



## Review

A critical review of the literature on school dropout <sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

This paper reviews the growing literature on early school leaving. We clarify what is at stake with early school leaving, and touch upon underlying problems and methodological issues raised in the literature. The paper investigates the levels, the methods and models with which the topic has been studied, and discusses potential (dis)advantages of each of those. We focus on early school leaving in all its complexity, and on the interplay of relevant (levels of) factors, rather than on just certain factors, typically located in individual students, schools or families. The findings in the literature are discussed and placed into perspective. Finally, a wide set of policy measures are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction and problem statement

The high dropout rates in Western countries sharply contrast with the social and economic objectives that have been formulated by government officials and policymakers in order to achieve sustainable economic growth. School dropout has been defined as leaving education without obtaining a minimal credential (most often a higher secondary education diploma).<sup>1</sup>

In the OECD countries, on average 72% of all 25- to 34-year-olds had completed a year 12 equivalent in 1999 (Business Council of Australia, 2002a). Another report mentions a year 12 equivalent level of education in the European Union of 77.3% of the population in 2005; a level similar to that of the United States, albeit one that has only slightly improved since 2000 (European Commission & Culture, 2006). These rates mask several things: first, the diversity of standards by which school dropout and completion are measured across various studies (from “event” and “status dropout rates” to “graduation” and “status completion rates” or even “averaged freshman graduation rates”; Cataldi, Laird, & KewalRamani, 2009); second, the plurality of differential criteria underlying them (the age, grade and time range: e.g., “permanent” versus “temporary” dropout or “stopout”, types of credentials: e.g., a regular or adult high school diploma versus a GED or alternative diploma, grade entrance versus completion, intra- or inter-school enrolment, etc.; Blue & Cook, 2004; Entwisle, Alexander, & Steffel-Olson, 2004; Hammack, 1986; Pittman & Haughwout, 1987; Rumberger & Lamb, 2003, 2005; Dalton, Gennie, & Ingels, 2009); and third, the interests involved in their measurement (e.g., on the part of schools receiving funds according to a “capitation” formula; cf. Entwisle et al., 2004).

In order to reduce the dropout rates, the “No Child Left Behind Act” (2001), and the “Lisbon 2000” and the “Europe 2020” goals have been formulated in the United States and Europe, respectively. The former aimed at an average high school graduation rate of 90 percent, whereas the latter expressed the desire that at least 85 percent of all 22-year-olds in the European Union complete upper-secondary education and maximum 10% of all pupils leave school early by 2012 (i.e., an objective to halve the dropout rate between 2002 and 2012; see: US Department of Education, 1990; European Commission, 2006).

Despite increasing attention on the part of policy makers, school dropout still is a serious issue. The growing literature on early school leaving indicates that school dropouts, compared with their graduated peers, are more frequently associated with long-term unemployment, poverty, bleak health prospects, sustained dependence on public assistance, single parenthood (in females), political and social apathy, and (juvenile) crime (Business Council of Australia, 2002b; Christenson, Sinclair, Lehr, & Hurley, 2000; Kaufman, Alt, & Chapman, 2004; Rumberger & Lamb, 2003; Vizcain, 2005 and references therein).

However, as Smith (2003) has argued, there is something naïve about the use of such associations, as they do not necessarily imply causation. It is indeed increasingly recognized that caution is required in interpreting such correlations, as the decision to drop out of school may be driven by exogenous factors, or may even result from systemic flaws, rather than factors intrinsic to dropouts themselves (Business Council of Australia, 2002a; Business Council of Australia, 2002b; Rumberger & Lamb, 2003). Structural inequality may not only cause early school leaving, but also for, e.g., health problems or poverty that in turn may be at the origin of dropping out.

In contrast to previous literature reviews on school dropout (e.g. Rumberger, 1994), this paper does not aim to fully summarize the dropout literature. Instead, it focuses on hitherto unchallenged commonplaces, possible underlying problems, methodological issues and research trends. It attempts to analyse the complex interplay of factors in its entirety rather than to concentrate on certain factors one-sidedly, as to avoid reproducing stereotypes. The literature is thereby carefully pondered with the aim of producing an overview of factors that may be most predictive of early school leaving (indicative of correlation), either by themselves or in interaction with other predictors. From this, and again in contrast to the previous reviews, we try to highlight aspects found in the literature that unite both dropouts and graduates, and that have a positive influence on all parties involved. In other words, it is aimed to pinpoint characteristics susceptible to improvement, from which both potential early school leavers and their fellow pupils may benefit. This focus significantly distinguishes our literature review from previous ones on early school leaving, as does its subsequent connection to important policy measures. By presenting policy measures next to predictive variables of early school leaving, we highlight their close interrelation. Indeed, in line with an evidence-informed paradigm, policy measures should focus on what research indicates as the most predictive measures.

This paper has benefitted from journal articles, books and reports from the past three decades (until 1980, with the exception of Reich and Young (1975) which provides a lowly cited yet nonetheless interesting starting point of this paper). To this end we have used the search engines ERIC (Educational Resources Information Center) and Google Scholar. As an additional criterion for inclusion, we have pragmatically restricted the literature search to English language literature. The review's emphasis is on early school leaving at the level of secondary (or high school) education.<sup>2</sup> The keywords “school dropout” or “school leaving”, and “secondary education” or “high school” have been used in search for abstracts. Using these keywords, Google Scholar yielded the highest number of hits (over thousands), whereas ERIC only provided us with 12 abstracts. To limit

<sup>1</sup> Early school leaving has often been referred to as “dropout”, early “withdrawal”, or “attrition” from high school, and before the 1960s also “student elimination.” We will use these terms interchangeably throughout the paper.

<sup>2</sup> Note that, in this literature review, we did not focus on the level of post-secondary (or college) education, so that it is somewhat underrepresented (exceptions being, Bynum & Thompson, 1983; Perna, Rowan-Kenyon, Bell, Thomas, & Li, 2008; Smith & Naylor, 2005).

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