

Programs for Retaining High School Re-enterers for Credentialling and Employment

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Abstract

This paper investigates the likely characteristics of effective programs to prevent High School re-enterers from dropping out again. Based on what is known about Australian High school dropouts and other dropout prevention programs, the literature is surveyed for appropriate directions and focus. Recommendations include specific programs addressing numeracy, literacy, and personal development. Career counselling and increased linkages between school, work and vocational education should be encouraged. School climate should be encouraging and supportive. Mentoring and proselytising by "old" dropouts should prove useful also.

Introduction

Current educational discourse emphasises that Western industrialised societies in the 21st century will make different demands on workers than those in the past (Jones, 1990). Future employees will need to have, among other things, a higher level of education in order to promote greater flexibility of thinking, creative problem-solving skills and better usage of technology.

Today, young people who leave high school early before gaining a credential face a market place which is very different to that operating even ten years ago. For example, in many Western capitalist countries the job market is shrinking and many unskilled jobs which were once available to young people without high school qualifications are now undertaken by machines, computers or other technologies. Those occupations which do offer a secure livelihood and good career prospects are most frequently taken by school leavers who have completed the final year of secondary school, or else by those who have

gained tertiary education entrance and thus have the potential for a further credential (Australia. Department of Employment, Education and Training (DEET), n. d.: 2). In our post-modern society, it is the school dropouts 'who constitute an 'information poor' with the most limited opportunities in the labour market . . . ' Harvey (1985: 2)

High School Dropouts

It has been found in the United States, Australia and elsewhere that high school dropouts are more likely to be disadvantaged, particularly economically, in both their short and long terms prospects (Peng, 1985; Rumberger, 1987; Blakers, 1990; McCaul, Donaldson, Coladarci & Davis, 1992; Commonwealth Schools Commission, 1985). Dropouts are more likely to be unemployed and looking for work than those who stay on at school to complete High School (DEET, n.d.: 2) and the chances of being unemployed decrease with level of education (DEET, n.d.: 2) This appears to be a world-wide trend and may be especially so for male dropouts (McCaul et al., 1992). As Smith notes:

The accreditation of Year 11-12 subjects affects student life chances. Credentialling and accreditation are significant because they are what might be called gateways to other things like a more advanced course or a job interview. No matter what else education might do, its outcome in the form of credentials is a critical ingredient for the reform of the institution and for mitigating the plight of the deprived and the disadvantaged (Smith, 1991: 8) .

For these reasons and others such as personal satisfaction, teenagers in Australia and elsewhere are being strongly encouraged to remain at secondary school to complete their final year of High School called Grade (or Year) 12, not only by teachers and schools, parents and the community (Adams, Ball, Braithwaite, Kensell & Low, 1989) but by Education authorities and employers. Completion of high school, it is argued, will enhance young people's future prospects either by making them more employable, or by launching them into further training or education.

Despite these efforts at increasing school retention, many young people are withdrawing before completing secondary school. However not all of those who withdraw do so on a permanent basis. There is a sub-cohort of dropouts who, for a variety of reasons, possess the determination to re-enter education they previously rejected, and go on to successfully complete High School (Goldman & Bradley, 1997, 1996a, 1996b, 1995). Both these students who remain outside the education system and those who re-enter it, share similar experiences of dropping out and all the choices and problems associated with it. Programs and strategies which may ameliorate dropping out in the

first instance may negate the need for some future re-entry programs. However with the continuing occurrence of dropping out, then re-entry, then subsequent dropping out, what sort of programs would be appropriate for this latter group? This paper critically reviews the literature related to this question, after first assessing the size of the problem, and the people affected.

Estimated Numbers of High School Dropouts, Re-enterers and Repeat Dropouts

The exact number of students who leave secondary school prior to graduation is difficult to determine because of definitional inconsistencies and record keeping shortcomings. As Rumberger (1987: 103) notes, 'there is no consensus definition of a high school dropout, nor is there a standard method for computing the dropout rate'. International comparisons are also difficult to make because the duration and nature of secondary school experiences vary both between and within countries. In Australia for example, the high school retention rate rose consistently throughout the 1980s, but has stabilised since 1992 at approximately 75% (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1995). Accurate national figures regarding the proportion of these dropouts who return to school at a later date are not available, although in the USA it has been estimated that approximately 40-44% of school dropouts re-enter the education system (Kolstadt and Kaufman, 1989; Pallas, 1987). If these percentages can be generalised, it may be suggested that approximately 10% of students (that is, 40% of the 25% who withdraw) will return to school.

