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***Why do teens drop out? Comparing the Views of Teen Prevention Program
Participants and Non-Participants.***

Introduction and Research Question:

What makes a teenager chose to drop out of high school? Are they necessarily “choosing” to drop out? More importantly, do they possess the skills at the high school age to understand the longevity of the rest of their lives and the long-term effects dropping out will have on their futures? Michelle Fine is an educational researcher who set out to study why teens are dropping out in order to answer questions like these. Although she intended on conducting her research by focusing in on the students, after spending time within the school’s walls her focus shifted from the students to the institution, meaning the school and its policies. Fine argues that the lack of concern on the part of the faculty and administrators is systematically pushing students out of school. Is she right?

When a teen drops out there has to be a reason behind it. Through my research, I have found that there are a multitude of reasons that can contribute to the causes of dropping out; these reasons can include drug use, family problems, the lack of motivation or interest, depression, lack of school bonding, teen pregnancy, or the lack of support coming from the school. Although there are a number of prevention programs available

for high school students, the prevalence of the participation seems to be lagging. If there were more participation would the number of high school dropouts decrease? This study examines the views of two different groups of teens from two different perspectives. The two groups I have chosen are different in three major ways: where they live and go to school, their ethnic background, and whether or not they are involved in a dropout prevention program. My first group is made up of Hartford minority teens that attend Hartford schools, and are currently involved in a dropout prevention program; my second group is made up of white suburban teens who attend suburban high schools and none of them are or have been involved in a dropout prevention program. I am looking particularly at the views of each group about why teens drop out. My research question asks specifically: How do the views of these two groups of teens differ in relation to why they think teens drop out and does the involvement in a prevention program have an effect on that? Furthermore, how does each group compare to Michelle Fine's research findings on the reasons teens are dropping out?

Who is Michelle Fine?

Michelle Fine set out to find the reasons teens were dropping out. She began her study on graduation day in June of 1985 at a comprehensive high school in Manhattan. She started at the end because she wanted to experience the graduation at this particular school and see first hand how many teens were graduating. This school had about 3,200 students, 200 of which were of the graduating class. This only represents about 30% of the students who started four years earlier (Fine, 1991).

Fine wanted to know why so many students were dropping out. Although she initially set out to gain information to answer this question by concentrating on the students, she ultimately shifted her focus from the students to the institution. Institution refers to the school and its policies. In order to begin her research, she “set out to find a ‘typical’ comprehensive high school in which to study the making of dropouts,” (Fine, 1991 p.5). Fine uses the ambiguous name Comprehensive High School (CHS) to ensure the school’s confidentiality. CHS is a typical high school in that it spans grades nine through twelve. The student body, typical of an urban high school, comes predominately from low-income African-American and Latino families. During her study, Fine spent ten months in the school; her time was divided up between the students, faculty, administrators, and parents. As time went on, Fine started noticing that there seemed to be a lack of concern on the part of the faculty and administrators for the futures of their students. This became apparent after Fine spent an afternoon in the attendance office. This office is used to allow the students who have stopped attending but who are still on the roster to get the appropriate paperwork to make dropping out official. Fine commented on her visit:

“I can’t believe so many kids come in here [attendance office] and say, ‘I want to drop out’ and nobody says, ‘Where do you think you’re going? Do you know what this will do to your future?’ Instead the standard response is, ‘How old are you?’ followed by, ‘You have to fill out these papers and get your parents to sign,’” (Fine, 1991 p.6).

This display of disconcert interest was an eye opener for Fine and her research. Her fear was that the schools were systematically pushing their students out. Over her ten month period in the school, Fine found the school to be overcrowded. This is a common

problem found in most inner city schools. Fine holds that the overcrowding may contribute to the justification of pushing teens out. One can only wonder what would happen if all the teens in CHS were involved in a dropout prevention program, and if that involvement would impact the high dropout rates.

