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Been There, Done That

Student Inquiry About High School Dropouts

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EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

A striking example of a teacher engaging students in the action research process, Shager's work highlights the power of a relevant curriculum. Working within an alternative high school setting, Shager draws on his students' experiences and expertise to explore the issue of high school dropouts. Through their research, Shager and his students collect a variety of data (student and teacher journals, survey results, discussion notes, and other classroom artifacts), analyze their findings, and present their research to an assortment of audiences. By encouraging students to capitalize on their own life experiences, Shager's study provides a unique example of how teachers can empower their students to take action.

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According to the United States Census Bureau, a high school dropout's projected work-life earnings will be \$200,000 less than those of a high school graduate. This discrepancy increases as the high school graduate attains more education; a graduate with "some college" will see an additional \$300,000 in work-life earnings (Day & Newburger, 2002). Obviously,

students who drop out of high school are at a disadvantage in work-life earning potential. As a teacher in a small vocational high school, working with students who have at some time been considered at risk of not graduating, I often remind them of this payoff to finishing high school.

When we began our initial discussions as members of an action research group that focused on equity issues in our classrooms and schools, the idea of doing a study around the topic of high school dropouts seemed like a good idea. Based on what was happening in Madison—and, as I found out, throughout the country—there were questions about why students drop out of school. I was curious about what would happen if my students examined the issue of high school dropouts. I hoped that my students would progress from talking about the issue to conducting their own research, and I envisioned them identifying causes, proposing possible solutions, and taking action. Therefore, my action research question became: **What happens when my students inquire about the issue of high school dropouts in their local community?**

MY SETTING

For the past nine years I have taught at the Work and Learn Center High School (WLC), a diploma completion program in the Madison Metropolitan School District. Each student who attends WLC was at one time at risk of not graduating from high school. The majority of students who enter the program have earned fewer than five credits after two years of high school and therefore are significantly short on credits. Through a four-semester sequence of academic coursework and community-based vocational placements, WLC students can earn diplomas from their home high schools. For many students, enrollment at WLC is their last chance to graduate. The students involved in this study were scheduled to graduate at the end of the school year.

When this project began, there were 14 students in my class—six males (one African American, one Asian American, and four White) and eight females (four African Americans, one Native American, and three White).

Like many alternative schools, WLC has a low student-to-teacher ratio. The 13 students who participated in this project were the only students I worked with during the semester. We were together for three consecutive class periods each day. This structure provides me with a wonderful opportunity to teach in an interdisciplinary manner. The subjects I cover—language arts, social issues, computer skills, and psychology—rarely have clearly defined boundaries

WHY FOCUS ON HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUTS?

"Been there, done that."

—WLC student response to the question:
 "Why should we research the issue of high school dropouts?"

The topic of high school dropouts is typically of high interest to the students who attend WLC. Because they have not experienced much success in the traditional setting and may themselves have even dropped out at some point, they have firsthand knowledge of what might cause a student to leave high school before graduation. They know what it is like to attend high school in Madison, and they know students who have dropped out. Most important, they were at one time—and in some cases still are—at risk of not graduating from high school ("been there, done that"), and now find themselves less than five months away from their own graduation night. In addition, many are students of color—students disproportionately represented in the city's dropout statistics. For these reasons, I was excited to examine what would happen when my students dug deeper into this issue facing their community.

Every semester I have my students at WLC read an article from the *Wisconsin State Journal* titled "Nearly 1 in 5 Madison Students Don't Graduate" (Erickson, 2000). Students are taken aback by the number of students who do not complete high school in Madison, and they are surprised by the dropout rates for students of color in the district: 46 percent of African Americans, 28 percent of Hispanic students, and 54 percent of Native American students do not earn a diploma after four years of high school. Each semester this article prompts a deep discussion within the class about why certain students—especially students of color—leave high school without a diploma. During whole-class discussions, students generate a list of reasons that they think might account for why students stop attending high school before graduation: Students get pregnant. Students are lazy. Students lack focus. Despite the high level of student interest in this topic, until now we had rarely devoted more than two class periods in a semester to the discussion.

I thought it would be interesting to examine what would happen if students were provided with more opportunities to peel back the layers of this issue and create their own data-based knowledge relating to the topic. I also wanted to make certain that the students would be willing to work on this project, that the project could lead to a deeper understanding of the issue, and most important, that participation in the project had the potential to result in action by the students.

IDENTIFYING A FRAMEWORK

As someone who has experience teaching an issues-centered curriculum, I realize that issue selection is of utmost importance to student engagement. If students do not like an issue or do not feel that it is relevant to their lives, it can be a challenge to get them excited about the topic. In his article "Criteria for Issues-Centered Content Selection," Byron G. Massialas (1996) points out how important it is to select the right issue for students in an issues-centered classroom. He writes, "Little or no learning takes place unless the individual is involved personally in the topic of the presentation or discussion" (Massialas, 1996, p. 44).

Specifically, Massialas identifies five criteria he deems vital to issue selection: relevance, reflection, action, practicality, and understanding. Using these criteria as guides, I have generated a series of questions in order to identify good issues for classroom inquiry (see Table 1). I use this series of questions as a litmus test to help me to identify what issues might work best within my classroom.

When I positioned the issue of high school dropouts within this framework, it appeared to be a good issue to explore. Based on my previous experience with the topic, I knew it was definitely relevant to the students and would provide an opportunity for reflection. I also knew that the students would have an opportunity to understand and to build their knowledge using a variety of the social sciences; I had seen this occur in previous classes. I was confident we would be able to develop a project that would be practical and have support from others in our building. Equally important, this issue provided the *potential* for student action—a step the students in my previous classes had never reached.

