

## “They Stopped Teaching...and I Stopped Caring”: How a Lack of Caring Relationships Pushes Students to Drop Out

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### Abstract

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*There are a number of mediating factors in youths' decision to leave high school prior to graduation. This qualitative paper, from the perspective of students who have dropped out of high school, focuses on push factors, factors within the control of the school, and illustrates how a lack of caring relationships, favoritism, targeting and behind grade negative experiences pushes students to drop out. As already struggling students navigate a school climate that they perceive as uncaring, they further waver with most experiencing one final tipping point that either pull them away from school or further push them to dropping out. Implications and structural barriers to developing a pedagogy of caring is discussed.*

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**Keywords:** high school dropouts; push-outs; at-risk youth; ethic of caring; pedagogy of caring; qualitative research

In today's highly competitive workforce, great emphasis is placed on education, with most places of employment requiring at least a formal high school education. National trend data report a nearly 90% graduation rate for 18-24 year olds with an averaged freshman graduation rate of around 75% (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2008). While graduation rates are increasing at the national level (National Center for Educational Statistics), the number of students graduating from our local community high school, situated in a small rural city in the Northeast, housing two colleges and a medical center, have just risen to a 70% four year graduation rate--lower than would be expected given our demographics. More importantly, school officials report having a limited understanding of the specific issues facing students, understanding why so many students are failing to graduate, and thus how to alleviate this problematic issue (field notes).

Dropping out of high school has profound consequences for students, their families, and communities, both socially and economically (Christle, Jolivet, & Nelson, 2007). For instance, 56% of high school dropouts were unemployed, compared to 16% of students who completed high school (Stanard, 2003). In addition to higher unemployment rates, high school dropouts have lower income rates. According to Tyler and Lofstrom (2009), the disparity in income between women without a high school diploma and female high school graduates was nearly \$7500 less per year, a difference of living in poverty. Of greater significance is the life-long likelihood of impoverishment due to the considerably lessened employment opportunities. Dropouts lost over \$260,000 throughout their lifetime when compared to their high school graduate counterparts.

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Furthermore, high school dropouts usually end up working in low-skilled, low-paying positions with fewer possibilities for advancement and overall fewer options for employment (Christle et al., 2007), not to mention significantly fewer benefits such as health insurance or sick leave. Thus, the decision to drop out has life-long economic implications for youth.

Yet, it is not only personal economic issues that are of concern. Students who drop out are also more likely to experience health problems, engage in criminal activities, and become dependent on welfare and other government programs (Campbell, 2003/2004; Legters & Balfanz, 2010). High school dropouts constitute approximately 52% of welfare recipients, 85% of juvenile justice cases, and 82% of the prison population (Stanard, 2003). Thus, dropping out of high school can have deleterious effects not only on youth, but on families and communities as well. Ultimately, the decision to leave school before graduation has serious negative impacts not only on the quality of life for the individual who has dropped out, but also for society and the community in which he or she lives. To help prevent these negative impacts, there has been a growing body of research on the reasons why students prematurely exit high school prior to completing their education.

According to various researchers, dropping out of high school is not a sudden act, but culminates a long-term process of disengagement from school (Christle et al., 2007; Lessard et al., 2008). Researchers have been primarily concerned with identifying different domains that pose serious threats to the student's academic career, with much focus on the student's personal and family risk factors as well as some school related risk factors (Lessard et al., 2008). Jordan, Lara, and McPartland (1996) and other researchers (ie., Davis & Dupper, 2004; Kortering & Braziel, 1999; Meeker, Edmonson, & Fisher, 2008; Scanlon & Mellard, 2002; Schwartz, 1999) categorized issues that pull students away from school, pull factors, and issues within the school that push students away, push factors, factors that are ultimately within the control of the school such as repeating grades, academic achievement, and lack of caring on behalf of school personnel (Davis & Dupper, 2004; Jordan et al., 1996; Kortering & Braziel, 1999; Meeker et al., 2008; Scanlon & Mellard, 2002; Schwartz, 1999). Even with increased attention, the contribution of the school environment is rarely considered as a primary issue in the decision to leave school (Christle et al., 2007), with the plethora of research focusing on the individual or family rather than the impact of school experiences (Campbell, 2003/2004). Davis and Dupper (2004) further suggest that with the research focus on personal and familial characteristics of students who drop out, on those factors that tend to pull youth away from school, rather than the ways in which schools tend to push students out, the importance of the school environment as a factor in teen dropout rates is negated. This lack of focus, then, on how schools contribute often places the blame on the student (Patterson, Hale, & Stressmen, 2007) rather than evaluating the complexity of the issues (Bickerstaff, 2009/2010), as well as how we could improve our educational practices to be more inclusive for youth we already know are at risk and vulnerable to leaving school prior to graduating. As Lee and Breen (2007) argue, viewing students as being lazy, lacking motivation, as academic failures or somehow to blame, legitimizes the very practices that often further alienate and push students away, fostering a school climate of exclusion rather than inclusion.

