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Gifted Dropouts: Personality, Family, Social and School Factors

Jan B. Hansen, Ph.D.

Suzannah Johnston Toso, M.A.

The University of St. Thomas

Gifted Dropouts

Introduction

Why do intelligent students drop out of high school? How does dropping out affect their life plans? This article shares findings from a research study on fourteen gifted dropouts. The first author designed the study after she came in contact with four gifted young men who chose to leave school rather than put up with what they described as low-level curriculum and a culture that disrespected them. The intent of the study was to explore why gifted students drop out and examine the effects of dropping out on their plans for the future.

Twenty nine states in the U.S. require students to remain in school until age 16; eight require them to stay until age 17; and the remaining thirteen and the District of Columbia require students to remain until age 18 (Galehouse, 2002). In spite of the fact that 37 states do not require students to remain in school beyond age 17, data show that 75 percent of American high school students graduate (Laird, DeBell, & Chapman, 2006). But what about those who drop out? Specifically what about those who are gifted and drop out?

Traits and Experiences of Dropouts

Studies have revealed personal, social, family, and school variables associated with dropping out of high school. These include boredom and irrelevancy of school, lack of motivation, underachievement, not turning in homework, unsatisfying relationships with teachers, low self-esteem, and lack of organizational skill related to school tasks (Schwartz, 2002; and Suh & Suh, 2006). In addition, factors outside of school such as moving one or more times during high school, becoming pregnant, or holding a job that interferes with school, have influenced students to drop out (Gewertz, 2006). Important distinctions have been made between dropouts from different racial groups. Hispanic students are at most risk of dropping out;

followed by African-Americans (Gonzalez, 2002). The interaction of race with any other variable affects a student's vulnerability and risk of dropping out. Interestingly, dropouts have often retained high career aspirations in spite of leaving school prior to graduation (National Center for Education Statistics, 2005).

School experiences for dropouts were negative. Most dropouts reported that they had been grouped with low-achievers, had less inspiring teachers who dismissed their needs, and had failed at least one course (Beatty, Neisser, Trent & Heubert, 2001). Sixty-six percent of students in Philadelphia Public Schools, who considered dropping out, said they wanted more personal attention, and wanted their teachers to plan more exciting and challenging tasks and courses (Snyder, 2003).

Coley (1995) and Drapela (2006) found that families were aware of problems early on, advocated for intervention and were disappointed with the school's response. By high school families were more opposed than the school, to their child dropping out. In addition, they discovered that intervention efforts that occurred in 9th grade and later had almost no effect on whether or not a student dropped out (Coley, 1995; Drapela, 2006). The researchers called for early diagnosis of problems and provision of support services for students at risk noting that dropouts are more likely to be unemployed or earn less than those who graduate high school (The National Center for Education Statistics, 2005).

In a more positive vein, Leonard (1998) asked dropouts to name a teacher who had influenced them constructively, and then interviewed the "positive" teachers. Findings revealed that the positive teachers did not think of students as deviants, acknowledged problems with school policies, and were open to making adjustments in instruction. Similarly, schools in Rochester, New York adopted the common sense view that a one-size fits all program, that

makes no adjustments for individuals does not suit many students, especially students on either end of the achievement spectrum. Their alternative model allowed struggling students four or five years to complete high school, while it allowed able students to complete high school in just three years with compressed curriculum (Janey, 2002).

Gifted Dropouts and Their School Experiences

In their research on gifted dropouts Renzulli and Park (2002) found that those they studied disliked school and felt disconnected from the groups there. In general, they were from lower income families than gifted students who had stayed in school, and had parents who were not as likely to monitor their school activities as their counterparts who remained in school (Renzulli & Park, 2002). In a related study (Thorp, 2004) reported a "disconnect" between gifted students who considered dropping out and their gifted classmates who did not.

> According to Thorp (2004), "All participants [in the group who considered dropping out] marveled over the dullness of their more high-achieving classmates…Many of those students worked much harder for the same results, were more compliant and content with busywork, wanted to please their teachers, and didn't share the same complex questions or views of the interrelatedness of things. They saw dissonance between who the teachers perceived to be smart and who really had quick, agile and creative minds" (p.6).

