

STUDENTS - AT - RISK:

A CASE STUDY OF IDENTIFICATION

AND INTERVENTION STRATEGIES.

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As part of the current push towards increased student retention rates, grants have been provided in 1990-1991 to selected low-retention schools through the federally-funded Students-At-Risk (STAR) programme. Keebra Park State High

School, a medium sized school on Queensland's Gold Coast, used its 1990 STAR grant to fund a comprehensive research project. The project used both questionnaires and interviews administered to over 500 current and past students, parents and teachers, to investigate a range of issues related to the satisfaction, academic performance and retention of the school's Year 9-12 students. This paper reports some of the findings from this study, and describes the ways in which these findings have been used to develop a set of strategies which seek to assist at risk students.

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the most significant changes that has occurred in Australia over the past decade has been the substantial increase in rates of student retention at secondary school. Recent data indicate that, across Australia, apparent retention rates have increased from 34.5% in 1980 to 64.0% in 1990 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1991). In Queensland, approximately 70% of students remain at school until year 12 nowadays. No doubt this trend has been encouraged by Commonwealth and State government policies, by increased rates of youth unemployment, and by a more general acceptance among students, their families and the wider community that completion of a full secondary education is in the student's and the nation's, best interest (Adams, Ball, Braithwaite, Kensell, Low and Parker, 1989).

One component of the federal government's drive towards the attainment of higher school retention rates is the Students-at-Risk (STAR) programme. Announced in the 1989-90 budget and funded at a level of \$7.5 million spread over three years, the programme's aims are to identify those students in government schools most at risk of not completing secondary schooling and to encourage their continued participation by supporting a range of school-based projects. In order to ensure that disadvantaged young people are the beneficiaries of STAR funds, priority schools experiencing low retention rates were targeted.

One school identified for STAR funding in 1990-91 was Keebra Park High School, a co-educational state high school for students in Years 8-12. Established in 1973, the school grew to a peak population of approximately 1600 students, before declining to a size of 544 students in 1990 and 670 students in 1991. The school is located on Queensland's Gold Coast, approximately three kilometres south-west of the Southport business district. Thirty-eight teachers worked at Keebra Park in 1990 and this

number increased to 43 in 1991. Students in Years 11 and 12 at the school study English plus five other subjects from a list of over 30 academic and vocational subjects.

The school was selected for STAR funding on the basis of retention rate data pertaining to the years 1987 to 1989. These data indicate a Year 10 to Year 12 retention rate of 50%, compared to an average rate of almost 70% in neighbouring schools. Given this evidence of the student retention-problem at the school and the availability through the STAR programme of funds designed to increase the retention of at-risk student, the school was faced with the task of choosing specific projects for implementation in 1990 and beyond. After a detailed consideration of several specific options, it was decided to use the STAR funds available in 1990 to carry out a research project to investigate a range of issues associated with student satisfaction, performance and retention at the school. In the section that follows the objectives, methods and major findings from this comprehensive study are summarized. Full details of the study are given in Bradley (1990).

2. THE 1990 KPHS STAR RESEARCH PROJECT. (September - November, 1990)

The research conducted at Keebra Park High School in 1990 aimed to address the following research questions:

- * How many of the students at Keebra Park are at risk of leaving school before completing Year 12?
- * What characterizes these students at risk?
- * What factors influence their decision to leave school early?
- * Can these students be identified in advance?
- * What can be done to prevent their unnecessary departure from school prior to completing Year 12?

The study involved the collection of information and opinions from 384 current students, 14 past students, 102 parents and 31 teachers at Keebra Park. The data were obtained using self-administered questionnaires and face-to-face interviews. School records were also consulted in order to gather details of the students' past academic performances. The survey instruments were constructed after a thorough examination of the existing literature (eg, Adams et al, 1989; Ainley, Batten and Miller 1984; Solman, 1987), and were administered under conditions designed to maximize participation rates and respondent honesty.

Some of the major conclusions from the study regarding student satisfaction were:

- * the majority (72%) of students were moderately or extremely

satisfied with the school.

- * aspects of the school which were viewed most favourably were its small size, its friendly teacher-pupil relationships and its sporting programme.

