Preventing Drop-Outs: Teacher Action Research

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**Abstract**

Each year, thousands of students make the decision to drop out of high school. As a middle school teacher, none of my students are old enough to legally drop out, but unfortunately some of my current students have expressed interest in dropping out in the next two years. Obviously there are many negative consequences for my students if they make the choice to drop out of high school, including that they are more likely to struggle financially, cannot attend college, and are more likely to commit crimes. To build a better relationship with several of my at-risk students, I created in-depth student profiles and completed 1:1 student interviews. I found many common themes between student profiles and interviews, including high rates of absenteeism, death in the family and/or single parent family, learning disabilities, discipline reports, and more. I am internalizing what I’ve learned to become a better teacher and to effect change in my school, including helping to run a mentoring program for at-risk students next year.

*Key words:* drop-outs, failure

Each year, thousands of students make the decision to drop out of high school. As a middle school teacher, none of my students are old enough to legally drop out, but unfortunately some of my current students have expressed interest in dropping out in the next two years. Obviously there are many negative consequences for my students if they make the choice to drop out of high school, including that they are more likely to struggle financially, cannot attend college, and are more likely to commit crimes. Therefore I made it my mission to try to better understand this issue so I can be a part of the solution. Through my research, I learned that researchers have identified common risk factors and causes for dropping out of school, such as difficulties with the academic, behavior, and/or social aspects of school, chronic attendance issues, and a lack of support at home. I also researched options for dropout prevention, which can and should begin as early as elementary school, when students first begin to show signs of being at-risk for failure and dropping out of school.

After reviewing the literature on this topic, I decided a good first step would be to try to get to know a few of my 8th grade students better, to hopefully build a better relationship with them and make myself into a better teacher. Specifically, I am researching the following questions: “Why do students drop out of high school?” and “How can schools prevent drop outs?” For this study I chose to focus on several of my students who are struggling in school for various reasons. It is impossible to describe them fully in a paragraph or two, which may lead you to wonder why I feel the need to get to know them better. Well, it is obvious to me that although I may feel like I know these students well, I have not built a strong enough relationship with them if they continue to struggle and do not seek me out as a mentor. I know I can’t solve everything for these students, but it does not keep me from wanting to try.

The first student I have taught for 3 years. He enjoys being silly and joking around with his peers and teachers. He responds best to positive feedback and will shut down if you are not being respectful or caring towards him. Though this student has a lot of “street smarts”, he has a very intense reading disability and continues to read at a beginning level despite being in special education since early elementary school. His reading level makes it very difficult for him to access material in his classes, and he rarely gives his best effort during class because decoding text is still very hard work for him. This is heartbreaking because he has an excellent vocabulary and listening comprehension, and can comprehend text very accurately once he decodes the words, but it takes him a long time. I think his reading difficulties have a big impact on his self-esteem. He also does not have a lot of support at home because his dad works nights. His mom passed away when he was in kindergarten, and he is responsible for watching his little sister. He does not share much about his home life, but I know that things have been hard for him.

The second student I chose to focus on for this study is another student who I have taught for three years. She has always seemed very capable, but struggles greatly with organization. She will understand concepts in class when given time to practice and ask questions, but then will forget to do her homework and usually struggles on every test. Because of these deficits, her self-esteem is very low and she has already mentioned wanting to drop out. Attendance and motivation are a concern. However, this student is extremely kind and seems to understand other people on a very deep level. She is quiet and respectful to everyone. She lost her father at the beginning of this year and a close uncle a few months ago, and this has had a huge emotional toll on her, though she does not open up about it often.

The third student I am focusing on is new to my school this year. He was placed on my caseload for IEP paperwork and I have been trying to keep an eye on him, but it hasn’t been easy. He is already 15 in 8th grade, and came from a school where he was put into a separate special education setting because of his behavior. Academically, he is not far behind his same-aged peers with learning disabilities, but his emotional ups and downs and attendance impact his success in school. After just a few months at our school, he has many, many write-ups for minor and major behaviors. Despite this, he has a good heart and wants to do well- he just has a hard time controlling himself when he feels attacked. This student has a great sense of humor and is a wonderful conversationalist when he is calm, which is 99% of the time. However, his emotional issues have led to so much time out of school or out of his usual classroom routine.