Thorp (2004) concluded that dropouts linked their dislike for school with being ignored or treated disrespectfully by teachers, and claimed this began as early as elementary school.

Another study (Hansen, 2002) showed that pre-service and in-service teachers were most concerned about struggling students and were willing to modify lessons for them, but were reluctant to do so for gifted students. Teachers trained in gifted education, however, extended curriculum and showed more eagerness than other teachers to do so. However, modifications to

instruction were more often offered to struggling students than to able students among all teacher groups (Hansen, 2002).

Renzulli and Park (2000) suggested that schools have tended to ignore the warning signs that were present as early as the elementary years. Signs included underachievement, poor performance, absenteeism, and disruptive behavior. To stem the problems associated with each of these warnings, the researchers suggested that schools should identify potential gifted dropouts in the early grades, work closely with parents on common educational goals, and change school culture to provide challenging curriculum tailored to students' needs and interests (Renzulli & Park, 2000).

In summary, research revealed that gifted dropouts showed signs of frustration with school as early as the elementary years; felt disrespected by teachers; were frustrated with busywork and resented that teachers confused students who conformed with students who were gifted. Often, they were grouped with low-achievers, and in later years were frustrated by family relocation, employment commitments, or pregnancy that interfered with school. Most dropouts were from families that were adamant that they complete high school. Some maintained high aspirations in spite of dropping out. At particular risk were students from minority backgrounds.

The Research Study

The Leaving School Questionnaire (Questionnaire) was designed, piloted and modified during fall, 2001. It contained 60 items that focused on 1) personal information such as age, date left high school, test scores, job and income, race, family background, etc.; 2) Likert ratings of high school experiences related to staff, respect, school climate, curriculum, self-perception, participation in organized activities such as sports, music, and art; drug and alcohol use, problems with the law, grades, friendships, etc.; and 3) open-ended essay questions regarding the

main reasons for leaving school, incidents leading to dropping out, truancy, parent or guardian responses, education and employment goals since dropping out, feelings about dropping out, resolution of issues, significant life events, family, etc. The items focused on many aspects related to dropping out and provided the main vehicle for data collection.

The study began in March, 2002 and continued through December, 2002. Participants in the study needed to meet two criteria: They needed to have dropped out of high school prior to graduation and they needed to be formally or informally identified as gifted. Formal identification included significantly above average test scores and/or participation in gifted programs, and informal identification included statements from sponsors regarding the nominee's giftedness, such as potential or performance in a selected area, insight, creativity, problem-solving, memory, etc. The researchers suspected that schools may be reluctant to offer information regarding dropouts and concluded that a multi-faceted sampling effort was needed.

The first sampling initiative involved reconnecting with the four young men mentioned at the beginning of this article. The first author suspected giftedness when she spoke with the young men and based her diagnosis on signs of verbal acuity, depth of insight, creative humor and mental dexterity. In fact it was their apparent giftedness that made their dropping out of school seem so odd. One of the young men was employed at a store in the author's community, was easy to locate, and was invited to participate in the study. He knew the three others and submitted their names. The first author sent each of the four young men a letter explaining the study and inviting them to participate. Three of them responded.

The second initiative involved sending letters regarding the study to area high school principals and counselors and Minnesota General Education Development (GED) coordinators. The letters explained the study and asked for nominations of students who fit the two criteria for

participation in the study. No principal or high school counselor submitted names. One GED coordinator submitted four names, three of whom responded and participated in the study.

The third initiative involved the primary author's request to two university professors to ask graduate students in Gifted Education (inservice teachers, counselors and coordinators) to submit names. Nineteen persons were nominated this way and six participated.

The fourth initiative was not planned. As the first author presented the findings at conferences and at seminars she was approached by people in the audience who were either high school dropouts, parents of dropouts, or who knew a dropout. Three participants were nominated this way and two responded.

