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CAN OUT-OF-SCHOOL TIME PROGRAMS REDUCE HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUT?
A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PROGRAMS

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ABSTRACT

High school dropout is harmful to individuals who dropout as well as society. Consequences of dropping out include earning less money than graduates, being more likely to go to prison and experience long unemployment stretches and being less likely to participate in civic life. This literature review aims to answer the question, can out-of-school time (OST) programs reduce high school dropout? The goal is to identify recommendations for policy makers in relation to OST programs. After discussing the consequences of dropout, risk factors of dropping out are identified at the microsystem level—attending a high school with a large minority population and having a low socioeconomic status (SES)—and at the individual level at school—low attendance, poor academic performance, and weak student engagement. Next, the components of youth engagement are discussed. These include affective, behavioral, and cognitive engagement. Youth are engaged through quality relationships and through knowledgeable staff members. In fact, the characteristics of quality programs overlap greatly with factors that engage youth. OST programs may be useful in dropout prevention by providing a risk-free environment, which is a prime opportunity to engage youth. However, OST programs may not be useful in dropout prevention because they cannot change characteristics such as an adolescent's SES or neighborhood. The literature review concludes by providing recommendations for policy makers regarding OST programs to reduce dropout.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

In an ideal society, everybody graduates from high school. This is the ultimate goal because there is a positive correlation between earning a high school diploma and one's average salary. This means that people who graduate from high school, on average, earn more than individuals who do not. The median lifetime earnings for someone who does not finish high school is \$973,000, which can be compared to \$1,304,000 for high school graduates (Carnevale, Rose, & Cheah, 2011). The numbers increase with each additional degree. For example, someone with a Bachelor's Degree earns an average of \$2,268,000 over their lifetime (Carnevale, Rose, & Cheah, 2011). A 100 percent graduation rate is not a reality in our country. Though graduating can affect one's lifetime success, there are considerable variations across institutions. Overall graduation rates are between 75 and 78 percent. There are also substantial race differences. Eighty-four percent of whites, 72 percent of Hispanics, and around 65 percent of blacks graduate from high school (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). What happens to the young adults who deviate from this path and do not graduate from high school? Aside from earning less money than those who graduate, there are other future consequences of dropping out. These include being more likely to go to prison and to experience long unemployment stretches, as well as being less likely to participate in civic life (Neild, 2009). Therefore, students need to stay enrolled in and attend school through graduation to become as successful as possible.

It is evident that dropout rates are a problem in today's society. Staying in high school is vital to their future success. There are many strategies to reduce dropout rates that have been used in the past and continue to be used today. Examples include mentoring and tutoring, professional development, family engagement, and alternative schooling (Johnson, 2010). Another solution may be out-of-school time programming.

This literature review will focus on this last approach, asking: Can out-of-school time programming help reduce the dropout problem? The goal of this paper is to review literature to examine whether activities that occur during out-of-school time can successfully transition these individuals to high school. To do this, I will begin by discussing dropout rates and explaining why they are a problem. Second, I will review the main reasons why students are dropping out of high school. Realizing why students are leaving school, I will then look at effective ways to intervene, including finding ways to increase engagement. Next, I will explore whether out-of-school time programs can effectively help reduce dropout rates. Lastly, I will conclude with recommendations for policy makers regarding out-of-school time programming that can help prevent youth from dropping out of high school.

Chapter 2

High School Dropouts

High school student drop out rates are a large concern in today's society. For this literature review, I will define dropouts as adolescents who stop attending school before earning a high school diploma for any reason. I will not be discussing individuals who went back and passed a General Educational Development (GED) test instead of earning a high school diploma. This test is the most commonly used equivalency exam (Cameron & Heckman, 1993). Still, while GED recipients typically earn more money annually and hourly than high school dropouts, most still earn less than those who obtain traditional high school diplomas (Boesel, Alsalam, & Smith, 1998). Cameron and Heckman (1993) concluded, "exam-certified high school equivalents are statistically indistinguishable from high school dropouts. Both dropouts and exam-certified equivalents have comparably poor wages, earnings, hours of work, unemployment experiences and job tenure" (p. 43). However, they did find "GED-certified persons are closer to high school dropouts than traditional graduates in their measured ability and in their market status" (p. 43).

Dropout rates are currently high, and it is important to recognize the differences between the multiple types of dropout rates being reported and studied. One type of dropout rate being reported is the status dropout rate. This rate is typically lower than the overall dropout rate and can be defined as the percentage of "people in the 16- through 24-year-old age group who are not enrolled in school and who have not completed a high

school program, regardless of when they left school” (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011a). In 2010, the total status dropout rate among people between the ages of 16 and 24 years old was 7.4 percent. However, this rate varied by race/ethnicity and sex. Males dropped out of high school more than females (8.5 percent compared to 6.3 percent). Additionally, Hispanic individuals had the highest dropout rate by ethnicity, averaging 15.1 percent, while the rate of white individuals was 5.1 percent and that of black individuals was 8.0 percent (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011b). As one can see, Hispanic and black students drop out of high school more frequently than white students.

The annual, or event, dropout rate is typically lower than the status dropout rate. This rate “measures the proportion of students who drop out in a single year without completing high school” (Thurlow, Sinclair, & Johnson, 2001, p. 4). The total event dropout rate in the United States during 2008-9 for 9th- through 12th-grade students was 4.1 percent (National Center for Education Statistics, 2008-9).

As mentioned earlier, overall graduation rates are only between 75 and 78 percent (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). However, due to the multiple types of dropout and graduation rates, there is debate about what is considered the “true” rate. While only between 75 and 78 percent of individuals are graduating from high school, this does not mean all of the remaining students are dropping out. This rate is actually the averaged freshman (ninth-grade) graduation rate, or the “percentage of public high school students who graduate with a regular diploma four years after starting ninth grade” (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009, p. 79). This does not include students who complete high school equivalency exams, such as the GED. Additionally, it does not count students who graduate in more than four

years. This rate only includes students who earn traditional high school diplomas in four years. Therefore, there may be a gap between this rate and the various classifications of dropout rates.

