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HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUT FACTORS: IS THE TREND CHANGING AND WHAT STRATEGIES ARE NEEDED?

Nicole C. West

Department of Energy, Manufacturing &Trades Management, Lone Star College, Houston, TX

Email: Nicole.West@lonestar.edu

Abstract
Low high school graduation and high dropout rates remain issues in the United States. A gap in rates among ethnicities is observable from national dropout data and suggests the need to consider factors associated with dropping out, given that often intervention and prevention strategies fail to target factors associated with students at risk of school failure. A mixed-methods study explored differences in archived dropout rates over a period of 12 years and teachers' perceptions of dropout factors for two high schools in a large urban school district in Southeast Texas. The results revealed dropout rates differed between the two schools at post intervention with increased dropout rates for both schools rather than decreased rates. Major conclusions include that absenteeism remains a trending factor for high school dropout rates and leads to poor grades and low levels of literacy. Implications for school and district wide intervention support strategies are discussed.

***Keywords*:** dropout, dropout factors, dropout prevention and intervention, at risk students

1 Introduction

The concept of high school dropout is an outgrowth of changes in expectations and eligibility criteria for high school attendance which became the norm during the 1960s. Along with the expectation for more students to attend high school came the expectation for them to graduate in preparation for the job market (Cervantes, 2016; Chappell et al., 2015). Explanations of why students do not remain in school have been identified in the theoretical framework of *pushed, pulled, or fall out* that Jordan et al. (1994), and Watt and Roessingh (1994) developed. The premise of the framework is that the school is the agent of students being pushed out of school because of environmental factors and adverse situations, including attendance and discipline policies (Doll et al., 2013). Students pull themselves out of school because of family conditions and needs, illness, or financial concerns (Doll et al., 2013). Students fall out because of circumstances that may include poor academic progress and academic disengagement (Doll et al., 2013).

Factors contributing to high school students dropping out are explained in relation to characteristics or traits defining students who drop out of high school. High rates of school dropouts are associated with low socioeconomic status, ethnicity, race, and gender organized within categories such as demographic, behavioral, familial, personal, performance, and school (Meškauskienė & Guoba, 2016; Zaff et al., 2016). Researchers typically identify demographic and performance risk factors as self-esteem, attendance, grades, motivation, personality, family demographics, and school demographics (Cambron et al., 2017). In terms of student motivation, school structure, climate, resources, curriculums, subject matter content, and teachers are among influential factors (National Dropout Prevention Center, 2019; Orpinas et al., 2018). Also included in some categories are specific risk indicators such as school readiness, academic failure, anti-social behavior, social inequity, and cultural discontinuity (Tomaszewska-Pękała et al., 2019).

Frequently agreed upon factors contributing to students dropping out of high school are poverty, race/ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, absenteeism and grades, motivation and personality, and school influences. The demographics of poverty, familial, and socioeconomics as factors appear as interlinking predictors of students dropping out. Following academic failure and student behavior that includes absenteeism and poor grades (Kearney & Graczyk, 2014; Shahidul & Zehadul Karim, 2015), some researchers report poverty is a leading predictor of the likelihood of students dropping out (Robison et al., 2017; Wood et al., 2017). In terms of race and ethnicity, African American and Hispanic students represent the highest number of dropouts with difficulties with the English language, cultural differences, low expectations of family and peers, and familial factors as contributing factors (McFarland et al., 2019). School structure, climate, resources, curriculums, subject matter content, and teachers also have an influence on student motivation

These factors and associated categories showed the need for additional research regarding dropout indicators. The question remains, "Why do students drop out of high school and what strategies can intervene?" This article addresses this question based on recent research conducted in a large urban school district in Southeast Texas (West, 2021). The findings reflect views of teachers in two high schools with majority student populations representing Hispanic and African American

