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Examining Counseling Services, Familial Support, Involvement in the Legal
System, and Teenage Parenthood as Predictors of Academic School-Year Completion

by

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Abstract

The purpose of this quantitative study was to investigate whether receiving counseling services, having familial support, being involved in the legal system, and being a teen parent were related to high school academic year completion. This quantitative cross-sectional research used a convenience sample of 208 student-intake forms from a local continuation high school in San Jose, California. This study was a secondary data analysis; it examined student-intake forms from the junior class for the 2007-2008 academic year. The hypotheses of the study were that students who received counseling services and/or had familial support had an increased likelihood of completing the academic school year, and that students who had involvement in the legal system and/or were teen parents had a decreased likelihood of completing the academic school year. The study results did not support the hypothesis that counseling services, familial support, involvement in the legal system, or teenage parenthood were related to academic school-year completion. This study indicates that further research is needed to examine different variables as well as to conduct qualitative interviews for an accurate explanation of the findings.

Introduction

Although every child in the United States has the right to a free, public education, large numbers of students continue to drop out of high school. This number is disproportionately high for alternative high schools, where the student population is comprised of mainly racial and ethnic minorities and tends to face a larger number of risk factors such as living in poverty, teenage pregnancy, gang involvement, and limited social support. In the rapidly advancing society of today, being educated is essential to securing employment and having a financially stable life. A high school diploma is not only required for the vast majority of jobs, but is directly related to higher incomes as compared to workers who did not graduate from high school. Thus, it is important that youth remain in school long enough to earn their high school diploma. This quantitative research examined the relationship between multiple variables and academic school-year completion at an alternative high school. These variables included receiving counseling services, having familial support, involvement in the legal system, and being a teen parent. This research is necessary and relevant to social work because it examined the effects of outside factors on academic success. With the appropriate school-based changes made based on future empirical data, it is hoped that there will be a noticeable and long-term decrease in high school drop-out rates.

Literature Review

Background of High School Dropouts and Predictors

Approximately half a million students drop out of high school each year across the country (Strom & Boster, 2007). Many feel the effects of this phenomenon including the general public, in terms of higher taxes, and the individuals who drop out, in terms of fewer

job opportunities and lower wages (MacDonald & Heath, 2005). It is widely known that high school dropouts face a high likelihood of poverty, incarceration, and unemployment (Jimerson, Egeland, Sroufe, & Carlson, 2000, Strom & Boster, 2007; Rumberger, 1987). A recent statistic revealed that high school dropouts who are employed only earn 60% of what their high school graduate counterparts earn. In addition, individuals with college degrees reportedly earn 72% more than those with only a high school diploma (The Associated Press, 2006). These numbers clearly point to the importance of education on the economic success and overall well-being of our youth.

It is difficult to identify a single predictor of high school drop-out rates as it depends on the individual and his or her social, financial, psychological, and educational situation (Rumberger, 1987). Although a wide variety of factors may lead an individual to drop out of high school, the research has shown that some of the most common predictors of dropping out of high school are poverty, single-parent families, low parental educational achievement, a language other than English as the primary language in the home, teenage pregnancy, and low academic achievement (Strom & Boster, 2007).

Theory of Stress and Coping

Stress is a biological, psychological, or social state of arousal that occurs when internal or external events become too much for an individual to cope with (Walsh, 2003; Aneshensel, 1992). The internal or external events that cause an individual physical or emotional harm are referred to as stressors, while the actual physical and/or emotional arousal is known as stress. The feeling of stress is not an automatic reaction of various stressors; rather, it is the culmination of stressful life events and individual coping skills and resources (Aneshensel, 1992). The long-term effects of stress are widespread and serious.

According to the American Institute of Stress (2008), stress is related to depression, anxiety, heart attacks, strokes, hypertension, and immune system disturbances, which can lead to infection or even cancer.

A number of theories have been proposed by researchers that deal with stress and subsequent coping mechanisms. Sidney Cobb asserts that social support works as a buffer against stress (Vaux, 1988). According to this theory, in order for students to effectively cope with stress and successfully complete high school, they need to have some source of social support present in their lives. This could include familial support as well as individual or group counseling.

Another theory was proposed by scholar Gerald Caplan (1974) that emphasized the importance of support systems as a coping method to protect individuals against the stress related to daily activities, crisis situations, and major life changes. A life-change event is a significant event in an individual's life that severely disrupts his or her activities of daily living (Aneshensel, 1992). A life-change event can also be referred to as a crisis and may include events such as a major illness, the death of a loved one, termination from a job, or the occurrence of a natural disaster (Walsh, 2003).

