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Race, Ethnicity, Class, and School Dropouts:

A Policy Perspective

Richard Verdugo, *National Education Association*

The author presents a review of literature on conditions and circumstances that cause youth to drop out before finishing high school. The essay explains the key features of both cultural and structural theories of low academic performance, and the author argues these theories might profitably be fused in order to formulate effective dropout prevention/intervention policies. The author recommends use of the public health model for prevention and intervention and synthesizes the findings of three recent reports on effective dropout programs.

Introduction

Every year a significant number of American youth fail to complete high school and thus place great stress on themselves, their families, and on society (Levin; McDill, Natriello, and Pallas; Peng; Rumberger). Among this group, ethnic-racial minorities and working-class students have the highest dropout rates. For example, in 1999 the dropout rate for non-Hispanic whites ages 16 to 24 was 8 percent, 12 percent for non-Hispanic Blacks, and 31 percent for Hispanics. Also, students from the lowest family incomes have higher dropout rates than students from families with higher incomes. Being a school dropout is an additional obstacle that hinders the life chances of ethnic-racial minority or lower class student.

The dropout rates among minorities and working-class youth should not only motivate us to develop explanations as to why these rates are so high, but they should also drive our search for effective dropout prevention/intervention strategies. I have three objectives in this paper. First, I use an at-risk framework in reviewing an extensive body of

literature about why youth dropout. Such a review is a necessary step toward developing sound theoretical explanations, as well as effective dropout prevention/intervention programs. Second, I describe the two main theoretical paradigms used in explaining the dropout rate among minorities and working-class youth. Third, I merge the at-risk research and the paradigm literature in creating a strategy for developing dropout prevention/intervention program(s).

Risk Factors and School Dropouts

Review of the literature

A review of the risk factor literature indicates that risk factors fall into one of six broad categories:

- Individual
- Family
- Peers
- Schools
- Community
- Societal.

Individual Risk Factors

Student Attitudes

Student attitudes are related to dropping out because students who are not motivated to do well in school and/or do not bond with school are at risk. To begin with, low commitment to conventional goals and objectives increases the risk of dropping out (Lawrence). A corollary with such attitudes is low educational expectations (Pirog and Magee; Rumberger; Rumberger and Larson; Swanson and Schneider). Students who are at risk of dropping out not only do not expect to do well in school, but they may not care to do so either. A third attitudinal risk factor is low psychological well-being. Students who have psychological problems and/or low self-esteem are at greater risk of dropping out (Gottfredson). Students must be engaged in school if they are to perform well.

Student Skills and School Performance

Students who do not perform well in school are at risk of dropping out (Alexander et al. 1985; Coleman and Hoffer; Pallas 1984). Moreover, consistency in academic performance is also important because early academic performance later becomes an important predictor of leaving

school (Alexander et al. 1997; Garnier, Stein and Jacobs; Goldschmidt and Wang; Roderick; Rumberger and Larson). Also, youth who have poor study habits perform poorly in school and are thus more likely to drop out (Pallas 1984).

Immigrant status and the attendant poor language skills are also factors related to dropping out. Not only do immigrant status and language skills interact in their effect on dropping out, but research also finds that immigrant status and poor language skills interact to increase the likelihood of dropping out (Goldschmidt and Wang; Rumberger 1995; Velez). However, research also points out that some immigrants perform well academically (Suarez-Orozco). While some have argued that language is a factor in the dropout rates, Krashen (2000) argues that it is not. Instead, Krashen argues that dropping out is related to such factors as familial socioeconomic status.

Student Behavioral Issues

Among those behavioral issues identified by research as affecting the dropout decision are low integration into school and its culture, involvement in adult roles, delinquent behavior, and student mobility. Low interest and participation in extracurricular activities are factors related to dropping out (Fine; McNeal 1995). Other integration indicators include a lack of psychic attachment to school, and the lack of participation in school activities (McNeal 1995; Newman et. al.; Tinto). Truancies and absences from school are also related to dropping out. Indeed, the greater the truancies and/or absences from school, the greater the likelihood of dropping out (Goldschmidt and Wang; Rumberger 1995; Rumberger and Larson).

In many cases, grade retention increases the odds of dropping out (Goldschmidt and Wang; Jimerson; Kaufman and Bradby; Roderick 1994; Rumberger 1995; Rumberger and Larson). However, there are some scholars who point out that being held back has the opposite effect by increasing student achievement (Alexander et al 1994).