Estimating the number of students who return to school and persist through to graduation is even more problematic. By definition, the least successful of school participants are those who dropout on more than one occasion. Pallas (1987) estimates that approximately 25% of US re-enterers withdraw from school prior to graduation. In the Netherlands, Ten Dan (1995) provides a similar estimate. Smaller studies conducted in Australia (Bankstown Technical College, 1984) and in New Zealand (Cocklin, 1990) found the recidivist dropout rates to be 25% and 58% respectively. The wide discrepancy between these last two figures may be due to small sample size and the restricted geographical regions studied, rather than reflecting genuine national differences.

More recently Goldman and Bradley (1997, 1996a, 1996b) investigated the study progress of a national Australian sample of 1,046 re-entry students. When followed up approximately 15 weeks after first being surveyed, only 893 remained enrolled. That is, almost 15% of the re-entry students who commenced the school year had dropped

out before the end of their first semester. Presumably, an additional and unknown percentage of these students have withdrawn subsequently without graduating. In a related survey (Bradley & Goldman, 1996), 315 providers of education to re-entry students estimated that, on average, approximately 31% of the students with whom they had contact withdrew prior to graduation.

In sum, it seems that reliable data are not available in relation to the subsequent study progress of school dropouts. The limited evidence which does exist suggests that approximately 10% of the population may re-enter the secondary education system after having previously dropped out, and that at least one-quarter of these school re-enterers dropout a second time. This suggests that repeat dropouts represent 3% of the national population, which translates into hundreds of thousands of individuals in Australia alone. In re-entering school, these people have taken risks with their personal identity, financial security, social status and career prospects, and in dropping out again it would seem that the risk has not paid off. This population of repeat school dropouts is worthy of study (Goldman & Bradley, 1995), not only because of what may be learned to assist them as individuals, but also because of the potential educational and social benefits which may accrue to society following their graduation.

Characteristics of School Dropouts, Re-enterers and Repeat Dropouts

In order to examine the literature on re-enterers who drop out and appropriate programs, a succinct overview of the findings on High School dropouts themselves will first be provided. This literature is voluminous and many researchers have drawn attention to the consistencies amongst the dropout population, whilst highlighting the dangers associated with treating this population as a single homogeneous mass (Abbott-Chapman, 1987; Kolstadt & Kaufman, 1989; Poole, 1983; Rumberger, 1987). In general, school dropouts tend to be struggling academically, and/or tend to have difficulty adjusting to the normative structures of the school environment. Underpinning this lack of school success and these negative attitudes to school are a range of school, family personal and extraneous factors.

School factors which predict high dropout rates include large student numbers, a narrow and outdated curriculum, and a punitive and unsupportive school climate (see for example, Adams, Ball, Braithwaite, Kensell & Low, 1989; Bryk & Thum, 1989; Kagan, 1990; Wehlage & Rutter, 1986). Family factors associated with school dropout include low levels of parental educational and occupational attainment, limited parental aspirations and support for their child's

education, persistent family disharmony and abuse or neglect of the child (see, for example Franklin & Streeter, 1992; Williams, 1985). Personal factors relate to gender, for example, males tend to drop out more frequently than females, and socio-economic status, ethnicity, abilities, career interests, area of residence, involvement in criminal activities, health status and self esteem (see, for example Eckstrom, Goertz, Pollack) increase the likelihood of school dropout. These include government policies, economic conditions, employment opportunities, peer pressure, drug taking, and so on (see Finn, 1989; Power, 1984; Stamp, 1988).

Whilst the characteristics of school dropouts have been clearly identified, the school re-entry population has been less extensively studied. Several writers have suggested that compared to those who do not return to study, school re-enterers tend to be more able intellectually, socially, psychologically and financially, and more able to cope with further study (Bachman, Green & Wirtamen, 1971; Kolstadt & Owings, 1986). Using multivariate statistical analyses, Kaufman (1988) demonstrated that in terms of ability, aspirations and several demographic factors, school re-enterers were more like retained students than like dropouts who did not return. These generalisations aside, however, Cocklin (1989: 92) observes that re-entry 'is a highly individualised process, the outcomes of factors of influence from student biography, social context and interactions within and outside the school situation'.