These issues of school climate, or school culture, can be used to describe the sense of belonging that a student feels towards the school, and the degree of involvement the student has within the school. According to Fortin et al. (2006) and Meeker et al. (2008) school factors do play a significant role in a student's decision to drop out of high school. Factors that affect school climate include school demographics, environment, policies, disciplinary procedures, classroom environment and instruction, as well as administrator and staff relationships, philosophies, attitudes, values and behaviors of school personnel (Christle et al., 2007). Student- teacher relationships weigh heavily on a student's perception of their school, and students who drop out are often unable to develop concrete relationships with teachers or other adult members within the school (Drewry, Burge, & Driscoll, 2010). Davis and Dupper (2004) further suggest that these key relationships are one of the most important factors, that are often overlooked, that ultimately contribute to a student's desire to leave school. Christle et al. (2007) and Drewery et al. (2010) agree, indicating that students who feel less attached are more likely to leave school before graduating. Of a more serious nature are issues where students imply that their teachers are simply unwilling to accommodate their needs, even when asked for help (Meeker et al., 2008) and that these students are often labeled as a nuisance or as troublemakers. Penna and Tallerico (2005) concur, suggesting that teachers not only may fail to meet student needs, but make negative comments about students' performance in the classroom.

Overall, these students believed that their teachers had a serious lack of concern as well as a lack of encouragement for their success (Meeker et al., 2008), and those poor relationships with teachers and school personnel contributed to students dropping out of high school. Ultimately, teachers seem to misjudge their impact on student success and how their attitudes and expectations have a major impact on the achievement of their students (Davis & Dupper, 2004).

So, while the plethora of research continues to focus on personal and familial issues, there is a continued need to better understand how schools contribute to youth dropping out (Davis & Dupper, 2004). In addition, there still remains a lack of research focusing on the lived experiences of youth who have left school prior to graduation, which could add depth and insight into understanding how schools may be pushing youth away (Bickerstaff, 2009/2010; Drewry et al., 2010). As Bickerstaff (2009/2010) and Terry (2008) suggest, understanding the student perspectives of the issues affecting their decision to leave school and their story of dropping out could add a great deal of understanding to this connection. Ultimately, few studies have focused on the dropout's perspective, which prevents the students from voicing their experiences (Lessard e. al., 2007) and doesn't really address the complexities of how youth perceive the school environment impacts their decision to leave school prior to graduating.

## **Methodology**

### **Purpose**

Given the detrimental and life-long impacts of dropping out of high school, the continued focus on personal and familial factors in the research, rather than on how schools may push students out of school prior to graduation, and the limited scope of qualitative, in-depth research that could contribute valuable insight into perspectives of youth who have left school prior to graduation, we have attempted to answer the following research question: What are participants' perspectives as to the reasons for leaving school prior to graduation?

The primary researcher (Karen) spent over six months attending the GED Program approximately one to two days per week, then a year attending, on average, one day per week. Although when data collection began, Karen was considered an outsider-researcher, with no previous relationship with the GED program or any of its participants, she was able to become part of the classroom environment, and their interactions and time in the classroom assisted in establishing a mutually respectful, open and honest environment in which to learn from each other.

Participants of this study consisted of 24 youths who left high school prior to completing their high school diploma, often referred to as "dropouts" and all participants were working toward or had recently attained their General Education Diploma (GED) at the time of the interview or interviews. Participants' ages ranged from 16 to 21. Of the 24 participants, 13 were Caucasian males, one was Latino male, nine were Caucasian female and one was Latino female.

