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It just made me feel like I'm not even going to try anymore: Academic Hopelessness in Youth Narratives about Dropping out of High School

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"It just made me feel like I'm not even going to try anymore":
Academic Hopelessness in Youth Narratives about Dropping out of High School

by
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Abstract

Many students experience repeated failures at school, which may lead them to drop out. I apply the psychological theory of learned hopelessness to a case study of two young women who dropped out of school. Through in-depth, qualitative interviews with these two low-income, minority teenagers, I wish to better understand the processes by which they lost hope in themselves and in school, and ultimately dropped out before obtaining a high school degree. Special attention was paid to the two students' family backgrounds, as well as their perceptions of the role of teachers in helping them stay in school or contributing to their decision to leave. The findings support the idea that repeated academic failures lead to a loss of hope and contribute to school-leaving, while also highlighting the importance of factors in students' personal and family lives. The findings suggest that interventions to help students facing extreme challenges (both outside of school and inside the classroom) are critical, in order to enable these students to persevere with their studies and reduce the chances of school-leaving.

According to the local newspaper of where I live now, *The Morning Call*, I suppose that my hometown of Albuquerque, NM is pretty dumb. On the front page of *The Morning Call's* Oct 9, 2011 issue was a picture of a man wearing a cap and gown, with the words "Where the SMART People Are" written across the image. Below that, the subheading read, "Lower Macugnie has the most educated residents; Allentown has the most high school dropouts" (McGill, 2011). In a glance, the heading equated schooling with smartness, and, by association, dropping out of high school with not being smart.
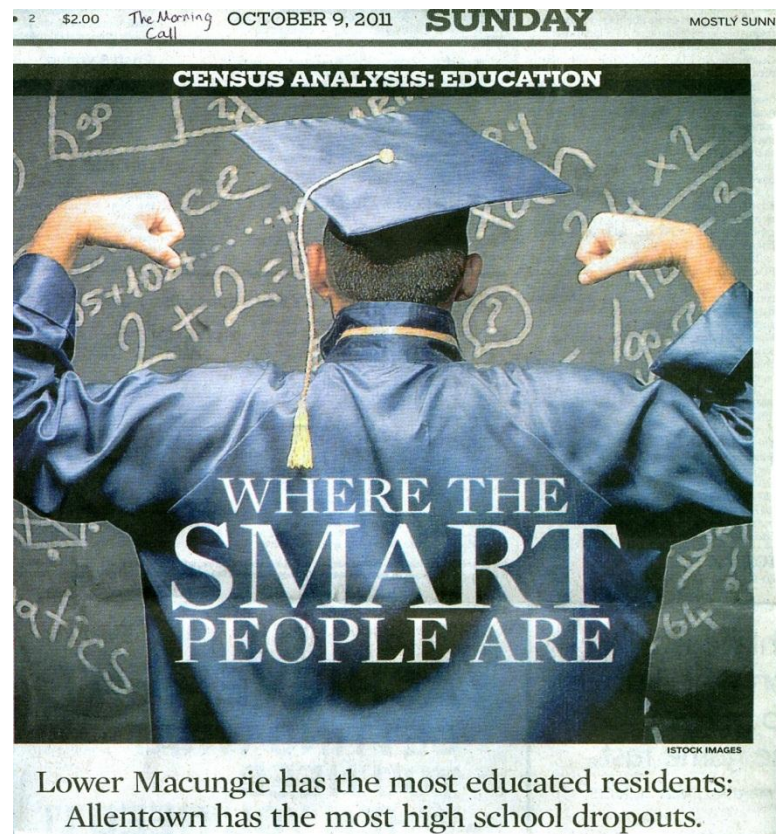

Illustration 1: The Morning Call *front page, October 9, 2011*

In unfortunate Allentown, where the smart people are *not*, 25% of the population 25 years or older does not have a high school degree (McGill, 2011). Compare this to Albuquerque, where only 66% of the people who entered Eldorado High School with me graduated four years

later (Contreras, 2005). In some high schools in the Albuquerque Public Schools district, less than 40% of students made it to graduation (Contreras, 2005).   These numbers refer to real people, to the kids whom I passed in hallways, next to whom I sat at lunch, and with whom I practiced on sports teams. I know them, and I know that Albuquerque, like Allentown, is not afflicted with some kind of contagious, city-wide dumbness.

Rather, behind dropout statistics are the stories of students, children and youth who gave up on the educational system and their possibility of succeeding within it. The psychological theories of learned helplessness and hopelessness depression (Abramson, Seligman, & Teasdale, 1978; Abramson, Metalsky, & Alloy, 1989) have been applied to academic failure (e.g., Au, Watkins, Hattie, & Alexander, 2009) to offer a germane perspective from which to understand the challenges faced by such students, who in the United States, disproportionately come from poor minority backgrounds (Berliner, 2005; Flono, 2010; Hothschild, 2003; Jacobson, Olsen, Rice, King, & Sweetland, 2001). As Mickelson (2003) points out, academic discrepancies along racial lines are so pervasive in the US that, rather than trying to look for specific instances of discrimination, it is more worthwhile to ask "When are racial disparities in education *not* discrimination?"

This approach highlights how systematic discrimination, more subtle and entrenched than isolated acts of racist individuals, creates an environment that makes it very difficult for minority students to succeed**.** Poor students – and, since race and class are highly correlated in the US (Berliner, 2003; Hothschild, 2003; Wilson, 2010; Fischer et al, 1996), poor students are often also minority students[1] – face additional challenges at school, whether due to the effects of

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[1] Indeed, some authors seem to conflate racial and class differences completely, switching between ethnic distinctions and income levels without distinguishing between the two or providing further explanation; see for

poverty itself (Berliner, 2003) or due to disadvantages that build on each other at several levels of the educations system, in the form of "nested inequalities" (Hothschild, 2003).

Students who struggle academically, especially those students who experience systematic discrimination due to their race and class, often feel that teachers and the school system in general have given up on them (Jonker, 2006; Kincheloe & hayes[2], 2007; Fine, 1991). If school has declared them hopeless, whether this is done explicitly, or more subtly through tracking or teachers' disapproving looks or comments, then how are these children to sustain their own hopes? In the words of Paulo Freire (1989), "Hopelessness is a form of silence" (p. 80). I wished to listen to the voices of these students to understand how they view their own successes or failures at school, and the feelings that result, focusing especially on hopefulness or hopelesness. In order to do so, I conducted case studies of two young women (no males wished to participate in the research) who had dropped out of school within the previous year. My research examined how these out of school teenagers view the school system, and what they perceive to be the factors that contributed to their decision to drop out of school.   In-depth interviews with these two young women, both from Puerto Rico and both experiencing precarious living situations due to poverty, were used to construct narratives of their own views of success and failure, of hopefulness and hopelessness.

Literature Review

The theory of learned hopelessness was premised on the observation that a prolonged, painful situation from which a person or animal cannot escape provokes a feeling of helplessness (Abramson et al., 1978). A little over a decade later, Abramson et al. (1989) revised the learned helplessness theory by examining the impact of a negative outcome expectancy combined with a

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[2] Please note that kecia hayes does not capitalize her name.

hopelessness expectancy; this expanded theory on learned hopelessness created a subtype of depression. According to this view, depression may occur when there is an expectation that bad outcomes will occur or that good outcomes will not occur, combined with an expectation that no possible response could prevent or change these expected negative outcomes. Alternately, if an event or situation is so severely negative as to create a feeling of hopelessness all by itself, the event, coupled with the state of hopelessness created by it, may provoke depression.

Abramson et al. (1989) argue that at least three types of inferences that people make can affect the development of hopelessness depression. These include inferences about:

1. why the negative or stressful event occurred (I failed the test because I'm stupid)

2. consequences of the event (I'll fail Chemistry and have to repeat my sophomore year)

3. the self as a result of the event (I'm a failure)

According to the theory, hopelessness depression is more likely to occur when people view a negative event as important and due to stable, global causes. If the situation leads to beliefs that the negative life event is *low in consensus* (everyone else passed the test), *high in consistency* (I always fail Chemistry tests), and *low in distinctiveness* (I fail tests in all my classes), then people are more likely to develop hopelessness. Situations of repeated failure in school, especially when students know that others, though they may be in different schools or even different cities, experience great academic success (Kozol, 1991), are thus of the kind likely to give rise to hopelessness.

Au et al. (2009) review the literature on hopelessness and academic outcomes in an effort to synthesize it into a workable theory of hopelessness as it applies to students' school performances. Negative experiences of struggling learners who experience repeated failure at

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school build upon each other to create a sense of helplessness, which combines with expected

negative outcomes for future schoolwork, to create hopelessness. Prolonged, repeated failures

lead to even poorer school achievement through a cycle of negative feedback from teachers, who

may view the student as inadequate, and from the student herself, who attributes the failure to her

own personal shortcomings and inability to succeed. Au et al. (2009) claim that hopelessness

may:

> be powerful in explaining the various beliefs and strategies that students develop when faced with learning tasks. There are many students within the educational system who have struggled long and hard in the face of significant and continuing difficulties, and failure for these students is a regular occurrence. It is our contention that the model of learned hopelessness presented herein can be a valuable mechanism not only for comprehending the conditions that may well give rise to students' resignation and academic withdrawal, but also the consequences that these unfavorable and painful experiences may wrought on learners' motivations and self-conceptions. (p. 114)

Building on Au et al.'s model, I believe that learned hopelessness provides a powerful lens

through which to examine the stories of young people who, having "struggled long and hard in

the face of significant and continuing difficulties," have given up on the school system and

dropped out. I also argue that, due to systematic discrimination in the United States, youth from

poor, minority backgrounds face especially "significant and continuing difficulties" (see

discussion above, e.g. Berliner, 2005; Hothschild, 2003; Mickelson, 2003). In addition, I review

literature about the role of teachers in helping these students, highlighting attitudes and behaviors

that are likely to ward of hopelessness. While the literature in this area, mostly drawing from

critical education theory, emphasizes the importance of teachers' efforts to understand and

appreciate students' lives outside the classroom, there is little research about whether students

agree with this idea. My findings fill this gap, indicating that the teenagers in this case study

believe that, had certain teachers been more willing to understand and accommodate the circumstances of their lives, they would not have left school.

