New Trends and Promising Directions in Modern Education
School Dropout

Edited by
Mevlüt AYDOĞMUŞ
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Muhittin ÇALIŞKAN

There is no alternative to school, at least for now. The COVID-19 pandemic has clearly revealed this fact. We need schools so that education can realize its manifest and latent functions in a society. Unfortunately, school dropouts are deprived of all the benefits that education can provide to the individual. Therefore, we care about school and school attendance.

School dropout is a serious and challenging problem, which poses some psychological, social and economical threats. We are well aware of this challenge. This awareness motivated us to do many studies on early school leaving. As a collection of chapters by various authors, this book is just one of those efforts. We do really hope that the book will raise awareness about school dropout

NEW TRENDS AND PROMISING DIRECTIONS IN MODERN EDUCATION-SCHOOL DROPOUT

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PALET YAYINLARI

DON'T
DROP ME OUTSIDE

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PREFACE

What would Ivan Illich, the author of 'Deschooling Society' say if he took this book in his hands? He would probably say, "School dropout is not a problem. The real problem is school itself. So, forget worrying about preventing school dropout." This is because, according to him, school has no direct and profound effect on our lives. It just creates the need for certification as a tool to maintain the status quo, and those who do not get such certificates are considered miserable. In short, school is a myth for him. This critical orientation of Illich is valuable as it has raised the questioning of the purpose, meaning, content and methods of school. However, we cannot offer an alternative to school, at least for now. The COVID-19 pandemic has clearly revealed this fact too.

Education has some manifest and latent functions in all societies. The manifest functions are socialization, cultural transmission, raising individuals who can provide innovation and change, political and economic functions. Among the latent functions are preventing unemployment, gaining status, choosing a spouse, child care, preventing crime, establishing social capital and network, and protecting children from being employed and exploited economically. How can these functions be realized in a society without schools? It is difficult to find a convincing answer to this question. Therefore, we care about school and school attendance.

School dropouts are deprived of all the benefits that education can provide to the individual. First of all, this can cause depressive mood, suicidal tendencies, social disconnection and isolation, low self-esteem, increased crime rates and anti-social behaviors. In addition, since the individuals are not qualified enough, they can contribute less to a country's economy. The demand for social and financial aids also increases. Thus, governments are forced to allocate more financial resources for social benefits. This will result in collecting more tax from all citizens to provide for these services. On the other hand, school dropouts are much more likely to engage in illegal work than graduates. These negative consequences that school dropout can cause for students, families and society make it necessary to reduce the dropout rates. Low school dropout rates can give clues about the quality of education

as well as prosperity of a country. For this reason, many countries are trying to develop policies to tackle this problem.

Consequently, school still maintains its importance and will probably do so in the future. Accordingly, school dropout is a serious and challenging problem. We are well aware of this challenge. This awareness motivated us to do many studies on early school leaving. As a collection of chapters by various authors, this book is just one of those efforts. We do really hope that the book will raise awareness about school dropout and help those working on this issue all around the world.

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SCHOOL EXCLUSIONS AND CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS (SEN): TRENDS AND LESSONS FROM ENGLAND

Seamus BYRNE[*]

Introduction

Although the phrase 'school drop-out' does not enjoy the same lexical currency within English education law, policy, and practice as elsewhere perhaps, the consequences of an exclusion from school for the individual child concerned are nonetheless identical; increased educational disaffection, decreased employment prospects and the heightened risk of societal exclusion and possible criminal offending (Macrae et al, 2003; Hodgson & Webb, 2005; Barnardo's, 2010). And despite these terminological distinctions, the individual and societal effects of children being excluded from school in England are equally as long-lasting and consequential. This is especially true for children with special educational needs (SEN) who occupy the unenviable statistical reality of being disproportionally excluded from school in comparison to their non-SEN peers (DfE, 2021; Timpson Review, 2019). Such realties were ominously captured nearly ten years ago by the Children's Commissioner for England who stated that children with SEN "were nine times more likely to be permanently excluded than those with no SEN" (2013, 25).

Accounting for approximately 14.9% of the total pupil population in England (DfE, 2022), children with SEN also represent one of its most vulnerable population groups with evidence consistently underscoring their educational under-attainment (Parsons & Platt, 2017; Crawford & Vignoles, 2010). Indeed, governmental figures illustrate that children with SEN are 25% less likely to be in sustained employment by the age of 27 in comparison to their non-SEN peers (DfE, 2018). However, despite recent legislative changes which have substantially overhauled the legal framework governing the provision of

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education for children with SEN, pursuant to Part 3 of the Children and Families Act 2014 (hereafter 'CFA'), the disproportionate exclusion from school of children with SEN remains stubbornly high. Despite these legislative changes appearing to align more clearly with the state's human rights obligations towards children under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989 (CRC), and the accepted importance of inclusive education as a government objective (Harris & Davidge, 2019), children with SEN continue to occupy a particularly perilous position within the English education system. This is compounded by the fact that they are increasingly susceptible to the illegal practices of unlawful or 'unofficial' school exclusions (Done et al, 2021; Children's Commissioner for England, 2017) and the practice of 'off-rolling' (Long & Daneichi, 2019), described by OFSTED, the state body responsible for the inspection of educational institutions, as the practice "of removing a pupil from the school roll without a formal, permanent exclusion or by encouraging a parent to remove their child form the school, when the removal is primarily in the interests of the school rather than in the best interests of the child" (DfE, 2018). Thus, against this backdrop the correlation between children with SEN and school exclusion prompts multiple human rights concerns, not least the enforcement of the right to education for children with SEN, itself. These realities have been further exacerbated as a result of Covid-19 (Alghrani & Byrne, 2020).

This chapter will explore the interface between school exclusions and children with SEN in England. It will do so by firstly setting out the legal framework which governs the exclusion of children from school in the first instance. This section will examine both the relevant domestic and international legal standards, particularly in the context of children with SEN. The second part of the chapter will examine existing policy and data in relation to the exclusion of children with SEN and identify current trends within the English education system, while the third and final section of the chapter will explore some lessons that need to be learned to better rights-proof the provision of education for children with SEN to ensure that they are not almost automatically assigned, by virtue of their disability, to a precarious educational hinterland where they are disproportionally susceptible to being excluded from school.

School Exclusions in England: The Legal Framework

To fully understand the legal framework governing the exclusion of children from school in England, it is firstly necessary to grasp the domestic constitutional arrangements which govern the provision of education in the United Kingdom (UK) in the first instance. The advent of parliamentary devolution following the enactment of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, the Scotland Act 1998, the Government of Wales Act 1998 and the Government of Wales Act 2006, resulted in the transfer of education policy to the various spheres of executive competency in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland respectively, a process which Rees (2002) stated "marked a sea-change in British constitutional arrangements". Consequently, education, and by extension the law and policy surrounding school exclusions, now occupies an autonomous province of executive and administrative control within the devolved regions of the UK, in addition to England (Duffy et al, 2021). Aside also from domestic constitutional arrangements, the law governing school exclusions exists within a multi-layered legal framework which includes the obligations deriving from European human rights law under the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) and the states obligations under international human rights law. For children with SEN, two additional notable international treaties include the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006).

2.1. Domestic Legal Provisions

The law relating to school exclusions in England has developed from common law principles which were previously instituted on the twin notions of discipline and authority. These historically resided in, and derived from, the teacher acting *in loco parentis* whereby they supplanted the role of the parent (Elton Committee, 1989). However, the current legal framework relating to school exclusions has since endured considerable statutory evolution and is underpinned, and influenced by, several statutory provisions.

The Education (No.2) Act, 1986 was the first statutory codification relating to school exclusions in England, with section 22(f) providing for the:

'Power to exclude a pupil from the school (whether by suspension, expulsion or otherwise) to be exercisable only by the head teacher'

This power, exercisable only by the head teacher was later incorporated into the Education Act, 1996[1] which further prohibited indefinite exclusions and/or exclusions which resulted in the exclusion of the pupil for fifteen days in any one school term and these powers were subsequently incorporated into the School Standards and Framework Act, 1998.[2]

However, the current law on school exclusions is governed by three principal reference points. These include: The Education Act 2002 (s51A as inserted by section 4 of the Education Act 2011); Statutory Instrument (SI) 2012/1033, The School Discipline (Pupil Exclusions and Reviews) (England) Regulations 2012 (hereafter 'the 2012 Regulations') and the Department for Education's 2017 Statutory Guidance, 'Exclusion from Maintained Schools, Academies and Pupil Referral Units in England for those with legal responsibilities in relation to exclusion' (hereafter 'the Statutory Guidance') (DfE, 2017). Drilling down deeper into the legal framework, the specific legal basis for dispensing a school exclusion is provided by section s.51A(1) of the Education Act 2002, which allows the exclusion of a pupil, either on a fixed or permanent basis, from a maintained school. Its states that:

"The head teacher of a maintained school in England may exclude a pupil from the school for a fixed period or permanently."

Thus, school exclusions can be either for a fixed term period or be permanent. In relation to the former, a pupil may be excluded on a fixed term basis on more than one occasion up to a maximum of 45 days in a single academic year while the latter version of exclusion results in the deletion and removal of the child's name from the school register. Additionally, under the 2012 Regulations, a head teacher may not exclude a pupil for one or more fixed term periods, in the case of both maintained schools (section 4) and pupil referral units (section 13) if that pupil would be excluded for more than 45 school days in any given school year. Similarly, common to all the legislative and statutory guidance regarding school exclusions is the clear and unequivocal stipulation that the decision to exclude must be taken on disciplinary grounds (DfE, 2017). This usually involves a student breaching, or persistently breaching, a school's disciplinary or behavioural policies. The statutory guidance and the 2012 Regulations are central to the exclusion

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[1]   Section 156 provided for near identical terms as the 1986 Act, allotting the power to exclude solely to the head teacher.

[2]   Section 64 demarcated the role of the head teacher to exclude pupils.

process and elaborate in substantial detail the procedures and processes which schools must follow in the event of an exclusion. The purpose of the statutory guidance firstly is "to provide greater confidence to head teachers on their use of exclusion and to provide greater clarity to independent review panels and governing boards on their consideration of exclusion decisions". (DfE, 2017; 6) Throughout the guidance, the emphasis on school discipline is the variable which dominates the legal and policy landscape relating to school exclusion. Indeed, a permanent exclusion should only be used as a 'last resort' and in response to 'to a serious breach or persistent breaches of the school's behaviour policy; and where allowing the pupil to remain in school would seriously harm the education or welfare of the pupil or others in the school' (DfE, 2017; 6). Moreover, the use of exclusion by the head teacher is to be determined by a threefold consideration comprising lawfulness, reasonableness and fairness and general compatibility with the enduring principles of administrative justice. In short, the decision to exclude must be lawful, rational, reasonable, fair and proportionate (DfE, 2017; 8). As such, the power to exclude and the strict legal considerations which underpin it arguably amount to the exercise of a quasi-judicial function by the head-teacher, authorised by statute and framed in the age-old legal language of public law litigation. The head teacher must not exclude a pupil for a non-disciplinary matter (DfE, 2017, 9) and is encouraged "where practical … to give the pupil an opportunity to present their case before taking the decision to exclude" (DfE, 2017; 10). This is significant as no further elaboration is given within the statutory guidance, or indeed the primary or secondary legislation, as to what is meant by 'where practical'.

For children with SEN, further protection is contained within the Equality Act, 2010 which stipulates that any decision taken by or on behalf of the school in question, which includes the decision to exclude, must be taken in accordance with the duty of non-discrimination which prohibits discrimination on the grounds of disability, amongst others. However, such protections have not proved unproblematic in practice. Research carried out by Smith et al (2012) on behalf of the Children's Commissioner for England into school exclusions found that just under 40% of 1,600 teachers surveyed stated that their school had informed staff about the requirements arising under the Equality Act 2010, with another 40% stating that they did not know. Accordingly, Smith et al (2012; 28) argue that such evidence suggests that "the Act's requirements

have not been adequately communicated to classroom teachers". Further research by JUSTICE (2019; 18), an all-party law reform and human rights organisation, found that the law relating to school exclusions was "not always fully understood by schools" and that for children with SEN, this often resulted in the misinterpretation and misapplication of the requirements of the Equality Act, 2010. Such findings clearly demonstrate a lack of consistency within English schools regarding both the requirements and applicability of the Equality Act 2010.

Further consideration from a domestic standpoint must also be accorded to the right to education as enshrined in Article 1 Protocol 2 (A2P1) of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR). Domestically enforceable in English Court though the passing of the Human Rights Act, 1998, this provides a further layer of protection for children with SEN given that the right to non-discrimination in Article 14 ECHR also contains a guarantee against disability related discrimination under the protection labelled 'or other status'. However, the extent of the protections afforded by A2P1 are somewhat minimal in nature (Ferguson, 2021). Indeed, regional and domestics decisions on the right to education pursuant to A2P1 have confirmed it as a negative obligation which restricts the provision of education to that which exists within the structural make-up of the contracting State in question.3 Domestically, Lord Bingham observed that the right to education under A2P1 is:

"a weak one, and deliberately so. There is no right to education of a particular kind or quality, other than that prevailing in the State".[4]

2.1.1. Children's Rights Deficits within the Legal Framework

However, it is undoubtedly after the decision to exclude a child from school, which includes children with SEN, that the children's rights shortcomings of the exclusion process become apparent. Firstly, following the decision to exclude, parents have the right to make representations about the exclusion to the governing body of the school in question and are also entitled to know how any representations should be made and, where there is a legal requirement for the governing body to consider the exclusion, the parents have a right to attend the meeting and be represented at the meeting at their own

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[3] Belgian Linguistics Case [1968] 1 EHRR 252.

[4] Ibid at paragraph 24

expense and to bring a friend (DfE, 2017; 12 – 15). Certain circumstances demand that the school's governing body consider the reinstatement of the excluded pupil within fifteen days of receiving notification of the exclusion. These include instances where the student has been permanently excluded, where the student has been excluded subject to a fixed-term exclusion but where this would result in the student being excluded for more than fifteen days in an academic term, or where the pupil would miss a public examination or a national curriculum test (Regulations 6 & 24, 2012 Regulations). In the determination of a reinstatement, the governing body must invite the parents, the head teacher and a representative of the Local Authority in the case of a maintained school or Pupil Referral Unit (PRU), to the hearing. Critically however, the child or young person who is the subject of the exclusion not invited to the hearing.

Secondly, in cases of permanent exclusions where the Governing Body decides not to reinstate the pupil, they must notify the parents of the excluded child of their right of review by an Independent Review Panel (IRP) pursuant to section 51(A)(3)(c) of the Education Act, 2002. This also includes the parental right to appoint an SEN expert to attend the review. Crrucially, however, the IRP cannot direct the reinstatement of the child to their school. Indeed, it is this particular function of the IRP which has attracted considerable commentary. This is due to the fact that, in overhauling the legislative framework governing school exclusions, the Education Act 2002 also substantially diluted the remedies available to parents and ultimately, children. By replacing the previous Independent Appeal Panels (IAPs) which did have the power to reinstate excluded pupils with IRPs which do not, the Act has vastly curtailed the corrective powers which this important body has in the context of school exclusions and in ensuring the authorisation of an exclusion in a fair, legal, and transparent manner. Indeed, during the Acts' passage through Parliament, the Joint Committee on Human Rights (JCHR) expressed unequivocal concerns regarding the diminution of the powers which IRPs were to possess. Through their examination of the caselaw arising under Article 6 (Right to a Fair Trial) of the ECHR, the JCHR noted that "the provisions for review panels without full appellate jurisdiction and without the power to order reinstatement are incompatible with the requirements of the Article" (House of Lords, 2010; 4). In reaching their conclusions, the JCHR were heavily influenced by the work and recommendations of the Administrative Justice

and Tribunal Council (AJTC) which not only noted the "life-changing" (AJTC, 2011) impact which a school exclusion has on the child concerned but also the high statistical correlation between permanent exclusions on the one hand and children with SEN on the other.

Moreover, in his assessment of the legislative changes which effectively downgraded the powers available to an IRP, Dance (2013; 183) stated that their current inability to direct the reinstatement of an excluded pupil, unlike its predecessor, severely limits its powers such that the question arises "whether it is worthwhile for the majority of families submitting a review application at all, when there is no prospect of a favourable outcome". Similarly, Berman and Brotherton (2015; 17) noted that the removal of the reinstatement power from the IRP represented a "crucial change" within the legislative framework, while in the first judicial review to come before the courts on foot on the changes introduced by section 51(A) Education Act 2002 as inserted by the Education Act 2011, Collins J., stated that "the amendments resulting from the insertion of 51A in the 2002 Act, and the new regulations are substantial, because before then a review panel had much wider powers"[5] Thus, by reducing the powers of the IRP, important accountability and appellate functions have been removed from the school exclusion system, including important remedial rights for children and young people, including those with SEN, who are statistically more susceptible to being excluded from school than their non-SEN peers.

Thus, from the foregoing analysis, several anomalies exist for children with SEN as regards the legal framework underpinning school exclusion. Firstly, the invisibility of children from the entirety of the exclusion process is a noticeable anomaly. The existence of review rights, as opposed to formal appellate rights, which exist solely in favour of parents creates a legislative and procedural imbalance which renders the child an extraneous actor within the very system they seek to rely on. This is problematic as the law is arguably premised on the assumption that all parents will display the same level of equivalence towards their children's education. By failing to provide for independent review rights from excluded children in the case of permanently excluded children and more widely peripheralizing children in relation to the exclusion process itself, the law fails to provide a legal safety net where parents

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[5]   R(CR) v Independent Review Panel of the London Borough of Lambeth [2014] EWHC 2461 (Admin), para 16.

do not pursue their children's educational interests either though indifference or negligence. Indeed, the downgrading of the rights afforded to parents who do seek to challenge their child's exclusion has been held to be inconsistent with Article 6 ECHR. Secondly, the invisibility of the CRC and its interpretative provisions from the legislation, regulations and accompanying statutory guidance represents a further irregularity within the school exclusion framework. Such absences, despite the explicit references within the law to enduring public law standards occasion a children's rights deficit within the law governing school exclusions. The failure of the legislation, regulations, or guidance to reference the child's best-interests principle (Article 3 CRC), the child's right to education itself (Articles 28 & 29 CRC), or the child's right to be heard pursuant to Article 12 CRC is objectively inconsistent with established children's rights principles. This is compounded by the fact that when considering whether to exclude in the first instance, the head-teacher is only encouraged 'where practical' to consider the child or young person's side of the story. Thus, the non-existence of the established right of the child to express his or her views, coupled with her concomitant inability to personally have her exclusion reviewed and challenged results in an imbalanced procedural process which jars heavily with established children's rights principles.