### **Data Collection**

The data from this research project were drawn from several sources including field notes taken throughout the course of time spent in the classroom, throughout the interviewing process, and during both formal and informal interviews and discussions with school personnel. Other sources of data include transcriptions of individual semi-structured interviews with participants, informal and formal interviews with the GED teacher, the curriculum coordinator for the school system, principals from an elementary, middle and high school, guidance counselors from an elementary, and middle school and an intervention specialist. Finally, access to school records was granted by participants' or their legal custodians through assent and consent forms.

Individual qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted with all participants. At the beginning of each interview, the researcher informed participants of the purpose of the study, the types of questions which would be asked, the participants' right to confidentiality, and their right to stop the interview, or skip questions. The interview consisted of open-ended and probing questions, which explored the participants' family, peer and school relationships, background and experiences of their school environments and how these multiple contexts may have contributed to their decision to leave school prior to graduation, as well as recollections of earlier school experiences that either enhanced or detracted from a positive environment in which to learn. Each interview took place in a private classroom or on the grounds of where the GED program was held. The in-depth interviews, lasting 45-125 minutes, were audio- recorded and then transcribed, verbatim. Paralanguage was excluded from interview transcripts.

Field notes were taken indicating interviewer observations of the youth, physical appearance and dress, body language, hygiene, overall feelings, hunches and perceived characteristics of participants as well as observations within the classroom and programmatic observations throughout the process. All data was analyzed, constructing categories or themes that captured a recurring pattern (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984) and used in accordance with methods outlined by Allen (1989).

A number of validation strategies were utilized, including ongoing member checks, triangulation with field notes (including classroom observations, programmatic observations and formal and informal interviews with varying school personnel) and school records, such as attendance records, grades, teacher notes and any other archival data that was accessible.

### **Findings**

Although nearly every student experienced a number of risk factors outside of school, including poverty, family dysfunction, parental illnesses or mental illnesses, negative influences of their peer group, and AOD issues, and even though these issues clearly were connected to students leaving school prior to graduation, this article focuses primarily on push factors (Davis & Dupper, 2005; Jordan et. al, 1996; Kortering & Braziel, 1999; Meeker et al., 2008; Scanlon & Mellard, 2004; Schwartz, 1999) and how those push factors became a catalyst for dropping out.

The experiences that students shared regarding their choice to leave school prior to graduation were complex and powerful, with many students sharing painful memories. For many of the students interviewed, there seemed to be a process of navigation in understanding the school environment, figuring out who was safe and could be an ally and who to avoid. Students quickly acknowledged their own contributions through negative attitudes toward school and teachers, their lack of interest and motivation, issues with truancy, feelings of boredom, and the ability to see any viable connections between what they were supposed to be learning in the classroom and to their lives outside of school. Yet, they also emphasized that there was often a connection between their negative attitudes about being in school and behavior at school, and how they were treated as a member within the school environment.

Many youth spoke of alienation, the lack of caring teachers, and for many, the belief that there was not only a great deal of favoritism, but outright targeting, and this increased resentment and isolation. As Joe said, “some teachers just don’t give a shit!” A number of students spoke of being bullied by peers in front of teachers, and of teachers doing nothing. At times it seemed the teachers were the bullies. These experiences enhanced a perception within the students that they didn’t matter. Or, to use Cheryl’s words, “I just felt like I didn’t belong.”

Ultimately, for many students, they felt that “dropping out” was really the only choice, especially when considering that they may have been behind grade level or were struggling with ongoing conflictual relationships with their teachers or issues outside of school. For most, leaving high school seemed to relieve a huge burden, and almost became an escape from a world that felt very disconnected to their needs and had little consideration for who they really were.

