



Drop out from primary to secondary school in Mexico: A life course perspective



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ABSTRACT

Preventing school dropout is a critical feature of the Millennium Development Goals. Yet, as primary school enrollments become universal, dropout rates in Mexico near 50% by the end of formal schooling. Using a unique, nationally representative data set (Mexico Family Life Survey) we track children ages 5–11 in 2002 to the years 2005–2006 to determine how many have students have dropped out of school. We then apply a life-course perspective to determine if the influences of family, school and macro-factors interact with the child's level of schooling and the transition from primary to secondary school. We find that the transition to secondary school has the highest dropout rates. Rurality matters most during this transition. As family factors are the most predictive indicator of dropout, the family's influence is dynamic over time—the role of mother's education fades while the influence of an unemployed father grows.

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1. Introduction

Education is widely promoted as a means of improving individuals' prospects for economic security and overall social well-being. The centrality of education is highlighted in the Millennium Development Goals (MDG). One of the eight goals is universal primary school enrollment by the year 2015. And according to MDG data, this goal is close to being achieved. Primary school enrollment reached 89% in the developing world by 2008 (United Nations, 2010). Progress is clearly evident in Latin America where several countries have nearly reached universal enrollment (Urquiola and Calderon, 2006).

But, as countries become more successful in ensuring that all children begin formal education, preventing school dropout is the next obvious step (United Nations, 2010). This issue is clearly evident in Mexico. Mexico has one of the most successful enrollment rates in Latin America (95–99%, Urquiola and Calderon, 2006) yet concurrently suffers from dropout rates nearing 50% (ECLAC, 2001–2002). Children marginalized by rural residence and poverty experience particularly high risks of dropping out (Muñiz, 2001). As a result, Mexico has developed a large-scale cash-transfer program (Oportunidades) to encourage families to keep their children in school. Developed in 1997 as the Programa Nacional de Educación, Salud y Alimentación (Progresa), and renewed as Oportunidades in 2002, the program was created to provide

subsidies to poor households if parents enrolled their children in school and made regular trips to health clinics. As of 2006, one-quarter of Mexicans were enrolled.

Given considerable attention to the dropout problem in Mexico, we argue that understanding why students dropout can be enhanced by considering how the determinants of school attendance shift as children transition from primary to secondary school. We focus on how the roles of family, school and social context change as children move through the education system.

To date, considerable scholarship has focused on the correlates of dropout in secondary school, often with cross-sectional data, but less attention has been placed on younger children either during primary school or in the transition from primary to secondary school. In order to more accurately assess the role of family, school and macro forces shaping school dropout, we adopt a life-course approach with a longitudinal sample of children age 5–11 who are enrolled in school at wave one of the Mexico Family Life Survey (MFLS) and predict whether they are still enrolled at wave two, three years later. We examine the influence of primarily family, but also consider school and macro forces on school dropout during primary school with a focus on the transition from primary to secondary school. We argue that the relative importance of these factors will shift over time.

2. Dropout in Mexico

The dropout rate in Mexico is significant, with nearly half of students dropping out before the end of secondary school (45% in

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2000, ECLAC, 2001–2002; Espíndola and León, 2002).¹ More specifically, of total dropouts, 10% dropout during primary school (first six years of school), and an additional 28% dropout at the end of primary school. Another 52% of student dropouts leave school at the start of secondary school (6–12 years of schooling) and 10% near the end of secondary school (ECLAC, 2001–2002). To understand why, we start with Buchmann and Hannum's (2001) conceptual framework for understanding educational outcomes in developing countries. Development research on educational inequalities has focused on three sources of explanation; macro-structural forces, school factors, and family factors. Macro-structural forces, such as state education policies and economic conditions, can shape educational outcomes by effecting school access and quality, and material conditions in the home. In turn, school and family conditions can also influence child dropout rates. Although macro-structural forces, family factors and school factors interact in complicated ways (i.e. child labor; remittances), we use this conceptualization to frame our review of the literature and structure our analysis of early age drop out.

2.1. Macro-structural forces

The decentralization movement in Mexican education radically transferred the control of education from the federal government to the states. As the movement was underway between the late 70s (Palafox et al., 1994) to early 90s (Torres and Puiggros, 1995; Bujanda, 2006) federal education spending significantly declined (Binder, 1999; Palafox et al., 1994). Although the impact of decentralization on dropout is unclear, some macro-structural forces thought to influence educational outcomes were relatively stable during this period. Inequality between the rich and poor, for example, remained relatively unchanged (World Bank, 2011).² Others, however, have played an important role in understanding dropout rates in Mexico—specifically migration and the federal education program Oportunidades.