High school is a vulnerable period of time for many adolescents as they attempt to maneuver through conflicted family relationships, peer pressures, educational advancements, and self-identity. Individuals often experience great stress due to these issues. For students who are minorities and have a low socioeconomic status, completing high school is an even greater challenge than for most high school students. These minority and low socioeconomic status students often live in stressful home environments where school achievement is underemphasized. These life factors alone have been found to strongly contribute to

dropping out of high school (Janosz, LeBlanc, Boulerice, & Tremblay, 1997). Furthermore, it can be inferred that the consequences of a stressful home environment, including increased anger and frustration, difficulty concentrating, and reduced work efficiency (American Institute of Stress, 2008), are related to increased dropout rates. That is, students who have high levels of stress, perhaps due to an unplanned pregnancy or being placed on probation, may experience intense anxiety and helplessness and feel that they cannot manage the difficulties of school.

Counseling and Academic Success

According to the literature, the definition of counseling has been accepted as the “face-to-face relationship in which a trained individual is consciously attempting by verbal means to assist another person to modify attitudes or other behavior with respect to educational, emotional, and vocational issues” (Rothney & Danielson, 1951, p. 132). An extensive search of the literature revealed a limited number of studies focusing on the effects of counseling on academic achievement. In addition, the available research showed mixed results concerning the relationship between counseling and high school dropouts.

A positive relationship between counseling and increased school achievement was found in the study of 32 underachieving high school students. This study examined the effects of varying levels of counseling on students by placing the participants in one of four groups; depending on the group, the participants received extensive individual counseling, extensive group counseling, one-time group counseling, or no counseling services (Callis, 1963). The researchers determined that those who received counseling services saw a large increase in their high school grade point averages as well as their personal adjustment compared to those who did not receive any counseling (Callis, 1963). It is important to note

that the sample size for this study was relatively small and only encompassed a single high school.

Another study on a much larger scale also revealed positive results of counseling. Rothney and Roens (1949) evaluated 129 students who had received continuous counseling from grades eight through twelve in comparison with a matched control group who had not received any counseling. The researchers found, among other things, that the students who received counseling had significantly higher academic performances than the control group (Rothney & Roens, 1949).

Other research has found different results concerning the effectiveness of counseling. For example, multiple studies of high school students as well as college freshmen revealed that counseling services had no significant effect on participants' grade point averages compared to those who did not receive counseling (Callis, 1963; Catterall, 1987). The studies explained that a student's motivation and desire to receive counseling plays a large role in the effectiveness of the services (Callis, 1963; Catterall, 1987). While the literature reveals mixed results concerning counseling as a predictor of high school graduation, it is clear that counseling services can impact a student's academic success if he or she voluntarily seeks out services.

Familial Support and Academic Success

Social support, in particular, family support, is widely understood to be related to life satisfaction and overall well-being (Wan, Jaccard, & Ramey, 1996). According to the research, social support defends against the negative effects of stress as well as crisis situations by means of coping and adaptation (Cobb, 1976). Many studies have shown that supportive family relationships and strong communication habits are integral to the healthy

and successful development of adolescents (Coll, Juhnke, Thobro, Haas, & Smith Robinson, 2008; Strom & Boster, 2007). Additionally, research has shown the reverse effect is also true; negative family relationships are related to poorer outcomes in the lives of adolescents (Coll et al., 2008).

It is understood that adolescents tend to exhibit behaviors similar to those that are modeled in their homes (Coll et al., 2008). Thus, adolescents who have dysfunctional families and unsupportive relationships are likely to display similar patterns in their outside relationships and responsibilities, such as school. A recent study of youth offenders found that the less family support an individual had, the more antisocial behaviors he would exhibit, including truancy from school (Coll et al., 2008).

Research has shown a strong link between school achievement and supportive family environments. Strom and Boster (2007) found that families' values and attitudes about education and school performance strongly influence adolescents' school performance and likelihood of graduating from high school. Another study revealed that a strong predictor of whether or not a student dropped out of high school was the amount of parental involvement in the student's education. Interestingly, this study also took into consideration students who performed poorly in school but did not drop out of high school (Rumberger, Ghatak, Poulos, Ritter, & Dornbush, 1990). In conclusion, empirical evidence has overwhelmingly shown that social support provided by families is central to students' emotional, social and academic success.

Legal System Involvement and Academic Success

The literature on adolescents involved in the legal system revealed negative impacts on rates of high school graduation (Freudenberg, Daniels, Crum, Perkins, & Richie, 2008;

Jacobi, 2008). One recent research topic studied 491 male adolescents at the time of their arrest and one year following their release from New York City jails (Freudenberg et al., 2008). The study found that prior to their arrests, 69% of the male participants were enrolled in high school or a vocational program. One year after their release, only 29% of the participants were still enrolled in school. Additionally, 47% of the adolescents were rearrested within a year after being released (Freudenberg et al., 2008). To explain these results, the researchers cited ineffective policies and procedures that made it difficult for male adolescents to return to school after being released from jail (Freudenberg et al., 2008).

Research conducted by Wood, Wood, and Mullins (2008) identified several hindrances for adolescents returning to school following incarceration. A large proportion of adolescents who are arrested suffer from mental disorders including affective disorders, anxiety disorders, ADHD, ODD and substance use disorders. These disorders may cause students to display inappropriate and problematic behaviors in school, such as sleeping, inattentiveness, defiance, and opposition. As a result, many students' academic performances decrease and graduating from high school becomes less likely (Wood, Wood, & Mullins, 2008).