In a recent study, Goldman and Bradley (1997, 1996a, 1996b) discovered the following characteristics of a sample of 1,233 re-entry students in Australia. These students are a diverse group in terms of gender, age, place of residence, living arrangements, marital status and other demographic variables. Sixty-five percent of their fathers are unskilled or have no occupation, and 58% of their mothers are either unskilled or are fully occupied with home duties. In general, re-entry students are seeking higher levels of education, and are aspiring to a higher occupational status, than that achieved by their parents, but many appear to be in need of counselling for choice of courses suitable to their abilities. More re-entry students are studying on a full-time, than on a part-time basis, with a significant proportion (40%) employed in paid positions such as semi- or unskilled trades, office work or sales jobs. Most students returned to study in order to improve their chances of employment, career advancement and/or university entrance. After completing their secondary schooling, approximately two-thirds of re-entry students intend to apply for a university place, and one-quarter intend to apply for a place in a Technical and Further Education College (TAFE) or other training

position.

Almost half of re-entry students experience financial difficulties when returning to study, and many experience problems associated with a lack of self-confidence and a lack of academic background. Twenty-six percent of re-entry students believe they need a bridging course when returning to study, but only 7% participated in such a course. Most participants rate such courses very highly. Re-entry students are most frequently enrolled in between four and six subjects. English, Maths and Science are the most popular subjects, whilst very few re-entry students enrol in Languages other than English. Almost 50% of re-entry students receive Australian government financial assistance (through a scheme known as AUSTUDY), while the remainder receive an income through paid employment, family members or other sources.

Most re-entry students hold positive attitudes towards their institution, although some sub-groups, such as males and those from traditional High Schools, are less favourably inclined. Three factors out of a list of 34 are of concern to more than half of re-entry students. These factors are financial difficulties, doubts over job prospects and difficulties getting motivated to study. Other serious causes of concern for large numbers of re-entry students include excessive demands upon their time, and poor study skills. A significant minority of re-entry students report difficulties in gaining access to, and making use of, institutional facilities such as the library and cafeteria. Most re-entry students believe that their institution is supportive of their attempts to return to study, and most regard their institution's services and facilities as good, but not excellent. Innovative institutions are rated much more highly in these respects than are traditional high and correspondence schools. Re-entry students believe much can be done to increase the number of returning students, and the success of those who do return. Prominent among their suggestions is the provision of greater financial, academic and psychological support for returning students. For further details see Goldman and Bradley (1997, 1996a, 1996b).

In order to discover what factors are associated with re-entry students withdrawing from school for a second time, the study progress of 1,046 of these re-entry students was tracked (Goldman & Bradley, 1997, 1996a, 1996b, 1995). The repeat dropouts were found to be distinguishable from re-entry students who complete their secondary education in several ways. They are more likely to be attending a traditional High School than other types of institutions. They have left school earlier, are younger, are in a more junior year level, and are

taking more subjects than students who are still enrolled in their courses. They are more likely to describe themselves as "homeless" and to be encountering financial and transport difficulties. On average, this group of re-entry student dropouts have lower educational and occupational aspirations than do their peers who are continuing with their studies. They may well experience more difficulties with some aspects of their course work, and feel they are inadequately supported by their institution. They differ markedly in their estimation of their teachers, and in the extent to which they report being in conflict with the authority of their institution. In general the pattern to emerge suggested that the re-entry student dropout problem is characterised by socio-emotional immaturity, insufficient support services, inflexible institutional procedures, and financial and domestic difficulties. Multivariate discriminant analyses revealed that the re-entry student dropouts could be most economically predicted from a) their report of conflicts over school rules, b) their lack of interest in going on to tertiary study, and c) their attendance at traditional high schools. Other characteristics, such as youthfulness and their negative attitudes to school and teachers, were correlated in the region of .35 with dropping-out, but did not add significantly to the discriminating power of the function.

This recent study of re-entry student dropouts aside, however, there are only a few isolated studies related to this topic. In the USA, success rates of re-enterers who dropout appear to increase with the later the year the student originally dropped out. Success rates almost double from dropping out in the early years of high school to dropping out in Grade 12 (Kolstadt & Kaufman, 1989). Svec (1986) claims that in the USA success rates also appear to be enhanced if greater numbers of dropouts re-enter. Possibly this is because there will be greater peer support from larger numbers of peers and also better provision of services.