Thesis Statement:

Dropout prevention programs are a much needed tool in combating the dropout rates. But it is not the dropout programs alone that will conquer the problem. To better combat dropout rates we need to implement a combination of ideas through the schools and through dropout prevention programs. I believe that teens who are involved in prevention programs are given the opportunity to look at the issue in a different light. Prevention programs typically stress the importance of a good education and explain the ramifications of those who do not finish high school.

Upon comparing the two groups in my study, the group of teens that are involved in the dropout prevention program are more likely to say that teens drop out due to institutional reasons, such as inconsistent school rules, unfair treatment or lack of necessary policies that could make dropping out harder to expedite. The group of teens who are not or have not been involved in a prevention program are more likely to attribute teens dropping out to individual reasons, such as drug use, family problems, lack of interest or motivation, depression, and teen pregnancy. I tend to believe this is because of their lack of participation in a prevention program. I would speculate that they are not privy to the politics of education such as the curriculum development, the occurrence of

overcrowded classrooms and the way in which school rules and policy are developed. Without this knowledge, they are likely to think of the school as having all the answers and making all the proper attempts to keep kids in school, even though that is not always the case.

Significance to Educational Studies:

The rate of high school dropouts is a nationwide concern. The US Department of Education's Institute of Educational Sciences at the National Center for Educational Statistics released information from a study done for the 2000-2001 school year. I have chosen a sample of five east coast states to give an example of the pervasiveness of dropouts in the US. The states I chose and the percentage rates are: New Jersey at 2.8%, Connecticut at 3%, New York at 3.8%, Rhode Island at 5%, and New Hampshire at 5.4%. Although these percentages may not be shocking, the actual numbers of students are 9,882, 4,694, 30,898, 2,212, and 2,763 respectively. That is 50,449 teenagers who have dropped out in the 2000-2001 school year (see website in references). This clearly illustrates a serious problem. There are many factors that can contribute to the high dropout rates such as teen pregnancy, drug use, the lack of motivation or interest or the lack of parental involvement and supervision. However, these individual reasons are not the only factors that can lead teens to dropout. There are also institutional factors such as the lack of concern the schools may have for their students, which is what Fine argues.

I believe if we start looking in the direction of the teens and their perceptions of why teens are dropping out at such unacceptably high rates; we may be able to turn the

focus towards the schools and their policies. This may in turn catapult new ways to combat the dropout rates from within the institutions. Teens do not necessarily possess the skills that can keep them out of trouble which can then lead them to dropout; this is why it is important to learn how these teens are thinking and what, in their opinion, causes them to dropout. I believe if we have access to this kind of information we can start to facilitate better, more successful prevention programs for teens that are not in optimal situations. I think if we are able to uncover the views high school students have about these different adversities that exist we can then start to better speculate what types of programs will be most effective. By comparing the views of those involved in a dropout prevention program with those who are not, we can look at common trends in both groups, which may allow us to better understand what may be needed to develop a successful prevention program.

What about other research? A Literature Review:

In order to learn about past research on the topic of dropping out I have chosen six pieces of literature to review. These include four journal articles and two books. The first article I chose is titled: *Not All School Dropouts are the Same: Ethnic Differences in the Relation Between Reason for Leaving School and Adolescent Substance Use*, by Patricia A. Aloise-Young and Ernest L. Chavez. This comparison study was conducted in 2002 and looked at whether or not the use of drugs was the primary factor for dropping out. These researchers wanted to see if there would be a significant difference in the results between Mexican American students and non-Hispanic Americans. The methods in this

study included a random sampling of participants who filled out a survey containing various questions about school attendance, tardiness, drug use and the desire to stay in school. I chose this study because, while focusing on drug use, it aims to look at the factors that may cause teens to drop out. Young et al. found that the Mexican-American teens cited family problems as the most common reason given for dropping out at 31.3%; and the non-Hispanic white American teens cited the lack of school bonding as being the number one reason for dropping out at 26.4%. Young et al. incorporated the answers the teens gave along with results of drug testing and found the drug and alcohol use highest within the group that cited the lack of school bonding as the number one reason for dropping out. This study shares my dependent variable in that it looks at the reasons teens are giving when asked why they dropped out; however, their focus is whether or not ethnicity has an impact.