It was not easy to connect with dropouts. Schools did not respond to requests about them. One GED center and several educators submitted names, however, many dropouts did not respond in spite of Institutional Review Board (IRB) assurances. It was easy to imagine that dropouts had strong emotions about schools and perhaps linked those emotions to research about their experiences. For example, one young man returned his questionnaire along with a consent form he had created asking the primary investigator to sign that he would never be contacted again regarding school issues.

Each person whose name was submitted received a letter explaining the methods and merits of the study, an informed consent document that ensured protection of their rights, an invitation for their voluntary participation, and a Leaving School Questionnaire that focused on their experience of dropping out of school. Thirty questionnaires were sent out and 14 (47%) were returned and analyzed. Following questionnaire analyses, three dropouts were interviewed using guided questions based upon the preliminary examination of emerging phenomena and contexts.

The researchers took into account the possibility that those submitting names of dropouts did not accurately identify them as gifted. The statements of justification from sponsors however, included references to IQ scores, achievement test results and cognitive and affective traits often associated with giftedness. Further, analyses of narratives and test scores from the dropouts themselves showed significantly above average performance (130+ with one submitting an IQ score of 180), sophisticated vocabulary, depth of thought, and feelings that correlated highly with gifted students. However, there are limitations to the sampling plan and methodology and therefore data from this study alone should not be used to make generalizations about all gifted dropouts. Further research that focuses on larger samples of purposive or randomly selected individuals is needed.

Participants

Fourteen participants, six females and eight males participated in the study. Each was given a pseudonym: Alicia, Becca, Celeste, Danielle, Ellie, Felicia, Alex, Bob, Chad, David, Eric, Fred, George, and Harrison. Ten of the fourteen reported race and were White. In general the males dropped out their junior year at an average age of 17. Females also tended to drop out their junior year, however, one girl dropped out as a ninth grader when she was fourteen years old. Over half of the sample dropped out two years prior to the study with the exception of a female who dropped out nine years prior to the study and three males who dropped out five years prior, eight years prior, and fifteen years prior to the study.

Their Stories

Each dropout stated his or her main reason for dropping out. Most lacked a sense of belonging at school, lacked positive relationships with teachers, lacked challenge, and lacked respect for values held in high esteem at school (popularity, conformity, and sports). Males cited

difficulties with authority and feelings of disrespect. Three females listed reasons linked to personal friendships and two listed reasons associated with dissatisfaction with the culture of school.

Danielle's story seemed typical of a gifted student with complaints about lack of rigor. She dropped out at age16 and was 19 at the time of the study. In her response to the questionnaire item that asked what caused her to leave high school, Danielle wrote, "I wasn't challenged or learning. I left high school when I did because I couldn't take it anymore." She elaborated, "I wasn't learning anything new. There wasn't anything exciting or challenging. I felt I wasn't getting the recognition or appreciation from teachers. Students did not respect me." Danielle acknowledged that she wanted rigor, could not find it, and consequently left school—the place designed to provide it.

Ellie's story was similar—she got fed up with the boredom and superficiality. Ellie was 18 at the time she left school and was just 4 classes shy of graduation. She was age 26 at the time of the study. She was a high achiever in school but was not accepted into the honors courses. In regular courses she found herself surrounded by low level curriculum and by students who did not share her interests in learning. More significantly, she was sexually assaulted by another student. Because school authorities blamed her, she attempted suicide and ultimately left school. Prior to the event, school was discouraging and dissatisfying—following the event, it was frightening and toxic.

Importantly, four of the six females named relationship issues as main reasons for dropping out. Two girls, for example, attached themselves to friends and then "followed them" out of high school. After Becca's best friend was expelled, Becca concluded that she had no friends at school and followed her friend's lead, "I wanted to party all of the time. I just didn't

want any responsibilities." Similarly, Celeste ran away from home with her boyfriend during her senior year at age 18. (She was 20 at the time of the study). Celeste commented, "Instead of running away from home and getting pregnant, I [should] have gotten counseling right away." Although Alicia's situation was a bit different, it, too, was linked to social interaction. Alicia suffered from an anxiety disorder and left school at age 14 because she could no longer tolerate the physical problems that her condition caused. She shared, "I was frequently sick because of my anxiety problems. I had many headaches and was nauseated before and during school." Felicia didn't elaborate much on her story but noted "I did really well in the beginning but then I stopped caring and became a druggie."

