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Obstacles to Graduation: A Look at Poverty's Effect on Academic Work

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Abstract

Our presentation was aimed at providing a thorough overview of concepts that interfere with an adolescent's ability to stay in school and graduate. Additionally, the presentation addressed what other factors of poverty, such as risk-taking behaviors (e.g., marijuana use, binge drinking, or sexual activity), might carry over into college life and affect a student's academic career. Variables connected to family community, family responsibilities, and adolescents' self-esteem were described as well. Finally, the presentation discussed factors that play into a student's willingness to seek out college campus resources for support. With this paper, we hope to outline variables that lead to academic drawbacks within our youth and to raise awareness about the multi-faceted phenomenon of retention of students.

Introduction

In a world where college dropouts, divided family systems, and increasing risk behavior are common issues, we as professionals in the field of human services are called to encourage and support young adults to thrive. The more stressors affecting the family system, the more likely an adolescent will be adultified in some way to fulfill family needs. This can also lead to detriments in the adolescent's developmental trajectory and contribute to youth's shame-proneness (Wells and Jones, 2000). On the other hand, there may also be positive outcomes related to the adultification of adolescents. The experience gained when adolescents support and assist their families is unique in its opportunity to promote responsibility and reflect closer families that care for and help one another (Goodnow, 1988; Goodnow & Lawrence, 2001). This paper will examine what variables, correlated to adultification, serve as obstacles to students' graduation.

Aspects of Adultification

In Burton's (2007) definition of adultification, she alludes to the prospect of exposure to various forms of precocious knowledge. This definition includes the witnessing of situations and acquiring knowledge that are advanced for the adolescent's age and may include alcohol use, drug use, and sexual activity. In many families in poverty, adultification may entail shared responsibility, as families may have to pull together to keep the system intact. Notwithstanding, positive consequences of adultification are noted in a variety of domains. Whether adultification is entirely negative or positive is not clear, but the purpose of this study is to address uncertainty and take a closer look at some of the variables that might interfere with a student's ability to graduate.

Family Structure

Parents' marital status is an important correlate to consider when it comes to adultification because it affects adolescents' family experiences and alters family roles that many will later hold as adults (Larson, Wilson, Brown, Furstenberg, & Verma, 2002). Research indicates that adolescents and young adults from married, biological parent families feel younger and are less likely to consider themselves adults than young people with other family structures (Benson & Furstenberg, 2007; Johnson, Berg, & Sirotizki, 2007a, b).

In a study about the effects on subjective age, Benson and Johnson (2009) found that adolescents from two-biological-parent families were less likely to report feeling like adults all of the time in early adulthood compared to those from all other family types, with the exception of two-adoptive-parent families. In comparing stepfamilies to two-biological-parent families, family processes were more likely to predict who would identify as an adult. Specifically, youth from stepfamilies had 44% greater odds of perceiving themselves as adults. Although high conflict families predicted self-identifying as an adult, family closeness limited it. Furthermore, research by Farris, Smith, and Weed (2007) indicated that single mothers and their children are exposed to a multitude of risks, and this exposure makes it essential to consider their potential impact on development. Adolescents within these homes are more likely to be performing adult work to help their single parents.

Neighborhood Factors

Neighborhood factors may also interact with family structure to determine if the adolescent may assume adult roles. Casper and Smith (2004) suggested that the perception of neighborhood safety was related to parents' choices to leave children alone. They found that parents' perception of neighborhood safety plays a role in the choice of self-care over supervised care, such that a perception of medium safety or better predicted a parent would be more likely to allow their children to care for themselves, rather than to have relatives care for their children, than were parents who considered the neighborhood to be unsafe or of low safety. Parents were also more likely to choose self-care over care by nonrelatives when they perceived their neighborhoods to be moderately safe or better, rather than unsafe.

Hill et al. (2008) found that human capital enrichment (as measured by the presence of computer or dictionaries and attendance at extra lessons or classes), as well as neighborhood safety, was strongly associated with household structure and was especially lacking in households headed by single mothers. These households are especially likely to be in worse neighborhoods, so parents may have adolescents stay busy with household work in an effort to keep them out of trouble when they cannot be present. Therefore, neighborhood safety may contribute to the adultification of an adolescent in that it may be a mechanism by which parents keep children safe.

Continued Caregiving

Social activity outside the home also seems to be maintained in adolescents who place an importance on helping their family. There has been no difference in involvement in social relationships with other youth among adolescents who placed more importance on family obligations and those who valued assisting, respecting, and following the advice of family

members spent just as much time with peers as did other adolescents (Fuligni, Tseng, & Lam, 1999).

Alternatively, family needs such as providing sibling care, providing elderly care, work to contribute to family finances, speaking to bill collectors and social service workers, and serving as an emotional confidant, often superseded the child's needs and could become inappropriate in certain conditions (Burton, 2007). The ability of learning to care for another early in life may promote empathy and prosocial interpersonal skills but may also compromise other aspects of youth development by engendering feelings of anxiety, insecurity, and low self-esteem (Hetherington, 1999). Earley and Cushway (2002) have noted that adultified children usually grow into adulthood and continue to serve others, choosing careers in helping professions like human services.