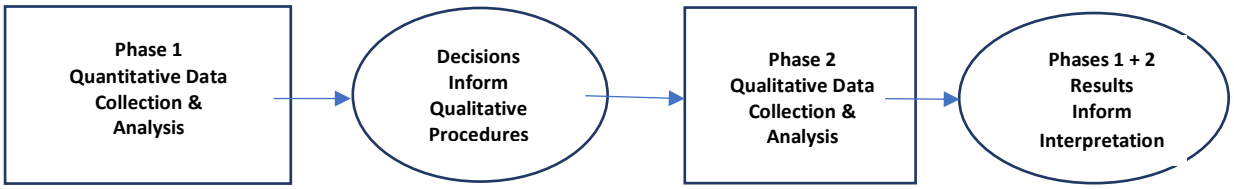
2 Methodology

This study examined dropout rates and factors teachers (N =38) and school leaders (N = 2) perceived as contributing to students dropping out of school. A mixed method design comprised of the explanatory-sequential approach focused on gaining a greater understanding of dropout rates through identifying possible reasons for what the numerical analysis revealed (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2017). The quantitative component, causal comparative in nature (Mertens, 2019; Mills & Gay, 2019), used archived dropout data to examine trends in dropout rates six years before and after schools instituted dropout prevention strategies. The intervention strategies involved a school-wide approach to include activities and services such as mentoring, monitoring progress, services focused on economic needs, alternative school schedules, and credit recovery to permit on-time graduation. Phenomenology constituted the qualitative component for identifying reasons participants perceived influenced students' decisions to drop out of school. Participants lived experiences were acquired through individual interviews. Additionally, an open-ended survey collected data on participants' perceptions of

dropout factors. The questions guiding the study were (a) Is there a difference in dropout rates between two high schools after implementation of intervention strategies? and (b) What are the factors that influence students to drop out of school? These questions provided insight for determining whether there is a changing trend that suggests reasons for students not graduating high school. Figure 1 is an illustration of the design phases used to explore the research questions.

Figure 1

Sequence of the Explanatory-Sequential Approach



Note. Boxes contain the analysis of data collected for decision making in the circles. Quantitative data appear in Phase 1 Box which determine what qualitative data are needed in Phase 2 Box. Analyzed data from both boxes are presented in the last circle for interpreting, triangulating, and reporting results.

2.1 Data Collection

In a two-phase approach, quantitative data were collected first in the explanatory-sequential mixed-methods design as recommended (Mertens, 2019; Mills & Gay, 2019; Subedi, 2016). These data included dropout rates for a 12-year period from the district's archived databases. The data were divided as pre and post intervention rates. In phase two, qualitative data were collected from a researcher-created peer-reviewed leadership survey administered through Survey Monkey. Teachers' responses to 20 factors identified in the prevention/intervention literature indicated factors they perceived were targeted in their dropout intervention efforts for decreasing the potential for students to drop out of school. In addition to the list of 20 factors, participants had the option to include their choice of other factors. Qualitative data also resulted from one-on-one interviews conducted through Zoom using an interview protocol consisting of 12 peer-reviewed questions that described intervention/prevention efforts including how personnel identified and targeted factors aimed at reducing dropout rates.

> During the interview participants were also provided the following scenario based on the results of survey from their respective school:
> The responses of participants from your school about factors that they perceived are targeted in the dropout intervention effort for decreasing the potential for students to drop out of school indicated that the following factors are the leading targeted items (The researcher cited the factors from highest to lowest frequency).

The following questions were posed:

> What is your thinking regarding the factors stressed in your efforts to reduce dropout rates? What specifically is done to address these factors (What does the school do in

targeting such factors as poverty/socioeconomics/school attendance/parental involvement/test score performance in working with students at risk of dropping out?)

2.2 Data Analysis

Computations for a Mann Whitney U test with a *p*-value of 0.05 determined whether there was a significant difference between the two schools for the 12 cases investigated on dropout rates for six pre intervention academic school years (2006–2012) and six post intervention academic school years (2012–2018). The quantitative analyses also included descriptive statistics to identify frequencies of participants' responses identifying dropout factors cited on the quantitative questions of the survey. The qualitative analyses included a mixture of content and phenomenological analysis with guidance from the methodology literature (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Krippendorff, 2013; Mayer, 2016; Moustakas, 1994; Saldaña & Omasta, 2018).

Interview data were transcribed through a reputable transcription company. The analyses performed by the researcher involved coding the data, identifying significant statements that denoted how participants experienced the phenomenon; categorizing data into meaningful units; and reducing and selecting units most applicable to the problem and research questions (Krippendorff, 2013; Mayer, 2016; Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). Following the initial coding, patterns of responses emerged. Themes that emerged from the patterns and categories were identified. These themes and significant statements permitted a report of the essence of participants' experiences based on what was experienced and how it was experienced. The themes served as the results of this component.

3 Results

3.1 Quantitative Results

The analyses of dropout rates for the 12 years examined determined whether differences existed in pre- and post-dropout rates between the two schools. The descriptive statistical analyses of the data reported frequencies, means, and standard deviations for both dropout datasets. The analyses used the Mann-Whitney U test, which is an appropriate test for a small sample size with non-normal data (Wiedermann et al., 2017). An established *p*-value of 0.05 determined whether there was a significant difference between the two programs for the 12 cases investigated on dropout rates. The analysis of pre-dropout rates resulted in $U = 17$, $z = 0.08006$, $p = .93624$. The critical value of U at $p > .05$ was 5. The result was not significant at $p > .05$ level. Therefore, the null hypothesis failed to be rejected since no significant differences existed in the pre-dropout rates between the two schools. Both schools had similar rates prior to the intervention.