Some high schools with significant dropout rates are even known as dropout factories (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). A dropout factory can be defined as “a high school in which twelfth grade enrollment is 60 percent or less of ninth grade enrollment three years earlier” (Balfanz, Bridgeland, Bruce, & Fox, 2013, p. 17). Many of these schools are grouped together in certain areas of the country. Balfanz and Legters (2004) found 80 percent of schools in the United States with the largest dropout percentage are located in only fifteen states (p. 15). In 2011, there were over 1.5 million students attending high schools that were considered dropout factories (Balfanz et al., 2013, p. 17).

Dropping out of high school can be harmful to the individual student and to society. As mentioned in the introduction, there are long-term consequences to dropping out. These include earning less money than high school graduates (Carnevale, Rose, & Cheah, 2011), being more likely to go to prison and to experience long unemployment stretches, and being less likely to participate in civic life (Neild, 2009). Specific characteristics of individuals who are the most at risk for dropping out of high school will be discussed in the next section.

Chapter 3

Why Students Are Dropping Out

Risk Factors for Dropping Out of High School

Adolescents drop out of high school for various reasons. In order to help these students and future students, we need to understand why adolescents choose this option. There are many risk factors associated with dropping out of high school. Psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979) studied individuals within the contexts of the ecological environment. He developed the Ecological Systems Theory and described a child's environment as "a set of nested structures, each inside the next, like a set of Russian dolls" (p. 3). The layer closest to the child is the microsystem, which refers to settings and factors within a pattern of relations. These settings are places "where people can readily engage in face-to-face interaction—home, day care center, playground, and so on" (p. 22). Many of the risk factors for dropout, including an adolescent's family, school, neighborhood, and community, are found within the above settings. The microsystem and its settings are important to study because youth are always living in at least one of the settings, and these settings can positively or negatively influence their lives.

The following two sections will discuss risk factors that are present within the settings of Bronfenbrenner's microsystem as well as individual risk factors. Identifying these risk factors can help identify individuals who have a higher probability of dropping

out. More specifically, looking at risk factors of an individual can even further target those who are already at risk of dropping out via microsystem risk factors. Interventions can be appropriately and effectively executed by targeting such individuals before they have the chance to drop out.

Microsystem Risk Factors

Youth do not have control over some of the risk factors and influences they may face in their lives. Bronfenbrenner (1979) considered family, school, neighborhood, and community characteristics to be part of the settings of an individual's microsystem. These settings are not always in the control of the adolescent. Several risk factors of dropping out of high school can fall within these settings. The microsystem risk factors that will be discussed include the race distribution of high schools and a child's socioeconomic status (SES).

As mentioned earlier, areas with high populations of minority students have the highest dropout rates (Balfanz, 2009). Therefore, the race distribution of a school can be viewed as a risk factor. This can affect large percentages of certain schools because most high schools in the United States either have close to all white students enrolled or close to all minority students enrolled. In fact, only one-fifth of high schools represent the "national distribution of majority and minority groups enrolled in public high schools" (Balfanz, 2009, p. 20). High dropout rates are seen in high schools with large percentages of minority students. Some high schools with a large percentage of minority

students fit the characteristics of dropout factories. The schools with high populations of minority youth experience the most students dropping out before graduating.

Promoting power is used to estimate students who are still in school by senior year. To measure this, one must divide the number of twelfth grade students by the number of ninth grade students three years earlier. It identified the amount of students who are reaching twelfth grade on time (Alliance for Excellent Education, n.d.). “A majority minority high school is five times more likely to have weak promoting power than a majority white school” (Balfanz & Legters, 2004, p. 5). As mentioned earlier, Hispanic students have the highest dropout rate of any race, followed by black students. While it must be noted that promoting power is different than graduating, identifying schools with low promoting power may help in identifying dropouts because these schools have students who are not advancing in school.

Another risk factor is a child’s SES. Many students from poor urban areas are at risk of doing poorly in high school (Rouse & Kemple, 2009). There is a large difference between the number and kinds of resources and the amount of money in the poorest and wealthiest communities. This leads to different outcomes in graduation rates. Only one-half to two-thirds of students in high-poverty neighborhoods graduate from high school (Balfanz, 2009). Additionally, “students from low-income families were roughly 10 times less likely to complete high school between 2006 and 2007 than were students from high-income families” (D’Agustino, 2013, p. 63). Therefore, students with low SES may be at risk of dropping out of high school.

Balfanz and Legters (2004) said “identifying high schools with promoting power of 60 percent or less provides a good estimate of the number of high schools with severe

dropout rates and thus can be used to locate the high schools which produce the majority of the nation's dropouts (p. 3). Lofstrom (2007) agrees that the characteristics of a school are important for a child's success. In addition to student composition, Lofstrom also believes other factors within a school are important. One example is the amount of money a school spends per student. This affects the number of students from the school who drop out. However, he concluded by saying "the results suggest that neighborhood characteristics, here simply measured by the location of the school attended and the school's student race/ethnicity composition, contribute more to the high African American dropout probability than school characteristics, such as pupil-teacher ratio and expenditure per pupil" (p. 118). Therefore, it is important to be aware of a school's spending, but Lofstrom believes it is more important to study the neighborhood factors.

These identified risk factors are difficult for youth to change. Attending a school that has a majority of minority students, being members of families with a low SES, and living in poor urban neighborhoods are out of the control of the child. However, these characteristics can help identify students who are at risk for dropout so appropriate interventions can be implemented for these students.

Individual Risk Factors at School

After looking at risk factors individuals cannot change, it is important to look at risk factors of individuals. There are several examples of factors that occur at an individual level, which relate to adolescents' successes in school. These factors, which include low attendance, poor academic performance, and weak student engagement, can

help us identify students at risk of dropout and may help us understand why students are actually dropping out of high school.

It is difficult for people to achieve academic success if they do not attend school. Individuals must be physically present in the classroom throughout the school day in order to learn the material. Appropriately, low attendance is an example of a risk factor for students dropping out of high school (Neild, 2009). In fact, adolescents can become at risk for not graduating by being pushed out for causing trouble or missing too many classes (Balfanz, 2009). High levels of absenteeism can also lead to the next risk factor, low academic performance, because regular attendance is sometimes counted as “a minimum requirement for a passing grade” (McPartland, Balfanz, Jordan, & Legters, 2002, p. 152).

