High School Dropouts: Factors that Contribute to Disengagement

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Abstract

This paper reviews the literature surrounding the high school dropout phenomenon. To better understand how to reduce dropout rates, research has examined the antecedents to dropping out from many different perspectives. Just as students themselves report a variety of reasons for quitting school, the literature also identifies a number of salient factors that contribute to the decision to drop out. This paper will focus on the interactive role between the intra-personal and school factors, with a focus on why particular groups are at risk. More specifically, the process of disengagement is an extended one, which is influenced by student backgrounds, explanatory styles, and self-concepts, all of which can be exacerbated by a poor school environment.

High School Dropouts: Factors that Contribute to Disengagement

From the 1960's until now, the phenomenon of high school dropouts has been examined from countless different perspectives within various areas of study, with the hopes of diminishing the number of students who choose to leave school before completion. This issue has become of increasing concern as the complexity and technological nature of modern society continue to increase. Today's technological growth and exportation of low-skilled jobs overseas creates a growing demand for high skilled labor, leaving fewer opportunities for low-skilled labor. These trends predict that dropouts will struggle more economically than in the past, and their outcomes will be significantly worse than for their graduating peers. In an attempt to lessen these dropout rates, several programs have been implemented in schools and in the media, which encourage students to stay in school. However, these attempts have been studied with inconclusive, inadequate, and mixed results. To better understand how to help these struggling students, it is important to first understand the multifaceted process that leads students to the decision to drop out of high school.

Much research has been focused on the question of student-level predictors of dropping out in an attempt to identify those who are most at risk. A number of studies have identified a multitude of factors associated with students' decisions to drop out. Most unanimously determined in the literature is the association between student decision to drop out and their family's level of income, or socioeconomic status. That is, students of a low socioeconomic background tend to be more likely to drop out of high school than students from middle or upper class families (Ferguson, Tilleczek, Boydell, Rummens, Cote, & Roth-Edney, 2005). Associations also exist between student demographic characteristics and their decisions to drop out. Interestingly, while high school dropout rates have declined between

1980 and 2009, from 12% to 7%, racial disparities persist. In 2009, 5% of whites ages 16-24 were not enrolled and had not completed high school, in comparison with 10% of blacks and 18% hispanics. Asian youth, with a droupout rate of 2% had the lowest dropout rate among all racial and ethnic groups (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). Data from the U.S. Census Bureau (2012) also suggests that family makeup plays a role in the student's decision to drop out. For example, students living with both parents have higher graduation rates than students in other living arrangements. Research also supports that parenting practices and involvement including monitoring their child's academic progress, communicating with the school, and knowing the parents of their children's friends are correlated with higher rates of graduation. Though these factors on their own do not lead to dropouts, research has suggested that those who experience multiple risk factors are at greater risk for dropping out of school (Ferguson et al., 2005). Unfortunately, we are unable to control individual factors such as poor financial standing, racial background, family makeup, and parenting practices, but these statistics have helped researchers to better understand the mechanisms behind the decision to drop out.

Pinpointing the cause of dropping out, however, is quite difficult to do. This is because unlike other forms of educational achievement such as test scores, the decision to drop out is influenced by a wide range of direct and distant factors related to the individual. Given that the decision to drop out is not often viewed as a single event, but as an ongoing and lengthy decision in development, researchers view the phenomenon as a process of disengagement. Disengagement from school is defined by the lack of commitment to school socially, academically, and behaviorally, which includes an emotional detachment from school. Throughout this paper, the process of disengaging from school is defined through several parameters: reducing effort and involvement in school, disconnecting from norms and expectations, and withdrawing from commitment to school over a period of time.

A wide range of factors (intrapersonal, family, and school) interact to lead to pervasive disengagement and a complex rationale for leaving school early. However, while it is necessary to consider these various factors and their relation to one another, the focus of this paper will be on the intrapersonal mechanisms behind disengagement, and how school factors contribute to these processes. The reasoning behind this focus on the schools and their role in disengagement is a practical one. Of course, school is inherently the setting where dropping out occurs, making it a vital grounds for investigation. More importantly, however, the school setting is one that is most within our control in comparison to the macro-level parameters such as socioeconomic status and race. To explore the research surrounding high school dropouts, this paper will begin by discussing the intrapersonal psychological process of disengagement. This section will discuss the key components of disengagement, including students' feelings of powerlessness, social isolation, and threats to self-esteem. The following section will describe how the school setting can perpetuate or prevent the development of disengagement from school through student-teacher interactions, instructional strategies, curriculum, school climate, policies, and practices. The paper will conclude with implications for school reform based on the current research and will include examples of particularly successful programs and interventions.