Clearly, the reasoning behind the retention decision is crucial. If a child is being held back for reasons related to maturation and he/she does not have a history of poor academic performance or discipline problems, then retention is probably a good decision. If the decision is based on a history of academic and other behavioral problems then retention may increase the likelihood of dropping out. Student involvement in adult roles has mixed effects on dropping out. Research indicates that being married, having a child, and working long hours increases the likelihood

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of dropping out (Pallas 1984, 1987; Mc Neal 1995). There is still some debate about the effects employment has on dropping out. Some scholars find that employment increases academic performance, school commitment, and self-esteem (Greenberger and Steinberg; Lewin-Epstein). Recent work by McNeal (1997a) provides an explanation for these contradictory findings—the effects of employment on the likelihood of dropping out depend on the job and the number of hours worked. Student delinquent behavior is a significant predictor of dropping out. For instance, drug use is linked to dropping out (Mensch and Kandel). Other kinds of delinquent behavior linked to dropping out include aggressive and violent behavior, as well as activities that can only be seen as delinquent, such as vandalism, theft, etc.

Moving from one school to another increases the likelihood of dropping out (Rumberger 1995; Rumberger and Larson; Swanson and Schneider; Teachman et al.). There are two problems associated with moving from one school to another. First, students are not allowed enough time to bond with a school and its culture. Second, students fail to form important relationships with peers. These are important issues because friends are important during the transition from elementary to middle school, and from middle school to high school.

Family Risk Factors

Family Relations

Unstable family relationships tend to exert negative effects on student behavior, well-being and thus on remaining in school. Family divorce, separation, or domestic violence place children at risk (Fine; Fitzpatrick and Yoels). Poor family relations tend to place students at risk, such as not enough parental time with children (Liebowitz). Other parenting issues that place youth at risk include the lack of influence on children pursuing conventional goals and objectives (Wright and Wright); poor communication between parents and their children (Alpert and Dunham; Rumberger et al. 1990); harsh behavior of parents toward their children (Bachman, Green, and Wirtanen); and single-parent households (Goldschmidt and Wang; Mc Neal; Rumberger, 1995; Rumberger and Larson; Teachman et al.). Research also indicates that strong relationships between parents and their children reduces the likelihood of dropping out (Mc Neal 1999; Teachman et al.). Stable, positive family relations can be the bedrock of positive school experiences for many students.

Family Economics

Low parental socioeconomic status increases the likelihood of dropping out (Bryk and Thum; Coleman; Mc Neal 1999; Pallas 1984; Pong and Ju; Rumberger 1995; Rumberger and Larson). A topic that is clearly yoked to family socioeconomic status is underclass status; being a member of the underclass increases the likelihood of dropping out (Ricketts and Sawhill). Economics is linked to the presence of education-related resources and materials available to children. The lack of study materials and other literary materials in the home is associated with dropping out (Ekstrom et al.). A related topic is family mobility. That is, the number of moves a family makes during a child's school career is positively related to the likelihood of dropping out. Research indicates that the greater the number of moves, the greater the risk of dropping out (Peng; Matute-Bianchi). Finally, research has linked greater parental education, living in a two-parent household, owning a home, and living outside the central city as protective factors against dropping out (Hauser, Simmons and Pager).

Family Educational Support

Parental involvement in the education of their children is crucial for their children's educational performance. First, by supporting their children's education, parents not only act as role models, but they act as advocates for their children by providing support when it becomes necessary. Second, parental involvement is symbolic; parental involvement signals to their children that they and their education are important. Research indicates that low parental involvement in the education of their children increases the likelihood of dropping out (Rumberger 1995; Suichu and Willms).

Peer Risk Factors

The influence of peers on the behavior of young people has been well-documented, and in terms of dropping out, two themes emerge from this research. First, young people who associate with peers exhibiting low attachment to mainstream social institutions, such as school, and who also engage in delinquent behavior are more likely to drop out (Coleman and Hoffer; Kim).² It should also be pointed out that associating with delinquents also places students at risk (Lawrence 1998). A second peer-related risk factor that research has identified as placing students at risk is dating (Pallas 1984). The implication is that the time spent dating and preparing to date is time that one might have spent studying or on some other school task.

It is the negative peer relations that tend to place some students at risk of dropping out. Of particular importance are peer relations that lead to delinquent behavior, attitudes that eschew mainstream goals and values, and peer relations that take a significant amount of time away from school and school activities.