2.2. International Standards

Additionally, the adequacy of domestic legal standards must also be considered in light of prevailing international human rights developments, including the protections afforded under both the CRC and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). In relation to the former treaty, numerous substantive and procedural rights are afforded to children which are particular relevance in the context of the overlap between school exclusions and children with SEN. As discussed above, these include, *inter alia,* the right to have their best interests taken into account,[6] the right to be heard in matters which affect them,[7] the right to education itself,[8] and the right to non-discrimination,[9] amongst others. However, the translation of such rights into reality for children who pass through the English school exclusion system

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[6] Article 3 CRC.
[7] Article 12 CRC.
[8] Articles 28 & 29 CRC.
[9] Article 2 CRC.

has not been unproblematic in practice. Harris and Eden (2000, 12) have long remarked that the absence of the best interests principle within school exclusion law was tantamount to a "gap in domestic law", while the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2008, para 66(d)) have not only expressed their concern at the high number of permanent and fixed term exclusions occurring in the UK, but have long articulated their anxiety regarding the rights deficiencies within English education law and the school exclusion framework (UN, 1995; UN, 2002. Indeed, they noted in 2008 that that children and young people "should be encouraged and allowed to state their case at all stages of the exclusion process" (UN, 2008; para 472).

However, despite the traction which the CRC has undeniably had on the development of domestic law and practice since it was ratified by the UK in 1991, (Doek & Liefaard, 2015; Gilmore, 2017), its status as an unincorporated treaty in the UK, and the legal ramifications which flow from that status, was recently articulated by the UK Supreme Court in the case of *SC and CB v Secretary of State for Work and Pensions*. Here, the Court held that "although treaties are agreements intended to be binding upon the parties to them, they are not contracts which domestic courts can enforce".[10] In what can only be regarded as a decisive setback for the deployment of the CRC and the provisions therein, for the advancement of children's rights before the domestic courts, the *SC* case highlights in unequivocal terms the limitations of rights-based advocacy and litigation on the basis of unincorporated treaties. Nonetheless, the absence of incorporation does not of itself, *ipso facto,* absolve or release the state from their voluntarily agreed upon children's rights commitments.

In a similar vein, the rights contained within the UNCRPD must also be assessed when considering the overlap of school exclusions and children with SEN. With a clear emphasis on the importance of inclusive education (Buchner & Shevlin, 2020; De Beco, 2014; De Beco, 2018), which itself represents an important objective in combatting the historical segregation of children with disabilities within our education systems (Hegarty & Alur, 2002), the UNCRPD contains several significant rights relevant to the education rights of children with SEN. These include explicit protection for

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[10]   [2021] UKSC 26, para 76.

children with disabilities,[11] the right to education,[12] and the delivery of these rights (amongst others) in conjunction with the treaty's 'General Principles' as enunciated in Article 3 UNCRPD. These include adherence to the precepts of dignity, participation, inclusion, non-discrimination, equality of opportunity, gender equality, accessibility, and respect for the evolving capacities of children with disabilities and their identities (Arduin 2018).

Ratified by the UK in 2009, the UNCRPD also remains an unincorporated treaty under the constitutional design of the UK. However, it does contain significant guidance pertaining to the rights of children with SEN who are more vulnerable to exclusion and educational under-attainment than their peers. Reyes (2019, 408) sates that is:

is an important source of guidelines for inclusion in terms of facilitating reasonable adjustments, personalised support, and the provision of support within the general education system to facilitate students' effective education

However, in a similar fashion to the domestic translation of the rights within the UNCRC, the domestic conversion of the rights within the UNCRPD has also been problematic in nature. In their 2017 Concluding Observations on the UK's performance under the UNCRPD, the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities expressed concern at the "persistence of a dual education system that segregates children with disabilities in special schools" (UN, 2017; para 52(a)), the "increasing number of children with disabilities in segregated education environments" (UN, 2017; para 52 (b)), and "reports of school authorities refusing to enrol a student with disabilities who is deemed to be "disruptive to other classmates" (UN, 2017; para 52(c)). Thus, despite the UNCRPD enshrining a right to inclusive education, the consequence of which, as Kanter (2019, 25) describes, should "prohibit the exclusion of children and adults with disabilities from educational opportunities based on their disability", the reality for children with SEN in England is far removed from the commendable and necessary legal protections afforded within the UNCRPD. With consistently higher rates of school exclusion than their non-SEN peers (DfE, 2021) and mounting evidence of unofficial and illegal school exclusions (Gill, 2017; Power & Taylor, 2018), a curios, yet unacceptable legal paradox emerges, whereby children with SEN, who should benefit

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[11]   Article 7 UNCRPD.
[12]   Article 24 UNCRPD.

unquestionably from the protections afforded by the well-crafted domestic legislative and international human rights provisions appear to be the group who suffer the most frequent and enduring violations of their rights. Indeed, in her recent examination of the extent of the legal traction which the right to education had had for vulnerable children in the context of school exclusions, Ferguson (2021) states:

the right to education, pre-pandemic, has not had any measurable impact on reducing the range of ways in which certain children 'drop out' from school and become disengaged form the education system beyond legal fixed-term or permanent exclusion, which includes illegal exclusion

Trends from England

Having discussed the domestic and international legal standards which are relevant to the overlay of school exclusions and children with SEN, several common trends and indeed, lessons can be learned from English law and practice. Numerous trends can be identified regarding the vulnerability and susceptibility of children with SEN in relation to becoming excluded from school in England. The first identifiable trend that can be extrapolated from the official numerical governmental data is the persistent over-representation of children with SEN within the exclusion data. In line with precious years (DfE, 2020; DfE, 2019; DfE, 2018), the 2021 data for the preceding academic year indicates that children with SEN, and especially those with emotional, social, and behavioural disorders were among the highest ranked excluded children from English primary and secondary education. This demands scrutiny in view of the fact that the law governing the provision of services for children with SEN was radically overhauled in 2014 with the enactment of the Children and Families Act (CFA) 2014. Designed to overhaul, centralise, and consolidate the provision of education, health, and social care services for children and young people with SEN, and accompanied with the introduction of a new statutory Code of Practice to ultimately meet their needs, the practical effect of the legislative changes has been far from faultless and has not evaded scrutiny (Hodkinson & Burch, 2019). Indeed, evidence from the House of Commons Education Select Committee (2019, 3) paints a picture of a system which is typified by "unlawful practice, bureaucratic nightmares, buckpassing and a lack of accountability, strained resources and adversarial experiences", while research from one region in the north of England

corroborates such evidence and further points to evidence of children with SEN being illegally excluded from school (Byrne et al, 2020).

The second primary trend that can be extrapolated is the persistent, if not ineffective, official review of the system itself. In recent years this has included an official investigation into the practice of school exclusions in England (DfE, 2019) and the publication of a Green Paper setting out the proposed future provision of services for children with SEN (DfE, 2022). However, an examination of both major policy initiatives indicates major children's rights anomalies. Dealing firstly with the review into school exclusions, known as the Timpson Review, several significant issues abound. Commissioned in March 2018, the report was to review and explore how head teachers use their powers to exclude children from school and to ascertain why certain groups of children are more likely to be excluded than others. Although restating the troublesome reality that certain groups of children are persistently over-represented within the exclusion figures, the report represented a missed opportunity for strengthening, developing and progressively realizing children's education rights. While the report acknowledges that "systemic improvement is required" (DfE, 2019; 12) to redress, *inter alia,* the practices of illegal and unofficial exclusions, children being "off-rolled" within schools, the capricious and inconsistent use of exclusions within schools and the lack of safe-guards which protect children against such practices, the ultimate recommendations failed to propose a rights-respecting culture within schools whereby children and young people, including those with SEN, would be the direct proprietors of legal entitlements. Indeed, the report was itself limited in its acknowledgement of children's rights as a whole. With no reference to the child's best interests principle, the child's right to be heard or the child's right to a remedy should any breach of their education rights, the Review arguably disproportionally favoured the rights of schools over the rights of children.

More recently, the publication of the governmental Green Paper into the provision of services for children with SEN (DfE, 2022), indicates that 80% of children with SEN are educated in Alternative Provision (AP) centres, which is generally education provided outside mainstream schools. Such statistics also raise profound questions around the issue of inclusive education and children's rights under the UNCRPD. Central to the new proposed reforms is the governmental desire to make AP an integral part of the system governing services for children with SEN through funding stability, building system

capacity, increasing transparency and accountability and development of a bespoke performance framework for AP which focuses on standards (DfE, 2022; 56). However, against this canvas of proposed reforms is an established body of evidence which underscores the vast educational, structural, and indeed, legal shortcomings which currently typify AP in England. Findings by the House of Commons Education Committee in 2018 into both Alternative Provision and what they called the "scandal" of ever rising school exclusions uncovered instances where schools were unable to provide pastoral support owing to a lack of funds, (2018, 10), where pupils with SEN were being excluded on the basis that their needs would be better accommodated for in AP, differences in the quality of educational standards and teaching and situations where children's emotional, social and mental health needs were not being met by the school. The Committee further noted that: "The exclusions process is weighted in favour of schools and often leaves parents and pupils navigating an adversarial system that should be supporting them" (Ibid, 17). Although the Green Paper is open to public consultation, it too is characterised by its inattention to children's rights and the failure to adequately incorporate a children's rights-based approach to the delivery of SEN services especially in the context of education and the associated issue of school exclusions. Notable also is the total absence of any reference to the Timpson Review of School Exclusions within the Green Paper despite the prevalence of SEN amongst children and young people who have been excluded from school. At best, this points to a lack of official joined-up-thinking within governmental and departmental planning, whilst at worst, it indicates a wilful disregard of stated governmental objectives (although imperfect) to overhaul the law and practice pertaining to school exclusions.

Concluding Lessons to be Learned

From the forgoing examination of the law, policy and practice relating to school exclusions and children with SEN in England, several lessons should be learned moving forward. The first among these is the need to remediate the children's rights deficiencies which currently underpin the legal framework governing school exclusion. Further to this, legislative amendments should be enacted to ensure that the child's best interests principle forms a central deliberative axis around which decisions pertaining to school exclusions, at all stages, are taken. Additionally, children should have an independent and

autonomous right to appeal their exclusion in view of the serious impact which it has on their education and the child's right to be heard pursuant to Article 12 CRC should be formally enshrined in the legislation. In view further of the high percentage of children with SEN who are routinely excluded, both legally and illegally from school, such procedural protections would afford a basic and uniform degree of legal protection for children within the exclusion system.

Secondly, adherence to children's rights and an appreciation of the intersectional nature of school exclusions in England warrants increased scrutiny at governmental level. While movement has begun, this has largely overlooked the rights of the child and indeed, the intersectional realities which exist within the school exclusion system. This also prompts a wider discussion of why children with SEN, which invariably engages the issue of disability, are more susceptible to exclusion that others. This assumes increased significance in view of impact which Covid-19 has had on children with SEN and their education. Research by Alghrani and Byrne (2020) has outlined the devastating impact which Covid-19 has had on children with SEN in England with further research by Ashworth et al (2022) outlining the disproportionally negative effect which Covid-19 has had on such children. Taken together, such realities warrant an increase children's rights-based approach to the law, policy and practice governing school exclusion in England to ensure that children with SEN are not disproportionally consigned to an excluded and often inhospitabel educational hinterland.

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DEAR PRINCIPAL, DON'T LET ME FADE AWAY BUT SPARKLE: A QUALITATIVE INQUIRY INTO SCHOOL DROPOUT

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Abstract

Arguably one of the major 'threats' to schooling, education and thereupon to the ongoing as well as to the overall development of a(ny) country is school dropout. That said, school dropout is also acknowledged as a barrier to individuals' intellectual, personal, and social development. Verily, it indeed constitutes 'a burden on the shoulders' of states considering the multi-dimensional structure of the problem. To that end, both micro e.g., student and school wise and macro level viz. policy-bound measures need to be taken urgently to work toward the issue in question and ideally in a proactive fashion. It would be fair to state at this point that as critical agents of their schools, school principals do have a vital role in foreseeing, targeting and eventually minimizing and eliminating school dropout. In this direction, the present research, which is an instrumental case study taking place in four dissimilar schools in Ankara, Turkey, intends to concentrate upon educational leadership strategies of four school leaders developed to prevent early leaving. It is believed that the results of the current study will cast light particularly on the aforementioned micro-scale situations through unearthing what school leaders try to do to fight against school dropout and how they 'manage' to do it as the managers of their schools.

Key words: *School dropout, instrumental case study, school principals.*

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"The dropout crisis is just the tip of an iceberg. What it doesn't count are all the kids who are in school but being disengaged from it, who don't enjoy it, who don't get any real benefit from it."
~ Ken Robinson

Introduction

One can comfortably put forth that education holds the power of altering-if not most often reforming-societal constituents through shifting mindsets, mentalities and the relevant modus operandi pertaining to institutions and organizations existing in the societies (Brown & Lauder, 1991; Sharma & Monteiro, 2016). With that being said, educational territories themselves are inherently and constantly subject to the changes the society brings about like the visible and invisible impacts of poverty, migration, and wars along with such sudden happenings like the recent pandemic. Amongst the all-time evident issues of education irrespective of contexts has been early school leaving and school dropout. As a matter of fact, taking a closer look at the line of literature it appears that school dropout problem encompasses a number of factors related to school, namely, school factors; personal factors and social environment (Simsek & Katitas, 2012). Along with that school dropout is highly connected to educational policy making and implementation as a multi-layered phenomenon thereupon policy makers have (preferably when need be) been into the reasons and results of school dropout. The following striking phrases mirror the interrelated being of educational policies and the topic of school dropout: "A related argument for policy-makers is that the risk of unemployment is much higher among people with low education level, the risk of being on welfare is higher." (Falch & Strøm, 2008: 4). There is ample evidence that underlines school dropout is associated with unemployment, lower lifetime earnings and low levels of life satisfaction besides its adverse impact on public revenues through tax and parafiscal revenues (e.g., Bakirtas & Nazlioglu, 2021; Millenky, 2016).

Another crucial layer of the subject of school dropout is its' being in close connection with the problem of push-out, which, in a fair number of studies (e.g., Cassidy & Bates, 2005; Ergun, 2017), described as the factors that push the learner out of the school as opposed to the situation with dropout, in which the student leaves the school apart from the causes belonging to the school they study at. To this end, the intertwined nature of the said issues calls for a careful scrutiny so as to be able to identify, define and attend to all these as desired, that is, by assuring a maintained approach in determining the solutions and thereby putting them into action. Plentiful means are suggested in order to be able to overcome school dropout like intervention practices/programs that aid successful school completion, which are enlisted

as: "Academic achievement programs, attendance mentoring, counseling services, after-school educational clubs, peer tutoring, prosocial skill development, behavior management training, positive assertiveness, vocational training and alternative school programs." (Tayli, 2008, p. 91).

It would not be wrong to put forward that the school acts both as one of the main forces that comes into play resulting in school dropout (Simsek & Katitas, 2014) and as the very 'remedy' bearing in mind the proactive efforts that might be considered by the administrators and teachers as prominent agents. In fact, it has been accentuated that the role and function of the mentioned stakeholders are invaluable in reducing school dropout rates through their practicum, the strategies they employ and the decision-making processes they actively get involved in (Akuzum et al, 2015). It is then noteworthy to punctuate that considering deeply about the causes and the results of school dropout with a view to diminishing its effects across school levels with the help of insider perspectives i.e., those of school principals, would be a meaningful and purposeful endeavor. Moreover, it is well known that the management of school has a clear role and impact in preventing school dropout via warranting and maintaining organizational effectiveness (Ira, Cetin & Dogan, 2019).

Methodology

In light of the aforementioned outlook on the concept of school dropout, to wit, accepting the potential weight of school principals as the immediate observers and expedients, this study attempts to focus on educational leadership strategies by four school principals that wish to prevent school dropout. To do so, the present study is structured around the central question: What educational leadership strategies are developed and employed by four participant school leaders to prevent school dropout? The following questions are directed to the participating school principals in the time of the interviews bearing in mind what the methodology employed in the study, that is, instrumental case study entails: Do/did you have any students who you know/knew they plan(ned) to leave the school? How do/did you know they are/were about to leave? What do/did you do as a school principal to detect such students and prevent their leave?

Within this frame of reference, four school principals working at four schools of varying nature are invited to the study to welcome their views on the phenomenon as part of an instrumental case study. It is believed that the participation of these school principals, who have diverse educational and professional backgrounds and years of experience, and who are also from state schools with distinct features, can assist in enriching the data sought by paving the way for better delving into the term school dropout. This non-probability/purposeful sampling is thought to serve for the research to a greater extent in this regard (Creswell, 2013). The data is obtained through conducting one-to-one semi-structured interviews with the participants mentioned earlier. The necessary information about the participating school principals as well as the schools they work for is given below:

Table 1. Participants of the Study

Participant	Year of experience as the school principal	School
Principal 1	6	A middle school located in the outskirts of the capital
Principal 2	2	A middle school located in the city center of the capital
Principal 3	4	A high school located in the city center of the capital
Principal 4	4	A high school located in the outskirts of the capital

To realize the analysis of the data coming from the interviews conducted, content analysis is deployed, and all the results are attempted to be categorized in the form of themes, and later the findings are shared in rich and descriptive texts accordingly (Merriam, 2008) at the same time serving for the utmost being of the researcher throughout the process (Creswell, 2014). With an eye to ensuring trustworthiness and caring for ethical considerations, the expertise of an educational researcher is requested during the analysis of the data, in another saying, during the course of deciding on the themes and codes. At the end, Miles and Huberman's (1994) recommended standard of 80% agreement on 95% of the codes is assured between the coders, that is to say, between the researcher and the aforementioned expert of the field of educational sciences. As for the ethical aspects, the identities of the participants are kept confidential throughout, and all the other ethical procedures are carried out meticulously.

Results

These two main themes emerged at the end of the analysis: *Principals' keeping the finger on the pulse of the student and their cooperation with the stakeholders* and *their situational acts,* which point to being sensitive toward the issues going on in and outside the classroom and school, being in constant communication with the students, parents and teachers and coming up with contextual schemes respectively.

For the first theme indicated above: Principals' keeping the finger on the pulse of the student and their cooperation with the stakeholders these are uttered by the first principal:

"The school principal should be like a spy camera to fully understand the dropout problem taking a 360-degree view. Here, I don't mean that the principal can or should get involved in unethical type of behavior or investigation watching others. What I mean is the school principal should always be alert even if they are in the office. They need to decode the displayed behaviors among students and teachers in and outside the classroom. Or outside the school. But this is not enough. You need to listen to the parties. Especially the parents. Since at the end of the day, for the most part, they play a critical role in students' leaving."

The second principal punctuated the expected principal attitude along the same lines:

"I continuously watch. When I walk down the halls, during the breaks, during when students come and go, during the ceremonies on Fridays…I always watch. Believe me or not you can get the signals from the students who are on the verge of going. I mean leaving. You have to interact with the others as well like the counsellor, the peers of that student, all the teachers teaching the student. What I can say from my experience is these students seem to be not interested in the things going around. Or at least no more. They walk in a preoccupied manner. They mostly stay away from others during the breaks. They tend to misbehave-even the ones who used to be non-problematic can turn out to be the ones who cause trouble for us, for everyone else."

