Common Sense Approaches to Increasing School Completion

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Abstract

There is no denying that today’s students confront multidimensional problems and crises (e.g., misidentification, misassessment, miscategorization, misplacement, and misinstruction). Some of these problems create stressors that force them to drop out of school, abuse and deal on drugs, fail to graduate from school, and become societal problems. Our traditional response has been to “discipline the devil out of students” or send them to jail. In reality, we need to reverse this trend and develop innovative strategies to help students to stay in school and graduate from school. To achieve our desired goals, I prescribe the Comprehensive Support Model (CSM) to utilize the collaborative energies of students, families, schools, communities, and government agencies. In this paper, I discuss common sense approaches to increasing school completion.
Common Sense Approaches to Increasing School Completion

In an ideal world, people would always benefit from a difficult situation and turn it to some personal gain. However, to categorically assume that a person will emerge renewed from a crisis is naïve and ignores the reality of what life crises can do to a person. I do not believe that every life crisis offers a challenge or an opportunity for positive growth experience, a chance to emerge a better and stronger person. In the real world, an event may leave a person changed in ways that could only be construed as adverse. A person’s failure to gain strength from such an event reflects the reality of personal experience, not some problem in the attitude or perspective of the person. (Holmes, 1994, p. ix)

Holmes’ (1994) statement reflects intriguing realities that human beings endure. Understandably, “bad” stuff happens to “good” or “bad” people – that is the reality of personal experience. Since personal experience is a part of life’s reality, blaming the victim can have far-reaching negative psychological and educational consequences (Obiakor, Mehring, & Schwenn, 1997). One such consequence is learned helplessness that results in the self-fulfilling prophecy which eats deeper at the resiliency quotient or inner-power of people (Rosenthal & Jacobsen, 1968).

Holmes (1994) explained that real-life problems can be temporal or lasting. As he indicated:

To efficiently address a temporal real-life problem, the person experiencing the problem and those who are trying to help must deal with the reality of what the person is experiencing. Neither the person nor the helper should approach efforts
to resolve distress as if the origin of the problem were psychopathological. It is not. Moreover, life situations outside the person’s control may change, the person may learn new ways to cope, or the person may learn ways to change the situation itself. Thus, the possibility of change offers hope of eventual resolution of the problem. Nonetheless, the distress must be endured, and the person’s efforts to cope with that distress require support. (p. 4)

He added:

One must keep in mind when considering lasting real-life problems that the psychological and emotional damage of the event has been done; there is no possibility of resolution through any action that might be taken by the person or the helper. However, to say that resolution is not possible is not the same as saying that there is nothing one can do to help the person deal with conflict and distress. (p. 5)

Clearly, real-life problems affect real people, whether they are young, youthful, or old. However, how we deal with these problems has continued to matter in our families, schools, communities, and nation (Holmes, 1994; Obiakor et al., 1997). Just as grown-ups quit their jobs, divorce their husbands or wives, or engage in strange actions when they feel overwhelmed by life’s crises; our children and youth drop out of school and fail to complete their education when confronted with their own life’s crises. Rather than make negative judgments and draw illusory conclusions that are based on biological determinism and pathological interpretations (Gould, 1981), general and special educators can creatively help our youth to stay in school, dream “big” dreams, graduate
from school, and become productive citizens. In this paper, I discuss common sense approaches to increasing school completion.

**School Drop-out in Context**

From time, school drop-out and school completion have been burning issues confronting general and special educators and school leaders. Schools and government agencies have made some efforts to deal with these issues. Consider the following recent examples. The promulgation of the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act (Public Law 107-110) presented an excellent rationale for leaving no child behind and dealing with all educational problems confronting our children and youth. It was supposed to reduce and eliminate the existing achievement gaps between “disadvantaged” students, and to a large extent, increase institutional accountability for adequate yearly student progress. In 2004, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (Public Law 108-446) was passed to deal with educational problems confronting learners with special needs. While these legislative efforts have created some form of accountability in educational programming, they appear to have “scotched the snake, but not killed it.”