Poor academic performance is another risk factor for dropping out, particularly low grade point average (GPA) and course failure (Neild, 2009). Poor school performance is especially risky in 9th grade because “approximately one-third of the nation’s recent high school dropouts were never promoted beyond the 9th grade” (Neild, 2009, p. 55). Students at risk for dropping out often fail many 9th grade classes. This is evident because students who show low academic performance in 9th grade usually have a “lack of intermediate academic skills, weak reading comprehension and fluency abilities, and underdeveloped mathematical knowledge.” (Balfanz & Legters, 2004, p. 23). Ninth grade students who are performing poorly in school also did not usually achieve academic success in middle school. Consequences of failing classes—such as being at risk for dropout—can be seen in middle school (Rumberger, 2011), so it is important to intervene early. Poor academic performance can be used as an identifier for

those who are at risk of dropout. Therefore, the goal may be to help these students get on track to achieve academic success leading up to graduation.

Another predictor of dropping out is weak student engagement. Student engagement is actually a key factor in a student's decision to dropout of high school (Rumberger, 2011) and can be connected to many of the other risk factors. Anecdotally, the most common reasons for dropping out given by students include, "I didn't like school," "I didn't like the teachers," "I didn't see the value in the schoolwork I was asked to do," and "I had family issues" (Smink, 2013, p. 50). After studying several definitions of youth engagement, Joselowsky (2007) determined all of the definitions intersect at "a sense of agency and empowerment for students" (p. 260). Low engagement may be the cause of some of the more observable risk factors like low attendance (Jerald, 2007) and discipline problems (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009).

These three factors—low attendance, poor academic performance, and weak student engagement—appear to be the main reasons why students drop out of high school. Russell Rumberger (2011) concluded that while there is a wide range of motives, the majority of students reported dropping out for a reason related to school or academics (83 percent). These included "students' own attitudes, behaviors, and performance, such as missing school, getting poor grades, or not liking school. Others involve features of schools and classrooms, such as classes not being interesting" (p. 158). Craig Jerald (2007) noted many of these factors—especially regarding academic performance and school engagement—could be highly connected. In fact, "middle-grade students who fail their courses, attend school less than 85-90 percent of the time and are seen as having behavioral problems either via suspension or poor behavior or effort marks seldom

graduate” (Balfanz, 2007, p. 4). This complicated web of risk factors makes it easy to identify high-risk students.

The implications of this for intervention are huge. Combining the above factors, Robert Balfanz (2007) and his team from the Center for Social Organizations of Schools at Johns Hopkins University found “about half of eventual dropouts can be identified by the end of sixth grade, and close to 75 percent by the start of high school” (p. 4). Numerous students who drop out of high school can be identified.

If eventual dropouts can be identified as early as the beginning of middle school, why is this not occurring? Many school districts lack the tools needed to analyze data and identify these characteristics and risk factors (Neild, 2009). Therefore, many of these problems are not noticed until the students drop out of school. In other words, the warning signs are noticed too late.

Low attendance, poor academic performance, and weak student engagement are three examples of individual risk factors that can help identify high school dropouts. Researchers believe dropout could be due to a combination of these risk factors, but there is a strong emphasis on the importance of fostering strong youth engagement. As many dropouts can be identified as early as sixth grade, it is important to intervene early to try to prevent the students from dropping out of high school.

Summary

Research shows that while most adolescents do not drop out, those who are at risk can be identified. The aforementioned neighborhood factors—schools with high percentages of minority students, low SES, and living in poor urban communities—can help target the schools with many at risk students. Studies show that within these neighborhoods, specific individuals with certain characteristics—high absenteeism, poor academics, and low student engagement—are at risk. The combination of the various types of risk factors can most specifically target individuals who are the most at risk of dropping out of high school. “Within-school factors (as reported by dropouts themselves) appear to be the most important for predicting their decision to drop out” (Jordan, Lara & McPartland, 1996, p. 69). These students can then be strategically targeted during dropout interventions.

Chapter 4

How Should We Intervene? Spotlight on Youth Engagement

We need to look for effective ways to intervene to try to decrease the number of students dropping out. While many of the risk factors affect one another, one primary risk factor—a lack of engagement—can be a central place to target interventions to reduce dropout rates. As stated previously, this is one of the most common reasons for students to leave school. It may be the key to motivating students to stay in school. Researchers in the youth development field have been studying youth engagement. This chapter will focus on the importance of youth engagement, including how to define and measure it, and effective ways to intervene by engaging youth. Lastly, it will discuss beneficial times to intervene.

Importance of Youth Engagement

Researchers from the Centre of Excellence for Youth Engagement view youth engagement as “the meaningful participation and sustained involvement of a young person in an activity, with a focus outside of him or herself” (Pancer, Rose-Krasnor, & Loiselle, 2002, p. 49). People must be engrossed in activities and programs in order to stay interested and committed. This is especially true for adolescents who have many choices of ways in which to occupy their time. Students typically decide to drop out after feeling disengaged from school for a long period of time (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009).

Therefore, engagement plays a strong role in adolescents' lives in terms of leaving high school before graduation. It is important to avoid the disengagement of youth in order for individuals to successfully attend high school through graduation.

Defining and Measuring Youth Engagement

How does one measure the extent of youth engagement? Programs cannot be considered successful in engaging youth solely by the success of maintaining high attendance in the programs. Attendance in a program is important, but it does not mean adolescents are actively engaged. Youth are not always engaged even if they are present throughout particular programs. Attendance is the first step to becoming engaged because one cannot be engaged in a program without being present; however, participation and engagement are not equals. Once youth attend programs, they must be doing something that will engage them. Weiss, Little, and Bouffard (2005) suggested engagement and attendance are components of participation in a program. Attendance alone cannot be the only factor in determining a program's ability to engage youth. W. Todd Bartko's ABC Model provides an understanding of three important components of youth engagement.

