, they would have tried harder to pass their classes to be able to continue in their sport, which they feel would have led to staying in school and graduating. Lisa and Moriah both said, if given the opportunity to do it over, they would involve themselves in extracurricular activities.

When the information given by the participants is evaluated, there is evidence that supports the literature, that students who drop out of school, often feel “disconnected” from their school. Quiroz (2000) stated in his article that there is evidence that students are more likely to drop out of school if they are not involved in extracurricular activities. Cho, Hallfors, & Sanchez, (2005), supported this notion and found that students who feel alienated are more likely to not only drop out, but engage in behaviors such as, use of drugs and alcohol, truant behaviors, and risky sexual behaviors. Although the sexual behaviors of the four participants were not were not part of this study, the other behaviors

in the studies by Cho, Hallfors, and Sanchez (2005) were addressed. The individuals in this study support the literature that students who drop out are those who, for some reason, did not feel connected to their school. What the literature suggests, but did not directly address, is why they feel disconnected and what other factors may be going on in students' lives affecting their performance in school or their ability to form positive relationships.

The conclusion drawn from the interviews is that they support the literature found on why students drop out of school. Each of the four participants gave information supporting the fact that students who feel disconnected, have a higher likelihood of dropping out. Interestingly, for the four participants, no matter how chaotic their home life was, wanted to go to school when they were in elementary school and did not feel a desire to leave school until either middle or high school. James knew from the time he entered the public school system that the only thing keeping him in school was his basketball. Braxton didn't realize it until it was taken away from him, but it was his connection to his sport, football, that had been keeping him connected and interested in staying in school. The fact that Moriah and Lisa began having a desire to leave school much earlier, when the connection was lost, provides further evidence that this is a major factor in students dropping out.

When Moriah was in Madison, she had friends and was satisfied with her school experience. When she returned to her original school, her friends, or she, had changed and she became lonely and isolated and began detaching from school and her performance deteriorated. Lisa's experience gives another reason for disconnection that was evident in the others' reports, but was not the main issue as it was with her. Lisa had

negative contacts with teachers that had a significant effect on her emotionally which affected her motivation for even trying to succeed. She had friends, but with the numerous occasions in which teachers expressed and exaggerated her inadequacies, she found herself no longer caring enough to put forth much effort. By the time she had a teacher who showed interest and confidence in her ability, it was, in her opinion, too late to begin to make up for lost time and lack of credits to graduate.

While they all had serious family issues that can't be ignored as possible explanations for their problems in school, all but one, Moriah, were experiencing family issues while in elementary school and were still functioning and interested in attending and succeeding at school. Braxton had traumatic family issues during his elementary years, but reported loving school until later. Lisa's chaotic family life was also present from early years in school. Elementary school has an environment that is usually more child-centered and seems to provide a safe haven from the events that transpire in the home, while as students grow into middle and high school, this appears to change from a nurturing and helping environment, to one that demands responsibility and maturity which children from chaotic homes often aren't prepared to handle. Another theme that appeared throughout the interviews was a feeling of favoritism toward the "good" students who were involved in extracurricular activities, got good grades, and didn't challenge teachers' authority in any way.

Braxton and James were, to an extent, in the "good kid" category and even with minor incidents with teachers, felt like they were a part of their school. It was, however, an incident with a teacher that began James' path to leaving school. He liked school before that, but as a result of that incident and the events that followed, he ceased to care

at all about the work of school and was only there to be with his friends and play basketball. When he found he couldn't stay in basketball, he increased his drug use and gave up on school altogether. Braxton was able to pass classes and get by with otherwise unacceptable behavior because of his status as an excellent football player. When the time came that a teacher simply refused to pass him, he was out of football and out of school shortly afterwards. This not only supports the assertion that students who are in extracurricular activities are less likely to drop out of school, but also that teachers play a significant role in how a student can feel and stay connected.

Lisa and Moriah fell out of the good graces of their teachers much earlier than James or Braxton and their process of dropping out began much sooner. Their desire to drop out appears to correlate with negative teacher contact, as it was for James and Braxton, but they did not have anything else to keep them interested in attending. While in 7th and 8th grade respectively, Lisa and Moriah were having personal issues that made them less likely to be able to concentrate and complete homework. They each had a teacher or teachers who embarrassed them in front of their peers and gave them the message, at least in their minds, which they were not liked and they did not "belong" in school. Moriah was told that her teacher had given up on her and that she would never pass, while Lisa was told that she may as well get herself kicked out of school. In their eyes there was no reason for them to be there. Both girls still exhibit a lot of emotion when talking about these teachers and feel that there is a possibility their lives may have been different if these teachers had reached out to help them instead of pushing them toward getting out of school. They say this because they also had a teacher or teacher who had a very positive impact on how they felt about leaving and about themselves.

