

Understanding Factors that Influence Academic Performance in Tenth Grade Students

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Abstract

This study examines factors contributing to the poor academic performance of tenth grade high school students. Throughout my eight years teaching experience at this grade-level, the one constant from class to class and year-to year is the academic decline. This decline typically starts at the end of ninth grade, becomes obvious and serious in tenth and then starts to wane as eleventh grade progresses.

The most deficient students tend to leave school for either credit recovery programs, alternative schools, or they just drop out altogether. The research goal is to identify the factors that contribute to this decline and work towards instituting change in the classroom to prevent what has become inevitable.

High school students from an affluent suburban community in the San Francisco Bay Area participated in a focus group. They were asked to identify the factors that contributed to either their poor academic performance or that of their peers. Also, they were asked to identify the elements that made them successful. Results indicated that having a driver's license or a friend with a driver's license gave them freedom and access to parties, drugs, and alcohol.

In a small classroom teachers had time to interact with them on a personal basis, where they really felt as if the teacher cared. In this case they felt they did not want to disappoint their teacher. Poor academic performance contributes to the issues relating to the achievement gap and the drop out rate and therefore deserves a closer look.

Chapter 1 Introduction

While I was in the credential program I can remember a teacher who came and spoke to my class about engaging students in what might be considered “boring subjects.” During the course of her talk the subject of tenth graders and their typically poor performance came to light. The woman had been teaching for over thirty years and shared some of her ideas about what she thought might be the decline in student overall academic performance. While she was not able to identify the cause, she was well aware of the consequences. The number of students who left for alternative schools or dropped out continued with every new class.

I have been teaching tenth grade since I received my credential eight years ago. Every year I have at least three-five students (out of 64) who leave my affluent suburban high school for an alternative school to make up lost credit and at least 1 student who will drop out while waiting for a spot at an alternative school.

Students who have done well academically up to the middle of ninth grade are also performing lower than would be expected based on their test scores. Tenth grade teachers are talking about this issue and we all agree that we need to pin down what is getting in the way of their performance so that we can address it and help our students achieve their full potential.

Statement of Problem

The academic performance of tenth graders continues to decline. The decline can be seen in student test scores, drop in number of assignments completed in and out of school, as

well as delinquent assignments and completion of long-term projects. These students easily become credit deficient and have to leave in order to attend an alternative school to make up the credits. While waiting for a space to open at an alternative school or, because they will have to attend a school where they have no friends, some students will drop out.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study is to identify the factors that contribute to the poor academic performance of a particular set of tenth grade students. Identifying the factors can help educators address not only the performance issues but lower the number of students needing alternative schools for credit deficiency as well as lowering the number of drop outs. Secondly I want to see if addressing the factors in tenth graders poor academic performance contributes to the narrowing of the achievement gap.

Research Question

What are the influences in the poor academic performance of tenth graders? What can teachers do to address those factors to keep these students in school, attending class, and improve their academic performance?

Theoretical Rationale

I examined the broader area of academic performance in high school with the idea of identifying those issues that are most relevant to tenth grade students who are at risk for dropping out of school. There many theories and articles that address poor academic performance as it relates to working mothers, divorced parents, the lower educational

levels of parents, as well as the plight of certain ethnic groups in urban settings. There has been a move toward encouraging teachers to “engage all students” and not allowing students to “opt out”. Teachers are being encouraged to find new ways to engage students in the English language arts curriculum by adding more relevant non-fiction issues and even a healthy dose of humor. Recently there has been some conversation around the relationship of the students and teachers (or other adults on campus, such as aides and supervisors).

In Noguera’s (2007) work with the Boston public high schools he surveyed and interviewed 150 10th grade students to get their perspective on what needed to be done to improve the schools. Of the items formulated by the students and presented as a necessary means of improving schools was relationships between students and teachers/adults. Noguera reports that though the students were not sure how the relationships could be improved, they were able to articulate that having a teacher who knew them made a difference. In my survey this issue was also in the forefront. My students expressed that having a teacher who knew and cared and/or believed in them made the biggest difference. They were excited when teachers made the effort to come and see them participate in events at school or were able to support them in activities unrelated to school, such as dog shows, equestrian events, beauty pageants and open microphones. On the campus of a comprehensive high school students often feel lost. The newfound freedom that comes with age and a driver’s license often makes them feel adrift. Several students in the survey expressed having a teacher on campus that they

knew and trusted was important because at the end of the day they often went home to overworked parents who had little time or energy.