I had high expectations for this project and hoped that students would find the intrinsic drive to take action while they were in the process of investigation. However, I did not want to force my students to take action. I envisioned them becoming what Westheimer and Kahne refer to as "justice-oriented citizens"—students who "[c]ritically assess social, political, and economic structures and explore collective strategies for change that challenge injustice and, when possible, address root causes of problems" (Westheimer & Kahne, 2002, p. 3).

DATA COLLECTION

Various forms of data collection were used in this project. I wrote in my teaching journal as the students completed the various components of the project, documenting their interactions and insights. I also kept notes of

Table 1 Selecting an Issue for Student Inquiry

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1. Relevance
 - How does the curriculum relate to the students and the social context in which they find themselves?
 - Does it affect students inside and outside of the classroom?
 - Does it contain "burning issues" involving students that stem from larger societal issues?
 - Can traditional subject content be used as background data?
 2. Reflection
 - Does it trigger thinking in the students?
 - Does it engage the students?
 - Are all sides heard? Are students asked to form a position based on explicit evidence?
 - Is it open-ended?
 - Is there a classroom climate that provides for an exchange of views?
 3. Action
 - Will the critical and systematic analysis produce action?
 - Will the action transfer out of the classroom?
 4. Practicality
 - Can the project be implemented?
 - Is there support for this type of project in the school community?
 5. Understanding
 - Will it promote understanding in students?
 - Does it promote or hinder reflection on perennial or persistent problems of humankind?
 - Does the issue connect with relevant sources?
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SOURCE: Adapted from Massialas (1996).

class and group discussions. I observed the students as they developed a survey, administered it to students in our building, tabulated it, and analyzed the results. Student journal entries about the topic of high school dropouts and the students' thoughts on the progress of the project provided a wealth of information; many of the quotations used to begin sections in this paper were taken from those entries. In addition, the results of student small-group work shed light into students' thought processes.

The students and I also worked together to consolidate our findings, with the students explaining their thoughts, which I recorded on the computer. In addition, a student from UW-Madison pursuing his teacher certification was present in our class four hours per week, often while we

were working on this project. His observations provided another perspective on what was occurring. Informal conversations with students and their parents also provided some insight.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

We began the project with a single question: Why do students drop out of high school? The students spent 15 minutes writing about this question in their journals, and the rest of the class period (30 minutes) discussing what they had written. As the discussion facilitator, I tried not to steer the conversation in any specific direction.

The theories that my class came up with at this initial stage about why students drop out were similar to those mentioned by my previous classes. A lack of support at home, or simply a lack of will to succeed, were cited as possibilities. Some teenagers, they wrote, were "lazy," while others were "crazy." Other students in my class mentioned the need for teenagers to work and earn an income for themselves and their families.

Many of my students also mentioned teen pregnancy as a reason for dropping out. One of the four teenage parents in our class related her struggle to be both a good parent and a good student. Many students, she explained, simply cannot handle both responsibilities. Some students in class who did not have children asked how she was able to juggle both. She replied that she just tells herself that she has to finish high school—that she has been in school too long (she is one year behind the class with which she began high school as a freshman) to not finish now. She also said that she felt a responsibility to show her daughters how important it is to finish school. "How will I be able to tell them how important school is if I don't graduate?" she asked. She did say, however, that she often gets upset when she is at school because she does not see her children as often as she would like; her busy work and school schedules leave little time for her to have quality contact with them. "Sometimes I get so sad, because I miss my kids so much," she said with tears in her eyes. Later in the semester, this student told me that she was offered a job change that would include a promotion and, most important, some desperately needed additional income but would also eliminate some of the "awake" time she spends with her children. At the time of this writing, she was still trying to decide whether to make the job change.

Our next step was to read about the local dropout situation. During one class period, I had the students read the article mentioned earlier in this paper: "Nearly 1 in 5 Madison Students Don't Graduate" (Erickson, 2000). As they read, I asked them to identify things they found important

in the article. Most of the students pointed to the fact that almost 20 percent of students who start high school in Madison do not finish. The high number of dropouts surprised them. Only a few mentioned the disproportionate number of students of color who drop out of school, and the students seemed uninterested in discussing why African American, Native American, and Latino/Hispanic students drop out at such high rates. "I don't know" and "How would I know?" were common responses to the question of why this phenomenon was occurring. At this stage, my students seemed to be more interested in the total number of dropouts than in the breakdown by racial groups.

We also read articles that pointed to specific reasons why students might leave school early. One column, written by the father of a high school student in Madison, mentioned that African American male students feel pressure not to do well in school out of fear of being looked down upon by their peers. "To gain friendship, to be considered 'hip,' even to be defined as a black man, my son must hide his brain," the author/father wrote (King, 2003, p. B1). I asked my students if they agreed with the premise of the article. Had they seen this type of behavior? Some students said that they had seen it, while others emphatically denied that it occurs. The conversation quickly turned to anecdotal evidence of students they knew or had known who fit this profile. Most students agreed that there was some evidence of this occurring, but they did not quite agree that students felt pressured to hide their "school smarts." Rather, the class believed that skipping school provided more opportunity for fun than did attending school. They also said that they had grown out of that phase of their lives and were ready to focus on completing their education.

Following the initial brainstorming on the topic and discussion of the newspaper articles, students worked together in teams, deconstructing their hypotheses. The students formed research teams based on the themes they had identified as reasons why students might drop out of high school. The three themes that evolved were: student as the reason, family/community as the reason, and school as the reason. Each team used a cause-and-effect map to peel away the layers of their identified problem, repeatedly asking why a certain problem exists. What follows is one example from the "school" team:

One reason: Students drop out of school because they *don't want to go to class.*

Question 1: Why don't they want to go to class?

Answer 1: Because classes are boring.

Question 2: Why are classes boring?

Answer 2: Because they're not interesting to a lot of students.