Intra-personal factors that contribute to disengagement

One clear finding from prior research on the process of disengagement is that, although different students may begin disengaging from school for different reasons, many of the same outcomes present themselves throughout the process. More specifically, disengaging from school includes both emotional and behavioral components. The emotional component involves attitudes towards school, teachers, and classwork while the behavioral manifestation of disengagement involves resistance from or a lack of participation in

academic and extracurricular activities (Fredericks, Blumenfeld & Paris, 2004). Both the behavioral and emotional aspects of disengagement affect the willingness of students to invest in their education. Research has identified several factors that contribute to the internal process of disengagement, which include: learned helplessness, stereotype threat, and social isolation (Seligman, 1972; Ciarrochi & Heaven, 2008; Dweck, 2006; Purandare, 2010; Määttä, Nurmi, & Stattin, 2007; Parker & Asher, 1987; Gronlund & Holmlund, 1958; Steele, 1997; McKown & Weinstein, 2003; Osborne, 1997). These factors and their role in the process of disengagement will be discussed throughout this section, and will be further explored within the context of schools in the next major section. This section will conclude by identifying the behavioral manifestations of disengagement, which incidentally only alienate students further from the school.

Learned Helplessness

Several studies have identified one of the most important contributors to disengagement and dropping out as the way in which an individual perceives events in their life. Ciarrochi and Heaven (2008) define this *explanatory style* as an individual's patterns of attributions about the cause of events which is largely consistent across situations. That is, individuals develop predictable ways in which they interpret the events in their life. The way in which individuals interpret events is a learned behavior which is based on observing the explanatory style of loved ones (social modeling) and direct experiences with negative life events (behavioral theory). Here, I will discuss the dimensions of explanatory style and then explore the conditions that lead individuals to their own personal way of interpretation.

Seligman identifies three dimensions within the causal attribution of events. The first aspect is the individual's perception of internal or external control, which is known as locus of control. This explains whether an individual considers an event within their control ("I

studied hard and got an A on that test") or beyond their control ("Gee, the teacher gave us a very easy test"). The second dimension regards the individual's interpretation of permanence and stability of the cause of an event ("I have never been and will never be good at math" versus "I am having trouble understanding algebra right now"). Third, individuals assess events in terms of global rather than specific causes ("I am dumb" as opposed to "I didn't do very well on that test"). Based on these dimensions, theorists have divided explanatory style into pessimistic and optimistic explanatory style. Those who have pessimistic explanatory style explain bad events with internal, stable, and global causes. Conversely, these same individuals tend to explain positive events with external, transient, and specific causes (Seligman, 1972; Ciarrochi & Heaven, 2008; Dweck, 2006). Within the school context, students with an optimistic framework are likely to interpret failure as a temporary state of affairs which is confined to that task and over which they have ultimate control. For pessimists, the same failure is likely to be perceived as being more long-lasting, uncontrollable, and due to their own lack of competency, which can often lead to feelings of helplessness and powerlessness over the situation. This sense of powerlessness over one's own successes and failures negatively influences attitudes, motivations, and level of engagement in school. The remainder of this section will focus on the factors that contribute to the development of pessimistic explanatory style.

Essential to the understanding of pessimistic explanatory style is the fact that it is a learned behavior, hence the term *learned helplessness*. To illustrate this point, it can be helpful to discuss Seligman's founding behavioral study which first identified learned helplessness (Nolen-Hoeksems, Girgus, and Seligman, 1992). In his research, Seligman repeatedly exposed dogs to electric shocks that they could not escape. At first, the dogs actively attempted to escape by jumping and barking, but the shocks continued. Eventually,

the dogs stopped trying to escape the shocks and simply lay passively as they were continually subjected to the suffering. This passive and helpless behavior even continued when the dogs were given the opportunity to escape, suggesting that they felt they had no control over the situation. Given their experiences with negative events that were inescapable and pervasive, these dogs acquired a learned response that caused them to feel helpless when faced with negative occurrences. Similarly, humans often exhibit comparable patterns of passivity and helplessness following prolonged adverse events.

The critical determinant of learned helplessness developing in children is the experience with early and uncontrollable negative life events. Some of the most commonly cited examples of adverse events are parental divorce, a death in the family, unemployment, abuse, and extreme poverty. These adverse events are often accompanied by major and chronic disruptions in the child's environment as well as in parents' ability to nurture their children (Nolen-Hoeksems, Girgus, and Seligman, 1992; Purandare, 2010). That is, the nature of these particular negative life events is that they are often pervasive and affect several aspects of the child's life, none of which the child has the ability to control. For example, if one parent passes away, there is a significant shift in the family's finances, perhaps leaving the child hungry many nights. Furthermore, the surviving parent is left to raise the children alone, while both the child and parent are mourning. Not only will a situation such as this one lead a child to be deprived of food and care, but also causes feelings of powerlessness and helplessness. A longitudinal study by Nolen-Hoeksems, Girgus, and Seligman (1992) supported that when negative life events are pervasive or persist for long periods of time, it may convince the child that there is nothing she or he can do to prevent them, thus leading to learned helplesness. Conversely, if the crisis gets resolved quickly, the child learns to believe that adversity is specific, temporary, and can be overcome.

Not surprisingly, research indicates that children from disadvantaged backgrounds are significantly more likely to suffer from learned helplessness than are those from more privileged backgrounds. Purandare (2010) explains this finding by suggesting that children from low socioeconomic background are significantly more likely to experience pervasive adverse life events such as abuse, parental divorce, unemployment, etc. Additionally, since their primary caregivers are experiencing the same adverse events, it is likely that their exhibited learned helplessness has an affect on the child's learned explanatory style. Purandare (2010) supports that children from disadvantaged backgrounds are less capable of coping with such stressful life events when they occur because their parents or loved ones do not exhibit proper coping mechanisms. Thus, children are not able to observe an optimistic explanatory style and adopt the learned helplessness response.