Case studies about dropping out: Cross-cultural perspectives

Similarly to my research, Jonker (2006), focuses on the case studies of two young people who dropped out, focusing primarily on the trajectories that led the two students to leave school. Her research took place in the Netherlands and examined the cases of a young immigrant woman and a young native Dutch man. The Dutch educational system tracks students in secondary school, where level 2 vocational training programs constitute the lowest track. Half of the students who enroll in these programs leave before obtaining a degree, a problem which has garnered significant public attention in the Netherlands and which has persisted despite repeated attempts at educational reform. Jonker (2006) points out that much of the discourse among policy-makers, researchers and teachers attempting to explain dropouts focuses on students' lack of academic achievement, which in turn is attributed to factors in students' personal backgrounds such being poor or a non-native speaker of Dutch. She criticizes this approach for promulgating stereotypes about the inadequacies of certain social groups while at the same time obscuring an understanding of "what it means and takes to either be successful or fail at school in Dutch society" (p. 122) and for neglecting to dig deeper into the problem of dropouts misses such powerful structural forces as silencing (Fine, 1991) and tracking along gender and class lines Jonker (2006) thus constructed narratives, which she calls "full-colour snapshots, at best. They are multilayered snapshots, however, which permit us to look into the workings and emotions of inclusion and exclusion" (p. 123). She believes that:

> …young people's stories about their schooling experience reveal complex issues of power, cultural capital, and socio-economic status, usually concealed in the ideology of

meritocratic society with equal access and equal opportunities for all... I assert that young people's levels of agency in some school types are quite low. (p. 123)

Jonker (2006) highlights the important place of the educational experience in shaping young people's perceptions of the self. Adults, including teachers and administrators, approach student academic failure as an individual problem, pointing to lack of effort or motivation. Students, both those still in school and those who had dropped out, pointed to their own academic inadequacies as explaining their failures, though they also recognized the roles of teachers and the school system. Jonker (2006) reports similar feelings about personal versus structural attributions for failure among drop-outs and non drop-outs. The main difference she found was that students who stayed in school used positive, self-affirming refrains such as "I'll show them" or "I will go on," while drop-outs used refrains such as "I cannot remember anything I read... something must be wrong with my brains" or "I am not like them [teachers, successful students]. It has always been like that" (pp. 131-135). When teachers paid special attention to these failing students and provided accommodations to their unique needs, they experienced a significant improvement in their academic experiences, only to fail again when they were no longer in those teachers' classes.

Like in the Netherlands, teachers in the US played an important role for potential dropout students. Data from two case studies of Latino adolescents in the United States highlight the importance that teachers and school officials have to these struggling students. Rigidity in enforcing truancy rules or refusing extra help can make the difference between students graduating or dropping out. Aviles et al. (1999) found that the majority of the Latino students they interviewed had dropped out not because they had failed a large number of classes, but because their life situations prevented them from obtaining the necessary amount of credits to

graduate**.** One student explained that "school was hard and the teachers did not want to help;" others noted they would have remained in school if the school had been more flexible and cooperated with the students to find a way to let them complete coursework and get credit despite their disrupted schedules due to work. (p. 468). This contention is supported by Tapia's (1998) case studies of Puerto Rican families in Philadelphia, in which he relates the story of a teenager who became pregnant and, as a result of school missed due to medical complications, was forced to drop out. Her mother refused to accept the situation, however, and after a protracted battle with school administration, including the threat of filing a complaint with the school district, the principal found a way to allow this student to complete her work and graduate. This story illustrates that it was not the pregnancy per se, nor any lack of desire to remain in school on the part of the student or her family, that led to her almost leaving school. Rather it was the school system's response that would have forced her to abandon her studies.

Similarly, Aviles et al. (1999) refer to participants being "facilitated out" instead of dropping out, highlighting that abandoning their studies was less a choice the students made than an almost-inevitable result of the school system's treatment of them. This perspective echoes that of Fine (1991), whose findings showed that structural barriers to graduation at the school she studied were so great that it became the rule, rather than the exception, for poor minority students to drop out. Participants in Aviles et al. study (1999) reported negative expectations from teachers and administrators that followed them from primary to secondary school, including assumptions that Latino students would act badly; when further complications arose, such as pregnancy or a need to miss school due to their occupation as migrant harvesters, the lack of support essentially forced them out of school (p. 470). These findings support Fine's (1991)

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contention, discussed above, that for some students, especially those from poor minority backgrounds, dropping out become the rule rather than the exception due to the way the school system is structured to force them out.

As with the young woman in the Tapia (1998) study, in many cases, a pregnancy is involved in the processes by which female students leave school. However, assuming that leaving school is primarily a female problem would be a mistake, since, both nationally and in the state of Pennsylvania, slightly more boys than girls leave high school (Department of Educational Statistics, 2011; PA Department of Education, 2012). Several of the works cited in this project (Aviles, 1999; Fine, 1991; Jonker, 2006) found very similar reasons for school-leaving for male and female students, reasons that had to do with structural barriers to academic success and students' loss of faith in regard to the school system, instead of with specifically gendered experiences. The findings from Aviles et al. (1999) indicate that young women who left school due to pregnancies expressed two, apparently conflicting, sentiments: first, that the pregnancy offered a "way out" of school when they were already feeling hopeless about their abilities to succeed academically; second, that they did not want to leave school, but the lack of support for young parents forced them to drop out. While asserting that they were on their way to dropping out already, and at the same time wishing for more support that would have allowed them to stay in school while handling the responsibilities of being a parent, appear to be contradictory, ultimately both sentiments express a frustration with their schools. It is also likely that the young women interviewed did experience ambivalence, wishing to continue in school but feeling that they were unable to because they struggled academically and then became pregnant.

Institutional structures and student achievement

As the case studies above highlight, an essential factor in teaching to sustain hope is recognition of the larger processes that effect each student's achievement (Weiner, 1999; Jonker, 2006). Because teaching is fundamentally an activity between individuals, it is easy to lose sight of all the structural factors that shape what happens in any given classroom (Weiner, 1999); however, such a shortsighted view essentially penalizes students for broad social-based problems over which they have no control. Freire (1989) puts this concept in terms of the "oppressor" realizing the injustice of the social order and working with the "oppressed" to overturn it. Kincheloe & hayes (2007) and Murrell (2007) similarly insist that educators recognize that larger issues of power and privilege in society affect the individuals seen in the classroom, and, beyond recognizing them, must actively challenge assumptions and underlying themes that contribute to elements of structural violence. In *Pedagogy of Hope* (1994), Freire makes a similar call for the necessity of acting to oppose an unjust social order.

In the United States, examining the effects of political and social processes on individual students is especially salient in the case of Puerto Rican youth, due to the colonial relationship between the United States and Puerto Rico (Nieto, 2000). In addition, Puerto Ricans' unique legal status, unlike that of immigrants, allows families to engage in "circular migration," in which individuals or entire families go back and forth between Puerto Rico and the US mainland (Nieto, 2000). This "survival tactic" provides financial, psychological, and family support to parents (Tapia, 1998, p. 312) but may disrupt children's educational trajectories, as they switch between schools that have very different cultures, organizations, and operate in two different languages. This lack of stability further burdens students who also face severe inequalities that

stem from their situation in the linguistic, racial, and class schema of American society (Aviles et al., 1999; Tapia, 1998). Perhaps in an effort to challenge stereotypes such as those described by the participants in the Aviles study, there are several articles that present case studies of high-achieving Puerto Rican students (see, for example, Antrop-Gonzalez et al., 2004, 2005; Flores-Gonzalez, 1999; Garrett et al., 2010). While challenging the stereotype of the low-achieving Puerto Rican student, and understanding the strategies and resources that allow these exceptional young people to succeed are certainly worthy endeavors, I believe that it is also essential to pay attention to students who struggle and who give up on school. Focusing on their experiences highlights that, contrary to the dominant "epidemiological" model of school failure, it is not these students who are the problem, whether due to individual deficiencies or demographic risk factors (Aviles et al., 1999, p. 471). A close understanding of these students' experiences, such as that offered in case studies or ethnographies, highlights that instead it is the *system* that is the problem, creating situations of such inequality, such repeated struggle, that students feel nothing they do will allow them to pass their classes and graduate (Aviles et al., 1991; Fine, 1991), a feeling that may induce hopelessness (Abramson et al., 1978, 1989; Au, 2009).

Theorizing learned hopelessness in education

Conducted two decades ago, the findings of Michele Fine's (1991) ethnography of an urban high school remain salient today, especially considering the lack of recent similar research. While spending one year working at a "failing" school in New York City, Fine interviewed teachers, administrators, students who dropped out, students who stayed, and parents. Fine's book is certainly broader in scope than a case study, but her work highlights the importance of deeply understanding the experiences of individual students who leave the school system. She

found that students in this school almost universally experience repeated failure. Some students (in this school, less than half) manage to persist until graduation, while a greater number drop out. As a society, we traditionally view students who leave school as failing to persevere and succeed due to individual shortcomings. Fine found, however, that it is the system that pushes these adolescents out, making it the rule, rather than the exception, to leave school. One of the major ways in which the educational system pushes students out is by silencing them (and their teachers and parents), stifling opportunities to express concerns or challenges to the status quo.