Cultural Aspects

Researchers have suggested that there are good arguments for expecting differences in the behaviors and outcomes of adolescent children of different racial and ethnic groups (e.g., McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). For Asian and Latino families, a collectivist orientation and familism play significant roles in shaping adolescents' development (Fuligni et al., 1999). Traditions within the Asian culture emphasize family solidarity, respect, and commitment to the unit, family, or community (Ibrahim, Ohnishi, & Sandhu, 1997). Within Latino cultures, there is an emphasis on loyalty and respect for elders as well as more rigid traditional gender roles (Chilman, 1993). Consistent with these cultural values, adolescents are often asked to perform chores such as shopping for food, cooking meals, getting a part-time job, and assisting with the care of other family members (Caplan, Choy, & Whitmore, 1991).

In a study of 356 ethnically diverse children living in high-risk family systems characterized by urban poverty, maternal substance abuse, and maternal psychopathology, McMahon and Luthar (2007) explored the characteristics and potential consequences of caretaking burden of children. Adultification was also correlated with having an African American heritage and being male. As society becomes more tolerant of crossing gender lines in behavior, adolescent roles may cross traditional boundaries. For male children, emotional caretaking and childcare duties may encourage a more androgynous orientation (Jurkovic, 1998). The child's household work may also be an initiation into adult gender roles (White & Brinkerhoff, 1981). In some cultures, like the African American culture, housework is seen as more gender egalitarian and is expected to be performed by both male and female adolescents.

In African American families, the involvement of boys seems to be the cultural norm, and more importantly, African American mothers, possibly out of necessity, had instilled in their sons an alternative view of masculinity (Penha-Lopes, 2006). Although previous research work suggested that females would be more likely to perform adultified tasks, it is likely that this association is moderated by culture. Specifically, boys may be more likely to be adultified in African American families than European American families.

Additionally, adultified behaviors may be especially likely with regard to immigrant families. Parents who bring their children to the United States often rely on their learning the English language and translating for the family. This translating often has the effect of exposing the adolescent to adult knowledge, termed precocious knowledge in Burton's (2007) model.

Examples of *cultural brokering* include translating documents from government agencies, school, and employment agencies or prospects, arranging doctor visits, answering the telephone, and explaining to the parent when someone is speaking English (Buriel, Perez, De Ment, Chavez, & Morgan, 1998; Orellana, Dorner, & Pulido, 2003; Trickett & Jones, 2007).

Method

We hypothesized that issues within the family system, such as an illness, disability, abusing of substances, arrest, death or loss of job, can interfere with a student's ability to graduate. Furthermore, we hypothesized that students who come from an unsupportive and irresponsible family unit, in regard to academics, will not be likely to graduate. Additionally, we expected that the safer the neighborhood, the more likely the adolescent will be adultified, and that neighborhood status will interact with parental marital status. Our last hypothesis included a student's self-esteem and belief in ability to excel.

Data from the National Longitudinal Study of Freshmen was used to examine these variables. Participants (N = 3924) completed the survey, for an overall response rate of 86%, which by the standards of survey research is very high, particularly for a long (2+ hours) face-to-face interview that for all intents and purposes was unpaid (respondents received a token payment of $15 for participating). The final sample included 959 Asians, 998 Whites, 1,051 African Americans, and 916 Latinos. To be eligible for inclusion in the sample, a respondent had to be enrolled at the institution in question as a first-time freshman and be a U.S. citizen or resident alien. Foreign and returning students were excluded from the sample. With quantitative analysis software, Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), variables were compared and analyzed.

Results

Many of our findings were consistent with what we already established about poverty. Financial issues, loss of parental job, death, or trouble with the law all contributed to loss and to student's inability to be academically successful. Additionally, 52% of students who did not graduate experienced a major life event. It was not only family factors that contributed to leaving college or not graduating in 6 years but also neighborhood factors as well as how often students visited home during college. Additionally, this study found that, even though support services such as counseling, tutoring, financial aid, and food pantries/transportation do exist on college campuses, students did not report having taken advantage of those services.

In our presentation, educators, students, and human service professionals discussed a variety of ways that we can help these students access the services that might help counteract the findings in these studies. Students commented that often they are told about available services in the beginning, but as time progresses, they do not recall all of the services that were introduced. They suggested more reminders of these services by professors who thought they could benefit may be more effective than a one-time orientation. We also discussed that students benefited from being reminded that their fees already paid for these services, so they should use them to help when needed.

Educators shared stories about checking in with students regularly, especially when we note changes or are told that family issues back home have started to interfere with academic performance. Some educators shared that they often walk the student to the service they might need, ensuring that the student went to get the help. Students agreed that this might make them more likely to use the service if a professor walked them to the office. When that is not a possibility, other educators mentioned calling the office (counseling, tutoring, etc.) while the student was in front of them and telling them that you were sending a student to them or setting an appointment. Also discussed was the idea of being trauma informed and more aware of the issues our students face. This could be incorporated into the way we interact with students.

Conclusions

As professionals and workers in the field of human services, we want to promote physical and emotional wellness, rich educational experiences, and bring hope to those who seek our services within this population. Every interaction is a chance to connect students to our college/university and to let them know that other students have family, past, and current issues that may interfere with academic performance. Familial obligations that are extended into college can be addressed and incorporated into the advising we do with our students.

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