ABC Model

According to Bartko (2005), youth engagement is a multi-dimensional construct that is comprised of three components: affect, behavior, and cognition. He referred to this as the ABC Model. While affective, behavioral, and cognitive engagement are separate aspects, these three components are interconnected within an individual.

Affective Engagement

The first component of the ABC Model is affective engagement. According to Bartko (2005), “affective engagement refers to positive and negative reactions to teachers, classmates, the academic curriculum, or school. It also is defined as having feelings of belonging and of valuing learning and the broader goals of schooling” (p. 112). Affective engagement encompasses one’s emotions. Therefore, some researchers have described affective engagement as emotional engagement. The feelings aspect of this component can be used to influence a person’s willingness related to the task at hand (Fredricks, Blumenfield, & Paris, 2004).

Behavioral Engagement

The next component of this multi-dimensional construct is behavioral engagement. Bartko (2005) believes “behavioral engagement is related to participation; it includes involvement in academic and social activities in the classroom, including

conduct, attention, following rules, and effort” (p. 112). The National Research Council issued a report on engagement in 2004, which discussed engagement being seen through various behaviors. One part of their findings said “engagement involved both observable behaviors (actively participating in class, completing work, taking challenging classes) and unobservable behaviors (effort, attention, problem solving, and the use of metacognitive strategies” (Rumberger, 2011, p. 152). Fredricks et al. (2004) also see behavioral engagement through a range of various levels of participation. They believe it includes “involvement in academic and social or extracurricular activities and is crucial for achieving positive academic outcomes” (p. 60).

Cognitive Engagement

The third and final component of this model is cognitive engagement. “Cognitive engagement refers to investment in learning; it includes being thoughtful and willing to exert the effort necessary to comprehend complex ideas and master difficult skills” (Bartko, 2005, p. 112). Cognitive engagement can be seen through investment and people’s applied efforts when trying to understand difficult and complicated ideas and complete challenging tasks. It “can range from simple memorization to the use of self-regulated learning strategies that promote deep understanding and expertise” (Fredricks et al., 2004, p. 61). Students who feel value or worth in their tasks and performances should be more likely to work harder in the classroom. Self-efficacy studies have found positive associations between efficacy and cognitive engagement. These studies concluded, “self-

efficacy beliefs seem to be important mediators of cognitive engagement and academic performance in classrooms” (Pintrich & Schrauben, 1992, p. 166).

Summary

This model shows the importance of looking at several pieces of an adolescent’s engagement. It should be noted that many students report different levels of certain kinds of engagement. One student might report high levels of engagement to all of the components, while another student might not report high levels of engagement to any of the components. Other students might experience mixed levels. Therefore, it is essential to look at affective, behavioral, and cognitive engagement concurrently instead of independently to determine the most effective ways to interest youth (Bartko, 2005, p. 112). As it is suggested that weak youth engagement is an essential risk factor of dropping out of high school, it is important to understand the various components of this large construct. The following sections will explain characteristics that engage youth.

What Engages Youth?

There are numerous characteristics of youth settings that engage youth. Yohalem and Martin (2007) consider there to be “two different sets of predictors of youth engagement, those that cluster at the individual/family level, as well as structural or community level predictors” (p. 808). They believe the individual characteristic is motivation and deem other internal and external predictors as “family, peer, and

individual characteristics and the relevance of the issues being worked on” (p. 808).

While education research often focuses on test scores, research on out-of-school time programs has focused heavily on characteristics of settings that engage youth.

Identifying these characteristics can help create quality programs that incorporate ways to engage youth. Many of the factors associated with youth engagement have to do with the adults within a program. These factors—peer and adult interactions, quality relationships, and knowledge—will be discussed in the next sections. They are each important components of characteristics that engage youth.

Peer and Adult Interactions

Specific kinds of interactions between adults and youth may be engaging throughout adolescence. Adolescents are more engaged when adults are present during activities. These engagement outcomes can be seen through youth paying more attention and having better concentration when adults are present. Since youth enjoy themselves more when their peers are also present, combining peer and adult interaction in programs is beneficial for fostering engagement. In fact, the highest level of engagement occurs when adults supervise peers working and participating with one another (Shernoff & Vandell, 2007). Adolescents are also engaged when adults are leading major parts of a program’s activities.

Quality Relationships

Good relationships between youth and adults are important as well. This includes more than the structure of the relationships. The quality of these relationships is the important factor. The adults present in the programs should treat the adolescents with respect, while giving them support and promoting autonomy (Joselowsky, 2007). As adult-led programs also encourage youth engagement, forming relationships with the adults who are leading the programs is also beneficial to promoting youth engagement (Weiss et al., 2005). Furthermore, this can be seen through one-to-one mentoring relationships. Kuperminc, Smith, & Henrich (2012) report “youth with positive one-to-one mentoring relationships engaged in more positive interactions in the group setting (e.g., showing caring for others), whereas youth who were dissatisfied with their one-to-one mentoring relationships showed more negative social behaviors (e.g., disengagement) in the group context” (p. 10).

Knowledge

Lastly, youth are most engaged when lead staff members are fundamentally knowledgeable on the subject matter being taught. A qualitative study that looked at youth decision-making found that knowledgeable and committed staff members help promote youth engagement (Murdock, Paterson, Lee, & Gatmaitan, 2011). The staff members in various programs should have sufficient training in the subjects they are teaching the participants. Additionally, these people should be “deeply involved in decisions about how the program would be structured and how the content would be

delivered” (Hynes, Constance, Greene, Lee, & Halabi, 2011, p. 7).

Characteristics of Quality Programs

Research on youth engagement overlaps well with research from the OST field regarding the characteristics of quality youth programs. Eccles and Gootman (2002) believe there are eight characteristics that give such programs quality. The eight features include:

- “Structure and limits that are developmentally appropriate and that recognize adolescents’ increasing social maturity and expertise;
- Physical and psychological safety and security;
- Opportunities to experience supportive relationships and to have good emotional and moral support;
- Opportunities to feel a sense of belonging;
- Opportunities to be exposed to positive morals, values, and positive social norms;
- Opportunities to be efficacious, to do things that make a real difference and to play an active role in the organizations themselves;
- Opportunities for skill building, including learning how to form close, durable human relationships with peers that support and reinforce healthy behaviors, as well as to acquire the skills necessary for school success and successful transition into adulthood; and
- Strong links between families, schools, and broader community resources” (p. 117).