Question 3: Why aren't they interesting?

Answer 3: Because all students do is sit around and listen to teachers talk all the time.

Question 4: Why don't some students like listening to teachers lecture?

Answer 4: Some students learn better through hands-on activities.

In the end, each team had a list of reasons why students might drop out of high school. Although this activity tended to take a long time and at times seemed repetitive, it did force the students to narrow their focus. They knew, based on their earlier discussions, that the reasons why students might drop out seemed limitless. Getting to the heart of each thematic area helped students decide which questions to ask in the surveys they planned to give to other WLC students.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE SURVEY

"The best thing I like about the project is that we are letting them know what the outcome of it is, because I hate doing surveys and not knowing what becomes of them."

"I'm actually pretty geeked up about it! I just wanna hand it out and explain what the survey is about. I like going to classrooms and explaining stuff. Makes me feel special and important!"

"I don't think we should do a multiple choice, and do a q/a so people will put down the truth."

One of the most challenging aspects of the project was to develop a survey to distribute to the students in our building. After discussing the various ways students could acquire more information about their topic, they decided that a survey would give them the best information. The students were very concerned about the format of the survey they were creating; they said that when they had been asked to complete surveys in the past, they did not take them very seriously. Some even admitted to "just filling in dots" instead of providing honest responses. They decided that they needed to take steps to ensure that their survey would not meet with similar negative reactions.

The students said that it was important that people taking the survey should know its purpose, that it was created by students, and that the

tabulated results would be made available to all the students who completed the survey. They felt that sharing this information up front would garner the most genuine and accurate responses.

The students also felt it was important to keep the survey concise enough to keep respondents interested, yet thought-provoking enough to elicit the honest, informative responses they wanted. Some students thought that only open-ended questions would allow for these types of responses and wanted to steer clear of multiple-choice questions. Others wanted to limit the survey to statements that could be answered using a scaled list of predetermined responses. I encouraged the students to think about the effort it was going to take to compute and analyze the data they would collect. The students struck a compromise and decided that the survey should include both open-ended questions and statements that required the person to select at what level they agree or disagree with specific reasons why students might drop out.

The entire class helped develop the survey. Using the ideas they had generated earlier in the project and independent Internet research they had done, students met in their thematic groups—student, school, family/community—to come up with a series of statements stemming from the prompt: *Students drop out of school in Madison because . . .* Students viewed various online surveys in order to select the scale of responses that fit best with what they wanted to determine: How students feel about the issue of high school dropouts in Madison. The students selected a scale with responses ranging from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree.” The students also decided to include a “neither” or “neutral” option. Originally, the students wanted to limit the number of these statements to 10, fearing that the survey takers would “zone out” if they were required to do more. When the groups combined their work, they realized that they had a total of more than 30 statements. Due to overlaps in the statements, however, they were able to settle on 16 statements to include in the survey (Appendix A).

The class created the open-ended questions during a whole-group activity. Each student submitted one question that he or she thought should be included in the survey. As each student shared his or her question, I entered the question into a PowerPoint slide, which I projected onto a screen at the front of the room. Once again, the students saw overlap in their questions and combined several of them. Eventually, the students selected three to be included in the survey and agreed on the wording of each question. The three questions focused on issues they felt were vitally important to their research: why students drop out; what students’ motivation is for finishing school; and what changes the survey takers would make in order to keep more students in school. At this point in the project, the students also decided to ask the respondents to provide their age, gender, grade, and race/ethnicity on the surveys (Appendix B). The surveys were color-coded

in order to determine which school or program the respondent attended. Students also decided to have the survey takers answer the open-ended questions first, fearing that the statements on the survey might influence responses.

In the end, three students volunteered to administer the survey to the classes at WLC and WLC-Park and to the other alternative programs in our building—the School Age Parent Program (SAPAR), Alternative Education Resource Options (AERO), and the Cluster Program. When the students were not able to administer a survey in person, they attached a note that stated what the survey was for and why they would appreciate honest responses.

The students chose to administer the survey to these students because they felt that they had the knowledge and school experience that could provide them with the best information. Many students who attend either of the WLC sites or SAPAR are very close to graduation and could explain how they achieved that goal despite the obstacles they encountered along the way. The younger WLC and SAPAR students and the students in the middle school programs—AERO and Cluster—could give some insight about the thinking of younger students regarding school.

ADMINISTERING THE SURVEY

"The next steps for the survey would be to make sure we try to get it to everyone and get everyone's responses."

Once they had prepared a draft of the survey, the students developed a plan to administer it to the students in our building and at the other WLC site. Luckily, the survey administrators were able to meet with the entire student bodies of SAPAR, AERO, and Cluster. The survey was administered on a class-by-class basis to WLC students, because at no time during the school day are all WLC students together in the building.

The students enjoyed this part of the project. The three survey administrators explained why our class was gathering this information and how important it was for respondents to give honest responses. They also stressed their willingness to share the results of the survey. Although, just as predicted, some students expressed resistance to filling out the survey, the survey administrators were satisfied that they had convinced the survey takers to complete the survey as honestly as possible. I was able to observe my students administering the survey on two occasions and was impressed with how they handled the pressure of being in front of a large group of students.

TABULATING THE SURVEY DATA

"I personally liked writing the information down into the computer. I like to type. So not only was it something that I'm good at, but it was somewhat easy and had a good flow to it. It's hard to find something that you're good at and like to do in school. So that was really cool for me."

One of the biggest challenges in this project was deciding how to tabulate responses from the 118 completed surveys. After toying with the idea that students could break into teams to tally the results by hand, we decided to locate a computer program that could help us with this process. I had some familiarity with the database program Filemaker Pro and suggested that we ask Larry, our building's Filemaker expert, if he would be willing to give us a quick tutorial. He agreed, and we began the process of tabulation.