The third principal apparently agreed with the other participants:

"I am able to spot the students who start to behave differently. This is what being an effective principal necessitates. I search for the chances to talk to the people around the student including the blue-collar workers. I had a student with a chronic disease. At first, she was so eager. She would behave cheerfully and participated in the lessons. She would even be there when it came to extracurricular activities and alike. Then something happened. You would understand that she would just disappear one day. And it happened. She had to leave as her situation got worsened. I tried hard to do something

against that, but the case was different. You could not do anything. For God's sake she is better now and began the open high school. We still keep in touch."

The last principal announced a similar pursue:

"The school principal should have the eyes of a spider. You know they have up to eight eyes. But please allow me to change the animal. The school principal should be like a hawk. Yes, a hawk. Truly, an effective school principal already has the eyes of a hawk. Plus, the intuition. Your inner voice never lies. What is more, at one point, others should step in. Now you are powerful enough to find these students who are about to go away from the school and stop them."

Under the second emergent theme: *Principals' situational acts* it is discovered that there are no 'ready-made remedies'. Instead, complying with the authentic ethos, the diversified dynamics of schools and also with the individuals as unique entities that take part in the process; school principals try to search for their own ways which they think might be useful for certain scenarios and under specific conditions. In this sense, the first principal highlighted these:

"It is not very easy to talk about my strategies to prevent school dropout. I don't know but maybe the other participants can do that. The reason behind this is I cannot word all the things I do all throughout. All I can say that there is not a single prescription. The strategies just come through the years of teaching and managing."

The second principal said:

"Each and every student has their own story. We as teachers and managers have our own story too. This makes everything so simple and simultaneously so complicated. This is also valid for the school dropout issue. I listen to the stories. I never get tired of doing so. I recommend my colleagues to do the same. They need to be patient."

The third principal pinpointed the customized facet of the struggle of a school principal to fight against school dropout:

"If you ask me, being a school principal is like being a tailor. You cannot be a part of mass production with your small-scale business in the neighborhood. You need to look out what every person needs; without missing a centimeter. I am like this tailor. To really understand the problem with the specific student respecting the school dropout issue, and to solve it, I have always tried to find new tools and instruments. Each time new devices for the different student."

In sum, dwelling upon the shared opinions of the participating school principals, one can pronounce that despite the evident good intentions and acts there indeed is a scarcity of acts that are pertinent to initiative taking or risk taking, which may be closely linked to the fear of principals of being 'held' responsible, and more importantly accountable. This

may be about a relatively larger scale issue such as the lack of spaces for maneuver for those participants or that of legislations and regulations. Within this interpretation it can be concluded that eliminating school drop out in a sustainable manner is a matter of strategy building and making systemic changes as appropriate. School principals should not be 'left alone', on the contrary, be backed up by the right mechanisms.

Discussion and Conclusion

Obviously, school dropout issue constitutes a 'burning' item on the agenda of many countries in particular taking into account the macro-level outcomes it yields, which are usually tied to policy making (Bakirtas & Nazlioglu, 2021; Falch & Strøm, 2008). The issue covers a range of parameters, which are oftentimes bound to personal, school, and social factors (Simsek & Katitas, 2012) and it is worth italicizing here that the elements of push-out goes hand in-hand with the those of school dropout despite the fact that they generally signpost two disparate notions (Cassidy & Bates, 2005). There are almost countless components of the domain of school dropout (Tayli, 2008), school here being the major one (Simsek & Katitas, 2014). With the aim of preventing school dropout, a high number of efforts in differing shapes and forms are put (Akuzum et al, 2015), particularly through the strivings of the school principal (Ira et al., 2019).

One can figure out through the findings of this study that school dropout, remarkably when evaluated through the eyes of school principals as leaders attempting to solve the problem by resorting to their own methods, is an issue that requires a tailor-made discernment catering to the school type or the reasons of leaving the school whilst directing attention to the very ecosystem including shareholders, legal entities, school ethos and other characteristics (Gurr et al., 2021). With the themes emerged at the end of the analysis, which are: Principals' keeping the finger on the pulse of the student and their cooperation with the stakeholders and their situational acts, the participating school principals say a lot about the 'black box' of their intervening and also about their extremely valuable responsibility. All the principals declared that they felt the need to be attentive and vigilant at all times so that they can diagnose the problem of school dropout in their schools in proactive modus. Addedly, they signified that they should collaborate with the involved parties to be successful in their venture. Howbeit, how much of this aspiration can actually be realized and how much of it is then feasible is a pivotal question to be directed by the practitioners, researchers and policy makers. The below

words of a school principal in Turkey summarizes the extant situation of school principalship (Korumaz, 2016, p. 6):

"The most important reason preventing me from connecting with teachers, students or parents are issues of time. I have to get through lots of work in the same day. Nobody would think that these bureaucratic processes take such a long time. I really feel responsible for getting this work done."

Reading between and beyond the lines of this quote it would be appropriate to think that larger-scale policy shifts are required to ensure a comprehensive outlook and thence intervention in the problem of school dropout, which undoubtedly extends beyond the daily works of school principals.

The current study aimed to scrutinize the educational leadership strategies of participating school principals as leaders and explored the preventive doings targeting early leaving and school dropout. The findings may shed light to situational, albeit not systematic, applications via snapshots of the connections between principalship and school dropout and help policy makers contemplate about the ways through which solutions of more permanent sort that address the problem can become attainable for all parties.

In spite of the fact that the battle against school dropout proved to be a huge situational operation taking place in and outside the school, more data can be practical to further generalize the list of exemplary acts of school principals. Thus, mixed method studies, intercultural research and longitudinal studies can be helpful to gain more insights into the issue and further interpret the breadth of the problem that includes sociological concerns such as child labor, early marriages, bullying, violence, disability as well as educational ones like academic performance.

All in all, policy makers, educators, researchers, and other members of the field need to embrace the understanding that school dropout is yet another problem to cope with alongside scores of other issues that are pertinent to classroom management, curricula, learner motivation, teacher burnout and others.

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JUST THREE OF THE MYRIAD REASONS FOR DROPPING OUT OF SCHOOL

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ABSTRACT: As determined by the European Commission investigations on average, the rate of early school leaving decreased from 13.4% in 2011 to 10.2% in 2019 across Europe. However, considerable differences still exist between countries and demographics with people of a migrant background, young men and those living in rural areas being more likely to end their education before compulsory school leaving age. It is therefore helpful to look not just at Europe but also countries around the world to learn lessons. This chapter will address three phenomena that contribute to students dropping out of school. They are by far not the only reasons, but they should be examined along with other factors in understanding school dropout rates in Europe as well as in the United States. The chapter is divided into three sections: (i) Social Class in Schools: Another Class We Are Failing (ii) Cultural Capital: Researching the concept without agreeing on the definition (iii) The Game Is Rigged.

Key words: *School Drop Out, Social Class, Schools*

SECTION 1 - SOCIAL CLASS IN SCHOOLS: ANOTHER CLASS WE ARE FAILING

One way that we are 'tracking' students to failure is simply because many schools are warehousing the working class and poor students until they leave school. Throughout Europe and in the United 'States our schools are willing partners in social reproduction and often hide behind excuses like, the lack of parental involvement, being unprepared to start school, low ability levels of students, and students lack interest in schools. We believe that students are treated as the least important part of our public school system and that non-

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college bound students are the lowest of the low. Schools are more involved with policing lower tracked students than helping them succeed academically. Most schools do not provide students with lesser abilities students a chance at an upward mobility. What they do provide is boring, less stimulating classes, often without regard to learning styles or needs. Most students that do manage to 'grow' upward in the system, take more challenging classes, and have some chance for success do so despite their schools. Working class and poor students that 'swim against the current' and achieve some success, do so in a large part independently of the efforts of their schools. Often through pure luck, they have a mentor, maybe an older sibling, or a coach, or other adult that takes an interest in them, and encourages them to succeed. Often the mentor has experience in navigating the college track system and the college enrollment process. Sometimes the mentor provides a negative motivation to succeed. For example, several students report that having an older sibling caught in the criminal justice trap was an incentive not to follow in their footsteps.

In *"Invisible Inequality: Social Class and Childrearing in Black Families and White Families"*, Annette Lareau (2002) examines the differences that class makes in the lives of children. She finds that by looking at social class differences rather than strictly race shows a pattern of cultivation of children that differs significantly by class. Lareau finds that middle-class parents provide what she terms "Concentrated Cultivation", while working-class and poor parents utilize "Accomplishment of natural growth". These differences show up in the language use of the two classes with middle-class parents using more reasoning and negotiation in their parenting styles. Working-class and poor parents tend to give firm directions, rather than reasoning and therefore miss many 'teaching moments'. Lareau shows that middle-class parents, often through their parenting style, focus on helping their child develop opinions, judgments, and observation skills. Often for working-class and poor children the parenting style of 'firm directions' leads to either a willingness to accept authority, or a negative reaction to authority. The options of reasoning and questioning seem to be only in the 'toolboxes' of middle-class children. There are three key differences in the styles shown that impact the lives of the children: 1) the organization of daily life and schedules; 2) language use; 3) social connections. Middle-class students often have their schedules packed so full of 'adult supervised' events that they have little time to themselves.

Working-class and poor children have few 'adult supervised' events, and they are most often left on their own to find either positive or negative activities. Often their view of adult authority led to negative outcomes both in and out of school. Coupled with low tracking in schools, working-class and poor students' experiences virtually guarantee social reproduction. A downside for middle-class, higher tracked students, is often a feeling of schedule driven exhaustion, some boredom when on their own, and for many the inability to organize their own activities. The long-term consequences of the two different styles show that middle-class students develop an attitude of educational entitlement. They believe that they are entitled to learn, grow, and succeed, whereas working-class and poor students develop restraint and often accept what they are allowed. What Lareau finds is that social class often plays a much larger role than race in determining success and mobility due to the classed based style of parenting and the class-based tracking in schools.

Tiffani Chin and Meredith Phillips in *"Social Reproduction and Child-rearing Practices: Social Class, Children's Agency, and the Summer Activity Gap"* (2002) add to the body of knowledge by examining the summer activity gap between the social classes. Similar to Lareau's work the authors find that the major class difference during the summer can be labeled "structure" with economic or occupational activities for middle-class students and "natural growth" for working-class and poor students who are often left to fend for themselves. The cultural values, practices and learning that follow these different styles accumulate over time, even though academic progress during the in-school year is about equal for both groups. Karl Alexander and Doris Entwisle in *"Lasting Consequences of the Summer Learning Gap"* (2007) find the organization of summers differ considerably, in quality and experiences. The cumulative effect of the learning gap becomes pronounced in the disparity of the class achievement gap. The achievement gap appears most predominately for students aged 14-15. The summer learning gap, coupled with the existing tracking of students exacerbates the student's chances for upward mobility and therefore significantly contributes to social reproduction. Perhaps if society wants to counter this confining trend a good deal more attention needs to be in place to provide working-class and poor students with educationally enriching programs through community centers, pools, and local youth organizations in an affordable and inclusionary manner. Another alternative,

that has been tried is some districts, is a move to year-round schooling to reduce the summer learning gap.

Robert Crosnoe and Carey Cooper in, "Economically Disadvantaged Children's Transitions into Elementary School: Linking Family Processes, School Contexts, and Educational Policy" (2010) seek to explain the process that family-based mechanisms of economics (class structure) effect early learning. In looking for mediating processes the authors find that teacher experience at grade level is a critically important factor in providing a buffer against family-based risks for reading. In many school systems the mobility of experienced elementary teachers moving to 'better resourced schools', as a reward for teaching tenure, makes it difficult at best, to have experienced teachers consistently in economically disadvantaged schools where they can provide the students with at least a chance to develop their reading skills.

In Willis's *Learning to Labor* excerpts demonstrate, through the words of students, their attitudes, values, and beliefs toward their future life and work. The interviews demonstrate that 'job-choice' is basically a middle-class construct that is not imagined or conceived in working and poor classes. For the working-class and poor, essentially a 'job-is- a job' and more distinction might be placed on inside jobs versus outside jobs as the only possible choice to consider, if any choice is even possible. For most, any job will do, and the working class and poor respondents show the same 'conformist' identification with teacher and later boss's authority. In fact, the 'conformist' basically sees the process as a continuum from school to the workplace. The interviews point to a class structure that is in effect a 'work to live' acceptance of whatever comes next, without any sense that there may be anything different or that there is any self-determination allowed. From the experience of living and working in England and Ireland we wonder if the social reproduction shown in interviews like the ones Willis presents is 'medicated' by society through beer and football as a way of distracting the working class and poor from contemplating their condition and rebelling. To many of the 'conformists' described in the interviews, their only hope of social mobility would be to win the lottery. Their chances of that happening, however remote, are better than their chances of upward mobility since they have already lost the upper class and middle-class parent lottery. Perhaps, in the United Kingdom and in the United States, social reproduction is a direct reflection of children choosing the wrong parents and since they did choose wrong, it is their fault, which

absolves society of any responsibility. Thomas Jefferson once speculated "the purpose of religion is to keep the poor from killing the rich" which may account for a mediating factor in life where people often medicate with drugs, alcohol, or religion as a way of coping with social exclusion.

The attitudes shown in Willis's excerpts are again reflected in *"Ain't No makin 'It: Leveled Aspirations in a Low-income Neighborhood",* Jay Macleod (1987). Macleod begins by presenting the dominant ideology in the United States, that any child can grow up to be president, who characterizes a perspective of American society that believes it is open and that the barriers to success are personal and not social. Jefferson's quote is especially telling when one reads the interviews in MacLeod's study. The work also shows that class more than race is a determinate. Although the subjects in the study had similar outcomes, their earlier beliefs differed somewhat by race, with whites believing that there was no use in 'playing the game' and African American youth believing they could succeed if they applied themselves. The African American youth would learn over time, through racially negative experiences, what the whites already accepted, that the doors out of their situations were blocked. Only one African American youth somewhat escaped and became a postal employee. His escape might make the difference for his children's upward mobility as it has comparatively for him, but had he been middle-class joining the postal service might have been one of several choices available, rather than a lucky break. We believe MacLeod's work once again exposes the myth of American 'self-determination' and once again demonstrates the underlying belief that "we in America don't dispose of people—they do it to themselves". Perhaps many working class and poor Americans are just 'shoveling sand against the tide of social reproduction'.

Finally, in *"Exceptions to the Rule: Upward Mobile White and Mexican American High School Girls",* Julie Bettie, (2002) the author shows that while most high school students acquire future class positions consistent with their existing class, a few will find the formula to upward mobility. She explores the unique set of challenges the young women in her study face and those girls often suffer from lower self-esteem and are usually accepting of their place. She also demonstrates, similar to Lareau, that class operates independent from race, until negative racial factors and experience conspire to limit upward mobility. What seems consistent with the handful of girls that succeeded in upward movement was an outside factor, a mentor not usually provided by their

schools. For some it was an older sister that had managed to get to community college and then provides encouragement and understanding of how to navigate a higher track in school, the college enrollment, and financial aid structures. Others found their strength in a negative mentor, such as having a brother embroiled in the criminal justice system and, as mentioned above, not wanting to follow in his footsteps. Athletics and team socialization and inclusion helped those with athletic gifts. All found ways to escape the reproductive nature of family class handcuffs, but again with outside help. Nowhere to be found in these experiences were 'high-school counselors. Where were they? Why does a student need an older sibling to help them navigate the complexities of applying to college? Are counselors only concerned with middle-class college bound students? For working class and poor students are counselors there to provide 'policing' until the students are either forced out of the system, graduate with useless skills, or leave on their own out of boredom and frustration?

Finally, in defense of many caring counselors, their workload is so overwhelming that if they want to meet privately with every student, the time available would amount to about 15 minutes a year. Hardly enough time to say, "hello my name is Mr. or Ms. Smith and I want to help you, good luck and goodbye, times up". It is no wonder that 'social class' tracking is another class society is failing.

SECTION 2 - CULTURAL CAPITAL: RESEARCHING THE CONCEPT WITHOUT AGREEING ON THE DEFINITION

Ever since French Sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu, first introduced the term Cultural Capital in the 1960s to describe a social phenomenon in the French school system, other sociologist have been either building upon his work, or being critical of his findings. Unfortunately, much of this work seems to have been completed without a common understanding of the definition of culture or cultural. 'Cultural Capital' is a wonderful and intriguing term that can be interpreted numerous ways, which leads to a process that has allowed each researcher to study the phenomenon through their own definition, and often misinterpreting the definitions of their colleagues. For example, does 'culture' refer to so- called 'Highbrow Pursuits' or does it define the important aspects of a particular population or subgroup? Is the importance of 'Cultural Capital' any different for a child growing up in an urban slum than that an Innuit child

growing up in rural Alaska? It is not if 'Cultural Capital' is described as 'highbrow' but is very different if the definition has more to do with surviving and flourishing in societal groups and subgroups. Also, does 'highbrow' mean the same thing to all societal groups or is it different for different groups. In this context 'Cultural Capital' has more to do with function and survival, than an appreciation of 'high art'. And even in this example 'high art' can be defined by the dominant societal norms within the child's dominant social culture. Currently the Navaho Nation is struggling with deciding if a tribal leader, not fluent in the Navaho language, is qualified to lead. Therefore, is being fluent in the Navaho language a form of 'Cultural Capital' and if so, what role does it play in the success or failure of a Navaho child?

Paul DiMaggio's research looked at 'Cultural Capital' as an understanding of a particular set of *"Highbrow understanding and appreciation",* regarding success in academic achievement. DiMaggio questions Bourdieu's definition of 'Cultural Capital' while Paul Kingston finds more questions than answers in 'Cultural Capital' theory. He seems to question what exactly we mean by 'Cultural Capital' and does the definition vary with the needs of various diverse groups. Annette Lareau and Elliot Weininger review 'Cultural Capital' through other research and attributes to show that many of their colleagues missed the depth to which Bourdieu understood 'Cultural Capital'. In reading their review we wonder if they see their colleagues, like the preverbal blind men describing an elephant, or fully sighted researchers studying different animals? A more complete research question might involve looking at what is considered 'Cultural Capital' to a particular population or subculture, and then seeing how attainment of that 'Cultural Capital' translates into academic success in that population or subculture. The corollary to that research might be to see how the attainment of 'Cultural Capital' of another class or subculture translates into mobility into that population or subculture. Could an inner-city child function more effectively, have greater success, living within the Innuit culture if they obtained an understanding of what Innuits would consider 'Cultural Capital'? Would children from both populations have more success in living in Paris if they were fluent in classical music, western art, and opera, as DiMaggio would describe as "prestigious cultural practices"?

Josipa Roska and Daniel Potter attempt to describe the introduction of 'Cultural Capital' through different parenting practices, based on class and cultural norms. Reading their work on intergenerational transmission of

educational advantage raises the question to what extend do we want a one-size fits all educational system? If so, who makes that decision, and how would the deciders determine what is 'Cultural Capital'? Again, we find ourselves at the beginning point of examining Bourdieu's work and trying to understand what he was envisioning when he coined the term 'Cultural Capital'. And if 'Cultural Capital' is a measure of both inherited and learned behaviors, through processes, values, and opinions, then how do we assign activities, and measure the influence of those processes, values, and opinions in relationship to measured achievement? Again, the context of the answer must address who determined the measures, and how do the measures effect one's standing in their existing society or in mobility to a different society.