- * no aspect of the school was consistently targeted for negative comment.

- * comparatively low levels of satisfaction were apparent in the following sub-groups of students: those with lower (self-rated) abilities and self-esteem, those who were not involved with the life of the school, those with few friends, those who did not intend to complete Year 12, those from non-English speaking backgrounds, those who placed low values on staying at school and on doing their best at school, and those in Years 9 and 10.

Some of the major conclusions regarding academic performance were:

- * the students enrolling at Keebra Park appeared to be academically at least "average" when compared to the broader population of secondary school students.

- * poorer academic records were disproportionately concentrated in the following groups of Keebra Park students: those whose parents were less highly educated, those whose fathers worked in "blue-collar" jobs, E.S.L. students, students who perceived their parents to have low educational aspirations for them, and students with low abilities and self-esteem.

Some of the major conclusions regarding student retention were:

- * the majority (87%) of Year 9-11 students stated an intention to stay at school to complete Year 12.

- * students who intended to leave, when compared with those intending to complete Year 12, dislike school to a greater extent, perceive their parents to be less supportive of their continued education, and express a number of other distinctive attitudes. The two groups were not, however, distinguishable on the basis of their demographic background.

More specifically, the research identified some important correlates of the student's intentions to leave or remain at school. For example, 81% of intended "stayers" (compared with only 25% of intended "leavers") believed their parents viewed staying at school as important, and 53% of intended "stayers" (compared to only 11% of intended "leavers") believed that their parents had tertiary aspirations for them. When asked to assess their own abilities, "stayers" were more likely than "leavers" to rate themselves above average for verbal ability (51% versus 9%), maths ability (39% versus 14%), and general academic ability (42% versus 3%); "stayers" also rated their self-esteem more highly than did "leavers" (52% versus 22% rated as above average). Thirty-one percent of intended "stayers" reported a high level of involvement in the life of school, compared to only 11% of students who intended to leave early. The Year 7 Test of Learning Ability (T.O.L.A.) mean score for the "stayers" was 8.12,

compared to a mean score of 5.68 for the "leavers". This significant difference in the academic achievement of the two groups was also apparent in the student's Grade Point Averages, both at Year 9 and in their most recent semester. Intending "leavers" were not only performing worse academically than intending "stayers", but this difference was widening with each passing semester. The "stayers" were more likely to aspire to tertiary education and a professional career, and were two- to three-times more likely than the "leavers" to believe that staying at school not only would improve their job prospects, but also would be an enjoyable experience in itself.

The study also identified a number of school-based initiatives which were considered likely to help increase student retention rates. The following six interventions were widely supported by students and teachers alike:

- * broadening the academic curriculum
- * extending the programme of practical subjects
- * increasing opportunities to be involved in work experience and part-time study
- * removing restrictions upon subject choice caused by time-tabling inflexibility
- * increasing the use of experiential/"hands on" teaching methods, and
- * providing more support for students who are struggling academically.

Whilst highly desirable as longer-term goals, these various curriculum, organizational and other changes were seen to go beyond the limits of the school's limited funding allocation through the STAR programme. Thus, it was recommended that in 1991 this grant be used to employ a STAR support person who would perform a range of counselling, skill-building and support activities with students who were identified as being at-risk.

3. DEVELOPMENT OF THE SCREENING QUESTIONNAIRE. (April, 1991)

After the completion of the 1990 research study, and the publication and dissemination of the final report in February-March 1991, it was decided that this research component of the project should be continued. In particular, there was a perceived need to gather statistical information regarding the school's 1991 Year 9 population, in order to make comparisons with the 1990 cohort and to draw inferences regarding trends in student characteristics and school leaving intentions. In addition there was a need, in line with the guidelines laid down in the STAR programme, to develop a strategy to permit the early identification of at-risk students.

More specifically, the project team sought a strategy through which the Year 9 student population could be divided into two groups:

- * those who were suitable for STAR support. (This category would include, for example, students who stated an intention to leave school, but who appeared to have the ability and the home support to continue, and those students who stated an intention to stay but who presented with a number of risk factors which may contribute to an early departure), and

- * those who were not suitable for STAR support. (This category would include those students who stated an intention to stay at school, who were performing well academically and whose attitudes, interests and home background were congruent with school completion).