The analysis of differences in post-dropout scores between the two schools began in the year 2012. The rates for Pseudonym School BW were higher during this school year than Pseudonym School AM. Therefore, the schools entered the post intervention period with differences in dropout rates. Also, dropout rates for School AM for 2012 and the years moving forward were not as consistent as those for School BW. The analysis of post dropout rates resulted in $U = 0$, a significant difference in rates between the two schools. After program implementation, the post dropout rates for School AM were lower than the rates for School BW.

The differences in the post intervention rates suggest that School AM's program was more effective in its prevention and intervention efforts for lowering dropout rates; however, a small sample size, differences in dropout rates between the schools at the beginning of post analysis (school year 2012–2013), and inconsistencies in dropout rates should be considered in fairness of the results.

Responses to quantitative survey questions regarding factors that most likely influence student dropout revealed attendance as the leading factor cited for both schools. Poverty, socioeconomics, and parental involvement followed as the next leading factors for School AM. Student behavior, test score performance, academic performance, literacy in reading and mathematics, and teacher awareness of students' needs received the same number of responses for the next leading factors for School BW.

3.2 Qualitative Results

Interview responses supported those from survey results. Three levels of themes emerged that contained seven subthemes. Theme 1.1, Whole-School Approach, identified the overall structure of the intervention activities. Theme 1.2, Dropout Factors, identified influences on students' decisions to drop out of school and how school personnel identified those factors. Theme 1.3, Communication, was the foundation of preventive strategies. It identified intervention features that were centered on the communication process aimed at decreasing dropout rates. Theme 2.1, Setting the Example, identified behaviors that teachers and leaders exhibited that increased student attendance and student motivation. Theme 2.2, Specialized Services, consisted of an account of services provided to students that would deter them from dropping out of school (i.e., credit recovery and similar programs). Theme 3.1, Facilitator of Services for Student Success, identified the role of teachers in providing diverse services for students' individualized needs that lead to success. Theme 3.2, Image Maker, functioned to promote the behaviors personnel model to create the image that success is possible.

The dropout factor theme emerging from interviews was consistent with survey results as absenteeism emerged as the leading dropout factor. Teachers and leaders responded to this finding through addressing reasons for absences. These reasons were also consistent with findings from other studies cited in the review of literature and included poverty or socioeconomic conditions, and issues related to home conditions. The reason for absence largely consisted of the need for students to work, stay home with siblings while parents worked, or stay home with their own child. Figure 2 is a cross referencing of themes with frequently used words and participants' meaning of the themes.

Figure 2

Themes Cross Referenced

Theme	Frequent expression	Essence of meaning
1.1 Whole school	Whole; within; after; intervention	A multi-activity school-based initiative
1.2 Dropout factors	Attendance, needs, priorities, parents, communications, student engagement	I want to drop out because…
1.3 Communication for preventive strategies	Tracking home visits attendance, listening, talking	Communicating for credit recovery and support services to keep students in school
2.1 Setting the example	Model, celebrate, share, expectations, interests, self-efficacy	Teachers and leaders' model high expectations whereby students feel good about themselves.
2.2 Specialized services	Programs, grad lab, credit recovery, showcase, attendance	Opportunities for students to grow through varied programs
3.1 Facilitator for success	Differentiated services and instruction, modeling, roles	Failure is not an option.
3.2 Image maker	Interests, success, doing something	Background and the environment don't have to limit career options.

4 Discussion

The results of the analysis of dropout rates showed an increase in both schools' dropout rates after implementing prevention strategies for the years 2012-2018. Also, simple linear regression statistical analysis with school dropout rates as the dependant variable and the graduation years as the independent variable predicted graduation rates for the years 2018-2020. The results showed that graduation rates predicted dropout rates to increase for each year: 2018, 2019, 2020. A review of reports for the entire district supported the increased trend. For the academic term 2018–2019, district dropout and graduation rate analyses showed that dropout rates increased from the 2017–2018 school term. The dropout rates in the district for African American, Asian, and Hispanic students were respectively 0.8, 3.1, and 1.1 percentage points higher than the rates for the class of 2018. The dropout rate for White students decreased by 1.2 percentage points.

In addition to reasons associated with absenteeism, interview participants attributed increased dropout rates in part to changes in district priorities and instability in school leadership.

Interview results also triangulated survey findings regarding possible factors contributing to dropout rates with attendance as a leading factor. Survey results from both schools showed attendance had the highest frequency of responses. Most interview participants cited economic reasons as contributing to poor attendance for most students. These reasons included poverty where students lacked basic resources, work schedules that interfered with the school schedule, and baby or sibling sitting while parents worked. Differences in the geographical location of schools also contributed to differences in attendance rates.