Migration has been shown to be both positively and negatively associated with school dropout. Migratory experiences of family members and relatives can minimize school attachment (Halpern-Manners, 2011; Kandel and Kao, 2001; McKenzie and Rapoport, 2009)³ and the absence of a family member can increase the labor burden at home (Meza and Carla Pederzini, 2008; Parreñas, 2005). In addition, the migration of family members can create a “culture of migration” (Massey et al., 1998) where kids devalue schooling with anticipation of migrating themselves. Conversely, migration may have positive effects on reducing dropout. Remittances from such family members can offset inhibitive costs of education (Edwards and Ureta, 2003; Taylor and Mora, 2006; Lopez-Cordova, 2005; Durand et al., 1996) and inspire children to do their part and stay in school (see Halpern-Manners, 2011).

The other notable macro-level impact on education is Oportunidades. Oportunidades provides subsidies to poor households. These subsidies, in the form of cash-transfers, are thought to offset the tendency for children in low income families to enter the

labor force instead of attend school (Skoufias and Parker, 2001; Kandel and Post, 2003; Levison et al., 2001).⁴ The program is extensive, with nearly one quarter of the Mexican population participating. As of 2004, the program served almost 40% of rural families and nearly 12% of all families in Mexico (Coady and Parker, 2004).

A sizable literature has emerged showing small to modest impacts of the program on several educational outcomes, including dropout (Skoufias and Parker, 2001; Buddelmeyer and Skoufias, 2003; Schultz, 2000a,b; Ravallion and Wodon, 2000; Skoufias and Parker, 2001; Bourguignon et al., 2003; see Azevedo et al., 2009 for a review). Specifically, Oportunidades has been shown to slightly influence the labor participation of boys between the ages of 12–17 and increase school attendance by 20%, with the largest impact for children above age 12 (Skoufias and Parker, 2001). But the effect of Oportunidades is limited to secondary school-age children (Azevedo et al., 2009). When examining primary school, the effects are small or nonexistent (de Janvry and Sadoulet, 2006; Schultz, 2004; Behrman et al., 2005; see Azevedo et al., 2009), perhaps because enrollment rates in primary schools are already high (Azevedo et al., 2009).⁵

Although migration and the Oportunidades are dominant forces in the literature, there are other important macro-level factors that may also help explain dropout, including gender (Post, 2001), indigenous identification (Halpern-Manners, 2011), and rurality (Kandel and Post, 2003; Halpern-Manners, 2011; Kandel, 2003; Lutz, 2007). Although partly an individual characteristic, ethnicity and gender can be considered part of the larger macro forces in Mexico because of the societal norms that underlie gender and ethnic inequality. Ethnic minorities are often at an educational disadvantage. This disadvantage arises from a history of discrimination, social and geographic isolation, and language (Hamel, 2008). In Mexico, darker skin is associated with lower education, occupational status and affluence even after other characteristics are taken into account (Villarreal, 2010) and non-Spanish speakers are at decided disadvantage due to Spanish-focused curriculums and instruction (Hamel, 2008).

Substantial research has focused on the gender gap in education. This gap is not as great in Latin American as in other regions (ECLAC, 2001–2002) and even favors women in some countries and at younger ages such as Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, Honduras, Panama, Uruguay and Venezuela. Mexico, on average, has slightly more females than males dropping out of school (47% compared to 46%, ECLAC, 2001–2002) and has recently narrowed (Parker and Carla Pederzini, 2000). Poverty and the demand for female household labor play an important role in female dropout in Mexico (Post, 2001).

Finally, rural residents generally live farther from schools, have lower quality schools, and see education as less relevant given the job opportunities available (Shultz 2004; Behrman et al., 2005).

2.2. School

The role of school on educational outcomes has a sorted history. While the *Coleman Report* (Coleman et al., 1966) found that family background had a more profound effect on educational achievement in the United States, Heyneman and Loxley (1983) found that school and teacher quality explained a greater proportion of

¹ The term “secondary school” in this context refers to both “secundaria” and “secundaria superior.” The first is equivalent to junior high in the U.S. or gymnasium in some European countries and lasts three years. The second refers to upper secondary school. It also lasts three years. We use the term “secondary school” to refer to both secundaria and secundaria superior school following conventions used elsewhere (ECLAC, 2001–2002). When we discuss dropout during the transition from primary to secondary school we are referring to the transition from primary to secundaria school. We are grateful to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this clarification.

² The Gini coefficient for Mexico has been around 50 from the years 2000–2010. A score of zero represents perfect income equality and a score of 100 equals perfect income inequality. A score of 50 is relatively high by comparison.

³ Strangely, child and sibling trips to the U.S. are linked to higher dropout, whereas a head of household trip is linked to staying in school (Kandel, 2003).

⁴ Children in the program had to attend at least 85% of class per month. In secondary school, incentives are age-graded with a one-time cash transfer after high school completion. The program also provides school supplies. Yet, many eligible households did not sign up due to lack of knowledge or uncertainty regarding eligibility status (Azevedo et al., 2009).

⁵ This has led some to argue for substantial scholarship increases in secondary schools and less investment in primary school (Azevedo et al., 2009).

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