School Risk Factors

School Policies

Some school policies place students at risk by stigmatizing, isolating, or increasing their disengagement from school.³ For instance, a recent school policy that researchers argue places students at risk of dropping out are educational standards. The push for greater standards tends to place marginal student at even greater risk by raising the academic bar which marginal students cannot meet (McDill, Natriello, and Pallas 1985, 1986). The result will be to increase the dropout rate among marginal students.

Tracking is another policy that tends to place students at risk of dropping out. Lower tracked students are isolated from their peers and must face the stigmatization and labels of being slow learners. The processes of isolation, labeling, and stigmatization tend to push low tracked students away from school; they fail to see, with good reason, schools as places that enhance their self-esteem (Gamoran; Oakes).

School retention policies also place students at risk of dropping out. Retained students are more likely to be absent from school, to be truant and to eventually drop out (Heubert and Hauser; Smith and Shepard).

School Climate & Resources

By school climate I mean a school's normative value system. For example, does the school have high academic and social expectations for students? Does the school value and respect students? Some research shows there are a number of school climate factors that place students at risk of dropping out.⁴ To begin with, a school's academic climate has an effect; the lower the school academic climate, the greater the risk of dropping out (Bryk and Thum; Hoffer; Rumberger and Thomas). McNeal (1997b), however, found that no such effect exists after controlling for student socioeconomic background and other factors, such as school social composition, school resources, and school organizational structure.

The values and expectations teachers have of students also play prominently in the student dropout rate. Research has indicated that low teacher expectations and negative comments directed at students who are

already at risk tend to increase that risk. Verdugo discusses how labeling and expectations affect minority student achievement.

Two additional school climate issues have emerged from the literature: race and class composition of the studentry, and Catholic vs. public schools. The larger the racial composition and/or lower the class composition of the student population, the greater the risk of dropping out (Bryk and Thum; Mc Neal 1997b; Rumberger 1995; Rumberger and Thomas). Research also indicates that Catholic schools have fewer dropouts than public schools (Bryk and Thum; Coleman and Hoffer; Rumberger and Thomas). However, students who leave Catholic schools have the option of attending public schools.

In addition to climate, school resources have an effect on dropping out. Several kinds of social and physical structures affect the likelihood of dropping out. Smaller class and school size, a core curriculum of high standards⁵ with opportunities for students to recover without failure or retention, teacher professional development, and scheduled planning time are all factors that reduce the likelihood of dropping out (McPartland and Jordon; Aness and Wichterle; Bryk and Thum; Rumberger and Thomas).

Community/Societal Risk Factors

Community Risk Factors

One important community factor placing students at risk is low prospects for socioeconomic success or upward social mobility (Rumberger). Students raised in communities where adults have poor jobs or no jobs fail to see the relationship between education and their economic life chances.

Related community topics are high unemployment, poverty, mobility, and crime which tend to raise the risk of dropping out (Brooks-Gun et al.; Clark). Students in such environments not only question their economic prospects, but they face a number of serious educational obstacles, e.g., their safety while in school, the reality of unequal educational opportunities.

Societal Risk Factors

The larger society is also implicated in the dropout rate. Low tax revenues for government assisted programs tend to be linked to increasing the risk of dropping out, (Levin; Rumberger 1987). In addition, low national income (recessions and depressions) which

reduces job prospects and lower political and social participation are linked to dropping out (Catterall; Levin).

Cultural and Structural Theories of Dropping Out

Two paradigms dominate theoretical discussions about academic performance and dropping out: Cultural and Structural paradigms. Cultural theorists argue that values, views, and norms found in the family, community, and in youth themselves affect student academic performance. Structural theorists, in contrast, argue that the patterned, regular, and predictable behavior (and attitudes) of society, its institutions and its agents are the main causes for student's poor academic performance.

Cultural Paradigms

The most prominent Cultural paradigm hypothesis concerns the oppositional stances taken by minorities and working-class youth toward school. By oppositional culture, I mean that the views, beliefs and behaviors of youth are counter to those of mainstream society and its institutions. The research in this area is quite extensive and covers race/ethnicity, gender, and social class.⁶

African American Youth: Code of the Street

A number of social scientists have argued that African American youth, especially those in the inner city, are sabotaging their own academic careers as a result of the oppositional stances they take toward education and school (Fordham; Anderson 1994, 2000; McWhorter 2000). At the core of this oppositional stance is the "code of the street." In a 1999 study, Aderson has this to say:

called a code of the streets, which amounts to a set of informal rules governing interpersonal public behavior, including violence. The rules prescribe both a proper comportment and a proper way to respond if challenged. They regulate the use of violence and so allow those who are inclined to aggression to precipitate violent encounters in an approved way. The rules have been established and are enforced mainly by the street-oriented, but on the streets the distinction between street and decent is often irrelevant, everybody knows that if the rules are violated, there are penalties. Knowledge of the code is thus largely defensive; it is literally necessary for operating in public (82).

