



Teachers' beliefs about students, and the intention of students to drop out of secondary education in Flanders



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HIGHLIGHTS

- We examined the teachers' role in students' intention to dropout from high school.
- We related teachers' beliefs about students to students' intentions to quit school.
- Being enrolled in vocational education heightened the risk of planning to quit.
- Teachers' beliefs impacted dropout plans, beyond students' perceived teacher support.
- Particularly in vocational education, teachers' beliefs played an important role.

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 13 April 2015

Received in revised form

3 December 2015

Accepted 14 December 2015

Available online xxx

Keywords:

Dropout

Teacher beliefs

Vocational education

Teacher expectations

ABSTRACT

Students dropping out of education with no qualifications has been an important problem in the West for decades. Little relevant research has concentrated on school characteristics, and research into the role teachers might play in students' decision to quit school is particularly scarce. Using multilevel analyses of data for 11,844 students in 84 Flemish secondary schools, we investigate whether teachers' shared expectations of students are associated with students' intention to drop out. Particularly in vocational education, teachers' beliefs about the teachability of students influence the students' intention to quit, irrespective of perceived teacher support and students' sense of futility.

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1. Introduction

Students dropping out of education with no qualifications has been an important problem in the West for decades (Lamb, Markussen, Teese, Sandberg, & Polesel, 2011). In Flanders, on average 10%–15% (even higher in the cities) of students in secondary education leave school prematurely, and without any educational qualifications (Van Landeghem, De Fraine, Gielen, & Van Damme, 2013). Predictors of student attrition have been studied intensively, but most existing research has focused on individual student characteristics, specifically sociodemographic and academic risk factors (De Witte, Cabus, Thyssen, Groot, & Maassen van den Brink, 2013), turning dropout into an individual problem (Luyten, Bosker, Dekkers, & Derks, 2003). Relatively little empirical

research has concentrated on school characteristics (Luyten et al., 2003), and research into the role teachers might play in students' decision to quit school is particularly scarce. However, some studies have associated dropout with students' own reports on the quality of teachers (Rumberger & Thomas, 2000), on teachers' relationships with students, and on students' perceived teacher support (Croninger & Lee, 2001; Lee & Burkam, 2003). Perceptions might, however, be shaped after students have left school (see Worrell & Hale, 2001). Moreover, negative feelings about school might bias students' views about their teachers, and accordingly might not inform us about the actual role of teachers in the dropout process (Van Houtte, 2011). Therefore, an assessment that is not obtained from students, but reported by teachers themselves—for example teachers' expectations or beliefs concerning their students—might provide a more accurate picture of the impact of teachers. On a methodological note, research also indicates that surveying a single respondent (teacher or student) when measuring different concepts, might create problems of shared-method variance. Using the

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same method to measure two variables—in this case, the same individual is surveyed—can yield inflations of intercorrelations and effect sizes, creating bias in the results (Hawker & Boulton, 2000).

Accordingly, whereas previous research relating teacher and student characteristics has focused exclusively on either teacher or student data (e.g., Baker, Grant, & Morlock, 2008; Blue & Cook, 2004; Hallinan, 2008), in the current study we relate teacher-reported data to student-reported data. More specifically, we examine the relationship between teachers' self-reported beliefs, and students' self-reported intention to drop out. This is made possible by considering individual teacher beliefs as manifestations of the teacher culture at school. These beliefs can be related to student characteristics through a multilevel framework, in which the teacher culture is added as a school-level feature, and the student outcome as an individual-level feature (see also Demanet & Van Houtte, 2012). Consequently, although we lean on the expectancy effects tradition begun by Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968), we do not focus on the expectations individual teachers have about individual students, or on teachers' predictions for particular students (cf. Dalton, Glennie, Ingels, & Wirt, 2009). Instead, we focus on the effect of the teacher culture, in other words, the beliefs teachers in the same school share about their students in general (see also Van Houtte, 2004, 2011). To our knowledge, the possible direct influence of teachers' beliefs has rarely been considered in dropout research (for an exception, see Rumberger & Palardy, 2005). However, as teacher beliefs affect both student–teacher relationships and student engagement (Demanet & Van Houtte, 2012)—the latter being considered the primary factor in understanding and predicting high school dropout (Fall & Roberts, 2012; Finn, 1989)—it is not too far-fetched to hypothesize an effect of teacher beliefs on students' intention to drop out.