At present, drop-out rates among students with exceptionalities are still high and pervasive. According to Williams Bost and Riccomini (2006), drop-out rates “vary by characteristics such as ethnicity, socioeconomic status, geographical location, and type of disability” (p. 301). Earlier, the U.S. Department of Education (2003) noted that students with emotional and behavioral disorders and students with learning disabilities drop out more than others with disabilities. The intriguing question continues to be, What actually causes school drop-out? In her study, Williams Bost (2007) found some factors that cause school drop-out. As she pointed out:
• Problem behaviors coupled with academic difficulties or prior academic failures are key risk factors that are predictive of school dropout.

• The repeated use of exclusionary discipline practices, such as suspension, has been identified as one of the major factors contributing to drop-out. Exclusion from class due to disciplinary action also leads to lost instructional time and increased academic difficulties.

• Academic progress and school completion are not equally distributed across disability, income, or ethnicity. Almost half of youth with emotional disturbances drop out. Youth with disabilities from low-income households continue to experience high drop-out rates, and Hispanic youth have experienced the smallest improvement in school completion over time.

• High absenteeism and being held back a grade are serious risk factors for dropping out that can be monitored by schools.

• Feelings of isolation and alienation often lead to social and psychological disengagement that result in school drop-out. (p. 1)

In addition to the above points, culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students, with and without exceptionalities, drop out of school because of endemic school-related and teacher-related factors such as (a) misidentification, (b) misassessment, (c) miscategorization/mislabeling, (d) misplacement, and (e) misinstruction/misintervention (Obiakor, 2001, 2007; Obiakor & Beachum, 2005a, 2005b; Obiakor, Algozzine et al., 2002). There is nothing more frustrating than to be educated in an environment where one is expected to be “invisible” and see himself/herself as a “silenced voice.” When CLD students feel unwanted, they perform
less and fail to maximize their fullest potential. When expectations are “low,” inaccurate, or prejudicial, the potential of students is not maximized; and productivity suffers (Obiakor, 1999; Obiakor, Grant, & Dooley, 2002). Additionally, when assumptions are negative and based on biological determinism (i.e., genetic superiority or inferiority), underlying pathological deficit-oriented technique is prescribed; and students suffer (see Gould, 1981). It is in the interest of the society to deal with issues of school drop-out and school completion.

Consider the following negative consequences of school drop-out:

- Drop-outs have fewer options for postsecondary education than do students who remain in school. Additionally, only a few drop-outs complete a GED within two years of leaving high school.
- Drop-outs are more likely to be unemployed or employed in low-skilled, lower-paying positions. While initial earning may be comparable between drop-outs and graduates, drop-outs tend to work more jobs and earn less per hour than graduates.
- Drop-outs also experience a “ceiling effect” in earning power much sooner than graduates.
- Drop-outs are more likely to commit crimes as compared to students who complete school. Three to five years after dropping out, the cumulative arrest rate for youth with SED [serious emotional disturbance] is 73%.
- Drop-outs are more likely than high school graduates to need the support of living with parents in early adulthood, experience health problems, engage in criminal
activities, and become dependent on welfare and other government programs.

(Williams Bost, 2007, p. 2)

**Increasing School Completion: Beyond Tradition**

It is imperative that school completion be the goal of students, families, schools, communities, and government. To reduce student drop-out and increase school completion, all stakeholders must collaborate, consult, and cooperate with each other. I believe the “whole village” must work together to enhance school completion. As a result, I prescribe the CSM to connect all stake holding entities in helping students to complete school (Obiakor, 2001; Obiakor et al., 2002). The CSM has mutually inclusive elements that are operational when:

- The development and use of identification, assessment, and instructional strategies function within multidimensional and cultural contexts.
- The creation of a collaborative system of community support for families has its guiding principle in the eradication of social stereotyping based on race, ethnicity, national origin, gender, and socioeconomic status.
- The development of an awareness and appreciation for the many family forms values individual differences and strengths.
- The thwarting of conditions leading to violence in the home or the community cultivates a sense of safety for children and families.
- The advocacy for economic policies and human services attests to being pro-family by virtue of proven outcomes.
- The promotion of culturally competent practices in schools and in the larger society respects differences in world-views and learning styles among individuals.
• The advocacy for expanded services provides for affordable quality childcare to meet the varied needs of all families and children (e.g., infant and adolescent 24-hour care and weekend care).