In order to record all the responses, we had to create a new survey form within Filemaker. This form contained all the information from the original survey. It also included a field to record a survey number (in case we wanted to check the hard copy of a survey) and a field in which we could record the program affiliation of the student who completed the survey. (It was at this point in the project that we realized we could have saved a lot of work by creating the survey directly in Filemaker—a thought I will keep in mind for the next time my class works on a research project.)

Although we now had a means to tabulate the survey, we still had to physically enter the data into the computer. Larry once again helped us, this time by setting up the computer at my desk to be the "host" computer to collect all the data. We then set up four stations at which students took turns entering the data. Because we had formatted the demographic questions and the 16 scaled-response statements using a drop-down menu of choices, students were able to enter that data relatively quickly. Transcribing the responses to the open-ended questions tended to take more time and, due to the handwriting of the survey takers, some patience. Some students liked this part of the process more than others did and ended up entering more of the surveys.

Another benefit of this part of the project was that it gave the students an opportunity to work directly with the data to assess the quality of the survey they had developed. Although some surveys contained what the students felt were immature responses—"These kids need to grow up!" one student observed—or no responses at all, the majority of the surveys met with the class's approval. The students were particularly interested and surprised by the depth and length of the responses to the open-ended

questions. On some occasions, students would stop their typing to read a response to the rest of the class and identify how the response connected with the hypotheses they had created.

The class was able to tabulate the answers to the scaled-response statements by using a feature in Filemaker. I then helped the students export their data into a spreadsheet program in order to create a table of raw data (Appendix C) and a table that displayed the percentage of students who chose each response (Appendix D).

Working with the qualitative responses was more labor-intensive. In fact, the tabulation of the responses actually morphed into an early form of data analysis as students began to see patterns emerging in the responses. Due to some problems that we were having printing out the responses to each of the open-ended questions, students had to use the original completed surveys. Working in three groups, the students sorted through the completed surveys, identifying themes that emerged in the responses to each of the questions. The class then consolidated the findings from each group and created a list of new themes identified for each question. For example, some of the themes identified in response to the questions "If you could change anything that would help keep students in school, what would it be? Why?" were:

- Better classroom activities
- Less time in the school building
- More community-based learning
- Different ways of teaching
- More encouragement of students
- Be more understanding of students
- Get to know students better
- More one-on-one help for students

Using the themes they had identified in this process, the students then returned to the computers and began doing keyword searches using the "find" option in Filemaker. Each group was responsible for searching for thematic keywords for one of the questions and recording the number of hits they got on each search. The themes that received the highest number of hits were selected for further analysis. The group mentioned above, for example, found that the following searches yielded the most hits:

- "Teach" (mentioned in 21 surveys)
- "Help" (mentioned in 18 surveys)
- "Fun" (mentioned in 17 surveys)
- "Work" (mentioned in 15 surveys)
- "Learn" (mentioned in 14 surveys)

The groups then printed all the survey hits and collated them for further analysis.

SURVEY RESULTS

The analysis of the survey data was also completed in both small-group and whole-class settings. One group of students analyzed the results of the scaled-response statements, and the other three groups analyzed the results of the three open-ended questions. Each group's goal was to synthesize its findings and submit them to be included in a report authored by the entire class.

The group that worked with the scaled response statements combined the results of the "strongly agree" and "agree" selections for each statement in order to determine which statements had the highest level of support. They also combined the "strongly disagree" and "disagree" selections for each statement to determine which statements had the highest level of disagreement. In addition, the group used a graphing program on the computer to create charts showing some of these results. They then presented their findings to the entire class for inclusion in a final report. Their findings included the following:

- Many students don't find school interesting (82.1 percent).
- Many students find it easy to skip (73.6 percent).
- Many students feel that it's hard to catch up after falling behind (72.4 percent).
- Many students feel that students are afraid to ask for help after falling behind (68.6 percent) and are not getting the help they need (70.3 percent).

The remaining three groups were responsible for analyzing the results of the responses to the open-ended questions. Each group was responsible for one of the questions. They analyzed the responses from each of the thematic groupings that had been identified during the tabulation process, wrote short summaries of what they found, and shared these results with the entire class.

The final step in the analysis process was the production of a list of findings and recommendations (Appendix E). Two students also volunteered to write a story for *The Link*, the student newspaper that "links" the various alternative programs in our building; they also e-mailed the story to a member of the MMSD Board of Education, who is the father of one of the students in class. At the time of this writing, students were scheduling visits to classrooms to share the results of the survey and discuss their

recommendations; a presentation to district-level administration was also under consideration.

STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IN THE PROJECT

"I guess what surprised me the most was how hard it was to put all of the information together to get a response. I was also surprised that most of the students took the survey, especially the younger students."

"I'm not really sure what we're supposed to be doing right now."

"I have learned that not everyone is as cooperative as you think they would be. It's not as easy as you think it would be. You have to persuade people into wanting to do the survey and answer questions that they have. I also found out that a lot of people are really determined to graduate and make something of themselves. I didn't think people would share this information to others so openly, either."

Toward the end of my research project, when I was busy sifting through the mountains of data I had collected, I attended an educational retreat with four other members from our building. The purpose of the retreat was to reflect and to develop goals for next year. I saw this as an opportunity to step away and take a break from my research. On our first day, however, I was brought back to my research as I listened to our keynote speaker, a professor from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, describe his idea of a "developmental contextual learning environment" in classrooms. Simply put, in a "developmental contextual learning environment" the classroom operates in such a way that it pulls the potential out of each student. I think that this project had that effect on many of the students. The size of our class, the interest and experience with the topic, the instructional time devoted to the topic, and the cooperative nature of the individuals in the class all helped this type of a classroom setting to evolve. There was at least one aspect of this project that provided an opportunity for students' potentials to emerge—each student found his or her niche.