Brian Kisida, Jay Greene and Daniel Bowen look at how cultural reproduction and cultural mobility have been studied in an attempt to measure the effects 'Cultural Capital' on academic outcomes. They argue that the debate has lacked the examination of how children actually acquire 'Cultural Capital' when their families do not provide 'Cultural Capital' within the home. They would argue that children, whom they would classify as *"disadvantaged can be activated to acquire"* 'Cultural Capital' and thus compensate for family background characteristics. Their work seems to miss two important questions, the first as discussed above, what is the definition of 'Cultural Capital' and secondly, they miss that often the acquisition and appreciation of new activities can have more to do with the individual, than with their inherited status, or social conditioning. We refer to this phenomenon as the 'opera and ice hockey phenomenon'. When a person is first introduced to either of these activities, without having any previous exposure, there seem to be two very different reactions to the introduction. One reaction can best be described, as "I have wondered what this, opera and/or ice hockey, might be like. I am glad I have experienced it, but it does not appear to be something I wish to pursue, other than this exposure." The other reaction is, "Wow, how long has this been going on, and can I come again?" Neither, is truly an acquired taste, unless the individual has a secondary motive for wanting to acquire the taste and to be fluent in the cultural language, which is different than learning more, because of personal interest. Opera and ice hockey both have 'blue collar' roots, depending on one's heritage, but both have been elevated to somewhat 'highbrow status', opera often through cultural elitism, and hockey through its introduction at the collegiate level in the early 20th

century at American Ivy League colleges. Similarly, even though both have enjoyed some elitism status, they both have a much wider non-elitist audience. The introduction, and appreciation of both is as described above, owing more to inherent taste than acquired taste. I suspect that many of the 'disadvantaged' youth described by Kisida, Greene and Bowen acquired their 'taste' for art, and music through the exposure from field trips and encouragement, once they were exposed and found that they really liked what they saw. Perhaps showing an interest also gained them academic recognition and praise. It is ironic that, if it is true that the acquisition of the appreciation of art and music might lead to achievement and even upward mobility, that both art and music have disappeared from so many schools. At a time when we are worried about failing schools, disenfranchised youth, and lost populations we are introducing more 'test' measures and ignoring those things which can add appreciation, and motivation for learning.

Bourdieu very well may have had a much wider view and understanding of the notion of 'Cultural Capital'. He may have understood that 'Cultural Capital' is relative to context, and that the context is relative to the social norms of the dominant culture. It is an important concept that needs a common definition if it is to be understood in a wider context, or it should be defined by sub-cultural norms. Finally, 'Cultural Capital' needs to be looked at in a similar way to what many are now questioning in the term Human Capital to describe workers. Originally, business schools deployed the term Human Capital to describe the value that corporations have, either hired for, or developed in their employees. It was originally intended for corporations to understand and appreciate their workers as a capital asset. Researchers in compassion and civility are beginning to see the term Human Capital in a more negative light, by examining how capital is traditionally utilized and how dehumanizing the term has become. Capital is something that is collected, prized, and hoarded, so that it can be spent, and exploited to the betterment of the corporation. The term 'Human Capital' has little to do with respecting the human beings that have provided the labor.

'Cultural Capital' as a term, may very well fit into a similar pattern, whereby it is considered coinage that one acquires, and spends on upward mobility, without a true appreciation of its components. Should students acquire 'Cultural Capital' so that their teachers might be inclined to see them in a different light than their peers, and therefore reward them with higher grades,

or should our measures of students be based on our providing them the tools to succeed in a life that can be rewarding, fulfilling, and with dignity? Does 'Cultural Capital' acquisition enrich students, or make them 'Human Capital' for the enrichment and exploitation of society? Agreeing to a commonly accepted definition of 'Cultural Capital' might help to answer this question.

SECTION 3 - THE GAME IS RIGGED, THE DICE ARE LOADED, AND THE CARDS ARE MARKED: BUT WE ARE BEING FAIR, EQUITABLE, AND NON-DISCRIMINATORY

Since the one room schoolhouse grew into a facility that served hundreds of children, schools, by definition, needed to organize in a way that placed students in smaller groups for instruction. The obvious choice for placement is by grade level, ability, academic potential, and capacity for learning. Additional choices for grouping might be learning styles, individual needs, work ethic, and special needs. Many schools originally grouped by grade, and future potential, or capacity for higher education, or training for eventual work. This practice became known as 'tracks'. As a student, unless you were a special needs student, you were either assigned to the 'college prep track' or the 'vocational track'. In many schools 'tracking' subdivided into multiple levels that have names like 'advanced', 'honors', 'traditional', 'academic' 'technical/vocational' and 'special needs'. Since schools, as presently constituted, must have some way of taking the student body as a whole and breaking it into classroom sized units, 'tracking' became a way of satisfying that need.

It soon became obvious that 'tracking' can readily lead to a familiar form of segregation and create a system of 'separate and unequal' inside of individual schools. Adam Gamoran, in *"The Variable Effects of High School Tracking"* found that *"Tracking adds to inequality when placement in a high-status track permits students to gain more than if they had been assigned to a lower track"*. His study concluded that some forms of tracking lead to more inequality that others. The study also found that tracking could influence a school's overall level of achievement. He looked at Catholic schools, in comparison to public schools, and found that Catholic schools had a higher level of overall school achievement, especially in math and verbal skills. He also found less status difference between tracks than in the public schools he studied. A logical question to ask is, "is there more homogeneity in Catholic schools and less of

a divide between the abilities of the top students and the more challenged students, than there would be in a public school? A second question might relate to choice, since Gamoran states that *the electivity process goes a long way to reducing differences between tracks and the students are more motivated by being able to choose."* In fact, choice is a big part of Catholic education, from the choice to pay, and enroll a child, and since Catholic schools are strongly tuition dependent, parents have a voice that is more readily heard as it relates to choice then their public school counterparts. A final question might be that since the school is tuition based, the success of each child is important, each child is therefore special, and the school's success is based on each child's future success not just an overall school rating. Public school parents normally look to the overall rating of a school, if they even have a choice of schools, not necessarily how successful the school has been with an individual child. Catholic parents generally know each other thorough their parishes, and they personally know the success or failure of individual students. Finally, Gamoran finds through the work of Hoffer et al. 1985 that the *"narrower gap* (in achievement between tracks) *in Catholic schools occurs because low-track students are brought up, not because high-track students are held down.* We would argue that tuition-based schools must work to satisfy each of their customers, the parents, and the students, and not some outside third-party funder that looks at collective assessments.

In *"Tracking: From Theory to Practice"*, Maureen Hallinan in the early 1990s saw tracking as *"both inequitable and ineffective",* she argues for a flexible tracking policy that allows for reassignments. To her a serious problem is the negative effect of tracking which causes slower growth in the low tracks. That slow growth is caused by instructional inadequacies, low expectations, low standards, and just uninteresting, boring lessons that are not delivered by passionate teachers, nor received by passionate students. She asks, *"Since this can be modified, why not"?* She wants to understand why we tolerate negative social psychological consequences in lower tracks.

We often give lower track students an excuse to underperform by the labels assigned to them, either overtly or covertly, and then we reinforce the label with boring dispassionate lessons and basically baby sit until they are old enough to drop out. Émile Durkheim's 'labeling theory' is alive and well in the lower tracks in schools. Labeling theory is also active in the high-status tracks

with both parents and students accepting the 'gifted' label and expecting and often receiving concierge service.

Jeannie Oakes, in "More than Misapplied Technology: A Normative and Political Response to Hallinan on Tracking", both agrees and disagrees with Hallinan. Oakes sees tracking as "imbedded in culture and political context, replete with good intentions, bad intensions, and messy human decision making". She also states "Most educators cannot imagine tracking as a technical, neutral organizational practice that is unrelated to personal, societal, or vocational purposes. Tracking in real schools is connected to a deeply held conviction that schools are expected to contribute to a wide array of goals, only some of which are strictly cognitive…"

In response Hallinan, states "Most of the negative consequences of tracking can be attributed to a school environment that fails to provide the support needed to make tracking effective…. A tracked school's failure to provide students with equal opportunities to learn is not due to tracking, but the absence of the school's commitment to equality." Oakes in response in "One More Thought" states "…like racial segregation, tracking builds inequalities into schools that both devalue and materially disadvantage those groups who are least able to defend themselves. Ability, like race, is a social construction that leads schools to define and treat children from powerless groups—Black, Brown, and White—as expendable."

In *"Potential Pitfalls of Systemic Reform: Early Lessons from Research on Detracking"* Amy Stuart Wells and Jeannie Oakes address how they believed decentralized decision making and local control would likely backfire because the micro politics of more autonomous schools would prohibit educators from equalizing opportunities to learn within schools. They also found that little attention has been paid to equal opportunities for students to learn within schools as the major effort have been directed toward comparisons between schools.

In *"The Correlates of Tracking Policy: Opportunity Hoarding, Status Competition, or a Technical-Functional Explanation?"* Sean Kelly and Heather Price looked at 128 schools to identify tracking policies. They found that in the most part the policies related to technical-functional concerns and to a lesser extent status, competition was usually associated with elaborate tracking policies. They also found that even though *"tracking exacerbates educational inequality, it has proven to*

be a remarkably resilient educational policy. In most instances, we believe, the choice is not whether a school will track students but how it will."

They conclude their study explaining "research has generally ignored the specific policies that create tracking systems" and that because of the lack of research "states, districts, and schools are left with little guidance in constructing tracking polices that might serve their schools the best." People should find that amazing, since schools are supposed be run by professional educators who should have an interest in getting it right. They can easily promote and fund independent research through local colleges and universities. In addition, they can look to other schools, public and private to see how they get it right. Again, we can only conclude that individual customers, i.e. students, do not matter, only the collective aggregation of scores matter under school accountability measures.

In *"Choosing Tracks: "Freedom of Choice" in Detracking Schools",* Susan Yonezawa, Amy Stuart Wells, and Irene Serna, look at the hidden institutional barriers within schools, that allow choice, that often keep African American and Hispanic students from seeking higher tracks. They found the there are three main factors that keep these students from choosing to move to higher tracks: first, 'instructional barriers', such as prerequisite courses that are no longer available to the student, not even through some form of remediation; second, the 'tracked aspiration" of students and parents, which can be readily understood through labeling theory; and third, students 'choosing respect' either from their cultural and neighborhood peers or choosing not to be disrespected in a 'white' culture that is alien and they believe hostile to them. Additionally, the authors found that often information is overtly or covertly withheld from lower tracked students as to what choices they might have available to them. Some schools have gone to a process they call 'ability grouping' that is de-facto tracking. Finally, the authors conclude their paper with a wonderful paragraph that should be adopted by more schools *"Through the voices of the students and educators will understand that Detracking is not merely a process of opening doors between separate and unequal classrooms. Rather, detracking must involve questioning why we continue to build walls that divide and stratify students based on narrow constructions of students' merit and the value of their lived experiences. Efforts to detrack must involve more than moving students across tracked spaces; detracking must reconstruct and define what these spaces mean by attending to how they shape and codify the identities of individuals within them."*

Unless we find a way for schools to adopt the wisdom of Susan Yonezawa, Amy Stuart Wells, and Irene Serna schools will continue to 'reorganize the deck chairs on the Titanic' and we will continue to pursue a course that sees many students as expendable. Unless we adopt an attitude that every child is a unique human being and an important 'customer' our schools will never get it right and we will continue to create the environment for school failure that results in students dropping out of school. If not, then we should at least be honest and admit that the game is rigged, the dice are loaded, and the cards are marked. We should finally stop lying to ourselves and to others, that we are being fair, equitable, and non-discriminatory.

As can been seen from the research the group of young people that has a high-risk profile of early school drop-out and a 'career of unemployment' are young people in secondary education, and specifically young people who live in urban metropolitan areas.

Students' educational engagement is both an important predictor of study success and a key preventive factor for dropout. There is strong evidence that the solution to educational disengagement lies in student-centered, powerful learning environments with a challenging curriculum that connect to student lives.

The European Commission recognized the need for a stronger focus on preventive and early intervention measures both at system level and at the level of individual education and training institutions. In Social Inclusion through Employability: Youth Work Approaches to Unemployment, the report recommends putting an emphasis on the prioritization of preventing early school leaving. To help schools the European Commission has developed a European Toolkit for Schools Promoting inclusive education and tackling early school leaving - https://www.schooleducationgateway.eu/en/pub/resources/toolkitsforschools.htm

This will be accomplished through providing and creating an authentic and attractive learning environment (Placklé, 2017), that requires complex thinking and allowing time for exploration, while taking individual differences into account, developing cooperation, problem solving, communication, negotiation and social competencies, and emphasizing autonomy.

The Final European Commission Report of the Thematic Working Group on Early School Leaving (2013) recommended that cooperation should be

centered on schools: Their boundaries should be opened to enable them to include other professionals such as social workers, youth workers, outreach care workers, psychologists, nurses, speech and language therapists and occupational guidance specialists.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To reduce early school leaving, a whole school education approach is needed that addresses a range of triggers and combines education and social policy, youth work and health related aspects. A whole school approach needs to be embedded in a cross-policy strategy regarding qualification.

The priority is therefore to explore how existing school curricula within the context of secondary schools can be enriched, improved, and made more attractive by adding increased sport and technology dimensions, leading to a fall in early school leaving and a stronger position of young people in relation to the labour market.

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STRATEGIES TO REDUCE COLLEGE DROPOUT IN THE UNITED STATES: STATE OF ARKANSAS AS EXAMPLE

Mohamed IBRAHIM[*]

Introduction

Pursuing a college degree in the United States is a significant milestone decision for all students, considering the time commitment, and the ever-rising cost required to achieve this goal (Bailey & Dynarski, 2011; Ma & Pender, 2021; Ricks & Warren, 2021). Many students believe that achieving a higher education credential, whether at a traditional four-year school or a community college, or through a career-specific certificate program, would typically bring many benefits and extend beyond just obtaining a degree. Further, there is overwhelming evidence that completing a college degree is a key pathway out of poverty for most of the graduates and offers many rewarding prospects that might have otherwise been inaccessible. College graduates would normally enjoy many advantages such as improving earning, gaining economic stability, ensuring personal growth, and offering access to job opportunities (Carnevale et al., 2021; Goldrick-Rab et al., 2016; Torpey, 2018).

Although there are wide varieties of rewarding reasons for attending college, recent reports over the past two years in the United States indicate that many students have not returned to colleges or completely drop out, regardless of their age, income, social status, gender, or ethnicity. For example, it is reported that the overall dropout rate in the United States during the fall semester of 2021 was 40 percent for undergraduate college students and just 20 percent of admitted students were able to complete their college degree. Further, less than 60 percent of students at 4-year institutions have earned their degrees after six years (Hanson, 2021; Huo et al., 2022; Kose et al., 2022). Additionally, in 2021 academic year, fewer students were enrolled in colleges and universities compared to the semester prior to COVID-19. These

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conditions indicated that many Americans between the age of 25 and 35 fallen short of attained any credentials beyond a high school diploma (Greenfield; Kose et al., 2022). For example, post-secondary enrollment in fall 2021 was 2.6 percent lower compared to enrollment numbers in fall 2019. Similarly, there was more than 3.4 percent decline in the undergraduate enrollment in fall 2021 compared to fall 2020 and about 7.8 percent lower from fall 2019 (Center, 2021; Sedmak, 2022). As a result of these numbers, the latest statistics of college dropout rate ranked the United States as the19th in graduation rates among 28 countries in the Organization for Economic, Co-operation and Development studies (OECD) (Hanson, 2021). Economists and policy makers are especially concerned about this issue and have estimated that students' dropout in the United States would cost around $3.8 billion of lost earnings in a single year to the workforce, the national Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and students' income (Hanson, 2021).

There are many complex reasons that manifest long before students enrolling in college that may affect their decision to drop out, such as financial, academic, family, or personal issues. However, the inseparably related reason of students' dropout in the United States is the cost of going to college and the steady increase of expense over the years. It is well documented that attending college in the United States is one of the largest expenses an individual can face in their lifetime. The cost of going to college in the United States has constantly increased, adding financial pressure on many families and preventing or delaying others to send their kids to college (Hanson, 2022). Additionally, there is a demographic shift between students who are planning or attending colleges in the United States that will affect the enrollment numbers at universities and colleges in the near term and long term. For example, the freshmen attending post-secondary institutions are most likely to be individuals who are working adults, from low socioeconomic groups, and people of color. This population of the new college students are largely struggling financially to support their college expenses and their families, in addition to their personal obligations (Fry & Cilluffo, 2019). Regardless of these different reasons, dropping out of college puts individuals who do not complete their post-secondary education in financial and career disadvantage (figure, 1).

Figure 1
Percentage of College Dropouts by Age
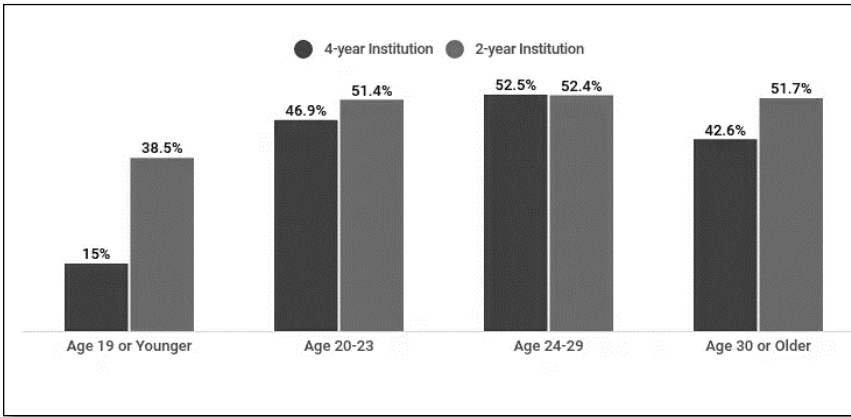
Source: Education Data Initiative

Given the importance of the topic of college dropout and its adverse consequences on students' employment, earnings, and health as well as the country's economic and social development, this chapter will discuss the causes and effects of college students' dropout and the steps many universities have taken to decrease the number of students' dropout in the United States.

Why do students attend college?

There is overwhelming evidence that earning a degree after high school, either through a university, a community college, or a technical school, would help expand graduates' employment possibilities and professional development. Further, a college degree found to be significantly providing long-term financial gain, and keeping graduates highly sought after due to the high demands for college graduates in the job market. Recent reports indicated that more jobs are demanding post-secondary degrees, including services such as restaurants and hotels (Khine, 2019). For example, most of the fastest growing and highly demanded jobs require higher education, such as government sector, artificial intelligence, education, and healthcare (BLS, 2021; Joubert, 2020; Wladawsky-Berger, 2018). Earning a college degree can also enable graduates to receive more job offers and flexibility to work. For example, it is reported that more than 80 percent of the jobs offered online are requiring post-secondary education (Joubert, 2020). The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reported that there were 13 million jobs for individuals with a 4-year degree or higher and the employment rate in the

2020 was 86 percent compared to 57 percent for individuals without high school (Cheah et al., 2021; NCES, 2021b). Another benefit of attaining a college degree is the difference in earning potential compared to the earning scale of high school diploma graduates. For example, the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) reported in 2020 that individuals with bachelor's degree are making annually $25,000 more than high school graduates and this difference in pay can be translated into missing $1 million in earnings over a lifetime (Joubert, 2020; Nietzel, 2021). In addition to earning more money, college graduates have more career stability and a lower rate of unemployment compared to high school graduates (BLS, 2021; Shrider et al., 2021; Stebbins, 2021). Consequently, many reports indicated that earning a bachelor's degree would lead college graduates to more financial stability, flexibility in the job selection and lower unemployment rates.

