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Finding the Words: A Counterstory

Abstract

The hegemonic view on students who leave high school is that they are lazy, criminals or simply unmotivated. In this paper, I explore not only the different forces at work that push students out, but also highlight the strength students show. I do this by citing relevant research, while also discussing my own story, from having dropped out in the 9th grade to struggling in my graduate program now. In my case, I was pushed out by the humiliation I experienced from having an (undiagnosed) learning disability, but equally, I chose to leave, because it was my way of resisting that humiliation. Opting-Out of school can be a way for students to exert power over their lives and resist what is unfair in the school system. Rather than seeing students as lacking something, these students are using the tools they have access to, and forge a new path for themselves. Educators would do well to respect and honor who their students are, what their needs are, and their forms of resistance.

Our deficiency-focused narrative about students who leave school, often assigns blame to students, calling them lazy, disorganized, or "bad." In this paper, I discuss my story as a student who was pushed out of school starting in the 8th grade. My story, like that of many students who are pushed out, involves undiagnosed learning disabilities, and resistant cultural capital. I discuss the literature on how students are pushed out, and what policies might help retain students. But most importantly, I seek to queer our conversation around students who leave school. I argue that student's resistance to a harmful system may show as opting-out of school. Creating spaces for these students to discuss their experiences outside the hegemonic narrative is vital (Flores, 1996). My writing is a part of creating this discursive space for pushed-out students who exerted their agency and resilience.

Drop-Out or Push-Out

In the U.S., the rate of high school "dropouts" in 2014 was the lowest it's ever been - with 12% of Latinx folks dropping out (Krogstad, 2016). This is a dramatic difference from the 54% rates reported in the early 2000s (Greene, 2001). However, this is still a high rate compared to African Americans (7%) and white Americans (5%) (Krogstad, 2016), and it does not consider how many students never enter the school system (Aviles, Guerrero, Barajas Howarth & Thomas, 1999). Many researchers looking at this issue operate from the hegemonic assumption that students bring in problems and drop out

because of these problems (Aviles et al., 1999). Students often have to deal with the assumption that they will drop out because of pregnancy, fighting, drugs and more (Aviles et al., 1999). Drop-outs, indeed, are the punchline of many a classist joke, for example: "You remember, you fail math, you flunk out of school, you end up being the guy at the pizza place that sweeps the floor and says, 'Hey, kids, where's the cool parties this weekend?'" says Willow on Buffy the Vampire Slayer (Green, 1997). But in contrast to this simplified image of drop-outs, tor many students, leaving school is a complex issue.

I refer to these students as being pushed-out, rather than dropping out, as pushed out students find themselves in adverse situations within their school environment (Doll, Eslami & Walters, 2013). This can include inept instruction, lack of transportation, a racist curriculum, and more (Ecker-Lyster & Niileksela, 2016). Some researchers argue that students can also be pulled out by things outside of the school - pregnancy, illnesses and the need for employment - or fall out by lack of progress (Doll, Eslami & Walters, 2013). However I believe schools should have ways to support students in staying despite those factors that may be pulling them out. Attendance policies that make space for ill students, earlier disability testing and interventions, flexible school schedules and formats, personal support, and discipline policies that are more social justice oriented are just some of these ideas. I, in particular, would have benefitted from these support measures.

In the 8th grade, my mother and I abruptly moved from Panama to the United States. My parents had decided to separate - and though the relationship had been crumbling for years, it finally broke then. It was a shock to leave my father, my older sister (only 18 months older than me), my country, and my language. We moved back to Las Vegas, where we had lived for a few years when I was younger. That first semester back in school, I wanted to prove to myself that I could do this. I wanted to make my mother proud. I could do this. I got straight As, auditioned for Las Vegas Academy's Creative Writing program, and got in! Everything seemed great.

But then in my second semester, I had a meeting with one of my teachers. It was the only meeting I had that year, and in it, my math teacher asked me why I kept making careless mistakes and had earned a C average. I remember leaving upset - angry and sad - I had been trying! I had no language for what I was experiencing, no one to blame it on, and so I turned it all against myself, blaming myself for being "careless." I felt helpless, and anxious about that math class, and so, I started chronically missing school, left my extracurriculars, and stopped seeing friends. The daily 15 minute walk to the bus stop seemed eternal, while I ruminated on the day ahead, and often I would only make it half-way before returning home. I was bone-weary tired and could not talk to anyone about it. This feeling of alienation is not specific to me. In Marin's (1995) study of Puerto

Rican students who had left school, most students reported feeling alienated from school. But my absences earned me a reputation for "just not trying."