As every teacher knows, it is almost impossible to design a lesson or unit that gets *every* student in the class excited about learning. Although it may sound as though this project captured the interest of every student, not every student attacked this research with the same degree of vigor and energy as others. While they all seemed to feel vested in the project and completed the required work, some students seemed to believe in it more than others. For example, some students were disappointed on days when we did not devote any class time to the project. Some appeared to enjoy

certain aspects of the project and were willing to do extra work if needed. For example, some students preferred entering the data into the computer, while others preferred creating graphs or charts of the data. Three students volunteered to administer the survey, while other students agreed to write up our findings. One student spent additional time analyzing the data, trying to identify certain demographic trends in the respondents. Overall, students seemed to view this project as worthwhile.

STUDENTS AS EXPERTS

"I know because I have been there and done that."

"Because of my past experiences and changes I have been through."

"Because it might have happened to one of us before, or it might have happened to someone we know."

"Some of the girls down the hall need to know what's up!"

—Student responses to the question:
"What qualifies you to do this type of research?"

In addition to the level of student engagement in the project, I also noticed that the students increasingly viewed themselves as experts on this subject—and they were. When I asked them what qualified them to do research like this, students were eager to share the experiences that had led some of them to drop out of school and left others hanging on the edge. They were also excited to highlight the changes they had made in their lives in order to graduate. They brought a lot of knowledge to the project in the form of anecdotal information and personal experience; as they gathered more evidence, they built upon that knowledge.

They also felt that they had a lot to share about the subject with the other students in our building. Even before they had gathered their data, a group of students asked if they could go speak to the younger students in our building. Based on some of the behavior they had witnessed, they assumed that these students needed the guidance of successful older students like themselves in order to avoid the same path that they had taken: the path of the high school dropout. They viewed it as a responsibility to talk with "the girls down the hall."

As my students set out to administer the surveys, I noticed a level of conscientiousness; they were the all-knowing ones, visiting those who needed their guidance. And even though their task was simply to administer the survey, it did become a teaching moment. In sharing why they were doing

the research, they had an opportunity to talk about their own experiences as struggling high school students. After she had administered the survey to a group of students in the AERO program, the student who was the mother of two young children shared how her pregnancies had affected her high school career. Although she was graduating one year behind her class, she was proud of what she had accomplished. She also pointed out that school would have been a lot easier had she not gotten pregnant.

The knowledge my students were creating also became visible to people outside our classroom. It sparked the interest of the survey takers. As groups were presented with the survey, they asked my students why they were doing this project. "Do you *have* to do this?" they asked. Third-semester WLC students, who will be in my class in the fall, asked me if they were going to be able to do a similar project. It also sparked interest among both building and district staff. Some students' parents also expressed interest in the project, asking to see the results.

DESIRE TO TAKE ACTION

"I liked when we went to talk to the AERO and WLC children about our research project. I felt like I can inspire some students to continue to stay in school. Even though some might drop out, at least in the long run, I can say I tried to help them, or I tried to prevent it."

"They asked a lot of questions about my life and how it is as a parent of two. Hopefully by me talking to them, some of the females will get the message and wait until they're ready to have kids."

As I mentioned earlier, students were anxious to devise solutions to the problem of high school dropouts. From the first day of the project, students were suggesting ways to solve the problem of dropouts in Madison. They were anxious to speak to the younger students in the building about what it takes to become a high school graduate, and they wanted to address the school board. I tried to rein in that enthusiasm and have them focus on the research. By the end of the project, students were asking if they could go out and share our results; two students wrote an article for the school newspaper. Other students asked if we could expand our research in order to gather even more information; they noted that the data would be strengthened by the inclusion of student responses from Madison's four traditional high schools—the high schools my students had previously attended. Due to time constraints, we were not able to survey students at these other schools. This could become a project for future classes, however.

Another example of this desire to take action occurred while our staff was hosting a meeting of teachers from Milwaukee and northern Illinois as part of the Accelerated School Project. As one of the meeting's coordinators, I had arranged for a panel of WLC graduates to speak to the group about their experience at WLC and their accomplishments since they had graduated. I arranged the meeting so that my current students could also attend; I felt that they could benefit from listening to the graduates. I encouraged my current students to share their experiences with the group of teachers as well.

Two of my current students, however, thought that they did not receive the same opportunity to tell their stories as did the graduates; they thought that they had just as much, if not more, to share as did the graduates on the panel. I asked them if they wanted me to arrange a time when they could address the group by themselves, even if it would require that they do so after the rest of the class had been dismissed. They agreed and proceeded to lead the group in a wonderful discussion of what they had accomplished as students at WLC and the class's progress on our dropout project. These same two students took the lead in writing an article for our school newspaper and helped to compose a sheet of talking points to use while addressing groups about the project's results.

Although the students did not become the "justice-oriented citizens" (students who take action to address the root causes of the problem) I had hoped for at the beginning of this project, they did take more action on this issue than had any of my previous classes. My experience with this project has laid the groundwork for future projects. I am excited to research new ways to bring about more collective action from my classes.

INCREASED UNDERSTANDING OF THE ISSUE

"What surprised me the most is that all the students know that they don't want to be dropouts, and they know what can happen if they were to become a dropout."

"The thing that has surprised me the most is that a lot of kids say that the biggest reason that they drop out of school is their family life, but the biggest thing that inspires them to stay in school is younger brothers and sisters. That to me was just kind of surprising because it contradicts what they just said before, but it makes sense overall."

"Why do they think it's easy to skip, but they don't think high schools are too big? That's why it's so easy to skip!"

"The reasons students are using to drop out are things that can be prevented and worked around, but they don't want to bear the stress that it's going to take."