Overall, the limited evidence available suggests that re-entry students who withdraw from school (repeat dropouts) may be distinguished from continuing students in that "leavers" tend to be younger, less emotionally mature and physically secure, less educationally and occupationally ambitious, less accepting of the school's authority, less well integrated into the school's social system, and less able to cope with both the academic workload and the other practical difficulties with which they are confronted. It would thus seem that the variables which are of assistance in predicting initial school dropouts are also useful in understanding the experiences and decision-making of re-entry and repeat dropout students.

Programs for Re-enterers

Having summarised above some of the factors associated with dropping out and re-entry, the question then arises as to what programs can be created to prevent re-enterers from dropping out again? Do such programs make a difference? Do they in fact inhibit further dropping out?

Before reviewing the evidence available in relation to these questions, it must be noted that this literature is extremely limited, both in quality and quantity. Few published studies could be located, and those which do exist tend to be descriptive accounts rather than rigorous, evaluative, research using matched control groups. Objective indices of success and long-term follow-ups appear to be completely absent.

In a study of returners in the USA (Azumi & Gourgey, 1985), remedial programs in basic skills are suggested as routes to success. However, in order to help students earlier, such remedial courses should be offered before it is too late for the student to drop out in the first place. Presumably this means providing such courses well before actual dropping out as a means to improving retention and to encourage continuing successful studying. For a re-enterer there is an obvious need for such courses. In Australia it is perceived rightly that 'Maths at Work' is a more attractive title for students than 'Remedial Maths'. Similarly 'Communication Skills' is preferable to 'Basic English'. In a study of Australian re-enterers, Aveling (1986) found that success depends on an educational environment which positively reinforces re-entry students' desire to succeed. This promotes increasing levels of confidence in the students about themselves and their abilities.

A Canadian program focuses directly on dropouts, aiming to provide them with the opportunity to combine in-school and out-of-school learning experiences while earning credits towards their High School Diploma (Clement-Godin, 1988). The program also encourages the development of a positive attitude towards self, learning and work. The in-school component has four main objectives: to know and appreciate oneself; to learn how to relate to others; to develop appropriate educational plans; and to explore career alternatives. An examination of access courses in the UK (Further Education Unit, 1987) designed to facilitate gaining matriculation by non-traditional students suggests that the basic characteristics needed of such courses include: no initial insistence on formal educational requirements; recognition of prior, experiential learning; a needs-based negotiated curriculum; and guaranteed progression to specific higher education courses. This

study also suggests that local education authorities and tertiary institutions need to consider the following: developing policies for access to High School along with resources to support them; developing mechanisms for effective consultation and progression between technical and tertiary institutions; and providing flexible courses of study.

One successful program to assist dropouts to re-enter successfully is analysed by Welch and McKenna (1988). Their 'School within a School: A Middle Level Dropout Intervention Program' in Rhode Island was designed to retain dropouts at school. Although no statistics on repeat dropout graduation rates are given, the authors note that teachers felt that 100% of the dropouts improved their classwork, that 95% improved their attitude to school, and that 84% improved their scores. This re-entry program is designed for younger re-entry students. A unique aspect of the program is that parents of dropouts had to sign contracts guaranteeing parental involvement in courses including a once-a-month meeting at the school.

Thiel (1985) found that three particularly successful types of American re-entry programs are continuing education high school programs, technical school programs and outreach programs. The characteristics enhancing the success rates in these include: sensitivity to the stresses faced by young adults; providing a warm and flexible environment; clarifying teacher expectations of students; individual counselling; curricula relevant to the needs of students; and continuous constructive feedback. Many of these factors have resulted in policies encouraging broader curricula for High Schools to include employment-related subjects, credentialling for more than university entrance, more open access to education at all levels, and the need for appropriate teaching/learning environments.

One of the few studies dealing with identifying and retrieving dropouts (Baltimore City Public Schools, 1986) examines a project designed to encourage dropouts to re-enter education and complete their secondary school. Based on the responses of surveys of dropouts it recommends the following: outreach programs to students at risk of dropping out; flexible programs for individual students; transport to and from school; child care and counselling. Once again, recommendations include greater flexibility, student-oriented programs, and personalised advice and support.

In sum, these papers suggest that the retention of re-entry students can be facilitated through a combination of approaches. These include strategies aimed at modifying or removing conditions of risk (such as a lack of basic academic skills, a school climate and curricu-

lum not in tune with the needs of young adults, and practical difficulties with time-tabling, transport, child care and so on). Other strategies would focus upon enhancing the factors which make school re-entry attractive (such as the provision of positive and constructive feedback, the availability of vocationally-relevant curriculum, and the opportunity to proceed to university or technical education.) As plausible as these suggestions appear, further research is required both to extend the range of interventions available and to carefully evaluate those strategies proposed.

