An Examination of Motivational Factors in High School Dropouts Participating in General Education Development Degree Programs

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Abstract

According to the GED Testing Service (2011), over 18 million people have earned a GED credential since 1942. GED programs offer students an opportunity to further their education, but often there are motivational barriers that prohibit them from taking the necessary steps to enter and persist in such programs. In an effort to better understand why students would dropout of high school, yet enroll in a GED program, this quantitative study was conducted to examine which factors, whether autonomous or controlled, influenced dropouts to pursue the equivalency of a high school diploma after leaving the traditional school setting. The results of the study could lead to a better understanding of the motivations of those who pursue a GED, and the needs they have while in such program. The results revealed that Pearson correlations determined a low, weak, positive relationship between autonomous regulation and controlled regulation. A two-way ANOVA determined a significant main effect for the variable Gender and the variable Autonomous Regulation. No gender and ethnic differences were found in GED students’ self-regulation behaviors. Overall, there was a weak to moderate, positive correlation between autonomous regulation and controlled regulation. Increases in autonomous regulation scores were correlated with increase in controlled regulation scores.

Earning a GED affords individuals the opportunity to achieve goals which would have otherwise been unattainable. In order to earn a GED, participants must be self-determined, and possess a certain amount of motivation, as motivation plays a key role in anything that people do, especially when the task is not mandatory or required. The theory of self-determination differentiates the types of regulation a person possesses, and the degree to which they represent autonomous (intrinsic), or controlled (extrinsic), regulation. Whether autonomous or controlled, self-regulation is the factor that facilitates an individual’s ability to persist in a GED program, and earn a high school equivalency credential.

In Houle’s (1961) sensitivity study of motivation, three subgroups emerged: the goal oriented learner, which is one who learns to gain specific objectives such as learning to speak before an audience; the activity-oriented learner who participates for the sake of the activity itself, rather than to develop a skill; and the learning-oriented learner who pursues learning for its own sake. There is a simplified version of Houle’s model which was introduced by Allen Tough (1979). Tough’s model suggests that adults learn to increase their self-esteem; to have a sense of pleasure and to impress others; and to possess certain pleasures or satisfactions. Regardless of whether one’s beliefs mirror Houle’s model or Tough’s model on motivation, both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation plays a key role in an individual’s ability to persist in an adult education program through completion.
Individuals drop out of school for many reasons. Oftentimes, those same people find themselves seeking out, and enrolling in, GED programs. After leaving the traditional school setting, some individuals wish to increase their likelihood of having a better life for themselves and their family—hence, intrinsic motivation. On the other hand, some participants have extrinsic motivating factors such as court orders, or social services’ referrals, which makes pursuing a GED mandatory. Regardless of the reason, successful completion of an adult education training program depends heavily on an individual and his/her ability to persevere.

This study, through an analysis of results from surveys completed by GED participants, attempted to answer the questions that related to non-completers and their motivation(s) to sign up for GED classes and pursue their high school equivalency credential after dropping out of high school. The results were generated from surveys administered to high school dropouts who were participating in GED programs provided free of charge by the state of Alabama. The goal was to try to ascertain whether a GED student’s motivation to learn in a non-traditional setting after dropping out of a more structured and traditional setting was more autonomous or controlled.

This research was conducted as an attempt to understand why individuals are motivated to earn their GED after dropping out of school. In October, 2008, approximately three million 16-24 year olds were not enrolled in high school, and had not earned a high school diploma or alternate credential (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). According to the GED Testing Program Statistical Report (2010), in Alabama, there were approximately 797,910 adults, age 16 and over, who did not have a high school diploma in 2010. Of that number, 14,622, or 1.8% of candidates attempted to take and pass the GED exams. Only 8,973 of the 797,910 Alabama dropouts passed all five exams, and earned a GED credential. This left 788,937 people in 2010 without a high school equivalency diploma (GED 2000 Statistical Report, 2011). These numbers are staggering, especially in light of the reduced number of jobs available due to the downturn in the economy in recent years.

Although the dropout rate in Alabama is high, the success of the GED Testing Service is evident. More than 18 million people have earned a high school equivalency credential through the GED testing program since it was founded in 1942. Of that number, 472,913 Americans earned a GED credential in 2009 (GED Testing Service, 2010). Although the number of people who have earned a GED since the program’s inception is impressive, a large number of today’s youth are still dropping out of high school, and are not choosing to pursue a GED.

