

Teachers' Perceptions of High School Dropout and Their Role in Dropout Prevention: An Initial Investigation

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Abstract

Though students at-risk for school dropout appear to recognize the important contribution of teachers to students' persistence to graduation, it is unclear if teachers are equally aware of their empowering influence. Gaining a better understanding of teachers' beliefs about dropout is important to continued efforts to develop interventions that effectively support students to graduation. This article describes the results of a pilot study that surveyed 95 high school teachers from a Midwestern school district about their perceptions of school dropout, along with their perception of teachers' role in supporting students' school completion. Teachers' perceptions of the causes of dropout tended to focus on factors outside of their control. Factors that support strong student-teacher relationships were more moderately rated as contributing to dropout. A quarter of the teachers reported that they had only limited influence on students' decisions to stay in or dropout of school.

Keywords: Dropout, Prevention, Teachers, At-risk Students

Researchers increasingly depict students who leave school without a diploma as pushouts instead of dropouts (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Wehlage, 1986), seeking to add the voices and experiences of students (i.e., Jeffries, Nix, & Singer, 2002) to the numerous analyses of the number of students who leave each year (Hall, 2005). One consequence of the broadening of the research is the recognition of the role of supportive teachers (Fall & Roberts, 2012) and the importance of students' sense of school belonging (Benner, Graham, & Mistry, 2008) to students' ability to persist until graduation. Yet though students appear to recognize the important contribution of teachers (Davis & Dupper, 2004), it is unclear if teachers are equally aware of their empowering influence. To begin to address this need, this article describes the results of a pilot study that surveyed high school teachers about their perception of school dropout, along with their perception of teachers' role in supporting students' school completion.

An extensive literature base has been developed describing the students most at-risk for dropping out. Poor academic performance (Battin-Pearson, Newcomb, Abbot, Hill, Cattalano, & Hawkins, 2000), employment during school (Barro & Kolstad, 1987; Entwisle, Alexander, & Olson, 2005; Karpinski, Neubert, & Graham, 1992), lack of motivation (Gewertz, 2006; Lan & Lanthier, 2003; Vallerand, Fortier, & Guay, 1997), grade retention (Cairns, Cairns, & Neckerman, 1989; Entwisle et al., 2005; Jimerson, Anderson, & Whipple, 2002; Schargel & Smink, 2001), and high-risk behavior (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Rosenthal, 1998) have been correlated with early school leaving. However, these student-centered characteristics have not proved useful in creating effective interventions (Dynarski & Gleason, 2002). Student demographic factors such as ethnicity, low socioeconomic status, and early parenthood also have consistently been associated with school dropout (Cairns et al., 1989), yet these wide-ranging variables leave significant variance unaccounted for and so are not sufficiently informative when trying to determine the process of school withdrawal (Jimerson, Egeland, Sroufe, & Carlson, 2000).

Current Conceptualizations of High School Dropout

Current theoretical conceptualizations of high school dropout describe a complex, interactive process, influenced by both alterable and unalterable factors, that influences students to leave school prior to graduation (Christenson, Sinclair, Lehr, & Godber, 2001). Tyler and Lofstrom's (2009) summary of variables associated with dropout expands the picture beyond those variables associated only with the students themselves, including the contributions of family, school, and broader school reform. Families' socioeconomic status (Eckstrom, Goertz, Pollack, & Rock, 1986), parents' involvement in their students' education (Rumberger, Ghatak, Poulos, Ritter, & Dornbusch, 1990), and family stability (including both family structure and mobility) are correlated with students' dropping out of school (Pong & Ju, 2000; Rumberger & Larson, 1998). Alterable school characteristics such as discipline practices, resources, school size, and pupil-teacher ratio influence students' educational decisions (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009), as do characteristics outside of schools' direct influence such as the location of a school and the make-up of the student body (Lofstrom, 2007). Additionally, caring teachers who have high expectations for all students' success are associated with lower dropout rates (Christenson, et al., 2001). Student engagement theory suggests that students

who perceive themselves as being connected, or having a sense of belonging, to their school are more likely than disengaged at-risk students to graduate (Appleton, Christenson, & Furlong, 2008). Finally, research suggests that school reform efforts that mandate graduation tests place academically low-performing students at higher risk for dropping out of school. (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2007).