Then came the 9th grade. That first semester I had As in everything except math. I was, once again, called in for my only meeting, this time with someone from the Dean's office. He asked, plainly, why I was being lazy about math. He then let me know I would have to repeat that grade or at least that class - I was shocked, as many students in my situation are (Aviles et al., 1999). I felt defeated, anxious and helpless. I wasn't going to pass math, so what did the future looked like for me? After that I, once again, started missing classes, to the point that I knew I would be kicked out of the magnet program. I blamed myself - clearly I could do better - everyone kept saying that. How could I blame school for this? It must have been me. But why did I keep doing this? I had no answer.

Other students who leave school find that unclear absenteeism policies, being overwhelmed by make-up work on top of their regular school work, and/or having to make up semesters, caused them, too, to leave school, as graduation seemed impossible (Aviles et al., 1999). Why do these students miss class? Some report it's for work, while others mention disinterest (Aviles, 1999). I couldn't tell you what it was for me, other than it was the only way for me to express my anger. Indeed, missing school out of frustration is one way students take back their power (Gosine & James, 2010). Students dealing with this, themselves often don't know how to stay in school or to affect the school system (Aviles et al., 1999). Many, like me, are humiliated by staff who hold negative views about the students (Aviles et al., 1999). And, so, I "dropped out" of school. I saw no future for myself, and those years were lost to darkness (quite literal: I rarely left my house or was awake during the day). I could not envision a future where I was happy, or employed. This laziness that I could not control would just take that away from me.

Higher Education

At 19, I got my General Educational Development Test (GED), an alternative to a high school diploma. I still felt like I was simply floating around aimlessly, but I had learned at least a GED was needed for most jobs. I enrolled in college the next year, terrified that after five years without school, I wouldn't know what to do. I don't know who chose my schedule, but I am forever grateful, as I took Sociology 101, Psychology 101 and Anthropology 101. Suddenly I learned that people made a career out of being deeply interested in understanding groups of people. During those "lost years" I had a tendency to spend a year or so learning all I could about different groups of people. I still have a 120 page document I put together about the Quiverfull movement. I saw a path for myself (I didn't yet know how difficult the path to being an academic is but I'm glad I didn't! I was able to spend 4 years thinking all I needed were As). I was thriving - I felt empowered and proud of myself and what I could do. Unlike my previous - and many other student's - experience of only focusing on where I was struggling, I had a chance to focus on what I excelled at (Baum, 1989). This was what kept me going, even as my struggles with math

continued. I failed Math 95, 96, 98 and 120 the first time I took each. Then I had to take them as my only class for the semester, in order to spend up to 4 hours every day working on the class. I accepted that it was simply what I had to do to counter my "lack of motivation."

It wasn't until 2015 that I had a professor who seemed to notice something was wrong, according to our hegemonic views of how students should perform. We had an in-class short answer exam, and he took note of the fact that I paused every few minutes to rub my hands, as I was in pain. He also noticed I spent about 30 minutes going back over my paper and re-writing words as carefully as I could - and even then, sometimes it would still not be clear, as I seem to have little control over my hands. He asked me, first, about my handwriting, - had it always been this bad and painful? "Yes" - and then asked me if I struggled with anything else in school. I was ashamed to tell the truth, - I was a gifted student as a child! - but the question itself was so unexpected that I answered truthfully. He nodded, and said "Have you heard of dysgraphia? And dyscalculia?" He then mentioned how, as a principal at a public school in NYC, he had seen many kids who seemed to struggle with these things because of a learning disability.

I have never been able to get diagnosed - I still don't feel financially secure enough to spend $200 or more on getting a diagnosis. While students in K-12 might be diagnosed through their school, college students have the burden shifted on to them (Eckes & Ochoa, 2005). Even for students in the K-12 system, however, Eckes and Ochoa (2005) argue that there are a lot of students who "fall through the cracks" (p. 17). This can, in part, be caused by regulations that will only diagnose a child with a learning disability if they are below grade level, so that a student struggling tremendously to stay on their grade level can "slip through" (Baum, 1989). I felt that my failing at math meant I was inadequate as a student, and this feeling is is one shared by other students, even those who are twice-exceptional, meaning they are both gifted and disabled (Besnoy, Swoszowski, Newman, Floyd, Jones & Byrne, 2015). This makes postsecondary education a lot harder for them. These students not only lack an explanation for their experiences, but they also lack strategies to help them cope (Eckes & Ochoa, 2005).