• The development of collaborative community approaches to problem solving involves students, parents, schools, community leaders, and government agencies.

• The recognition that the problem in at-risk situations is not only in the individual but also in institutional barriers in the environment.

• The reconfiguration of curricula eliminates the hidden curriculum and other culturally insensitive curricula variables.

• The reinstitution of rites of passage and service opportunities cultivates a sense of belonging and resiliency in youth.

• The broadening of visions in educational reform includes economic reform and the investment in human capital.

These aforementioned elements must be functional in nature and lead to goal-directed decisions of stakeholders (i.e., students, families, schools, communities, and government agencies). Surely, these stakeholders have to play specific and interrelated roles to maximize the potential for school completion in this age of change.

**The Student’s Role in Increasing School Completion**

Based on the CSM, the student has roles to play in increasing his/her school completion. This is not the traditional “blame-the-victim” idea; it is the individual’s power and ability to be involved in his/her destiny (Obiakor & Weaver, 1995). There are success stories of persons who have pulled themselves up by their own boot straps, even though some had boots without straps and straps without boots. Since the “self” is so
important in reducing school drop-out, students must be taught to be resilient and believe in themselves (Obiakor & Beachum, 2005a). Specifically, they can be taught to:

- Develop self-talks and individual plans.
- Relax and not jump to conclusions.
- Learn to work collaboratively and consultatively with others.
- Engage in positive thinking.
- Talk with counselors about personal and school problems.
- Be a part of school conflict resolution teams.
- Inform adults and parents when situations are not going right.
- Manage their time properly.
- Respect school regulations and society’s laws.
- Utilize mentors from the school and community.

The Family's Role in Increasing School Completion

Family functioning and parent-child relationships have greater influence in career development than family structure or parents’ educational and occupational status (Kerka, 2000). Parents must be proactive, involved, and supportive. Negative home circumstances can affect school performance; and when parents are discouraged in the education of their children, they become unaware of how their children perform. Kerka concluded that proactive families:

- Are well-organized, cohesive, and expressive.
- Are extroverted and manage conflict positively.
- Seek out ways to grow.
- Make decisions through the democratic process.
• Are sociable.
• Encourage individual development.
• Are emotionally engaged.
• Are willing to work with their child, school authorities, and community and government agencies.

The School’s Role in Increasing School Completion

Schools have the power to uplift humanity when teachers and service providers are well-prepared. Poorly prepared, ill-prepared, or unprepared professionals negatively impact their students. Renchler (1992) agreed that schools can increase students’ motivation by implementing polices that promote:

• Goal-setting and self-regulation.
• Student choices.
• Student achievements.
• Teamwork and cooperative learning.
• Self-assessment models rather than social comparisons.

Apparently, schools can reduce the failure syndrome (Brophy, 1998) if they are to increase school completion strategies for students. The failure syndrome can be reversed when schools value their students, collaborate with families, work with community members, and consult with government agencies (Obiakor et al., 2002; Obiakor, Algozzine et al., 2002). King (2003) concluded that teachers and service providers must arrange and modify their classrooms and programs to:

• Facilitate on-task behaviors.
• Facilitate listening and attending skills
• Facilitate academic performance.

• Make implementation of a behavior management system easy.

• Allow for large, small, and cooperative grouping and one-on-one instruction.

• Have a place for students to relax.