Dropout Interventions

Historically, research on high school dropout has focused on describing the students who leave, rather than effective approaches to preventing their exiting. The research literature on dropout intervention strategies is mostly descriptive in nature with significant limitations in conceptualization of dropout and methodology (Lehr, Hansen, Sinclair, & Christenson, 2003). Though current conceptualizations of dropout describe a complicated process of disengagement, research on dropout interventions suggests that the interventions still tend to have an oversimplified focus on student characteristics rather than taking a more ecological approach (Davis & Dupper, 2004). Methodologically, multiple needs have been identified: increased use of experimental research designs; increased attention to sample size, random assignment of participants, and statistical analysis which reports levels of significance; and more replication of studies reporting statistically significant results (Lehr et al., 2003). Following their review of dropout interventions, Lehr and her colleagues (2003) concluded that “the most prominent finding is the paucity of published intervention studies given the complexity and importance of this issue for individuals and society as a whole” (p. 350). Perhaps it is not surprising then that the high school graduation rate has remained relatively stable over the last forty years at about 77% (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009).

Lehr, Hansen, Sinclair, and Christenson (2003) reviewed the published research on interventions designed to support high school students’ persistence to graduation. The majority of the 45 studies they reviewed evaluated dropout interventions at the secondary level with most of the studies involving interventions focused on the at-risk student. The most common type of intervention addressed students’ personal/affective needs through such methods as counseling or support groups; only about half of the interventions provided students with academic supports. Lehr and her colleagues point out that although the current conceptualization of high school dropout emphasize an ecological approach that considers at-risk students in the context of their schools and communities, most of the reviewed interventions targeted student change in isolation, to the exclusion of peer, family or school factors. In their recommendations for future intervention research, they call for research that evaluates the conditions under which dropout prevention programs are successfully implemented (Lehr et al., 2003). This suggests that intervention research should identify not only the content of an intervention but also should describe how the intervention was implemented and characteristics of those involved with its implementation. Dropout intervention research needs to more intentionally consider the role of teachers in efforts to support students to graduation.

Teachers and Dropout Interventions

In their review of the literature on dropout prevention, Davis and Dupper (2004) discuss the importance of including the student-teacher relationship in both the understanding of why

students dropout and the development of more effective interventions to support their persistence. Doing this requires research that includes the voices of students (Christenson et al., 2001), as well as their teachers. A limited number of qualitative studies have included the voices and experiences of the students who have dropped out. This research provides clear support for the critical role of caring and supportive teachers in interventions to support students to graduation (Gallagher, 2002; Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko, & Fernandez, 1989; Williams & Riccomini, 2006). The voices of teachers are for the most part absent and this is problematic. Teachers have the potential to positively influence students not only to graduate, but to thrive in the school environment. Yet it is unclear from the current research literature whether teachers themselves are aware of the significant influence they have (Marquez-Zenkov, Harmon, van Lier, & Marquez-Zenkov, 2007), potentially limiting the effectiveness of their participation in dropout interventions.

To develop interventions that more effectively include teachers, a better understanding of how teachers conceptualize dropout and their role in dropout prevention is needed. Thus, this pilot study sought to answer the questions: What factors do teachers believe contribute to students' decision to drop out of school? What type of influence do teachers believe they have on students' educational decisions? In addition, because of the exploratory nature of the research, the question was also asked: Do these beliefs vary based on teacher gender or content area taught? Currently, there is no framework in the research literature for addressing these variables, not because they do not have empirical support but because there has not been a substantial enough investigation.