Furthermore, Fine (1991) found higher rates of depression among those students who stayed in school than among dropouts. While this result seems shocking at first, another of her findings helps to explain it: students who stayed in school had a more obedient, cowed mindset and believed their struggles were their own faults. Dropouts, on the other hand, displayed more critical thinking and were more able to see the structural factors that contributed to their academic failure. While Fine (1991) was not specifically investigating hopelessness, the narratives she recounts, from students as well as teachers, administrators and parents - those tasked with helping students succeed - relate an enormous sense of hopelessness. Society and the school implicitly presented students with an agonizing dilemma: either attribute their struggles to their own shortcomings, and thus suffer from the hopelessness and, in some cases, depression caused by this attribution; or attribute their struggles to the structural factors that stand in the way of many poor, minority students' academic achievements, an attribution that led many to abandon a system that, they believed, set them up to fail. The tragic irony, of course, is that by leaving school without the credential of a high school diploma, these students ultimately perfectly conformed to the social/structural expectation of failure.

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Reaffirming the relevance of the theory of hopelessness to the experiences of poor minority students in school, Murrell (2007) presents three broadly-defined categories of students: those who persist in enduring schooling even though it has ceased to make sense to them, those who fall away and eventually check out of schooling activity, and those who persist because they find meaning, purpose, and academic identity (p. 11). While poor minority students are especially likely to fall into the first two categories due to class- and race-based inequalities that are built into social institutions, teachers have an essential role to play in bringing all of their students in to the third category (Murrell, 2007). It is striking that, although Murrell's (2007) work contains no references to the psychological literature on hopelessness, the first two categories of students that he describes align quite closely with negative mental states discussed earlier in the context of psychological research.

This expectation of failure for poor minority students may even be communicated by the very institution tasked with helping young people succeed. Lynn, Bacon, Totten, Bridges, and Jennings (2010) interviewed teachers and administrators at a low performing high school in order to examine their attitudes towards their African-American male students. The researchers found a pervasive attitude among school staff of hopelessness regarding these students' abilities to succeed. Certain teachers, identified as being especially invested in making a difference in the lives of African-American male students, were the subject of further interviews, during which they disclosed that they did not feel supported in their endeavors to help their students, rather, they viewed the school as hostile to any special efforts aiming to encourage the success of African-American male students.

Beyond school climate and teacher expectations, other institutional factors can contribute to hopelessness. Au, in addition to the theoretical contribution (2009) discussed earlier, has conducted research on secondary students in Hong Kong. Au et al. (2010) present a longitudinal study, focusing on 14-15-year-old students in the Hong Kong system of a highly competitive state examination system and harsh, punitive discipline at school. The authors found, unsurprisingly, that the most powerful predictor of low academic achievement was low prior achievement. The researchers posit that hopelessness is an outcome of lower achievement, and that its effects, including low engagement, are "a recipe for disengagement from schooling" (p. 135). They further find a statistically significant path from causal internality to hopelessness, which "reinforces the notion that the student takes on most responsibility for their failing" (p. 135). The researchers call on teachers and parents to recognize this downward spiral of low achievement and hopelessness; they suggest that teachers who make student engagement in learning a priority, who employ peer collaboration in the classroom, and who give positive feedback may be able to interrupt this vicious cycle.

In an earlier work, Au (1997) examines the hypothesis that repeated failure at school may lead to a feeling of hopelessness, which in turn may lead to hopelessness depression, (Abramson et al., 1989); which may then lead to even lower academic achievement. The study examined students aged 12-13 from two secondary schools in Hog Kong, one from the highest track, and one from the lowest. The majority of the students at both schools were middle- to low-SES and lived in public housing. The researchers found that prior academic failure was strongly associated with hopelessness, which in turn was moderately negatively correlated with scholastic self-esteem and achievement. Their analysis found that prior academic failure did not produce

low academic achievement at the time of the study by itself, rather, it created hopelessness and low scholastic self-esteem, and these situations contributed to continuing failure in school. The author also argues that the study highlights the negative effect on students of a norm-based assessment system that promotes competition, and advocates for a different approach that would validate all learners.

Critical Education and the Role of Teachers

Two books intended as resources for teachers in "urban" or "city" settings draw on reflective pedagogy (Weiner, 1999) and critical pedagogy (Kincheloe & hayes, 2007) to advise teachers trying to help students facing the kinds of challenges outlined above. Weiner (1999) in particular takes the position that teachers, especially those teaching in urban settings, must always be mindful of their words and actions, and must continually strive to take the students' and parents' perspectives into account. In this respect she draws on Dewey's (1966) work on Reflective Pedagogy. Attention to every interaction, though daunting, is important because the sum of these interactions creates a climate that can foster, or destroy, hope (Murrell, 2007). Kincheloe (2007) points out that when students experience few self-esteem damaging situations at school, they feel safe to experiment and inquire – in a word, to learn (in Kincheloe & hayes, 2007). When the opposite occurs, and painful experiences occur repeatedly, hopelessness arises, and learning becomes impossible.

Additionally, Weiner (1999) and Kincheloe and hayes (2007) offer clues about the characteristics of teachers who make great differences in the lives of their students, teachers who allow their students to hold on to hope and feelings of self-worth. For both authors, a deep comprehension of the students, including the circumstances of their lives, is a prerequisite for

such teaching. Kincheloe (2007) argues that teachers, especially those in urban settings, must

truly know their students. In a passage worth quoting at length, he makes a stirring call for the

necessity of teachers who are:

> empowered through their knowledge of their students and the contextual forces that shape
> them to understand their students as learners in all the diverse ways learning can take
> place. Such teachers are experts at developing curricula that account for the ways of
> learning and the contexts in which such processes transpire. Thus, critical urban teachers
> become explorers of the worlds of their students, their social and cultural contexts as well
> as the mindspaces produced by operating in such locales. Here individual identities are
> recognized, problems faced are understood, hopes and dreams are carefully taken into
> account in a larger effort to provide positive academic and social experiences. (in
> Kincheloe & hayes, 2007, p. 5)

In situations where major cultural or socioeconomic differences in background exist between

teachers and students, such understanding may have an especially profound impact on the

learning that occurs and the way students feel about class and themselves in it. Teachers cannot

assume that they know where the students are coming from, but must make a concerted effort to

familiarize themselves with students' ethnic, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds

(Weiner, 1999; Kincheloe & hayes, 2007; Murrell, 2007). Such an approach is reminiscent of,

and inspired by, Freire's (1989) call for educators to actually go the communities in which their

students live, to spend time observing and recording what they see, and then to reflect on their

own reactions to this exercise (p. 103-104). Such a step is necessary, according to Freirian

pedagogy, because learning must arise from the students' lived realities, as Kincheloe echoes

above.

In order for teaching to be effective in combatting hopelessness, however, it is not

sufficient to merely understand the students' realities. In addition, teachers must respect and

build upon the knowledge that students bring to class based on their own lived experiences

(Freire, 1994). Freire (1994) is careful to specify that this does not mean that students and teacher are forever locked in a cycle of reviewing lived experiences, but rather that educators recognize the legitimacy of students' "way of an understanding of the world" (p. 85), and that curricula take this way of understanding the world into account. In the present case study, I seek to appreciate participants' ways of viewing the world; more specifically, I wish to understand their perceptions of the school system and their own experiences within it.

Methodology

As the literature from psychology, sociology, and education has shown, the theory of learned hopelessness can be readily applied to the experiences of struggling students.   However, there is a gap in the reviewed literature when it comes to the student perspective, precluding a fuller understanding of why students become, or do not become hopeless. A deeper comprehension of how students view their own academic successes and failures, and of the factors that encourage or discourage hope, is essential to understanding the connection of hopelessness to educational failure. Therefore, I conducted a case study with two young women to examine how these out-of-school teenagers view the school system, and what they perceive to be the factors that contributed to their decision to drop out of school. I chose to interview students who had already dropped out of school, and not those on the verge of doing so, because I thought that students who had already left school might be more open to speak with me and more honest about their experiences. Having already dropped out, they would be in a less vulnerable position than those who were struggling to remain in school, for whom an interview about their negative school experiences might influence their decision about whether or not to leave.

Study Design

As Yin (2003) explains, case study method is appropriate when "a 'how' or 'why' question is being asked about a contemporary series of events, over which the investigator has little or no control" (p. 9). As elaborated above, this study specifically focuses on young people who had already left school, since exerting any kind of control over their life trajectories would be wholly unethical and inappropriate. In the absence of any possibility of experimental research, as Yin (2003) writes, a case study is beneficial to understand "how" and "why" a process occurs. In this study, I aim to understand how and why young people drop out of school, *focusing specifically on their own perceptions of the process.* Rather than gathering extensive contextual data on the actual events and circumstances of participants' lives, which would be typical of case-study research according to Yin (2003), I focused on how the participants *experienced* these events. Theorizing the impact of a negative outcome *expectancy* combined with a hopelessness *expectancy,* Abramson et al. (1989) argue that it is not important whether the negative outcome will actually occur; what is important is that the subject expects that it will. Keeping in line with my theoretical framework, then, I do not invoke documentation or other contextual data to ascertain (as Yin, 2003, encourages) whether or not my participants' stated perceptions are "correct" or not.

Participant Sampling

Since this study focused on the perception of hopelessness in the academic experiences of young people who have dropped out of school, I wished to talk to drop-outs while these experiences were still rather recent. As teenagers get older and their time in school recedes into the past, their views will likely change and become less relevant to my research topic (although

the views of adults who dropped out several years previously could form the basis of another research project). I therefore focused on teenagers who have left school within the last year. Since students may legally drop out of school in the state of Pennsylvania at age 16 (PA Department of Education, 2011), I did not interview anyone younger than 16. The age range of the sample was 17-19.