The code's key concept is respect; something that is not available in the wider society. Within oppositional culture, respect is not easily attained and a tremendous amount of energy and effort are spent maintaining one's respect. A set of rules and regulations about how one obtains and maintains respect are part of the code. To attain and maintain respect, one's entire demeanor and presentation of self focus on the "potential for violence." Clothing, speech, and movement are all part of the package.

Getting and maintaining respect is also part of one's identity, and is a central concept for research among scholars adhering to the cultural paradigm. To be a respected person, one must know the code of the street, and if one does not have respect they are diminished as a person and do not deserve things that are valued in their very narrow social system. There is, then, a certain meritocracy to the code of the street; everyone has the opportunity to know and understand the code and follow its prescriptions. Everyone is also held accountable for knowing the code; if one does not know the code and becomes a victim, well then too bad, it's that person's fault.

The process of getting respect is crucial. In gaining respect, one must exhibit nerve. One exhibits nerve by taking someone else's possessions (the greater the value, the greater the nerve), "messing" with someone else's woman, throwing the first punch, getting in someone else's face, or pulling a trigger. Such public displays of nerve are symbolic—an individual displaying such behavior has nerve and will take drastic measures to get and maintain respect. The proper display of "nerve" also sends another public message: that one is not afraid to die. Among the hardcore street youth, dying to get and maintain respect is perfectly acceptable. As Anderson's 1994 work points out:

Not to be afraid to die is by implication to have few compunctions about taking another's life. Not to be afraid to die is the quid pro quo of being able to take somebody else's life—for the right reasons, if the situation demands it. When others believe this is one's position, it gives one a real sense of power on the streets. Such credibility is what many inner-city youths strive to achieve, whether they are decent or street-oriented, both because of its practical defensive value and because of the positive way it makes them feel about themselves (92).

The implications for education are varied, but they can be summarized by noting that youth embroiled in such a system reject or do not value educational values, beliefs, and behavior. Inner city youth who pursue school goals and objectives are "selling out," and "acting white." Thus, students reject the value of academic performance, and other mainstream values that stress achievement and attachment to mainstream institutions.

Hispanic Youth: Being a “Vato”⁷

Fordham and Ogbu and Ogbu and Matuti-Bianchi make an important contribution to this area of study by distinguishing between voluntary and involuntary immigrant minority groups. As a result of structured inequality and prejudice, involuntary minorities believe that economic success can only be accomplished by adopting the cultural and linguistic traits of the superordinate culture. For high-achieving Latinos (and Blacks as well), such a perspective puts them in a bind because they are placed in the unenviable position of choosing between maintaining their ethnic identities or achievement. Achievement to some members of this ethnic group translates to “acting white.” For many Latinos, the choice is clear:

To be a Chicano means to hang out by the science wing; it means, not eating lunch in the quad where all the gringos, “white folks,” and school boys eat; it means cutting classes by faking a call slip so you can be with your friends by 7-11; it means sitting in the back of a class of “gabachos” and not participating; it means not carrying books to class or doing your homework; it means doing the minimum to get by. In short, it means not participating in school in ways that promote academic success and achievement (Matuti-Bianchi 253).

In other words, being a “Vato” means acting and presenting oneself in a manner that undermines mainstream white culture.

Foley (1991) discovered similar findings in his study of Chicano youth in South Texas. Foley found that some Chicano students come to school with a set of ideas and attitudes that undermine their academic success. Three traits were especially important among Chicano youth: Chicanos form separatist groups (become “Vatos”), they fail to follow rules and regulations, and they “ditch” school rather than do school work. The reasons for such behavior are because of the school’s hidden curriculum (which degrades them, their families, and their culture), and they fail to see how education would produce economic opportunities for them (Foley 1992).

Working Class Youth: Manual v. Mental Labor

In a classic study of working-class “lads” in a decaying, industrial city in England, Willis (1977) found that such youth developed an oppositional culture to school. Specifically, Willis’s working-class lads rejected the school’s achievement ideology, subverted teachers and administrators, and frequently disrupted classes.