Why do students drop out of college?

Although there is a common consensus among students that a post-secondary credential is an essential qualification for success in the job market, American college students' dropout rates are quite shocking and are no longer news. In the 2021, the overall dropout rate in the United States for undergraduate college students was around 40 percent and the rate was higher for students at two-year institutions (Hanson, 2021). Many reports showed that one of the major reasons for students to drop out of college is the increased tuition and the out-of-pocket costs of post-secondary education in the United States. In addition to the tuition increase, there is another increase of out-of-pocket fees, such as the expenses of personal accommodation, books, school supplies, and transportation. For example, just during the last 10 years, the cost of going to college in the United States increased about 56 percent (Bishop, 2019). Although there is no doubt that education in the United States is costly, there are many other predictable factors lead students to drop out of college or university such as lack of interest in their major, academic struggle due to lack of preparation, insufficient connection to the campus, mental health, social challenges, isolation, unclear expectations, lack of support, or family issues (Figure, 2). Regardless of the reason to drop out of college before graduation, the result is the same, dropping out of college without a degree or credential would cause students to receive less pay, fewer job offers, limitations to contribute to families and community and leaving students with a huge debt that has done nothing to advance their careers (Collinge, 2021; Ma, 2021;

Perna, 2021). In addition to the financial issue as the main cause of dropping out of college, other students have different reasons. For example, social challenges, family lack of support and work obligations can force students to drop out of college (Chandra, 2021; NCES, 2021a). Additionally, college living expenses are causing many first-generation students to drop out due to the rising costs of attending college (Bishop, 2019; Collins, 2021; Goldrick-Rab et al., 2020).

Figure 2
Top reason why students are dropping out of college
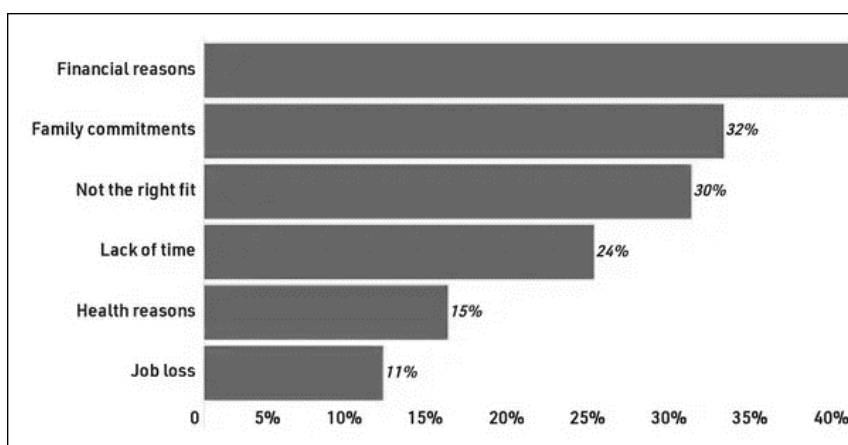
Source: The University of Professional and Continuing Education Association (UPCEA)

Efforts to enhance students' retention and enrollment

Administrators at higher education institutions in the United States are increasingly concerned about the students' retention due to the high dropout rate and the declining number of freshmen. Several reports predicted that regional public universities will see sharp enrollment declines of about 11 percent compared to 2019 academic year (Barshay, 2018; Bransberger et al., 2020; Grawe, 2021). Prior to 2019 academic year, many higher education institutions were showing warning signs of sharp decline in enrollment and financial distress. The decline in enrollment rates suggests that immediate changes must take place in the enrollment practices of many institutions. However, COVID-19 academic interruption accelerated the need to embrace those changes by these institutions. Therefore, retaining current students has

become critical to the future success of higher education institutions academically and financially and critical for the institutions to be able to receive state and federal public funding. Especially, legislatures in many states are beginning to look at an institution's retention practices and the number of enrolled students as part of their distribution of state resources.

Driven by the forecast of students' enrollment and retention decline, higher education institutions in the United States are pressured to develop innovative strategies to enroll more students and create initiatives to help retain them. Administrators at academic institutions often tackle the enrollment and retention issues through early academic intervention programs, corrective action initiatives, and plans to help student to integrate into the campus community. These approaches focus on altering enrollment strategies to adjust to the evolving issues driving retention and recruitment surrounding each institution. The aim of the administrators is creating pathways of information and programs to connect students with advisors and resources and to help them understand their academic and financial options to graduate successfully. Many of the higher education institutions in the United States develop various retention and recruitment strategies include lowering the cost of tuition, increasing online learning opportunities, and helping students to balance their academic and life demands. Administrators also use many strategies to improve students' engagement and communications to create personal support systems and sense of integration with their school. Importantly, administrators would focus on solving students' needs by directing them to available resources designated to help resolve their problems early before they become critical.

Improve retention using predictive analytics tools

Many universities utilize student data and predictive analytics as strategy for early detection and corrective actions to improve students' retention and graduation (Bird et al., 2021; Böttcher et al., 2021; Demeter et al., 2022; Von Hippel & Hofflinger, 2021). Although the predictive analytics' procedure collects and processes data about all students enrolled in each institution, the predictive analytics' software gives special attention to students who are academically underperforming or in need for help. Students' data comes normally from students' academic and behavioral activities. Students' academic activities include, attending class regularly, completing class activities on time, and participating in class discussions. The centralized data

centers pay attention to warning signs received about students and are configured to send automated alerts based on different activities that inform administrators of a student's academic progress. The automated alerts could include students' academic and persistence level and assign tags to target retention efforts to specific student groups. Additionally, many universities tend to gather feedback and insights on a regular basis to optimize ongoing programming efforts through measuring students' needs, level of success and program effectiveness. This stream of information is also communicated to the administration so that they understand the challenges facing their students and design the proper interventions to support students' success.

There are many higher education institutions in the United States that implement data analytics to address the issues of students' enrollment and retention. For example, Georgia State University (GSU) utilizes a system to track many students academic and risk factors daily and reports it to the student's academic adviser. Administrators at GSU also implement an advising system called "the Graduation and Progression Success (GPS) to proactively find students who are 'at-risk' before they are actually at risk".

A case study: Retention strategies for Arkansas Tech University

During 2021, the Arkansas Division of Higher Education announced that eight of 10 public universities' retention rates climbed during the pandemic of 77.1 percent from 75.2 percent a year earlier. The retention increase was due to universities' outreach efforts and the COVID-19 relief fund (HEERF). Out of 10 universities, there were two universities that had a decline in their retention, Arkansas Tech University (ATU) and Henderson State University (HSU). Enrollment Statistics at ATU indicated that the total number of students enrolled during the fall semester of 2019 were higher (11,829), compared to the total number of students enrolled in the fall of 2020 (10,829) and the number of students enrolled in the fall of 2021 (9,640). Additionally, Henderson State University had the lowest enrollment in the state of Arkansas among 10 public universities. The number of freshmen at HSU in 2019 was 690 students, down from 840 students who were enrolled in 2018 academic year (Adame, 2021).

Driven by plans to improve students' retention and enrollment, administrators at ATU utilized a comprehensive plan starting spring semester 2022 for advising, retention, and graduation by establishing data-driven analytics. The ATU plan includes investing in a diverse enrollment portfolio that

simultaneously caters to different groups of students, and strategies for attracting and keeping them. The plan includes increasing enrollment and graduation by 25-30 percent over the next three years in face-to-face and online programs of diverse populations, such as African American, Latinx, transfer, low-income, international, and underrepresented students. The plan also includes an increase of non-baccalaureate degree students who enroll in ATU System certificate or micro-credential programs and offer credit-bearing and non-credit bearing possibilities within its programs. The ATU plans were based on five areas of improvement, admission, advising, teaching, scholarship, and community outreach.

In the area of admission, ATU plans to streamline the admission process by reducing bureaucratic stress for all students, particularly with first generation students, and developing a conditionally admitted program that provides students with clearly defined actions to support their graduation successfully. The new admission policies include developing and promoting additional accelerated undergraduate-to-graduate programming, adding other teaching modalities that provide students with flexibility in scheduling, incorporating "work integrated learning" into curricula for more authentic real-world work experience, promoting "study abroad: or "study away" for high-ability students to increase awareness of civic and global engagement. To prepare newly admitted students for college life, ATU plans include study skills preparation, financial literacy, mentoring, and providing additional assistance for at-risk admitted students. The admission process also includes developing plans for enhancing first-year academic preparedness programs that help the students' transition to the university, including "first-generation institute", the "early arrival program", the "summer bridge program", and the "first-year experience".

In the area of advising, ATU expands the existing services of advising, counseling, tutoring, and mentoring for undeclared majors and facilitating connection to preferred faculty in designated majors. The plans also include increasing faculty engagement to create more robust connections among students, faculty, and advisors through regular meetings with advisors, more in-depth planning of student schedules, and discussions of career connections for chosen fields.

In the area of teaching, ATU administrators plan to develop programs for technology support and training for faculty and students to enhance

instruction, such as developing a laptop program to allow low-income and underrepresented student populations and incorporating additional virtual reality or other technologies. The ATU administration is also encouraging the use of digital materials and open-source textbooks, increasing supplemental instruction and outreach for low-income and underrepresented students. To support students learning, ATU plans include developing programs such as peer-to-peer mentoring, expansion of learning communities, the sophomore student focused initiatives, expansion of kiosk usage around campus for services access, or the establishment of a learning resource center that included programs for specific courses.

In the area of scholarship and community outreach, ATU is pursuing endowed funding through ATU Foundation that would fund honors program with full academic support. The ATU community outreach efforts would focus on sponsoring additional informational sessions on ATU campuses for high school and regional counselors. These types of community outreach and relationships can better ensure the retention of enrolled students and open the door for new incoming students.

Conclusion

This chapter discussed the issues surrounding college dropout and examples of steps many universities have taken to address this issue. While pursuing a college degree in the United States is very important, the increase of students' dropout rate became of great concern to all college and universities in the United States. During the last two years, many students decided to drop out of colleges and universities across the fifty states due to many reasons such as financial, personal, academic, or a mixture of issues. The importance of college dropout stems from its negative effect on students' employment, earnings, and health. Many universities developed different strategies to improve students' enrollment and retention, such as early academic interventions, corrective action, and student integration into the campus community. Additionally, many institutions utilized a data predictive analytics process to help all students, especially who are academically underperforming. Other universities utilized comprehensive strategies in areas of admission, advising, teaching, scholarship, and community outreach. Responding to the demographic shift in higher education institutions, many universities sponsored plans to improve students' enrollment and retention by increasing graduation rates of diverse

students' populations, such as African American, Latinx, transfer, low-income, international, and underrepresented students. The improvement plans include many areas such as, admission, advising, teaching, scholarship, and community outreach.

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GOOD PRACTICES IN PREVENTING EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING

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Introduction

The impact of the Early School Leaving (ESL) phenomenon has a major effect on European life, both directly and indirectly, and can have significant implications on career prospects, mental well-being, and one's overall life trajectory past the point of compulsory education (D'Angelo & Kaye, 2018). ESL may take several forms, based on the definition used by the European Union (EU), where a student/young person may drop out of school prior to completing compulsory education, or they may have completed compulsory schooling but were unsuccessful in obtaining an upper secondary qualification, or they may have pursued per vocational or vocational coursework that did not result in qualifications to upper secondary level (Gyönös, 2011). A number of reasons exist for students leaving school prior to completion, these include but are not limited to learning difficulties, low motivation and/or social-emotional problems, bullying, family disruptions, financial troubles, etc. (Downes, 2020; Gyönös, 2011). However, researchers assert that outcomes (ESL) stem from a gradual process through which a student disengages from school (D'Angelo & Kaye, 2018). According to Gyönös (2011) ESL signifies a loss of potential with social and economic impacts, i.e., social connectedness is reduced, incomes are lowered, and there is the need for increased social resources to be allocated.

Currently, no single approach exists to address this challenge without a collaboration of services to address the needs of vulnerable learners. As such, helping professionals are tasked with prioritizing differentiated strategies, to

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address the diverse needs of learners. These strategies will be examined in reference to the three elements of Relational Cultural Theory: mutual engagement, mutual empathy, and mutual empowerment. Our hope is for professionals working in schools to find value and begin building meaningful connections with students and using a multidisciplinary team approach to tackle early school leaving.

Why Early School Leaving?

Early School Leaving (ESL) has been identified as one of the main challenges faced by European societies (Araújo et al., 2019). Before we focus on Early School Leaving, it is important to understand who early school leavers are. Early school leavers are young people who leave education and training with only lower secondary education, or less, and who are no longer in education and training (European Commission, 2015). Previous literature recognizes educational and social problems as the basis for ESL (OECD, 2014). Most of the time students do not feel connected or belonging to the school. Some of the known factors that contribute to ESL include, personal challenges, family circumstances, social relationships, institutional factors and structural factors (Brown et al., 2021). The personal factors are very specific to the student, this includes abilities and challenges that support or limit learning at school. Examples could be self-esteem, emotional maturity, perceived social support and positive or negative student identity. Family circumstances on the other hand are all those factors that come from the immediate social support system of the student. These take various forms like socio-economic status, cultural background, social circumstances, and actual support from family members. The next known factor is social relationships. The social relationships category of risk factors includes all challenges that can come across in relationships through the differences in relationships and dynamics other than the family. This includes friends in school who are supportive, peer pressure, unrealistic expectations of adults in an authoritative capacity, and also the influence of social media. Institutional features of the school environment can also be a contributing factor for ESL. Non-inclusive classroom layouts, unwelcoming and uncomfortable learning environments, too big class size that prevents social engagement and absence of safe spaces to access can also contribute to ESL. There are also some other institutional factors like poor behavior management or well-being systems, exclusion and attendance policies, lack of

flexibility at the institutional level, limited teacher resources or time, lack of career, personal, or academic guidance also paves way to ESL in students. Beyond this, structural factors include lack of funding to schools, poor infrastructure facilities, national policies and guidelines pertaining to public education, exam pressure and performance targets, performance pressure on teachers, and lack of collaboration from parents can also lead to ESL.

Analysis of ESL in relation to Relational Cultural Theory

Early School Leaving (ESL) in the context of Relational Cultural Theory, can be viewed in terms of the connections that students make at the school. The relationships students form within their schools and communities matter greatly to their retention. Students spend most of their awake time at school, so it is important that they have a positive atmosphere at school. Creating this positive culture can be related to the elements of Relational Cultural Theory- mutual engagement, mutual empathy, and mutual empowerment. Let's now see each of these elements and how these can help prevent ESL.

Relational Cultural Theory (RCT) is a more recent approach to counseling that considers the impact of social injustice, marginalization, and other systemic inequalities that contribute to an individual's dysfunction, to some degree that other counseling theories neglect to consider. RCT also places a great emphasis on relationships that are forged out of self-love, empathy, encouragement, and connectedness. According to Crumb and Haskins (2017), the counselor-client relationship begins with egalitarian principles and focuses on awareness of the client's self-image and his/her relationship with others. The counselor and client also work together to change injustice and social inequalities at a societal level (or provide psychoeducation on the issue). Ultimately, the objective of RCT is for the client to develop positive and reciprocal relationships that provide clarity, connectedness, and growth (Crumb & Haskins, 2017). Results from studies that have used RCT showed that "the participants' displays of mutual empathy increased and dysfunctional interactions decreased" (Crumb & Haskins, 2017, p. 266). Overall, research suggests that RCT is an effective methodology for counseling adolescent students.

Mutual Engagement

There are a lot of factors that affect student attendance, one of them is engagement. Previous research shows that active engagement helps students to learn better and enjoy their classroom experience (Smith et al., 2005). And how to increase this involvement and engagement is through relationships. A study by Snijders et al. (2020), indicates that positive relationships between students and teachers is essential for student engagement and involvement. Therefore, it is important to have a mutual engagement pattern between teachers and students. Mutual engagement is a bond based on mutual respect and shared goal, which creates an atmosphere of trust and freedom.

Mutual Empathy

According to the glossary of Relational-Cultural Theory Key Terms (2013), mutual empathy is detailed as willingness to be affected by and affecting another person. The relational process in mutual empathy includes both emotional and rational aspects. The importance of respect in fostering mutual empathy has been highlighted by researchers (Gerdes et al., 2011), which could be an important factor in culturally responsive pedagogy. Culturally responsive teachers implement the RACCE in their classrooms. Mutual empathy is demonstrated through RACCE by showing respect, acting immediately, communicating, celebrating, and encouraging students (Farinde-wu et al., 2017). León-Jiménez et al., (2020) talks about the importance of school in a child's life. Schools provide a supportive and safe environment which fosters positive feelings in children. Additionally, friendships in schools and supportive teachers provide greater well-being and an environment of safety and support. Previous research shows that to be academically successful, children need to have a safe and supportive environment. Oftentimes a safe and supportive school environment is possible through mutual empathy (Coelho et al., 2020).

Mutual Empowerment

Mutual empathy leads to mutual empowerment. When students start having a sense of belonging and feel like they are acknowledged and respected in the school environment, they begin to generate mutual empowerment. Hartling and Miller (2004) explain that mutual empowerment has five key parts: a sense of energy that comes from connecting with another person, an increased ability and motivation to take action in the relationship, increased knowledge

of oneself, the other person and of their relationship, an increased sense of worth and a desire for more connection beyond the particular one. Students who leave school early often portray disempowerment, disconnect, or humiliating relationships within the school. Therefore, mutual empowerment can create new relational possibilities and new opportunities for growth.

Cultural Sustainability of Relational Pedagogy

Relationship quality among students and teachers and all other supporting staff members are essential for student engagement and trust. Creating a positive environment and building mutually supportive relationships with students can have a positive influence on student retention and prevent early school leaving. The model of Progressive Relational Pedagogy developed by Caine et al. (2022), highlights the importance of how cultural sustainability is established using relational pedagogy. The model emphasizes a "sense of belonging, student voice, value and cultural wealth, globalized curriculum and links to industry and community" (Caine et al.,2022, p.115). Qualitative research which studied teacher's perspectives on inspiring practices that could prevent early school leaving suggested fostering relationship-based interventions (Rodríguez-Izquierdo, R.M., 2022). Relational pedagogy is important for retention of all learners. This could also be seen as an extension of culturally responsive pedagogy by building strong student-teacher relationships, where teachers know their students individually at a personal level, including their prior knowledge and their learning style (Bell & Chealuck, 2021).