It is our hope that, in sharing their experiences, we can challenge the belief that we, as educators, are not a primary consideration in students’ decisions to leave school. As Virginia Axline (1964) has stated, “I had known children who had been overcome by their fears and anxieties, striking out in self-defense against a world that for many reasons was unbearable to them.”(p. 21)

### **Lack of Caring and Meaningful Relationships**

Although most of the students reported having at least one positive adult relationship within the school, the many negative influences culminated in creating a barrier to effective learning and often decreased the motivation to “stay with it.” Mariah conveyed a very common theme, “I feel like teachers don’t care. They just give you what they want you to do and walk away. All’s they want is the paycheck at the end of the week. They don’t really care about how you feel.” It was the same for Cleo, a very bright student who spoke enthusiastically of her love of history and explained that she had once been a very good student. In the ninth grade she began hanging out with the “wrong people.” She started using alcohol, smoking drugs and ultimately began using “hydros, oxys, [and] klonopin...I used to use them before I went to school. It just like helped me get through the day and deal with people.” Although Cleo was later diagnosed with an anxiety disorder and is now clean and on prescribed medication, the damage had been done. She goes on to say,

I stopped going to class and stopped going to school, and when I went I slept. You would think that they would have, the teacher [would] realize that this girl, that something's going on. But no one ever talked to me about anything. And nobody ever just asked me, are you okay? Why aren't you coming to class? ....The teachers just didn't care.

Delilah described a sentiment that seemed to run through many of the interviews.

I was done. I didn't have any effort towards the teachers who were giving me no effort back. It was kind of like everybody at the school stopped. They stopped willing; they stopped teaching me, and trying to push me forward. And I stopped caring.

Delilah's portrayal showed not just an ethic of uncaring but added a more structural component saying that it was more of a process to get rid of the kids that they deemed as difficult,

They don't care; they are just there to get their paycheck and leave. They were very much pushers.... yeah, they are just pushing everybody out. It, it feels like the only reason they have you in there is because they are making money off the students being there. That's the only reason you're there; they make their money off you being in class and then you go home and they're done. If they can, [they] sure will send you wherever. They're still getting money for you being in this program to do your GED so sure, why not send as many kids as we can.

Ultimately, for many of the students the lack of caring was very much connected to their lack of motivation and desire to do well in school and then giving up. Mark struggled, continuously asking for more help, but felt ignored. He seemed very frustrated by the lack of desire for teachers to help students: "They don't make it so that the student actually gets enough help- 'cause when a kid does need help their teacher doesn't actually help them. They say figure the problem out by themselves."

The students interviewed suggested that this lack of empathy and desire to help students didn't actually apply to all students at the high school they had attended, but rather they alleged a pervasive level of favoritism toward better students, wealthier students, as well as student athletes. Barrett reflected what the experience was like for him. "They (students the teachers liked more) pretty much owned the classroom. They were pretty much the teacher's pet....making everybody else feel retarded." Cleo alluded to favoritism for specific groups such as student athletes or more popular students.

For the most part, the teachers only pay attention to the kids they like....There is a big issue with favoritism, there is a *really* big issue with favoritism in our school. Like I remember in gym class, the gym teachers only, like they'll talk to you but you can tell that they like the kids who are on sports teams more. And you know they favor them and they can do whatever they want to and if they're not doing what they're supposed to, they don't get yelled at. But if somebody else does something they're not supposed to do- they- it's the end of the world.

Cleo went on to say that it wasn't just student athletes, but kids who were more popular, or perceived to be better students who were favored. For Cleo, it was unfair and made her feel like she wasn't really wanted at the school. In referring to an English class she stated,

The teacher there, she would talk to all the popular girls and stuff and all the popular kids and, like if you're a teacher you're supposed to teach everybody, not just the kids that are considered popular and get all the good grades and stuff. The teachers don't help everybody that they should, and that they have favoritism and favoritism is actually really bad.

### **Difficulties with Teachers and Feeling Targeted and Bullied**

Although Cleo and many of the students interviewed suggested serious issues with favoritism, a number of students claimed that it moved beyond the realm of just favoritism. Many students had observed or been the victim of overt targeting by teachers. As Luke was describing the level of favoritism that he had observed, he implied that the targeting of students was much worse. As he discussed the issue of targeting, it was clearly upsetting to him. He stated,

This isn't going to sound good either, but I think that teachers target students. It does happen a lot over there. A lot of students get targeted. Just because the way they dress or the way they look or the way they act. They get targeted. Skater, punkish. If I were to go in there like this with a different shirt on, like a rock t-shirt or something. They'd put a target on my back because I look suspicious of being a bad kid or a trouble maker or a mischief kid or whatever. And that's how they get targeted. It's pretty, pretty much they do most of it on appearance. How you look is how you get labeled, and how you're labeled is if you're gonna' get targeted or not.