After the proposal was approved by the Lehigh Institutional Review Board (IRB), I contacted several programs that provide support to out-of-school youth in the Lehigh Valley, and most of these programs agreed to pass on my information to the young people they work with (Please see Appendices 4-6). This rather indirect method of recruiting participants, however, did not result in any volunteers. Administrators at the community organizations were very helpful and assured me that they were telling their clients about my study, but no one wanted to be interviewed (possible reasons for this reluctance will be discussed in the limitations subsection on page 23). After about two months with no participants, I obtained permission from the Lehigh IRB to pay each participant $25. Upon the recommendation of a staff member at a community organization, I offered payment in the form of gift cards to Wal-Mart. After receiving permission to pay participants, I realized that I needed to use more direct recruiting methods. A few organizations allowed me to come talk to their clients or students in person. They also reached out on their own initiative to certain clients, encouraging them to participate in my study. In this way, I was put into contact with several individuals, two of whom ultimately agreed to be interviewed. Interviews with these two participants formed the basis for the case-study of academic hopelessness among youth who dropped out of school. As Yin (2003) points out, the use of multiple cases, even if there are only two, greatly strengthens the case study

research because it allows for the more powerful analytic conclusions arising from divergences and common elements (p. 53).

Data Collection

For the purposes of this research, I interviewed two teenagers aged 17 and 19, both of whom were young women, had dropped out of school within the past year, were from Puerto Rico, and were experiencing precarious living situations due to poverty.[3]

The women wished to be interviewed together, which may have affected their responses. They often expanded upon each other's points, so the joint interview might have also yielded richer results than one-on-one interviews would have. In the interviews, I explored the following issues: background (socioeconomic status, ethnic identification, and family and peer educational status); participants' perceptions of the effect of school structures; and special attention was paid to participants' perceptions of the roles of their teachers in sustaining or extinguishing hopefulness. The interview lasted about two hours. Please see Appendix 1 for interview questions.

Interviews were semi-structured, allowing issues and ideas important to each interviewee to emerge. In such loosely-structured interviews, especially where the participant's own lived experience is the subject of the interview, responses often take a narrative form (Czarniawska, 2004), which "reveals the actor's own 'story' of why he is where he is today" (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996, p. 70).   By paying attention to these narratives, one can come to understand "the relationship between social processes and individual lives" (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996, p. 75); or more specifically for the proposed study, the relationship between social and educational

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[3] In order to protect their privacy, I cannot give further detail, but their current living arrangements gave evidence of great poverty.

processes and the lives of individual students. Yin (2003) points out that conducting case study

interviews can be difficult because they require the researcher "to operate on two levels at the

same time: satisfying the needs of your line of inquiry while simultaneously putting forth

'friendly' and 'non-threatening' questions" (p. 90). For this reason, in order to focus on this

double task, I had planned to record the interviews , but the participants declined permission to

be recorded. Although presenting a challenge, taking notes while conducting the interview was

not as difficult as expected, since I felt an easy rapport develop with the young women, and they

appeared to view all my questions as "friendly" and "non-threatening." My professional

experience as a teacher and mentor to high school and university students likely had something

to do with this rapport, possibly in addition to the fact that, like them, I am also a young woman,

and so did not appear very threatening.

I handwrote notes during the interview and then typed up a more complete version as

soon as I returned home. As I took notes, I made an effort to be as faithful as possible to the

participants' own words instead of paraphrasing them.

Data coding and analysis

Coding was used to determine important concepts in the participants' narratives, both to

simplify the data into major themes, as well as to allow me to further explore those themes once

they were identified. This approach is consistent with Coffey and Atkinson (1996), who propose

coding as a "mixture of data reduction and data complication" (p. 30). Since there was only one

set of notes for the joint interview, I manually coded it, following the steps set forth in Auerbach

and Silverstein's (2003) introduction to qualitative data coding and analysis. To accomplish this,

I read and reread the notes several times, looking for ideas that occurred repeatedly in each

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participant's statements. I also looked for converging and diverging ideas between the two participants. I used color coding to manually separate important ideas, which I then combined into major themes. More specifically, I used In Vivo coding, in which the participants' own words and phrases are used instead of those of the researcher or existing literature (Saldana, 2009). Saldana recommends this coding method in studies employing ethnographic methods with young people in order to avoid marginalizing the true voices of youth by fitting them into the researcher's own categories. Since my research is focused on hearing the voices of young people who have been rejected from the schooling system, In Vivo coding was appropriate because it allowed me to respect and maintain their language and perceptions. Although using In Vivo coding without a written transcript of an audio recording is not ideal, my focus during and after the interview on taking notes with the participants' exact words allowed me to use this approach despite the participants' declining to be audiotaped. Finally, I used narrative analysis to interpret the young people's experiences, paying attention to both the structure and content of what they said (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Czarniawska, 2004).

Protecting study participants

One of the participants, aged 19, was legally an adult, and the other, aged 17, was a minor. I provided a consent form to the guardian of the one minor participant (Appendix 2), and obtained written consent before interviewing her adolescent child. I met her in person in order to answer any questions she had and to verify that she signed the consent form. Since this study presented only minimal risk, I required only one parent or guardian to sign the consent form. I also provided a written consent form to the 19-year-old participant and a written assent form to the 17-year-old participant (Appendix 3), and obtained written and verbal assent before

conducting the interview. Interviews were conducted in a semi-private environment, in a room at a community center, to protect the participants' privacy while staying in a public setting.

Staff members at one of the local organizations that helped me recruit my participants also know these participants personally. In order to protect my participants' privacy, I see no way to share my findings as planned with this organization, since the administrators would be able to match the findings to their clients. However, I will share a shortened version of my final report with the other organizations that do not know who I interviewed. I used pseudonyms in my notes and in this paper, and there is no audio record. Participants' names are written on the consent, assent, and parental consent forms, which are in a locked cabinet and will be destroyed after 3 years, as suggested by Lehigh research guidelines.

As mentioned above, one reason that I chose to interview young people who have already left school, and not those still in school, was to minimize risks to participants. Students struggling with academic hopelessness and on the verge of dropping out are considerably more vulnerable than those who have already left school. That said, I entered the interviews aware that I would be interviewing young people, who might share some very difficult academic experiences during the interviews. There could be psychological risk, as they described feelings of academic helplessness. In order to minimize this risk, I offered to provide participants and their parents/guardians with information about local resources for out of school youth, including, if necessary, organizations that provide counseling, and I offered to help put participants in contact with these kinds of organizations (Appendix 7). Both participants and one girl's guardian declined this information. They stated that they already knew about all the resources they needed.

Benefits

While sharing stories about the difficulties faced at school may be a psychological risk for some participants, talking about it with someone who cares about their stories and their perceptions about school could also be a benefit. Both participants expressed relief after having told their stories, explaining that "I wanted to do this interview so that people would know that not everyone drops out of school because they're lazy." I believe that this project was therefore a benefit to the participants themselves.

This project will also benefit the local community, since I will share my findings with organizations that serve youth, so that they can better understand the population with whom they work. Finally, this project can benefit society by increasing understanding of the processes that lead students to drop out, thus allowing for improved school-retention efforts.

Limitations

The sampling method used in this study presents a limitation, since young people seeking services from community organizations are not representative of all out-of-school young people. Since it was not feasible to find out-of-school teenagers without going through youth service organizations, due to regulations that govern what information school districts can share about their current or former students, access to drop-outs was limited, and this was a necessary limitation. Its qualitative nature, the project's case study design and its focus on the narratives of a few young people are also limitations in that the findings cannot be claimed to be applicable to all out-of-school young people. Concentrating on the experiences of these two young people who have rejected, or been rejected by, the school system is nonetheless a worthwhile pursuit

because it allows a deeper understanding of this process than would a more representative, larger-scale study.

The difficulty I experienced in recruiting case study participants could also be a limitation, since one could argue that the two young women who agreed to participate were more the exception than the rule. I wonder if the reluctance to discuss their school experiences signals out-of-school teenagers' own cautionary, uncomfortable, and/or indifferent feelings toward schooling. Declining to participate in an interview about one's school experiences could in itself be a sign of hopelessness. Paradoxically, though, without interviews to back up this claim, it remains only a hypothesis, but one that would explain the overwhelmingly negative response I received from potential participants.

Findings

The participants' stories

Before exploring the themes that emerged from Julia and Amanda's interview, background information on each young woman will help put their statements into context.

<u>Julia</u>

Julia was born in Puerto Rico and moved to the United States at age of four with her parents. She went back and forth to Puerto Rico several times, although she did not say whether she was in Puerto Rico long enough to attend school there. During her time living in the United States, Julia mostly lived in the Lehigh Valley, although she moved around quite a bit to different towns and neighborhoods. Her parents split up after arriving in the US, and Julia also spent time living in New York City with her mother.

Julia experienced a very difficult pregnancy about a year ago that contributed to her dropping out. Julia is a very petite, very thin 17-year-old, and talking to her, it is not hard to imagine that a pregnancy a year ago would have taken quite a toll on her young body. She told me that at one point she came to school after a stay in the hospital so covered in bruises that the school reported her as a possible victim of abuse. The investigation found that all the bruising was due to IV insertion, but the story allows for an understanding of how sick she was. Julia has also dealt with family members' serious illness as well, as her mother has leukemia and her boyfriend's mother, the grandmother of Julia's baby, suffers from severe depression. Despite all her health problems during the pregnancy, Julia gave birth to a healthy baby boy in the summer of 2011. She dropped out after having the baby, as she was several credits behind due to her illness, and there was no one else who could take care of her son during the day while she went to school. Had Julia continued on track to graduation, she would graduate this spring. She dropped out at the beginning of the 2011-2012 school year.

Amanda

Amanda was also born in Puerto Rico and moved to the United States with her parents when she was two years old. She actually lived in the same neighborhood where she lives now for her first years in the United Sates. She then returned to Puerto Rico for first and second grades, after which she moved back to the Lehigh Valley area, but to another town. After that, she moved to New Jersey, and then returned to Puerto Rico, finally arriving in her current neighborhood in 10th grade. She and Julia met and became friends in their neighborhood the summer before 10th grade, and both started as new students at the same high school that fall.