They shared positive memories of the teachers who helped them realizing how it felt to succeed, unfortunately for them, they viewed it as too late and they had already completely disconnected themselves.

Braxton, James, and Moriah made the decision to obtain their HSED and Lisa is now planning to do the same. They have come to the understanding that they can't progress in their careers without it. As the literature stated, high school dropouts earn less money than those who graduate from high school. Smith (1997) reported that high school dropouts make on an average about \$13,000 per year. Now in the year 2006, where the cost of living and minimum wage are significantly higher than they were in 1997, the highest earner in this study was making only \$18,000 per year. The current minimum wage in Wisconsin is \$11,856. None of the participants have a diagnosed learning disability and, in fact, did quite well in their early years of education. There is no reason linked to ability that these people couldn't have attended college and been earning more. Three of them are currently aware of this and are taking steps to enroll in a form of post-secondary education. It is likely that James is a gifted student and has potential to be anything he would want to pursue. His problem is, according to him, that he has never been able to follow through on anything since leaving high school. From the time his interview was done and the time this section was written, approximately two months, James has enrolled in two classes, quit his job, and dropped out of the classes. He is currently "between jobs."

Recommendations

The first recommendation to come out of this study is an obvious one. It would be to develop a program for at risk children while they are in elementary school. The

purpose should be to identify “at risk” children and find special talents that can be encouraged throughout their elementary school experiences. This would provide an option later on when the eagerness for school wears off. Since three of the people in this study had significant family problems early on, they would be the target group to start with, but if there were resources available, it would be beneficial to all students. Those in this study who felt good about their abilities in something other than school and the work of school itself, lasted much longer than those who didn’t. It could be assumed from the retelling of their experiences that James and Braxton would have probably graduated if they had not lost the ability to participate in their sports. The only way for this to work, however, is if this is somehow followed up on in the middle school. Encouragement for students to be involved in other activities is not just in providing those activities, but to make a concentrated effort to make it possible for them to do so.

The school needs to have an environment of caring and understanding that the students who tend to irritate and cause the most problems are the ones who need the most positive attention. For Lisa, it wasn’t just an issue of not wanting to play basketball. She pretended she didn’t want to because she knew there was no way for her to be able to anyway. She would need rides to practices, games, and money for the shoes, at the very least. If the coach would have taken her aside and talked to her or had a conversation with the school counselor, they may have been able to work through those issues. Many teachers, coaches, and other staff don’t realize that counselors are not just the ones who deal with issues after they are problems, but have a wealth of information of services and other resources, even within the school that others wouldn’t.

As it is now, at least for a great deal of middle schools, there is one counselor for each 200-500 students to provide those needs. In the elementary school, everyone participates in creating a positive environment. So why is this such an issue? For starters, these students are, on their best days, full of drama, every minor issue is life shattering, they ping-pong between emotional extremes, they are arrogant (at least behave that way), and can be rude, obnoxious, and just plain annoying. There was a running joke at a local middle school, “all middle school girls are bi-polar.” Although one may laugh at this, the behaviors are quite similar and can make even the most patient people tempted to “lose it” and say just what they are thinking to let off some of the frustration caused by these almost inhuman little beings. If these behaviors are further complicated by a dysfunctional, chaotic, and unsupportive home life, these issues can seem insurmountable to the student and can make the behaviors escalate, making the teachers more frustrated and likely to say harmful things that cause the student to act out further and then the cycle has been officially established.

This leads to the next recommendation. Administration should make sure during the interview process, especially in middle schools, that the staff they hire are really aware of the needs of all middle school aged children and are not only willing, but have a desire to work with this special population. It needs to be recognized that students of this age are a special population with special needs. Within the context of graduate coursework, this researcher has listened to numerous teachers and pre-service teachers and counselors who say, “I don’t want to be in a middle school, but I would do it if that were the only job I was offered.” It is exactly that attitude that causes teachers to get burned out on these students. It is no secret these students are in a vulnerable state. They

are developmentally trying to find a balance between their independence and parental control. Friends are becoming the central focus of their lives and can be so cruel to each other. Their hormones are reeking havoc with their bodies and moods. On top of all this, according to Dr. D. Zirkle-Brouillard (UW-Stout professor, class lecture in the Behavior Problems of Children course, July 13, 2005), there are studies coming out in the past several years that indicate that the frontal lobe of a child's brain during the adolescent years is actually growing. Studies of the teenage brain show that there is as much growth going on as there is when a child is around two to three years of age. This is significant growth and the studies indicate that what is learned at this age is what will tend to remain with them for the rest of their lives. This makes this period of time even more important because what happens during this time will set the tone for the rest of their lives. If a child at this age is involved in drugs or alcohol, which are proven to kill brain cells, the cells that are killed will not grow back.