Josh insinuated that when students were targeted, they were treated poorly, often received unfair punishment and that teachers would selectively enforce school rules and policies. He recounted several instances of what he perceived to be an abuse of power by teachers targeting specific students.

I've seen students, like they're not supposed to wear hats in school. Some teachers will just let other students walk by and then look at that one particular student they don't like 'No take your hat off now! Go to the office.' Cause they don't like him. I know that's it. They don't like him. The teachers in that school are very choosy for the most part about who they're nice to.

For some students, the targeting and bullying at the hands of teachers was brutal and very personal. Many students received distinct messages that they should just leave or drop out. Others were actually called names and told by teachers they were stupid or retarded, or didn't belong in school. For Mark, he was told there was no question that he should quit school. And yet, when he tried to report his teacher, he was consistently told he was lying. On several occasions, he was even suspended. During his interview he recounted,

One of the teachers there said I was retarded and that I would never amount to anything and that I should just drop out. So...I told the principal about it and the principal didn't take my word for it and I was suspended. Some other kids I'm pretty sure might have had these problems [too] but, that teachers telling them that they're not smart enough they're not good enough too, and then principal's going 'oh no you're lying, our teachers would never do that.'

Unfortunately, after Mark was suspended on several occasions for lying, he decided to take things into his own hands.

[I was suspended again] because they thought that I was lying, and I was makin' stuff up about the teacher. So I went back after my two weeks of being suspended, and he did it again so I kinda' took this one overboard and I hit him.

After this incident, Mark was again suspended. Mark indicated he felt like he was tired of being called names and that no one would believe him. He felt it was up to him to defend himself, insisting teachers should, "treat them with the respect they deserve." Mark wasn't the only one who wasn't believed and then punished when he attempted to report a teacher for misconduct. Luke portrayed a similar account. He came into the school building with his headphones and hat still on. A teacher told him to take them off and Luke said he would take them off at his locker (this was the school policy-field notes) when he could put his book bag and things away and continued to walk toward his locker down the hall. This quickly escalated into a power struggle. The teacher followed him down the hall.

So [the teacher] takes my bag and she throws it against the locker and lets it just slam and drop to the floor. I had iPods in there, CDs, everything in there and nothing [was done] about it....Of course [the principal] is going to believe a

teacher over a student. ..[The principal said] 'Well she gave me a whole 'nother story and I believe her so, I'm going to have to suspend you for two weeks.'

In private, a school official who was familiar with the incident said that they thought Luke was telling the truth, but since Luke was often in trouble, he became a scapegoat (field notes).

Incidents such as these were common in both the interviews and in informal discussions in the classroom and during breaks at the GED program. All in all, the messages were clear to the students who chose to leave high school before graduation. For some it was a lack of caring relationships. It was about favoritism, and the implications that you're not special or don't belong.

For many it escalated into becoming targets and developing power struggles with teachers. Regardless, the life struggles youth were experiencing were ignored and the message of devaluing students felt persistent. As John said, “the ones that didn’t like me, they used that against me.”

### **Falling Behind**

As students shared their experiences of trying to understand and make sense of their school environment and the lack of caring relationships, they also struggled a great deal with teaching styles, and needed more hands on learning, and had great difficulty with feeling very overwhelmed when they had fallen behind academically. But falling behind wasn’t the most difficult and upsetting part for most students interviewed who had been held back. Rather, it was the negative and often embarrassing remarks made by teachers for a kind of public shaming. Teachers often called attention to a student’s failure in front of other students, and students would then harass and further embarrass students who had failed. Mariah was made to feel stupid by students, and felt the teacher believed she didn’t care about her work. And for her, this further exacerbated her feeling of alienation. She said,

I felt like (sniffles, crying) like I was being judged in class. If I said like, oh I don’t understand that; can you like re-explain that; I felt like everybody was looking at me. Like, we already went through this, like what are you stupid? Like you already went through this class [before] and you don’t know what’s going on? So I just stopped asking questions and then I would never ask the teachers because of course, you know most of the teachers said they probably failed because they don’t care.