Methods

Participants

Participants in this pilot study were a convenience sample of teachers from two Midwestern high schools in the same school district, including special and general education teachers from all content areas. The graduation rate of the school district was 77.7% compared to a state graduation rate of 90.7%. Information on each of the individual school's graduation rates was not made available. Neither school was identified as a School in Need of Assistance. All teachers were informed that the researchers were conducting research on high school dropout. The researchers received prior permission from school administrators to distribute materials to participants. Any surveys completed by individuals other than teachers (e.g., guidance counselor, school psychologist) were discarded.

School A. Surveys and cover letters were distributed to 108 high school teachers in School A. The complete list of teachers was provided to the researchers by the school principal. Of the 108 teachers, 56 (51.9%) returned completed surveys. There were 1,851 students enrolled in grades nine through twelve with 50.4% eligible for free and reduced lunch. Seventy-six percent of the student body was Caucasian, 17% was African-American, 4% was Hispanic, 2% was Asian, and 1% was Native-American.

School B. Surveys and cover letters were distributed to 78 high school teachers in School B. The complete list of teachers was provided to the researchers by the school principal. Of the

78 teachers, 39 (50%) returned completed surveys. There were 1,225 students enrolled in grades nine through twelve with 50.5% eligible for free and reduced lunch. Sixty-one percent of the student body was Caucasian, 35% was African-American, 3% was Hispanic, and 1% was Asian.

Survey

The researchers developed the survey following a review of the literature on high school dropout and dropout prevention. Participants answered five demographic questions (school, content area taught, current grade level taught, years teaching, gender) at the beginning of the survey. Next, participants completed four items addressing the study variables. The first item required the participants to identify how significant of a problem they believe high school dropout is at their school on a 5-point scale (*not a problem/mild problem/moderate problem/significant problem/do not know*). The second item required the participants to respond to describe their school's dropout rate during the last five years on a 4-point scale (*decreasing/staying the same/increasing/do not know*). The third item required the participants to describe how much of an influence teachers have on students' decisions to stay in or drop out of school on a 5-point scale (*not at all/a little/some/significant/do not know*). The fourth item required the participants to describe the importance of teachers to schools' efforts to reduce the number of students who drop out on a 5-point scale (*not important/mildly important/moderately important/very important/do not know*). Then, the participants described the extent to which they believe 18 factors contribute to high school dropout on a 5-point scale (*not at all/a little/some/significantly/do not know*). Following these items, participants responded to an open-ended question asking them what type of influence educators may have on students' decisions to stay in or drop out of school. Lastly, participants were given an opportunity to list any additional factors they felt might contribute to high school dropout.

Surveys were placed in the school mailboxes of teachers from the two high schools. Teachers received materials in a research packet. Inside the packet, there was a cover letter explaining the purpose of the study, assurance of confidentiality, the survey, a self-addressed return envelope, and directions for completing and returning the survey. The teachers were allotted two weeks to return the survey. Follow-up letters and another copy of the survey were sent to those who did not return a completed survey before the deadline. Upon completion of the survey, the teachers placed the survey in the self-addressed return envelope.

Results

Factors Contributing to Students Decision to Drop Out

Teachers were asked to respond to statements addressing their perception of factors contributing to dropout. On a 4-point scale, with ratings from 1 (*not a problem*) to 4 (*significant problem*), teachers described dropout as being a moderate problem in their school ($M = 3.35$, $SD = 0.76$, $n = 92$). On a 3-point scale, with ratings from 1 (*decreasing*) to 3 (*increasing*), teachers described their school's dropout rate during the last five years as "staying the same" ($M = 2.00$, $SD = 0.81$, $n = 74$).