In Noguera's comparison of small schools versus large schools the advantage of the small school was the personalization the students felt from teachers. This has long been held as the advantage to small schools, where it is easier for teachers and students to know each other. The promotion of things like an advisory period built into the school day is an active way to improve the relationship of teachers/adults on campus with the students at no cost. It would provide the necessary building blocks for motivating students as well. Noguera's study showed that "students who had the clearest goals were most likely to cite an adult—a teacher, counselor, a parent, or a relative—as the source of guidance related to future aspirations" (p. 209). Again, in his comparison of small schools versus large schools even the middle and low achieving students at the small schools had developed goals they intended to pursue after graduation (cite) which further acknowledges the importance of the relationship of teachers and students.

Noguera's study focuses on urban schools and in particular the populations of African-Americans and Hispanics but my experience with affluent, suburban, white kids has proved that the needs of all students seems to be in a large part, the relationship formed by students and teachers/adults.

Assumptions

My assumption going into this project is that there are probably multiple factors that contribute to the poor academic performance of tenth graders but the heart of the matter

may be contributed to their age and social /psychological development more than any other factors. Students at this age are extremely social and friendships are vital. They exhibit intense bonding needs as they become more independent from family and more dependent on the relationships being established with their peers. As they mature they feel the need to explore who they are and who they want to be and the answer to those questions come from their relationships more than from the academic world.

Looking back to elementary school there is an obvious connection between the desire of the student to please the teacher and their success. Once a student enters high school there is a loss of the one-to-one the student had with the teacher to be replaced by as many as six or seven teachers in a day. Teenagers often feel adrift as they struggle for independence from their families and try to establish relationships with their peers.

Background and Need

In the attempt to close the achievement gap there has been considerable controversy about how that should look and what needs to be done to improve overall scores. To that end, education has established an exit exam all students must pass in order to receive a diploma. The exit exam, administered by each state, tests for competency and proficiency in the areas of reading and writing.

Typically the test is given to 10th graders and they often have more than one opportunity to retake the test. Special provisions are provided for students enrolled in special education. No Child Left Behind (Presidential Remarks, 2002) has forced schools

to make all students college ready, and schools are now judged by their scores, and poor performing schools are punished. The shake up to reform schools and how that should be done has all the politicians and experts scrambling to identify the quick fix at no cost.

Pedro Noguera has researched and written extensively about high school reform and what seems to be working. Though the majority of his studies highlight the urban, African-American and Hispanic population his ideas on reforming today's high schools are getting attention even at the affluent, suburban, white schools.

Chapter 2 Review of the Literature

Introduction

This section provides background information from the research literature regarding the poor academic performance of tenth graders. This chapter is divided into the following: historical context, American attitude and student alienation. Information from administrative records, statistical performance indicators, and an interview with an expert are also included.

Historical Context

Poor academic performance has a long history in education and many researchers have delved into the various aspects that contribute to the situation. During the last twenty years much of the research has been aimed at lowering the drop out rate and closing the achievement gap, especially with the No Child Left Behind (Presidential Remarks, 2002) mandate.

Since the mid 1960s family socioeconomic status was thought to have played a key role as an influence on the academic achievement (Caldas & Bankston, 1997). While there is some support of theory researchers are now questioning to what extent the socioeconomic status of one's peer environment in school exert an independent influence on student achievement, regardless of a student's own individual social status. It is generally accepted that peer groups are strongly related to behavior and attitudes especially among adolescents (Caldas & Bankston, 1997). In the early 1970s and 1980s

many researchers were looking at the rising number of working mothers (Heyns & Catsambis, 1986) as a contributing factor in the negative effect on student achievement. The problem with the research was the age-related factors--attitudes towards work, number of children at home, and family income--were strongly related to the employment status of mothers (Heyns 1982; Hoffman 1979, 1980). The reality was the variables became significant, especially in terms of the attitudes.