Role of the Multidisciplinary Team

In order to meet the ever-changing needs of all children and to allow for the integration of regular and special education services, multidisciplinary teams (MDT) were initiated to aid in decision making regarding students' conditions, education, and placements (Hopkins, 2020). Drawing on Hall and Weaver's (2001) definition, MDTs allows stakeholders from each discipline to independently contribute their particular expertise to an individual student's care. Members of the MDT work in parallel with each other with minimal direct communication except through the team leader (Downes, 2011). More specifically, in schools, the MDT is usually composed of a group of educators

from different backgrounds including a general education teacher, a special education teacher, a child and youth development support specialist, school counselor, school social worker, school psychologist, a nurse practitioner or other medical professional, and school administrator - who sets expectations/key performance metrics by which the MDT's effectiveness is measured (Hopkins, 2020).

MDT, referred to as child study teams or student support teams are tasked with reviewing student data. Their professional collaboration ensures students receive comprehensive care and attention, resulting in a chosen course of action that is not biased by one particular perspective (Hopkins, 2020). The significance of MDT is seen when ESL students receive focused attention in the form of mental health support, outreach to family, and systemic changes within the school (Downes, 2011). For families marginalized and systematically excluded from the educational system, MDTs provide the ESL student and their family with emotional and behavioral support focused on fostering motivation, language development, and isolation. At the school system level, MDTs help ESL teachers to develop conflict resolution skills and diversity awareness, which translates into system-wide and classroom-specific bullying prevention programs as alternatives to suspension (Downes, 2011). By providing students with "flexible wraparound support, relationship building with families and stakeholders, and ongoing assessment" MDTs are uniquely positioned to meet their behavioral and mental health needs (Hopkins, 2020, p. 85) minimizing ESL.

The ultimate role of MDT is the prevention of early school leaving based on targeted prevention efforts that can be universal prevention, i.e., the school, classroom and community-wide systems; selective prevention, i.e., targeting specialized group systems for students are risk for ESL; or indicated prevention, i.e., specialized, individualized systems for high-risk ESL students (Downes, 2011). Below we provide guidelines for key stakeholders comprising MDTs based on a resource by Kapsali (2008) housed on the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education website and by Spainhour (2022).

School Counselors

Are certified and/or licensed educators whose focus is on improving student success for all students through a comprehensive school counseling program.

Collaborating with the MDT, they ensure all students are given access and treated with equity. They implement academic achievement strategies, help students manage their emotions and develop interpersonal skills, and aid in planning postsecondary options, ensuring the success of students and the MDTs.

Teachers (both regular and resource)

Provides important information to MDT on student's history, sensory-motor development, cognitive development, school/academic performance, social-emotional development. They may also provide and implement recommendations to/from MDT and monitor the student's progress. Special education teachers may be responsible for writing and updating the student's individualized education program (IEP) and communicating updates to MDT.

School Social Workers

Focuses on the psychosocial functioning of the student, promoting their health and well-being. They may assist in a number of capacities from attending to mental health and behavioral concerns to supporting teachers in consultation with the MDT.

School Psychologists

Conducts student assessments (i.e., psychological and academic) specifically in relation to medical, developmental and educational history. They always seek permission and cooperation from caregivers before assessing students, observing them in various contexts (in and out of class, play, communication with peers or significant others), and collaborating with MDT to support a student's case.

Administrators

This person may be the principal, special education director, or other school district representative who supervises the services provided to the student by the MDT. They may also aid in the implementation of services to the student.

Solutions and Recommendations: Preventing ESL

Differentiated strategies are used in classrooms to promote learning and individuality, and to ensure that teachers provide effective educational services in the classroom and in the schools (VanTassel-Baska & Hubbard, 2016). Likewise, differentiated strategies should be used for preventing ESL for three purposes: a) to provide various learning experiences from inside and outside of the classroom (i.e., in the school level and in the community), b) to express

students' cultural backgrounds/heritages, and c) to develop and build support systems between students and their peers, students and educators/educational staff, and students and their community. This section discusses a case study about Bruno who is considering dropping out of

school, followed by a discussion of two strategies to prevent early leaving. The two strategies discussed below include a) entering Bruno to a mentoring program that emphasizes community-based activities and b) engaging all students in open dialogue about their family and cultural backgrounds, in collaboration with various professionals (e.g., school counselor, social worker, and administrators).

Bruno is a 14-year-old student in secondary school. Bruno's parents immigrated to the region he has been living in. He has been a quiet student in the school who prefers to stay alone. Not many students in his school know who Bruno really is. Bruno often was picked on and belittled by Lars, an older student in the school. Bruno always has passing grades in most of his classes, and he never cares about what his grades are. The only subject that Bruno is always excited about is English. He also likes his English teacher Ms. Rizzo. Bruno recently told Ms. Rizzo that he is quitting school, because he has been offered a job at a car repair shop near his home. Bruno's parents are extremely busy and work multiple jobs. Bruno's parents recently welcomed their newborn daughter, and can barely spare time to manage Bruno's intent on quitting school. After briefly talking to Bruno, Ms. Rizzo decided to talk to the school counselor to discuss possible strategies to help prevent Bruno from dropping out of school.

In this case study, Bruno has support from limited sources. Bruno experienced bullying at school. His parents provided limited help or guidance towards his educational path. He was not able to build strong relationships with his peers either. Using Relational Cultural Theory (RCT), educational staff, such as school counselors, teachers, and social workers, would focus on helping Bruno develop positive relationships with others in various contexts. The key of RCT is to help individuals develop relationships that may help further resolve personal problems (Simi

& Matusitz, 2015). The first strategy to prevent dropout may be helping the student develop relationships outside of the classroom through a mentoring program. Research found immigrant adolescents who participated in

mentoring programs experienced improvements in emotional well-being and dealing with stressful events (Sánchez-Aragón et al., 2020). In an 18-month community-based mentoring program conducted among adolescents in the Netherlands, Heppe et al. (2021) found that mentees improved in wellbeing, autonomy, and competence satisfaction. Social activities included participating in cooking- or pottery workshops, participating in sports such as yoga (Heppe et al., 2021) may be used in the community-based mentoring program. The key idea of a community-based mentoring program is to become exposed to multiple chances of developing social relations. School administrators may be involved to develop partnership between community organizations and the school, to execute the mentoring program. Bruno and his mentor may participate in community-based activities as a part of their mentoring program, supervised by the school social worker.

The second strategy is to develop a lesson plan to learn each students' family and cultural backgrounds in English class. Engaging in conversations about family and cultural backgrounds promotes multicultural classroom experience that uses a socially responsible pedagogy and advocates for social justice (Beatty & Hernandez, 2019). The lesson may be co-taught by Ms. Rizzo and school counselor. The lesson may involve asking students to describe their customs related to family and cultural backgrounds in English and having students share aspects related to their family and cultural background such as food, activities, and traditions in English. This strategy uses student-centered learning to promote diversity and understanding towards various family and cultural backgrounds. RCT emphasizes developing connections among individuals (Jordan, 2017). This platform creates opportunities for students to learn life experiences of various individuals, promoting awareness of similarities and differences in family and cultural backgrounds, and further developing connections (Beatty & Hernandez, 2019).

Future Trends
There is a growing focus on preventing early school leaving using a holistic, equitable interdependent, multidisciplinary approach that includes the cooperation of all school systems, families, and communities. One growing trend among National, Regional, and system levels across some EU Member States is developing policies to reduce early school leaving and supportive interventions for vulnerable students (Downes, 2018; van der Graaf et al.,

2019). The knowledge that nationality, gender and family, and socio-economic background frequently drive early school leaving and that historically vulnerable students are those of low socioeconomic status influences policies and interventions creation (van der Graaf et al., 2019). Trending policies and interventions focus on access to quality education and improving teacher training to teach language courses for migrant students and career guidance and study skills guidance (van der Graaf et al., 2019). In addition, mainstream educational systems with the EU are working to improve school learning environments by supporting student voice and flexibility to address issues like the need to focus on examining student trajectories throughout the educational journey, expanding vocational pathways and school systems' ability to adapt to uncertain labor markets and demands for new skills (Santos et al., 2020). There is a growing examination of the holistic needs of students that extend beyond academic needs. In 2017, the EU Commission adopted principles to guide and encourage an inclusive system framework that supports students' holistic, social-emotional needs using multidisciplinary approaches, including individuals, families, and communities (Downes, 2018). Additionally, efforts are made to remove barriers, support equity, and build the strength and resiliency of students, particularly targeting historically marginalized individuals (Downes, 2018).

Conclusion

Early school leaving is a recurrent issue stretching across numerous European countries. While no singular factor impacts early school leaving, the problem has direct social and economic impacts for both the student and the community. The development and implementation of supportive policies and interventions that focus on delaying and preventing early school leaving are steps in the right direction to mitigate early school leaving. Through the lens of Relational-Cultural Theory, stakeholders within educational systems, families, and communities can work as a multidisciplinary team to apply an equitable and relationship-centered, social emotional growth and resiliency approach to policy implementation to protect against factors that lead to early school leaving.

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SCHOOL DROPOUT IN SPANISH SECONDARY EDUCATION: ANALYSIS, CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES

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Introduction

One of the most crucial priorities in contemporary education is to ensure that all learners achieve at least an acceptable level of education. The interruption of the process of formal education logically poses numerous issues that not only affect the student as an individual but also their immediate community and social environment. As a state, Spain has dealt with early school leaving (ESL) for decades, and the situation has reached a critical point, since the rate of school dropout is currently the second highest of the European Union at 16% (Eurostat, 2021). Provided that the average rate of the EU sits at 9.9%, the concerning nature of the situation is evident. Additionally, Spain has apparently failed to keep up with the progress of other countries who were also in precarious situations during the last decade.

This study aims to shed light on this matter through the observation of the most recent available data provided by the Spanish Ministry of Education and Vocational Training. The study thus accounts for the phenomenon of secondary school dropout and its inherent relation to other spheres of the Spanish society. Moreover, data retrieved from other European countries are also considered so as to provide a broader picture of the issue. This analysis also considers research that regards the possible causes that lead to early school leaving, and, consequently, it also ponders over the potential consequences of the phenomenon in Spain.

It should also be noted that this analysis hereby considers the available data regarding ESL in Spain and other countries as of November 8th, 2021, when the latest Eurostat (2021) report was published. The Spanish administration issued its Labour Force Survey report (MEFP, 2022) on January 22nd, 2022,

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where the dropout rate has been updated, showing a record-breaking 13.3% rate, the lowest in the country's history. As the next Eurostat international report is not expected until May 2022, any attempt at comparing outdated and updated data would be considered biased and tendentious. Consequently, only equivalent variables and figures have been regarded in the study.

School Dropout in Spain: an overview

In its yearly report, the Spanish Ministry of Education and Vocational Training (*Ministerio de Educación y Formación Profesional* or *MEFP*) revealed that, despite consistently managing to lower the dropout rate in the last decade, Spain is still in a desperate situation. Accordingly, for the year 2010, Spain reported a prominent 33.6% dropout rate, which kept lowering until 2020, where data shows a 16% rate (MEFP, 2021a). In spite of an admirable development, Spain is far from the prevision of the European Union, whose main objective is to set the ESL rate below 10% (Andrei et al., 2011; Romero Sánchez & Hernández Pedreño, 2019). As seen in Figure 1, eight out of the 27 countries of the EU are above the average dropout rate. Germany, Cyprus, Hungary, Bulgaria, and Italy exceed the expected rate by less than 3%, which is still quite close to the intended objective.
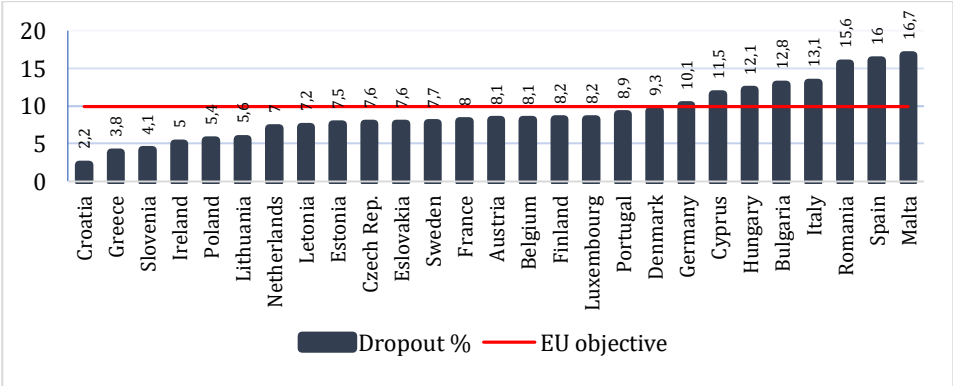

Figure 1. Early school leaving % rate in EU countries % in 2020 (MEFP, 2021a)

However, Spain (16%) remains in a dire position, as it exceeds the average rate by more than 5%, in a similar vein to Romania (15.6%) and Malta (16.7%). The alarmingly high dropout rate is even more striking when revisiting previous yearly reports. Eurostat (2021) points out that Spain

reported a 9% reduction of the rate of early school leavers in the period of 2010-2020, which is the most noticeable for any member of the European Union. Prior to 2010, Spain presented a 31.2% dropout rate in 2009, and a 31.7% in 2004, which at the time doubled the 15.6% rate of the European Union (Faci Lucia, 2011). As discussed, the situation was troublesome, especially towards the end of the 20th century. For instance, for the year 1992, Spain reported a 40.4% dropout rate in the year 1992 (Faci Lucia, 2011).

The European Commission demanded Spain to raise awareness of the problem and act accordingly, but investment in the implementation of new programs for education and vocational training was rather slow, which has clearly impacted the way the phenomenon has developed throughout the past two decades (Faci Lucia, 2011). Despite the slow response, Spain has managed a consistent decline. However positive this trend may seem, the number of students who do not continue their education or training is still notably high. In other words, although policies are working towards the EU objective, Spain has hitherto had a need for improvement with regards to the school dropout phenomenon.

Causes of Early School Leaving in Spain

Determining the causes of students dropping out of school in Spain, and specially pointing out the factors that make the ESL rate so high in comparison to other counties, is a complex matter. Research shows a consensus when it comes to the idiosyncrasy of early school leaving. Regardless of context, the phenomenon itself is not independent, and it is rather a continuous process that starts when a student enters school for the first time (Tinto, 1975, as cited in Gil, et al., 2019). As a result, when learners drop out, attending to the immediate factors that affect their lives at the time of interrupting their education is not enough, as the underlying reasons that triggered the situation may be in the past. In addition to the personal events in the lives of students, the situation of society and the educational system pose a strong influence on the dropout tendencies (García et al., 2013, as cited in Romero Sánchez & Hernández Pedreño, 2019). Therefore, understanding school dropout requires acknowledging it as a multifactorial phenomenon.

Notwithstanding the moment in time and context in which the issue has its inception, research seems to indicate that the factors interconnected to early

school leaving are clear. Despite discrepancies related to the taxonomy used and the approaches chosen to carry out the analyses, authors agree on school dropout being linked to unfavorable socioeconomic circumstances. Chirteş (2012) cites that there are four main areas, and that they comprehend family factors, school-related factors, social, and personal factors. Romero Sánchez and Hernández Pedreño (2019) expand their scope, thus including seven disadvantages, namely economical, labour-related, related to training and formation, sociosanitary, residential, relational, and participatory. In a similar vein, Gil et al. (2019) address factors related to students, to their families, to the school, to the teaching practices within the school and to other elements of the students' immediate context (e.g., their group of peers) as areas that are strongly connected to the issue of early school leaving.

Romero Sánchez and Hernández Pedreño (2019) argue that all the areas cited could be classified into two major groups of causes of social inequality: endogenous causes and exogenous causes. Endogenous causes are understood as those in which the student is observed as an individual, and not an agent that is part of the educational system. As a result, some of these causes include aspects such as the personal features and characteristics of the students, or the relation with their families and peers. Exogenous causes are seen as factors related to the student as part of a community within a larger scope, thus considering relevant factors such as structural and institutional matters. Consequently, policies at a regional, autonomic, and national level, the state of the educational system, the labour market or the place of residence are perceived as notable exogenous agents in determining dropout tendencies. Nonetheless, it should be noted that both endogenous and exogenous dimensions are not to be considered as entirely independent, for personal and collective factors influence each other significantly.

In the context of Spain, it could be argued that exogenous causes have a greater impact than endogenous, especially when putting into perspective the whole financial condition of the country over the last decade. Romero Sánchez and Hernández Pedreño (2019) discuss how prolonged situations of financial crisis and high unemployment rates often lead to less acquisitive power and less resources, to which families respond to by discouraging the younger members of the family to extend their education further. The Spanish economy suffered greatly during the global financial crisis of 2008. The recovery period from 2014 onwards suffered a setback, and the progress

stopped after the start of the COVID-19 sociosanitary crisis. As a result, the unemployment rate in Spain has remained high for the better part of the last decade.

By attending to the latest data retrieved from the National Statistics Institute (*Instituto Nacional de Estadística* or *INE*), in particular the unemployment survey data (INE, n.d.-a) and the early school leaving data (INE, n.d-b), both variables can be compared over time. Statistically speaking, as Faci Lucia (2011) claims, positive financial periods and low unemployment rates are related to a low dropout rate. However, as reflected on Figure 2, it is quite apparent that prior to the financial crisis of 2008, Spain was still unable to achieve a low ESL rate despite reporting record-low unemployment rates.
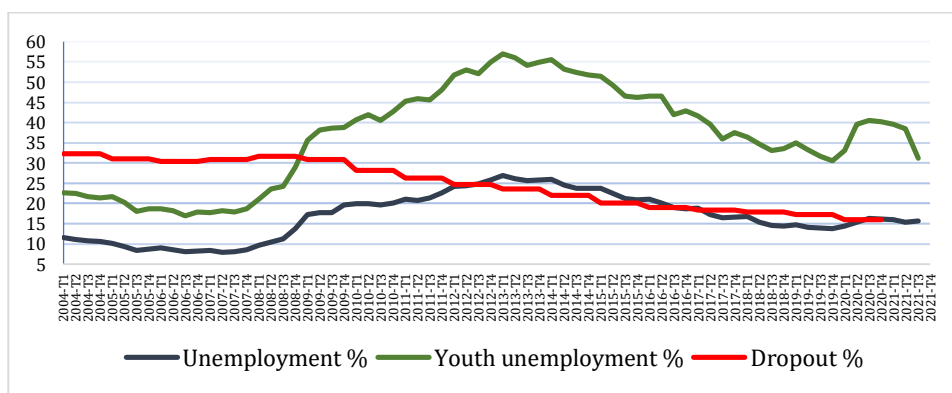
Figure 2: Unemployment and dropout rates comparison in Spain for the period 2004-2021 (Adapted from INE's unemployment survey and INE's early school leaving study)

As a result, it can be argued that although early school leaving and unemployment are areas that are intimately linked, the financial situation of the country cannot explain the dropout phenomenon in its entirety. Nonetheless, as Andrei et al. (2011) argue, early school leaving is still perceived as a major factor in explaining unemployment and precarious social status. Accordingly, Eurostat (2022) reports that Spain presents the highest unemployment rate of the European Union as of December 2021. With a 13% unemployment rate, Spain surpasses the average rate of the EU (6.4%) and the Euro area (7%). Additionally, and even more significant to the purpose of the study, Spain also presents the highest unemployment rate of the EU for people under 25 years old with a 30.6%, which is more than twice the rate of the EU average (14.9%) and the Euro area (14.9%). Under these circumstances, it is

apparent that some families may not be capable of investing enough money, and some students would be encouraged to find a job to alleviate the financial state in their households. Some students may want to keep studying, but they usually end up having little to no time, which also leads to dropping out (Watson et al., 2008, as cited in Gil et al. 2019). The lack of financial support, as a result, may be the most determinant factor in explaining early school leaving in Spain, as it has affected a large section of society during an extended period of time.