Amanda's mother was the victim of domestic abuse for many years before Amanda and her brother were born, and Amanda blames this violence for her mother's current mental illness, including major depression and bulimia. Caring for her mother has been a major burden on Amanda. A staff member at the community center where I interviewed the young women, who has known Amanda since she was a little girl, mentioned to me that he believed the stress due to taking care of her mother is what led Amanda, who had been a very strong student, to fail several classes, which led to her dropping out. Amanda would also be graduating this spring if she had graduated after completing high school in four years. She dropped out last semester (Fall 2012).

Major themes

Five main themes appeared in Julia and Amanda's narratives. I used In Vivo coding, so each theme comes from the participants' own words. The themes are briefly described below, and each will be explored more fully in the following sections:

1. *"I was going through a lot of stress because of family problems."* This theme was the most wide-reaching, as Julia and Amanda expressed complicated and occasionally conflicting views about their families and environments.

2. "*If teachers gave me a chance I would not have had to leave school.*" Both young women recounted the process by which the school system and individual teachers contributed to their leaving school.

3. *"She is a good teacher and I like her a lot."* Although the overall school experience was one of repeated frustration for both Julia and Amanda, they both also described the actions and attitudes of specific teachers who left a strong positive impression.

4. *"It just made me feel like I'm not even going to try anymore."* In the face of multiple

    academic failures and mounting obstacles to continuing their education, both participants

    described feelings of hopelessness that led to them dropping out.

5. "*I wanted to do this interview so that people would know that not everyone drops out of*

    school because they're lazy." Despite sharing feelings of hopelessness in regard to

    school, both participants also expressed resistance to prevailing notions about dropouts as

    failures and expressed hope for their futures.

One striking aspect of the data is that both young women's responses showed strong connections

in both the overall ideas and, often, specific facets of the narrative. The fact that they were

interviewed jointly very likely contributed to this similarity, and the shared background and

friendship of the two participants also likely resulted in consistencies of their narratives. Further

research is needed to ascertain whether these shared themes are a result of the circumstance of

this study, or whether they might be indicative of some aspects of the shared experience of

students who drop out of school.

I was going through a lot of stress because of family problems

    Both girls discussed their perceptions of their families and environments as major factors

influencing their academic trajectories. Sometimes, their statements reflected conflicting or

contradictory feelings. Amanda stated, "My family is full of lazy people. None of them have

graduated. Because in Puerto Rico the schools are bad." In this statement she describes her

family as lazy, ostensibly because no one had graduated from high school, a position that she

later contradicted in two ways: first, by describing the hard work of many members of her

family, including several who owned one or more business, and second, by arguing that it was

wrong to equate dropping out with laziness. By following the statement about none of her

family members graduating with a characterization of Puerto Rican schools as "bad," perhaps

Amanda was trying to justify her family members' – and by association, her own, since she also

spent time in Puerto Rican schools – academic struggles as due to the failings she perceived in

the Puerto Rican educational system.

Both girls described a strong feeling of antipathy towards the Puerto Rican educational

system. It was not clear whether their negative feelings towards Puerto Rican schools stemmed

from their own experiences in schools in Puerto Rico, or from a more general perception about

Puerto Rican schools in general, especially for girl students. Amanda seemed especially strong

in her critique of the educational system in Puerto Rico, and out of the two, she spent more time

in school in Puerto Rico – first and second grades, and part of middle school and high school.

She remarked that, "Schools in Puerto Rico are so bad. They teach you bad there. In Puerto

Rico you see little 12-year-old girls pregnant and dropping out." Julia echoed this concern with

the experiences of young women in Puerto Rico, saying, "[My aunt's] parents married her to my

uncle when she was 11 years old and she had my cousin when she was 12." Julia took her aunt's

experience as an inspiration, explaining that despite the considerable obstacles in her life, "She

got here [the US] and didn't know any English and she learned English and became a nurse. If

she could do it, I can do it!" Her aunt has provided career guidance to Julia, explaining that if

she can pass her GED and get accepted into school to be a nursing assistant, she can be paid to

work while she is in school. Since they both live in poverty, one of the main obstacles for the

young women to obtaining further training or education is financial.

This lack of financial security also affected both participants' ability to continue their high school education. As Amanda put it, "When I first started out, I couldn't even think of college because my family was so broke. We can't even pay the bills we have." Without the possibility of college because of financial constraints, even a high school degree did not appear as valuable. Julia shared that her mother worked three jobs and her father worked 12-hour shifts when she was a child so that they would be able to support her studies. When this safety net broke down however, she was no longer able to continue in school:

> I didn't have a stable place to live. I couldn't live with my mom in NY [later she told me that this was because her mom had leukemia and she was caring for her], and my dad doesn't want me to live with him. I was living with my baby's daddy in the basement of some friends, but then they kicked us out, so we went to his mom's house, but she has problems – she has depression.

The confluence of family and environmental factors at play here – financial, medical, psychological, and practical (ie, no place to live) – is tremendous. Imagining a girl in her mid-teens trying to manage all these challenges and her own health difficulties, which will be discussed later, while also maintaining "normal" school progress towards graduation, begins to allow us to understand why she left school.

While both young women expressed love and appreciation towards their families, the sense that family difficulties had weighed heavily on their academic trajectories was strong. Amanda explained that when she dropped out, "I was going through a lot of stress because of family problems and that made me depressed, and that made me slack." She later attributed her mother's mental illness to the abuse she had suffered at the hands of a boyfriend before her children were born. Both young women experienced a reversal of the caretaking relationship between children and parents, caring for one or more sick parents. This added responsibility and stress took away from their abilities to attend school and concentrate on their schoolwork.

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If teachers gave me a chance I would not have had to leave school

In addition to the family challenges discussed above, the major contributing factor to

Julia's dropping out was a pregnancy beset by health problems. As with the young women

whose experiences are highlighted in the literature review, it was not Julia's pregnancy per se

that led to her dropping out. Rather, the health difficulties from which she suffered, compounded

with teachers' lack of flexibility regarding her circumstances, led to her leaving school. Because

of frequent doctor visits and hospital stays, Julia missed a lot of school. During the first two

trimesters of pregnancy, she was able to just barely keep up with her schoolwork. After going

into premature labor at six months, however, she was put on bed rest. According to Julia, some

teachers made an effort to help, and some did not. She recounted:

> If teachers gave me a chance I would not have had to leave school. My baby's daddy
> was bringing the homework, and I was trying to do it every night, and he would turn it in.
> I didn't even have a science book so I was looking on the internet trying to do it myself
> but the teacher still failed me. She [her science teacher] would not help me even though I
> had a medical excuse [for not being in school; ie, bed rest]. The gym teachers failed me,
> they made me walk laps during the whole hour and a half period, even though I had notes
> from the doctors explaining that I couldn't do any activity. The Science teacher yelled at
> me. I used to get hungry and dehydrated, and the doctor said it was bad for the baby, so I
> would have to drink Vitamin Water, and she would yell at me. It made the year awful.

She ended up failing several classes and was told she would have to repeat the year. She could

still graduate as scheduled by doing junior year and senior year at the same time. This would

entail completing a full-time day schedule and also taking night school which would involve a

mixed class of 11th and 12th grade classes. At this point in the story Amanda piped in, explaining

that "You have to pay for these classes, and for each full-credit class in night school it costs

$200. If you fail any of these classes, you need to do it again – so it could take 2 more years to

graduate, and it would be expensive." By this time, Julia's baby had been born, and that

presented a further challenge. Due to the family difficulties described in the previous section,

she did not have a stable living arrangement during this period either. As Julia recalls, "There

was no one to take care of the baby and I had no address. Plus I couldn't pay for the classes. So

I had no choice but to leave and do my GED.[4]"

As the narratives above have shown, both Julia and Amanda experienced substantial

family and environmental pressures that made it difficult for them to do well in school, or even

to attend regularly. For Amanda, the stress of caring for her mentally ill mother prevented her

from giving full attention to school needed to pass. She reported that she failed 10th grade twice,

and that "it was mostly a problem in specific classes like Biology and English… I failed a few

times, so I had to repeat the year over and over. If you're 21 you can't graduate, so I wouldn't

have been able to finish anyway." Amanda is 19 now, and she left school at the beginning of

this school year, so she was 18 or 19 when she dropped out. The fact that she decided that in 2-3

years she still would not be able to pass the required classes, and would be forced out due to her

age, is a profound statement about her own perceived inability to pass the classes that she had

previously failed.

At the same time, the school's role Amanda's lack of credits seems rather significant. In

her words, "I was failing gym so they put me in study hall. One semester I was just in study hall

all semester!" From my own experience as a teacher at a similar school, I am familiar with the

dilemma of whether students are helped or hurt when they are placed in study halls instead of

academic classes. I have seen that students who showed the slightest disinclination to a certain

class, or whose guidance counselors wanted to prevent them from a bad grade in a class, were

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[4] As of the time of the interview, Julia had not enrolled in GED classes or signed for the exam, although both young women said they planned to do so.

taken out of academic classes and placed into study halls. During several informal conversations

about this issue, a colleague explained that in his view, guidance counselors think they are

helping students by taking them out of the classes they do not like or in which they are

struggling, but in the end they are hurting them because the students cannot get the credits they

need. This teacher's view seems to be in line with Amanda's experience, since, because of the

study halls, she spent so much time in school but not earning credits, that she reached a point

where she had no hope of earning the required credits in a timely manner.