The males had slightly different stories. They described problems with teachers and administrators. Alex was 23 at the time of the study, five years after he left high school. He cited the "relationship with faculty" as the main reason he left. He said, "I felt like I wasn't challenged enough and the administration made me feel unwanted." Similarly, Bob (who left at 17, and was 19 at the time of the study) explained his situation. "I left because of the lack of respect from staff. I skipped almost every day of 10th grade except 2nd block. I didn't want to deal with teachers or other students." (Bob missed 1st block each day, then attended a Life Skills class during 2nd block where he played chess, met up with Chad, and skipped school.) Eric, age 25 at the time of the study, left at age 17 because he couldn't imagine "taking another year to finish." Eric stated that in high school, his teachers thought he was "a lost cause". David too, cited "lack of respect from staff and students", as the main reason he left high school. (David did not report his age.) In addition he explained that when his parents divorced, he was moved into foster care. He said that other students "had higher social status due to their longevity in the town and the

families they were born into" and that his lack of acceptance into the community contributed to his school problems.

Males also cited lack of rigor and challenge at high school. Eric explained, "High school was not for me. In college I averaged a 3.8." Like Eric, Fred went on to college. He dropped out of high school at 16 and was 18 at the time of the study. When asked on the questionnaire, why he left high school, he stated, "It was pointless to go. I didn't learn anything [there]." George left high school at 16, and was 31 at the time of the study. He enlisted in the Navy at 17. He described himself in high school as "bored and depressed and did not feel like being around all those people everyday. After my attempted suicide I just didn't see the point in suffering through the school experience any longer". Like Eric and Fred, George left high school and went on to college, where he completed his bachelor's degree and is presently working on a degree in law.

Harrison was a bright student who worked full time. He commented on the near impossibility of balancing school with a full-time job. He reported having attention difficulties and that "sitting still" in school was excruciating for him. Just prior to dropping out he completed none of his homework and perceived himself as an employee with a job who partied in the off-hours. Eventually, school simply didn't fit into that picture.

Chad, on the other hand, was asked to leave his high school. He left school at age 17 and was 19 at the time of the study. He reported that he was ridiculed by other students and marginalized by teachers as early as elementary school. By middle school he had friends who accepted him and those friends introduced him to drugs. Chad gave up on school before he was a teenager.

Almost all of the participants talked about lack of respect from and for teachers. Bob explained, "They didn't want me there. The dean told me that I was wasting everyone's time.

They looked down on me”. Alex said, “Only my ROTC [teacher] made me feel like I still belonged”. Fred felt misjudged and stated, “Two teachers knew me”. Similarly George said, “Only two teachers knew where I was coming from.” Becca explained, “there was one teacher…actually she was a counselor. She was the only one that seemed to care about what I was going through.”

Importantly however, the dropouts reported that none of the teachers who had shown concern for them was seen as having the power or ability to effect change on their behalf. Dropouts described some teachers as “understanding” or “nice”, but not one described a teacher who translated concern for the student into any sort of change that provided some relief from their situations. The result was that they felt alone and unempowered.

When asked if they trusted anyone at school, Danielle stated, “There was one teacher who I liked because she was different. She was only there a year.” Similarly, Alicia stated, “All of them moved away. Some students didn’t like one teacher because she pushed the students. Unfortunately, being a small town, they told their parents, some of which were bigwigs of the community. The teacher’s contract wasn’t renewed the following year—big surprise there…” Not one dropout reported a sustained meaningful connection with a teacher.

Thematic Analysis

The questionnaire responses and secondary source data (such as sponsor justification of giftedness of the dropouts) were examined using thematic analysis and the constant comparison procedure (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). Constant comparison procedures allowed the researchers to categorize the dropouts’ responses and refine relationships between and among the data. Theoretical concepts were generated from the coding analysis, and interrater reliability reached 96% exceeding the 90% criterion. Themes were clarified and refined and resulted in a set of

emergent themes. Themes were then shared with a group of three dropouts who offered even more insight and observation. In addition, the themes and assertions were shared with audiences at a state conference, a national conference and several university seminar or course settings where audiences were invited to make observations and share their insights.

