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Characteristics of At-Risk Students: Opinions of Elementary
and Secondary School Teachers¹

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Abstract

This study focused on a major problem facing today's educators: high school dropouts. Research questions addressed differences in teacher perspectives of the characteristics of struggling students. Differences in teachers' perspectives based on teaching level (elementary & secondary) were examined. The researcher conducted focus groups with a total of 12 teachers. The research was conducted in two suburban districts. Focus group questions were designed following a survey administered to 108 suburban public school teachers. The survey responses reported previously identified four dimensions of characteristics of at-risk students: *behavior*, *achievement*, *family involvement*, and *family background*. The data from the focus groups can be used to inform decisions regarding the identification and support of at-risk students.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine perspectives of public school teachers at elementary, middle, and high school levels in hopes of providing information to assist with identifying students at-risk for dropping out of school at the earliest age possible. This study investigated teacher perspectives regarding at-risk students by addressing the following questions:

- (1) What are the perspectives of elementary and secondary (middle and high school) teachers with respect to characteristics of at-risk students?
- (2) Is there a significant difference between perspectives of public school teachers (elementary and secondary) with respect to characteristics of at-risk students?

Theoretical Framework

The rate at which students drop out of school has remained about the same for the past 30 years. However, in today's workforce, dropouts are far less likely to obtain a stable job than in past generations (Monrad, 2007). More than half a million young people drop

out of high school each year (Heckman & LaFontaine, 2007). Addressing this problem is critical for several reasons. The average earning difference between a dropout and a graduate is estimated at about \$9,000 annually or over \$260,000 over a career. The economic consequence is that dropouts contribute to the economy only about half as much as high school graduates (Dynarski et al., 2008). Additionally, dropouts are more likely to draw large government assistance and have a higher rate of imprisonment, poor health and lower life expectancies when compared to graduates (Dynarski et al., 2008).

Methodology

Following an explanatory sequential design, previously reported initial responses to a survey (based on characteristics of at-risk students) informed the focus group questions.

Data Collection and Analysis

Specific questions designed to elicit participant views on characteristics of at-risk students were utilized. Participants were allotted time for general discussion and allowed for any concerns that arose during the focus group interviews. A scribe was utilized to transcribe the participant responses (Creswell, 2009). To support content validity, the questions employed were based on the literature from the National Dropout Prevention Center and reviewed by 3 educational leaders (school administrators).

Two focus groups were conducted; each consisted of 6 teachers with varied education experience and background. The first focus group consisted of elementary teachers. The second focus group included only secondary teachers. The researcher used the long-table approach for data analysis with a coding system for classification (based on themes) of teacher responses (Patton, 2002). Focus group questions were as follows:

1. What do you think are some factors that contribute to students becoming at-risk?

2. What can be done to assist students that are at-risk?
3. Talk about high risk peer groups and high risk social behavior. What impact do you think this has on students?
4. Is attendance and truancy a major factor? Explain.
5. Do you think family conversations about school and family contact with school impacts student success/failure?
6. Which of the following factors do you consider the most influential in determining if a student struggles in school: family background and involvement, social behaviors and attitudes, school engagement and performance, and individual characteristics? Explain.
7. Are there any strategies or programs that you have worked with that have been effective in assisting struggling students? Why do you think these were effective?
8. Any additional information you would like to add regarding the topic of at-risk students?

Elementary Teacher Perspectives

There were 49 recorded teacher responses to the focus group questions. Of these 49, elementary teachers referred to family involvement or family background on 24 occasions (49% of responses). Responses indicate a high level of importance placed on these areas. When asked what factors contribute to students becoming at-risk, 4 of the 6 teacher responses directly named family involvement or family background. Other responses included social interactions and behavioral concerns.

In response to what can be done to assist students at-risk, teacher answers varied from instructional supports and specific academic programs to extra-curricular activities and

increased family involvement. The third focus group question dealt with high risk peer groups and high risk social behavior. Teacher responses mostly dealt with student misbehavior. Many responses also mentioned constructive activities for students at the elementary level. Consider the following response from an elementary physical education teacher “if their friends are involved in a certain set of things, they are more apt to take part in the scene...whatever their friends are doing, they’ll be likely to do too.”

When questioned about attendance and truancy, teacher responses illustrate a great importance on this area. As reported by a reading teacher, “if a student is continually absent by illness or truancy, it becomes extra challenging to recover; students are not learning the material the same as if they were in class.”

Questions 5 and 6 involved family background and involvement. Teacher responses indicate that these are areas of great importance and concern. The responses are best summarized by the following statement from a special education teacher, “the more the parents are connected to the learning process, the more likely the students will be connected to the school. When a student sees that the parent and teacher are on the same page, they will step up and respond to that.”

When asked to identify the most influential factor in determining if a student will struggle in school, 4 of the 6 teachers responded with family involvement. Other responses included poor performance at an early age and poor social behavior. Finally, teachers indicated that supports were needed across the all levels to address the issue. This is best reflected with the following statement from a fourth grade teacher:

we need supports in place for families as well as for students. We want kids to want to come to school rather than that they have to come to school. Families need to feel that their kids are taken care of, not just educationally but as a whole person.