The strategy selected for identifying at-risk students involved drawing upon three kinds of information, namely:

1. the students' stated intentions regarding the timing of their departure from school,
2. the students' perceptions, attitudes, values and goals, with particular reference to those variables identified in the 1990 research project as discriminating between the intended "stayers" and the intended "leavers", and
3. the teachers' (and the school administrative team's) reports of the academic performance and classroom behaviour of the students.

In order to gather information of the first two types, a screening questionnaire was developed using those items from the 1990 survey instrument which distinguished intending "stayers" and "leavers". These items were retained in a format identical to that used in 1990 so as to permit direct comparisons between the responses of the two student cohorts. The resulting questionnaire included 18 items from the 1990 instrument, and was one-third the length of the original instrument. It comprised seven pages of questions, mostly of the forced-choice variety and took approximately twenty minutes to complete. The questions sought information regarding the following areas of relevance to the issue of retention:

- * family support for continued study
- * academic self-concept
- * academic attitudes & values including attitudes to school, to staying at school and to education
- * academic performance
- * career preferences
- * intention to leave or stay, & reasons for this choice.

The aim was to use the information pertaining to these issues to build a detailed profile of the at-risk status both of individual students and of the entire 1991 cohort of Year 9 students.

4. IDENTIFICATION OF THE STUDENTS - AT - RISK. (April-July, 1991)

The screening questionnaire was administered to all 122 Year 9 students under teacher-supervised conditions in their normal classrooms in April, 1991. Analysis of the responses suggested that 17 of the students clearly fell into the "at-risk" category across a multitude of dimensions, with approximately 20 additional students displaying at least two areas of concern. Discussion with members of the school administration and calls for nominations from the Year 9 teachers, resulted in a total pool of 52 possible students-at-risk.

All 52 students were individually interviewed by the STAR-support person. This interview focussed particularly upon the students' responses to the items on the screening questionnaire. On the basis of these interviews, the 52 students were divided into two groups:

- * 24 students-at-risk (including all 17 identified through the screening instrument), and
- * 28 others (not at-risk, who have since been interviewed only a couple of times).

The 24 students-at-risk were a given second interview, during which they were shown an outline of the proposed STAR intervention programme (entitled "Futurebound"), and were invited to participate. Informed consent was also sought from the students' parents.

Of the twenty-four students identified as being at-risk, twenty-two (12 males and 10 females) agreed to participate in the Futurebound programme. (One student declined because he was leaving the district; the other student's parents believed the programme was inappropriate because the student intended to leave school soon in order to enter the family business). The Futurebound programme was thus developed and implemented to suit the perceived needs of this group of twenty-two Year 9 students.

Before giving details of the Futurebound programme, the following section of this paper describes the results of the screening survey. Detailed comparisons are made between the characteristics of the students identified as being at-risk and those of students identified as not being at-risk.

5. CHARACTERISTICS OF THE STUDENTS - AT - RISK.

The twenty-four students identified as being at-risk responded to the items on the screening questionnaire in a manner which was strikingly different from the profile of responses given by the students not at-risk. Several of the most important of these differences are summarized in Table

1. As can be seen from this table, compared to the students not at-risk, the at-risk students received considerably less parental support for their studies, perceived themselves as less able scholastically, and enjoyed school less. In addition to being disaffected by their experience of school, they appeared to have less realistic and specific career directions than did their not at-risk peers.

Table 1 : Comparison of At-Risk and Not At-Risk Year 9 Students.