Dropout Prevention Programs

Much of the literature on dropouts and re-enterers suggests the importance of dropout prevention programs in the first instance in order to alleviate later problems. While there are few research studies into re-entry dropout programs and their evaluation as shown above, initial dropout prevention programs appear to have some relevance for those who re-enter senior schooling. If a program works for students prior to their dropping out, then the key components of such programs should be examined in an effort to determine whether or not those who have already re-entered may be retained by the same or similar programs.

A wide range of strategies has been suggested to counter the school dropout problem. Several researchers have sought to systematise this knowledge. For example Bradley (1992) proposes nine categories of school-based programs. These nine categories are primarily targeted at one of the following: curriculum, teaching-learning processes, assessment and credentials, personal relationships and school climate, discipline and control, school organisation and administration, environment and facilities, external links, and finally, staffing.

To illustrate the breadth of possible approaches, two specific papers may be cited. The first of these examples comes from the annual conference of the 'Staying-in-School Partnership Program' (City University of New York, 1988) covering ten programs throughout New York State. In order to successfully diminish the numbers of dropouts and at-risk students, education areas in need of improvement include; school organisation and social services; social climate and effective needs; curriculum and instruction; staff development; parent involvement; and partnerships with business and community-based organisations. A second American example (New York City Board of Education, 1987) includes the following six components; facilitating services to students; attendance outreach or strategies directed beyond the school to increase school attendance; guidance and counselling services; health services; school level linkages whether

between teachers, school levels or administration; and alternative educational programs.

From these examples it is tempting to agree with Caterall (1987: 522) who observed that 'school persistence benefits can be and have been loosely claimed for just about anything that takes place in schools' from remedial maths programs to drug abuse counselling, school discipline policies and federally funded school breakfast programs. More comprehensive reviews of a broad cross-section of these kind of programs are available elsewhere (see, for example, Royan, Moisan, Saint-Laurent & Giasson, 1993; Rumberger, 1987). The aim of the following account is more selective. It focuses upon thirteen categories of programs which may be particularly relevant to re-entry students.

Counselling and Guidance

In a study of retention in Tasmania Australia, Abbott-Chapman, Hughes & Wyld (1989) state that dropout potentials should be located and counselling and encouragement given before the student becomes alienated. In an Australian study of locally delivered services to young people (Australian Council of Local Government Associations, 1987: 19) students commented that dropouts should be provided with more vocational guidance. Many respondents in this study report that students who a few years ago dropped out after Grade 9 or 10 were able to obtain apprenticeships, but now, most employers require completion of High School. In order to ensure that students who drop out before completing High School are well prepared for the workforce, schools should provide more employment-preparation courses, community-based or alternative curricula covering 'living skills, vocational and careers education, parenting and the like'.

In an evaluation of the STAR (Students At Risk) program in Tasmania Abbott-Chapman and Patterson (1990) note that recommended programs would include counselling with a vocational emphasis for those potential dropouts who have academic reasons for not continuing at school, and counselling and practical help for potential dropouts with social or other reasons for not continuing. Other research (e. g., Goldman & Bradley, 1996c) suggest that re-entry students may particularly need advice regarding study load, subject choices, and the stresses likely to be encountered when returning to school.

School Characteristics

A study of excellent secondary schools in America (Corcoran &

Wilson, 1986) found that the drop out rate in these schools was three and a half times less than other schools. These excellent secondary schools exhibited a sense of shared purpose among teachers, students, parents and community; school leadership exhibited by the principal; control and discretion in creating a culture of collegiality; higher percentages of teachers with higher degrees (Masters degrees or better); teacher accomplishment being rewarded; enhanced motivation of students; strong conviction that all students can be motivated to learn; high degree of parent and community involvement; and flexibility in adapting to change.

A study of dropping out in Wisconsin by Wehlage and Rutter (1986) found that the characteristics of educational institutions seem to account for the gulf between stay-ins and dropouts. That is, the interaction of school and students produce dropouts. The authors state that it is the schools' responsibility to introduce educational programs to stem the outflow. In doing so, the authors suggest the following: an enhanced sense of professional accountability among educators to all students; a renewed effort to establish legitimate authority within the institution; and redefining school work to allow more students to achieve with success and satisfaction.