If these studies are correct, we need to concentrate our efforts on what is the best way to enhance this growth time and help students reach their potential. It has been referred to as a cruel joke nature plays on us. Considering the facts, this researcher is compelled to agree. At the time in our lives when we are going through major physical, emotional, and social changes, and can hardly decide what to wear, our brain goes through another time of growth, that will probably be the last time, that can have an impact on the rest of our lives. If a three year old is repeatedly made to feel that he doesn't belong, that he is stupid, that he is a "bad kid", and exposed to drugs and alcohol, we don't have a great deal of optimism for his future and are disgusted by those who harmed the child in this way. With adolescents, too many influential people in their lives

feed them that information hoping it will cause them to look at themselves and begin behaving the way we want them to behave. We need to stop seeing and treating them as little adults and more like big three year olds. This does not mean don't hold them accountable and work toward responsibility, rather in more of an emotional way. Help them see their strengths and work through their shortcomings with patience and commitment. If we give up on them, according to the people in this study, they tend to give up on themselves.

One way to accomplish this is to make sure all students are having some positive contact with adults. It has to be a school-wide commitment, no one teacher, counselor, or administrator can take this responsibility alone but it only takes one to start the process. One school in LaCrosse, WI had a system that has been quite successful. It was a wall in the break room that was covered with a paper with the names of all the students. Each time a teacher, counselor, administrator, or any other school staff member had a positive contact with a student they would put a check and their initials by that student's name. Each staff member was required to have several contacts per week and each student was to have checks by their name. This provided all students the positive contact they needed. This may not be feasible in very large schools and for that it would be recommended that the students who needed the contact the most to have their names on the wall. These are never to be seen by the students. This was witnessed in a small elementary school, but would be effective in the middle school as well. Positive interactions with adults were what the participants of this study lacked getting enough of, yet remembered feeling good about when they did receive it. At the same time, the staff need to be made aware of the long lasting harmful effects of lack of positive contact and even worse, the impact of

negative interactions. Self-esteem is huge at this point and to have a teacher or teachers giving them negative feedback about themselves can be completely devastating for the “average” student at that age, but if this happens to a child who is already having problems at home, the damage can have lasting effects, as shown in the feelings that both Lisa and Moriah expressed.

Schools need to be up-to-date on the issues of their students, not just on current standards, lesson plans, and curriculum, especially in the middle schools. As stated by Jardine (2003) and demonstrated by the interviews done for this study, the elementary schools seem to have figured out what their students needed. They, for the most part, provided a nurturing, supportive environment consistent with what students required at their developmental stage. It is this researcher’s contention that elementary school teachers set out to be elementary school teachers as did high school teachers. Many middle school teachers seem to be stuck because it was the first job they were offered. It is very rare to hear in-training teachers and counselors say, “I want a job in a middle school,” yet this could well be where students need the most commitment. In this study, all four participants’ most memorable negative teacher experiences were in middle schools. We need to ask ourselves why this is occurring. This was also the time when each of the participants lost interest in school. It appears that there is not enough emphasis placed on the students’ developmental and emotional needs at this critical point in their lives. In elementary school, self-esteem, confidence building, and keeping them connected to their school and learning are part of everyday activities. Children feel safe with the teachers who make them feel important, even when their home life is emotionally distressing.

All the recommendations so far made are simply put into practice by running a middle school with the same nurturing, caring, and concern that is prevalent in the elementary schools. It is not recommended that they be babied or have their hands held to a point where they are not able to grow and mature. It is recommended that all the expectations remain the same, but be delivered in a way that takes into account all the circumstances that make middle school students the special people that they are. These students can be difficult under the best of circumstances, but schools need to be aware that those with family issues will most likely exhibit more undesirable behaviors and need more positive reinforcement, interaction, and connection. Paying attention to these students can make a difference long into their future. Most teachers want to have a positive impact on the lives of their students and would be willing to put forth the effort they just lack the knowledge of how significant the need for attention is or how easy it is to make a connection to a student. None of the participants in the study complained of the work being too difficult. It was more a matter of lack of motivation, interest, and connection that led them to give up.

