Identifying the Characteristics of Students at Risk: A Psychological Approach

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Abstract

This paper Titled Identifying the Characteristics of Students at Risk, adopted a psychological approach to critically examine the characters of students at risk, of likely dropping out of school. A psychological approach is a method used to monitor and study people's behaviors, predict their next line of actions and possibly avert negative exhibitions and equally provide means of reviving and restructuring the mindsets of others into a more desirable behavior. The paper also identified some of the reasons and causes why students drop out of school. Ways of aiding students at risk, the resultant effects of students dropping out of school and it negative impacts to the society was reviewed. The paper limited the case of students at risk to Nigeria context, possible ways of addressing this menace was discussed and recommendations based on teachers' role was made.

Introduction

The increasing rate of school dropouts among students of all categories at both rural and urban schools in Nigeria is of great concern to all stakeholders in the society. Parents in both rural and urban areas lay blames on the school system for being responsible in making the students to be at risk, while the government attributes most of the factors to poor parental care and poor school management but the schools system holds the parents and the government to low esteem for not providing an enabling environment for the students to learn hence the cause for students being at risk.

Due to these controversies, academic psychologists have been deeply rooted in the course of investigating the factors responsible for this ugly menace, the intricacies associated with this factor is negatively impacting the Nigerian society. Some of the issues generated by students at risk factor over the years ranges from low academic performance, low economic output, increase in social vices such as stealing, rapping, cultism, drug abuse, political thugs, disrespectful youths, lazy dependant youths and militancy etc. Based on the issues enumerated and there negative effects in our society, it is imperative to define who are students at risk.

According to Slavin (1989), students at risk are students with very high probabilities of not being able to acquire the minimum academic skills necessary for the success of adulthood in the society. He further explained that most of such students drop's out of school before attaining high school graduation while others graduate without basic skills in both arts and sciences. These classes of individuals are unequipped to make useful and meaningful contributions to their immediate family and the society at large.

Lee and Burkam (2003); U.S Dept of Edu. (1992) supposed that most reasons for students' school dropout are largely dependent of the student itself than the school roles.

Against these controversies, is the need to critically examine the characteristics and possible causes of students at risk in the school.

Characteristics Account of Students at Risk

Students at risk are the students basically, the learners with special educational needs. Most of these learners have learning disabilities, emotional and behavioral even physical problems that interfere their normal learning, as such affects their academic achievements. Some others may be affected by cultural backgrounds which may oppose that of the school cultures, while others could be students whose home backgrounds do not match the school curriculum. Religion factors cannot be undermined for contributing to students being at risk.

Jeanne (2008) postulated that most students at risk cuts across all socioeconomic levels, but the children of the poor and single-parents families are more vulnerable to leaving school before high school graduation. In a similar vein Collins (2018) argued that male students are more of the victims than their female counterparts, and those children in the most interior hamlets, over crowed cities, students of parents with English language barriers, Islamic religion fanatics are the highest among the class of school dropouts.

Jeanne (2008) in (Hardre & Reeve, 2003; Miller, 1995; National Research Council, 2004; Roderick & Camburn, 1999; Rumbenger, 1995; Steinberg, Blinde, & Chan, 1984) listed the following school dropout characteristics:

1. *History of academic failure*. This implies that students who drop in school usually have low academic performance right from when they started school. Jeanne's view is in tandem with that of Alexander, Entwisle, & Dauber (1995) and Garnier, Stein, & Jacobs (1997) whom concluded in their studies that students with ineffective reading and studying skills has low achievement score while Battin et al (2000); Jozefowics et al (1994); Wilkinson and Frazer (1990) postulated that students with poor academic achievement mostly repeat class and fervently drops out of school.

2. *Older age in comparison with younger classmates.* On the fact that poor academic achievers do repeat class, they also are likely to be a beat older than the class age. Gottfredson, Fink, & Graham, (1994) and Rumberger, (1995) in Jeanne (2008), concluded that older students gets distracted when learning with younger students whom they are more mature in terms of physical and social context, their findings revealed that such students sees school unattractive and drops out of shame.

3. *Emotional and behavioral problems.* Potential school dropouts have less academic confidence than the academic vibrate students. According to Finn (1991), Garnier et al (1997) in Jeanne (2008), this class of students are likely to be characterized by indiscipline, use of drugs and other criminal activities.

4. *Frequent interaction with low-achieving peers*. As the adage states, that birds of the same feather flocks together. School dropouts (low academic achievers), locates their peers to form anti-social peer. Battin-pearson eat al (2000), Hymel, Comfort, Schonert-Reichl, and McDougall (1996) in Jeanne (2008) explained that such peer argues that school is not important therefore distracting other learners attention from academic pursuit.

5. *Lack of psychological attachment to school*. Students who stand at the risk of academic failures intentionally absent themselves from school activities, instead they feel joy when they engage in extracurricular activities. Christenson and Thurlow (2004) confirmed that students with low academic achievement are always dissatisfied with school programs.