Since today’s youth continue to drop out of school, there is a sense of urgency to tailor programs that might encourage potential dropouts to persist through high school, and earn a diploma. As a result, the data collected for this study can be used by school system administrators and middle and high school principals as a tool to implement programs that might aid in decreasing the dropout rate, and improve the retention rate. It can also be used by administrators and directors of GED programs to strengthen their program, which might assist the students who need a second chance at completing their education.
The primary purpose of this study was to determine if there was a relationship between autonomous and controlled regulation among GED students who had not been successful in, and eventually dropped out of school. In addition, there was a focus on the gender and ethnicity of GED students, and whether either gender or ethnicity had an affect on autonomous and/or controlled regulation and the student’s ability persist in a GED program and eventually earn a GED. Further, there was an investigation of whether or not there were gender and ethnic differences in GED students’ self-regulation behaviors. This study contains information which might be utilized by adult educators and supervisors who work in the geographic areas studied when seeking to enhance the quality of their GED program.

**Research Questions**

The following research questions were used to guide this study:

1. To what degree is there a relationship between autonomous regulation and controlled regulation among GED students?
2. Do gender (female, male) and ethnicity (African American, Caucasian) of GED students affect autonomous regulation?
3. Do gender (female, male) and ethnicity (African American, Caucasian) of GED students affect controlled regulation?

Based on current dropout data reported by the Department of Education, the Census Bureau, and the National Center for Education Statistics, there is a need to aggressively pursue and develop stronger dropout prevention programs. As a result, the findings of this study can be used by school system administrators to strengthen their dropout prevention programs. They can also use the results to address the educational and instructional needs of students, as well as any behavioral issues which might be related to academic shortcomings. Stronger, more interesting course offerings, which capture the attention of students could be developed using the results, as these might increase the retention rate, and decrease the dropout rate. Also, a class that offers real-life solutions to motivational issues that today’s students face might attract the attention of potential dropouts, as well as other stakeholders such as parents, teachers, mentors, civic groups, and community activists. Directors and administrators of GED programs will be able to use the information to better accommodate their participants and their individual needs.

This study includes data which were gathered from GED students enrolled at two community colleges in Alabama. Chattahoochee Valley Community College (CVCC) is located in South-East Alabama, just across the Georgia line, and Southern Union State Community College (SUSCC), is located in East-Central Alabama. Both colleges are a part of the Alabama Community College System (ACCS). The ACCS is managed and operated by the Department of Postsecondary Education.

Only current students, 19 years of age or older, who were enrolled in CVCC and SUSCC’s Adult Education Program were surveyed. All five of CVCC’s classes met at their main campus which is located in Phenix City, Alabama. Five of SUSCC’s classes met on their main campus which is located in Wadley, Alabama. Southern Union’s 13 other classes were held at satellite locations in rural areas of Alabama. The rural areas employed fewer teachers, and had a decreased number
of resources and advertising opportunities available. Because of fewer advertising opportunities, these classes had lower enrollment numbers than the classes held in the urban areas.

Conversations between the Principal Investigator (PI) and the Adult Education Instructors revealed pertinent facts about the student population. The instructors stated that many of the students were unemployed as a result of the bad economy, and used their extra time to pursue a GED. They stated that a large portion of the students were not gainfully employed because of their lack of a high school diploma, and had not been able to go back to work as a result. Therefore, there were students who were forced to return to GED programs to further their education in an effort to pursue and/or secure employment, as well as to continue to draw unemployment compensation. As a result, this study is limited to the perception of those who participated in the survey, and their individual reasons for participating in GED programs at the time the surveys were administered.

The Adult Education Instructors stated to the PI that their enrollment numbers were lower since data were gathered during summer break. Some of the classes had numbers as low as one student. Others had no students attend class on the day the survey was administered. As a result of low numbers in some classes, and much higher numbers in other classes, the population that was surveyed varied widely depending on geographical location.

Currently, in Alabama, there are 20 community colleges, and four technical colleges that offer GED programs. GED programs are also offered at other locations throughout the state such as county jails and youth detention centers. Data were collected from adult education students who attended two of the Alabama Community College System’s adult education programs. Therefore, many geographical areas in Alabama were not represented in the study.