And yet, students were repeatedly placed with the same teachers, even after they had failed a class—at times more than once. Several students referred to this and how demoralizing it was for them. Francesca stated,

I failed her class [and] got put back in her class; failed it again, and I was talking to the principal and was like ‘can I please, can I please have a different, a different [teacher], I am going to fail this again.’ They put me in her class again!

This policy seemed to just further alienate students who were struggling academically, placing one more barrier, pushing them just a bit further from gaining their education. And, it was here that many of the students seemed to come full circle, feeling the full impact of a lack of caring and meaningful relationships within the school and simply gave up on themselves.

### **Wavering, Deciding to Leave**

For the majority of students interviewed, the lack of meaningful relationships with school personnel, feeling like an outsider, judged, often treated unfairly, and even targeted became a cycle in which they simply either withdrew more and more, or in cases like Mark, Luke, and John escalated their negative behaviors, living up to the labels they had been assigned by their teachers. Regardless, students felt misunderstood by those tasked with educating them. As Mariah outlined,

I struggled, and they were like, ‘well you just don’t care.’ And that’s how I really, I think that’s what really started it (the desire to drop out). They were trying to tell me that I didn’t care about my homework or my school work or, you know, my tests. And that wasn’t it. I was struggling.

In the end, it was just simpler to walk away.

For most of the students interviewed, the decision to leave school prior to graduation was very much connected to their relationships with teachers and how they perceived they were treated. Though nearly every student stated that they had at least one positive relationship with an adult in the school it was often too little too late. As John remarked, “even though other teachers like you, it wasn’t, it wasn’t enough.” Although students accepted much responsibility for their behavior, lack of motivation and a multitude of issues outside of school, they were also, for the most part, clear about how important those relationships within the school were in their decision making process. When asked why he ultimately chose to leave school, John emphatically stated, “teachers would probably be number one. The whole being blamed for a lot of stuff that I never really did, and the teachers always, always targeted me for things.” Mariah said it was important “to be listened to. Listen to what your students say.... If they say they need help, do something. Don’t just sit there and look at them. Help them.” And, the negative messages abounded. Students reported being called stupid, retarded and for Josh, being told, “You don’t stand a chance.”

Joan wanted to make it clear that though the school work and process were difficult, those weren't the real reasons behind why she ultimately chose to leave. She said, "I don't want to say I couldn't handle the school, that's not what it was. I couldn't handle being there with those teachers." The favoritism, targeting, power relationships and lack of caring relationships had taken their toll for many of these young students. Mariah exemplified a very common theme, "You know, it was just a lot of alienation." Cleo reflected very similar sentiments, "[I was] feeling isolated, not having anybody in the school; that was a part of that too."

So, although the complexity of reasons and processes toward leaving varied, there was a consistent thread of wanting, needing positive relationships within the school in order to be successful and continue their education toward the completion of a high school degree. And, when those relationships were lacking, many held on for a period of time, but in the end, leaving high school for the GED program was the most viable option.

### **Leaving: The Tipping Point**

There were two general themes for students in deciding to finally leave high school prior to graduation. For both themes, there was the experience of a number of push factors from within the school and pull factors from outside. There was a progression, a sequence of students wearing down over time, and in the end, there was a final tipping point that culminated in dropping out. John stated, "I was done with it." Students in this category suggested they had simply had enough, experienced one final push, and believed it was time for them to "get out of there." A second theme, "I had nothing left to give," occurred when students who were already struggling with a number of family, personal or school issues had one final serious incident outside of school that proved to be a catalyst for leaving. As Julio said, "Ya' know, one thing you try to deal with, and just more and more keeps getting stacked on top of it, and then all the sudden you realize you have all this stuff going on and it's just so much stress." It was not so much that they were done with it, but rather much of the pressure they were experiencing was beyond their coping ability, and they simply "had nothing left to give."

#### *"I had nothing left to give"*

"I had nothing left to give" was really about the abundance of push factors within the school and pull factors outside of the control of the school. For these students, they were often struggling, had usually already felt either isolated within the school, or experienced many of the push factors, were wavering, and then one final event, from outside of the school, finally compelled them to drop out. For Jessie, who had struggled a great deal throughout his school years, diagnosed as bipolar and suffering from insomnia said, "I was just trying to make it work till my depression got really bad." Jessie's mother was also diagnosed with bipolar and an anxiety disorder. She had begun to deteriorate and he felt like he couldn't leave her at home alone any longer.