There were very logical reasons why the lads had such attitudes and displayed such behavior. They had come to realize the inferior economic and social conditions of their class under capitalism. Very few of their fathers, older brothers, and friends had jobs; fewer yet had jobs that required an advanced education. Consequently, the lads focused their energies on manual labor over mental labor. Such stances had tragic consequences; the uncritical acceptance of this ideology led many of them to bad, dead-end jobs and reproduced class-based inequality.

Similar results were unearthed by MacLeod (1987) in his study of working-class youth in Boston. MacLeod was able to identify two groups of students, one group calling themselves the “Hallway Hangers” were composed primarily of white youth, and one group, the “Brothers,” made up of Black youth. The Hallway Hangers cut classes, acted out in class, smoked, drank, used drugs, and committed crimes. They did whatever they could to oppose the school’s ideology of achievement and conformity. In contrast, the Brothers attempted to fulfill mainstream roles: they went to class, conformed to rules, studied hard, rejected drugs, played basketball, and cultivated girlfriends. Why were they so different in their reactions to school?

Structural theorists argue institutions and their agents erect barriers for certain kinds of student populations...

MacLeod’s analysis is instructive in offering reasons why the Brothers did well and the Hallway Hangers did not. MacLeod argues that cultural factors shaped different responses. The Brothers were optimistic about their futures and the role of education in shaping their future success. In addition, the parents of the Brothers held high expectations for their sons and held them accountable for their academic and social behavior. Parents of the Hallway Hangers were not nearly as involved in the lives or education of their children. Their children were given free rein and their schoolwork was not monitored.

Structural Paradigms

Cultural theorists focus on values and norms, Structural theorists argue institutions and their agents erect barriers for certain kinds of student populations and that these barriers tend to lower academic performance.

Some scholars have defined structure in terms of political economy (Noguera; Wilson; Massey and Denton). That is, the operation of social institutions affects educational opportunity, e.g., the labor market, the educational system. Their argument is that the “practices” and policies in such institutions deny or create barriers for upward mobility, and that these obstacles are the main cause of academic failure or low academic performance among minority and lower-class students. Three concepts

are particularly crucial to the Structural argument-isolation, school policies, and school climate.

Student Isolation

Schools are places for the instruction of the values and norms one needs for participation in a social system; that is, how to follow and obey rules and regulations (Apple; Bowles and Gintis; Spring; Loewen). Through its practices and policies, schools tend to isolate minority and lower-class students from other students, either mentally or physically. Both practices are important because there is a link between school climate and school structure (Lee and Bryk; Irvine; Morrow and Torres), and both are tied to student performance. Indeed, accesses to experiences and/or activities that are primarily academic, as well as teacher encouragement are especially important for the academic performance of minorities (Foster; Irvine; Ladson-Billings; Sanders and Reed). Also, socioeconomic origins and race have direct effects on how students are treated and the set of expectations educators have about such students (Verdugo 1986). Four isolating practices are particularly crucial-tracking, school policies, expectations, and socialization.

Tracking

Considerable body of research indicates not only that minorities and poor students are tracked into lower classes (Simmons and Grady; Wright; Oakes), but that special education classes and learning disabled students are disproportionately represented by minorities and poor children (Harry and Anderson). Once students are placed in low tracks it is difficult, if not impossible, for them to get out, and their entire educational career entails addressing the label and stigma of being a slow learner by both students and educators. For example, most often African American males are seen as problems, including defiant, aggressive, deficient, and intimidating (Majors et al.; Slaughter-Defoe and Richards).

School Policies

An important contributor to the disengagement of minority and poor students from school are school policies. Research has shown that minorities are punished more severely and more frequently other students (Harry and Anderson; Sandler; Ferguson; Skiba and Peterson). Schools generally fail to support such students in a manner that would enhance their academic performance.

School Climate

School climate has been implicated in the poor educational experiences of minority and poor children. Of particular interest is the interaction between race and gender. Schools are places where gender identities and roles are learned, practiced, and influence social interaction. For minority male students, for example, gender is important in the school context because research suggests that they tend to see schools as feminized environments (Thorne). The importance given to neatness, orderliness, and other kinds of practices in school are seen as feminine traits, and more importantly such school traits are reinforced by a predominantly female teaching force.⁸

Schools are also places in which the roles associated with race are learned (Apple; Troyna and Carrington; Peshkin; Tatum; Cross et al.). Students learn these dimensions through a variety of manifest and latent rituals in the school: teachers' lesson plans, the hidden curriculum, play, name-calling and the use of racial epithets, and the implementation of school policies, such as suspensions, expulsions, and tracking.

