

Early school leaving : definition, prevalence, risk factors, screening

Definition and prevalence

It is not as easy as it could seem to define early school leaving or school drop-out ; it is even worse to produce decent data. For how long a student has to be out of school to be considered as a drop-out ? A few weeks, a few months ? Should we include those who choose deliberately to enter in the work force and are working, those who will come back to adult education, those who don't have the cognitive capacities to obtain a high school diploma ? Are we excluding those who move from one province to another or one country to another ? There are legal and illegal drop-out, since most provinces have made school compulsory up to the age of 16 years.

One definition often used is the following : a student is registered in a regular sector at the beginning of the year (not adult education), is not registered anymore the year after, does not have any diploma and is still alive and living in the province. Another definition is : not having a high school diploma from regular sector or adult education before 20 y.o.

There are many definitions and ways to calculate prevalence of drop-out thus making comparisons hazardous between schools, school boards, provinces and countries.

In our country, in 1992-93, notwithstanding the problems mentioned above, the percentages of students who obtained a high school diploma, according to Statistics Canada was :

Canada :	75%
New Brunswick :	83%
Manitoba :	78%
Prince Edward island :	78%
Ontario :	75%
Saskatchewan :	75%
Newfoundland :	72%
Nova Scotia :	70%
Québec :	69%
Alberta :	66%
British Columbia :	64%

As an example of the statistical problem, Québec has a rate of non-diplomation varying from 15% to 45% according to the different regions, definitions and calculations. In 1993-94, Québec showed a rate of non-diplomation of 31%, 37% in boys and 25% in girls, including all those who had not obtained a high school diploma before 20 y.o., in a regular sector or adult education. If we exclude those who don't have the cognitive capacities to obtain a high school diploma, the real rate of non-diplomation is estimated at 21% in Québec (that is, 10% are considered as not having the capacities to complete high school education).

A longitudinal study

The biggest school board in Québec, Montreal catholic school board, has released a longitudinal study on school drop-out. Students were followed for six years after finishing primary school, entering post primary education. In Québec, this is called secondary school and consist of 5 levels, secondary 1, 2, etc. The first cohort dated back in 1981.

Overall, 46% of the students, 55% of the boys and 45% of the girls, did not obtained their high school diploma ; this rate is higher than the province rate. Seventy one percent of the drop-out were aged 15-18 years, 21%, 12-14 years, 8%, 19 years and over. Fifty five percent abandoned school in secondary 4 or after.

Academic failure is an important associated risk for dropping-out of school. In fact, 68% of those who failed french and 51% of those who failed mathematics dropped-out from school. The risk is higher if this failure occur in secondary 1. Also, 60% of those who had to repeat one year in primary school dropped-out in secondary school, and this was true for 58% of those repeating one year in secondary school (83% of those repeating secondary1).

Moreover, 60% of those who registered at 13 y.o. in secondary 1 dropped-out as compare to 35% registering at 12 years old.

Factors involved

Many factors are associated with early school leaving, as shown in table 1 ; this obviously does not mean they are causal. The two most important and consistant set of factors in the literature are those related to school (academic performance, motivation, behavior) and the family (srtucture, attitude toward school, relationship).

Table 1: Comparison between students who have a diploma and those who have abandoned secondary school (from the study "Après l'école" Ressources humaines et Travail Canada, 1993)

	Drop-out	diploma
SOCIO-DÉMOGRAPHIC		
* Biparental family with father unemployed at the time of dropping-out	14 %	7 %
Biparental family with father low income	55 %	40 %
Biparental family with mother unemployed at the time of dropping-out	30 %	24 %
Biparental family with mother low income	12 %	7 %
* Monoparental (mother or father)	25 %	12 %
* Has not lived with parents in the last year	13 %	5 %
Parents with few education	45 %	32 %
* Has a child (girl)	27 %	4 %
* Has a child (boy)	7 %	1 %
SCHOOL EXPERIENCE		
* Does not like school and unsatisfied with programs	41 %	10 %
Find no interest in classes	41 %	21 %
Problems with teachers	12 %	7 %
Unsatisfied with rules in the school	21 %	15 %
Miss days of school	75 %	59 %
Does not participate in school activities	45 %	27 %
* Has repeated one year in primary school	36 %	8 %
PSYCHOSOCIAL CHARACTERISTICS		
Friends who find important to obtain a diploma	45 %	80 %
* Friends dont find important to obtain a diploma	18 %	2 %
* Feels different	11 %	5 %
Work 20 hrs a week or more (boys)	33 %	25 %
Work 20 hrs a week or more (girls)	22 %	18 %
* Young offender criminal act in last year	12 %	3 %
* Use soft drugs	30 %	15 %
* Use hard drugs	7 %	2 %

* Factors where the difference is over 100%

Identifying school drop-out

There are a few tests that could identify potential drop-out. These tests are usually administered in secondary school and have a good predictive value. These tests have over 50 questions and are covering many aspects : school performance, school motivation, behavior at school, peers relationship, parents attitude toward school performance, family environment, self perception, etc.

Janosz et al (University of Montreal, 514-385-2513, Fax : 514-385-9825), after studying predictors of school drop-out, have developed a test including only 7 questions on school items (delay, performance, motivation); this test has a very good predictive value and allows one school to decide how many false negative or false positive they wish to include, according to the intervention they have in mind.

However, it is useless and dangerous to identify potential drop-out if no intervention is planed. Janosz proposed an early identification in secondary 1 or 2 and then evaluating the profile of potential drop-out to decide on possible intervention. In their study, with a few more questions, they have develop a classification of drop-out in four categories ; they are described in table 2 along with the intervention suggested.

Types	Characteristics	Interventions
Discrete (40%)	Comparable those who can obtain a diploma: they like school and are involved. But their academic performance are somewhat low and they are from low socio-economic environment.	Help to increase academic performances : support with homework, tutor, individualized teaching, varying teaching styles, etc. Best prognosis among the four types.
Inadapted (40%)	Academic and social profile somewhat negative : school failure, delinquency, problem with family, etc.	Multidimensional and intensive strategies. Psychosocial intervention and academic intervention.
Disengaged (+/- 10%)	Without behavior problem, average academic performance, but not engaged in school matters.	Best candidates for programs aimed at increasing motivation. Intervention limited by lack of information on why they are not motivated.
Under-achievers (+/- 10%)	Without behavior problem, not engaged in school matters and academic failure.	In depth evaluation and individual intervention. Early screening is important. Worse prognosis .