**Method**

SUSCC has nine class sites, eight of which are satellite locations located in both rural and urban areas. There are 17 separate classes that are held at those nine locations. Five classes are located on the Opelika campus, and 12 classes are located at satellite locations throughout Chambers, Clay, Lee, and Randolph counties. Classes are held in the mornings, midday, and evenings. Southern Union has a full-time adult education director, and 15 adult education instructors.

Chattahoochee Valley Community College has five GED classes where students can enroll in, and attend classes. All of their classes meet in one location, which is located on their main campus in Phenix City, AL. CVCC offers classes in the morning, at noon, and in the evening. Chattahoochee Valley has a full-time adult education director, and five adult education instructors.

The target population included high school dropouts attending adult education classes at two junior colleges located on the eastern side of Alabama. In October, 2008, there were over three million high school dropouts in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008). According to data reported by the State of Alabama, Department of Education, during the 2009/2010 school year, there were 217,585 students enrolled in school in Alabama. Of that number 3,934 dropped
out of high school. The graduation rate was 87.65% for the 2009/2010 school year for the entire state of Alabama.

Chattahoochee Valley Community College is located in Phenix City which is in Russell County, Alabama. Russell County has two public school systems that include Phenix City Schools and Russell County School System. Phenix City Schools reported an 89.53% graduation rate for the 2009/2010 school year, which is slightly above the state average. Russell County School System reported an 80.69% graduation rate, which is below the city schools’ as well as the state graduation rate.

Southern Union State Community College’s main campus is in Wadley, Alabama which is located in Lee County, Alabama. Lee County has two public school systems that include Lee County School System and Opelika City School System. Lee County’s graduation rate was 89.01% and Opelika City’s graduation rate was 86.16% for the 2009/2010 school year. When comparing the two public school systems in Lee County, Lee County has a slightly higher graduation rate, while Opelika City has a slightly lower graduation rate.

SUSCC also has GED class sites located in Chambers, Clay, and Randolph Counties. Chambers County School System reported an 84.45% graduation rate, which is below the state graduation rate. Clay County School System reported a graduation rate above the state rate at 94.2%. Randolph County has two school systems which include Randolph County School System, and Roanoke City School System. Randolph County reported a graduation rate of 88.82%, and Roanoke City Schools reported a graduation rate of 93%. Both of Randolph County’s school systems have a graduation rate above the state rate.

The quantitative method was used to collect data for this study. The quantitative approach is about measurement; therefore, this method was the most suitable for gathering data from GED students while using the SRQ-L assessment. There were both strengths and weaknesses to using this approach. One strength was it enabled the researcher to collect data on processes that were not directly observable. Secondly, it was well-suited when making comparisons between groups, i.e., race and gender. Also, generalizations were establishable, and answer to the question “how many” were readily available. The process of gathering data was efficient when using this approach. Finally, this approach can be used for analysis and explanation of (causal) dependencies between social phenomena.

Some weaknesses encountered while using this approach were that it simplified and compressed complex reality, as only five selected response options were given. It was difficult to determine a description of the participants’ perspectives, intentions, and meanings. For these reasons, this approach is only applicable for measurable (quantifiable) phenomena. Lastly, using this approach made it difficult for the PI to answer why there were statistical differences, etc.

The SRQ-L questionnaire was used to survey the participants. The survey asks three broad questions about why people engage in learning-related behaviors. This questionnaire was developed by Ryan and Connell (1989). They have granted permission to users to adapt the questionnaire as needed to refer to the particular course or program being studied. Although the questionnaire was formed with just two subscales, controlled regulation and autonomous
regulation, the responses that are provided are either intrinsic or extrinsic. Data were gathered using a face-to-face collection method in the classroom setting. All of the questionnaires were administered during the month of July, 2011. After data collection was completed, the results from the questionnaires were analyzed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software.

Although these graduation rates are representative of the school systems which are located within the counties the adult education programs are located, they do not necessarily represent the students enrolled in those programs. Graduation data does not represent students who live outside of the areas represented, and commute to the GED class sites. Students could be transient students, or could have moved to the area after dropping out of high school and relocating to the area where an adult education program is in existence. None of the school systems reported graduation rates below 10 percentage points of the state graduation rate; however, none of the systems reported 100% graduation rates.