Review of the Previous Literature

American Attitude

Other factors have included working students. The American attitude has long held that work complements school and better prepare students for a smooth transition from the world of school to the world of work (Singh, 1998). However the other theoretical perspective on academic achievement is that time is limited, and when time is spent working it takes away from homework and engagement in other school-related activities (Singh, 1998). This ultimately results in poor academic performance and lower academic aspirations (Wirtz, Rohbeck, Chamer, & Frazer, 1987).

Student Alienation

There has been extensive literature demonstrating how students' alienation contributes to academic problems (Crosnoe, Johnson & Elder, 2004). Ultimately a major factor is the importance of social interactions, whether that is between peers and/or intergenerational bonding that correlate to the student-teacher bonding as well as small learning

communities. Researchers are now looking at the social/developmental stage of the tenth grade student, the move towards independence from the family and the immense importance placed on peer relationships.

Statistical Information

Statistics on high school dropout rates as reported by Rand California (2111-2007) illustrates a unique picture of high school academic performance. Before 2005 the number of dropouts in a suburban community in Northern California was relatively low and then in the year 2005 there was a large jump in the percentage of students who dropped out of high school. Though the number has steadily dropped the number still remains quite high.

Administrative Records

California Board of Education (2011) content standards present the framework for all subjects taught at the high school level and the purpose of these standards is to provide consistent expectations for teachers and a framework for student achievement. I teach all 10th graders an array of multicultural literature. Given the diversity of teaching methods I still have students who are unable to meet the course expectations. Students who are deficient in course credits are at risk for dropping out or transferring to alternative schools. My concern with this is that the schools are focused on the academic issues rather than the personal social emotional needs specific to this age group.

Interview with an Expert

M. Burns (pseudonym) has been a teacher at this affluent, suburban school for 38 years. He has also served as a coach at this same school for over 40 years. He is familiar with students on and off the field and has a lot of experience with both tenth and twelfth graders. He currently works with students in an independent study credit recovery program that assists students who have a history of poor academic performance in working towards a diploma. These students usually come to him in the eleventh and some late into the twelfth grade.

In anticipation of our meeting to talk about the factors that influence the poor academic performance of tenth graders he led a class discussion on the topic to see if the students would identify the same factors he did. He has identified the driver's license as the biggest major factor.

As soon as the student gets his or her driver's license or has a friend with one, they have an increased independence from the family and access to parties, where they also have access to drugs and alcohol. In this affluent community most students are given a car as soon as they pass their driver's test.

This often leads to the second contributing factor, the job. While most parents give their student a vehicle right away, most of them are encouraged to get jobs to help support the use of the car. This money, along with the car is their gateway to independence, parties, drugs and alcohol.

When asked what he thought contributed to a student's success Mr. Burns emphatically announced that it was teachers who were able to convey to their students how much they cared. Teachers who discussed what the student was involved in, either in class or out made the biggest difference.

The students who contributed to his classroom discussion felt that teachers who came to their games, plays, musicals, or just took an interest in them were most likely to see them contribute to their schoolwork. A student I talked to said, "It's why I did well in second grade. Not because I was smart, or because my parents made me, but because I knew [Mrs. Brown] liked me and I didn't want to disappoint her by not doing the very best I could."

Another factor identified was small class size. When there are twenty students or less it is easy to find the time to talk and work with each one. It is hard for a student to slip through the cracks in a small class setting as opposed to a class with over 30. The students also felt that the teacher had time for them in a small class and was too stressed in a larger class to give them individual help if they were to ask.

Ethical Standards

This study adheres to the guidelines for protection of human subjects proposed by the American Psychological Association. Additionally the proposal was reviewed by the Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects, approved and assigned number 8278

Chapter 3 Method

This study followed qualitative research approach using narrative discussion format in conversations with tenth grade students at a comprehensive suburban high school.

I surveyed my classrooms of 63 tenth and 64 twelfth grade students. There is a loss of 4 boys and 2 girls with 8 current students earmarked for transfer to credit recovery programs or alternative schools sitting out the school year. Of the 2 girls one left because of fulfillment of one semester credit in English 10.