Student understanding of the issue of high school dropouts in Madison increased during this project. As shown in the statements above, their written responses at the end of the project were more multifaceted than those at the outset, highlighting the complex nature of the problem of high school dropouts. The students used all the resources at their disposal—newspaper articles, Web sites, class discussions, small-group work, survey results, and each other—to craft for themselves a more complete understanding of the issue.

At the beginning of the project, many of my students felt that students who were at risk of dropping out simply did not care whether or not they graduated. This assumption was partially contradicted by the survey results. A large number of responses, particularly from older survey takers, indicated a strong desire to finish school and the importance of having a high school diploma. However, the survey results of younger respondents supported some of my students' hypotheses. For example, one popular idea among the students in class was that middle school-age students and those just beginning high school do not value the importance of graduating from school. This lack of belief in the importance of a high school diploma was seen more often in the responses from younger students.

My students' deeper level of understanding is also seen in the recommendations they made at the end of the project (Appendix E). The blame they attached to both the individual students and the school at the beginning of the project evolved and was replaced with a list of proactive steps that could be taken in schools—steps that should make a lot of sense to anyone who spends time in a high school. After I asked my students to create a list of recommendations based on what they saw in the data, I observed that they viewed the problem as a progression of activities and interactions that led to students dropping out—it was not simply one factor. For example, students do not feel comfortable in a large school, so they do not go to class. Because they are not in class, they fall behind. Since they already do not feel comfortable in class, they will not seek additional help from teachers in order to catch up. Eventually, they end up getting so far behind that they stop attending school.

It is interesting to note the great emphasis that my students placed on the relationship between students and the adults in school. One reason for the significance of this factor may be the positive experiences they have had as students in the smaller setting of WLC. When I asked these current students why they are graduating when many of the classmates with

whom they began high school are not, they pointed to the changes they made once they began attending WLC. They pointed out that because of the intimacy of the program, teachers got to know each student better and were able to provide one-on-one attention. They also credited the other support staff in the building and some of the adults with whom they interacted at their school-sponsored job placements for their recent successes.

The value the students placed on a strong student-teacher relationship mirrors results from some of the research on preventing students from dropping out of high school. Croninger and Lee (2001) found that a teacher's guidance can provide a form of "social capital" that can reduce the probability of dropping out by nearly half. Most important, they found that "[s]tudents who come from socially disadvantaged backgrounds and who have had academic difficulties in the past find guidance and assistance from teachers especially helpful" (Croninger & Lee, 2001, p. 548).

There is also research that supports the students' suggestion to utilize adult mentors as role models for students. Zirkel (2002) found that positive relationships with adult role models who were matched to students by race and gender had a positive impact on student achievement. In Zirkel's longitudinal study of 80 adolescents, she found that "[s]tudents who reported having at least one race and gender-matched role model at the beginning of the study performed better academically up to 24 months later, reported more achievement-oriented goals, enjoyed achievement-relevant activities to a greater degree, thought more about their futures, and looked up to adults rather than peers more often than students without a race- and gender-matched role model" (Zirkel, 2002, p. 357).

WHAT DID I LEARN?

As a result of my participation in this project, I learned a lot about my teaching and the students I teach. I learned about how students who enter my classroom came to be considered at risk of not graduating from high school. I was able to participate with my students as they took an in-depth look at a social issue that was very close to them, and I witnessed how powerful this level of authenticity was to the students. I also learned how to organize a research project that will result in student action outside the classroom. Although there are some things I wish I had done differently—such as using more community resources—I was pleased with what occurred during this project. I look forward to working on similar projects with future students.

Like my students, I also increased my understanding about the issue of high school dropouts. Many of the survey results helped inform me

about what current students were thinking about their educational opportunities. It was fun to help my students as they sifted through the same types of qualitative data that I was collecting for my own research. In helping my students construct their survey and the summary of their findings, I educated myself about the types of students who will be entering my classroom. I also learned more about the various strategies being used throughout the country to address the problem of high school dropouts; my students' interest in dropouts prompted me to do my own research on the topic. I was encouraged to find that some of the same strategies recommended by my students had also been identified by other researchers.

One thing that surprised me, however, was that the issue of race as a factor did not show up much in the work my students did or in the results from the student surveys. In fact, the issue of race did not show up in any of the survey responses or in any student journal entries. Based on what I knew about the achievement gap in Madison and about the disproportionate number of students of color who were dropping out, I expected race to show up somewhere in their findings. The only time race was even mentioned was in a graduation speech by a Hmong student in my class. In the speech, he reflected on the experiences he had in high school before he came to WLC. WLC, he felt, was the best school he had ever attended; he wished he could stay at WLC for another two years. He contrasted his experience at WLC with his previous school, where a teacher often marked him absent even though he was present. The teacher had confused him with another Hmong student in his class who had not been attending. My student reasoned, "If my teacher doesn't know who I am, why should I be here?" So, he stopped going to school. Student research specifically on the topic of race is a possibility for a future project. Different data-gathering techniques, such as ethnography, might help to focus on this particular issue.

Finally, I learned how challenging it is to do a project like this. It is hard to know when to lead and when to let students proceed at their own speed. It is impossible to know exactly what students will find in an inquiry project such as this. At the same time, the unknown answers make this type of project all the more exciting to both teacher and student.

EPILOGUE

"Been there, done that" chronicles my effort to engage my students in a high-level, meaningful research project. As a member of an action research team focusing on equity, I appreciated the opportunity to reflect on what it means to promote equity in education. Teaching in a small alternative high school for students who are at risk of not graduating provided me

with a unique perspective on issues of equity in education. After all, my students were not receiving the same education they would get at a traditional high school.