Ten themes emerged from the analyses (See Table 1). These themes showed that as early as elementary school, dropouts sensed they did not belong there, felt little respect for staff and students, and found curriculum to be unchallenging and/or irrelevant. They were highly sensitive, (most) experienced loss, and received no meaningful help as they tried to cope. Many reported that they had no advocate who could bring about meaningful changes, and turned to alcohol and drugs. Most reported conflict with their parents over school-related issues.

When Problems Began

Most of the dropouts reported difficulties as early as elementary school. They reported feelings of insecurity about friendships or acceptance by classmates, and lack of motivation to do busy-work. Some shared stories that they were persecuted or mocked by other students and that teachers did not intervene on their behalf. Most resented their teachers who confused conformity with giftedness. They could pinpoint when underachievement, poor performance, and disruptive behavior began. Most noted that the patterns continued through middle school and into high school. Perceiving no advocate within the system, they eventually opted out of the school environment.

Sensitivity

Nearly all of the dropouts showed extreme sensitivity. How they described their lives, their empathy for others, their potent feelings, and the emotions caused by circumstances such as death and loss, led the researchers to believe that they were highly sensitive. When asked to list

three words to describe themselves they listed “reclusive”, “intuitive” “introspective” “compassionate” to name a few. Each revealed a rich inner life, and a few wished that they were more resilient. All reported disappointment with school, disappointment in others, and sadness about the pain in life. Even Becca’s postscript showed sensitivity. She wrote, “Sorry about the [spelling] mistakes [on the questionnaire]. I was in a hurry. I hope you are still able to read it. I hope I helped you understand why so many kids drop out.”

Nearly all dropouts described school as “painful”. It became obvious that high levels of sensitivity among the dropouts contributed to the students’ vulnerability and in some cases defenselessness. From this platform of extreme sensitivity among dropouts, we explored the theme of loss.

Loss and Aloneness: Lack of Advocacy

The majority of the dropouts experienced profound loss. When asked why she left school Alicia said, “Both of my mom’s parents had cancer and my Dad’s father had heart problems. The summer after my grandmother died, both of my grandpas were in the hospital, one having open-heart surgery and the other was having a cancerous kidney removed. That same summer my great uncle was hit by a train.” When asked if anyone in school helped her, Alicia replied, “I could go to 2 teachers with my problems but then all of them moved away.” She felt alone. Alicia’s situation was not unlike over half of the dropouts.

Bob and Fred attended a small parochial school. During their 8th grade year, one of their best friends died suddenly of spinal meningitis. They graduated from 8th grade a month later and moved on to a new class of 450 at a large public school. Although school personnel were made aware of their situation, no help was offered. Each described a teacher and a counselor who acknowledged their sadness but did nothing proactive about it. Grief and hopelessness set in.

George's loss was also tragic. "A friend's older brother killed himself. I can remember the weekend he did it; his parents were out of town for the weekend. I really looked up to him, and it hit me pretty hard. I think it may have been an influence in my later attempt." George reported confusion and trying to handle his emotions alone. He commented: "the only person I had really connected with at the high school moved to NY."

Becca reported, "My grandpa died of cancer my freshman year and my grandma killed herself a year later." David's loss wasn't death but was a divorce and for reasons not explained on the questionnaire, he was sent to foster care. Danielle's loss was her mother's physical and mental health. "My mother's health [affected me at school.] She had a heart-attack when I was in 8th grade. She also suffers from mental illness which only worsened as I got older. I had trouble dealing with that. I didn't have a real mother to talk to." Ellie's mother also suffered from mental illness. After being attacked and molested at school, Ellie felt alone as neither school officials nor her mother helped her. Again, loss and hopelessness set in.