These positive features are said to be ones that promote youth development in a program. A program shows a more positive setting and improves in quality with each additional feature that is incorporated into the given program. Each of these features can help improve adolescent development in a positive manner (p. 117-8).

Many of these characteristics of quality programs overlap with characteristics that engage youth. One example is an opportunity for supportive relationships. This can be related to adult supervision and mentoring. These positive interactions can help foster relationships and a sense of belonging. This is important because some of the adolescents in such programs may not have those relationships and support systems at home. These adults have chances to make large impacts in the adolescents' lives by investing in the individuals. They can become strong, positive role models in their lives.

Another example of an overlapping characteristic is having opportunities to be efficacious. When looking at characteristics that engage youth, it was determined that self-efficacy plays a role in promoting cognitive engagement, which is one of the components of Bartko's ABC Model. One last example of an overlapping feature is encouraging healthy relationships with peers. While it was seen that youth are most engaged when adults are present, youth also enjoy themselves and are engaged when interacting with their peers. This adult-peer interaction combination can be seen in quality programs to promote supportive relationships.

The fact that several of these characteristics of quality programs overlap with those that engage youth shows us the importance of program quality if the goal is to increase youth engagement. This may be the key to interventions to prevent students from dropping out of high school.

When Should We Intervene?

While the focus of this literature review is on dropping out of high school, many students who drop out have problems that begin much earlier. For instance, research on the black and white achievement gap goes all the way back to preschool. As individuals get older, the achievement gap among black and white students increases. Research on the racial achievement gap is informative for dropout prevention because, as discussed in Chapter 3, low achievement and poor academic performance are critical in dropping out. Fryer and Levitt (2006) found “Blacks continue to lose ground relative to Whites in second and third grade at a pace consistent with the losses observed between kindergarten and first grade” (p. 251). They found these students lose ground at different paces, depending on variables, such as the income level of their mothers, race, and location and type of school. Black students tend to live in environments that are less advantageous to succeeding in school when compared to white students. As students grow older, the achievement gap continues to expand. The black students also continue to fall behind their white counterparts within the same classroom (Fryer & Levitt, 2006). If this continues through middle and high school, it is not surprising that the highest percentages of dropouts are minority students. These students are typically the majority of those falling behind in academics. Thus, it is no surprise that black students drop out of high school at a higher rate than their white counterparts.

Alexander, Entwisle & Olson (2001) found the achievement gap could be reduced by first grade. This is a result of preschool and kindergarten. However, this narrowed gap is difficult to maintain and entails many resources. Children with low SES do not

have as many opportunities as children from the middle class. OST programs could be a resource to help these kids. Addressing the above risk factors earlier than high school can help narrow the achievement gap. Therefore, the students will be closer to the students who are at the top of the gap and will be at a lower risk for dropping out of high school. These researchers “support summer school or extended years programs just *for poor children* as well as supplemental school-year services for these children during the early grades” (p. 184). These researchers are highlighting the possibility of using out-of-school time programming to engage children and support their development.

Students can be at risk at any age. It is known that transitional years can increase the risks for some students. This includes the first year of elementary, middle, or high school. These years can be positive for some students as well as challenging and risky years for others. As mentioned earlier, 9th grade performance is a large identifying factor for dropping out of high school (Neild, 2009). While the race achievement gap begins as early as preschool, it increases as students get older. Intervening at appropriate times can influence the successes of the interventions. Intervening shortly before an adolescent reaches 9th grade may be able to increase performance in this grade, thus reducing one’s risk of dropping out.

Middle school is a vulnerable time for adolescents due to its transitional nature and the importance of students’ upcoming 9th grade performances. Given the focus on high school dropout, middle school may be a particularly good time to intervene and influence adolescents. “Middle school is a terrific time for career exploration activities that expand youths’ horizons and introduce them to jobs and careers they may have never thought about or heard of. These activities can be springboards for helping youth select

appropriate classes and activities in high school, and for developing a future orientation” (Hynes et al., 2011, p. 12). This can help adolescents explore activities that interest them, which will hopefully engage them.

Chapter 5

Can Out-of-School Time Programs Help Reduce High School Drop Out?

It is evident youth become engaged when certain characteristics are present. This chapter will discuss various intervention methods and programs that occur during out-of-school time. As these blocks of time are prime opportunities for intervening, it is important to do so effectively. The following sections will explain reasons why OST programs may or may not be useful in dropout prevention and give detailed summaries of two quality programs—LA’s BEST and After School Matters. It will conclude with the barriers of OST programs.

What is Out-of-School Time?

For the purpose of this literature review, I will use the definition of out-of-school time (OST) from a study by Public/Private Ventures and The Finance Project that was commissioned by The Wallace Foundation. This study defined an OST program as “a set of activities for youth provided in a single location during non-school hours. It includes programs that operate before and after school, on weekends and holidays and during the summer” (Grossman, Lind, Hayes, McMaken, & Gersick, 2009, p. 56). OST programs are important because youth spend very little time in school. Students in the United States attend school for an average of 6.7 hours per day and 180.4 days per year (National Center for Education Statistics, 2003-4). These times typically occur on Mondays

through Fridays from about August or September through May or June. Accordingly, the most common times for out-of-school time programs are after school and throughout the summer (Lauer, Akiba, Wilkerson, Apthorp, Snow, & Martin-Glenn, 2006).