The second article I have chosen is: *Fighting the Latino Dropout Rate* by Michelle Adam. This article offers some useful information about the pervasiveness of Latino dropout rates which “surpass those of African Americans and whites,” (Adam, 2003). “Dropout rates for African Americans and whites have decreased significantly, 40% or so [between 1972 and 1999], but for Latinos it has only been about 15%,” (Adam, 2003). I chose this article because there is a large Latino population in Hartford high schools, and a portion of my sample will be coming from Hartford schools. This study was broken down into three categories that address dropouts: individual factors, family-related factors, and structural factors. This study offers useful background information for my project. I will be doing a thematic content analysis of my data that I wish to categorize as well; however my study will be from the students perspectives.

Another piece I am using is called: *Stories from the Strays: What Dropouts Can Teach Us about School*, by Carole J. Gallagher. This is an interesting study looking at four recent high school dropouts and their perceptions about school and the stressors that lead them to drop out. This study was conducted through a series of interviews of the four former students to get their views on school and why they dropped out. This study is different from my study because I will be interviewing students who are still in school. It will be interesting to see the differences in the perceptions of the students.

The fourth article I am using is called *Current Information of Dropout Prevention: Ideas from Practitioners and the Literature*, by Emma J. Martin, Tary J. Tobin, and George M. Sugai. The main points in this article cover the consequences of dropping out for the individual and for society. The topics that are raised are the lack of job options for dropouts, physical and mental health issues, criminal activity, and welfare dependency. This article talks about the many (mostly futile) attempts that have been made to prevent dropping out, such as labeling at risk students at an early stage, universal intervention programs, GED preparation, and alternative schooling. Much of the research presented in this article implies that there has to be significant changes in the schools to help to combat this epidemic.

Much like the Martin et al. and the Adam articles, Michelle Fine's book, Framing Dropouts talks a lot about structural issues in the schools that aid in the high dropout rates that plague this country. Fine's study was inadvertently an analysis of the poor structuring in one of New York's comprehensive high schools. Her study focused mostly on the lack of support the students were receiving, making it very easy to drop out. After reading this book, I have learned that there may be some major issues in the schools that

contribute to dropping out. This will enable me to look for themes in my own research to see if the students are aware of such covert adversities.

The last piece of literature thus far is Urban Sanctuaries by Milbrey McLaughlin, Merita A. Irby, and Juliet Langman. Like my study, this book focuses on inner-city youth and the necessity for prevention and intervention programs to keep kids in school. The goal of the study is to find a way to create environments that will instill a sense of pride, and positive identities that will foster learning and the desire to stay in school. This book offers high kudos to the people across the country that makes programs like this happen. This is an important piece for my project because I will be working with students in a preventative program researching dropouts. This book will allow me to compare it to the participants in my study.

Collectively, these pieces of literature express the need for more dropout prevention programs. They all touch on the reality of the pervasiveness of this issue. The overall concern is for the students and the lack of successful programs. It is research like these that help in creating effective programs.

Methods:

The Prevention Program:

In order to gain the information needed for this study I conducted interviews with two groups of high school teens. My first step in doing this was to get IRB approval since all of my participants are minors. My IRB included parental consent, youth consent and observational consent forms. The observational consent form was used because I have been involved in a placement at a dropout prevention program that I have been

observing. This is where I drew half of my sample. To ensure the program's confidentiality I will be referring to them as KKIS (keeping kids in school). My first step towards getting interviews for my program participant group was to become part of the group at KKIS. I sat in on several sessions and took part in many of the conversations. KKIS is a prevention program designed specifically to keep teens in school. There are currently 40 teens involved in the program along with three research educators, two observers, an administrator and a board of directors to oversee the program.

The program is designed to accomplish a number of things. First it employs 40 teens, keeping them busy and out of trouble. As part of their job, the teens have to conduct research on a topic chosen by them. Second, the teens are meant to learn about strategy, problem solving skills, how to develop interpersonal relationships and life skills. Ultimately, the teens' collective goal is to devise a way to implement a program created by them to keep kids in school. The program starts each year in the summer with a new group and lasts through the school year. During the summer the teens do the footwork for their research, and during the school year they analyze their data and work on developing a prevention strategy. KKIS is a cyclical dropout prevention program because it *is* a prevention program and it helps to create additional prevention programs.