Paradigms and Risk Factors: A Synthesis

In this section I propose merging two bodies of research: Cultural and Structural paradigms and the risk factor research. I begin by making three observations. First, in causal ordering, structure precedes culture, but culture then feeds back and affects structure. Thus, while minority and working-class youth develop oppositional sub-cultures in response to an unequally structured mainstream society, in so doing, many also reproduce such a system.

Second, while cultural theorists emphasize the importance of norms, values, and behavior as factors contributing to the poor academic performance of minority and poor youth, they also acknowledge the role of structure. That is, they recognize that the development of such cultural responses are the result of real and perceived structural inequities (Ogbu). Both Structuralists and Culturalists are selective in how they criticize one another, because they fail to recognize the strong ties between them. For example, Cultural theorists are aware of the importance structure plays in influencing cultural responses. Indeed, as Anderson's 1994 study says:

The inclination to violence springs from the circumstances of life among the ghetto poor—the lack of jobs that pay a living wage, the stigma of race, the fallout from rampant drug use and drug trafficking, and the resulting alienation and lack of hope for the future. ...Simply living in

such an environment places young people at special risk of falling victim to aggressive behavior (81).

In addition, Cultural theorists realize that structures are also perceived as open by some and not merely barriers to socioeconomic success.⁹

Third, the arguments made by both Structural and Cultural theorists are not “either/or” propositions. Rather, they are based on a continuum. For Structural theorists, the continuum is from open-to-closed, and for Cultural theorists, the dimension is from oppositional-to-conformity.

Fourth, risk factors fit into one or more of the arguments being advanced by both Structural and Cultural theorists. For example, individual risk factors clearly belong in the Cultural camp, while school and community risk factors fit nicely into the Structural camp. Such a synthesis helps us focus our strategies and programs on problem areas. If cultural views are taken into account, then the focus should be on values, norms, views, and behavior-skills. If the focus is on structure, then the focus should be on changing, dismantling, or erecting new structures.

The table below presents my view of how both bodies of research are related. As can be seen,

Risk factors and theoretical paradigms: a synthesis		
Risk Factors	Theoretical Paradigms	
	Structural	Cultural
Individual		✓
Family	✓	✓
Peers	✓	✓
School	✓	
Community	✓	
Society	✓	

I view individual risk factors as solely cultural since they address skills, attitudes, and behavior. School decision-makers can work to build these factors so students can become engaged in the school process and reduce the risk of dropping out.

Individual risk factors are primarily cultural and focus on values, norms, and behavior. Programs and strategies can be developed that enhance student bonding and commitment to school. Programs also need to assist students in developing academic and social skills.

Family and peer risk factors are both structural and cultural. Low family SES (Author please spell this out) and factors related to work and economic status can be addressed by structural policies such as greater effort by schools to involve parents in the education of their children; schools need to be “parent-centered” in addition to being child-centered. Family cultural issues such as domestic violence, poor family relations, etc., can be addressed by schools providing access to counseling or social welfare services. Peer relations are also structural and cultural because youth involved in delinquent behavior lack the attachment to school and/or adults that can lead to less risk of dropping out. School policy can be developed to better integrate students into the school culture or, in effect, modify school culture so that it accommodates students who are otherwise seen as problems.

School, community, and societal risk factors are structural. At the school level, policies need to be enacted that engage students and their parents in the school culture. For example, school policies, such as zero-tolerance, tend to push students away from school, especially those at greater risk of dropping out. Schools need to think through carefully their policies. Policy at the community and societal level can work to counteract risk factors in these environments. Schools in communities with high levels of crime, unemployment and other risk factors need to make schools safer and offer children the sense that schools and education can lead to greater economic attainment and security in their lives. Schools should also counteract the larger societal stereotypes about minorities and lower-class children by developing their self-esteem and emphasizing the role minorities and working-class people have had in American society and culture.

Developing Dropout Policies

In developing sound dropout prevention/intervention strategies, I strongly recommend use of the public health model described by Hamburg. The public health model has the following tasks:

1. Identify the problem through surveys and other data collection efforts
2. Identify risk factors and co-factors associated with the problem
3. Design interventions and evaluations
4. Conduct outreach/education/information dissemination

In this section I discuss practical aspects of developing programs, program implementation, and how to go about choosing a program.