Data were examined to identify relationships between teachers' school and their perception of a dropout problem. A *t*-test showed a significant difference between the means for the two schools in regards to the teachers' beliefs on whether dropout is a problem at their school ($t_{90} = 2.628, p < .01$). Teachers at School B more often believed that dropout was a significant problem at their school ($M = 3.59, SD = 0.69$) than teachers at School A ($M = 3.18, SD = 0.77$). In addition, a *t*-test showed a significant difference between the means for the two schools in regards to the teachers' beliefs about their school's dropout rate during the last five years ($t_{72} = 3.423, p < .001$). Teachers at School B were more likely to believe that the dropout rate was increasing at their school ($M = 2.35, SD = 0.71$) than teachers at School A ($M = 1.74, SD = 0.79$).

Next, teachers' were asked about their perceptions of dropout as an issue beyond their school. The survey asked teachers to identify the extent to which they believed 18 specific factors contribute to students' decisions to drop out of school on a 4-point scale, with ratings from 1 (*not at all*) to 4 (*significantly*). Frequent absences ($M = 3.89, SD = 0.35$), frequent trouble at school ($M = 3.67, SD = 0.52$), limited parental support ($M = 3.62, SD = 0.59$), low academic achievement ($M = 3.56, SD = 0.62$), and trouble with the law ($M = 3.56, SD = 0.70$) were believed to contribute to students' decisions to drop out of school.

Data were examined to identify relationships between teachers' school and their perceptions of dropout. Of the 18 dropout factors, the only *t*-test which showed a significant difference between the means for the two schools was in regards to the extent to which frequent student absences contribute to student dropout ($t_{70} = 2.25, p < .05$). Teachers at School B believed that frequent student absences were a more significant contributor to dropout ($M = 3.97, SD = 0.16$) than teachers at School A ($M = 3.83, SD = 0.43$).

Teacher gender. Data were also analyzed to identify relationships between teachers' gender and their knowledge of high school dropout. Of the 18 dropout factors, a *t*-test showed a significant difference between the means of both genders in regards to the extent to which they believe the following factors contribute to student dropout: frequent trouble ($t_{54} = 2.13, p < .05$), frequent absences ($t_{35} = 2.33, p < .05$), no sense of belonging ($t_{89} = 2.69, p < .01$), limited parental support ($t_{84} = 2.12, p < .05$), and believing no one cares if they drop out ($t_{88} = 2.91, p < .01$). Females believed that frequent student trouble ($M = 3.75, SD = 0.47$), frequent absences ($M = 3.97, SD = 0.18$), no sense of belonging ($M = 3.34, SD = 0.63$), and believing that no one cares if they drop out ($M = 3.31, SD = 0.73$) were more significant contributors to dropout than males ($M = 3.50, SD = 0.57$; $M = 3.75, SD = 0.51$; $M = 2.91, SD = 0.89$; $M = 2.81, SD = 0.86$, respectively). Males, on the other hand, believed that limited parental support ($M = 3.77, SD = 0.43$) was a more significant contributor to dropout than females ($M = 3.53, SD = 0.65$).

Content area. Next, these variables were examined through the lens of teachers' content area. Of the 18 variables, only three factors produced significant results in terms of teachers' content area. The ANOVA on content area taught produced a significant result on the "frequent trouble in school" factor, $F_{2, 90} = 3.31, p < .05$. The Fisher Least Significant Difference (LSD) post hoc test was conducted to identify significant differences among the

content areas. Post hoc comparisons indicated that the difference between teaching core classes (e.g., Math, Science, English) and teaching “other” classes (e.g., Art, Physical Education) was significant. Specifically, “other” class teachers rated frequent trouble at school as a more significant contributor to dropout than core teachers.

The ANOVA on content area taught produced a significant result on the “no sense of belonging at school” question, $F_{2,89} = 7.37, p < .05$. Post hoc comparisons indicated that the difference between teaching core classes and teaching “other” classes was significant. In addition, the difference between teaching core classes and teaching special education classes was significant. Specifically, teachers of special education and “other” classes rated the “no sense of belonging at school” as a more significant contributor to dropout than core teachers.