Hence, our objective is to investigate how teachers' shared beliefs about students—the teacher culture—affect the intention of students to drop out of school. In addition, we focus particularly on students in vocational tracks, as the prevalence of dropout is highest in vocational education, making these students most at risk (for Flanders: Van Landeghem & Van Damme, 2011; for the Netherlands: van Uden, Ritzen, & Pieters, 2014; for Turkey: Tas, Selvitopu, Bora, & Demirkaya, 2013). Therefore, knowing that teachers in lower tracks have a relatively poor image of their students (e.g., Kelly & Carbonaro, 2012) and knowing that lower track students, in particular vocational students, are most vulnerable to dropping out, we aim to examine what role the beliefs of teachers play as a determinant of vocational students' intention to drop out.

2. Background

2.1. Antecedents of dropping out

Dropping out—leaving secondary education prior to completion, and without qualification or diploma, or with only a minimal credential—has been studied for decades as a serious educational and social problem (e.g., Blue & Cook, 2004; De Witte et al., 2013; Lee & Burkam, 2003; Rumberger, 1987). By leaving school before completion, most dropouts suffer a high personal cost because of educational deficiencies that hamper their economic and social well-being in adulthood (Rumberger, 1987). There is also a social impact, in terms of the loss of human capital (Lee & Burkam, 2003) and the hindering of policymakers' objectives for sustainable economic growth (De Witte et al., 2013). Consequently, a great deal of research has concentrated on explaining *why* students leave school unqualified.

The most common explanations for dropping out focus on individual students and their families (overview: De Witte et al., 2013; Lee & Burkam, 2003), distinguishing broadly between two

risk factors: social risk and academic risk (Croninger & Lee, 2001; Lee & Burkam, 2003). Social risk entails demographic characteristics associated with a higher likelihood of school failure, such as low socioeconomic status, being male, and having an immigrant background (Blue & Cook, 2004; Dalton et al., 2009; Rumberger, 1987, 1995). Academic risk refers to the actual manifestation of school-related problems, such as poor performance, absenteeism, and grade retention (Blue & Cook, 2004; Croninger & Lee, 2001).

In the mid-1990s, Rumberger (1995) started to associate dropout with school features by means of multilevel modeling, dealing with school demographic composition (e.g., poverty concentration), and school structure (e.g., size), organization, and climate (e.g., discipline) (see also Blue & Cook, 2004; Dalton et al., 2009; McNeal, 1997). Remarkably, a large proportion of relevant research remains focused on factors related to students, rather than on those related to schools (De Witte et al., 2013; Lee & Burkam, 2003). Therefore, it remains unclear whether and how the organizational and functional features of schools, for example, aspects of culture and climate are associated with dropout, although these are alterable and therefore potentially useful with regard to prevention (Luyten et al., 2003).

Teachers in particular have been paid relatively little attention, notwithstanding evidence that the quality (as reported by students) and quantity (student–teacher ratios) of teachers have an effect on dropout ratios (Rumberger & Thomas, 2000). Moreover, a school's social climate, specifically student–teacher interactions and relationships as perceived and reported by students, has been demonstrated to be associated with dropping out. Students' reports of positive, caring, and supportive relationships with teachers coincide with lower dropout rates (Barile et al., 2012; Blue & Cook, 2004; Croninger & Lee, 2001; Lamote et al., 2013; Lee & Burkam, 2003). Accordingly, relationships perceived as negative, or student–teacher conflicts, might push students out of school, whereas positive relationships—social capital—might create powerful incentives to stay in school and be successful (Hébert & Reis, 1999; Lee & Burkam, 2003; Stearns & Glennie, 2006).

2.2. Teachers' beliefs and students' dropout

Research into dropping out points to the fact that it is not only associated with problems regarding learning and academic engagement, but also with problems regarding social engagement (Finn, 1989; Rumberger & Palardy, 2005; Wehlage & Rutter, 1986). In this vein, Finn (1989) presented the 'participation-identification model', which emphasizes the importance of 'bonding' with school. If this bonding does not occur, the likelihood of problem behavior, including leaving school before graduation, increases.

Studies into the impact of the social climate of schools, however, commonly rely on students' reports and perceptions of the student–teacher relationships and the support from teachers (e.g., Barile et al., 2012; Fall & Roberts, 2012; Lamote et al., 2013; Lee & Burkam, 2003). This might be deceptive, particularly in cross-sectional studies, as the perceptions of students who drop out might be formed after they leave school. Furthermore, these perceptions might express negative feelings toward school irrespective of how teachers act in reality, and therefore might not provide insight into the actual role of teachers in the dropout process. A more useful and accurate indicator of the quality of teacher–student relationships, not obtained from the students themselves, may be teachers' beliefs or expectations about their pupils (Van Houtte, 2011). After all, how teachers relate to and interact with their students is largely informed by how they see these pupils and what they think about them (Van Houtte, 2004, 2011). Over the years, colleagues (in the same school, for example) develop common ideas and

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