

BEEN THERE, DONE THAT:
STUDENT INQUIRY OF HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUTS

Erik J. Shager¹

Work and Learn Center – Brearly

When we began our initial discussions as members of the Teachers Network Policy Institute’s Wisconsin chapter, the idea of doing action research around the topic of high school dropouts seemed like a good idea. After all, the focus we had identified for our group was equity. Based on what was happening in Madison—and, as I found out, throughout the country—there was a question of equity regarding students who drop out of school. In addition, the students I work with every day have at one time in their high school experience been considered “at-risk” of not graduating from high school. I was curious as to what would happen if I were to take the work former students had done around this topic and expand upon it with my current group of students. I hoped that my students would progress from talking about the issue and begin conducting their own research. I envisioned my students 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 Madison, Wisconsin?**

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. Students who attend WLC were at one time at risk of not graduating from high school. The majority of students who enter the program are extremely credit deficient, having earned zero to five credits after two years of high school. Through a four semester sequence of academics and community-based vocational placements, WLC graduates can earn a diploma from their home high school.

¹ The author is a member of the 2003-04 Equity Classroom Action Research group, a project generously supported by the Teachers Network Policy Institute (TNPI), MetLife, Wisconsin Education Association Council (WEAC), the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, Madison WI Metropolitan School District (MMSD), Sun Prairie WI School District, and the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

For many students, WLC is their last chance to graduate. The students who were the subjects of this study were scheduled to graduate at the end of the school year.

There were 14 students in my class when this project began—six males (1 African American, 1 Asian American, and 4 White) and eight females (4 African American, 1 American Indian, and 3 White). During the duration of the project, however, one of the African American female students was required to leave the program due to a serious violation of school rules. She was offered the opportunity to complete her education at WLC the following semester, but chose instead to attend a diploma completion program. She is scheduled to receive her equivalency diploma a week before her former classmates graduate.

Typical of 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 our class in an interdisciplinary manner. The subjects we cover in our class—language arts, social issues, computer skills, and psychology—rarely have defining lines.

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 in my classroom. As students who have not experienced much success in the traditional setting, and may 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 know students who have dropped out. Also, 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 Madison’s dropout statistics. Based on these reasons, I was excited to examine what happens when my students dig deeper into this issue facing their community.

Every semester I have my students at WLC read an article from the *Wisconsin State Journal* entitled “Nearly 1 in 5 Madison Students Don’t Graduate” (Erickson, 2000, March 11).

Students are taken aback by the number of students who do not complete high school in Madison, and they are surprised by the drop out rates for students of color in the district—46 percent of African Americans, 28 percent for Hispanic students, and 54 percent for American Indian 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 students—especially students of color—leave high school without a diploma. Through whole class discussion, students generate a list of reasons why students stop attending high school prior to graduation. Students get pregnant. Students are lazy. Students lack focus. Despite the level of student interest, we had rarely devoted more than two class periods to this topic.

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 knowledge relating to this topic. I also wanted to make certain that the students would be willing to work on this project, that it could lead to a deeper understanding of the issue and, most importantly, that it might result in action on the part of the students.

Identifying a Framework

As someone who has experience teaching an issues-centered curriculum, I realize issue selection is of utmost importance. If students do not like the issue or feel it has no importance in 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. As Massialas (1996, p. 44) writes, “Little or no learning takes place unless the individual is involved personally in the topic of the presentation or discussion.”

Specifically, Massialas (1996) identifies five criteria he deems vital to issue selection—relevance, reflection, action, practicality, and understanding. Using these criteria as guides, I generated a series of questions in order to identify a good issue for classroom inquiry (see Table One). This series of questions serves as a litmus test, helping 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 there was an opportunity for students to understand and build their knowledge using a variety of the social sciences; I had seen this occur in previous classes. I was also confident we would be able to develop a project would be practical and have support from others in our building. Lastly, there was the **potential** for student action on this issue—a step the students in my previous classes had never reached.

I had high expectations for this project. I hoped that in the process of completing this project students would find the intrinsic drive to take action; I did not want to force this action on my students, however. I envisioned students becoming what Westheimer and Kahne (2001, p. 3) 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.”

Table One Selecting an Issue for Student Inquiry Adapted from Massialas (1996)
<p>1. Relevance</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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 used as background data? <p>2. Reflection</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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? <p>3. Action</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Will the critical and systematic analysis produce action? • Will this transfer out of the classroom? <p>4. Practicality</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can the project be implemented? • Is there support for this type of project in the school community? <p>5. Understanding</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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?

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. I also kept notes of 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 their thoughts on the progress of the project were also provided a wealth of information; many of the quotes used to begin sections in this paper were taken from those journal entries. In addition, the results of student small group work shed light into the thought processes of the students.