Secondary Teacher Perspectives

There were 68 recorded teacher responses to the focus group questions. Of these 68, secondary teachers referred to family involvement or family background on 41 occasions (60% of responses). Responses indicate a high level of importance placed on these areas. When asked what factors contribute to students becoming at-risk, all 6 teacher responses directly named family involvement or family background.

In response to what can be done to assist students at-risk, teacher answers focused mostly on student achievement and student supports. Several responses indicate an importance placed on opportunities outside of the traditional classroom. Consider the following response from a high school science teacher:

“I truly believe that parents want what is best for their kids but many times they don’t have the tools needed to help them in their studies. We need to create more opportunities for authentic work products that allow students to connect to the real world and to their parents’ areas of expertise.”

Attendance and truancy was seen as an important area as well. Responses illustrate a concern that the more a student is truant, the more at-risk the student will become. As a middle school English teacher stated, “when a student is out and are not able to catch up, they go into a high risk group.”

Family background and family involvement were directly addressed with questions 5 and 6. Teacher responses illustrate a great importance in these areas. The following response from a high school math teacher best summarizes the responses: “we could avoid many of these problems at the high school level if we taught parents and told them what their responsibilities are to their kids and school at the elementary level.” Several responses refer to early intervention needed at the elementary level. Another high school teacher responded “we need to put supports in place between and among schools, at the elementary level. How do you bring up a student to a grade 9 level if they come into your class at a grade 4 level?”

When asked to identify the most influential factor in determining if a student will struggle in school, secondary teachers all responded family background and involvement. As a follow-up to this, focus group participants spoke about how family background relates to a student’s social behavior. As stated by a special education teacher, “Many students who are at risk come to school for social reasons. It’s structure in their lives socially and academically.”

Table 1 contains a summary of the key finding for the elementary and secondary teachers. The researcher categorized teacher responses by theme, based on the four identified dimensions. *Behavior* was the dimension most commonly referenced by elementary teachers (33%). Conversely, *Behavior* was the least frequent response theme (16%) for secondary teachers. Family Involvement was the most common response theme for secondary teachers (38%), followed by Achievement (24%) and Family Background (22%). For elementary teachers, 27% of responses fall under the *Family*

Involvement dimension and 22% fall under *Family Background*. The least common response theme for elementary teachers was *Achievement* at 18%.

Table 1

Focus Group Response Themes (N = 117)

| Response Theme | Grade Level | | Total |
|--------------------|----------------------|---------------------|-----------|
| | Elementary n = 49 | Secondary n = 68 | |
| Family Involvement | <i>f</i> 13 | 26 | 39 |
| | <i>%</i> 27 | 38 | 33 |
| Behavior | <i>f</i> 16 | 11 | 27 |
| | <i>%</i> 33 | 16 | 23 |
| Achievement | <i>f</i> 9 | 16 | 25 |
| | <i>%</i> 18 | 24 | 21 |
| Family Background | <i>f</i> 11 | 15 | 26 |
| | <i>%</i> 22 | 22 | 22 |

Note. All % values may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

Results

The qualitative teacher responses were categorized by theme, based on four identified dimensions: *Achievement*, *Behavior*, *Family Involvement*, and *Family Background*.

Behavior was the dimension most commonly referenced by elementary teachers (33%).

Conversely, *Behavior* was the least frequent response theme (16%) for secondary

teachers. *Family Involvement* was the most common response theme for secondary teachers (38%), followed by *Achievement* (24%) and *Family Background* (22%). For elementary teachers, 27% of responses fall under the *Family Involvement* dimension and 22% fall under *Family Background*. The least common response theme for elementary teachers was *Achievement* at 18%.

There were 49 recorded elementary teacher responses to the focus group questions. Of these 49, elementary teachers referred to family involvement or family background on 24 occasions (49% of responses). There were 68 recorded teacher responses to the focus group questions. Of these 68, secondary teachers referred to family involvement or family background on 41 occasions (60% of responses). Responses indicate a high level of importance placed on these areas.

Conclusions

There are several areas of significant differences between elementary and secondary teachers with regards to the characteristics of students at-risk for dropping out of school. In particular, secondary teachers placed a greater importance on *Achievement* as compared to elementary teachers. Conversely, elementary teachers placed a greater importance on *Family Involvement* than did secondary teachers.

Teacher quotes demonstrate these conclusions. Consider the following response from a high school science teacher: “I truly believe that parents want what is best for their kids but many times they don’t have the tools needed to help them in their studies. We need to create more opportunities for authentic work products that allow students to connect to the real world and to their parents’ areas of expertise.” An elementary special education teacher stated “the more the parents are connected to the learning process, the more likely

the students will be connected to the school. When a student sees that the parent and teacher are on the same page, they will step up and respond to that.”

Educational Implications

This study provides insight regarding teacher perceptions of at-risk students. This can better inform school officials and administration regarding program design and implementation to address the needs of students. Results of the study can inform interventions at various levels of education from elementary school through high school.

Data analysis from the study can be shared with all stakeholders. Educators, parents, students, and community members can all benefit from the results of the data collection to gain an increased awareness around the perceptions of teachers regarding characteristics of at-risk students.

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