Unfortunately, this learned helplessness affects individuals in all aspects of their life, in that they interpret negative events with the same pessimistic framework. This interpretation of events leads to a sense of powerlessness which can be a serious impediment to students, as they are confronted with academic and social challenges each day. Students who exhibit learned helplessness are hindered in their ability to learn, participate, and engage in school due to their feeling of powerlessness when faced with challenges. Studies have supported that learned helplessness is correlated with giving up quickly on work and frequent expressions of frustration (Määttä, Nurmi, & Stattin, 2007). Thus, learned helplessness is identified as a significant contributor to disengagement from school over time due to feelings of powerlessness and continual frustration within the school setting.

Fortunately, trends suggest that early in life, children's explanatory styles are still under development, but as they grow older, their explanatory style becomes more stable and more

significantly affect the child's performance.

Stereotype Threat

Stereotype threat refers to being aware of a stereotype about a particular self-characteristic, which causes the individual to perform in accordance with that idea (Steele, 1997; McKown & Weinstein, 2003). While this phenomenon can occur for both positive and negative stereotypes, it is most often cited in reference to the reduced performance of individuals who belong to negatively stereotyped groups. Steele (1997) was one of the first theorists to demonstrate the substantial impact of negative stereotypes on academic performance for ethnic minorities, particularly African americans. These studies suggest that when a negative stereotype is salient, individuals often perform in a way that is consistent with the stereotype. This underperformance is partially explained by the person's anxiety about confirming the negative stereotype, which then leads to distraction and uncertainty, both of which diminish performance. In addition to a decline in academic performance, Steele also theorizes that stereotype threat leads to disengagement and disidentification from school as a defense mechanism protect self-image. That is, African Americans and other ethnic minorities may devalue academics and the school on the whole in an attempt to avoid having their academic underperformance affect their overall self-esteem. Unfortunately, student behaviors and outcomes are affected by the opinions that teachers and other school personnel hold about them. That is, when a teacher holds particular perceptions of a student, they then treat them differently. This behavior tells the student what the teacher expects of them. If this treatment is consistent over time, the student begins to internalize the stigma, and begins to conform to these expectations, creating a self-fulfilling prophecy based on the student's background and the teacher's expectations (Steele, 1997).

Empirical evidence has supported the theory that stereotype threat leads to disengagement and disidentification from the school domain. A longitudinal study conducted by Osborne (1997) compared the correlation between self-esteem and GPA among African American, White, and Latino students from 8th to 12th grade. The correlation between self-esteem and academic achievement were used to measure a student's level of disengagement. For example, correlations that indicate less of a link between self-esteem and achievement suggest higher levels of disengagement. Osborne found that white students had higher GPA at each grade level, while Hispanic and African American students declined in achievement over time. However, African American students had higher self-esteem than did Whites and Hispanics, which only increased over each grade level. While the correlations between self-esteem and GPA were significant for all groups in 8th grade, African American boys exhibited a weakening correlation over time. In fact, by 12th grade, academic achievement and self-esteem for African American boys were not significantly correlated. These findings provide evidence for the idea that stereotype threat leads to disengagement and disidentification from school over time.

Social Isolation

Because academic pursuits take place in a social context, poor social relationships often undermine student success and lead to further disengagement from the school context. Developing and maintaining positive relationships with others has often been cited as an important factor in school engagement, such that they help students to feel a sense of belonging (Parker & Asher, 1987). In an early examination of this issue, Gronlund and Holmlund (1958) compared the rate of dropping out among low-accepted sixth-grade children with the rate among high-accepted children of comparable levels of intelligence. They reported that low-accepted boys were 2.5 times more likely to drop out than high-

accepted boys. Similarly, low-accepted girls were 8 times more likely to drop out than high-accepted girls. This data suggests that children who are not as accepted by their peers tend to simultaneously disengage and alienate themselves from the school.

Interestingly, a student's level of acceptance is not only based on their clothes, jokes, or good looks, but also on their explanatory style. That is, a study by Ciarocchi and Heaven (2008) suggested that learned helplessness and the associated passive powerlessness affects a student's likability. Ciarrochi and Heaven explain that this lessened likability is also attributed to the children actively disengaging from their peers due to a negative view of self. This lack of effort in developing and maintaining positive social support networks has been cited as an important factor contributing to disegnagement (Ciarrochi & Heaven, 2008). This research supports that learned helplessness predicts higher levels of social isolation. To explain further, if children have a tendency to blame themselves (internalize) for negative social events, and give others credit for positive social events, they may over time become more pessimistic about their ability to form supportive relationships. The inability to form relationships with peers as well as adults can contribute to disengagement from the school setting. In fact, a study by Parker and Asher (1987) found that even having one friend to rely on reduced a student's later likelihood of dropping out of high school. The research suggests that social support provides students with a sense of belonging in school, which can help students to identify with school and serve as a protective factor against disengagement (Parker & Asher, 1987).