Implementation

In the implementation stage, it is important to select an appropriate program. In this section I offer some suggestions about how to go about such a process.

Traits of Effective Programs

Three recent reports provide excellent summaries on the traits of effective dropout prevention and student achievement programs. The reports were produced by Rossi, U. S. Department of Education, and the Northwest Regional Laboratory (1999).

Rossi not only stresses the importance of services for at risk students, but the author distinguishes program activities by grade level. The author lists five service-related traits of effective programs: they are not complex, they tend to coordinate services, they provide services for more than one risk factor, and they provide counseling and adult advocacy. Rossi also draws a distinction between elementary, middle and high schools. His reasoning is that risk factors differ by grade level and require the delivery of different services. In elementary schools, he emphasizes the teaching of academic skills and the delivery of activities that foster greater attachment and engagement of students in school— after-school tutoring, enrichment activities, and adults as friends. In middle schools, the engagement processes continue by stressing peer relations, flexible schedules, and counseling. Finally, in high school the emphasis is on making school relevant to paid work that is embedded in school activities.

The 2000 report by the U.S. Department of Education takes a slightly different approach. The report embeds activities for at-risk students within an effective schools framework. First, they provide a description of effective schools that begins with the autonomy of both teachers and administrators in determining curriculum and instructional strategies. The report also stresses a climate that is child-centered and allows students to move at their own paces. Several other concepts are central to effective programs: monitoring of attendance, coordination of services, constant communication among schools in a cluster, and parent/community involvement.

Within the effective schools framework, schools are able to address the needs of at-risk students. For at-risk students, the report adds accelerated learning, family outreach, and training and information for parents so they can help their children at home. Several kinds of activities are suggested in order to enhance the relevance of school to one's later economic status. Students are counseled and made aware of careers and job preparation. Moreover, families are made aware of various social support services, such as child care and health care.

The 1999 report by the Northwest Regional Laboratory also provides its views about effective programs. The NRL framework is similar to a business model and comparable to the Rossi and U.S. Department of Education reports. NRL suggests that effective dropout programs are comprehensive, offer professional development, have measurable and achievable goals, have school staff support, and involve parents and the community. In addition, the NRL report indicates that effective programs evaluate their activities and programs and coordinate resources.

A synthesis of the three reports is captured in the list below-

1. Effective programs are research-based
2. Use a comprehensive strategy that addresses more than one risk factor
3. Start in the early grades and make a long-term commitment
4. Create a smaller, more personalized school environment
5. Emphasize clear and equitably enforced rules and regulations
6. Include vocational education that is well integrated with the academic program
7. Include counseling that pays attention to careers, jobs, and life skills
8. Stimulate a supportive and caring school environment
9. Provide for coordinated and comprehensive services
10. Emphasize academically enriching activities
11. Allow flexible schedules
12. Ensure autonomy for educators in terms of curriculum and instructional strategies
13. Ensure systematic monitoring and follow-up of student absences with teachers, students, and parents
14. Provide special assistance and alternatives to promotion
15. Encourage communication among schools in the cluster
16. Stress parent and community involvement
17. Provide professional development and training
18. Have measurable goals and objectives and a comprehensive evaluation system.

Selecting a Dropout Program

How does one choose a program? A recent report by the American Institutes for Research outlines seven steps that education decision makers can use in choosing programs that enhance the educational attainment of their students . A summary of these steps follows:

1. Identify the school's needs: conduct an assessment.
2. Investigate alternative approaches to the one(s) being considered.
3. Ask program developers about-availability of support; cost; effectiveness; and other schools that use the program
4. Call a random sample of schools (if possible) that are using the program. Program developers may have contacts in these schools. Then ask the following kinds of questions—why was this approach chosen?; how were implementation programs addressed?; what was the cost of implementation?; how effective is the approach?
5. Visit schools if possible and, in particular-visit classrooms; meet and talk to staff; talk to students, parents, and community members; get a sense of the school's mission, its climate, and how it views students.
6. Match the developer's requirements with all available resources. Look at costs of-training; consultation; materials; staff
7. Put the decision to a vote—staff support is crucial to success; about 80 percent of all school staff have to agree on the approach.

Conclusion

While a considerable body of research indicates that education is the primary vehicle for upward mobility and economic success, a significant proportion of the school aged population in the United States drops out before completing high school. Leaving school before completing high school places individuals at significant economic disadvantage and also strains societal resources because an important proportion of the welfare population are school dropouts; the same can be argued regarding the incarcerated population. For minority and poor youth, a large number will join the school dropout population.