In contrast to most of the literature on incarceration and educational achievement, a small, qualitative study of 18 male youth in a correctional facility revealed very different results. The researchers found that the positive facility environment that focused on resiliency strongly impacted the boys' attitudes toward education and increased their likelihood of receiving a high school diploma (Feinstein, Baartman, Buboltz, Sonnichsen, & Solomon, 2008). The results of this study are limited by the small sample size. Additional research is necessary for more definitive and generalizable findings.

Teenage Parenthood and Academic Success

Teenage parenthood is an issue that concerns individuals of all ethnicities and socioeconomic statuses but has been highlighted as being a problem of society's poor, uneducated, and disadvantaged populations (Burdell, 1995-1996). Teenage parenthood has consistently been cited as a high predictor of high school drop-out rates (Rumberger, 1987; Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Strom & Boster, 2007). A review of high school dropouts by the American Education Research Association found that one third of female dropouts were due to pregnancy or marriage (Rumberger, 1987). Another study revealed that even after controlling for family background, becoming pregnant while in high school greatly impacted the student's chances of graduating (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000).

Despite what seems to be overwhelming evidence for the negative effects of pregnancy on high school graduation, several studies have found that having a baby during high school had no significant effect on graduation rates. In fact, the researchers discovered that teen mothers were more likely than not to graduate from high school (Burdell, 1995-1996; Upchurch & McCarthy, 1990). These conflicting results indicate the need for more extensive research on the topic.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

As reflected in the literature, there is a fair amount of information concerning the four variables being studied in this research. In addition, some of the past research revealed conflicting results, such as the research on teenage parenthood and school success. As a result, there is a great need for more in-depth research in all four areas.

This research examined the relationship between receiving counseling services, familial support, involvement in the legal system, teen parenthood, and successful

completion of the academic school year. Specifically, it asked the questions: Does receiving counseling services increase the likelihood of completing the academic school year for students? How do the other factors (familial support, involvement in the legal system, and teenage parenthood) relate to academic school year completion? It was hypothesized that having familial support and receiving counseling services will increase the likelihood of completing the academic school year. It was also hypothesized that being a teen parent and having involvement in the legal system will decrease the likelihood of completing the academic school year.

Methodology

Research Design and Sample

Table 1

Characteristics of the Sample

Characteristics	<i>n</i> ^a	%
Gender		
Male	101	52.3
Female	92	47.7
Ethnicity		
Hispanic/Latino	154	79.8
Caucasian	18	9.3
Asian/Pacific-Islander	13	6.7
African-American	8	4.1
Age (in years)		<i>M</i> = 16 <i>SD</i> = 1

^aTotal sample N = 193

This quantitative study utilized secondary data in the form of student-intake forms.

This study is both exploratory and cross-sectional in nature.

The data for this research was gathered from a convenience sample of student-intake forms from a local continuation high school. Of the 193 subjects used in the study, 101 (52.3%) were male, and 92 (47.7%) were female. The subjects' ages ranged from 15 to 18 years old. In terms of ethnicity, the sample consisted primarily of Hispanic/Latino subjects with 154 (79.8%) Hispanics/Latinos (See Table 1). The number of subjects who completed the academic school-year was 124 (64.2%) (See Table 2).

The study utilized all of the 11th grade student-intake forms on file. This amounted to 208 eleventh grade student-intake forms, 197 of which were used in the data analysis. The intake forms were completed by 11th grade students during their first week of the 2007-2008 school year; this exact date varied by student depending on when he or she enrolled in the school. The study also utilized a list provided by the school principal of the 11th grade students who returned to the school the next year for 12th grade (Returning-Student List).

Study Site

The study site for this research was a small continuation high school in San Jose, California. A continuation school is an alternative setting to mainstream high schools; students are placed at a continuation school after having been unsuccessful at two or more mainstream high schools. This could happen for various reasons including truancy, fighting, low grades, and pregnancy. The students at this school are divided into different programs depending on their learning styles. For example, there is a Behavior Modification Program, a High School Diploma Program, and a Special Education Program (Foothill High School, 2008). The students at this school are a generally underprivileged, low-income, and at-risk population. The study site offers an intimate and structured learning environment which

provides students with the attention and resources necessary to succeed. These students often have unstable home lives with very little emotional and academic support. For many of these students, this is their last chance to graduate from high school.