We also worked together as a whole group consolidating our findings, with the students explaining their thoughts and me recording them on the computer. In addition, a pre-service teacher from UW-Madison was also present in our class four hours per week, often during the time we were working on this project. His observations provided another perspective on what was occurring during this project. Informal conversations with students and their parents also provided some insight.

Project Description

This project began with a single journal 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 facilitator of this discussion, I tried not to steer the conversation in any specific direction.

Their ideas tended to be similar to those mentioned by my previous classes. A lack of support at home, or simply lack the will-power to succeed, were cited by as possible reasons. Some students, they wrote, were “lazy” while others were “crazy.” Others mentioned the need for students to work and earn an income for themselves and their families.

Teen pregnancy was also mentioned by many of the students. One of the four teen-age 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 of the other students in class, who did not have children, asked how she was able to do 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 she began high school with as a freshman) to not finish now. She also said

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 said. She did say, however, that she often gets upset when she’s at school because she does not see her children as often as she would like; her busy work and school schedule leaves 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 on in the semester she told me she was offered the Sunday opening position at her job—a job change that would include a promotion and, most importantly, some desperately needed additional income, but would also eliminate some of the “awake” time she spends with her children. At the time of the writing of this report, she was still weighing the “opportunity cost” of this decision.

Our next step was to read about the dropout situation in Madison. 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, 1999, March 11). As they read the article, I had them identify something from the article they felt was important in the article. Most of the students pointed to the fact that almost 20 percent of students who start high school do not finish. The high number of dropouts among the entire student body surprised them. Only a few mentioned the disproportionate number of students of color who end up dropping out of school and there was hesitancy among the students to discuss why African American, American Indian, and Latino/Hispanic student drop out at such rates. “I don’t know” and “How would I know?” were common responses as to why this phenomenon was occurring. The total number of dropouts seemed to be more important to the students than the breakdown by racial groups.

In addition to this article, we also read articles that pointed to specific reasons why students might leave school early. One article, a column written by the father of a high school student in Madison, mentioned that African American male students feel pressure to not do well in school out of fear of being looked down on 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, B1). I asked my students if they agreed with the premise of the article. Had they seen this type of behavior in their experiences as high school students? Some students said that they had seen this, while others emphatically denied that this 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 skipping school provided an opportunity for more fun than attending school. They also felt that they, as future graduates, had grown out of that phase of their lives.

Following the initial brainstorming on the topic and discussion of the newspaper articles, students worked together in teams, peeling away the layers of 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 worked together using a cause/effect map to peel away the layers of its 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.

Students in the other groups followed the same procedure. 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 help the students to narrow their focus. They knew, based on their earlier discussions, that the reasons why students might drop out were limitless. By getting to the heart of each thematic area, they were able to focus on developing a survey that they could distribute to students in the other alternative programs.

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 student survey would give them most direct information. The students were very concerned about what kind of survey they were creating, however. They admitted 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 insure that they would not have the same reaction to their survey.

It was important, they felt, that the people taking the survey knew that the survey was created by students and that the results of the survey would be shared with everyone after it was tabulated. By explaining the purpose of the survey, and that it was created by students, they felt they would get the most accurate 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 it was not possible to administer the survey in person, they decided to attach a note that stated what the survey was for and why they would appreciate honesty in responses.

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

The students also felt it was important to keep the survey concise enough to keep students 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 stay clear of “multiple choice” questions. Others wanted to limit the survey to

statements that could be answered on 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 development of the survey was a whole class project. 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 that fit best with what they wanted to find: How students feel about the issue of high school dropouts in Madison. The students selected a scale that ranged from “Strongly Agree” to “Strongly Disagree.” The students also decided to include a “Neither” or “Neutral” option for students. Originally, the students wanted to limit the number of these statements to ten, fearing that the survey takers would “zone out” if they were required to do more. The groups soon realized that when they combined their work they had more than 30 statements. Due to the overlap in the statements, however, they were able to settle on 16 statements to include in the survey (Appendix A).

The open-ended questions were created during a whole group activity. Each student was given an opportunity to write one question he or she thought should be included in the survey. As each student shared a question, I entered the question into a PowerPoint slide on the computer and projected them onto a screen at the front of the room. Once again, the students saw overlap in their questions and several were combined. Eventually, the students agreed on the wording of each question and selected three to be included on the survey. The three questions focused on issues they felt were vitally important to their research: why students drop out, what is their motivation for finishing school, and what change they would make in order to keep more students in school. It was at this point in the project that students also decided to include demographic information on the survey, asking the respondents to provide their age, gender, grade and race/ethnicity (Appendix B). The survey was color-coded according to which school/program the respondent attended. Students also decided to have students answer the open-ended part of the survey first, fearing that the statements they listed might impact their responses.