In many ways, this study is structurally similar to other action research projects I have completed in the past: I posed a question regarding my classroom practice; I gathered data to help me answer that question; I discussed my progress with other action researchers; and I presented my findings in the form of a written reflection. The major difference was that while I was gathering data regarding my question, my students were doing the same concerning a question of their own: Why do students drop out of high school in our specific community? As a result of these simultaneous examinations, a product developed that was more rich and far-reaching than what resulted from my previous classroom action research studies.

This richness is a testament to the capabilities of and effort put forth by the students in an alternative high school setting. They come to our school with plenty of ideas, thoughts, and knowledge; a research project like this helped them build on those ideas, thoughts, and knowledge. I discovered that this group of students was very capable of doing this kind of work, but also that it is not easy to facilitate. For example, facilitating this project required collaborative effort both inside and outside the classroom. In class, the students worked in teams to complete the tasks necessary for good social science research. Outside the classroom, other students and staff in our building provided my students with opportunities to gather information and share their findings. Student inquiry of a social problem is high-level work, analogous to the work done by teacher researchers and social scientists. I had hoped that it was possible for students to engage in similar investigations of social issues, and this project validated that belief.

The impact of this project was more far-reaching than that of previous action research I had completed. Whereas previous projects helped me become more aware of my teaching, the effects of this project traveled beyond the limits of our classroom walls and our academic calendar year. While the project provided numerous opportunities for my students to learn new skills and build on the strengths they already possessed, it also gave them an audience for the knowledge they had created. The reasons they heard from others about why students drop out mirrored their own experiences. They took on the role of expert in this project—they had experienced the life of a high school dropout and felt the need to learn more and, most important, to try to do something about this social problem.

My role as teacher also expanded as a result of this project. I ventured beyond the classroom door to help with the logistics of student data gathering. I also assisted in the dissemination of the students' findings. As I interacted with other educators—at local and national conferences, in

Listserv conversations, at MMSD meetings—I was able to talk about both the process students went through and the products they created. I still find myself quoting my students' findings in the many conversations I have with educators about how we can make schooling—especially at the high school level—better for all students. Since the completion of the project, school board members, professional researchers, and educators from both inside and outside our district have commented on the methodology of the project and the importance of the students' findings.

More than a year after I finished this study, I ran into Jessica Doyle, the wife of Wisconsin Governor Jim Doyle. She had agreed to speak at a celebration recognizing WLC's selection as a national demonstration site for Accelerated Schools PLUS. While I was in the beginning stages of this action research project, Ms. Doyle met with me and other members of my action research team; as a former teacher, she took interest in all the action research projects. At the end of the school year, I sent her a copy of my students' findings. Before I could thank her for coming to our celebration, she greeted me by asking, "So what project are your students working on this year? I still share your students' research every time I can."

This project and the students' findings are powerful pieces of evidence that support the push for small high schools presently occurring in this country. The recommendations the students identified—building better relationships with adults, smaller school and class sizes, improving communication between teachers and students—are found in educational research in support of small high schools. In fact, three years before we conducted our project, the school district's Research and Evaluation Department had conducted a study regarding students not completing high school. I sent my students' completed work to that study's lead researcher, explaining the process the students had gone through to generate their findings. His response in an e-mail confirmed what I already knew: "What a great project! The findings are very similar."

Now more than ever, I understand that education is not a one-size-fits-all proposition. My students' work on the project demonstrated that given the opportunity, these students are capable of doing high-level, authentic, meaningful work despite their checkered school histories and lack of academic credits. Their written findings are now part of my curriculum "canon." The knowledge they created is now a resource for other students, and their work has served as an impetus for students to conduct their own research projects on similar topics. To me, equity in education requires us to provide all students with the equal opportunity to use their strengths, talents, and abilities to construct knowledge of the world around them. This project is one example of what can happen when students are given the opportunity to tackle a social problem in their community.

APPENDIX A: SURVEY STATEMENTS DEVELOPED BY STUDENTS

<i>Students in Madison drop out of school because:</i>					
	<i>Strongly Agree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Neutral</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Strongly Disagree</i>
1. They lack the discipline needed to succeed in school.	SA	A	N	D	SD
2. They are not getting the help they need.	SA	A	N	D	SD
3. It's too easy to skip school and/or not attend classes.	SA	A	N	D	SD
4. They don't value the importance of graduating from high school.	SA	A	N	D	SD
5. They don't find classes interesting.	SA	A	N	D	SD
6. They don't feel that they belong in school.	SA	A	N	D	SD
7. It's not "cool" to be a good student or get good grades.	SA	A	N	D	SD
8. Health issues get in the way of school (pregnancy).	SA	A	N	D	SD
9. Their parents are not involved enough in their children's lives.	SA	A	N	D	SD
10. There is a lack of communication between school and home.	SA	A	N	D	SD
11. Schoolwork is not challenging enough.	SA	A	N	D	SD

(Continued)

(Continued)

	<i>Strongly Agree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Neutral</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Strongly Disagree</i>
12. There is a lack of hands-on/relevant activities in classes.	SA	A	N	D	SD
13. The high schools are too big; it's easy to get lost in the crowd.	SA	A	N	D	SD
14. Counselors are too busy; aren't available at all times.	SA	A	N	D	SD
15. They are afraid to seek out help after they have fallen behind.	SA	A	N	D	SD
16. It's too hard to catch up after falling behind in class work.	SA	A	N	D	SD

SOURCE: E. Shager (2004).

APPENDIX B: OPEN-ENDED SURVEY QUESTIONS AND DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Age:	Race/Ethnicity:
Gender:	
Grade:	
What do you think is the biggest reason students drop out of school in Madison? Why?	

<p>What motivates you to stay in school and <i>not</i> become a dropout? Why?</p>
<p>If you could change anything that would help keep students in school, what would it be? Why?</p>

SOURCE: E. Shager (2004).