As themes first emerged, it appeared that the losses were profound. Upon deeper analysis, it was affirmed that the losses were traumatic, shocking and devastating to the students. Students experienced emotional turmoil and did not receive the kind of help that they needed, and in some cases, asked for. Over half of the participants told about extreme loss; none reported that they received help at school. Interview data corroborated these findings and further suggested that some of the students still displayed symptoms of post-trauma stress two or more years following the loss events.

Lack of School Challenge: Rigor and Respect

Nearly all dropouts in the study shared frustration with low-level challenges in school. Comments from interviews and questionnaires revealed deep disappointment. When asked what

would have kept them in school they responded; “I longed for someone to guide me in my inquiries” (George); “More appreciative teachers; more challenges: greater emphasis on academics” (Danielle); “More challenging courses” (Alex); “More challenging curriculum and a new staff who cared about students” (Bob); “Better teachers” (David); “A better, more challenging curriculum, teachers who really care about their respective subject matter” (Eric); “decent teachers” (Fred); challenging and engaging curriculum and teachers who cared about gifted kids” (Ellie). Most dropouts stated that the curriculum was not challenging and that teachers did not care enough to create or locate any. Most males not only resented the lack of challenge in the curriculum, they harbored bitterness toward those in authority over that curriculum. They reported lack of respect for teachers and some admitted their concomitant refusal to show it. All dropouts admitted they emotionally gave up at school long before they dropped out.

Non-Acceptance at School: Turning to Alcohol and Drugs

No one in this study felt understood by teachers or students who were in power at school. Most reported that the peers who were available to them and who accepted them were those who drank alcohol or used drugs. Most dropouts admitted that their own drinking and drug habits produced even more problems. Fred reported, “I drank 2x a week and blacked out a lot. I was very angry and depressed. When I was 17, I realized I was an alcoholic and have given up drinking. I go to AA now.” Similarly Chad reported: “I drank every day for about a year with seemingly few consequences. Quitting drugs was significant however.” Unlike Fred and Chad who quit their habits, Becca shared, “The drinking is still a problem.”

One notable story was George’s. “In high school I started using drugs. I was consistently truant. I smoked marijuana and hash, and did marijuana almost every day and LSD or psilocybin

at least twice a week. I also tried guaalude pills, cocaine and crank, a methamphetamine. I also had friends into heroin and opium but I never tried either of them. For some reason I stuck with the pscyhomimetics."

Several dropouts reported a chronology that pointed to feelings of not belonging, being left out, and then gravitating to the group that drank and/or used drugs. Most of the dropouts admitted that alcohol and drug use caused even more problems at school and with their families. Three recognized that they had used substances to escape their pain and subsequently have stopped. Not one dropout made a positive comment about alcohol or drugs.

Alcohol and drug abuse among youth is often correlated with students who 1) do not find school meaningful; 2) have extra income; and 3) have educated parents (Svendsen, 2001; Johnston, O'Malley, Bachman, & Shulenberg, 2005). Half of the dropouts in this study made references to money at their disposal from their own jobs and from parents in professions such as medicine and health, education, business, and computer software. These factors combined with high degrees of sensitivity, profound loss, confusion and aloneness, made the students extremely vulnerable. Vulnerability increased even more as they tried to cope at school where they did not feel valued and did not feel part of the "community". They turned to friends who used substances as a gateway for acceptance and a means of escape. While the chronology is not as tidy or neat as it was just presented, it nonetheless contains key elements that led to substance abuse.

Interview data with three dropouts corroborated these findings. Fred summed it up, "Are you asking me which came first—the problems or the alcohol and drug abuse? Well, drinking and smoking pot made things worse in the long run, but were reactions to school and my problems at school. Alcohol and drugs were medicine to me. The problems at school existed long before I ever smoked or drank and now that I've quit all that, schools still have the same

problems that drove me away. But I'm glad that it all happened the way it did. It made me who I am."