This paper has covered several areas of policy and research with the objective of offering some guidelines about developing solid dropout prevention/intervention strategies. The areas covered included using a risk factor framework in reviewing the literature about school dropouts, reviewing two dominant theoretical paradigms about the academic experiences of minority and poor students, merging both paradigms - Structural and Cultural, with the risk factor research and developing a policy framework for addressing school dropouts. The model stresses the interaction between Structural and Cultural paradigms and risk

factors. A final section provides practical suggestions for developing and selecting successful dropout prevention/intervention strategies.

Three conclusions emanate from my work. First, ethnic/racial minorities and poor students have the highest dropout rates. Second, a review of the dropout research employing a risk factor model reveals that dropping out is a complex process. Indeed, many minority and poor students do not see schools as relevant to their current and future lives. Third, two bodies of research suggest that both Structural and Cultural arguments can be merged in a framework for developing sound dropout strategies. Such a framework suggests that schools must invoke both structural and cultural changes in order to engage and integrate minority and poor students into the school process. Schools must become engaging, nurturing and caring environments where students see its value for their current and future life chances.

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¹ In this paper Whites refer to non-Hispanic Whites, and Blacks to non-Hispanic Blacks.

² I should point out that associating with delinquent peers does not necessarily lead to dropping out. Dana Haynie (2001) used a networking framework and found that youth who associate with delinquent peers and exhibit delinquent behavior are those who are closer to influentials within the group, are popular, and have relationships with many members of the group.

³ A recent school policy that we expect to have significant dropout implications is zero tolerance. Russ Skiba and his colleagues have argued that such policies are at the origin of greater expulsions and suspensions among Black and Hispanic students (see Skiba and Peterson; Verdugo 2000). Such policies have the effect of further distancing students from school.

⁴ Research on the effect school climate has on student achievement, and factors related to achievement, such as teachers' job satisfaction, has a history of nearly forty years. There are currently two views about what constitutes a quality school environment: bureaucracy or community. The current research suggests that communities are the best environments. See Verdugo et al. (1997) for a review and analysis of teachers' job satisfaction. Also see Scheerens (1997) for an excellent review of the effective schools models and theories.

⁵ This body of research appears to contradict the earlier research reviewed concerning policy and academic standards. The crucial difference, though, is that the present body of research introduces the notion that students are cared for and supported in an environment where failure is not an option.

⁶ See Anyon, Bourdieu and Passeron, Robins and Cohen, Corrigan, McRobbie and McCabe, and Olson. This body of research makes, essentially, three points. First, it argues that the origins of the oppositional responses by minority and poor youth are based on the real and perceived structural barriers youth see as limiting their life chances. Second, these perceptions and realities lead certain youth to oppositional attitudes and behaviors. Finally, students who maintain these oppositional stances either drop out of school or resign themselves to a working-class or a "street" way of life. There are two views from the Cultural paradigm viewpoint: the "Reproduction", and the "Resistance" theories. For an excellent review see Giroux (1983). Theories of Reproduction begin with the notion that schools are places driven by class-based ideology, and that such an ideology drives social relations, teaching and the curriculum, i.e., schooling. The aim of schooling is to reproduce

the class, gender, and race-based stratification found in the larger social system. While Reproduction theorists acknowledge the emergence of oppositional behavior among students, they assume that students merely follow in lock-step fashion the way they are treated and educated. Whether students follow in lock-step fashion or develop oppositional stances makes not difference to the stratification system-both groups are channeled into specific roles and strata. In contrast, Resistance theorists argue that some students do not merely acquiesce to the schooling onslaught. Rather, schools are contested terrains where tension and conflict define group relations. In such an environment students resist (or struggle against) the class-based educational processes that demean their class, race, or gender. Oppositional stances are seen as rational forms of resistance to an oppressive system. Moreover, Resistance theorists acknowledge that some students engage in disruptive behavior that may not necessarily jeopardize their later life chances (Giroux)

⁷The concept of being a "Vato" does not have an easy translation in English. However, the clearest translation is that one identifies with and associates with Chicanos, and that one maintains appropriate values and roles.

⁸Most of the literature deals with class and males. However, there is some research addressing the status of female students. For example, Women's Study Group (1978) found that sixth-form students in England aggressively asserted their sexuality in response to what they viewed as a sexist school environment.

⁹Duneier points out that inner city communities have strong working-class segments. Families and individuals tied to these segments of the inner city exhibit strongly held mainstream values.

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