Amanda's reaction to being placed only in study hall for an entire semester carries

meaning in regard to her perception of her academic classes. She stated that, "It was the best

semester I ever had. We would have conversations about lots of things with each other and with

the teachers. Like one time, we told the teacher about the Illuminati[5] and she was asking us all

these questions." The best semester Amanda had *was one in which she was not enrolled in any*

classes. These study hall conversations were more fulfilling than her class time, primarily

because the teacher appeared interested in what the students were talking about. Discussing

another class, a vocational class in protective services, Amanda stated that the highlight was that

"They also teach you how to protect yourself, which is good if you get jumped." For her, a

young woman living in a rather dangerous neighborhood, the most worthwhile part of the class

was learning to protect herself. Taken together, Amanda's two comments suggest that there was

a rather large disconnect between her academic classes and what was relevant to her life: namely,

having a teacher listen to her, and knowing how to be safe.

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[5] This is probably a reference to the Dan Brown novel *Angels and Demons* and the film that was based on the book, although I did not ask specifically for clarification on this point.

Unlike Julia's experience with the science and gym teachers, Amanda did not describe

the actions of specific teachers as especially discouraging. Rather, for her, the challenges arose

more from the structure of the school. Yet both girls related that, whether the difficulties they

faced were at the class, school, or school system level, individual teachers' actions could provide

essential support.

She is a good teacher and I like her a lot

Like the study hall teacher responsible for the best semester Amanda had in school, there

were several educators the participants recognized as having made strong positive impacts in

their lives. These teachers were notable for their efforts to make class relevant and interesting

for their students and their willingness to work with the students to make school possible despite

the challenges the students faced. Amanda reflected on her best teachers:

> In 9th Grade I had a teacher, Ms. Johnson, for English and I failed. Then in 10th grade I had another teacher and I also failed. Then when I did 10th grade the 2nd time I had Ms. Johnson again and this time I passed! There was good teaching and that's not why I failed. I couldn't concentrate, like that poetry stuff. But even when I was failing she told me to do my best and helped me. She tried to encourage me and told me she expected more of me. Even after I failed I didn't have a grudge [against Ms. Johnson].

Despite Amanda's repeated failures of the course, she maintains a positive memory of the

teacher. In fact, Ms. Johnson made such an impression on Amanda that she made it a point to

tell me that she had run into her once, after dropping out school. She even remembered the exact

place where she had seen her: at the bottom of the stairs in the public library. Amanda also

appreciated the approach of her 9th grade history teacher, who "found fun ways to teach like

history games. He was like Ms. Johnson, he said you can do better, you have more potential than

what you're showing." For Amanda, who was struggling in school while she tried to navigate a

difficult home life, positive feedback from teachers had an enormous impact. While, in Ms.

Johnson's case, it was not enough to help her pass the class the first time, it made a huge

difference to Amanda, allowing her to avoid giving up despite her repeated failures.

Julia's experience also highlights the effect that a few actions or words from a teacher

can have. When asked if any of her teachers stood out as especially good, Julia remembered:

> My English teacher – I love her so much. She would help me a lot. She kept my work in
> a file and when I was feeling good and I could come to school she would help me catch
> up, she would stay after school with me and help me. With her I help I brought an F to a
> B-. Also my math teacher. She couldn't stay after school because she worked at another
> school in the afternoons, but she would also keep my work for me and help me catch up.
> She let me take my book home, even though you're not supposed to take math books
> home, and that way I could do the work when I was on bedrest. [proudly] I passed her
> class.

Each of these teachers made an effort to help Julia complete her work and learn the material

despite her frequent absences. While keeping a student's missed work in a file so that she could

complete it at home or when she returned to school seems like a minor act, for Julia it made the

difference between passing or failing those classes.

It just made me feel like I'm not even going to try anymore

When discussing their school experience, especially repeatedly failing classes or not

having enough credits to graduate, both participants made statements about giving up. These

statements reflect their hopelessness in regard to being able to continue in school, making

progress towards graduation. When Amanda was told she would need to enroll in the program

combining Junior- and Senior-level classes, in a combination of day and night school, in order to

stay in school, she reflects, "It just made me feel like I'm not even going to try anymore – and

you have to pay for it." The financial cost presented a serious obstacle, as discussed above, but

also the idea of the program was quite discouraging for her. While the idea underlying the

program, that students who fall behind can make up the credits and graduate on time, seems

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promising, in reality the increased course load and time commitment proved overwhelming. Presenting a student who had already struggled and failed several classes with even more classes may cause her to give up, as was the case with Amanda.

Julia also expressed the feeling that it was impossible for her to catch up. In her case, however, it was due to the actions of a specific teacher. Julia recounts, "She would make these big packets of make-up work, but without a note to say on what page to look for the information. And she took away my book! How am I supposed to do the work?" As mentioned above, for a while Julia tried to find all the information she needed on the internet, but eventually she was not able to keep up anymore. This sentiment, that they were trying the best way they knew how to do well in school, came up repeatedly in the interview. When asked whether she felt she had actively made a decision to drop out, Amanda answered: "I did have a choice yet I didn't…I was trying but it felt like I was not going anywhere." Overwhelmed by family stress, repeated class failures, and faced with taking a double course load to continue, Amanda felt that nothing she could do would allow her to succeed, and she gave up trying.

While both young women echoed this sentiment that they felt they had no other choice but to leave school, the fact that they had done so made them both quite sad. This unhappiness was a combination of the bad feelings that had accumulated during their struggles in school, a realization that achieving their goals would be harder without a diploma, and regret that they had not fulfilled others' expectations. Amanda commented, "If I could I would go back to school," and Julia nodded her agreement. Both young women were also cognizant of the disadvantage they experienced without a high school diploma. As Amanda put it, "It is better to have a diploma than a GED. Most jobs won't even hire you with a GED. Like for the army you need to

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have a GED plus two years of college, but a diploma alone is enough." Julia said, "I think that my baby's daddy will be able to go to prom, will be on that stage [the graduation ceremony stage] and it makes me really sad. I wish I were the one that was actually graduating. My parents didn't know I was going to get pregnant. They wanted to see me on that stage." What is especially poignant about this quote is that both Julia and her baby's father were involved in the child's life, both had experienced family difficulties, and both wanted to graduate and had been making an effort in school. The baby's father had even tried to help Julia, going to each of her teachers to bring her schoolwork every day. Yet despite all this effort, because the pregnancy affected *her* medically, and because, when it came down to it and "there was no one to take care of the baby," Julia was the one to whom that responsibility fell, she was the one whose academics were halted.

In the quote above, besides her own sadness, Julia also expresses regret that she disappointed her parents. This concept also came up several times during the interviews, as the young women told me that their families had expected them to graduate, to be the first people in the family to obtain a high school diploma. Amanda said with some bitterness, "My mom is putting me down. She saw my brother drop out too but she sees me as more of a failure because she had more faith in me. One of the things that is so horrible about the whole dropping-out thing is that my mom sees me as a failure." Although no one in her family, including her older brother, had graduated, Amanda felt that they expected her to, and she had let them down by leaving school. Yet she also said that she had not perceived much of a choice in the matter. Caught between the hopes of her family and the hopelessness she felt about her chances to

succeed in school, Amanda found herself viewed as a failure. Yet despite her unhappiness at this

characterization, she also expressed some resistance, adding, "I want to prove I'm not a failure."

I wanted to do this interview so that people would know that not everyone drops out of school

because they're lazy

Despite the sadness and regret both young women expressed, or perhaps in reaction to it,

Julia and Amanda also displayed resistance to the dropout-as-failure characterization and shared

their goals for the future with me. As Julia put it, "I want to prove to them [her family] that even

though I didn't finish high school I want to do something for my future and my son." For her,

doing something for the future meant "I want to get my GED and go straight to college." Both

young women said they were planning to get their GEDs and go on to further school or training,

mentioning the police, nursing, cosmetology, and auto mechanics as possible fields they wished

to pursue. Neither one had enrolled in a GED program as of the time of the interview, however.

Perhaps because their plans for future success were rather hazy, both participants also

spent a good deal of time telling me the goals they had before dropping out, the successes they

had accomplished before school started going so badly for them. Julia said that "In 9th grade and

10th grade I was in Vo-tech for nursing. In high school I also wanted to do cosmetology," while

Amanda stated, "Before I dropped out I was doing really good.   I was in Votech doing

protective services. You can be a police officer, a firefighter, or work in the courts." Amanda

also said that, as a child, "I wanted to be a vet, then work for the ASPCA, then a police officer,

then a nurse, or maybe a mechanic. My dad is a mechanic and if I became a mechanic I could

help him." While these statements convey a kind of pride, and a certain amount of hopefulness

for the future, in the context of the interview, after both young women had shared so many

disheartening stories about the challenges they faced, these goal statements came across as simultaneously wistful, wishing for a time before their problems at school, and defiant, as if trying to prove the people who had called them failures wrong.

This defiance came through most clearly when I asked the girls what they thought about popular perceptions of dropouts. Amanda said, "When people talk about dropouts they make it seem like you didn't want to go to school. Make you seem like a bad person." At this point I took out the *Morning Call* article, described in the introduction to this paper, and showed it to them. Both girls were very strong in their disagreement with the article's equating education with being smart. They exclaimed "That is wrong, it is unfair, there are a lot of things that can happen that make you drop out, it is *wrong*!" Both participants' own stories, as they shared them with me, offer clear examples of some of "these things that can happen that make you drop out." Julia explained that "I wanted to do this interview so that people would know that not everyone drops out of school because they're lazy. There are a lot of other things that can make it hard to go to school, like when my mom got leukemia and I had to take care of her. It's not easy being a parent and trying to go to school." Caught between caring for her mom and the difficulties of her own pregnancy, Julia found it virtually impossible to go to school. Amanda offered her closing thought to the interview, providing an apt summary for their narratives: "It's a crazy life. I want to make my mom proud. I won't make the same mistakes she made."