Behavioral Dimensions of Disengagement

As mentioned previously, the behaviors associated with the process disengagement are both a result of the process as well as a perpetuating factor. To illustrate this point, I will first identify the behaviors associated with disengagement and then describe how these

actions further contribute to the process. A longitudinal study conducted by Balfanz et al. (2007), found that misbehavior, low attendance rates, and poor grades in 6th grade represent a reduction in effort and engagement that are predictive of high school dropout. In fact, these indicators more accurately predict whether a student will drop out of high school than do socioeconomic factors, and can be used to predict about 60% of high school dropouts as early as the start of middle school (Schoeneberger, 2012). Interestingly, frequent absences have been cited as the most accurate predictor of dropping out. Researchers suggest that students skip school as an avoidance tactic, removing themselves from activities where they perceive themselves as having a low likelihood of success. Unfortunately, this process of avoidance and later disengagement is cyclical, such that students who are often absent will not be present for instruction, and are then likely to underperform, experience anxiety from their perceived lack of ability, and eventually are more likely to drop out of school.

Summary of Dimensions of Disengagement

In summary, it is evident that many adverse life events and conditions contribute to a particularly pessimistic way of viewing the world. This phenomenon, learned helplessness, leads to various attitudes and behaviors that can affect both social relationships and academic success within schools. Similarly, negative stereotypes and labels that are salient to students based on interactions with school personnel can be internalized. This internalization can lead students to negative self-concepts within the school realm, which cause the student to disassociate from school as a protective mechanism. While the above dimensions contribute to a particular predisposition for disengagement, trends suggest that early in life, children's explanatory styles and self-concepts are still under development. However, as they grow older, children's explanatory styles and self-image become more stable and more significantly affect their performance. Fortunately, much research has contributed to a better

understanding of the process of disengagement. This multidimensional conceptualization of engagement discussed above provides an inclusive understanding of the process and its effects on students' participation, sense of belonging, and academic achievement.

School factors that contribute to the decision to drop out

As the previous section noted, issues such as poverty, social inequality, abuse, and other varying adverse life events impact today's students from the early ages. Certainly, factors such as these are not within the school's control. Fortunately, while family backgrounds account for some effect on educational disengagement, studies have indicated that much of the influence of background can be moderated through schools. That is, students spend approximately half of their waking hours in school each day, which accounts for a significant portion of their daily experience. Research has supported that when the proper school characteristics are present, schools can play a liberating and empowering role in the life of many disadvantaged groups and individuals (Fredericks, Blumenfeld & Paris, 2004). Conversely, if the school environment becomes a constant source of failure and frustration, schools also have the power to further exacerbate the process of disengagement from the school context. In short, research by Fredericks, Blumenfeld and Paris (2004) suggest that disengagement is a malleable construct that results from an interaction between the individual and the environment. The characteristics of both successful and unsuccessful school environment require close examination in order to understand the optimal environment for encouraging student engagement.

Interestingly, only fifteen percent of the nation's high schools produce 50% of the nation's dropouts (Balfanz & Legters, 2004). Recognizing these differences in dropout rates among schools, researchers have examined the characteristics of schools with higher levels of dropouts. These studies consider several dimensions of schools such as structural, academic,

social, policy, and overall climate aspects that are associated with dropping out. This section will discuss many of the most important issues that have been identified within these underperforming schools. It will begin by addressing the various issues associated with creating a sense of belonging for students and then focus on curriculum structure.

Factors that contribute to a sense of belonging for students

School belonging refers to a student's perception of being accepted by and respected within their school setting (Hammond, 2007). Of course, all individuals have an innate need to belong to social groups and to form positive interpersonal relationships with others. Given the amount of time students spend in the schools, students' sense of belonging in these settings is vital in optimizing student outcomes. However, studies indicate that several factors within the school environment create the sense that many students do not belong, thus hindering their level of engagement. The school factors that affect student's sense of membership and belonging are: school size, school climate, student-teacher relationships, and policies and practices.

School Size. Studies have repeatedly identified large school size as a primary structural feature associated with higher rates of dropouts (Balfanz, Herzog, & Mac Iver, 2007; Schulz, 2007; Stanley, 2003). The reasons behind this correlation are wide in their scope, but all primarily point to one factor of school success: creating a sense of belonging for students. That is, in large schools, it is more difficult to personalize instruction, build supportive relationships, and to create a unified vision and sense of purpose to bind the school community. Interestingly, a study by Lee and Smith (1997) not only found that students reported higher levels of engagement and learned more in high schools with 600-700 students (relatively small), but also that engagement and learning were more equally distributed between students of differing socioeconomic background. This may suggest that

the environment of small schools can help to moderate the effects of early adverse life events mentioned in the previous section. Additionally, Lee & Smith found that smaller schools were more favorable environments not only for the students, but for teachers attitudes towards their students as well. The researchers attribute this positive effect to the small school teachers taking more personal responsibility for their students success and well-being than in larger schools. Thus, the research suggests that size of school has both a direct and indirect effect on engagement. That is, school size directly influences students' sense of belonging by creating a greater sense of community, and indirectly by influencing teacher's attitudes towards students, which is also associated with greater levels of engagement. So, while we do not have much, if any, control over the size of schools, we are able to improve in the realm of these mediating variables (school climate and social support), which will be discussed in greater detail below.