It was learned from the literature and the case studies that students are less likely to drop out if they are involved in extracurricular activities. Many schools don't have the resources to provide transportation home to students after practices and meetings. Schools need to find ways to provide transportation to those who want to participate but can't due to this issue. There are volunteer groups, funds that can be used, and staff who can be approached to assist with this effort. A counselor must have the attitude that "it never hurts to ask." There should never be a child who wants to be involved, but can't because of finances, it is just unacceptable. Encouraging students to find their talents and

use them should be a daily exercise. If Lisa's coach would have kept trying even a little more and helped her iron out the financial issues, her end result could have been much different. These students need to be sought out and every effort made to connect with them. This researcher worked for several years in a juvenile detention center and one thing that remained stable throughout the time spent there was that no matter how bad a child seemed to be while in his/her group, when in a one-on-one setting, he/she was just a scared, helpless, and often hopeless child. If this is the case in a detention center, it is definitely true in a school.

The final recommendation is in the training of school counselors. At UW-Stout there is an excellent program for getting graduates ready for a career in school counseling. The only thing lacking is in the practicum. Students must engage in 350 hours training under the supervision of a school counselor in an elementary school and in a high school to meet the requirements of graduation. There is no middle school training unless a student specifically requests it when applying for practicum. The school is more than willing to honor that request and set up a site for the requesting student. This does not provide nearly enough training in this area, especially since many of the students (as discussed previously) are not planning to be working in a middle school after graduation unless necessary. So it seems the population that needs the most attention is again getting the least. Perhaps if there were more education on the troubles that face adolescents and exposure to them, more pre-service educators and counselors would want to be in the middle schools. Knowing what a difference one can make for this population of students may cause them to put forth more effort for these students as well.

The literature suggests many reasons for students dropping out, such as family issues, high risk behaviors like drug and alcohol abuse, and truancy to name a few. It also suggests that a lack of connectedness to their school is a major factor in students making the decision to quit school and that being involved with extracurricular activities can prevent students from dropping out. The interviews conducted in this study support that information and further suggest that the feeling of not being connected can have a direct correlation to negative teacher or other staff contacts. It was also evidenced that many of the factors that begin the dropping out process began in middle school when students are going through many physical, emotional, and social changes. Middle school staff need to be more aware of these changes and the effects they have on the students in many ways. If more time and energy is put into the needs of these students and their unique situations are taken into account in daily interactions with them, we may be able to reduce the drop out rate significantly. Elementary schools, for the most part, have an environment that promotes positive regard for all students and a policy of making students feel good about themselves. This seems, at least for many students, to not be the case in middle school. Students are often thought of as young adults and expected to be more emotionally mature when they are probably even more fragile. It has been the purpose of this paper to point out those areas of special need and provide some ideas for middle school to promote the elementary school philosophy without stifling the students' ability to grow and mature. If this can be balanced and accomplished, many students can be spared the difficulties that dropping out of school causes.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

- 1) What was your overall school experience for as far back as you can remember?
- 2) Were your relationships with your peers satisfying before and during the time of your decision to leave school? Please describe in detail
- 3) What was your family situation, were there any issues that were difficult, uncomfortable, or traumatic?
- 4) What were your behaviors during your school years? Did you have issues: acting out, withdrawn, etc.
- 5) Who was your favorite teacher and why?
- 6) Who was your least favorite teacher and why?
- 7) Was there any school staff person (teacher, counselor, administrative staff, etc.) who heavily impacted you either positively or negatively?
- 8) When do you feel you began emotionally dropping out of school (detaching) and what was going on in your life at home and school at that time?
- 9) Do you feel that there was anything that could have been said or done at any point that may have changed your decision to dropout? If so, what?
- 10) Was there anything going on in your life personally, socially, or academically that you feel was “missed,” but should have been noticed and addressed by school staff?
- 11) Was there a specific incident or reason that made you reach your decision or was it a series of events? Describe in detail what that was.

- 12) Did you use drugs or alcohol? With what frequency?
- 13) Were you in any extracurricular activities? If so, which ones? If not, why not?
- 14) Is there anything you can think of that may have made a difference and led to you staying in school?
- 15) If you had it to do over, would you make the same decision? If not, what would you do over to change it?
- 16) What would you tell a prospective dropout?