Reasons Why OST May Be Useful In Dropout Prevention

There are many reasons adolescents drop out of high school. As discussed earlier in this literature review, examples include poor academics, low attendance, and most importantly, weak engagement. We know adolescents often drop out of school when they do not feel engaged. OST may be able to counter this problem by engaging youth. This period of time is different from school because there is less risk of failure. As adolescents primarily drop out of school because they do not find it interesting or useful, it is important to engage them and spark their interests before they reach high school. Finding ways to engage youth can occur either inside or outside of school. While there are many different kinds of interventions, one way to engage adolescents is through programs outside of the school day. These programs are prime opportunities to allow adolescents to be proactively engaged in risk-free environments outside of the classroom. Participants do not have to worry about the pressures and stresses of school during these programs. Instead, they can focus on fun, engaging and positive alternatives. Adolescents can be exposed to low-risk, nontraditional environments. Staff members are not struggling to keep up with structured curriculums and can use the time to try to proactively engage youth. As noted earlier, academic performance factors and school engagement factors are sometimes related to one another (Jerald, 2007). If engagement

increases, it is possible that students' academic performances will increase as well. This can reduce the poor academic performance risk factor for dropping out while also reducing the risk factor of low youth engagement. This might be especially important for those who have identifying risk factors, such as being part of a minority race or ethnicity.

As out-of-school time consists of multiple time periods, each time period has different benefits. Afterschool and summer are two examples of OST, which may be beneficial in reducing dropout.

Afterschool

Additionally, according to Bartko (2005), the highest time period for crimes and risky behaviors among youth, such as drug, alcohol, and cigarette use and participating in sexual activities is between 3:00P.M. and 6:00P.M. This is the time period in which kids have the least amount of adult supervision due to their parents' work commitments. During OST, adolescents can either partake in risky behaviors or they can participate in programs and activities that can benefit their wellbeing.

Summer

The various blocks of time that are considered OST are different. Summer is a time when most youth are not attending school. Children in the United States have a significant time period in the summer where they are not attending school compared to various other countries such as Japan, West Germany, and South Korea. There is a large

opportunity for students to experience losses in achievement during this period (Alexander et al., 2001). Therefore, it is important to intervene during OST to try to promote youth engagement and minimize the decline of academic performance that occurs during these time periods.

Parents show a great amount of support for summer programs. This support is even larger from low-income and minority students' parents (Afterschool Alliance, 2010). As these students are often at a higher risk for dropping out of school, it is extremely important to provide opportunities their parents support. Therefore, this is an ideal time period to positively engage youth in activities that do not promote dangerous actions. While it is a risky time for youth, they can be protected by the benefits of such programs.

Reasons Why OST May Not Be Useful In Dropout Prevention

Out-of-school time programs may be able to help foster youth engagement, but there are still several risk factors that OST programs may not be able to help reduce. There are certain characteristics that will never be able to be changed by any type of intervention. For instance, OST programs cannot change an adolescent's SES, a family's income level, or the neighborhood in which a student lives. Unfortunately, such programs will not allow families to be more financially stable or live in neighborhoods and communities with more resources. Additionally, it is unclear whether engaging youth through OST programs will translate into engagement in school or academic

achievement. Students must be engaged at school and attain sufficient academic standing in order to graduate from high school.

Summary

Despite these limitations, OST programs may be able to help reduce dropouts by engaging youth. Afterschool and summer OST programs are opportunities to promote positive behaviors to youth. They are also opportunities to reduce the chances of youth partaking in behaviors with negative consequences.

Examples of Quality Programs

Now that we know why out-of-school time programs may be useful in dropout prevention, the next section will summarize examples and the successes of such quality programs. These programs were chosen because they are nationally known and have been evaluated by several researchers.

LA's BEST

LA's BEST is a quality program for younger children. This program began in 1988 in Los Angeles. The mission of LA's BEST states the program strives "to provide a safe and supervised after school education, enrichment and recreation program for elementary school children ages 5 to 12 in the City of Los Angeles" (LA's BEST, 2012a). This free program runs in several different sites throughout the Los Angeles area and is

open to any student who resides and attends school in the areas where it is offered. However, out of the around 30,000 students the program reaches, it is comprised of “about 80% Hispanic and about 12% Black elementary students” (Goldschmidt & Huang, 2007, p. 8). This is important because, as discussed earlier in Chapter 3, Hispanic and Black youth are at an increased risk for dropping out of school. Programs through LA’s BEST begin right after school, which does not allow the students to become engaged in risky behaviors between the end of the school day and the beginning of the OST program.

One important characteristic of LA’s BEST is that many of the staff members live very close to the program sites where they work. They also represent the ethnicities of the students in the program. This assists the formation of relationships with potential role models who are similar in background to the youth attending the programs. As noted by Eccles & Gootman (2002), “opportunities to experience supportive relationships and to have good emotional and moral support” as well as “strong links between families, schools, and broader community resources” (p. 117) are aspects of quality programs. The characteristics of these staff members add to the quality of LA’s BEST. They can also relate to the youth who attend the program.

Each site has several staff members. These individuals include one site coordinator, one on-site staff for every 20 children, and program supervisors and activities consultants, who attend to 5-6 different sites (LA's BEST, 2012b). The staff members at LA’s BEST are invested in the lives and successes of the participants. The individuals are trained in ways to make activities engaging to youth while making changes as necessary. Program staff members work with teachers and other school staff to “promote tighter alignment of program efforts in support of enhanced student learning”

(Heckman & Sanger, 2013, p. 19).

LA's BEST also encourages engagement (Heckman & Sanger, 2013). Staff members and participants are able to influence the activities in which the youth participate during the program. There are also chances for students to attend field trips in addition to the everyday activities onsite. LA's BEST is broken into three and a half beats, or components of the program, that help boost various aspects of a child's development. These include homework and cognitive beats to help improve intellectual development, and a recreation beat to expand one's physical, social, and emotional developments. The beats and activities are meant to enhance the engagement of the youth in the program (Goldschmidt & Huang, 2007). These activities allow for skill building opportunities that encourage close, durable human relationships, which is another characteristic noted by Eccles & Gootman (2002).

Fittingly with the positive characteristics of this program, LA's BEST has seen success in reducing dropout rates. "Through its long-time collaboration with UCLA's National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards and Student Testing (CRESST), LA's BEST has more independent, longitudinal evaluation data and anecdotal results than any program of its kind in the country" (Heckman & Sanger, 2013, p. 20). A study by Huang, Kim, Marshall, & Perez (2005) tested both participants and non-participants of LA's BEST. They found the dropout rates of non-participants to be higher than those of participants of the program. These results were statistically significant for the 9th grade cohort who started the program in 1998. Three years later, these participants were 14 percent less likely to become dropouts (Huang et al., 2005).