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 a draft of the survey, the students developed a plan to administer it to the students in our building and at the WLC site located in a different part of Madison. Luckily, the survey administrators were able to meet with the entire student body of both SAPAR, AERO and Cluster. Due to the structure of the WLC programs—at no time during the school day are all WLC students together in the building—the survey was administered on a class by class basis.

The students enjoyed this part of the project. Using a list of talking points they had developed, the three survey administrators explained why our class was gathering this information and how important it was to get honest responses from those taking the survey. They also stressed their willingness to share the results of the survey. Although they did meet with some resistance to filling out the survey—just as they had predicted—they were successful in convincing all of the students to complete the survey as honestly as possible. I was able to observe this process on two occasions and was impressed with how they handled the pressure of being in the 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 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 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 our building’s *Filemaker* expert, our administrative clerk Larry, if he would be willing to give a quick tutorial. He agreed and we began the process of tabulation.

In order to record all of the responses, we had to create a new survey form within *Filemaker*. This form contained all of the information that we had asked on 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 medium through which to tabulate the survey, we still had to physically enter the data into the computer. Once again, our “expert” helped set the computer at my desk as the “host” computer to collect all of the data. We then set up four stations at which students took turns entering in the data. Since we formatted the demographic questions and the sixteen scaled-response statements using a drop down menu of choices, students were able to enter that data relatively quickly. Typing 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 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 there were some surveys that 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 the approval of the classes. They 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, identifying how a survey response connected with the hypotheses they had created.

The class was able to tabulate the responses 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 each response (Appendix D).

Working with the qualitative responses was more labor intensive. In fact, the tabulation of the responses actually morphed into early form of data analysis. Due to some problems that we were having printing out the responses to each of the open-ended questions, students had to revert to 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 themes identified

for each question. For example, the some of themes identified in responses to the question “If you could change anything that 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 searching for keyword themes 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 highest amounts of 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 of the groupings of survey “hits” on each search and collated them for further analysis.

Analyzing the Results of the Survey

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 while the other three groups analyzed the results of the three open-ended questions. The goal for each group was to synthesize their 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 had the highest level of support. They also combined the “strongly disagree” and “disagree” selections for each statement to determine which had the highest level of disagreement. These results were

then ranked by high level of agreement and 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 submission to a final report. Their findings included the following:

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

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 and wrote short summaries of what they found. These results were then shared 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—the father of one of the students in class. As of the writing of this paper, 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 being investigated.

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.”

Towards the end of this project, at the time when I was busy sifting through the mountains of data I had collected, I attended an educational retreat with four other members of our building. The purpose of the retreat was for us to reflect and plan some 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 occur. There was at least one aspect of this project that provided an opportunity for students’ potentials to emerge.

As every teacher has experienced, it is almost impossible to design a lesson or unit that gets EVERY student in the class excited about learning. Although it may sound like this project captured the interest of every student, not every student attacked this research with same amount of vigor and energy as others. While they all felt vested in the project, and completed the work that was required of each student, some seemed to believe in it more. For example, some students were disappointed on days when we did not devote any class time to the project. Others appeared to enjoy certain aspects of the project, and were willing to do extra work if needed. For example, some 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 trends in the age, race and gender of those who took the survey. Overall, students viewed 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 them girls down the hall need to know what’s up!”

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

Another development I noticed during this project was 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 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 this spring. They brought a lot of prior 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 they had a lot to share about the subject with the other students in our building. Even prior to gathering their data, a group of students was asking if they could go speak to the younger students in our building. Based on some of the behavior they had witnessed, they assumed that the younger students in the building needed the guidance of successful older students like themselves in order to avoid the same path that they had taken. They viewed it as a sense of responsibility to talk with “them girls down the hall.”

As they 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 to simply 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 for what she had accomplished. She also pointed out it would have been a lot easier had she not gotten pregnant.

The knowledge my students were creating also became visible to those outside of our classroom. It sparked an interest in the students who took part in the survey. As groups were presented with the survey, they asked my students why they 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 with the both building and district staff. Some of students’ parents also expressed interest in the project, asking to see the results when the students were finished.

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 jump to solutions regarding 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 aided 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 distribute and tabulate these surveys. This could become a project for future classes, however.

Another example of this desire to take action occurred while our building was hosting a meeting of teachers from Milwaukee and northern Illinois as part of the Accelerated School Project. As one of the coordinators of this meeting, I had arranged for a panel of former graduates of WLC to come and 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 be in attendance; I felt that they could benefit from listening to the former graduates. I also encouraged my current students to share their experiences with the group of teachers as well.

Two of my current students, however, felt that they did not receive the same opportunity to tell their stories as the graduates; they felt that they had just as much, if not more, to share as 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 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' 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 results of the project.