However, emotional support is said to be of great importance to students as well. Chirteş (2010) notes that parental support is crucial to the decision of dropping out of school. If adolescents do not feel supported to see their education through, it is unlikely that they will be motivated enough to keep on. Family support mostly depends on two factors, the socioeconomic situation, and the perspective on education. As previously mentioned, the more challenging the financial situation of a family, the higher the chances a student will have to drop out to start working (Andre et al., 2011). The relational dimension of the families, however, also comprehends more complex dynamics that do not necessarily involve their finances. Romero Sánchez and Hernández Pedreño (2019) also note that unstructured families that have personal issues may also affect a student negatively. In this case, it is not the perception of school that will be damaged, but the overall academic performance, for problems at home may prevent students from achieving their educational goals. As a result, the structure and dynamics of families are a salient factor as well.

Positive perspectives on education also influence the dropout trends inversely. Amongst the main factors linked to a good perception of school, research indicates that the level of education reached by the students' parents is a determinant consideration. Highly educated parents normally foster a more positive perception of education, and this is directly related to more children continuing their education in the process (Dalton et al. 2009, as cited in Gil et al. 2019; Romero Sánchez & Hernández Pedreño, 2019). Nonetheless, although this is a crucial factor, the achievement of high levels of education inherently requires substantial financial backup, which again emphasizes that the socioeconomic level of a family in particular and of a country in general is still pretty much a dominant factor in explaining early school leaving in Spain.

In the same vein as families, peers and teachers also influence the perception of school and education. The support or lack thereof from these agents modifies the personal perception of education, which ultimately impacts academic performance (Wentzel, 1998, as cited in Gil et al., 2019). According to Romero Sánchez and Hernández Pedreño (2019), peer pressure could be exponentially more influential than any other type of relations. If students associate themselves with peers who do not go to school, they will likely acquire a negative perspective on education, which normally prompts them to drop out altogether.

Regarding the role of teachers and instructors, it is fundamental to note that their responsibility in slowing down the rate of students that drop out of school has a personal and a professional dimension, and that an appropriate performance in both spheres may boost student motivation and prevent learners from leaving school. Chirteş (2010) argues that teachers who employ inadequate methodologies, approaches and strategies in their lessons foster a negative perception of themselves, which is then extrapolated to the school and education as well. Gil et al. (2019) agree on the influence of teachers, noting how the performance of teachers during their lessons can effectively affect student interest and motivation. It is fair to suggest that a passionate and invested teacher that is willing and eager to do their job will show a positive attitude towards the subject, the school, and the profession itself. This ought not to be limited to their day-to-day lessons and interactions, but a more profound investment in their job, including the innovation and research into the most suitable methods and approaches.

Another major issue that concerns teachers, but more importantly the educational system as a macrostructure, is the teacher-student ratio. Andrei et al (2013) rightfully notes that if this ratio is high, teachers might not be able to pay individual attention to students, which could generate performance and attitude-related issues that discourage students from continuing their education. Research seems to indicate that smaller groups should allow teachers to engage with students individually more often, which leads to more active interactions that entail a higher academic performance (Blatchford et al., 2011).

Consequences and solutions

Regardless of the context, the phenomenon of school dropout is so complex and is interconnected with so many different factors that the search for a solution requires acknowledging that it is a complicated objective in itself. It is apparent that the two most salient factors at a large scale are the economic level of the country, and the administrations and policies that regulate the educational system. Therefore, potential solutions to this issue must be concise and realistic in order to prompt any type of change.

Provided that it is mighty difficult to modify the whole national framework of education and vocational training, Merino and García (2011) argue that compensatory education could alleviate the situation insofar as it provides academic and individualized support to those students who require help. To this end, state and regional administrations should promote the creation of more compensatory programs while improving the existing ones. Nonetheless, funding remains the main roadblock to this solution, as it would require a substantial investment in education from the state government. Another reinforcement measure is hiring private tutors for individual compensatory lessons, but as previously discussed, not all families could afford it. As a matter of fact, promoting private tutoring would only highlight the differences between wealthy families and less fortunate ones, and that contrast would be evident in the academic performance of students.

A subsequent solution to this concern has already been launched in Spain, as both the state and regional administrations award grants to students who request them. The amount of money destined to these grants has been increasing over the last decade so as to provide financial support to the different needs of students of all educational levels. The Ministry of Education and Vocational Training organizes the total outlay into two factors. Firstly, the amount destined to grantees, including general grants, grants to students who belong to a large family (i.e., three or more children including the grantee), and financial help for students with specific educational needs. Secondly, the monetary compensation for the fees of the students who receive these grants. As shown in Figure 3, the investment in grants and monetary aid has never decreased, and it has experienced a salient increase for the year 2021, presumably to compensate the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic (MEFP, 2021a).
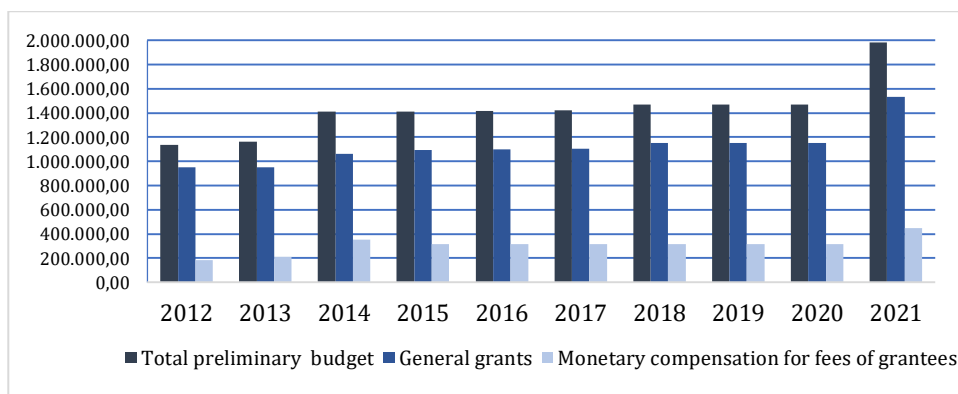
Figure 3: Amount of money (in thousands of €) destined to grants in Spain (2012-2021) (MEFP, 2021a)

The investment in grants and financial support has been key to the dynamics of the Spanish educational system, for there has been a continuous increase of students who request and ultimately are awarded these grants. The state government had expected a total of 1,041,469 grants for the school year 2020-2021, which would mark an increase of over 300,000 students over a ten-year period. As pictured in Figure 4, students do require to have access to additional financial support to continue their education.

Figure 4: Evolution of number of students who receive a grant for educational purposes (2010-2021) (MEFP, 2021a)

Nonetheless, the matter of grants in secondary education is quite particular in Spain. For the school year 2019-2020, the state administration was the main responsible for giving these grants, including grants for university students and students who are enrolled in post-compulsory non-university education,

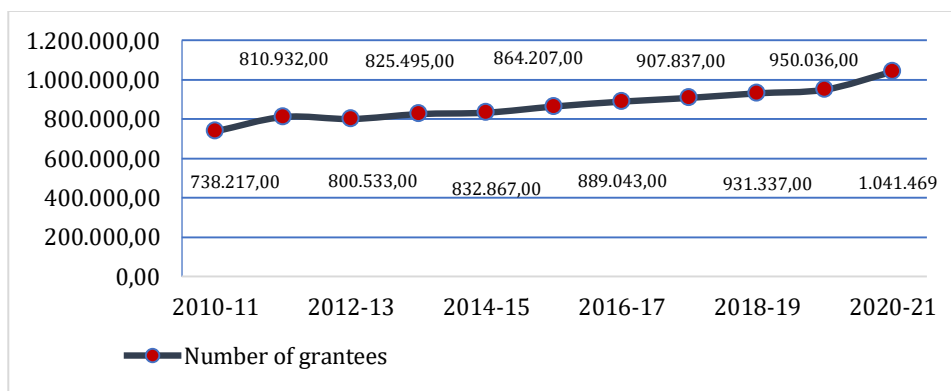while regional administrations provided a much-reduced funding. During the same period, the funding for students of elementary education, special education and secondary education primarily came from the regional administrations of the Autonomous Communities. Accordingly, state grants represented only 23.4%, while autonomic ones represented 76.6% (MEFP, 2021a). As a result, it is each regional administration that regulates the idiosyncrasy of the process, which could potentially affect the proportion of money each grantee receives and the requirements to be awarded those grants. In other words, secondary school students of different geographical areas are not subject to the same conditions depending on the administration of their regions, which is a potential indicator of inequality.

In addition to this, the aforementioned group of elementary education, special education and secondary education students represents the majority of the recipients of grants with 56.5% of the total (MEFP, 2021a). Despite that, these groups only receive 25% of the overall budget, while university students receive 45,8% of the total funding despite representing only a 24% of the grantees (MEFP, 2021a). Although university fees are notably higher, it should be noted that lowering the dropout rate would be a more manageable objective if those students could benefit from the advantages of meaningful grants.

Another solution to the early school leaving phenomenon would entail modifications of the curriculum to better suit the needs and preferences of students (Merino & García, 2011; Choi & Calero, 2018). Accordingly, some students leave school early because they do not identify themselves with the subjects at school, they lose interest and do not see the relevance of completing their studies. Although this type of measure does target the issue at its core, it remains a solution that can be hardly extrapolated to the entirety of the Spanish educational system. Accordingly, Merino and García (2011) also note that despite the potential benefits, some teachers may be adamant to invest time in adapting their prescheduled lesson plan, leaving this duty to teachers who are legitimately involved, motivated and empathetic towards their students. As a result, curricular adaptation is a matter that is not easy no achieve on a nationwide level. Managing to facilitate that all students will be able to enjoy a personalized learning experience is nothing short of a utopia. Nonetheless, any educational reform that aims at making the curriculum more flexible would likely reduce the chances of students dropping out (Choi & Calero, 2018).

In pursuing a more student-centered system as a solution, Merino and García (2011) discuss the possibility of hiring more personnel, including teachers and tutors, that could then attend to students' needs more closely. This proposal would be a direct response to the belief that the teacher-student ratio in Spain is too high, and that the students are not being looked after properly in large class-groups. However logical the proposal may seem, the statistical study of the Ministry of Education and Vocational Training indicates that there has been an increase in the number of hired teachers in Spain during the last decade (MEFRP, 2021a). As shown in Figure 5, the overall number of teachers hired in Spain in the school year 2020-2021 shows an increase of 71,918 teachers in comparison to the school year 2010-2011. When observing the same variable for public institutions only, there has been 48,934 more teachers working. Ultimately, as pertains to this study, it is fundamental to note that for secondary education in public institutions, the data shows that during the last decade, there has been 37,752 more teachers.
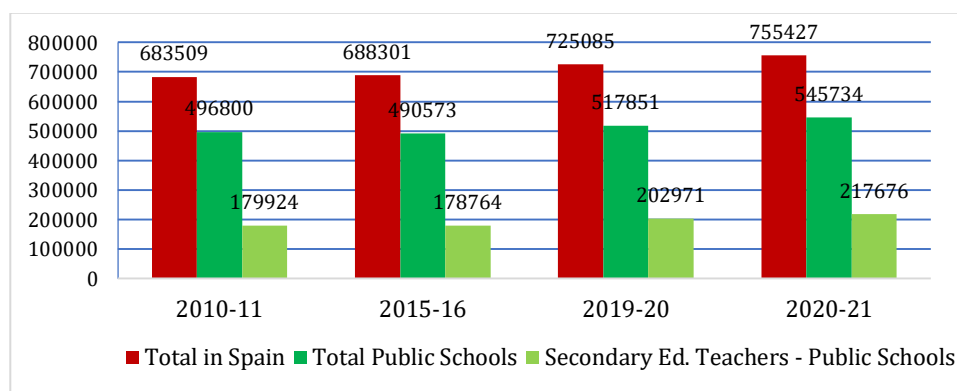
Figure 5: Evolution of number of teachers in Spain (MEFP, 2021a)

The core problem, then, would be whether the number of personnel that is currently working is enough to satisfy the needs of the students. Subsequently, the pace to which the state government is creating jobs in education might be an issue as well since the increase of the trend has been certainly slow for such a prolonged period of time. Notwithstanding the apparent lack of teachers, Spain does not actually present a high teacher-student ratio in comparison to the average rate of the European Union and its constituent countries (MEFP, 2021a).

For the school year 2018-2019, Spain reported a general rate of 12.1, whereas the EU average sat at 12.3. For the purposes of the study, it is more beneficial to regard the average number of students per teacher in the first stage of secondary education (i.e., lower secondary education) and in the second stage of secondary education (i.e., higher secondary education). When discussing these variables, the teacher-student ratios for both first and second stages of secondary education in Spain are also lower than the average of the European Union. As shown in Figure 6, Spain presents a 11.7 ratio in lower secondary education and a 10.4 ratio in higher secondary education, both below the average 11.9 and 11.2 for lower secondary and higher secondary in the EU, respectively.
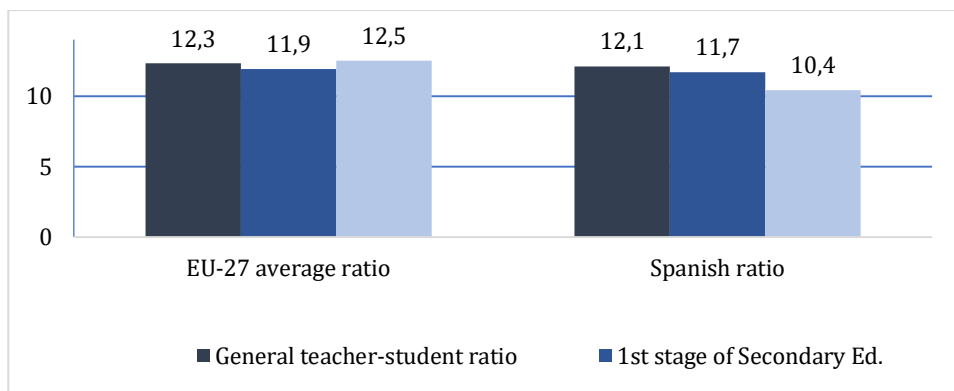
Figure 6: Average number of students per teacher. Spain and European Union comparison (MEFP, 2021a)

Moreover, if the dropout rates of Figure 1 are observed, it is noticeable that many of the countries with severe dropout issues do not report high teacher-student rates either, namely Bulgaria (with 11.2 in lower-secondary and 12.5 in higher-secondary), Italy (10.9 and 10.3) and Malta (6.5 and 7.5). In other words, only Romania reports a significantly high teacher-student ratio in the first stage of secondary education (14.5) and in the second stage (13.4) while also reporting a high dropout rate (15.6%). Curiously enough, the country with the highest average rate of students per teacher is the Netherlands. With a ratio of 16 students per teacher in the lower level of secondary education, and an average of 17.7 students in the second stage, the Netherlands exceeds the average ratio significantly (MEFP, 2021a). Despite that, the Netherlands reports only a 7% dropout rate, which is the fifth lowest in the European

Union. As discussed, a lower teacher-student rate would represent a clear indicator of quality in education (MEFP, 2021b). However true this might be, it seems that the ratio does not entail a direct impact on the tendency of students dropping out of school. Although it is a significant factor to ponder on, what is apparent is that many other factors must be taken conjointly to draw a concise correlation.

In their analysis, Choi and Calero (2018) cleverly noted that, as students dropping out was linked to a need to enter the labour market, a sensible solution would be the improvement of the quality of vocational training. This measure has been recently approved with the establishment of the latest constitutional law of education, better known by its acronym, LOMLOE, officially labelled *Ley Orgánica 3/2020, de 29 de diciembre*. This law ensures that all vocational training studies will have a dual nature, which will allow students to receive training during their apprenticeship from both the school and businesses akin to their studies (LOMLOE, 2020). As a result, students will be better prepared for their eventual integration in the labour market after having had legitimate working experience. The impact of this strategy, logically, is yet to be proven.

Ultimately, perhaps one of the most convincing remedies to the ESL phenomenon is to ensure that pre-service and in-service teachers are qualified to deal with students at risk of dropping out (Gil et al., 2019). The establishment of new programmes and the improvement of existing ones should be a valuable resource for teachers who are mostly concerned with the academic factor of education and not so much about the personal dimension of the teaching process.

The latest report reflecting the data from the *Teaching and Learning International Survey* (TALIS 2018) published by the Ministry of Education and Vocational Training (2019) indicates that the training of secondary school teachers in Spain is mostly focused on the content of their specific subjects, whereas other areas have been neglected in comparison to other countries and the OCED average results (MEFP, 2019). The data from the TALIS 2018 survey, illustrated in Figure 7, suggest that formal education of teachers is either inadequate or not long enough to address all matters properly.
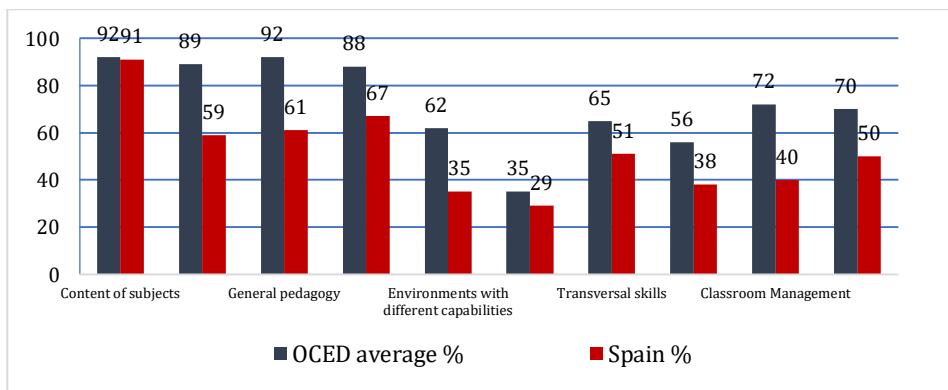
Figure 7: Percentage of teachers who received education in these areas during their formal instruction – Adapted from TALIS 2018 (MEFP, 2019)

While Spain reports a remarkable level of instruction regarding specific subjects, and the percentage of teachers who are educated in plurilingual environments is not that different from the average of the OCED, the underlying truth is that there is a general lack of proficiency in the education of teachers. In relation to the dropout phenomenon, it can be argued that a better instruction in classroom and learning management could train teachers in identifying early signs of academic underperformance in students. Education in environments with different capabilities and overall pedagogy would undoubtedly help teachers become acquainted with dealing with individual issues of their students, instead of extrapolating the behaviour of individuals from the whole class-group. As seen in Figure 7, an important number of teachers in Spain did not receive enough training in areas that are of major importance when discussing fundamental problems like early school leaving.