In their report on underage drinking in the United States, Bonnie and O'Connell (2004) stressed the importance of "coalitions" made up of families, schools and communities, and called for coalition-driven initiatives that reduce underage drinking. These would include 1) selective preventive measures aimed at vulnerable youth; 2) changes in alcohol availability; 3) increased compliance checks on retailers providing alcohol; 4) increased consequences for those in noncompliance; 5) reduction in advertising; and 6) tailor-made intervention strategies aimed at youth who are slipping (Bonnie & O'Connell, 2004). Similar strategies could address illicit drug use among youth. Importantly, the report suggested that major stakeholders must work together if the problem is to be solved.

Conflict with Parents and Guardians

Dropouts reported that their parents were upset about their school performance and that it was a source of family conflict. Nearly all dropouts reported that their parents were more upset about them leaving school than were teachers and administrators. Several reported that school personnel suggested that they should leave; one reported that he was simply asked to leave. These data suggest that dropping out was not due to parents' low value on education. Instead these data prompted questions regarding the school's responsibility and willingness to work with parents in difficult cases.

The results of this study have been presented at one state conference, a national convention, and several university seminars and presentations. At every presentation at least one educator from the audience has asserted that dropping out is the fault of weak parents. Data from this study, however, revealed that most of the parents were deeply concerned and involved in the

search for an effective plan for their child, and were discounted by their child's school. One parent commented, "Our truant son was the child in our family that the school ignored. My spouse and I worked for resolution of issues with the school, worked with community officials and other parents to hold our son accountable for his decisions, but time after time the school would not collaborate. They didn't know what to do so they pretended not to see him." Another parent commented, "My son was a casualty of the system. The school didn't seem to care." Another parent attended a seminar the first author gave and shared, "I have done the best I can. I just admit that these articles [on dropouts] were painful for me to read. I could see my own daughter in many of the case studies you shared with us. I would like to see you add her to your study and follow her in the future. She is certainly interesting as a person, and I feel her life is going to waste."

Conclusions and Recommendations

No institution can learn from its failures if people do not discuss and analyze them, yet schools remain reluctant to examine themselves in this way (Edmondson and Cannon, 2005). By not examining why some of its brightest pupils drop out, schools deny themselves important insights into how they could improve. On the other hand, when institutions engage in thoughtful analyses and discussion of failure with a spirit of openness and curiosity, they can learn from what went wrong and make meaningful improvements. Schools need to investigate why some of their brightest students have fallen through the cracks or have disappeared from school entirely.

The dropouts in this study were gifted, highly sensitive, caring and vulnerable people. For them, school was low-level, unchallenging, and designed for others. Often, they felt bored, devalued and emotionally withdrawn from the school environment. Many experienced a profound loss or tragedy and reported that they received no meaningful help as they tried to

cope. Their vulnerability increased. Most felt disrespected by other students and staff, felt they didn't belong, and some had issues with authority. They turned to various methods of escape including truancy, jobs, pregnancy, alcohol and drugs and friends involved in those things. Tensions and conflict with their parents or guardians ensued. Eventually each one dropped out. After they left school, most dropouts in this study looked forward to further education and had plans to acquire it. Several had obtained a GED certificate or were enrolled in college or university. Two dropouts had completed Bachelors degrees, one completed a Masters degree, one was near completion of a Bachelors degree and one was near completion of a law degree. These people did not believe they were sacrificing their futures by dropping out of school, and some thought they were saving them.

Recommendations

Educators and parents have commonly asserted that graduating from high school provides the best foundation for realizing one's dreams of youth. If that assertion is true for gifted students like those in this study, then effective school and family modifications tailor made for gifted learners need to begin early. Gifted students need to feel accepted and prized and need to experience rigor and choice in both school and out of school settings as soon as signs of precocity present themselves. Teachers, students and families who already agree that the high school experience is not working for the gifted student, should be able to agree upon alternatives that are relevant and effective. There is much that can be done.

The following selected recommendations and resources (not comprehensive) are offered as suggestions to help educators and parents. These recommendations will be refined as new data are collected and as emergent themes are revealed.