Discussion

Julia and Amanda made it a point to tell me that they had participated in the interview in order to counter prevailing images of dropouts as lazy or unmotivated. They wanted to share the stories of the challenges they had faced, challenges that led them to leave school. Yet in comparison to these two young women who agreed to be interviewed, there were dozens or perhaps hundreds of teenagers who knew about my study, either because I told them about it, employees at community organization told them about it, or they saw flyers I had posted, and who did not wish to participate. Perhaps, by the time I tried to reach them, potential participants had already succumbed so deeply to the silencing mechanisms outlined by Fine (1991) that they felt they had nothing to say. Perhaps the teenagers feared that I would take an accusatory tone or reproach them for leaving school. Perhaps my position as an outsider, as someone they did not know at all, prevented potential participants from wanting to tell me about their lives. Julia and Amanda were referred to me by a community worker who had very close ties to the families with whom he worked, and he had known one of the young women since she was a girl. In the absence of such close connections, it is likely that other potential participants did not have the level of trust required for them to agree to be interviewed. Yet even this community worker, who had close relationships with many youth who had left school, was not able to refer anyone else to me, implying that there was something more than the lack of personal connections to participants that was at work here. It is also interesting that both participants were women. Perhaps, because I am a woman, they felt more comfortable talking to me. I also wonder if young men's beliefs about appropriately masculine behavior prevented them from sharing

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personal details about their lives, especially painful parts of their lives such as failing in school, with another person (and a female stranger, at that).

I believe that the incredible silence of these young people is significant. Paulo Freire (1989) wrote that "Hopelessness is a form of silence" (p. 80). To switch his statement around, the silence of all the young people I approached before coming into contact with Julia and Amanda may be a form of hopelessness, but, ironically, without further research this remains unknown. Further research into the topic would be valuable, as would additional case studies of young people who have left school. While their generalizability is quite limited, insights from Julia and Amanda's case-studies are nonetheless very important. First and foremost, they add to the existing research about students being pushed or facilitated out of school (Aviles, 1999; Fine, 1991) by exploring the role academic helplessness in students' decision to drop out of school. Furthermore, those who call for schools and teachers that understand and adapt to students' lived experiences (Aviles, 1999; Fine, 1991; Friere, 1989; Kincheloe & hayes, 2007; Murrell, 2007, Weiner, 1999) would find strong support in the heart-wrenching stories of a bedridden student trying to teach herself science on the internet, or a teenager, formerly a strong student, who finds herself "slacking" due to the stress of caring for her mentally ill mother. The strong positive impact on the young women's self-image and their school experiences of the few teachers who did show flexibility and a willingness to help illustrates how powerful a few simple actions can be in the life of a struggling student (Jonker, 2006; Weiner, 1999).

The application of learned hopelessness to the experiences of students who drop out of school also found support in Julia and Amanda's narratives. Both had stories of trying over and over, only to fail repeatedly, and of reaching a point where they felt that no amount of effort

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would help them succeed academically and lead to graduation. It was at this point that they left school. These findings strongly support efforts to link the theory of hopelessness (Abramson et al., 1978; Abramson et al.; 1989) to education (Au et al., 1997; Au et al., 2010; Au et al., 2011), especially in the case of students who drop out. It is important to note, however, that the young women did not express a general state of hopelessness – they actually proved quite eager to talk about their goals and desires for future success. They also expressed regret at having to leave school, and wished that they had been able to graduate.

Conclusion

Much public attention has focused on "failing" schools and the students within them in the US and other countries, as well as on the disparities between middle-class white children, who as a group are doing quite well academically, and children from racial and ethnic minority groups or from poverty, or both, who as a group are not doing well at all (Baker and LeTendre, 2005). Explanations for the scarcity of academic success, as evidenced by poor grades, lack of expected skills and knowledge, and high dropout rates among these students abound (for a discussion and comparison of several paradigms dealing with the racial differences in academic achievement, see Banks, 2006, p. 93-105). Reform after reform, special program after special program, heated debate after heated debate have come and gone, while an educational system that provides an exceptional education to some, and a very good education to most, continues to fail a significant portion of its most disadvantaged students (Berliner, 2006; Hothschild, 2003; Kozol, 1991, 2005).

In order to be effective, any effort to help young people like Julia and Amanda must occur *before* they feel that they have no choice but to drop out. Both young women wanted to

succeed academically, but due to the school's inability to accommodate the personal challenges facing these teenagers, they lost faith in themselves and the educational system. In Kincheloe & hayes's (2007) handbook for teachers in urban schools, Richard Lakes writes, "the real challenge for urban educators is to assist young people in developing optimism in the face of hopelessness" (p. 76). My findings suggest that such a task might be begun by actions as simple as providing more support for young parents or offering flexible options for students to catch up on missed work, in addition to increased counseling for students dealing with difficult family issues.

Humans need to feel hopeful about themselves and the future (Freire, 2004; Johnson, 2006; Kozol, 1991) and schools should be a place where hope is nurtured and allowed to grow. Freire (1994) reminds us of hope's critical role in critical education:

> Without a minimum of hope, we cannot so much as start the struggle. But without the struggle, hope, as an ontological need, dissipates, loses its bearings, and turns into hopelessness. Hence the need for a kind of education in hope. (p. 9)

As Freire argues, a climate of hopelessness precludes true emancipatory dialogue. Yet the converse is also true: dialogue helps ward off hopelessness. An important facet in the challenge of helping all students stay in school and experience academic success - without sacrificing their mental health in the process - is to provide an environment in which dialogue and critical thinking about the realities of their lives, including structural barriers to success, is fostered (Freire, 1989; Kincheloe & hayes, 2007; Murrell, 2007), and a willingness on the part of the school system to work with, rather than against, students and their families to help them stay in school. Massive social change of the kind required to right embedded structural injustice takes a long time and requires political and public will, which in this time of Tea Party candidates and neoliberal education projects (Apple, 2001), seems dishearteningly unlikely. One change that

can happen right now, though, and quite inexpensively at that, is to create the kind of environment in the classroom, and to provide the kind of flexibility and support, that allow students like Julia and Amanda to maintain self-worth and hope while continuing their studies despite environmental obstacles and family or personal difficulties.

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Appendices:

1) **Interview Questions**
2) **Consent form for parents/guardians**
3) **Written assent form for interviewees**
4) **Local organizations that I contacted for participant recruitment**
5) **Flyer sent to local organizations to recruit participants**
6) **Information about local resources for youth that was offered to participants and their guardians**
7) **Morning Call front page, October 9, 2011**

1) **<u>Interview Questions</u>**

1) Please tell me about yourself and your background.

2) Please tell me about your experiences in school.

3) What do you think about the idea of school in general?

4) Please tell me about your teachers.

      a. Can you tell me about any teachers who stand out as being especially good?

         Why? What did they do that was different from other teachers?

5) How did you decide to leave school?

6) Would you say it was mostly your own decision or where there other people who influenced you? How did they influence you?

7) Please tell me about your parents' experience in school

8) Please tell me about your friends' experiences in school

9) Is there anything else you want me to know?

PARENTAL CONSENT FORM
School views of out-of-school youth

Dear Parent or Guardian,
Your adolescent youth is invited to participate in a study about the ways that young people who have left school view their past school experiences. My name is Mariam Yaqub, and I am a graduate student at Lehigh University's College of Education. This study is part of my Master's thesis. I am asking for permission to include your adolescent youth in this study because he or she was referred to me by a local organization that provides youth services. I expect to have 3-5 participants in the study. If you allow your child to participate, I will interview him or her for about an hour about how he or she feels about his or her school experiences. If he or she has more to talk about and wishes to talk to me again, we will have an additional interview. The interview will be audio-taped so that I can reference it later, but no one but me will hear the audio tapes. If your adolescent youth wishes to turn off the audio recorder, I will turn it off. Your adolescent youth will receive a $20 gift card for participating in this study.

The records of this study will be kept confidential and any information collected through this research project that personally identifies your adolescent youth will not be voluntarily released or disclosed without your separate consent, except as specifically required by law.   In any sort of report we might publish, we will not include any information that will make it possible to identify your child. Research records will be stored securely and only researchers will have access to the records. His or her responses will not be linked to his or her name or your name in any written or verbal report of this research project.

Your decision to allow your adolescent youth to participate will not affect your or his or her present or future relationship with Lehigh University or the organization that referred your adolescent youth. If you have any questions about the study, please ask me.

If you have any questions later, you may call me at 610-758-6983 or email me at mby210@lehigh.edu. You may also contact the Lehigh professor supervising this project, Dr. Iveta Silova, at 610-758-5750 or ism207@lehigh.edu.

Questions or Concerns:
If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher(s), you are encouraged to contact Susan E. Disidore at (610)758-3020 (email: sus5@lehigh.edu) or Troy Boni at (610)758-2985 (email: tdb308@lehigh.edu) of Lehigh University's Office of Research and Sponsored Programs. All reports or correspondence will be kept confidential.

You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.

You are making a decision about allowing your adolescent youth to be interviewed for this study and to be audiotaped during the interview. Your signature below indicates that you have read the information provided above and have decided to allow him or her to participate in the study and to be audiotaped. If you later decide that you wish to withdraw your permission for your adolescent youth to participate in the study, simply tell me.
You may discontinue his or her participation at any time.

_____

Printed Name of adolescent youth

_____   _____

Signature of Parent(s) or Legal Guardian   Date

WRITTEN ASSENT FORM
School views of out-of-school youth

Dear Participant,
You are invited to participate in a study about the ways that young people who have left school view their past school experiences. My name is Mariam Yaqub, and I am a graduate student at Lehigh University's College of Education. This study is part of my Master's thesis. I am asking you to participate because you were referred to me by a local organization that provides youth services. I expect to have 3-5 participants in the study. If decide to participate, I will interview you for about an hour about how you feels about your past school experiences. If you have more to talk about and wish to talk to me again, we will have an additional interview. The interview will be audio-taped so that I can reference it later, but no one but me will hear the audio tapes. If you wish to turn off the audio recorder, I will turn it off. You will receive a $20 gift card for participating in this study.