Probability sampling was used to select participants for this study. In probability sampling, in the most frequently encountered situations, each individual has an equal chance of becoming a part of the sample (Downie & Heath, 1974). Simple random sampling is a type of probability sampling, and is the basic sampling method of survey research (Powell, 1997). Downie and Heath (1974) contend the following about probability sampling:

Only when we deal with probability samples can we know the frequency distribution of the sample statistics generated by the sampling procedure repeatedly applies to the same population. It is this knowledge that allows us to infer from a sample to its population. Randomization is essential to probability sampling and therefore to statistical inference itself. When sampling procedures are not carried out like this, the resulting sample is said to be biased. (p. 154)

The sample consisted of 95 students who were currently enrolled in adult education programs at either CVCC or SUSCC. The student population included both male and female students. Students of all races and nationalities were invited to participate. The student population sampled ranged from 19-70 years of age. Students were given the opportunity to opt out, without any risk or harm. There were no rewards given for participation in the study. The students were receptive and welcoming to the PI. All who participated showed a willingness to participate in the data collection process.

Data were gathered over a month’s time period during the month of July, 2011. The PI distributed and collected all surveys. In an effort to avoid coercion, Adult Education Instructors were asked to leave the classroom while students completed the surveys. The Adult Education Directors and Adult Education Instructors were accommodating, and open to the data collection process.

The students were surveyed using the SRQ-L. The format for this questionnaire was introduced by Ryan and Connell (1989). The questionnaire was formed with just two subscales which assess domain-specific individual differences in the types of motivation or regulation a person
encompasses: Controlled Regulation, and Autonomous Regulation. These two subscales measure the degree of internal and external motivation an individual possesses.

Findings

The results of this study revealed that female students are more motivated to attend classes and earn their GED than male students. However, according to the GED Testing Program Statistical Report (2010), in Alabama the number of male test taking candidates (53%) exceeded the number of female candidates (43%). The number of male GED recipients (55%) also exceeded number of female recipients (46%). Although results of this study revealed that female students are more motivated to attend GED classes, it is important to note the geographic areas surveyed, and that the aforementioned numbers presented by the GED Testing Program are for the entire state of Alabama, and not just for the areas surveyed. As a result, the focus of administrators of GED programs should be on both male and female students, and how to enhance motivation in both groups of students. While motivating female students to earn a GED should be central to creating a plan, the retention of male students must also be a part of that plan.

In an effort to ascertain what is needed by individual students to increase their motivation to earn their GED, administrators and Adult Education Instructors could survey students to see what their immediate needs are. Cross (1981) surmised that the two most effective means of gathering information are face-to-face interviews, and questionnaires. These means of collecting data might cause students to buy into the process and take ownership of their learning. Also concerned administrators might cause students to get on board, and be more willing to continue through program completion. Oftentimes students value being heard, and are more willing to participate when they feel like their opinions matter.

The willingness of students to participate in surveys can be witnessed from Table 9 of the GED Testing Program’s Statistical Report (2010), where there was a 97% response rate under Percentage of Candidates Reporting Various Reasons for Taking the GED. As an Adult Education Instructor, I often involve my students in the decision-making process. I intentionally take a back seat, and let them decide what works best for them when deciding things such as when to take breaks during class, and how lessons should be presented. When students feel they have a role in planning, they tend to exhibit a newfound sense of empowerment.

Conclusion

In an effort to increase participation among males, administrators should examine the literature to see which strategies have proven successful in motivating male students. According to Fine and Zane (1989), in a study conducted over a year’s time in inner city, students reported reasons such as negative relations with educators as reasons for dropping out of high school. Wlodkowski (1985) highlighted 20 strategies that instructors can use to incite the empathy and expertise of the instructor. If instructors show that they care about the students and their well-being, they might find success by using the Wlodkowski’s strategies.

Instructors should also plan to visit successful programs to see what is working and what did not work for those programs. Ideas could be generated from students by administering surveys,
think tanks, and roundtables. Some of the strategies that I have observed that increases participation and motivation among male students include providing individualized attention, hosting recognition programs, including high-interest learning materials, and instruction that involve movement for kinesthetic learners.

References