Participants:

Due to restrictions of site access at KKIS, I was only able to collect limited data; therefore, I will do the best I can with what I have. My sample consisted of six teens, three involved in the prevention program and three who were neither in a prevention program nor have not been involved in one in the past. The three participants in the

prevention program have some similarities: they all live in Hartford and attend Hartford schools, they are all minority students, they all come from lower middle class families and they are all currently involved in the same prevention program. The schools these teens attend are Bulkeley High School, Hartford High School, and The Sports and Science Academy. In this group are two girls, 14 and 16 years old and one boy, 16 years old.

The three participants who are not in a prevention program have some similarities as well: they all live in suburban neighborhoods and attend suburban schools; they are all white and come from middle class families. The schools these students attend are Rockville High School and Cheney Technical High School. This group also consists of two girls, 16 and 17 years old and one boy who is 17 years old.

Although these two groups are very different they have a few similarities. Each group has three participants, and both groups have two girls and one boy. In both groups, two of the participants go to regular comprehensive high schools and one goes to an atypical high school; one being a magnet school and one a trade school. Each participant in both groups is scheduled to graduate on time.

The Interviews:

Because of the restrictions to site access and a lack of time, I conducted all of the interviews over the phone. This was really the fastest way to get the interviews I needed. I had easier access to the neighborhood teens that made up my non-prevention program group; however, I interviewed them by phone as well to be consistent across all interviews. I asked each participant the same list of questions with the exception of question 8, which was asked only of the program participants.

The Question Set:

For the interviews I came up with a list of eight questions and they are as follows:

1. What high school do you attend, and what year are you?
 2. How old are you?
 3. Have you ever been involved in a dropout prevention activity through school or otherwise? (If yes ask question 8 at the end)
 4. What do you think the dropout rate is in your school?
 5. Some people say that teens may dropout because of individual factors. Some may say that they may dropout because of institutional factors. What do you think?
 6. Do you know anyone who has dropped out of high school? Can you tell me about them?
 7. What are your plans for after high school?
- If the answer to question 3 was yes continue to question 8.
8. Has your involvement in the prevention program changed your opinion about school? And if so, how?

Why did I Chose These Questions?

I used questions 1 and 2 to learn about the age of my participants and what kind of high school they attended, whether it was a comprehensive school, magnet, charter, public, private or trade school. Question 3 allowed me to separate the teens into the two groups depending on their involvement, or lack there of, in a prevention program. I asked question 4 because I wanted to see if these teens had any conception as to how prevalent the issue is in their school. Question 5 was an important question to ask because it allowed the students to give an open ended answer as to what they perceive the

main reasons are causing teens to dropout. I asked question 6 to see if they would be able to tell me the reason the person they know dropped out; I wanted to see if they gave individual reasons or institutional reasons. I asked question 7 simply because I wanted to see what kinds of aspirations these kids have. And finally question 8, which went only to the program participants. I wanted to know if they recognize the impact that participation in a prevention program can have on a teen struggling with the every day issues of being just that, a teen.

Interpretation and Analysis of Primary Source Evidence:

I am looking for common themes within each of the two groups. I set out to see whether or not the two groups differ. If either group is likely to agree with Fine, and whether their involvement in a prevention program consciously shapes the way in which the teens view the importance of education. It is important to note that in this study there are five schools represented.