Size of Educational Institution

The size of American urban senior high schools with their large populations and often poor student/staff contact appears to encourage alienation and other problems which promote dropping out and discourage returning. In some Australian states, a recent innovation is the Senior High School or Senior College where the population is composed of young adults in Grade 11 and 12 only rather than young adults and adolescents. Size, however, is only one factor. It is the quality of an institution's climate which appears to be an important factor in both retaining students and encouraging dropouts to return. The large American urban senior high school would appear to be an inappropriate model for Australian education despite its apparent similarity to our senior high/college institutions.

School Links to Technical Institutions

The important connection linking school and vocational education in technical institutions in Australia is being recognised (Australian Education Council, 1990). The three main benefits suggested are the broadening of choice for students particularly in times of increased participation rates; enabling, in some fields of study, a mix of subjects that would provide a better basis for continuation to tertiary studies than school-based subjects; and the more efficient use of resources. In a case study in Queensland of co-operative programs between a State

High School and a Technical Correspondence School, Lees (1986) concludes that this linkage has extended the curriculum options available to students in Grades 11 and 12. He found that the students undertaking the program responded well to it and indicated they wish to continue with those subjects, thus encouraging retention.

The Provision of Vocational Programs

A number of studies (Hagen, 1989; Iannucilli, 1989; Cabrera, 1988) show that vocational education can play a significant role in dropout prevention in the first instance. Iannucilli (1989) claims that students involved in vocational education are more likely to participate in school activities which help them determine their own and their future goals. Vocational classes are claimed to be more individualised, student-centred and activity based, and provide greater educational experiences similar to dropout prevention programs than regular classes do. A role for vocational education in dropout prevention is noted by Hagen in the USA (1989) who says that the characteristics of many dropouts (low socio-economic status, lower ability, lower scores in tests) are similar to those taking vocational education classes. She claims that the greater the number of vocational education courses taken by such students, the greater the success rate of retaining these students. Based on this, Hagen says there is value in identifying potential dropouts in elementary school and encouraging them to enrol in vocational education classes in high school. Cabrera (1988) analysed a program in a New York high school oriented to immigrant students with limited English and from low income backgrounds. The program is career-oriented and includes the teaching of employability skills; word processing; career workshops; English courses; and counselling. The results show that the dropout rate of immigrant students was no greater than for mainstream students.

A study exploring vocational education and dropouts in a national American study (Mertens, Seitz & Cox, 1982) found that the more vocational education students take, the less likely they are to drop out. Despite the apparent success of vocational programs in preventing initial school dropouts, some caution is required when extrapolating to dropout prevention for re-entry students. On the evidence reported earlier that many re-enterers are seeking academic qualifications and eventual university entrance (rather than “work skills”), it would be unwise to bias the curriculum too heavily towards vocational subjects.

Study Skills Programs

Study skills are highlighted in a number of research projects as the means to successful completion of high school (see, for example Mayer,

Mitchell, Clementi, Clement-Robertson, Myatt & Bullara, 1993; Pearson & Banerji, 1993) An investigation of 95 dropouts in Texas (Jordan-Davis, 1984) suggests that providing all students with basic study skills, especially reading and writing, may reduce the number of dropouts. Success was achieved by enhancing the study skills of potential dropouts in a program in Colorado (Nelson, 1985). That program focussed on Grade 8 students and is evidenced by increases in test scores and only limited numbers of dropouts. In a dropout prevention series of booklets, Fennimore (1988a, 1988b) notes that two aspects are important—the role of a mentor and the improvement of study skills including: active listening; problem solving; developing motivation; clarifying goals; and sharing information. These, according to Fennimore are related to the self-development of students, and are essential for school success. The specific value to re-entry students of study-skills programs is likely to increase with a) the earlier the student's original departure from school, and b) the longer the period of absence prior to school re-entry.