Social Climate. Fundamental to a sense of belonging in school is a healthy, safe, and positive school climate. Several studies have examined the school factors that contribute to students investing in their experiences and success at school (Hazler & Denham, 2002; Balfanz & Legters, 2004; Newman, Wehlage & Lamborn, 1992). Research by Newman, Wehlage and Lamborn (1992) suggest that one of the most important factors in school success and engagement is "school membership", which is defined by connections students develop with the school. This sense of belonging and membership increases in schools that provide personal support for students, equality, and frequent experiences of success for all students, all within a caring environment. In terms of opportunities for success, Schulz (2007) suggests that students are less likely to feel engaged and a sense of belonging when there is an imbalance between the academic demands of school and the resources provided to meet

those demands. However, a sense of belonging extends beyond the academic world, with a strong emphasis on social climate.

An important protective factor against dropping out is an environment that fosters positive social relationships between peers. As mentioned in individual factors, social isolation can have a large effect on the decision to drop out. Outward behaviors such as bullying and teasing are intentional and evidence has supported that they contribute to further disengagement from school (Hazler & Denham, 2002; Parker and Asher, 1987). In a hostile school climate, many students may become victims, and may become isolated, untrusting, and alienated. Fostering a supportive, safe, and caring environment for all students can reduce this feeling of alienation and social isolation. The importance of teacher attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors towards students are stressed in cultivating such an environment.

Student-teacher Interactions and Social Support. Both qualitative and quantitative studies have found that students who drop out of high school continually pinpoint lack of social support as one of the primary factors for their decision. Several studies have suggested that the most disengaged students claim that the school personnel do not care about them or their academic success and are unwilling to invest in the students' problems, even after having reached out for help (Strambler, 2008; Croninger & Lee, 2001). Daily journals kept by disengaged students revealed that 70% of students mentioned not getting along with teachers, peers, and administration as a frequent struggle (Stanley & Baines, 2003). These studies suggest that when students believe that teachers, administrators, and "the system" do not care for them, and that there is little they can personally do about their outcomes in school, they feel powerless, an important dimension of disengagement mentioned in the above section. These students may feel it is useless to try or speak up about

problems because teachers and administrators ignore their complaints. They may ultimately feel alienated from the schooling process, contributing to disengagement.

Teacher-student relationships are one of the most important elements of school life, as they have been found to contribute significantly to student success and engagement. Strambler (2010) identified several aspects of teacher care that facilitate or hinder students' motivation to engage. These dimensions include the teacher's respect towards students, how they provide feedback, and responses to emotional and academic needs. After controlling for prior achievement differences, Strambler supported that when students who reported greater levels of negative feedback from teachers and less teacher care, these individuals displayed more disengagement from school. More specifically, there are significantly lower dropout rates in schools where students report receiving more support from teachers for their academic work, as well as guidance about school and personal matters (Cronger & Lee, 2001). Additionally, similar studies have found that positive teacher-student relationships are especially important for racial and ethnic minority students (Ferguson, Tilleczek, Boydell, Rummens, Cote, & Roth-Edney, 2005; McKown, & Weinstein, 2003). Results from the research of McKown & Weinstein (2003) found that African American students cited teacher encouragement as a source of academic motivation more often than White students did.

Though it is not mentioned in the literature, it is possible that the disproportionate success of minority students in a caring environment is linked to the psychological concept of stereotype threat. That is, students may come to expect the social stigma of poor performance based on their race, and are particularly affected when teachers treat them with care and respect rather than with a sense of inferiority. Unfortunately, minority students are more likely to be in a school where the teachers are less experienced, qualified, and motivated, and are thus less likely to receive this care they respond so well to (Ferguson, Tilleczek, Boydell, Rummens,

Cote, and Roth-Edney, 2005). That is, many quality teachers seek the optimal working environment, which they often believe to be in the high-performing schools or within the private school sector.

School Policies and Practices. Student misbehavior and other various issues are often handled with school policies that tend to push the troublesome student farther from the school setting. For example, misbehavior often leads to punishments such as suspension or expulsions, which may ultimately reinforce the idea that the student does not belong. Other policies regarding grade point average minimums, attendance regulations, age cut-offs, and retention also tend to cause a lesser sense of belonging and a greater sense of frustration with the school. This section will discuss these policies and procedures and their impact on dropout decisions.

These zero tolerance policies regarding student behavior are certainly implemented with good intentions; however, studies demonstrate that these policies negatively impact some students, particularly those from minority and low socioeconomic background (Brownstein, 2009). Suspensions and expulsions as consequences for poor attendance, low grades, and disciplinary issues have been found to push away students who are already disengaging from school. Initially, these policies zero tolerance policies were implemented to keep schools safe, and were primarily used in situations involving drugs, alcohol, possession of weapons, and violence. However, today minority students are suspended or expelled for less severe and more subjective misbehaviors (loitering, disrespect, etc.) , at a much higher rate than their White peers. In fact, students of color are three times more likely to be suspended from school, and 3.5 times more likely to be expelled than their white peers. Hispanic students are suspended at a rate 1.5 times that of their white peers, and and are twice as likely to be expelled (Brownstein, 2009). These unfair policies exacerbate

withdrawal behavior and disengagement and help convince students that they do not belong in school. Additionally, as students miss more school, they miss valuable class instruction, fall further behind academically, and are only at greater risk for retention and eventually dropping out.