The ANOVA on content area taught produced a significant result on the “lazy and unmotivated” factor, $F_{2,87} = 4.24, p < .05$. Post hoc comparisons indicated that the difference between teaching core classes and teaching “other” classes was significant. Specifically, teachers of “other” classes rated the “lazy and unmotivated” factor as a more significant contributor to dropout than core teachers.

Additional factors. Of the 95 teachers who completed the survey, 36 (37.9%) listed additional factors they believed contribute to dropout. Of the 36 teachers who listed additional factors, 15 (41.7%) listed a lack of parent/family support as a factor that contributes to dropout. Although “limited parental support” was listed as one of the 18 dropout factor variables on the survey, 15 teachers listed it as an additional factor. Other factors included: substance abuse (19.4%), lack of extracurricular participation (16.7%), negative peer influence (11.1%), curriculum the student perceives as irrelevant (11.1%), gang involvement (8.3%), homelessness (8.3%), medical reasons (5.6%), frustration (5.6%), and low self-esteem (5.6%).

Teachers’ Influence on Students’ Decision to Drop Out

Teachers’ perception of their role in dropout prevention was also assessed in the survey. On a 4-point scale, with ratings from 1 (*not at all*) to 4 (*significant*), teachers felt they had some influence on students’ decisions to stay in or drop out of school ($M = 3.14, SD = 0.77, n = 95$). On a 4-point scale, with ratings from 1 (*not important*) to 4 (*very important*), teachers felt they were moderately important in schools’ efforts to reduce the number of students who drop out ($M = 3.30, SD = 0.81, n = 92$).

Of the 95 teachers who completed the survey, 81 (85.3%) described the type of influence they have on students’ decisions to stay in or drop out of school. These factors were organized according to common themes. Four themes emerged from this analysis: (a) relationship-building, (b) communicating caring, (c) motivation and encouragement, and (d) pointing to the future.

Relationship-building. Of the 81 teachers, 25 (30.9%) described the importance of developing relationships with at-risk students. One teacher stated, “If a relationship is established or exists, some students will go to teachers for support.” Another teacher stated, “If a student connects with at least one adult, they are more likely to feel part of the school

experience.” These teachers described students as needing a positive adult relationship at school to provide a support network as well as create a system where the student feels like an integral component of the school environment.

Communicating caring. Of the 81 teachers, 21 (24.7%) wrote that displaying concern and care for students is crucial in their persistence. One teacher stated, “Even one adult who expresses concern lets a student know that someone is interested in his future. Some students are sadly in need of caring, supportive adults in their lives.” When students feel like they matter to someone, they often work hard to succeed because they recognize that their success is important to others. Another teacher explained, “Kids may feel that if a teacher is interested in their success, the student would not want to disappoint the teacher.”

Motivation and encouragement. Of the 81 teachers, 11 (13.6%) stated that they **must** encourage and motivate their students. For example, one teacher declared, “Teachers affect how students believe in themselves. We can either try to change attitudes or we can just let students continue on their course.” These teachers recognized a lack of motivation in at least some of their students and realized that they have the ability to increase this motivation.

Pointing to the future. Of the 81 teachers, 9 (11.1%) described the importance of demonstrating the necessity of a high school diploma on students’ future. One teacher stated, “Educators have the ability to assist students in seeing their futures in a more holistic way, helping them understand the importance of education and how what they are doing in school relates to future career possibilities.” Another said, “They need to see value in education.”

No influence. Almost a quarter (24.7%) of teachers stated that teachers have little or no influence on keeping students in school. These teachers felt that outside influences and student characteristics were too strong to overcome by their own efforts. One teacher stated, “Outside factors (family, peers, environment) are the only influences. We can provide only the classroom environments we are given to work in and the instructional materials we are given to use.” Another teacher explained, “Once the student entertains thoughts of dropping out, there isn’t much an educator can do to change their mind.” The conviction that they could not influence students’ who had decided to drop out of school appeared to be common among these teachers. They believed that outside forces were too influential and that students did not care about teachers’ opinions.