Obviously I could not measure the effectiveness of any intervention done in just a few months since these students still have several years left before they can even make the choice to drop out, and a few more years after that in which they could finish high school. Therefore, I designed my study to be more qualitative than quantitative in nature. I decided to create a short profile of each of the students to help me understand them better in terms of risk factors (See Appendix 1). After completing this, it was very clear that these three students are extremely similar in terms of risk factors, which I hadn’t noticed before. For example, all three of the students only live with one parent, and two of the three students had one parent pass away. However, I also completed a series of interviews with these students to try to understand my students’ perspectives of school, in an effort to see the whole student, not just the risk factors (See Appendix 2). The categories of questions are based on the research I read about factors that often lead to dropping out as well as factors that often lead to students staying in school. I have been coding the results of these interviews to help me analyze the data, identify common themes, and reflect on these to create plan moving forward. Specifically, I have been reading over the notes I made during each interview and annotating them, adding in other details I remember from the interview, making connections to previous knowledge about the student, and writing follow-up questions.

I did not put my coding results into a table because one of the two students I interviewed did not wish me to share her answers, even anonymously. However, the other student did give me permission to discuss our interview. Common themes I noticed throughout our interview are that he was overall very positive and forgiving about himself and his school experience. Because this student has so many risk-factors, I assumed he might have a poor opinion of school and a low self-esteem. However, that did not come out in his answers at all. Though he did share a few negative and hurtful memories, generally he chose to focus our conversation in a positive direction. This being said, this student did not seem interested in discussing his deficits for more than just a minute. It was so interesting to me that in many ways, he is really struggling in school, but he did not acknowledge that for much of the interview. It left me wondering if maybe he is not able to see the big picture of his actions and really doesn’t believe he is struggling. Or maybe he is becoming a more positive person and wants to believe that he can do better, which is great! On the other hand, he could have stuck to the positive as a defensive mechanism. Perhaps I need to get to know him better before he will open up and be “real” with me.

I have experienced many challenges when attempting to gather information about my case study students. One huge set-back was time. I couldn’t conduct the interview during class since it needed to be 1:1 in a private setting. The students I chose are often absent, and usually are tardy or do not get to school early enough for me to work with them during our 30 minute homeroom period, and while two of them agreed to interview with me during lunch, another refused, saying he needed that time for homework or socializing with friends. I offer after-school tutoring, but several of these students struggle with finding transportation home or simply did not want to stay after. I was able to do some of the interview with one of the students, but he was in absent, in the Alternative Learning Center, or suspended for many days this spring. When he was in school, he was busy catching up on missing work, so I couldn’t pull him away from that. For the other student who was willing to interview, we made it work but had to stretch out the interview over several sessions and it always felt kind of rushed and stressed since we were watching the clock for the next class.

One of my students flat-out refused to complete the interview once I told him that it was for my class. He explained that he didn’t have anything to say- he just goes to school, does his work, and goes home. I was so surprised by this, especially since this student has stayed after school with me before and opened up about past school memories and issues at home. I am not sure what changed, but I know his reluctance could stem from any number of things. However, I think I changed his mind when I told him that we could interview and I wouldn’t share the results, because he asked to stay after school with me 1:1 one day next week.

To be honest, I felt a little surprised by the responses of these students when I told them about the interview and why I was doing it. I was not expecting the one student to refuse to interview and I was surprised that the other student did not want me to share her results with my class, even anonymously. However, I thought about it a lot and I think many factors could play into these decisions. Looking back, I feel like I might have tried to do too many interviews in such a short time period. Unlike other data collection methods, an interview is very personal and can be uncomfortable, and takes a long time to do correctly. It is very possible that the students simply do not trust me as much as I think they do. On the other hand, they might trust me, but don’t feel like it is necessary to open up to me in such a formal way. Maybe they trust me, but don’t want strangers to be reading about them, even though I told them I would change all names and allow them to read over it and edit before I turned anything in. I hope the students were not thinking that I didn’t really care about their answers since I was just doing it for a class, though this is also a possibility. No matter the reason, I am still disappointed that I was not able to conduct interviews with all of these students, but I feel confident that I made the right decision with being open about the reason for the interview and what I would be doing with the information. After completing our ethics module, I understand how important it is to be open and honest with people instead of just focusing on results.