APPENDIX C: SURVEY RESULTS/RAW NUMBERS

<i>Students in Madison drop out of school because:</i>						
	<i>Strongly Agree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Neutral</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Strongly Disagree</i>	<i>Total</i>
1. They lack the discipline needed to succeed in school.	15	43	33	21	6	118
2. They are not getting the help they need.	30	53	16	17	2	118
3. It's too easy to skip school and/or not attend classes.	47	40	18	9	4	118
4. They don't value the importance of graduating from high school.	19	54	29	7	7	116

(Continued)

(Continued)

	<i>Strongly Agree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Neutral</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Strongly Disagree</i>	<i>Total</i>
5. They don't find classes interesting.	44	53	15	4	2	118
6. They don't feel like they belong in school.	28	40	31	17	2	118
7. It's not "cool" to be a good student/get good grades.	5	13	33	47	20	118
8. Health issues get in the way of school (pregnancy).	17	45	26	26	4	118
9. Their parents are not involved enough in their child's life.	25	42	29	20	2	118
10. There is a lack of communication between school and home.	17	40	37	20	4	118
11. Schoolwork is not challenging enough.	8	12	26	53	19	118
12. There is a lack of hands-on/ relevant activities in classes.	24	32	37	19	5	117
13. The high schools are too big; it's easy to get lost in the crowd.	11	19	22	45	20	117
14. Counselors are too busy; aren't available at all times.	17	32	33	29	6	117

	<i>Strongly Agree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Neutral</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Strongly Disagree</i>	<i>Total</i>
15. They are afraid to seek out help after they have fallen behind.	34	46	21	12	3	116
16. It's too hard to catch up after falling behind in class work.	42	42	16	13	3	116

SOURCE: E. Shager (2004).

APPENDIX D: SURVEY RESULTS/PERCENTAGES

<i>Students in Madison drop out of school because:</i>					
	<i>Strongly Agree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Neutral</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Strongly Disagree</i>
1. They lack the discipline needed to succeed in school.	12.7%	36.4%	28.0%	17.8%	5.0%
2. They are not getting the help they need.	25.4%	44.9%	13.6%	14.4%	1.7%
3. It's too easy to skip school and/or not attend classes.	39.8%	33.8%	15.2%	7.6%	3.3%
4. They don't value the importance of graduating from high school.	16.3%	46.5%	25.0%	6.0%	6.0%
5. They don't find classes interesting.	37.2%	44.9%	12.7%	3.4%	1.7%
6. They don't feel like they belong in school.	23.7%	33.8%	26.2%	14.4%	1.6%
7. It's not "cool" to be a good student/get good grades.	4.2%	11.0%	27.9%	39.8%	16.9%

(Continued)

(Continued)

	<i>Strongly Agree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Neutral</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Strongly Disagree</i>
8. Health issues get in the way of school (pregnancy).	14.4%	38.1%	22.0%	22.0%	3.3%
9. Their parents are not involved enough in their child's life.	21.1%	35.6%	24.6%	16.9%	1.7%
10. There is a lack of communication between school and home.	14.4%	33.8%	31.3%	16.9%	3.3%
11. Schoolwork is not challenging enough.	6.7%	10.1%	22.0%	44.9%	16.1%
12. There is a lack of hands-on/relevant activities in classes.	20.5%	27.1%	31.6%	16.2%	4.2%
13. The high schools are too big; it's easy to get lost in the crowd.	9.4%	16.2%	18.8%	38.4%	17.0%
14. Counselors are too busy; aren't available at all times.	14.5%	27.4%	28.2%	24.8%	5.1%
15. They are afraid to seek out help after they have fallen behind.	29.3%	39.3%	18.1%	10.3%	2.5%
16. It's too hard to catch up after falling behind in class work.	36.2%	36.2%	13.7%	11.2%	2.5%

SOURCE: E. Shager (2004).

APPENDIX E: STUDENT LIST OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

What do we know now after looking at the survey data? (statements)

- Many students don't find school interesting (82.1 percent).
- Many students find it easy to skip (73.6 percent).

- Many students feel that it's hard to catch up after falling behind (72.4 percent).
- Many students feel that students are afraid to ask for help after falling behind (68.6 percent) and are not getting the help they need (70.3 percent).

What do we know now after looking at the survey data? (open-ended questions)

Things that motivate students to stay in school:

- One reason that motivates students to stay in school is that they want to be successful and have a good job after earning a diploma.
- One reason that motivates students to stay in school is that they realize that having an education will help them in the future.
- One reason that motivates students to stay in school is to be able to further their education in the future (college).
- One reason that motivates students who have children to stay in school is to show their children that they did it—be a good role model.
- One reason that motivates students to stay in school is to set an example for other family members. "I'll be the first one to earn a high school diploma."

Things that students would like to see changed:

- Students feel that there is too much homework and not enough variety of assignments—more fun and hands-on activities.
- Students feel that teachers need to make activities more interesting and fun.
- More one-on-one help would help keep students in school.
- Teachers need to understand student needs—develop good working relationships with students.
- Students need more opportunities to get help when they've fallen behind.

Reasons why students drop out:

- Some students are scared to seek help when they fall behind—make students feel better about school/class/teachers.
- Family issues (pregnancy) have a big impact on whether or not students graduate. It's easy for students to fall into the "wrong" crowd and start doing drugs.

What are some recommendations that we have?

What should be done to help all students graduate from high school?

- Have better adult partnerships in school (mentors, counselors, advisors, older students in the school).
- Utilize older students to teach younger students or peer-to-peer teaching.
- Smaller classes/smaller schools
- Better student/teacher ratio—more one-on-one time with teachers
- Improve communication with students—get to know students better.

SOURCE: E. Shager (2004).

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