6. *Increasing dis-involvement with school*. Many school dropouts doesn't show the characters of dropping out of school on time, they always give excuses of not been in school, using health complaints, most of them intentionally misbehave, they fight, steal and abuse teachers in other to be suspended. However these characteristics are not mandatory of students dropping out of school as some other factors may include two-parental home, broken homes etc which the child will remain in school actively before dropping out. (Jeanne in Janoz, Le Blanc, Boulerice & Tremblay, 2000).

Factors that necessitates students dropping out of school in Nigeria
There are several reasons why students drop out of school in Nigeria, while some enjoys good health, wealthy family, complete parental care, peer courage etc. Others face stunting challenges. Few of this shall be discoursed in this paper in the following order;

1. *Poor home background:* Most students are very brilliant and interested in education but are cut half way by their parents due to economic poverty. Some children go to school with empty stomach, as such gets distracted during lesson. Most of this class are been withdrawn by their parents due to inability of paying school fees, buy books, feed the child, at the end the child is forced to drop and join trading, handiworks or even waste at home doing nothing.

2. *School location:* Children, whose parents stay afar from school locations, are given to close or extended family relatives who stay close to the school location to live with, so the child can have close access to the school environment. The said minders turns the child to house-help, overloading the child with bulky activities at home sometimes subjecting the child to street hocking, at the end the child drops out of school, in the case of female children, some are been impregnated prematurely while male folks joins criminal gangs.

3. *Ill health condition.* As most homes with national/state and multi-national cooperation enjoys free medical/national health insurance schemes, others suffer great health challenges without proper care. Most Nigerian students drop out of school due to health issues of either the parents or of the child.

4. *Peer influence.* Very good children with good home training can be influenced negatively by friends. This situation is most common at the secondary and tertiary level, at this level the student claims independent as an adolescent or full adult. Very brilliant scholar may join cult group and loss focus of education, due to the heat from rival cult group; they abandon the school as a dropout fellow.

5. *Drug influence.* Nigerian schools are witnessing a new trend in the school system where students get involved in several social vices. Research have shown that children between the age of 13-30 years are the critical ages involved in the excessive use of drugs in the school. These drugs are classified as tramadol, marijuana, whisky, gin, raw gin, cocaine, heroin, toilet menthol, adhesive gums among others. Students involved in

this illicit act ends up stealing, raping, destroying of public properties and political thugs, atlas constitute public nuisance after dropping out of school.

6. ***Demand for resource control.*** This factor is seen all over Nigerian regions, in the South-South of the Niger Delta, young youths of school age drops out of school to pursue resource control otherwise called Niger-Delta militants, in the East, school age children abandon school to fight for secession of Biafra Nation. The Northern region is not left behind as school age children abandon school to fight for religion course in the name of Bokoharam.

7. ***Religion influence.*** Students drop out of school due to religion dogmatism, where some parents feel that the school curriculum is not in consonance to their cultures.

8. ***Financial quest.*** Students drop out of school due to early quest for money. This situation is more prevalence in the East, where children of traders compare the kind of money their illiterate parents make in business, and sees schooling as a waste of time; as such opt out of school to join business.

9. ***School curriculum.*** The school curriculums some times are too bulky and the learners' interest is not considered. This kind of curriculum creates apathy on the learners; this scenario can lead to students dropping out of school.

10. ***Teacher/Student interpersonal relationship.*** This situation is more common among the junior secondary and the senior secondary school age. Some students hates their teacher, some dislikes his teaching pattern while some teachers antagonize students for personal reasons; among the female folks are sexual differences while the male students complaints of financial demands as assignment fees, handiwork fees among other factors that could lead to the students dropping out of school.

11. ***High school fees.*** Parents who stays in the city may loss their job, and may not be able to continue the payment of high school fees, sometimes the government owned schools charge some unnecessary fees that parents cannot be able to afford even if Nigerian government claims providing free primary and secondary schools, however this factor may be linked to corruption and population increase.

12. ***Force majeure.*** Force majeure is any unforeseen event or circumstance that could lead to occupants relocating from their natural inhabitant to another place. This situation ranges from fire outbreak, flooding, war, community crisis among other factors. Students whose parents have such challenges are likely to drop out of school; hence most of the parents may not be able to reinstate their dependants/wards in school after been relocated due to hardship.

Possible means of Aiding Students at Risk in Nigeria
Having identified the characteristics and causes of students at risk, it is quite apt to also identify ways of helping the students at risk in the school system as underlined;

1. ***Identify the students at risk at the early stage:*** Teacher, Parents and all stakeholders in the education sector should join force in identifying students with low academic achievement, low self esteem, disruptive behaviors, and lack of involvement in school activities as indicators, and take necessary steps to avert the situation before they officially withdraw from the school. According to Brooks-Gunn, 2003; Christenson &

Thurlow, 2004; Mccall & Plemons, 2001; Ramey & Ramey, 1998 in Jeanne (2008), reported that early intervention and long-term support are effective to prevent students at risk from dropping out of school.