Retention, or "holding back" a student in their grade level, is highly correlated with dropping out of school. It is used to identify those who do not have the academic abilities to continue on to the next grade level, which is often accompanied by behavioral and disciplinary problems. However, grade retention tends to exacerbate issues that contribute to dropping out more than it helps in the academic realm. For example, being retained may influence a student's peer relations, self-esteem, school engagement, and sense of belonging. Additionally, students often begin to view schools as a place of failure, and again aim to disengage to protect their self-esteem. (Stearns, Moller, Blau, Potochnick, 2007). Given these effects, it is not surprising that research has supported that students who are not promoted to the next grade in middle school are more likely to drop out once they reach high school. This effect is additive, such that multiple retentions further increase the risk of dropping out.

Summary. In summary, the school environment is an important contributor to students' understanding of school as a place of belonging. The factors that contribute to the school environment are the social climate, school size, student-teacher interactions, and policies and practices. This sense of belonging in schools is considered important because it affects both student engagement and disposition towards schooling. However, despite the arguments for community and social support as the basis for school belonging and engagement, schools often overlook the emotional needs of students. In fact, the emphasis on national standardized achievement tests only exemplifies the nation's focus on academic achievement rather than other measures of success. Unfortunately, there is little attention paid

to student's affective needs. Rather than focusing on cultivating a community, the focus in schools is often on competition. Integral to the development of this individualistic and academic culture are the school factors mentioned in this section, which directly contribute to students' experiences of isolation and alienation within the school.

Curriculum factors that contribute to disengagement

While the school environment contributes to the level of belonging a student feels, curriculum structure has the power to influence a student's sense of meaning and motivation. Each of these concepts has important implications for student engagement. Aspects of curricular structure that affect student engagement are "tracking", low expectations of students, passive instructional strategies, and a lack of relevant curriculum contribute to disengagement (Ferguson, Tilleczek, Boydell, Rummens, Cote, and Roth-Edney, 2005; Schulz, 2007).

Tracking and Low Student Expectations. As discussed above, schools create a self-fulfilling prophecy for low-performing students. That is, these students are not expected to perform well, so they don't. At all grade levels, low-performing students tend to be concentrated in lower level courses where they are given less rigorous curricula. Students who struggle with academics early in their school years may be sorted into the "slow students" track early on, only exacerbating the effects of stigmas or early deprivations. Once being placed into the low-performing track, the students may feel stuck within their low-performing label and believe that there is nothing they can do to increase their ability, encouraging pessimistic explanatory style and a sense of helplessness. Studies have suggested that labeling based on academic achievement leads students to feeling such as "I am dumb". Feelings such as these contribute to learned helplessness, which often leads to

negative attitudes towards school, poor persistence with academics, and contributes significantly to disengagement.

Similar patterns can be seen within physical education courses. Most often, schools do not emphasize activities that all students can do such as jogging, swimming, or bicycling, but rather they focus on competitive sports such as football, basketball, or soccer that are most often mastered by the physically elite. This emphasis tends to have a similar negative effect on explanatory style to that of academic tracking (Stephan, Caudroit, Boiche, & Sarrazin, 2011).

Instructional Strategies. Research within educational psychology has supported that a balance of active and passive instructional strategies help to facilitate learning. However, much of today's classroom instruction is passive, particularly due to the restraints and requirements placed on schools. For example, the No Child Left Behind Act implemented in 2001 under the Bush administration aimed to improve the quality of schools by setting national achievement standards. However, to demonstrate having met these standards, national tests were implemented to evaluate school success and effectiveness. Unfortunately, this has lead to teachers "teaching to the test", with particular goals in mind, and little time to stray from the required curriculum. This has only contributed to the pre-existing issue of passive instruction, which continues to be the primary instructional strategy in schools. Passive instruction is defined by teachers lecturing while students passively observe and aim to absorb the information, rather than learning through discussion, projects, or discovery. It is passive instruction that leads students to often describe school as boring; and some research has concluded boredom is the first step in disengagement (Stanley & Baines, 2003).

Curriculum Content. It has become apparent that the curricular content in schools today may not be providing meaning for students of disadvantaged backgrounds (Hammond,

2007). Much of the material learned in class assumes that students value the same traditional content. This traditional approach appears to be unsuccessful, such that students often question the value of their classes and the educational process on the whole (Hammond, 2007). Given that students are more motivated to learn material they can relate to, it is important for curriculum to be relevant both to students' cultures and aspirations (Yannick, Caudroit, Boiche, & Sarrazin, 2011). Students may feel there is a small or limited relationship between their schoolwork and their future requirements in the workforce, their everyday family lives, or the problems in their community. This lack of relevancy leads to a sense of meaningless, an important factor of disengagement (Schulz, 2007). With this sense of meaninglessness, students are not motivated to engage with the material. They understand that the material may truly have no bearing on their future life, and, thus, reduce their efforts in school.

