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Factors Influencing High School Dropout Among Teenage Mothers Using Measurement Development

Paper based on a program presented at the 2009 American Counseling Association Annual Conference and Exposition, March 19-23, Charlotte, North Carolina.

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Students with multiple risk factors have a higher likelihood of high school dropout. High-risk factors associated with dropout are poor academic performance, repeat of one or more grades, low socioeconomic status, English as a second language, pregnancy, and frequent absences/truancy (Baker, Sigmon, & Nugent, 2001). Other factors associated with dropout risk are prenatal complications and infant care. The transition of motherhood may present medical complications for the mother and/or child that may hinder a teen's ability to attend school and complete the necessary academic requirements. Medical complications are the increased likelihood of having a premature infant. Infants who are born prematurely are more likely to be placed in Neonatal Intensive Care and may suffer from heart and lung problems and poor growth. Given the importance of understanding and effectively addressing the factors that may potentially limit a young mother's desire to succeed, counselors and school administrators should understand the needs of young mothers. The current study focuses on the academic, personal, and social factors contributing towards high school completion.

Recent studies have begun to expand the research by examining the role of age and residence for adolescent mothers. High school dropout rates are higher for older mothers and mothers who reside in urban cities (Wolman, Bruiniks, & Thurlow, 1989 as cited in Lehr, Johnson, Bremer, Cosio, & Thomspson, 2004). In addition to age and residence, mothers with higher transition and mobility are at a greater risk of dropout. Missing or incomplete assignments may be the result of pregnancy illness or movement out of a school's district to reside with a different support person. To prevent the contributing factors of academic failure, an increase is needed in preventive programs and continued on-site services (e.g., childcare, mentoring, parenting, case management).

The interaction with family, school personnel, and members within the community are detrimental for the continued motivation of academic success for

adolescent mothers. Family factors that contribute towards dropout are socioeconomic status, family structure, parental education, and income (Blum, Beuhring, & Rinehart, 2000). The family-of-origin can hinder young mothers personally and socially, and is worth examining in the academic and mental health field. Unhealthy behaviors within the family-of-origin are often maintained and continued throughout generations. For example, many adolescent mothers may adopt a rigid parental lifestyle that closely resembles the parenting practices from their childhood. In addition, young mothers may imitate the occupational role of their maternal parent by seeking similar employment. Family therapy and career services for adolescent mothers can be a healthy source of support to increase healthy family involvement and post-high school educational aspirations.

Peer involvement is another factor related to high school dropout. Pregnancy or the birth of a child for an adolescent mother may change the social dynamic of peers. As students succeed academically, their reciprocal relationships change through engagement, stability, social involvement, and school experiences (Kaplan, Peck, & Kaplan, 1997). Individuals with problematic backgrounds, high-risk environments, and non-supportive family members may have fewer educational aspirations and an increase in negative peer involvement. Consequently, students with negative peer associations are more likely to imitate their peers' lifestyles, most often leading to increased feelings of marginalization (Kortering & Braziel, 1999). Students who are marginalized may be less satisfied in the academic environment and have a higher likelihood of school dropout (McGaha & Fitzpatrick, 2005). Counselors and school administrators can implement support groups and alternative activities for adolescent mothers to decrease feelings of loneliness. Increasing school involvement for this high-risk population ultimately may help develop feelings of inclusion and decrease the risk of early academic departure.

Method

Participants

Data in this study was selected from the second wave of the National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988, conducted by the National Center of Educational Statistics (NCES). The participants included all females (students in school and students who had dropped out) who identified themselves as either pregnant or a mother of at least one biological child (N = 572).

Sample Demographics.

Grade Level	12 th Grade
Race	White = 51% Hispanic = 23% African-American = 22% Native American/Alaskan Native = 3% Asian Pacific Islander = 2%

Residency	Rural = 39%
	Urban = 31%
	Suburban = 30%
SES:	Low Quartile = 50%
	Second Quartile = 29%
	Third Quartile = 15%
	Fourth Quartile = 5%

Instrumentation

An inventory was developed from 31 items using an exploratory factor analysis to predict dropout likelihood for teenage mothers. Items were chosen to measure students' personal, social, and academic perspectives of motherhood. The subscales chosen from the second follow-up of the NELS:88 database were measured by a five-point Likert scale.

Personal Attribute

Sample item: "I feel I do not have much to be proud of."

Future Goals

Sample item: "What are the chances that you will graduate from high school?"

Parental Support

Sample item: "My parent(s)/guardian(s) trust me to do what they expect without checking up on me."

Childcare

Sample item: "How often do you take care of your youngest child during the school year?"

Peer Involvement

Sample item: "How important is it to you that your friends attend classes regularly?"

Peer Academic Aspirations

Sample item: "How many of your friends dropped out of school without graduating?"

School Attendance and Absences

Sample item: "How many times were you late/skipped classes in the first semester or current term of the current year?"

School Climate

Sample item: “How much do you agree that there is real school spirit?”

Community Involvement

Sample item: “How often do you spend time doing volunteer or community service?”

Results

The first three components accounted for 14.23% of cumulative variance. The nine factors totaled 58.42% cumulative variance. The Pattern Matrix using the Extraction Method: Principal Axis Factoring was examined. Rotation converged in 7 iterations. The nine factors had eigenvalues over 1: 4.35, 2.58, 2.06, 1.81, 1.63, 1.53, 1.45, 1.31 and 1.20 and accounted for 41.56% of the variance.

Peer Academic Aspirations, the first factor, identified five pattern coefficients included study, good grades, attend classes, college, and finish high school. Items with the highest loadings over .50 were study and good grades.

School Climate, the second component identified three positive loadings over .30 to include teachers interested, teaching, and spirit. Teachers interested had the highest loadings.

Personal Attribute, the third component identified four positive loadings over .30 to include feels good, control, worth, and proud. Items with the highest loadings were having positive feelings regarding self and increased feelings of control.

Future Goals, the fourth factor with positive loadings over .30 were chances of graduating, chances of happy life, chances of college, and chances of children. Items with the highest loadings were chances of graduating and having a happy life.

Community Involvement, the fifth factor identified four positive loadings over .30 to include youth groups, sports, community service, and religious activities. The highest loading for the fifth factor was involvement of youth groups.

Childcare, factor six, identified two factors with positive loadings over .40 to include student care as the highest loading and grandparent care. Items addressed the following: “How often do you care for your child?” and “How often does the child’s grandparent care for the child?”

School Attendance and Absences, factor seven, identified two positive loadings over .60. Students were asked to rate the frequency of being late or cutting/skipping school during the current term of school.

Peer Involvement, factor eight, addressed peer interactions and identified two loadings with one factor as negative. The positive loading identified having friends who dropped out, and the negative and highest loading identified the involvement of friends with no plans for college.

Parental Support, factor nine, comprised of four items (two having negative loadings) with the highest loading of .50. Students addressed the ability to count on parents/guardians to solve many of their problems.

Implications for Practice

When using NELS:88 to study the propensity for adolescent mothers to dropout, exploratory factor analysis reveals a set of variables that could be used as a screening tool for dropout prevention of teenage mothers. Adolescent mothers with multiple needs may benefit from the preventive services of the schools and within the community. Many factors within this study are related to the discontinuation of academic involvement. For counselors and school administrators this information is particularly beneficial in examining the factors when increasing academic standards and retention rates. In essence, personal, academic, and social factors contribute to student success rates. Adolescent mothers who identify having supportive individuals may ultimately increase the likelihood of academic, personal, and social involvement.

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