The records of this study will be kept confidential and any information collected through this research project that personally identifies you will not be voluntarily released or disclosed without your separate consent, except as specifically required by law.   In any sort of report we might publish, we will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely and only researchers will have access to the records. Your responses will not be linked to your name in any written or verbal report of this research project. Your decision to participate will not affect your present or future relationship with Lehigh University or with the organization that referred you. If you have any questions about the study, please ask me.

If you have any questions later, you may call me at 610-758-6983 or email me at mby210@lehigh.edu. You may also contact the Lehigh professor supervising this project, Dr. Iveta Silova, at 610-758-5750 or ism207@lehigh.edu.

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You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.

If you later decide that you do not wish to participate in the study, simply tell me. You may discontinue your participation at any time.

Statement of Consent

I have read the above information. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and have my questions answered. I consent to participate in the study and to be audiotaped.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Signature of Investigator: _____ Date: _____

4) Local organizations that I contacted for participant recruitment

In order to protect participants' confidentiality, I cannot disclose which organization put me in contact with the two women whom I interviewed.

- Project of Easton, Inc. - Language and Literacy Programs
- Casa Guadalupe Center
- Adult Literacy Center of the Lehigh Valley
- STRIVE Youth Organization
- Northeast Ministries
- Northampton Community College - The Fowler Family Southside Center
- New Bethany Ministries
- CareerLink Leigh Valley
- Lehigh Carbon Community College

What do you think?

You can get $25 for a one-hour interview! I am a graduate student working on a project to hear the stories of teenagers who left school, and to learn about your opinions.

If you are at least age 16, and have dropped out of school within the past 2 years, you can participate!

Please email me at mby210@ Lehigh.edu or call me at 610 758 6983 .

Project about teenagers who left school
mby210@lehigh.edu
610-758-6983

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mby210@lehigh.edu
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610-758-6983

6) <u>**Resources for young people in the Lehigh Valley**</u>

PA CareerLink® Lehigh Valley
A variety of services are available to prepare Young Adults for the world of work. If you are pursuing your GED, seeking skill training or post high school education, or planning a job search and need help matching your skills and qualifications, PA CareerLink® Lehigh Valley can assist you in achieving your employment and educational goals.
http://www.careerlinklehighvalley.org/JobSeekers/ServicestoSpecialPopulations/Youth1621.aspx

- Linda Benko 610/841-1015, Carol Moy 610/841-1053, TTY 610/821-6760

Valley Youth House
Our programs foster positive growth enabling at risk youth and their families to become healthy, productive, responsible members of the community. Provides prevention and intervention services, counseling, life skills and behavioral health services.
http://www.valleyyouthhouse.org/index.html

- Mentoring and Internships, 524 Walnut St., Allentown, PA 18101, 610 432-6481
- Counseling and Child Welfare Services, 1615 Northampton St., Easton, PA 18042 610 252-2681
- Project Child, 531 Main St., Bethlehem, PA 18018, 610 954-9561, extension 40
- Education, Prevention and Intervention 531 Main St., Bethlehem, PA 18018, 610 954-9561

Bethlehem Area Vocational-Technical School
3300 Chester Ave., Bethlehem, PA 18020
610-866-8013
Provides vocation-technical programs: construction related, mechanical, technical, creative, service, health, and medical. Separate classes for high school students and adults in continuing education.

Casa Guadalupe Center
143 Linden ST., Allentown, PA 18101
610-435-9902
GED prep classes ESL classes, Homework Club, After School programs, Entrepreneurship Program (students learn how to set up a business either in the restaurant, fashion or publication industry, which reinforces important academic skills as well as life skills), and Summer Program.

Job Corps
1-800-733-5627
A residential education and job training program for at-risk youth (dropped out of high school), ages 16 through 24. Also offers GED programs, vocational training, intensive career counseling and related assistance.
http://jobcorps.dol.gov/

Lehigh Career & Technical Institute (formerly Lehigh County Vo-Tech)
Community Education Department
4500 Education Park Dr., Schnecksville, PA 18078
610-799-2300
GED testing and School-to-Work program, Vocational-technical training classes for high school to adult: construction, CDL, truck driving, mechanical, culinary, health (over 40 skill areas).
http://www.lcti.org/lcti/site/default.asp

New Bethany Ministries
610-691-5602
Mollard Hospitality Center Employability Program: GED preparation, basic computer skills, access to phone/internet/newspaper, interview behavior education, assistance with the application process and telephone etiquette.
http://www.newbethanyministries.org/

Northampton Community College
3835 Green Pond Rd., Bethlehem, PA 18020
610-861-5300
Offers GED prep classes, English as Second Language (ESL) classes, New Choices/New Options Career Development Services (free career and personal counseling for those who qualify) and Adult Basic Education (ABE) classes (non-credit courses focusing on personal enrichment, personal skills building and other areas of interest). Tuition may be charged for some classes.
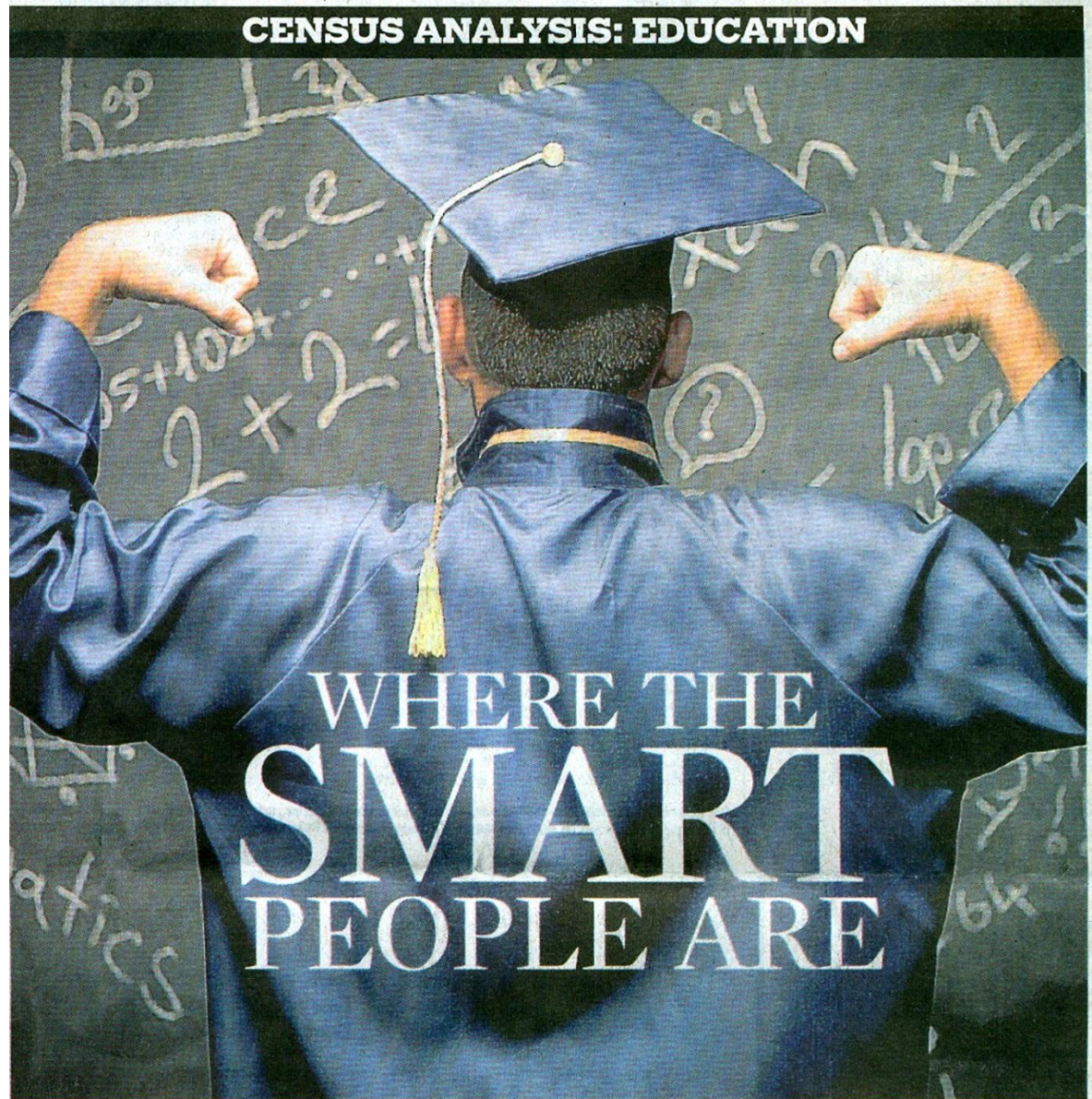http://www.northampton.edu/Prof_Com/default.htm

Great Schools
Helping kids with learning disabilities focus on life after high school.
http://www.greatschools.net/

7) Morning Call front page, October 9, 2011

CENSUS ANALYSIS: EDUCATION

WHERE THE SMART PEOPLE ARE

ISTOCK IMAGES

Lower Macungie has the most educated residents; Allentown has the most high school dropouts.

Author Biography

Mariam Yaqub grew up in Albuquerque, New Mexico and attended Arizona State University. At Arizona State, she was active in a variety of student organizations and political causes and worked as a teaching assistant in a junior high school in the Mesa Public Schools district. She also had the opportunity to study abroad in Lyon, France, and Meknes, Morocco. After graduating summa cum laude with a B.A. in Global Studies and a minor in Anthropology, Mariam moved to France, where she worked as an English teacher in public schools in St. Ouen, a diverse community on the outskirts of Paris. After 2 years in France, Mariam returned to the United States to pursue a M.A. in Comparative and International Education at Lehigh University, during which she also taught high school and worked for the Global Union at Lehigh.