Table 2

Independent and Dependent Variables in the Study

Variables	<i>n</i> ^a	%
Has Subject Received Counseling?		
Yes	91	51.3
No	96	48.7
Does Subject Have Familial Support?		
Yes	163	90.1
No	18	9.9
What Specific Familial Support Did Subject Identify?		
Mother	64	35.2
Other	31	17.0
None	19	10.4
Father	17	9.3
Parents/Mother & Father	14	7.7
Sister	12	6.6
Brother	12	6.6
Grandmother	9	4.9
Cousin	3	1.6
Uncle	1	0.5
Is Subject Involved in Legal System?		
Yes	65	34.0
No	126	66.0
Is Subject a Teen Parent?		
Yes	38	19.7
No	193	80.3
Did Subject Complete Academic School-Year?		
Yes	124	64.2
No	69	35.8

^aTotal sample N = 193

Variables and Measurement

The secondary data used in this study was collected from the student-intake forms as well as the Returning-Student List. The independent variables in this study included the following: counseling services, familial support, involvement in the legal system, and teen parenthood. The dependent variable was academic school-year completion. The independent variables were measured through responses on the student-intake forms (see Appendix A for sample form), and the dependent variable was measured by identifying names on the Returning-Student List.

The operational definition for receiving counseling services was a “Yes” response to the question, “Have you ever received counseling services?” For this question, the investigator coded a “1” for “Yes,” a “0” for “No,” and a “2” for unavailable answers.

Familial support was operationally defined by a response to the question, “Which family member do you depend upon the most?” This response must be in the form of a name or a familial relationship (i.e. “Mom,” “Cousin,” or “Sister”). For this question, the investigator coded a “1” for any name or relationship written on the form. The investigator coded a “0” for “N/A”, “None” or equivalent answers. The investigator also coded a “2” for unavailable answers.

The operational definition for involvement in the legal system was a “Yes” response to any of the following questions: “Are you currently in the Restorative Justice System?” “Have you been incarcerated?” “In Juvenile Hall?” and “At the Ranch?” For each of these questions, the investigator coded a “1” for “Yes,” a “0” for “No,” and a “2” for unavailable answers.

Teen parenthood is operationally defined as a “Yes” response to the question, “Do

you have any children?” For this question, the investigator coded a “1” for “Yes,” a “0” for “No,” and a “2” for unavailable answers.

The operational definition for academic school year completion was the appearance of a student’s name on the Returning-Student List, indicating that the student successfully completed the 2007-2008 school year. The investigator coded a “1” if the participant’s name was on the Returning-Student List and a “0” if the name did not appear on the list.

Reliability and Validity

The instruments for this study included the student-intake forms and the Returning-Student List. A significant concern regarding the reliability of the student-intake forms was the language barrier that existed. The student population at the study site was overwhelmingly Latino, and many students’ primary language was Spanish. The student-intake forms were written solely in English. This posed an issue for reliability, as participants may not have understood, to varying degrees, the questions asked on the forms. Therefore, English language competency could have a significant impact on the reliability of answers given. In contrast, the degree of validity of the student-intake forms and the Returning-Student List was high overall. Validity of the student-intake forms was maintained by careful review and collaboration between members of the Multi-Service Team (MST). The student-intake form was written and reviewed by the MST at the study site. The MST consisted of a Licensed Clinical Social Worker, a Drug and Alcohol Counselor, Marriage and Family Therapists, Social Work Interns, teachers, and school administrators.

The reliability and validity of the Returning-Student List depended upon the source of the information. Since the list was compiled by the school principal who had access to official data and records pertaining to student outcomes, there was a high degree of

reliability. The investigator established validity of the Returning-Student List by discussing with the school principal and Social Work Field Instructor on site the most efficient and effective means of identifying returning students. It was determined that a list provided by the principal would be most appropriate for the purpose of this study.

Reliability and validity issues existed in relation to the variable measurements in this study. Specifically, the variable “receiving counseling services” may not be reliable because of its vague terminology and lack of further explanation. Participants may have different definitions of counseling, and may not consider alternatives to individual therapy (e.g. group counseling, crisis counseling, or family counseling) to be considered counseling. In addition, participants may have been very young at the time of counseling and may not remember having received services.

The variable “familial support” may not have been reliable because of its lack of clarification as to what constitutes “family,” and what is considered “support.” To some participants, “family” may include close friends or supportive, but unrelated adults such as a teacher, a friends’ parent, or a probation officer. “Support” poses similar problems in that participants may not have the same definition of the term to include all aspects of support such as emotional, financial, and academic support.

Reliability was also an issue in relation to the variable “involvement in the legal system.” The question on the student- intake form asked participants whether they have been incarcerated, in the Restorative Justice System, at the Ranch, or in Juvenile Hall. These questions were very specific and if participants had been to multiple placements, they may not have been able to recall the titles of the institutions. In addition, the term “incarcerated” may have been confusing to participants; the participants may not have known what the term

meant, or they may have had difficulty determining what constitutes being incarcerated, depending on the charge and the amount of time spent in an institution.

The variable “teenage parenthood” may present reliability issues in that the question on the student-intake form did not specify how to respond if the participant is currently pregnant or expecting a child; it simply asked if the participant has children. Therefore, some participants who were expecting a child may have answered “Yes” to the question while others may have answered “No.”