1. Build and maintain strong classroom environments that prize gifted students beginning as early as precocity emerges and continuing throughout the school years (Robinson, Shore, and Enersen, 2006).
    - Provide rigorous curriculum in a relevant and accepting environment.
    - Appreciate and comment on strengths in students. Use class space to provide for them and class time to develop them.
2. Prize deep sensitivity and help sensitive gifted students convey it appropriately (Silverman, 1993).
    - Prize student responses to moral or ethical issues (no matter how intense).
    - Help students value sensitivity, cope with feelings it causes, and learn appropriate ways to express it.
    - Build trust through frequent and steady interactions that de-escalate defensiveness, accusation, and withdrawal.
3. Assist at risk gifted students as they cope with loss (Cross, 2004).
    - Don't let students be "invisible". Tell them you see them and their circumstances. Openly tell them you care.
    - You don't have to fix it but find someone who can help.
    - Advocate for them until the situation is addressed appropriately or resolved. Persist.
    - Deliver hope. Share stories of similar persons who showed resilience.
4. Build a true learning community by embracing all kinds of gifted students in your classroom (Silverman, 1993).
    - Do not marginalize or stereotype your gifted students.

- Beware of favoring students who conform to your view of a good student.
- Find ways to affirm students who don't fit the "good student" mold.
- Do not deny access to your classroom community even if students challenge your wisdom, method, or authority.

5. Insist upon respect and justice for each person in your classroom regardless of ability, race, age or any other factor (Boothe and Stanley, 2004).
    - Talk openly of respect and practice different ways to show it. Set goals.
    - Ask students to help you identify ways you can show more respect to them.
    - Identify a respected adult in the gifted student's life and work to connect that person with school-related projects or activities.
6. Provide challenging and relevant curriculum (Robinson, Shore and Enersen, 2006).
    - Make your teaching hard and engaging. Differentiate instruction (including the arts). Provide lots of above-grade material.
    - Cluster students with like interests and readiness levels.
    - Compact, accelerate and deepen basic instruction.
    - If you don't know how to guide gifted students or modify instruction for them, enroll in a learning opportunity for teachers of smart students.
7. Advocate collaboratively on behalf of gifted students with problems (Bonnie and O'Connell, 2004).
    - Proactively help students with problems to restore dignity.
    - Proactively and persistently work with service providers until the problems are addressed in meaningful ways or are resolved.

- Connect constructively: Do not triangulate negatively with educators or parents regarding students with problems. Do not allow the student's image to be characterized as deviant.
- Redirect negative portrayals of students by noting the student's strengths.

8. Provide sound examples of authority (King, 1963).
    - Redirect negative challenges to authority at school by acknowledging injustices (perceived and real).
    - Create goals and work together to address the challenges.
    - Collaborate and study agreed upon authority figures that inspire.
9. Initiate interventions for those who abuse drugs and alcohol (Svendsen, 2001).
    - Know the factors that put smart students at risk for substance abuse (don't find school meaningful, have extra income, have educated parents).
    - Don't rely on school drug programs to do the job for parents and teachers—work collaboratively.
    - Do not enable students. Let them know you see them, suspect their problems, and that you care. Involve authorities when needed.
    - Work with other professionals to tailor-make intervention strategies aimed at youth who are slipping.
10. Identify positive interaction points (other than school) to build family relationships.
    - Acknowledge that strong feelings and intense inner experiences are healthy. Portray these as positive signs of development.
    - Do not make school the only topic of discussion. Focus on topics where agreement is more probable.

- Seek wise counsel. Find a good counselor to provide insight and help mediate discussions.
- Identify gifted students' dreams and support their efforts to progress with those even if those efforts are outside the realm of conventional schooling.

As said previously, there is much that can be done to make schools more accepting and relevant for gifted learners. But, as has been shown in the lives of the dropouts in this study, intervention in high school is most often too late.

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Table 1

Emergent Themes Characterizing the Lives of Gifted Dropouts (N = 14)

- Problems began in elementary school
- High sensitivity not acknowledged at school
- Received no help coping with major losses (sickness, death, changing schools)
- Lack of community; non-acceptance at school
- Lack of respect from and for teachers, staff and students
- Unchallenging and/or irrelevant curriculum
- No advocate to bring about meaningful changes
- Issues with authority
- Mid to high levels of alcohol and drug use
- Conflict with their parents or guardians over school