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

Increased Understanding of the Issue

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

"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 to me because it contradicts what they just said before, but it makes sense over all."

"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 also increased during this project. As shown in the statements above, their written responses at the end of the project were more multifaceted, highlighting the complex nature of the problem. All of the resources the students tapped—newspaper articles, websites, class discussions, small group work, the survey results, each other—came together to provide each student with a more complete understanding of dropouts.

At the beginning of the project, many felt that students who were at risk of graduating 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 students, indicated a strong desire to finish school and the importance of having a high school diploma. However, when they focused on younger students some of their ideas were reinforced by the findings from

the survey results. 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 important of graduating from school. This type of thinking was seen more often in the responses from younger students. Those who administered the survey, however, were surprised at how cooperative and well-behaved the younger students were during the visit to their classroom; this level of maturity was absent from their written responses, however.

This 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 into 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 high school. As I asked them to create a list of recommendations based on what they saw in the data, I observed that the students 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 class. Because they are not in class, they fall behind. Since they already do not feel comfortable in class, they will not seek out additional help from teachers in order to get caught up. Eventually, they end up getting so far behind that they stop attending.

It is interesting to note how much importance they placed on the relationship between students and the adults in school. One reason for this importance may be because of 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 they began high school with are not, they pointed to the changes they made once they began attending WLC. They pointed out that because of the intimacy of program, teachers got to know each student better and were able to provide for one-on-one attention. They also credited the other support staff in the building and some of the adults they interacted with at their school-sponsored job placements for their recent successes.

The value the students placed on a strong student-teacher relationship mirrors 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 importantly, 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” (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 race and gender-matched role models impact student achievement. In her 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” (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 more 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 them; I witnessed how powerful this level of authenticity was to the students. I also learned what it takes to organize a research project that will result in student action outside of the classroom. Although there are some things I wish I would have done differently—such as utilizing more community resources—I was pleased with what occurred during this project. I look forward to working on similar projects with my future students.

Like my students, I also increased my understanding about the issue of high school drop outs. Many of their findings helped inform me about what current students were thinking about their educational opportunities. It was fun to help them as they sifted through the same type 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 this problem; 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 experts!

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 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 draft of a graduation speech by a Hmong student in class. In the speech he reflected on his high school experience prior 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 he was often marked absent by a teacher, even though he was present. It turns out 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 attending. Organizing specific student research 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.

Lastly, 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. As an inquiry project, it is impossible to know exactly what students will find. At the same time, the unknown answers make this type of a project all the more exciting to both teacher and student.

References

- Croniger, R., & Lee, V. (2001). Social capital and dropping out: Benefits to at-risk students of teachers' support and guidance. Teachers College Quarterly, 103 (4), 548-581.
- Erickson, D. (1999, March 11). Nearly 1 in 5 Madison students don't graduate. Wisconsin State Journal, A1.
- King, R. (2003, December 7). Problem: Teens shun academic achievement. Wisconsin State Journal, B1.
- Massialas, B. (1996). Criteria for issues-centered content selection. In R.W. Evans and D.W. Saxe (Eds.), Handbook on teaching social issues. Washington DC: National Council of Social Studies.
- Westheimer, J., & Kahn, J. (2002). What kind of citizen? The politics of educating for democracy. Paper presented at the American Political Science Association annual meeting, Boston, MA.
- Zirkel, S. (2002). Is there a place for me? Role models and academic identity among white students and students of color. Teachers College Quarterly, 104 (2), 357-376.

Appendix A: E. Shager, 2004
Survey Statements Developed by Students

Students in Madison drop out of school because:		Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
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 HS.	SA	A	N	D	SD
5	They don't find classes interesting.	SA	A	N	D	SD
6	They don't feel like they belong in school.	SA	A	N	D	SD
7	It's not "cool" to be a good student/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 child's life.	SA	A	N	D	SD
10	There is a lack of communication between school & home.	SA	A	N	D	SD
11	Schoolwork is not challenging enough.	SA	A	N	D	SD
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

Appendix B: E. Shager, 2004

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?

--

What motivates you to stay in school and NOT become a dropout? Why?

--

If you could change anything that would help keep students in school, what would it be? Why?

--

(USE SPACE ON BACK IF YOU WISH TO WRITE MORE ABOUT ANY OF THE QUESTIONS)

Appendix C: E. Shager, 2004

Survey Results/Raw Numbers

	Students in Madison drop out of school because:	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total
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 HS.	19	54	29	7	7	116
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 & 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
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

Appendix D: E. Shager, 2004

Survey Results/Percentages

	Students in Madison drop out of school because:	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
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 HS.	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%
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 & 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%

Appendix E: E. Shager, 2004

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

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 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.