After School Matters

The mission of After School Matters (ASM) is “to provide Chicago public high school teens opportunities to explore and develop their talents, while gaining critical skills for work, college, and beyond” (After School Matters, 2011). This is in sync with its vision, which “provides teens with opportunities to discover their potential and find their future” (After School Matters, 2011). Started in the early 2000s, this non-profit organization works to reduce dropout rates through interesting and interactive out-of-school time programming. Targeted at teenagers, After School Matters is a series of programs that grew from the already existing program, Gallery 37. These growing programs work within the collaboration of Chicago’s schools, parks, and libraries to offer apprenticeships for teenagers in the city (Proscio, 2004).

These apprenticeship programs are project-based and hands-on. They encompass a range of content areas including “the arts, science, sports, technology and communications (After School Matters, 2011). ASM offers “an exceptional opportunity to study whether an after-school program designed to help high school students learn work skills can increase their commitment to succeeding in school” (Goerge, Cusick, Wasserman, & Gladden, 2007, p. 1). Over 900 paid apprenticeships and internships are offered in underserved Chicago public schools. These hands-on projects also fall under one of the characteristics set by Eccles and Gootman (2002). The projects allow for opportunities for skill building. They also allow for students to feel efficacious. As this program aims to promote academic success, students are not allowed to participate in the programs on days in which they do not attend school (Goerge et al., 2007). This is

especially important because, as discussed in Chapter 3, academic performance is often affected by one's attendance in school.

As discussed in Chapter 4, relationships with adults are important to engaging youth. Another feature determined by Eccles and Gootman (2002) includes a program providing “opportunities to experience supportive relationships and to have good emotional and moral support” (p. 117). After School Matters programs have characteristics that encourage such relationships. For example, adolescents who participate in ASM programs are able to work along-side experts in different fields to develop mentor-mentee relationships (After School Matters, 2011), which can aid in this engagement.

Two large studies on After School Matters have been completed. Both studies show challenges, and one shows more positive outcomes than the other. The first study—completed by Robert Goerge and colleagues at Chapin Hill Center for Children at the University of Chicago—offers promising outcomes of ASM programs for increasing academic achievement and reducing dropout rates. Goerge et al. (2007) used observational data to compare kids who participated in ASM programs to kids who did not. They found adolescents who participated in the program experienced an increase in school attendance and a decrease in course failure. They also found the following results:

Students who participated in ASM had higher graduation rates and lower dropout rates than non-participants, and among ASM participants, graduation rates increased and dropout rates decreased in general as levels of participation and number of semesters in ASM increased. These results held even after taking into account student demographic characteristics and their prior academic

achievement. For students with very high levels of participation in ASM, the odds of graduating were 2.7 times greater than the odds for students who did not participate in the program, even after taking into account demographic characteristics and prior academic achievement. Similarly, for the students who participated in the program for four or more semesters the odds of graduating were 2.4 times that of students who did not participate. When it came to dropping out of school, the students who participated most intensely in the program and those who were enrolled for the longest time had significantly lower odds (p. 5). After controlling for grades and attendance, they found participants to be less likely to drop out of high school. They also saw stronger effects with more participation in the program. However, this was seen in students who continued the program. These motivated students were different from those who were not studied. For instance, the students who enrolled in ASM programs and continued to attend such programs were more motivated than their non-participate counterparts.

While these results all seem positive, there are some alternative findings about After School Matters. Hirsch, Hedges, Stawicki, & Mekinda (2011) looked examined various studies of this program. They decided “overall, evaluations of ASM have shown potential, yet they are inconclusive. The findings suggest that some youth benefit, but whether enough do so sufficiently to create an average treatment effect is unclear” (p. 18). Therefore, they conducted a study using an experimental design. This three-year study was a random assignment evaluation. Hirsch et al. compared kids who participated in ASM programs to kids who did not. However, this study differs from the previous study by Goerge et al. because it compared students who all tried to participate in ASM

programs. Therefore, the motivation of these students was consistent. In fact, many students from the comparison group participated in other after-school opportunities in Chicago. This makes it difficult to find conclusions about the benefits of ASM programs. Also, nearly half the students in the ASM group dropped out of the programs. The study did not make findings on these adolescents. Hirsch et al. did not find any significant differences related to school attendance or academics. They do find the impacts of After School Matters to be promising. Hirsch et al. said, “although it is frequently the case that no significant treatment effects are found in experimental outcome studies, in this research ASM did have a significant impact in areas that are important to adolescent development and to policy. Moreover, it demonstrated these impacts in relation to what was essentially an alternative treatment comparison group” (p. 6). Lastly, Hirsch et al. did not look at the impact of After School Matters in relation to high school dropout.

Discussion

Both LA’s BEST and After School Matters have strengths and weaknesses within the programs. While the studies about such programs have various limitations, they show potential for these OST programs. Specific OST programs—such as LA’s BEST and After School Matters—are not universal solutions to reducing high school dropout. Additionally, quality programs are difficult to implement. Robert Granger (2008) discussed some of the implications of OST programs. He argues, “there is a great need for research-proven ways to intervene and improve program effectiveness” (p. 4).

Barriers of Existing OST Programs

While there are numerous positive characteristics of youth programs, there are also several barriers that act as obstacles for existing out-of-school time programs. One underlying barrier of existing youth programs is that most programs have limited resources. The limited resources of a program often lead to structural challenges that can decrease the effectiveness for the program. Two examples include restricted staffing and supplies and programs not meeting the expectations of a community. People often expect OST programs to be able to fill every gap and help every individual in need. However, because most programs have limited resources, they cannot be expected to fix every existing problem (Eccles & Gootman, 2002).