STUDENTS CHARACTERISTIC	% OF	
	AT-RISK (n=98)	NOT (n=24)

PARENTAL SUPPORT:		
Currently live with only one parent 15		46
Get along "very well" with parent(s) 54	17	
Discuss school "most days" with parent(s) 68	38	
Parent(s) think it is "extremely important" to complete Year 12 55		17
Believe it is very important to do as parent(s) think is best 73		30
ACADEMIC SELF-CONCEPT: (Self-Ratings)		
Above average verbal ability 66	29	
Above average maths ability 57	12	
Above average academic ability 61	21	
Above average sporting ability	50	

70
High self-esteem 29
83

ACADEMIC ATTITUDES & VALUES:

Above average level of involvement
in the life of the school 13
56

Think school is "great" 0
38

Believe staying at school will
"greatly improve" chances
of obtaining a good job 42
88

Believe staying at school
would be enjoyable 13
78

Believe it is very important to
do one's best at school 50
95

CAREER:

Intend to enter a profession 17
55

Intend to work in a sporting
or recreational role 26
8

Don't know what to do after
leaving school 29
13

6. DESCRIPTION OF THE 1991 STAR INTERVENTION
PROGRAMME: "FUTUREBOUND".

The STAR intervention programme, "Futurebound", was implemented at the school over a fourteen week period from August 19th until November 29th (yesterday!). The programme was conducted entirely by the STAR support person (STAR-SP) who was appointed to the school on a 0.6 fractional basis (Monday, Thursdays and Fridays). The programme comprised two formal components (group interaction workshops and individual interview / counselling sessions), plus some less structured contact between the STAR-

SP and the 22 student participants. The individual interviews/counselling sessions were of 30 minutes duration and were held with each student at the same time on a weekly basis. The informal contact included occasional visits by the STAR-SP to the students' classes, as well as chance meetings and student drop-ins to the STAR-SP's office.

For the major component of the programme, the 22 students were divided into four single-sex groups of five or six students. Decisions regarding the composition of these groups were based upon (a) similarity of the students' problems and concerns, and (b) recommendations from the school administration as to which combinations of students would work best together. Each group of students was withdrawn from class once a week for a single (and sometimes a double) period. The total commitment of time was thus (approximately) eighteen 35-minute periods, or 10.5 hours.

The major aims of the programme were (a) to encourage students to more carefully think through their decision to leave school early, (b) to enhance students' self-esteem, social skills, career knowledge and other personal qualities, and, more generally, (c) to encourage students to take greater responsibility for themselves and their future. Programme content was drawn from a broad array of sources and was organized to proceed from personal to occupational issues. Specific elements of the programme included:

- * group building activities
- * values clarification exercises
- * listening and other communication skill-building activities
- * training in assertiveness, and impulse control
- * career exploration and clarification tasks
- * and so on.

The final session involved a field trip to the local Careers Reference Centre. The content of the programme was the same for all four groups.

Teaching methods were primarily experiential and interactive, with minimal use made of teacher-centred instruction. In conducting all of the sessions, the STAR-SP attempted to strike a balance between a rewarding and accepting style, on the one hand, and a style which included frequent use of direct and constructive confrontation, on the other. All sessions, with exception of the final field trip, were conducted on school premises, in a non-teaching room made available for the programme.

7. EVALUATION OF THE PROGRAMME.

The Futurebound programme will be evaluated over the next fortnight. The planned evaluation has five components:

1. A questionnaire to the 22 programme participants, asking them to assess

the programme's content and processes, to comment upon the benefits they derived from the programme, and to suggest improvements to it.

2. A questionnaire mailed to the parents of the participants, asking them to report upon their children's views of the programme, and upon any changes in their children's school-related attitudes or behaviours over the duration of the programme.

3. A questionnaire distributed to the teachers of the 22 participants, asking them to rate each student using a five-point scale (from "improved markedly" through "no change" to "deteriorated markedly") on such dimensions as self-confidence, completion of work, co-operation in class, and so on.

4. A comparison of programme participants and non-participants using the following three pieces of information extracted from the school records of all Year 9 students:

- * Grade Point Average
- * teacher ratings of attitude and behaviour
- * days absent from school

5. A modified version of the "screening" questionnaire used earlier in the semester. The original questionnaire has been scaled-down from 18 to 13 items, such that only those items related to the following issues have been retained:

- * attitude to the school
- * attitude to self
- * attitude to staying/leaving school
- * career intentions

This questionnaire will be administered to all Year 9 students (n = approximately 120), in order to permit comparisons between the "change-scores" of participants and non-participants in the programme.

The results of the entire study, including this evaluation component, are to be published in a report due for release in February-March, 1992.

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