Ethical Standards

This study adhered to ethical guidelines. It was an intact group following normal instructional procedure for all students enrolled in 10h grade English class. The research plan was approved by my advisor.

Access and Permissions

I serve as the classroom teacher. The procedure was the same for all students, embedded as part of the class.

Data Gathering Strategies

I surveyed the entire 10th and 12th grade regarding the factors that influenced their failure as well as their success. Students completed a written, anonymous, survey as well as verbally engaging in a class discussion.

Data Analysis Approach

All data gathered was in narrative form. Student responses were reviewed for common themes.

Chapter 4 Findings

Description of Site, Individuals, Data

The site is a comprehensive, affluent, suburban high school. Parental involvement is high, but not at the school level. Parents take their issues to the school board as an initial step if they see that something is missing for their children. This may have something to do with the fact that the high school has had a series of principals who only remained for a short term. Every new principal has come by to set different goals to close the achievement gap. The students have no real relationship with school administrators.

Most of the students are good kids from good homes. These are mostly Caucasian and affluent students. There is a handful of African American and Asian students who also come primarily from affluent families. Most students come from very well educated families where both mom and dad have college degrees.

In terms of data, this decline in student academic performance seems typical for 10th grade, based on my eight years of teaching at this grade level. One of the things I have noticed is that the few students that I can connect with are the ones I seem to be able to rein in from the abyss. This requires a great deal of time on my part. Those students that I can connect with, and show them that I care and am available, I can help them set future goals for themselves. However, there are those students I cannot reach. This is the problem.

Sample and Site

High school students at the 10th and 12th grade levels served as participants in this study.

Number of Students

63 10th graders	64 12th graders
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boys= 27	35
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girls=36	29
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African-American=3	1
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Hispanic=8	13
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Asian=5	2
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White=47	48
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+ first semester drops and adds!!

When surveyed the students articulated that homework was the major factor in their academic failure. Students used the time they would have normally spent on homework driving around and hanging out with friends. Most students admitted to going home for dinner but usually went out again after dinner with little regard for homework. Those who were forced to stay in and actually do homework admit that they spent the time connecting with friends on Facebook or playing computer and videogames. They also identified working parents who were either too tired or unable to help with homework. Homework help offered by the school or an individual teacher was always after school and by that time the student was ready to just go home. Some of the students felt they needed a break from school by that time but most admitted they were drawn to driving around with their friends and finding places to party.

Another factor that involves the issue of homework is that credit recovery classes or alternative school was easier because there was no homework required and usually got out earlier in the day so that they could still drive around with their friends or connect on Facebook.

Also identified as an issue by the students was “mean” teachers. Their interpretation of mean was a teacher who would not spend the time to help them with the things they didn’t understand in class or were perceived as not liking them. Many students tied their success to teachers who cared about them and/or understood the issues in their life that contributed to their failure or stood in the way of their success.

Summary of Major Findings

What I thought was the issue at the beginning of this research is essentially that students really need some connection with someone on campus. That is the major factor that makes a difference in a student's success or failure. The students themselves identified the same thing, the need for a personal connection with an adult on campus.

Comparison of Findings to Previous Research

Noguera reports that small learning communities, where there is a personal relations between students and teachers is the number one way to make no cost improvements to schools. He compared small schools to large comprehensive schools. The reason for more success in the smaller school, compared to the larger school was the personal connection.

Limitations of the Study

Whereas the literature discusses Hispanic and Afro-American urban students there is little discussion on the affluent suburban white kids and why they are performing as poorly. The present study took place at one school site. Results of the study are not necessarily useful for other high schools.

Implications for Future Research

Noguera (2011) promotes the concept of small learning communities. Those are sometimes referred to as schools within a school. The concept has recently been adapted to something now referred to as advisories. Typically a teacher would take a small

number of students as an advisor the entire four-year high school experience. Thus the teacher has the opportunity to develop a personal relationship with students. This may prevent students from disappearing, feeling adrift, and disconnected. Further research needs to focus on strategies that connect these students back to the high school.

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