In spite of these reliability and validity issues, the investigator still felt that the student-intake form and chosen operational definitions were of quality and relevant to the study. While revisions may be needed for future studies, the investigator felt the data sources sufficient for the present study.

Human Subjects Considerations

The investigator ensured confidentiality of the subjects by not including any identifiable information in the research report. Because the student-intake forms and Returning-Student List both contained students’ names and identification numbers, the investigator converted all names into identification numbers at the start of the study for increased security measures. All student-intake forms and the Returning-Student List were kept in a locked file cabinet at the study site. The Licensed Clinical Social Worker (LCSW) on site was in control of the key to the file cabinet and allowed the investigator to use it when needed. In addition, the investigator received approval of this study by the San Jose State University Internal Review Board (See Appendix B).

Procedures and Data Collection Techniques

This study consisted of secondary data analysis, and therefore, subjects did not have

any direct involvement in the study. The investigator conducted the research at the school site, where the student-intake forms were located. This exact location at the school site was in the Group Conference Room in the H-2 Portable. The H-2 Portable is where the offices of the service providers are located. The student-intake forms were kept in alphabetical order in a locked file cabinet. The LCSW on site was in control of the key to the file cabinet and allowed the investigator to use it when needed.

The investigator sat at the table in the Group Conference Room to conduct the research when the room was not in use by other school employees. The investigator examined each student-intake form, first separating the juniors from both the seniors and fifth-year seniors. The investigator only used 11th grade student-intake forms for this study. The investigator did not include in the study student-intake forms where the answers were left blank to the pertinent questions.

The investigator used a data collection form (See Appendix A) for each subject to record the data from the student-intake forms and the Returning-Student List. The investigator assigned a number (1-208) to each student and wrote it on the data collection form; this number was the same number given to the students on the Returning-Student List. The investigator identified demographic information from the student-intake forms including age, gender, and ethnicity and recorded it on the data collection form. The investigator then read each student-intake form and recorded the students' answers for the four variables being studied: receiving counseling services, having familial support, being involved in the legal system, and being a teen parent. After all the data from the student-intake forms and Returning-Student List were collected onto the data collection forms, this information was then entered into SPSS for data analysis.

Analysis of Data

Quantitative data analysis was conducted and analyzed using SPSS 16.0 software. After coding the independent, dependent, and dummy variables into SPSS, central measures of tendency, bivariate and multivariate tests each were run and analyzed. Frequencies and percentages were used to analyze the independent and dependent variables, subjects' demographic information, and the specific type of familial support reported by subjects. A chi-square analysis of probability was conducted in order to determine the effects of counseling services, familial support, legal system involvement, and teenage parenthood on academic school-year completion. Binary Logistic Regression tests were conducted in order to analyze the effects of each of the four independent variables on the dependent variable, controlling for all other independent variables.

Results

This research study hypothesized that subjects who had familial support or who had received counseling services would have a greater likelihood of completing the 2007-2008 academic school year. The study also hypothesized that subjects who had involvement in the legal system or who were teen parents would be less likely to complete the academic school year. Although 208 student-intake forms were initially examined in this study, a total of 193 student-intake forms were used for data analysis. Reasons for discarding certain intake forms included entirely incomplete forms, unrelated or off-the-wall answers, or the unavailability of demographic information for the particular subject.

Counseling Services and Academic School-Year Completion

It was hypothesized that subjects who had received counseling services in the past would be more likely to complete the academic school year than those who had not received

counseling services. Of the 91 subjects who identified having received counseling services, 61 subjects (67%) successfully completed the academic school year, while the 59 subjects who had not received counseling services showed slightly lower completion rates, at 61.5%. From a chi-square analysis, using an alpha level of .05, the results of the data revealed no significant correlation between receiving counseling services and completing the academic school year ($\chi^2 = .63$, $df = 1$, $p = .43$) (See Table 3). The results of the logistic regression test on the influence of this variable while controlling for the others were also statistically insignificant (OR = 1.23, $df = 1$, $p = .45$) (See Table 4).

Familial Support and Academic School-Year Completion

This research study hypothesized that subjects who had familial support would be more likely to complete the school year than those who did not have familial support. Of the 163 subjects who identified having familial support, 105 subjects (64.4%) successfully completed the academic school year. A total of 18 subjects reported that they did not have familial support; of these 18 subjects, 9 (50%) completed the academic school year. The results of the chi-square analysis, using an alpha level of .05, did not reveal a significant correlation between having familial support and completing the academic school year ($\chi^2 = 1.45$ $df = 1$, $p = .23$) (See Table 3). The results of the multivariate logistic regression test for this variable were also statistically insignificant (OR = 1.58, $df = 1$, $p = .41$) (See Table 4).