She quit her job, stopped working, started shutting down completely and would go into anxiety attacks in which she had to go buy \$1000 in dolls or something, or sleep everyday.... I feel like I've had to remind her, just to do things, like, just regular stuff I told her take showers, [to] go do something important."

Although Jessie's mother discouraged him from leaving school, he said, "I had to go. I wasn't going to continue to make it."

Other tipping point incidents were just as serious, a critically ill family member, a friend's death or suicide, loss of parental employment, hospitalization or institutionalization of a parent, or incarceration of a parent.

The day he (father) got incarcerated, it was the same day that she (mom) had signed herself into the psych ward. It was the same day that the aunt we live with now, came to my house with my other aunt and they picked us up and that was the last time; we didn't hear anything; we didn't see our parents. We saw them in the morning, you know I love you, goodbye, see you when we get home from school. We got home from school [and] it was my aunt [and] our social worker" – Delilah

Delilah never returned to classes in high school. Unfortunately, there was no follow-up from the school, nor encouragement to return.

*“I was done with it”: The Final Push*

John described a typical sentiment when he finally decided he would leave school. “I was done with it. I was done with all their hypocrisy and all that stuff up there. I was just sick of it. I couldn’t do it anymore.” These students too had experienced a number of both push and pull factors, but often experienced one final incident, from within the school, that proved to be a final push toward dropping out. Cleo indicated she just couldn’t take it anymore and that she’d rather drop out than continue trying to finish. Although once a good student, she began to struggle with family issues and had difficulty attending to her classes. She described getting in deeper and deeper and asking for help, but was continuously ignored by some teachers. She became very frustrated saying, “that’s probably what helped me decide to actually drop out. Like, I knew I didn’t wanna’ be in school ‘cause I started hating school.”

Francesca echoed a similar experience when she was struggling with course content and asked a teacher for help on some work. After asking several times, Francesca became very frustrated at the lack of assistance. She stated, “She would literally get pissed at me; and I told her I do not understand this; can I come after school? I need, I need more help with this and she just completely blew me off.”

In many cases, there was ongoing conflict with particular teachers who students perceived to be unfair. They described feeling like teachers or administrators wouldn’t listen to them or, as previously indicated, even suggested they were lying about their experiences. Mark described one such confrontation that became his final catalyst for leaving. After multiple confrontations with a teacher who called him retarded and stupid, and multiple suspensions for lying, he made one final plea to the school administration. “They thought I was lying [again] and I was makin’ stuff up about the teacher...so I basically dropped out and went to go get my GED.”

For Luke, it was one final confrontation that made the final push away from his high school diploma.

So I’m sitting there (in the office) and my English teacher walks in and she looks at her mailbox and stops and looks at me... ‘why is it that every time I come in here I see you in here?’ (Luke responds) because I have a bad temper problem and I was told to come here when I get aggravated. And she’s like, ‘Well, I think you should just dropout. I mean every time I come in here, you’re always in here and you’re not doing any good just being in here, just taking up space, so I might as well just drop out.’ So I got mad and I said, ‘Fine, you know what, I’ll dropout’ and I left. I walked right out of the building.

Luke returned only once more, to complete his paperwork to officially drop out so he could attend GED classes.

**Discussion**

It was unmistakable that most of the student participants in this study had many difficulties in their personal lives outside of school. Issues of impoverishment, family dysfunction, family or personal mental illness, AOD issues, parental criminal behavior, and negative peer groups were apparent for many of the youth who participated in this study. Students were also quick to indicate that their behaviors and attitudes were a contributing factor and that for many participants they struggled a great deal academically with many being behind grade level. And yet, with only two exceptions, the students shared much regret in their decision to leave high school prior to graduation. Most wanted to finish, but found themselves hitting a pervasive barrier within the school of not getting the help they needed, believing that teachers didn’t care about them, that they were not one of the worthy students, that teachers and administrators didn’t want them there, were trying to push them out by targeting them, and at times even telling them overtly that they should just drop out. These contextual messages took their toll on students already wavering until they either just gave up or experienced one final, often traumatic event that proved to be a catalyst for leaving.