Discussion

Historically, the focus of dropout research has been on the deficits of students who drop out of school. Although this information can be helpful, schools have little control over these factors and knowledge of these factors does not contribute to the development of effective interventions (Jimmerson et al., 2000). If schools want to reduce the dropout rate and support students persistence to graduation, teachers need to understand dropout and the role they play in the dropout process (Davis & Dupper, 2004). Generally, teachers in this study recognized dropout as a problem within their schools that was not decreasing. They described dropout as a moderate problem and felt that the number of students failing to stay in school until graduation had stayed the same over the last five years. With No Child Left Behind (NCLB)

legislation placing an emphasis on reducing dropout rates (Lehr et al., 2003), recognizing a dropout problem is the first step toward decreasing it. With this school district's graduation rate being well below the state average, high school dropout is a concern for these two schools. However, simply recognizing dropout as a problem is not enough to reduce it.

The teachers' reported perceptions about high school dropout suggested a tendency to focus on factors outside of teachers' control. Teachers rated low academic achievement, frequent trouble at school, trouble with the law, frequent absences, and limited parental support as the most significant contributors to high school dropout. Although all of these factors are not necessarily student deficits, they are largely unalterable and resistant to teacher influence. By pointing to factors outside of their control, teachers remove themselves from the problem, as well as the solution.

Factors such as "believing adults at school want them to drop out," "no close relationship with a teacher," "feeling emotionally and physically unsafe at school", and "believing no one at school cares if they drop out" were only rated as contributing somewhat to high school dropout. Previous research has shown that communicating caring (Gallagher, 2002) and positive student-teacher relationships (Brown, Higgins, & Paulson, 2003) have significant potential in reducing dropout and decreasing the alienation that students at-risk of dropout often experience. When teachers believe they can make a difference, change is possible. It is essential to develop an accurate understanding of the factors that contribute to dropout, especially those in teachers' control, if student persistence is to occur.

Although previous research has not examined the relationship of teachers' demographic variables with their knowledge of high school dropout, it was hypothesized by the researchers that these findings could prove insightful. Females were more likely to describe factors within their control as more significant contributors to dropout than males. For example, females believed that "no sense of belonging in school" and "students believing that no one cares if they drop out" were more significant contributors to dropout than males. Whether these differences in knowledge result in different behavior toward students at risk of dropout is unknown. Further research is needed in determining whether dropout knowledge is related to teachers' gender and if these gender differences in knowledge are related to differences in practice.

As is the case with most survey research, the assessment instrument may not have listed everything the respondent believes contributes to high school dropout. For this reason, teachers were allowed to list any additional factors they believe contribute to dropout. A number of factors listed were outside of teachers' control. Factors included: limited parental support, substance abuse, lack of extracurricular participation, negative peer influence, curriculum the student perceives as irrelevant, gang involvement, homelessness, medical reasons, frustration, and low self-esteem. A quarter of the teachers reported that they have little or no influence on students' decisions to either stay or drop out of school. This finding could have important repercussions for the implementation of dropout interventions that include teachers in their focus. With the importance of caring relationships between students and teachers to students' ability to succeed to graduation, it is possible that teachers' sense of

self-efficacy to reduce dropout influences intervention outcomes. Additional research is needed to explore this.

Limitations

Before discussing implications of this research, several limitations must be considered. First, self-report data were collected from only a small sample of teachers ($N = 96$). Second, the sample consisted only of teachers from schools in one medium-sized Midwestern school district. Third, the modest response rate further contributes to sampling bias because those teachers who chose to participate may have differed in important ways from those teachers who did not participate. These factors reduce the generalizability of the research findings. In spite of these limitations, empirical research in the area of dropout prevention, and specifically teachers' role in supporting students' persistence, is deeply needed. The findings of this study contribute to a greater understanding of the role of teachers in dropout prevention.