I am not claiming I do have dysgraphia or dyscalculia. I have instead, over the years, come up with alternative reasons for why I struggle. Perhaps I just have never cared enough about school. Maybe I just don't know how to study. Maybe it's the trauma I have experienced because of school. Even students who are eventually diagnosed have accumulated emotional trauma, shame and a number of negative experiences related to school (Eckes & Ochoa, 2005). Some come to feel hopeless and frustrated, leading to incomplete assignments, failed or dropped courses, and even leaving programs (Eckes & Ochoa, 2005). Indeed, I dropped my sociology major after failing our required statistics course, even though it was the only class I was missing for my degree. I felt like I had gotten myself "in trouble" and this feeling is also one shared among many

students with undiagnosed learning disabilities (Eckes & Ochoa, 2005). Students in these situations need better support systems, and when they don't have them, they might take things into their own hands.

Resistance

And so now. 3 years after that conversation with my professor, 1 year after dropping my sociology major, and 14 years after "dropping out" of high school. I'm getting my masters in Communication and though I am excited about teaching and about the research I want to do, I'm struggling to find energy for certain tasks. Sitting in my rhetoric class is particularly exhausting - I'm the only woman of color, the only queer person, am a non-rhetoric person, and am the only activist. It's exhausting to see your thoughts are less valued because you don't put them in perfectly academic words. It's infuriating to hear the people again complain about how much they hate Trump, and know that's the extent of their work to change the system. It's exhausting and infuriating to see even the "radicals" still enforce teaching policies I find harmful and oppressive, and find that they won't fight the system, since they benefit from it. This often leaves me feeling gaslighted and just not wanting to show up. My first semester I didn't miss a single day of class - the next I kept wanting to miss class. When I first noticed this desire, I was terrified of myself. Was this just a slip back into laziness?

Gosine and James (2010) discuss the resilience and resistance many marginalized students exhibit. When their strengths, stories, needs and cultural capital is ignored in schools, students feel disrespected, unrecognized and powerless (Gosine & James, 2010). And so they find different ways to resist and make themselves heard (Gosine & James, 2010). Some folks are aware of what is pushing them out. Aviles et al. (1999) conducted focus groups with Latinx/Xicanx folks who had left high school, and discussed some of these issues with them. Most of the participants felt that they were "facilitated" out, as teachers had low expectations of them, and staff left them without options, bluntly telling students they wouldn't graduate (Aviles et al., 1999). One of these ways is "opting out," where students drop out, are absent, late, challenge their teachers, or focus on extracurriculars (Gosine & James, 2010). I had a visceral reaction reading this. I saw how I had performed some of these behaviors: 1) I wanted to miss class out of frustration, 2) last semester I wrote a paper I called my "protest paper" - I knew I would have to re-do, but I was angered at my professor saying student's trauma had no place in the classroom - so I wrote a paper focusing entirely on making space for student's trauma, 3) I only look forward to my extracurriculars, to my education class, and to teaching - and so that's where my energy goes).

I became even more uncomfortable as I realized that 14 year old Claudia had also availed herself of that strategy, communicating her anger by missing class, being late and dropping out. This brings up complicated feelings. Rather than just feeling ashamed of myself or angry at myself, I have to confront my anger at a system that failed me. I

should have had more meetings, I should have been spoken to respectfully, and my options should have been clearer. I should have been tested for a learning disability. Perhaps, then, I wouldn't have felt the helplessness and frustration that drove me to missing class. I also am grappling with a strange new sense of pride and love for young Claudia. How amazing that I found a way to express myself and resist. This was my resistant cultural capital (Yosso, 2005 as cited by Gosine & James, 2010). And, so, this semester was the first time I confronted this shame over dropping out. What if it is a learning disability that made it so difficult? What if it wasn't, but it was 13 and 14 year old Claudia asserting her power as best she could? I was struggling, and I did feel helpless. This matters.

Educator's Role

And, so, what do we do for students who might be dealing with similar issues? In terms of undiagnosed disabilities, Eckes and Ochoa (2005) emphasize that students without a diagnosis may struggle the most to cope with school, particularly in higher education. They will not have benefited from a transition plan from high school, and may have never self-advocated before (Eckes & Ochoa, 2005). I know that I felt stumped when the Disability Resource Center (DRC) told me that once I had a diagnosis, I would have to tell them what kind of accomodations I needed. I have never lived in a world where I could ask for these things - how could I know if I needed extended work time on a test, or powerpoints provided ahead of time? Baum (1989) suggests there needs to be greater collaboration between high schools and colleges; University DRC's should visit high schools and help students learn their rights and how their accessibility will change, high schools should prepare students to self-advocate and create plans. This is, of course, for the students who are "caught" while in the K-12 system.