The most important evidence supporting my thesis comes directly from the interviews as well as my experience in the KKIS program. In the group of the prevention program participants, all three had mentioned how easy it is to drop out of their school. For example, one of the teens said while answering the second part to question 6, “Well, I’m not sure why exactly, but I know when he did dropout it wasn’t hard for him to do it.” This is an institutional issue. Two of the three stated that school’s rules were inconsistent. For example, one of the students in my prevention program group explained how he had received two days in school suspension for asking a new

teacher what their name was in the hallway: “. . . man, I just asked this teacher their name and I got two days in school, and yo – this other girl got all crazy in class and grabbed the teacher’s arm and threatened her and *she* only got two days in school. Man, she should have been suspended, that is definitely automatic suspension. She got the same punishment I did. Our vice principal is so unfair, it’s so ridiculous, I swear.” This teen is clearly commenting on the inconsistency of the school’s rules. One out of the three stated that they think teens may drop out for institutional reasons as well as individual reasons. None of the three in the prevention participant group knew what the dropout rate was in their school; and these teens are actually researching what causes kids dropout. This implies that none of the three schools represented in this group make it a point to discuss the issue with its students.

In the non-program participant group, all three stated that they think teens dropout because of individual reasons. Collectively, the teens said that drug use, family problems, lack of interest, lack of motivation, depression and teen pregnancy were the factors given as to why teens drop out. One out of the three stated that they think it is a combination of both individual and institutional factors. The institutional factor given in this case was that it is very easy to drop out. Again, like the other group, none of the three knew what the dropout rate was in their school. This poses a problem because five different high schools are represented and none of the teens claim to have any idea what the dropout rate is in their school. In my opinion, this shows a lack of concern for the issue on the schools part.

I have noticed common trends among the teens in the KKIS program during my placement. The most pervasive trends I have noticed is the importance the students place

on their education, and that they think dropouts are often caused by structural issues. One example of this was found during an activity called “The Right Family.” For this activity the director had the teens sit in a tight circle, each teen was given a piece of candy. The teens were asked to listen closely to the story and every time he said “right” they had to pass their candy to the right and to the left whenever he said “left.” In short the story was about a family vacation that went wrong. At the end of the story the teens were to answer some questions. Afterwards they were asked how they felt about the activity. One student said that it was kind of difficult because they had to depend on each other’s listening skills and teamwork. At that point the director asked if they had ever been in a situation that involved someone who was not really listening to them or offering good communication skills. One student replied, “Well, I was talking to my coach about working here and being able to play. He just said I’ll have to sit out more if I’m not there for practices. And that’s not cool because I’m trying to better myself for my future and he just doesn’t understand that.” I believe this student was inferring that the coach felt the team was more important than his future.

Discussion:

After reviewing the results of my data, it seems as though the group that is involved in the prevention program are more privy to information concerning the schools they attend and the ways in which structural problems can lead to dropping out. I believe they are more likely to agree with Michelle Fine. I may also infer that the lack of involvement in a prevention program may hinder one’s ability to see past the institutional problems and be quicker to blame one’s self for dropping out. I do realize that I have used a small sample for this study and that I cannot possibly apply my results to the

general population. However, because of my observations at the prevention program I feel as though I can speculate that if I were to continue interviewing those teens the new data would strengthen my claims.

It is a bit harder to speculate whether or not more interviews with non-prevention participants would strengthen my claim. However, I do believe that the involvement of a prevention program will inevitably open one's eyes to issues and factors that may not have been discussed previously. Therefore, the lack of participation may narrow the possible answers those teens may have to offer.

Ideally I would have liked to interview ten program participants and ten of their peers who are not in a program but live in Hartford. This would have allowed me to compare the two groups and use the involvement in a prevention program as the independent variable. So instead of comparing two completely different groups to Michelle Fine's work, I could have compared the two groups against each other. Unfortunately, sometimes research takes a turn for the worse and you have to roll with the changes. Perhaps that is a study I may consider for the future.

Conclusions:

It seems as though the involvement in this prevention program shapes these teen's opinions about the importance of school and what a good education can offer them. It gets them thinking critically about their choices as well as consequences for their behaviors such as choosing to stay in school. With my results, I have shown that the students in the prevention program have a greater awareness of the causes of dropouts. I

can only infer that in general, teens in a prevention program have a better overall understanding about the issue. In order to be sure that this applies to the general population I would have to do further quantitative research.

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Note: All of the direct quotes in this paper came from the teens during interviews for this project. None of the names will be disclosed for confidentiality reasons.

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