Implications

One factor identified as integral to students' school persistence was a positive relationship between teachers and students. Some teachers stated that students need an authority figure in school they can go to for support, as well as to feel a part of the school environment. Developing relationships with students can reduce the alienation that those at-risk of dropping out often experience (Dunn, Chambers, & Rabren, 2004; Kortering & Braziel, 1999). These relationships do not need to be intensive. Encouraging students to discuss their problems or simply establishing rapport can have far-reaching effects on engaging students. In Gallagher's (2002) study, many of the students felt that the teachers wanted them to drop out. They believed that the teachers had schemes to get them kicked out. If teachers commit to building relationships to students, they can make them feel like they are wanted in school, not unwelcome.

Second, the importance of communicating caring to students was recognized. Communicating caring can be as simple as saying "hi" in the morning, giving a friendly wave, and recognizing any form of effort exhibited by *all* students, not just those used to success. Author (2008) conducted a qualitative case study of a group of high school students at-risk for dropping out but managing to persist in school. Seventeen students were interviewed and observed. One of the major factors identified as a factor in student persistence was caring teachers. In addition, Lan and Lanthier (2003) identified the transition to high school as a difficult time period that can dramatically change students' perceptions of themselves and the school environment. Teachers must pay careful attention to students' needs during this transition. Having caring teachers within the school context can ease that transition if these teachers help these students feel comfortable in school and feel that they belong. Although caring for students may be especially important during the transition to high school, it should be maintained throughout high school as well.

Third, some teachers in this study felt that students needed to be motivated to succeed. Research has shown that motivated students are less likely to drop out of school (Lan &

Lanthier, 2003; Vallerand et al., 1997). Although students may come to school with low levels of motivation, teachers are in a role to motivate them to succeed. One way teachers can encourage student motivation is to provide the experience of success (Williams & Riccomini, 2006). If students repeatedly fail at tasks, their motivation quickly decreases, leaving them with feelings of inadequacy and frustration. These feelings often result in school dropout. In addition, teachers should take time to focus on what students do well (Author, 2006). By focusing on the positive, teachers empower students and encourage them to succeed.

Related to motivation, dropouts often may not see relevance in the curriculum (Baker, Derrer, Davis, Dinklage-Travis, Linder, & Nicholson, 2001; Dunn et al., 2004; Sinclair, Christenson, Evelo, & Hurley, 1998). If students do not see real-world application during instruction, they may become disengaged and lose motivation. Teachers can increase curriculum relevance by connecting content to real-world situations and building motivation into the curriculum design. It is important to note that teachers alone cannot motivate students to persist in school. Parents exert a greater influence than teachers on their children's perceptions of competence (Vallerand et al., 1997). Therefore, teachers and parents must collaborate in their efforts to increase students' perceptions of competence and, in turn, motivate them to succeed.

Finally, some teachers suggested that students needed to see the importance of a high school diploma. Students at-risk for dropout do not necessarily believe that a high school diploma is a prerequisite for a good job or a contented life (Gallagher, 2002). However, low income (U.S. Department of Education, 2004a), unemployment (U.S. Department of Education, 2004b), and high risk behaviors (Brown et al., 2003) are just a few of the negative outcomes that individuals who drop out of school often experience. Teachers are in a position to point out the unfortunate consequences that dropping out may produce. Helping students realize the advantages of a high school diploma may have the potential to increase graduation rates.

It is important to consider that although some teachers in the study recognized their role in dropout prevention, a quarter stated that they had no influence. Others felt that outside forces, such as family, drugs, and peers, are too influential for them to make a difference. However, some students who have dropped out of high school and then returned have identified teachers as crucial in supporting their persistence (Altenbaugh, Engel, & Martin, 1995). Altenbaugh and his colleagues interviewed students who dropped out and then returned to earn their high school diploma and found that these students wished that teachers had shown a greater interest in their school experiences. Therefore, it is crucial to raise teachers' awareness as to the role they play and the positive influence they can have on students at-risk of dropout.

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