Involvement in the Legal System and Academic School-Year Completion

Subjects who were teen parents were hypothesized to be less likely to complete the academic school year compared to non-teen parent subjects. Of the 65 subjects who identified having involvement in the legal system, 39 subjects (60%) successfully completed the academic school year. A total of 126 subjects reported that they did not have involvement

in the legal system; of this number, 83 (65.9%) completed the academic school year. The results of the chi-square analysis, using an alpha level of .05, did not reveal a significant correlation between having familial support and completing the academic school year ($\chi^2 = .64, df = 1, p = .42$) (See Table 3). The results for this variable from the multivariate logistic regression test were also statistically insignificant ($OR = .76, df = 1, p = .43$) (See Table 4).

Table 3

Bivariate Analyses: Chi-Square Test of Academic School-Year Completion by Counseling Services, Familial Support, Involvement in the Legal System, and Teen Parenthood

	Academic School-Year Completion		Significant Differences
	Yes	No	
Counseling Services			
Yes	61 (67.0%)	30 (33.0%)	None
No	59 (61.5%)	37 (38.5%)	
Familial Support			
Yes	105 (64.4%)	58 (35.6%)	None
No	9 (50.0%)	9 (50.0%)	
Involvement in Legal System			
Yes	39 (60.0%)	26 (40.0%)	None
No	83 (65.9%)	43 (34.1%)	
Teen Parenthood			
Yes	24 (63.2)	100 (64.5%)	None
No	14 (36.8%)	55 (35.5%)	

Teen Parenthood and Academic School-Year Completion

It was hypothesized that subjects who were teen parents would be less likely to complete the school year than those who were not teen parents. Of the teen parents, 24

subjects (63.2%) successfully completed the academic school year. The data also showed that 100 of 155 non-teen parents (64.5%) completed the academic school year. The results of the chi-square analysis, using an alpha level of .05, did not reveal a significant correlation between being a teen parent and completing the academic school year ($\chi^2 = .03, df = 1, p = .88$) (See Table 3). The results for this variable from the multivariate logistic regression test were also statistically insignificant (OR = .84, $df = 1, p = .68$) (See Table 4).

Table 4

Multivariate Analyses: Binary Logistic Regression Test of Academic School Year Completion by Counseling Services, Familial Support, Involvement in the Legal System, Teen Parenthood, Ethnicity and Age

Variable	Odds Ratio	Confidence Interval	p-value
Counseling Services	1.29	(.66, 2.58)	.45
Familial Support	1.58	(.54, 4.67)	.41
Involvement in Legal System	0.76	(.38, 1.51)	.43
Teen Parenthood	0.84	(.37, 1.91)	.68
African-American	0.19	(.02, 2.05)	.17
Hispanic/Latino	1.73	(.58, 5.17)	.33
Asian/Pacific Islander	0.84	(.18, 3.89)	.82
Age	1.17	(.63, 2.15)	.62

Note. Cox & Snell R Square = .058

Ethnicity, Age, and Academic School-Year Completion

To analyze the relationship between subjects’ ethnicities and academic school-year completion, logistic regression with dummy variables was used. Using an alpha level of .05, the findings showed no significant relationship between African-American (OR = .19, $df = 1,$

$p = .17$), Hispanic/Latino ($OR = 1.73$, $df = 1$, $p = .33$), or Asian/Pacific-Islander ($OR = .84$, $df = 1$, $p = .82$) subjects and academic school-year completion compared to Caucasian subjects. Logistic regression was also used to analyze the relationship between subjects' age and academic school-year completion. Again, the results revealed no significant relationship between subjects' age and academic school-year completion ($OR = 1.17$, $df = 1$, $p = .63$).

Discussion

The overall findings of this study were not statistically significant and therefore, did not support the original research hypotheses. Thus, having received counseling services or having familial support did not increase the likelihood of academic school-year completion. In addition, having involvement in the legal system or being a teen parent did not decrease the likelihood of academic school-year completion.

Counseling Services and Academic School-Year Completion

The findings of this research confirmed the results of some previous studies, such as those by Callis (1963) and Catterall (1987), who found that counseling services did not significantly affect the academic success of high school and college students. However, this research also contradicted the findings of Rothney and Roens (1949) who found that students who had received counseling services for four continuous years had stronger academic performances than those who had not received counseling. There are a few possible explanations for these inconsistent findings. First, it may be the case that the counseling services subjects received were mainly mandatory sessions which the subjects did not voluntarily seek out; according to Callis (1963) and Catterall (1987), this factor largely determines how effective the services are.

Additionally, this study did not identify how long the subject had received counseling

services. Rothney and Roens' (1949) positive results were based on four continuous years of counseling services which is an extensive amount of time. Thus, it may be possible that those who receive counseling services for longer periods of time have stronger academic performances than those who receive less extensive services. It is conceivable that the research subjects only received minimal amounts of counseling and thus, did not show positive effects in terms of academic performance. Further research is needed to identify the nature of counseling services (mandatory vs. voluntary) as well as the length of time subjects received counseling services.