Summary. In summary, tracking, passive instructional strategies, and irrelevant curriculum all exacerbate the psychological effects of disengagement in different ways. That is, tracking encourages a sense of powerlessness, such that students don't feel they have the ability to change their status as a "poor performer". Additionally, passive instructional strategies ultimately lead to boredom, which is the first step in disengagement. Finally, irrelevant curriculum encourages students to view school as meaninglessness, causing them to believe that there is no utility in putting in the effort to engage in and perform well in school. Given that academic instruction takes up such a large portion of a student's day, these flaws in the curriculum structure and academic learning environment create obstacles for the students that are quite difficult to overcome.

Implications for Schools

The studies reviewed above give insight into the dropout process. Moreover, the current research provides evidence that dropping out of school is not a single event, but rather a long process of progressive disengagement from school. This process of academic and social disengagement from school is influenced by the intersection of a variety of school factors, intra-personal processes, and family background. However, when the proper school characteristics are present, schools can play a liberating and empowering role in the life of many disadvantaged groups and individuals. To effectively address the issue of high school dropouts, policy makers and school stakeholders should utilize the research surrounding this topic. The most promising strategy is to restructure the identified issues within schools to meet the needs of all students. This section will discuss the implications of the current disengagement research on school reform. While there have been countless programs implemented and proposed, this paper will focus on three major areas to increase student engagement and reduce dropout rates: building meaningful curriculum, increasing students' sense of belonging in school, and involving all stakeholders.

Curriculum: Making Meaningful and Motivating Experiences

Though the word "curriculum" encompasses a broad concept, the focus for improvement within this paper will be on *what* we teach in schools and *how* we do it. That is, while much of what is expected of students is now held to particular nation-wide standards, it can be presented and taught in various ways that can facilitate learning for students of diverse backgrounds. Building more meaningful curriculum can be achieved by providing examples that are relevant to students' lives and through challenging and engaging material.

Even effective teachers need to understand that the techniques and material that work well with non-minority students may not be as effective for minority students. Instruction that is personally relevant and meaningful in the world beyond the classroom is more likely to

interest and engage these students than the basic and mundane coursework often offered to underperforming students. Aspects of classroom discourse as simple as using particular stories or examples to illustrate a concept can affect the relevance and effectiveness of a lesson. According to Ferguson, Tilleczek, Boydell, Rummens, Cote and Roth-Edney (2005), teachers who are more aware of their students' experiences and cultures are more likely to provide appropriate examples that facilitate learning. For example, they may choose to create word-problems in math that relate to particular problems they confront in their daily lives, or include materials and role models from students' own diverse backgrounds. Research in educational psychology has supported that a fundamental aspect in effective teaching is in tying existing knowledge or experiences to new topics (Woolfolk, 2012). In addition to providing students with meaningful material, it is important to challenge students in a way that makes the high expectations evident. That is, increasing student success requires that both students and teachers believe in their ability to learn. Since research suggests that teachers tend to have lower expectations for minority and disadvantaged students than they do for white and affluent students, it is important to educate teachers on the implications of these beliefs and prejudices. To adjust teacher's attitudes and expectations and help them to incorporate the cultures, experiences, and needs of their students into curriculum, teachers need to be sufficiently trained in the cultural values and experiences of their student population. For this reason, teacher training on cultural sensitivity is an important step towards reducing disengagement and dropouts in minority populations.

Increasing School Membership

For students to learn this rigorous and material, and to meet high-expectations, schools must provide them with a sense of motivation, which can often begin with a sense of belonging and membership within the school setting. Schools hold the responsibility to

provide the conditions that help students to feel a sense of membership. Student belonging is enhanced when schools provide a sense of community, support, and fairness. This sort of school climate can be achieved through several different programs that have been implemented in some schools, including: small "house" programs within large schools, implementing fair and supportive school policies, and providing peer mentors.

Creating Small School Environments. Creating and constructing small school buildings are, of course, one way of fostering small and personal learning environments. However, this is not always an option. Thus, some schools have devised methods to create small learning communities within a larger school building. One way that schools have created these small learning environments is by dividing a school into "house" programs. The division can be carried out by creating specific "houses" for each grade level or by dividing each grade level into different sections (Hammond, 2007). The purpose of creating smaller communities within the school is to provide students with a sense of cohesiveness and more personalized support, relationships, and instruction. Ultimately, this should contribute to a greater sense of belonging. However, these "house" strategies have been implemented with various degrees of success, depending on the levels of support and commitment provided by teachers (Hammond, 2007).