2. ***Creating a supportive and conducive classroom atmosphere:*** Teachers and schools management have the role of supporting the students at risk to be warmed by the school activities, care for them, communicate with them carefully and give to them a high respect and regards that will make them to be humble in school.

3. ***Make a curriculum that is relevant to students live and needs:*** The school curriculum should be able to address the students livelihood needs. According to Jeanne (2008), students are more likely to stay in school and most likely to learn and perform better in academics, if the curriculum is seen to be very relevant to their own cultural values, life experiences, capable of addressing their political and economic needs. Tate (1995), postulated that placing academic skills within the context of real-life tasks and students local environment will help to increase the relevance of students at risk.

4. ***Communicating very high academic values as expectation:*** Even if students at risk misbehaves they shouldn't be discarded, they should be encouraged knowing that no condition is permanent, that they still have the opportunities of picking up academically, they should be told success stories of others who made it after some setbacks. Anderson & Pellicer (1998); Garibaldi (1993); Ladson-Billings (1994); Alderman (1990); Maehr & Anderman (1993) in Jeanne (2008) explained that past knowledge and learning problems can be acknowledged but more important are the means of overcoming it by inducing into the learners the knowledge and skills they need for classroom success. That; focus should be on the students mastering important topics and skills rather than comparing the students at risk with other success prone classmates.

5. ***Provide extra academic supports:*** The teachers, school management and parents have a big role to play by providing extra moral class, extra skill activities, after lessons, computer training, story hour, prayer time and other engagements that will help to pre-occupy the child positively.

6. ***Show students that they are the ones who have made success possible in their school carrier:*** Alderman (1990) in Jeanne (2008), stated that it is necessary after assisting students at risk achieve academically, and quite important to make them realize and recognize their inputs for becoming academically successful. And he gave this example!

"Your essay about recent hate crimes in the community is very powerful. You've given the topic considerable thought, and you've clearly mastered some of the techniques of persuasive writing that we've talked about this semester. I'd like you to think seriously about submitting your essay to the local paper for its editorial page. Can we spend some time during lunch tomorrow fine-tuning the grammar and spelling?".

7. ***Encourage and facilitate identification with school system:*** Fredrick, Blumenfield, & Paris (2004) opined that most students at risk are less at risk of dropping out of school if they have an emotional feelings and attachment to their school as they mostly believe that they are equally important members of the school community, that such students

requires extra encouragement to become involved in the academic and social activities of the school. He further suggested the following strategies;

- Use of instructional techniques that will promote students active classroom involvement. (Discussion methods, cooperative learning etc.).
- Encourage participation in athletic programs, extracurricular activities, and student government. That these strategies are very important especially when students are having academic difficulties, because they provide an alternative ways of experiencing school achievements.
- Carry the students along in terms of policy making and management's decisions.
- Give the students some high level of management responsibility and positions. (Class prefects and program coordinators etc).
- Newmann (1998) and Sanders (1996) advocated for positive rewards for students at risk. (Field trips, gifts, praise etc).

Conclusion

Conclusively, hence most students at risk for poor academic performance are in diverse group, and differs in individual's set of needs and challenges, there is no single strategy that can address all the needs and challenges till these class of persons attain higher graduation of learning school, however it is imperative to note that effective classroom management and practices can be of help extensively. Janosz et al (2000), noted that creating a productive classroom environment can feature and offer a good and commendable encouragement and supports to the students at risk.

It is worthy to note that for Nigerian nation to ameliorate the issues raised on the falling standards of its educational system as well to address and prevent its economy from collapsing due to lack of useful youth manpower, the issues of the students at risk in Nigeria has to be treated with keen interest. The issues of non-chant attitudes of our youths has called for concerns, apathy to schooling, increasing rate of criminal activities, lack of ethical conducts in all sectors of leadership, political instability, poor value system, bribery and corruptions, lack of equity and justice among other challenges can be linked to those whom dropped out of school, those whom graduated half baked, those who bought certificates without attending school and those who distracted others from studying well in school. Therefore, a more psychological approach and guidance/counseling experts has to be given a speedy consideration and priority in our schools system to address this ugly menace.

Recommendations

Based on the issues discussed, the characteristics of students at risk identified, and some causes of students being at risk of dropping out of school, the following recommendations are made to help reduce the rate of students at risk;

1. Adapt instructional strategies that suit their current skills and knowledge.
2. Give the students at risk relatively structured task, and teach them how to accomplish the task.
3. The teachers should help in developing a better reading and studying skills and strategies that best befits their standards.
4. Develop mastery level techniques that they can master before introducing a more difficult task.
5. Evaluate their performance more frequently than others and improve on their areas of challenge.

6. Adhere to a one-on-one teacher/students relationship and interaction.
7. Inculcate visual learning and practical activities to keep them busy and happy.
8. Ensure after school structured homework.
9. Government and stakeholders should endeavor making the school environment attractive for students' activities.
10. Graduate employments and empowerments have to be in place and attractive to motivate the students as a reason of completing the school with excellent performance etc.
11. Above all the school curriculum should be modified to address the basic needs of the learner and that which shall make them relevant to the society, concisely.

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