Gosine and James (2010) suggest that for students who are frustrated with school, there may be other ways to empower them to stay. One way might be by honoring their ethno-racial identity, and to insist on their maintaining connectedness with others who share their identities (Gosine & James, 2010). Having a connection with staff may also prevent some students from being pushed out by the system (Lee & Burkam, 2003, as cited by Ecker-Lyster & Niileksela, 2017). For latinx students and other racial minorities, they may also experience the verbal humiliation I did, or other forms of microaggressions, and addressing this is vital. Students of color, or students who have experienced push-out factors, could benefit from creating their own spaces where they can communicate about their struggles, the choices they have made, what they need and more (Flores, 1996). Educators also need to have more honest conversations with students about the structural forces at work in their lives and on their futures, in order to empower them to make informed choices and to raise consciousness.

Policies that address the school environment are also important, and are the factors that may be more easily modified to meet student needs. One study found that schools with

the highest rates of students who were pushed out were also schools that had more inexperienced staff, staff dressed less professionally, the buildings were in worse physical condition, there was less family involvement, and these schools overall had a negative school environment (Ecker-Lyster & Niileksela, 2017). Lee and Burkam (2003, as cited by Ecker-Lyster & Niileksela, 2017) found that schools with more challenging courses and less students overall had higher graduation rates. Rumberger and Thomas (2000, as cited by Ecker-Lyster & Niileksela, 2017) found that schools with higher student-teacher ratios has higher dropout rates.

Schools should also move into using more positive reinforcements and support systems to prevent rule breaking, rather than detention, expulsions and suspensions (Ecker-Lyster & Niileksela, 2017). Schools could use guides like the Institute for Education Sciences (IED) Dropout Prevention practice Guide, which suggests schools have early warning systems that trigger interventions, for struggling students to be assigned an adult advate, for classroom teachers to provide more support and enrichment, and for more personalized learning environments (Ecker-Lyster & Niileksela, 2017). These school-wide responses must be guided by the school's and students own needs and resources.

However, it is not enough to simply fight the factors that make students choose to drop out. I think it's also important to queer our discussions of these students and their choices. We must see what these students are bringing. They bring a strong sense of what is right and wrong. They experience something that is unfair or wrong in the school system, feel pain in response, and they honor it by resisting. This is something to admire. The students don't have a deficit in motivation or skills - instead, they are students with differing needs or experiences, and a strong ability to express themselves. These students might reject the capitalistic and individualistic goals and messages of educational systems (Gosine & James, 2010). They might choose to queer their educational journey, blazing their own path, however difficult or scary this may be.

Conclusion

In this paper, I explored the driving forces behind my leaving high school. Rather than the shaming narrative I had accepted for half my life, and which our culture emphasizes, I turned to another idea. Perhaps students aren't dropping out because they lack something. Perhaps they're being pushed out by a cold and unresponsive system. Their resistance - through leaving school - is not a display of weakness, but one of strength and resistance. Other educators could use this to better understand students with chronic absences or other "disruptive" behavior. Knowing that their behavior might come from a sense of pain should bring compassion from educators, and a desire to better understand their students. Queering our narrative about these students can only help students and those who have left better understand the complex forces at work in education.

Leaving school in the 9th grade involved a lot of pain and confusion, and until now, I had been unable to make sense of my experiences outside of the shame I felt. I have been aware that there are structural barriers to Latinx student's success, yet the shame of "dropping out" was so deeply ingrained in me that it wasn't until a year ago that I started to question my own narrative. I wonder how others, who may not have the privilege to be in spaces where we discuss these issues, make sense of their experiences. Perhaps an environment where teachers and students feel comfortable sharing their past or current struggles with school could help those who are struggling. This may be a part of the school environment, or through a mentorship program. These types of programs, among with things like Ecker-Lyster & Niileksela's suggestions for (2017) early warning systems, positive reinforcements, and smaller classes that allow more personal attention for students, could help prevent students from being pushed out. More importantly, we must value student's strength and agency when dealing with environments that are unwelcoming, exhausting, or exclusionary. Allowing them to create their own discursive spaces can be a starting point for them to voice their concerns and needs.

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