Flexibility in Timetable

The organisation of the school timetable has a substantial positive effect upon reducing numbers of dropouts claimed White (1987). In his Colorado study of students, teachers and principals he found that when courses are timetabled throughout the year, including school holidays as, for example, in Summer Schools, dropout problems were markedly resolved and school holding power increased during the regular academic year. Such flexibility has the potential to be implemented in the semester system now common in many Western countries. However, there is a curious lack of research on the importance of flexibility of school hours. Where Australian Technical and Further Education has shown considerable flexibility in the provision of evening classes and weekend courses, senior schooling in Australia has shown little or no flexibility, simply repeating traditional school hours of 9am to 3pm or 3.30pm. Even where part-time attendance is permitted, often reluctantly, this usually occurs during these hours. Some senior high schools and colleges (for Grades 11 and 12), however, are moving slowly to greater flexibility by allowing evening and weekend classes, to encourage those working to return to study. Part-time work combined with part-time study in some academic areas may well be the pattern of the senior schooling provision of the future. This seems so in Australia, provided teachers' unions allow greater flexibility in conditions for their members. Further, the increasing use of technology, open learning and multi-media education will increase flexibility of access to education. Students will increasingly be able to learn at any time of the day or night, and this flexibility is likely to be

particularly appealing to those re-entry students who are trying to manage family and work commitments.

Absenteeism Prevention Programs

It has long been known that 'absenteeism, academic failure and early school departure are links in a long chain of interconnected problems' (Kaplan & Luck, 1977: 41). An interview study of 50 dropouts in Oregon (Estcourt, 1986) found that low achievement correlates with chronic absenteeism. Consequently a program was introduced to reduce chronic absenteeism, and to directly intervene to help students to understand the relationship between non-attendance and lower achievement. A study of six urban high schools in Virginia USA suggests that the most successful ingredients in reducing absenteeism are the following: a computerised system of recording and monitoring absences; political alliances with teachers and parents committed to reducing truancy; consistency in imposing penalties for repeat offenders; creating and supporting intervention programs; patience and the will to persevere through early implementation programs.

A study of school data in Ohio (Zafrau, 1987) confirmed that attendance is an important part of successful completion of high school. Attendance improvement strategies are most effective if they include positive motivation for students, not only to attend but also to improve their academic skills. These absenteeism prevention programs may be effective in preventing initial dropouts, but would need to be managed with sensitivity if applied to re-entry students who may for example have child-rearing, financial and other civic responsibilities which necessitate absences from school. In this context, it is worth re-emphasising that future advances in educational technology may decrease the importance of school attendance as students will be able to work on CD-ROMs at computer workstations in their homes, libraries, civic offices, or cafes.

Teachers' Attitudes in Senior Schooling

Focusing on a high school on Queensland's Gold Coast, Bradley (1991: 95) states 'A potentially critical determinant of student dissatisfaction, failure and withdrawal is the perceptions, expectations and values held by their teachers'. When teachers were asked about their attitudes to retention by stating what percentage of students should be encouraged to stay on at school to complete High School, Bradley found two sub-groups of equal size. One teacher sub-group said that only 50%-70% of students should be encouraged, while the other sub-group by contrast said 90%-100% of students. The first sub-group were more likely to be Maths/Science teachers and the other sub-

group more likely to be English/Humanities/Commerce teachers. Thus the influence of teachers, by subject area, may play a crucial role in influencing students' decision to stay or go. The involvement of teachers in appropriate professional development activities may be critical in retaining re-entry students once they return.

In a survey of the needs of an urban high school's community in New South Wales, Solman (1987) found that when teachers were asked to respond to the role of the school in encouraging students not to leave school, only 20% of teachers thought this was an important or very important role for the school. By contrast, 66% of the school community thought this to be so. Such a low level of support from teachers for encouraging retention suggests that if a positive change in teacher attitudes is effected even closer to that of community support, then this may influence and even encourage students not to drop out. It could also be a factor in retaining re-entry students who are not high achievers but wish to complete High School in less academically oriented subjects.

Mayer et al., (1993) report upon an evaluation of a program designed to encourage teachers to use more positive and approving statements towards students. The authors report that this intervention, in combination with the use of additional tutors, a career development program and a remedial skills course, was associated with reduced student suspension and dropout rates. This package of interventions would appear to address many of the concerns expressed by re-entry students, and would thus appear worthy of application in schools aiming to reduce their rates of repeat dropouts.

School/Community Support—Integrated Learning Environment

Dropout prevention is more likely to be effective with integrated education and community support says Fennimore (1988b). In his 'Guide to Dropout Prevention' he suggests the school introduce an integrated learning environment in the classroom which is adapted to suit local milieux. This includes: increasing educational relevance; changing teacher roles; creating a career-focused curriculum; providing for successes; and monitoring progress.