Familial Support and Academic School-Year Completion

This research found that familial support was not a statistically significant predictor of academic school-year completion. These findings contradict much of the literature on the effects of familial support on academic success. In general, previous research found that a supportive family is directly related to the overall well-being of the student. Particularly, parental involvement in a student's education plays an important role in their academic success (Strom & Boster, 2007). It is possible that this research did not find the expected results because of the operational definition used for "familial support." In this study, familial support was defined as the response to the question, "Which family member do you depend upon the most?" Some subjects may define "support" differently than this question, and thus, it may not have been the best measure of true familial support. In addition, different family members may provide different types of support. Therefore, a subject may have listed an emotionally supportive family member as opposed to an educationally supportive family member, which would affect the results of the study. Further research is needed to identify the family member who is most involved with and supportive of the

subjects' education. Additionally, future research may wish to focus more extensively on the specific family member identified by the subjects on the student-intake forms. This research revealed that 33.2% of subjects identified their mothers as their familial support; however, it is unclear as to what extent this particular finding relates to academic success.

Involvement in the Legal System and Academic School-Year Completion

This research found that involvement in the legal system did not play a role in subjects' academic school-year completion. These results contradict previous findings that legal system involvement negatively impacts high school graduation (Freudenberg et al., 2008; Jacobi, 2008; Wood, Wood, & Mullins, 2008). One possible explanation for this contradiction is the fact that the study site is very accepting and supportive of students who have involvement in the legal system. The school maintains communication with students' individual probation officers and offers excused absences in the event of a court date. In addition, court-mandated drug and alcohol counseling is provided at the school site during school hours, which is extremely convenient and accessible to the students. This flexibility and understanding nature of the school makes it easier for students to meet the requirements of the legal system as well as continue receiving their education. Therefore, it is likely that involvement in the legal system did not significantly affect the research subjects' academic success.

Teenage Parenthood and Academic School-Year Completion

This research found that teenage parenthood did not play a role in subjects' academic school-year completion. These findings contradict the majority of the literature on teenage parenthood as a strong predictor of high school dropouts (Rumberger, 1987; Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Strom & Boster, 2007). On the other hand, the research findings happen to

confirm studies conducted by Burdell (1995-1996) and Upchurch and McCarthy (1990) who found that being a teen parent had no effect on academic success. Similar to the discussion of subjects' legal system involvement, it is likely that the unexpected findings were the result of the supportive environment provided by the study site. The school is very accommodating to teen parents and is proud of its Family Learning Center (FLC), which is available for students with small children. The FLC has highly trained staff and offers free services such as daycare while the parents are attending class and mandatory child development classes for teen parents during school hours. Teen parents are encouraged to bring their children to the FLC and continue receiving their education. Thus, it is very likely that the results of the study were affected by the supportive nature of the school in regards to teen parents and their children.

Limitations

One critical limitation of this research was the study site used, which likely played a role in the statistically insignificant findings. The study site for this research was at a continuation high school, where students enroll after being unsuccessful at two or more previous mainstream high schools. This factor alone speaks to the unique characteristics and life experiences of these particular subjects as compared to other mainstream high school students. Because the study site is significantly different from the average mainstream high school, the results of this research may not be generalized to other high schools.

Another limitation of the study includes the student population from which the research data was obtained. The research subjects were primarily ethnic minorities, with 90.6% of the research subjects identified as either African-American, Hispanic/Latino, or Asian/Pacific-Islander. The study site is located on the east side of San Jose, an area known

for its poverty and gang activity. Therefore, the subjects likely faced a large number of obstacles and hardships in their lives that far exceeded the four variables which were examined in this particular study. These outside factors may include financial issues, gang involvement, drug and/or alcohol abuse, or relationship problems. These circumstances are likely to have affected the data and played a role in the inconclusive research findings. In addition, on account of the primarily Hispanic/Latino student population, the researcher was unable to use ethnicity as a control variable, and the research findings are not generalizable to other ethnic groups.

Also lacking from this study is a qualitative component. Had in-depth interviews been conducted on a random sample of the research subjects, common themes or explanations for the findings may have been revealed. For instance, other variables/factors which were not examined in the study may arise in the interviews which would help explain the findings as well as point to an area of interest for further research.

Further research is needed to examine additional variables on the student-intake forms as predictors of academic school-year completion. Previous literature identified poverty, single-parent families, language barriers, and low parental education achievement as risk factors for dropping out of high school (Strom & Boster, 2007). Future researchers may wish to examine the effects of these variables on academic success. Moreover, further research is needed to include a qualitative component in order to identify common themes and determine the reason for the statistically insignificant findings.

Strengths

Despite the statistically insignificant results, this study had several strengths. First, four different variables were examined in relation to academic school-year completion. This

allowed for four different hypotheses and results from which to draw conclusions about. This involved a systemic approach to the research; the researcher understood that a wide range of life factors influence an individual's identity, and thus, that multiple variables play into the academic success of a student. Another strength is the fact that this study used only secondary data prevented the possibility of harmful or emotionally traumatic experiences for the subjects. In addition, the quantitative nature of the study using secondary data analysis lends itself to a high degree of reliability; that is, future studies can easily be conducted with consistent results.