As is often the case with research, I ended up learning different things than I originally searched for in my research. The difficulties I had with finding time to work with just three students 1:1 made it clear for me how important it is for schools to be intentional with carving out time during the school day for students to spend time with a mentor, getting the help they need. If this is not possible, it is critical for schools to develop a strong before- or after school program for struggling students. I also learned that research cannot always be made to fit into a specific timeline. You can plan all you want, but there are so many things that come up in even just one school day that are beyond our control. Though I was not able to complete all of my interviews by the end of this research project, the project is not over for me. I do intend to continue with these interviews over the next few weeks and I will allow those results to affect my actions in the classroom. I also plan to take the information and share it with other teachers and administrators in the building in hopes of effecting bigger change. Finally, I learned that research is messy, and it is not always easy to see the immediate effects of your effort. Before I even started my interviews, I was reading tons of research on this topic and I think that influenced the way I paid more attention to these three students in class. I’ve seen a vast improvement in my relationship with these three students just from me reaching out to them more. These students are not the type to go seeking teacher attention, so I think it is wonderful that this project led me to getting to know them better. I can see the positive impact it has had on their effort and attitude in the classroom. This makes me feel eager to continue this process.

In conclusion, my research thus far makes me feel optimistic for the future. Knowing that just a few weeks of extra attention could have this impact, I can’t help but imagine what would be the effects of a structured tutoring/mentoring program, like those I’ve read about in my research? Several teachers at my school have proposed a program like this for next year, and I am going to be helping to run it. This program intends to start off by identifying young men who are at-risk of failure based primarily on discipline records. From there we will meet weekly with the young men after school. Ideas that have been proposed include teaching a behavior strategy of the week, connecting families to school and school activities, engaging parents in more meetings with teachers, maximizing use of community resources, partnering with local churches and universities, monthly speakers, monthly lunch dates with mentors, community service, and field trips by quarter. Possible field trips include courthouse/judge speaker, prison tour, high school visits, and college visits. I am hopeful that my work in this project can be helpful to the design and implementation of this program.

I’ve also taken an action step by visiting an area high school with some of the other 8th grade teachers and my principal, to see our new relationship building program, “Capturing Kids Hearts,” in action. This allowed us to get ideas and information about what is working and what is not so we can start strong in the fall. I am optimistic that some of the attributes of this program (greeting students at the door and shaking their hand before entry, social contracts, students monitoring each other and the teacher for meeting expectations, having students take responsibility for their actions before escalating situations, etc.) will have a positive impact on some of our students who need the most support. Research shows that students who drop out typically do not have a strong connection to school. It is my hope that this program will help build stronger relationships between our staff and students, and that this will help to reduce the dropout rate.

Appendix 1

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| Demographic factors (age, race, grade) |  |
| Student’s area of eligibility for SPED |  |
| When the student was found eligible for SPED |  |
| Has the student been retained? |  |
| Present levels of academic performance per IEP |  |
| Grades and EOG scores |  |
| Notes about behavior/discipline records |  |
| Notes about social/emotional factors |  |
| Notes about home life |  |
| Other notes |  |

Appendix 2

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| **Category** | **Questions** |
| Attitude/feelings about school | 1. Overall, do you enjoy school? 2. What are some things you like about school? 3. What are some things you don’t like about school? 4. Do you have a favorite class or a favorite teacher? Explain. 5. Do you have a least favorite class or a least favorite teacher? Explain. 6. Do you have any good memories about school? 7. Do you have any bad memories about school? 8. Are you involved in any clubs, teams, or activities in school? 9. Do you have an adult at school who you feel like you can go to for help or support? 10. What would you change about this school to make it a better place? |
| Self-perception | 1. What are some things that are hard about school or things you aren’t very good at? 2. What are some easy things about school or things you are very good at? 3. How do you learn best? |
| Value of school | 1. Do you feel like school is valuable? Why or why not? 2. Do you believe education can help you to be successful financially? Why or why not? 3. Who do you live with? Do you think they feel like school is valuable? Why or why not? |
| Home life | 1. Do you feel like your parents/guardians/etc support you with school? Explain. 2. Does anyone help you study, do homework, etc.? 3. Are you expected to do chores or take care of siblings? 4. Do you have internet at home? 5. Are you involved in any clubs, teams, or activities outside of school? |
| Future | 1. Do you know where you are going to highschool next year? 2. Do you feel ready for high school? (Academically, emotionally, etc.) 3. Do you know what classes you are going to take in 9th grade? 4. Do you think you will graduate from high school? 5. Do you think you will go to college? 6. What kind of careers are you interested in? 7. What suggestions would you have to help students who want to drop out of school? |