Brown & Rodriguez (2009) suggest that this neglect of academic and personal needs as both students and “human beings” places youth as outsiders and results in “a lack of care and accountability on the part of adults.” (p. 238) Structural issues of inequitable power, hierarchies of favoritism, and pervasive messages of an ethic of uncaring served to push students away, to alienate, isolate, and even escalate negative behaviors that were doomed to increase the likelihood of failure.

When students did fail classes, they faced a number of push factors. Students felt like they could never catch up and that the situation seemed hopeless. Students implied that teachers would often publicly embarrass those who had failed by making remarks in front of the class or in front of other students, thus outing students as a “failure.”

Not only was this embarrassing, but it ostracized students further and enhanced their sense of isolation and desire to disengage further from the school. When students failed a particular course, they were often placed into the same class with the same teacher, time and again. Ultimately, this further fueled a sense of alienation and disengagement.

Schools must also be aware of what Brown and Rodriguez (2009) refer to as “sites of unequal power in schools.” (p. 239) In the current study, school administration failed to accept that teachers were putting students down, calling them names, and even telling students to drop out, saying, teachers “would never do that.” Teachers are placed in a position of power, and have the ability to make a tremendous impact in the lives of their students. Unfortunately, for the students in this study, their perceptions were not just that teachers didn’t care, but at times used their power to belittle and bully students whom they may have perceived to be problematic in the classroom.

It’s somewhat ironic that school programs on bullying abound, but they seldom focus on how teachers are a part of that process, either as witnesses or perpetrators. Programs that did focus on teacher behaviors could be beneficial to heighten awareness of these practices and develop concrete processes for resolving these issues. Bystander training programs that focus not only on student intervention, but also adult intervention, could also prove helpful. It might also be useful to afford students the opportunity to evaluate teachers as is done on most college campuses (Brown & Rodriguez, 2009). This process would not only give voice to students who are experiencing these issues, but may afford administrators some insight into these abuses of power and how they may contribute to a negative school environment for students and school personnel. Ultimately, school personnel must recognize and actively utilize their power to assist students both academically and socio-emotionally (Brown & Rodriguez, 2009) rather than to disempower, discourage and push students away from attaining a high school education.

The importance of adult caring relationships within the school is a vital component in student success just as is the perception of an environment that conveys an ethic of uncaring has deleterious effects on students. Participants in this study were very clear about the connection between disengaging from school and their relationships with school personnel. As Drewry et al. (2010) suggests, students who drop out are often unable to develop these key relationships in a positive way and this lack of positive relationships becomes a key in youth deciding to leave. Knesting (2008) and Lee and Breen (2007) concur, emphasizing the importance of students’ perceptions of these key relationships and an ethic of caring. In reality, teachers may simply not see nor understand the full impact of how their attitudes, expectations and behavior toward students become a major barrier for students completing a high school degree (Davis & Dupper, 2004).

Ultimately, the need to develop a school environment that values students and fosters an ethic of caring through positive relationships has serious implications for teacher preparation (Bickerstaff, 2009/2010), teacher training and in evaluating effectiveness of teaching. Yet, current educational reform tends to focus on more quantitative aspects of educational assessment and teaching evaluation including test scores, developing modules of learning, expertise in content areas, and attaining graduate degrees, but seldom reflect on what Nakkula and Toshalis (2006) suggest is of significant importance, “caring for the student as a pedagogical priority.” (p. 98)

Although it is clear that teachers today face a multitude of stressors and the evaluative process for quality of teaching itself is often perceived to lack equity, with few teachers receiving accolades for their relational ability and ethic of caring (field notes), the movement toward increasingly narrowed perspectives on quality of teaching (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2006) can only continue to push students away. This study invites teachers, counselors, school personnel and researchers to challenge the predominant view that students who are struggling academically, behaviorally or emotionally are lazy and unmotivated, or that the primary reasons that students leave school before graduating are external to the school environment. Although the issues facing students who decide to leave school are multi-faceted and complex, we have the opportunity to foster a school climate that recognizes the value of every youth and has a compassionate understanding of not only their educational needs but of the part that educators play in who they will ultimately become.

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