Earlier reports of reasons students cited for not attending school in the district participating in the study included working, incarceration, and pregnancy (NCA Investigations, 2008). Current findings in the district show that pregnancy as a reason for school absence has declined; however, employment remains a leading reason for students incurring absences that eventually lead to them dropping out of school. Dropout trends described in the study are supported in quantitative and qualitative findings including that poverty influences the decision to drop out as students frequently engage in the labor market rather than attend school. This finding has relevance for the COVID-infested society where many students are having to seek employment to help their now unemployed parents.

The lowest-ranked factors from the survey for School AM were race and ethnicity, personality, and performance in study skills. Also, personality received the lowest number of responses for both schools. Although parent involvement received more survey responses at School AM than BW and neither listed this factor as a first priority, interview participants invariably placed the item in a leading position.

The study's results have implications for practices aimed at increasing attendance through strategies that address the reasons for absences. For example, truancy was a similar feature between the current investigation and other programs cited in the literature. An evaluation of the truancy feature of Check & Connect revealed the need to shift emphasis from studying students' characteristics related to truancy in efforts to reduce absenteeism to a focus on students' strengths and requirements for them to be successful (Ekstrand, 2015). Interview responses in the current study revealed that attention to truancy and attendance entailed focusing on students' characteristics, identifying their needs, and providing alternatives to alter negative conditions resulting from tardiness and absenteeism through various approaches to include credit recovery, student recovery, monitoring, home visits, and referrals to assisting social agencies.

Findings from this study were similar to those of other studies that identified irregular attendance and chronic absenteeism as factors contributing to behaviors that lead to students dropping out of school (Kearney & Graczyk, 2014; Tanner-Smith & Wilson, 2013). The reasons for school absence vary and some are directly linked to gender differences where females, for instance, are frequently absent because they may take on the role of caring for siblings or their own children as teenage parents (Shahidul & Zehadul Karim, 2015). Consistent with the current study's findings, reasons are also family-related causes where economic conditions require students to work (Shahidul & Zehadul Karim, 2015).

5 Limitations

The small sample size poses limits on the study's findings. The sample was drawn from two large schools with similar characteristics in the student population and dropout data; however, including additional schools with similar characteristics to the sample selected may have increased the number of participants and added additional insight to the issue of dropout factors. The demographics of other schools may have influenced dropout means, thus, potentially altering the study's results.

Interview participants represented a purposive sample. As such, the sample may not have adequately represented the population which restricts transferability. In addition to procedures for quantitative analyses, the research design encompassed an inquiry approach to acquire participants' accounts of their experiences. Making their meaning operational relied on a narrative account of the richness and depth of their experiences. Therefore, a portion of the phenomenon investigated represented participants' experiences and points of view and may not reflect the views of other teachers and leaders employed in the same district or state.

6 Recommendations

Absenteeism was a major factor contributing to school dropout. Economic reasons contributed to absence from school in favor of working. The grade level for the highest dropout rate is consistent with the age that students are eligible for employment. The economic needs of students may be addressed through the district instituting on-the-job training programs that would permit students to receive credit for graduation while also earning an income. Intervention/prevention efforts may incorporate aspects of a typical vocational curriculum and the flexible scheduling available to students. Efforts should include a support mechanism that involves mentoring and homework assistance.

Dropout factors identified in the literature review and in participants' responses suggest that in additional to addressing students' economic needs, other needs of students should be identified. These needs may be identified through personnel engaging in active listening. Listening to students can provide opportunities for identifying the most appropriate learning experiences for them. For example, sponsoring events to celebrate students' achievements, creating showcasing events whereby students can see that their suggestions are incorporated would likely increase student motivation and their confidence. From experiencing such events, students develop a sense of ownership in the school and also begin to realize that they have something to offer. Recommended is that the district assesses opportunities identified at both schools in the study and other schools in the district to determine those that may best encourage students to attend school. The results could then be used for the district to design a strategy required of all schools. In this way, all schools would have at least one comprehensive activity focused on encouraging student motivation to attend school.

7 Conclusion

Why do students drop out of high school and is the trend in dropout factors changing? This research supports that students most often drop out of high school as a result of high rates of absences that most frequently occur because of economic reasons. Absenteeism remains a supporting trend for students not completing high school. Absenteeism leads to poor grades and low levels of literacy. Unfortunately, COVID has added to the absenteeism trend which has prompted more students to seek employment to assist their families. Additionally, COVID has

influenced student motivation; therefore, not taking full advantage of schooling through virtual and other learning formats. Strategies for providing more support to students' economic and motivational needs are among challenges that must be better addressed so that students are prepared for a society requiring an educated citizenry.

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