Chapter 24

Gifted Learners Who Drop Out: Prevalence and Prevention

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Abstract Gifted dropout rates vary depending on how one defines both “giftedness” and “dropping out.” Recent empirical studies seem to agree that in contrast to allegorical estimates of 20% or higher, relatively few academically gifted learners actually leave high school without a diploma. However, dropping out clearly can be a serious problem for some gifted individuals. This chapter situates dropping out of school as an extreme manifestation of academic underachievement. Reviews of recent and emerging scholarship are considered to estimate the magnitude of this problem and to suggest possible interventions that may minimize the likelihood of the academically able learner dropping out.

Keywords Dropout · Underachievement · Diversity · Gifted · Prevalence · Latino

Introduction

A relatively large body of research has examined general education students who drop out of school, and there appears to be general agreement about the factors that place students at risk of dropping out. Dropping out can have lifelong consequences for students across a variety of indicators, with an especially high impact in students’ lifelong earning power and related outcomes (e.g., Feller, 2006).

High academic ability and/or high academic achievement appear to offer a strong protective effect against dropping out (Battin-Pearson, Newcomb, & Abbott, 2000). Ability in mathematics may be particularly salient (Matthews, 2006a). One might suspect based on these findings that academically gifted students would rarely if ever drop out of school. Popular wisdom also would suggest that highly able students face few academic difficulties in public school settings. Research shows, however, that this rosy outlook is likely inaccurate.

Numerous studies have documented the presence of academic underachievement among academically gifted student populations (Colangelo, Kerr, Christensen, & Maxey, 1993; Moore, Ford, & Milner, 2005; Spiers Neumeister and Hébert, 2003; Ziegler & Stoeger, 2003). Because academic underachievement is a continuum of behaviors (McCoach and Siegle, 2003; Reis & McCoach, 2000) that ranges up to and includes leaving school entirely, it seems reasonable to view dropping out as an end point in this continuum (Matthews, 2006a).

Despite widespread interest in gifted education regarding socio-emotional issues and underachievement, there have been relatively few empirical investigations of gifted dropouts. This state of affairs may be due in part to the difficulty of locating such individuals, who appear to be scarcer than is popularly believed (Matthews, 2006a). However, even if relatively few highly able students drop out, the loss of potential that these students represent may have consequences beyond what their numbers alone would suggest.

Below I describe some of the salient measurement issues related to giftedness and dropping out. Then, I briefly discuss a poorly supported estimate of dropout prevalence that has become widespread in gifted education circles, before reviewing three recent empirical studies on this issue. I conclude by presenting some...
ongoing studies and emerging research questions regarding gifted students who drop out.

Completing Secondary School in the United States

In the United States, there are a handful of options for completing public school. Traditionally, students who have satisfied all the relevant requirements are awarded a high school diploma. Requirements for receiving a diploma generally include some measure of satisfactory academic performance, which is customarily assessed in the form of passing grades received for academic and non-academic coursework. There also may be more than one diploma option offered within a single school, as (for example) general versus college preparatory, which reflect the curriculum and level of courses taken.

Some amount of mandatory attendance may also be required, such as having fewer than 10 unexcused absences during a 180-day attendance year. In practice, students who have met attendance requirements but not academic ones are sometimes allowed to participate in graduation ceremonies, but these students receive a certificate of attendance rather than a diploma.

In recent years, US schools have increasingly come to rely upon standardized criterion-referenced tests as an additional graduation requirement. Generally, students are afforded multiple opportunities—five, for example—to obtain a passing score on these examinations. Students who have satisfactory grades and attendance without passing scores on the high school graduation exam are not awarded a diploma. Students meeting grade and test performance criteria but not attendance requirements may not be allowed to graduate, although attendance requirements and practices vary somewhat across states as well as within them.

A handful of US schools now offer the International Baccalaureate diploma, which is recognized in many countries outside the United States. This option is often considered suitable for gifted learners (Shaunessy, Suldo, Hardesty, & Shaffer, 2006; see also the IB Diploma Programme web site at http://www.ibo.org/diploma/).

Students who do not receive a high school diploma through any of the options described above, for whatever reason, have an option commonly known as the GED (see, for example, http://www.pueblo.gsa.gov/cic_text/education/ged/ged.htm). The Tests of General Educational Development (GED Tests) are a 7 1/2-hour battery that includes subject area tests in language arts (both reading and writing), social studies, science, and mathematics. The GED Tests are offered in English, Spanish, and French editions. Test questions are primarily multiple-choice format, but some subject areas of the test also include constructed-response or essay questions. On passing these tests, the individual is awarded a GED credential certifying that he or she has attained the subject matter knowledge and skills associated with high school completion. Many employers and higher education institutions in the United States recognize the GED credential as the equivalent of a traditional high school diploma.

Descriptive Considerations

Dropouts

There are a variety of ways that dropout rates may be calculated. Woods (1995) describes four common methods. Event rates count students who leave high school each year, and may count the same student multiple times over different years. The status rate is a cumulative rate that is higher than the event rate, as it gives the proportion of all individuals in the population who have not completed school (or were not enrolled) at a given point in time. Status rates might count as dropouts some adults who never attended high school, or who immigrated to the United States as adults, as well as counting students who dropped out of private schools; these individuals would not be included in other types of commonly reported estimates. Cohort rates describe the number of dropouts from a cohort (a group made up of a single age or grade of students) over a set period of time, and may be thought of as event rates collected across two or more years. Finally, the high school completion rate indicates the percentage of all individuals of a particular age who have received a high school diploma or equivalency certificate. In such completion rates (also called graduation rates), those students who have successfully ob-