• Provide students with private space. (p. 12)

In addition to the above points, schools must have prudent professionals who can use common sense approaches to solve problems (Algozzine, 1995). These professionals must engage all students with realistic expectations and avoid the myth of socioeconomic dissonance (i.e., when poverty is viewed as the ultimate cause of all students' malaise). Poverty does not mean that students and their parents have “poor” intelligence, “poor” self-concept, and “poor” zest for success (Obiakor, 1999, 2001, 2003, 2007, Obiakor & Beachum, 2005a, 2005b; Utley & Obiakor, 2001). To avoid all forms of prejudicial, xenophobic, and racist actions that force some students to hate school or drop out of school, general and special educators and school leaders must:

• Know who they are.

• Learn the facts when they are in doubt.

• Change their thinking.

• Use resource persons.

• Build self-concepts.

• Teach with divergent techniques.

• Make the right choices.

• Continue to learn.
The Community’s Role in Increasing School Completion

The community traditionally houses a wealth of resources that students can access for academic and social development (Ford, 2002). Additionally, students can take advantage of the many learning opportunities that are available within the community (e.g., libraries, museums, schools, jobs, and entrepreneurial offers). Some communities are more forward-looking than others; and some are extremely destructive to their children and youth. Dooley and Toscano-Nixon (2002) concluded that some communities are:

- **Dysfunctional and struggling** – In such communities, “the problem can be traced back to either the role that community members are playing or the direction that community members are following” (p. 103).

- **Borderline** – In such communities, “there is universal community participation and the citizens rely heavily on the government to impose changes” (p. 104).

- **Conscientious** – In such communities, “all members assume their social and moral responsibilities to their community’s social and economic growth’ (p. 106).

To reduce drop-out rates and increase school completion rates, the goal is to have conscientious communities that:

- Develop cutting-edge programs that build capacity for change for students at-risk.

- Help to build responsible citizens through churches, mosques, synagogues, and community agencies (e.g., YMCA, YWCA, Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, Boys and Girls Club, Urban League, to name a few).

- Discover softer ways to manage behavior problems and not build jails/prisons to replace schools.
Have as their slogan, “Together we can make a difference,” and as their principle, “It takes a whole village to raise a child.”

**The Government’s Role in Increasing School Completion**

Government initiatives (e.g., No Child Left Behind Act and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act) have been instrumental in buttressing some levels of accountability in schools and communities. In many cases, they have provided funding to various institutions, school districts, and community organizations to create innovative school completion programs such as Charter, Voucher, and Choice Schools. However, to effectively increase school completion of students, the government must support programs by:

- Establishing policies that buttress positive changes and advancements.
- Instituting laws that protect its citizens. For instance, due process of students, parents, and teachers must be maintained.
- Imposing penalties on institutions that violate the civil rights of students.
- Funding research to discover new ways of doing things.
- Coordinating conferences that bring professionals and agencies together.
- Making programs accountable to their consumers/students.
- Assisting institutions in shifting their paradigms and powers.
- Rewarding visionary leaders and programs that do what they are supposed to do.

**Perspectives**

In this paper, I have argued that everyone goes through some form of crisis. There are apparent and underlying stressors that impinge upon all human activities. While grown-ups lose it and quit their jobs or divorce their husbands/wives, students drop
out of school and become societal problems. It is imperative that general and special education teachers, service providers, and leaders build proactive programs that can reduce drop-out and increase school completion. Students, parents, teachers, community members, and policy makers must work together for the common good. It is in this spirit that I prescribe the CSM to take advantage of the energies of all stakeholders. We must avoid unwarranted labels, derogatory categories, and illusory generalizations that disempower students. I strongly believe disempowered students drop out of school, do not graduate, and get involved in anti-social behaviors. Finally, we must practicalize the Native American proverb, “all the flowers of all the tomorrows are in the seeds of today.”

In the words of Brooks (1991):

> While all students deserve to have their islands of competence displayed and built upon, there is a more urgent need to do so for those students who lack confidence in their ability to learn. If we can reinforce the areas of strength these students possess, my experience has been that we can open the way for a “ripple effect,” where students may be willing to venture forth and confront tasks that have been problematic for them. (p. 32)

References


Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004, Pub. L. No. 108-446.