The limited resources of a given program can come in various forms. One primary example is a lack of money and funding for a program. OST programs can be very expensive to operate. “Not counting the cost of space, the cost of a typical after-school program usually ranges from \$10 to \$32 per youth per day. Thus, a program operating the average number of days (136), serving the average number of youth per day (63), can expect to spend anywhere from \$86,000 to \$300,000 per school-year program” (Raley, Grossman, & Walker, 2005, p. 36). This figure is most likely even higher today due to inflation over the last several years. As schools and communities have many competing needs, funding and resources are often the fundamental barriers of these programs.

A related barrier of existing OST programs is staffing because “many youth program staff have relatively little training or experience” (Yohalem & Wilson-Ahlstrom,

2010, p. 354). Programs end up being staffed by people who do not have sufficient educations in various aspects of the program due to the limited financial resources of the program (Bartko, 2005). One part of the challenge is staff members are often paid hourly and modestly. Additionally, staff members are “predominantly young, untrained, and prone to frequent turnover” (Granger, 2008, p. 14-5). These characteristics do not allow the youth to form the relationships with staff members that are vital to fostering youth engagement and operating quality programs. These relationships are necessary for keeping adolescents engaged in the programs. One explanation for hiring less qualified staff members is thus having the money to pay them. Even a quality program, such as LA’s BEST, experiences staffing issues due the timing of the program, which is usually only for a few hours on weekdays.

According to Granger (2008), the challenge is improving the quality of programs so they do make a difference. It is often more difficult to improve the quality of existing programs than to creating new programs. Improving the quality of programs requires time, resources, and people who are willing to work hard to better the programs. As mentioned earlier, he believes there is “a great need for research-proven ways to intervene and improve program effectiveness” (p. 4).

Another challenges we face trying to improve programs is an inconsistency within the terminology and language of various programs. There are many ideas that are common across various out-of-school time programs. Researchers and program staff members describe these ideas using varying terminology and language. Some examples of this language include “positive youth development, resiliency theory, asset building, social-emotional learning, brain-based instruction, constructivist education, community

service, and others” (Smith, Devaney, Akiva, & Sugar, 2009, p. 114). Each of these focuses on the same general components of engaging and encouraging youth. These terms are all talking about the same fundamental concepts but can be confused as individual pieces of the puzzle. This can therefore lead to barriers in programs’ development and initiatives.

Even as research improves, the limited resources of a program make it hard to implement that research. “Many community programs also lack staff knowledge and the funds to take full advantage of social indicators as tools to aid in planning, monitoring, assessing, and improving program activities” (Eccles & Gootman, 2002, p. 263). Therefore, programs must be assessed for various reasons and cannot be expected to fix every existing problem for every adolescent.

While there are reasons why OST programs may help and reasons why OST programs may not be useful in dropout prevention, there are specific characteristics of quality OST programs. These characteristics—as seen in quality programs such as LA’s BEST and After School Matters—are important in promoting youth engagement. Though there are some barriers in most programs, quality OST programs may be beneficial in reducing high school dropout.

Chapter 6

Recommendations and Conclusion

High school dropout is clearly a large concern in today's society. As noted earlier, these individuals earn less money than those who graduate, are more likely to go to prison and to experience long unemployment stretches, and are less likely to participate in civic life (Neild, 2009). We know students with certain characteristics drop out of high school more frequently than others. In addition to the microsystem risk factors, students are more likely to drop out when they are not engaged. Out-of-school time programs that foster youth engagement may be a way to reduce this problem. As seen in earlier in this literature review, several characteristics that engage youth overlap with characteristics of quality programs. These include opportunities for supportive relationships, opportunities to be efficacious, and encouraging healthy relationships with peers. Therefore, it is important to engage youth during OST programs.

While there are several barriers of existing programs and reasons why OST programs may not help dropout prevention, there are various reasons supporting the importance of such programs. Additionally, quality among OST programs varies tremendously and is large moderator of a program's results (Granger, 2008). However, some programs are more effective than others. Recognizing the characteristics of quality OST programs can help improve future programs. Recommendations for policy makers will be discussed in the next section.

Recommendations

The following are recommendations for policy makers regarding OST programs to help foster youth engagement and reduce dropout:

- ***Specifically target individuals who are the most at-risk. Use OST programs to reach these students prior to high school.***

Students with certain characteristics—specifically those who are minorities, have low SES, have poor academic performance, and are not engaged in school—drop out of high school more frequently than other students. As these individuals are often identified in grade school, it is important to intervene before they reach high school. Middle school is a prime opportunity for OST programs.

- ***Promote positive relationships between staff members and the program's participants.***

As noted by Eccles and Gootman (2002), forming supportive relationships and having opportunities for skill bonding are important characteristics of quality programs. This can be accomplished through adult-adolescent mentoring and through programs that hire knowledgeable staff members.

- ***Promote cognitive engagement through encouraging self-efficacy.***

Individuals have the opportunity to feel better about themselves. Youth are probably more likely to want to participate in activities and become cognitively engaged when they see improvement in their own skills.

- ***Target investments at high-quality programs. These programs need money and resources in order to do a good job.***

Various programs have a lot of potential for quality. However, these programs need appropriate money and resources to be successful. “The availability of after-school programs has grown to the point that using resources to improve programs is now ethical and feasible, and policymakers and practitioners are increasingly looking for ways to strengthen existing programs” (Granger, 2008, p. 14). Granger (2008) believes “programs should be intentional about what they want to achieve” (p. 16).

Conclusion

Research in out-of-school time is promising, but program makers still need to be cautious. There is not currently enough research to determine the full effectiveness of OST programs engaging youth and reducing high school dropout. More research is needed to specifically design programs for dropout prevention. The programs’ implementers need to work to develop such programs based on youth engagement. Then, researchers must track the progress of the programs to determine the extent of their effectiveness. While these recommendations sound simple to accomplish, they cannot be implemented without sufficient funding to ensure quality staff members and effective programs. As mentioned previously in Chapter 5, one of the largest challenges for out-of-school time programming is a lack of resources. This will continue to be an obstacle for future programs, especially due to the current lack of funding. Policy makers need to

be aware of the potential for quality out-of-school time programs to reduce dropout rates. It is important for policy makers to allot money to be used for such programs to increase the quality and productivity of our country's adult citizens.

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