School Provision of Practical Support

Similarly, Mayer et al., (1993) report upon the use of local business people to provide mentors, and assist teachers to incorporate a realistic view of the world of work into the curriculum. Such an approach may engage the interest of a proportion of re-entry students who are demanding "real-world" relevance, but could potentially offend another

er group if perceived to be overly-patronising and depreciative of their quest for academic credentials. The extent to which approaches such as this are adopted may thus require some local knowledge, and sensitivity to school-specific factors.

The school success of some re-entry students may require more sustained community interventions than those described above. Goldman and Bradley (1996a) for example, found that 5% of their sample of re-entry students described themselves as “homeless”, whilst a smaller percentage indicated that they live a “street lifestyle”. These students may require government or community-sponsored accommodation. One such example was established in Melbourne but was closed soon after because of state Government budget cutbacks. As Franklin and Streeter (1992) have observed, supervised living programs may enable these youths to find the stable social networks necessary to remain at school, and to rebuild their lives.

In examining the support services provided by schools to inhibit dropping out, Johnson (1990: 42) states that if schools provided child-care facilities, teenage mothers (and mature age students) would be able to continue their education. These kinds of provision are particularly relevant to re-entry students.

Peer Mentoring, Tutoring and Buddy Systems

Several authorities have stressed the valuable role that students can play in preventing their peers’ withdrawal from school. Srebnik and Elias (1993), for example, argue that students will stay at school to the extent that broad-based interventions succeed in maintaining students’ sense of belonging to the school. These authors analyse a range of peer mentoring and tutoring programs aimed at helping students feel needed, supported and academically able. Reciprocal peer tutoring among re-entry students may serve as an excellent means of developing the academic skills and social support networks necessary for school success. Where students feel some loss of status associated with their return to school, their participation as tutors of other students may help maintain their self-esteem. By contrast, the use of younger students as tutors of older re-entry students may be interpreted as demeaning, and may potentiate a decision to dropout.

Proselytising by Dropouts

The potential for using dropouts to proselytise intending dropouts is noted by Widmann and Housden (1988) in their California study where they state that most dropouts in the study report they would advise potential dropouts to stay in school. Future programs to inhibit school dropouts may be well advised to use this as part of their

strategy, particularly where dropouts are at risk of dropping out a second time. A similar strategy has been used in Victoria Australia where homeless youth have been used to talk to potential dropouts about their experience. It has at this time however not been evaluated as an effective strategy, and appears to have been positively discouraged by the authorities.

Recommendations

This article has explored the most important factors in programs which appear to be related to the process of high school dropping out and effective, successful re-entry. A suite of factors appears to be present for dropouts, re-enterers and re-enterers who dropout.

The research paints a picture of disadvantaged youths, particularly lower achieving males who are bored and disaffected by regular high schooling. A subset of these dropouts who are more ambitious re-enter high school, and it is only the psychologically determined, those ambitious for a career or university study, and those with backgrounds conducive to further study who appear to refrain from yet another dropout. The potential dropouts, and the re-enterers who are already marginalised, are in need of school-based assistance of an academic, personal and psychological kind.

The examples from the literature point to the role that remedial programs can play for potential dropouts. The inclusion in high schools of Dropout Prevention Programs dealing with numeracy, literacy, personal development, and mentoring which have been found to be beneficial elsewhere would appear to hold great promise. The literature strongly suggests that the problem of repeat dropouts can be profitably addressed at the school/work interface. Career counselling is frequently advocated in the literature. More high schools should address this important area to guide students before they contemplate dropping out of high school. Currently career counselling is patchy in Australian high schools and an increased emphasis upon this service could help students academically and personally.

The role of "old" dropouts to proselytise teenagers contemplating dropping out appears to be useful. Since most dropouts report that dropping out was a negative experience, using them to advise teenagers should prove useful. The role of high school staff in dropout prevention and re-entry assistance can not be underestimated. Staff can do much to ensure re-enterers are supported and guided to reinforce small successes. Students must also be given access to vocational curricula, technical colleges and part-time work, though the introduction of more flexible time-tabling and more "porous" boundaries

between work and external institutions. The linkages between school and vocational colleges appear to have very positive outcomes for students. A greater development of this linkage is currently occurring in Australia. This will be beneficial and effective for potential dropouts and potential re- enterers.

The lack of research into high school dropouts, re-enterers and re-entry dropouts in Australian and other countries highlights the need for greater analysis of this subset of young adults in order not to marginalise them further than they already are. Further investigations into the area are sorely needed if we are to gain an increased understanding of this cohort of our next generation.

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