Implications for Social Work

Statistics regarding high school dropouts are published every year across the country, yet relevant research examining specific predictors of academic success are limited. This study was a small contribution to this line of research; however, it was unable to identify either risk factors or predictors of academic success to a significant degree of confidence. This study revealed that suspected predictors of academic success—having received counseling services and having familial support—were unrelated to whether or not subjects completed the academic school year. Also, the factors which one would assume would negatively affect academic success—involvement in the legal system and teenage parenthood—were found to have no significant impact on academic performance. These results indicate that the factors leading to academic success are complex, not easily identifiable, and perhaps vary from person to person. As a result, much more research is needed about the factors that relate to academic success among high school students, particularly students who attend continuation schools.

This research aimed to benefit the field of social work by offering quantitative data

about the factors that influence whether a student will graduate or drop out of high school. However, since this was not possible, the results of this research are instead a demand for more extensive research, which will ultimately require funding. Additional studies will likely lead to more conclusive findings, which will benefit students in the long run. For instance, social workers can advocate for schools to adjust their programs and curriculum to fit the needs of the students. In addition, community organizations can use future research to provide the necessary support and resources to community members in an effort to decrease high school dropouts.

Understanding the relationships between different life factors and high school graduation is highly relevant to social work. Youth who drop out of high school are at risk of becoming involved with gangs, drugs and alcohol, having a criminal record, and becoming homeless. In 2006, the dropout rate of high school students in the United States totaled 9.3 percent (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). In California, 24 percent of high school students dropped out in 2007; 42 percent of African American students and 30 percent of Latino students were among these dropouts (Asimov, 2008). Future research is needed to point to preventive measures which will keep students, specifically ethnic minorities, in school and increase graduation rates.

From a transcultural perspective, cultural competency and cultural knowledge were central to the focus of the research. The researcher was aware of some of the issues faced by high school students, specifically at continuation schools, and was motivated to conduct this study based on this knowledge. The secondary data used in this study, while useful and effective in identifying at-risk students, could benefit in terms of its cultural competency by being provided in other languages such as Spanish, Vietnamese, and Cambodian, especially

given the ethnic diversity of the school. Because the researcher had previously been a social work intern at the study site for a year, she was very familiar with the school and its students. This familiarity and awareness of the population relates to the researcher's positionality and self-reflexivity. Because of this, the researcher may have had subconscious biases towards the population which could have affected the variables studied as well as the initial research hypotheses. The idea of power, privilege, and oppression also relates to the secondary data in that the questionnaires were handed out by an authoritative figure in the school setting. In turn, some subjects may have been intimidated or afraid to reveal too much, if any, personal information about themselves on the questionnaire. Although the students were told that the information on their questionnaires was confidential, their answers may have been affected due to the power differential.

This research relates to the social work theory of stress and coping in terms of the negative effects of stress on an individual's personal well-being, as well as the factors that allow an individual to cope and build resiliency. It is important that social work professionals and other service providers recognize signs of both stress and coping in their clients, including but not limited to the variables examined in this study. It is also crucial that social workers do not automatically assume that seemingly "negative" life events such as teen parenthood or involvement in the legal system are necessarily stressful or academically hindering for their clients. This research has shown that a variety of factors influence whether an individual will succeed or fail in school. In direct practice, social workers should be open-minded and explore many different areas of their clients' lives to avoid inaccurate assumptions or conclusions.

From a social work policy standpoint, this study is highly relevant to the current

economic state in California as well as the rest of the country. As budget cuts increase, public schools will undoubtedly be affected, and underprivileged and at-risk students will suffer tremendously. Schools may start to see valuable teachers, counselors, and extracurricular programs left behind, which is likely to have a negative impact on many students. However, despite the grim outlook for the future leaders of our country—our children—there is still hope. As social work professionals, we have the resources and power to influence political decisions and to inspire change in our communities and government. It is essential that social workers bind together at a micro and macro level to lobby and advocate for our students.

It was the ultimate aim of the research to gain more information on the variables (counseling services, familial support, involvement in the legal system, and teenage parenthood) and while the results were not significant, it created awareness of the complex issues faced by high school students and highlighted the pressing need for further studies.

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Appendix A

Data Collection Form

Data Collection Form

ID #: _____

Demographics

Gender: M F U

Age: _____ U

Ethnicity: W B H A O U

Dependent Variables

1. Teen Parent: 1 0 U

2. Family Support: 1 0 U

 Mom Dad Sister Brother Aunt Uncle Cousin

 Grandmother Grandfather Other: _____

3. Involvement in Legal System: 1 0 U

4. Received Counseling Services: 1 0 U

Independent Variable

1. Completed Academic School Year: 1 0 U

Appendix B

Human Subjects Institutional Review Board

Letter of Approval

Appendix C

Field Agency

Letter of Authorization

Appendix D

Field Agency

Approval of Research Project Prospectus