Finding Alternatives to Zero Tolerance Policies. Certain disciplinary policies can have a negative effect on student engagement and can have unintended consequences. Rather than reducing the likelihood of disruption, school suspension appears to predict *higher* future rates of misbehavior and suspension. As explained in the earlier section, both suspension and retention contribute to the students process of disassociation and disengagement from school. That is, such extreme and exclusionary disciplinary policies contribute to the student's sense that school is not a place of belonging for them. Additionally, the more school missed, either

voluntarily or involuntarily, the less learning takes place, the farther behind a student comes, and the greater the likelihood of dropping out of school. To combat this issue, school personnel need effective alternatives to exclusionary school disciplinary practices that support struggling students rather than alienating them further

Two alternatives that I believe could be more effective than out-of-schools suspensions are in-school suspensions or after-school suspension. Certainly, students still may not enjoy these consequences. However, unlike suspension, these disciplinary policies still keep students within the school environment, and do not fully deprive them of their coursework that results in a loss of school credits (Hammond, 2007). During suspension within the school environment, students will be given the time to complete their school assignments, whereas out-of-school suspension causes students to miss class work entirely. Additionally, providing the students with several school personnel, or even peers to provide academic assistance may also increase academic and social engagement as well as school membership.

Peer Mentors and Social Connections. Mentoring has also emerged as a strategy for fostering positive relationships, improving learning, and creating a better sense of support and belonging (Hazler & Denham, 2002). These mentoring programs match older students to younger students, who may be struggling with various difficulties. Peer mentors provide guidance and support in one-on-one relationships. Mentoring promotes personal interactions that build healthy relationships among students, and creates a sense of shared purpose and community. However, while peer-to-peer relations have the potential to increase belonging, support, and engagement in school. However, the most important contributors are the adult influences in student's lives.

Involving All Stakeholders

Given the wide range and scope of the issue, student's engagement in education is the shared responsibility of the principal, teachers, school personnel, families, community, and students themselves. That is, the research discussed throughout this review includes intra-personal, family, community, and school factors that all contribute to the process of disengagement. Strengthening the skills and understanding of the adults who affect the factors that contribute to school engagement or disengagement can facilitate student success. Positive student outcomes can be achieved by creating a cohesive school vision that all stakeholders are dedicated to and involved in. The first step in providing this cohesive environment depends on effective school leadership. The next step involves providing professional development and educational opportunities for the teachers and school staff in order to give them the tools to carry out this vision. Finally, family and community level involvement can help encourage students to value school and consider it important.

Effective School Leadership. When the goal is to create a cohesive community, effective school leadership is essential in shaping and implementing this vision. It is the role of the principal to not only create and implement a climate of support, but also to manage school personnel to cultivate leadership in others. An effective school leader should be aware of his/her student population and their needs, and develop a shared vision for school reform based on these needs. From here, an effective school leader will provide the teachers and other school personnel with the tools and resources to carry out the given goal. In my opinion, these tools should include focused professional development and trainings in order to foster the most supportive learning environment possible.

Professional Development for Teachers. In order to foster a cohesive and consistent environment, training and focused professional development on creating a supportive learning environment within this realm is necessary. Students attach considerable importance

to teacher's attitudes and behaviors towards them, which places a great weight on teacher-student interactions. To reiterate the importance of cultural sensitivity training mentioned in the curricular content section, it is important that teachers understand the effects that low expectations have on student engagement. The goal of this professional development program is to help teachers and other school personnel to become aware of the population that they work with, as well as the role they play in exacerbating effects of disengagement. Ultimately, this training should allow teachers to be more sensitive to the needs of their students, and become aware of their own behaviors and how they are meeting these needs. More specifically, the hope in requiring professional development programs such as this one is that it will reduce the occurrence of phenomenon such as stereotype threat. That is, teachers will become more aware of the effect of negative stereotypes and low expectations, and work towards altering their attitudes and behaviors. Professional development should be frequent, and can address a variety of other issues as the staff and school leaders encounter them.

Family and Community Level Involvement. Family involvement is a key component of a student's increased academic performance. Family background and involvement contributes to a way of viewing school, such that parents who exhibit interest in their child's schooling are sending an implicit message that school is important. When lessons from school are reinforced and encouraged within the home, student success increases (Hammond, 2007). In an ideal world, schools would be able to build collaborative relationships with parents. This may prove to be difficult, such that many parents, particularly those of disadvantaged students, may not feel compelled to be involved in their child's schooling. However, schools can engage parents in their child's schooling in a number of ways. They may explicitly emphasize the role of parental support on student success or

implement programs that involve the family's culture and values. Programs of this nature can encourage parental involvement, which ultimately influences the level of importance children place on schools.

Conclusion

In searching for primary areas to improve upon to reduce dropouts it is quite difficult to discern the importance of each factor, such that so many factors are interrelated. However, it is quite evident that nearly all of these factors are traced back to individual *people* in the student's lives: teachers, parents, principals, etc. The influence begins with these stakeholders, which then contributes to the bigger concepts such as school climate, curriculum, policies, and stereotype threat. Thus, my opinion holds that it is the role of the adults involved with students to assist in their academic pursuits and otherwise. Educating those involved with students on the mechanisms behind disengagement, and their role in shaping these factors can help them to be mindful of the effects they have on students. All students, not just those at risk, will benefit from warm and caring learning environments, teachers who believe in them and their abilities, and challenging curriculum that is relevant to their own lives. Schools must aim to be places where student engagement is universal and school membership is high.

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