The most viable solution to this situation would involve the creation of additional teaching and training programmes for in-practice teachers, who would then be responsible for their own adaptation to the arising issues of modern education and students' needs. However, the most durable and comprehensive strategy ought to be related to the actual qualifications necessary to become a teacher. A rather interesting measure would be to strengthen the master's degree in Teaching in Secondary Schools and other degrees alike in the Spanish territory. For that improvement to effectively work, the degree should be expanded, thus including subjects related to general pedagogy, good teaching practices, school functioning and dynamics, and the management of day-to-day matters in the classroom. Pre-service

teachers studying the degree would also benefit from a more extensive apprenticeship period, since it is generally considered a rather brief experience.

Conclusion

As discussed throughout the study, early school leaving does not emanate from a particular cause, and it is rather dependent on the intersection of multiple factors interconnected with individual circumstances and the situation of a country and its educational system. For Spain, the socioeconomic framework has hitherto been the most determinant and overarching element for education, and for the dropout phenomenon as a result. Despite the apparently positive evolution of the dropout rate, changes have been perceptibly slow in comparison to other countries of the European Union and the Euro area. Notwithstanding the downtrend, it is clear that, although there is no clear-cut factor, Spain does face several challenges in the coming years. Therefore, measures and policies must reflect a legitimate interest in tackling them accordingly.

Some of the actions to be considered moving forward need complete support from the general administration, as they would suppose a considerable shift in the Spanish educational paradigm. As of the present moment, it seems that the dual modules of vocational training, backed up by the latest educational law, will lead the movement against the high dropout rate of the country. Nonetheless, as suggested in the study, Spain has been showing a rather slow and reactive approach to socioeconomic and educational issues, which exacerbated complicated matters, such as the early school leaving phenomenon. A proactive approach based on statistical data and a thorough analysis of the state of the nation could exponentially help in the development of more strategies to battle inequality in all spheres of society.

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TRAINEES' DROPOUT FROM PUBLIC POST-SECONDARY VOCATIONAL TRAINING INFRASTRUCTURES

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Introduction

The already high rate of dropout from Vocational Education and Training in an era that demands for employees to have at least a medium level education is expected to raise rapidly in the following years (CEDEFOP, 2018, p.63), which is a significant problem that entails a financial impact in both societal and personal level (Beilmann & Espenberg, 2016; Feixas et al, 2015). Vocational Training Institutes (VTI), which are the subject of the present chapter, have been one of the pillars of the vocational training in Greece for the last 30 years. They are providers of knowledge, skills and abilities for a number of specialties in order to facilitate the integration of employees in the labor market, their adaptation to the ever-changing environments of the production procedure and the smooth promotion of the mobility of employees. Attendance is free and lasts five semesters. During the fifth semester the work-experience placement in a real working environment takes place.

VTIs are unclassified entities of non-formal education and Lifelong Learning, and their educational results are required to be certified through the National Organization for the Certification of Qualifications & Vocational Guidance (EOPPEP) so that graduates acquire a higher (level 5) certificate than the one of Lyceum, according to the certification scale of the European Qualification Framework. During the last two years, an effort to connect VTIs with the typical educational system is being made. Students that participate in the Pan-Hellenic Exams can be admitted, based on their score, in training programs by completing a special computerized form, while those that have completed a training course and have acquired certification can be admitted to university

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departments via entry exams. Although such statutes are motivations for enrollment in these schools, the dropout rate keeps rising (Apergi, 2019; Giotopoulos & Apergi, 2021). The dropout increased even more during emergency implementation of distance education and training. During the semesters of distance learning, the dropout rate was more than 43%, as shown in Figure 1 below, which presents the course of the dropout rate from the Patras Public Experimental VTI during the last eight years.
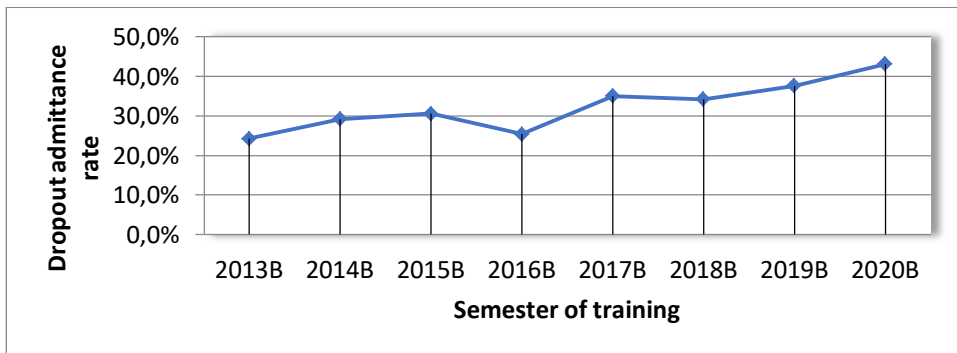
Figure 1. The course of admittance dropout of trainees in the Patras Public Experimental VTI, during the last 8 years

Most studies on the causes of the dropout focus on the enrollment motives and on the obstacles of attendance with all the trainees as a reference sample. We consider it is important that the early leavers themselves voice the reasons for leaving a vocational training program. For this reason, two studies took place at the training center. The first one, which took place in 2018, was a qualitative one with semi-structured personal interviews of 14 dropouts and the results were discussed with two trainers and two members of the management in personal interviews (Apergi, 2019). The second one, which took place in 2020, was a quantitative one with an online questionnaire with 32 questions, two of which were open-ended questions, and 53 early leavers answered (Giotopoulos & Apergi, 2021). Both used the German Center for Higher Education and Science Studies dropout model as a reference (DZHW, 2014, ref., to Heublein 2014, p.504).

The above studies showed that the main reasons of the dropout rate were external factors and more specifically, living conditions, studying conditions and also lack of motivation for learning which are relevant to the personal course of their studies as shown in Figure 2. Those causes are the axes around

which the discussion will take place in the present chapter. It must also be stressed that the unexpected in life, such as the pandemic right now, makes it more difficult for people that belong to financially and socially weaker groups of the population to acquire professional knowledge that will help them find employment or employment with better conditions and prospects.
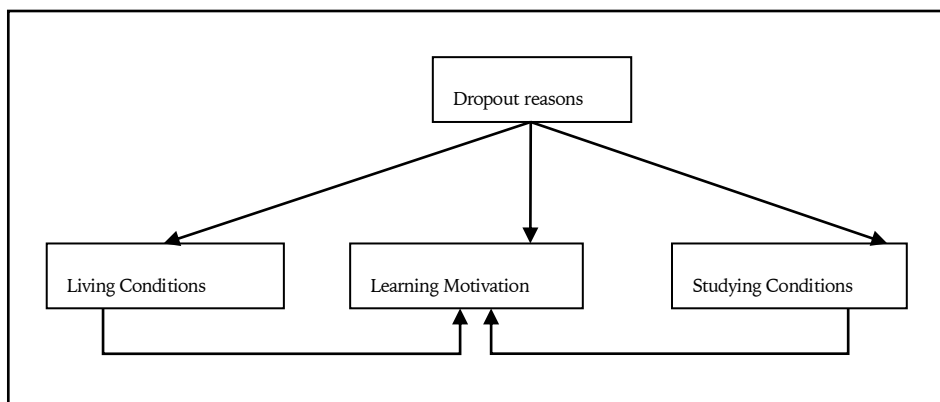
Figure 2. The main reasons of trainee dropout of the Patras Public VTI

Living conditions

As the individuals that choose public training centers come from low-income groups of the population (Giotopoulos et al 2021, p.176; Matousi et al, 2014), employment is a dominant need, necessary for their survival. Research has shown that trainees that were working dropped out immediately when training hours were similar to the working hours. They also dropped out immediately when an employment opportunity appeared or when the need to work became imperative. Employment is the cause of dropping out in several initial professional education and training studies (Gairin et al, 2014; Feixas et al, 2015; Hovdhaugen, 2013) but is also an obstacle in participating in general in Lifelong training programs (Karalis, 2013), as are the socio-economic characteristics of the students and seeking employment for financial reasons (Beilmann & Espenberg, 2016; Hovdhaugen, 2013).

While one would expect that during the lockdown because of the pandemic trainees that would not work would find it easier to continue training, research data leads us to the conclusion that it did not happen as the dropout rate increased. Trainees that had to attend via distance learning did not have the financial resources or/and the digital readiness, knowledge and skills to

participate in distance learning (Giotopoulos, 2020; Giotopoulos & Katsonis, 2020).

During the period of the pandemic and social distancing, several working trainees found themselves without employment. Being out of a job could have led to their attending training as they had more time available. However, research data shows that the dropout rated increased instead. This paradox can be sociologically interpreted. Trainees that come from financially lower parts of the population and have to study and work as well do not possess the minimum financial amount required for the implementation of distance learning. The state neglected to provide them the necessary equipment and they could not afford it. Moreover, this specific part of the population often lacks the digital knowledge and skills necessary for distance learning. Therefore, the trainees' available time for studying increased but they lacked the financial resources and digital awareness needed to participate in distance learning.

Concern is apparent over the social exclusion of those that wish to improve their knowledge but are not aided by the general educational policy, which treats privileged and unprivileged exactly the same way. Excellence scholarships, financing internship, securing part-time employment for trainees as well as providing broadband connections and personal computers when emergency distance training takes place are some of the proposals that have been made and they appear in our research findings as well, so that trainees can complete the training program they have chosen.

Studying conditions
Studying conditions include several different parameters. They include requirements of the Study/Training Guide of each program and of the Regulation of Operation of the educational center, the way classes are organized, the training methods used by the trainers, the choice and equipment of the laboratories and the general support of the trainees during their training progression.

The demands of the education and training programs are reasons for dropping out in several studies (Heublein, 2014; Larsenet al, 2013; Tanggaard, 2013) and it is substantiated in our own ones too. Based on the data collected from the question the trainees had to complete and elaborate on their points, the main reasons for dropping out, apart from being employed, were the demands

of the training programs, according to 35%. Those demands include the hours of attendance and the absences.

The feeling of going back to school, as almost all Public VTIs are housed in public school buildings, is intensified by the fact that all classes are obligatory and the limited number of absences – per taught subject – that trainees can make during their training. Utilization of the classrooms and laboratories may benefit the state and the citizens financially but promotes a school environment in professional training for adults which has a negative effect. That effect is increased when evening secondary schools are housed as well, which means that the training will take place during certain afternoon hours, which in turn makes attending classes very difficult for working students.

It is a fact that the financial crisis that affected some countries more than others for more than a decade has left a mark on education as well. Most laboratory educational spaces have declined technologically, the supply of consumable materials has been limited dramatically and the Curriculum of each program has not been updated based on the needs of the labor market. Syllabi improvement remains a steady proposal of previous studies as well to prevent dropout (Brown & Rodriguez, 2009; Frempong & Max, 2008; Tanggaard, 2013).

Furthermore, the trainers-trainees analogy has changed adversely as the employment terms of the teaching staff. The earnings of the educators suffered a spectacular decline during the first period of the financial crisis, and they continue to decline making the teaching profession unattractive. Meanwhile, during the pandemic, when distance learning was adopted, the whole procedure was based on resources of the trainers and trainees (Apergi, 2021). The quality of the provided professional education and training has been suffering a constant decline for more than 12 years. The dropout rate from the professional education centers showcases most emphatically the discontent of the trainees as regards the quality of the offered education.

The belittlement the trainers experience affects the way they teach. Our studies have shown that several trainers adopt the "banking education", in which educators "deposit" and trainees "save up" without engaging in any cognitive action, without the teaching procedure activating any kind of critical thinking (Freire, 1974). A previous study by Athanasoula et al (2008) has reached similar conclusions. However, the trainees in VTIs are adults and need the organization of teaching material to take into account their experience (Noyé & Piveteau, 1999, p.105; Rogers, 1999, p.160).

The studying conditions include the general support of the trainees during their studies as well. The deficiencies are great here too. The state has identified it and has recently established a Professional Development and Counseling Office in every Public VTI but, so far, no such office is operating. Similar offices operate in universities, offering assistance to students regarding anxiety management and time management, solving problems, recognizing and understanding personal needs, adjusting to the training environment, self-awareness and target setting.

Finally, one more obstacle that came up, mainly from the qualitative study (Apergi, 2019) has to do with the attitude of the trainees. The attitude is prominently marked by the difficulty of their integration, not generally in student life (Gairínetal, 2014), the culture of the training organization (Ulriksen et al, 2010) or the demands of the program (Brown &Rodriguez, 2009) but in the learning group itself. That group often suffers from the "diploma disease" as Dore mentions (1976, ref. to Dore, 1980) and Karalis locates (2010, p. 38). Trainees that are focused on acquiring the diploma without caring for essence of knowledge, try to enforce a teaching procedure limited to answering the questions of the certification exams.

Lack of learning motivation

The lack of learning motivation is relevant to the admittance period of a training program but alsowith the experience the trainees gain during their training or even their professional perspectives (Heublein, 2014). Our studies have shown that individuals enrolled in a program that was not their first choice dropped out easily. Moreover, due to insufficient information, some enrolled to a program and, during training, they realized it was not what they wanted. Others dropped out because they considered the program, they were attending had low employment perspectives. Besides, the majority of the dropouts do not consider that the certificate provided by the VTIs can lead to securing employment.

The operation of the Professional Development and Counseling office would have multiple benefits and could have either anticipated or prevented the dropout rate from vocational education and training centers. In the first case, the counselors could help future trainees to be informed about the obligations that result from the Curriculum and the Operation Regulation of the Institute. They could also help them to choose a program relevant to their talents and desires as the qualitative information about the framework of the training programs (Balzer et al, 2014; Tanggaard, 2013) and the proper professional

orientation (Brown &Rodriguez, 2009; Frempong & Max, 2008; Tanggaard, 2013) can prevent dropping out. In the second case, counselors could act in support during the training maintaining strong motives for remaining in the training. Academic guidance and aid makes it easier for individuals to remain in the education procedure (Gairínetal, 2014; Beilmann & Espenberg, 2016; Feixasetal, 2015; Frempong & Max, 2008).

An important motive for remaining in a professional training program is highlighting the perspective of finding employment after completing the program. The operation of the office can contribute to that aspect as well as it will operate as a communication channel between training and the labor market.

Conclusion

Dropping out of an initial professional education or training program is a problem for the entities that implement it but also for the individuals that are trying to enter a constantly developing and demanding labor market without proper knowledge and skills.

In this chapter, we attempted to discuss the constantly increasing reasons for dropping out of a public vocational training center for individuals that have completed Lyceum. The results of two researches that took place in the last four years in the biggest regional VTI of Greece served as a conversation opener for this discussion. They highlighted living conditions, studying conditions and learning motivation as main reasons for dropping out and agree with international researches that pinpoint the higher dropout in the introductory semester of the programs. Those findings confirm the bibliographic data that maintain that participation of the adults in Lifelong Learning, a form of which is vocational training, has two basic primary theories, that of sociology –which refers to the socio-economic obstacles- and that of psychology –which highlights the motives. The first one is dominant in the specific centers. The solutions suggested are relevant to the wider educational policy that continues to exclude the financially weaker part of the population, something that became even more evident during the emergency implementation of distance education/training.

Although the dropout rate at the specific Public VTI increased, a prediction about the future based on the available data would be precarious as the latest study was about the emergency circumstances imposed due to the coronavirus pandemic. We should get back to normality and then conduct a study to

determine whether the dropout rate has remained stable at one specific point or tends to rise regardless of circumstances.

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CULTIVATING ACADEMIC PERSEVERANCE IN ADOLESCENCE

Pouneh RONEY[*]

Introduction

While considerable progress has been made in increasing enrolment in STEM subjects and specifically in mathematics in recent years, the high dropout rates continue to undermine these efforts in all school systems around the world (Pinxten et al., 2015; Lamb et al., 2010). It is, therefore, extremely important to closely examine the complex phenomenon of academic perseverance amongst adolescents. The role of academic perseverance for predicting academic achievement and other life outcomes is widely agreed upon (Dweck, 2017; Farrington et al., 2013; Gutman & Schoon, 2013). Yet, there is little agreement amongst researchers on how academic perseverance is conceptualised and operationalised (Roney et al., 2019; Muenks, Wigfield, et al., 2016). This chapter aims to provide a deeper understanding of academic perseverance, its domain- specificity, its underlying mechanisms and whether perseverance in mathematics can be enhanced amongst adolescents.

These aims are addressed by focusing on recent research: two quantitative surveys (N=100 and N=1148) and a randomised field experiment (N=152) amongst adolescents attending secondary schools in England. The results showed that trait-level manifestations of academic perseverance, grit and self-control, made negligible contributions to the prediction of academic achievement, while domain-specific measures of academic perseverance had higher incremental predictive validity for predicting academic achievement. The results further highlighted possible mechanisms for perseverance in mathematics. Moreover, in an intervention study, the participant's mastery experience in mathematics was successfully manipulated, demonstrating impact upon self-efficacy in mathematics (with moderate effect size), effort regulation in mathematics (with moderate effect size) and performance requiring perseverant effort in a mathematics task (with large effect size. More

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importantly, the findings demonstrated the possibility of generalising the participants' mastery experience in a mathematics-related task to perseverance in mathematics as a subject.

The research explored in this chapter is novel in its focus on perseverance in mathematics, and in manipulating self-efficacy to enhance perseverance, offering support for domain-specificity of academic perseverance amongst adolescents. Findings have the potential to provide guidance for educational practice and for the development of educational interventions that cultivate academic perseverance amongst adolescents and most importantly impact school dropout rates.

Exploring Academic Perseverance in Adolescents

The backdrop of this research was the growing public interest in grit and self-control, as the key manifestations of perseverance, with many educators and policymakers embracing these constructs to address academic dropout (Barshay, 2019; Clark & Malecki, 2019; Credé et al., 2016; Kohn, 2016; Muenks, Wigfield, et al., 2016; Tough, 2016). Grit is defined as Perseverance and passion towards very long-term goals (Duckworth & Quinn, 2009). Self-control is the ability to regulate behaviour, thought, emotion and attention in the service of valued goals (Baumeister et al., 2007).

The theoretical framework for this research suggests that domain-specific measures of academic perseverance are likely to be superior to trait-level, since they better capture the complexities and the interactions between adolescent students and their academic contexts (Pajares & Schunk, 2001; Bandura, 1997; Pajares, 1996). The predictive validity of grit and self-control were compared to academic and mathematics self-efficacy for predicting academic achievement amongst students from two secondary schools in England. Academic self-efficacy is a learner's beliefs about their ability to engage and complete the actions necessary for accomplishing a given academic task (Bandura, 1997).

A cross-sectional design was used to collect the data for this study, using a survey. The sample included $N = 100$, recruited though their schools (M age = 17.35 years, $SD = 0.46$). After a brief introduction to the study, the students were asked to complete a pen and paper survey including demographic information and self-report scales of Grit-S, Brief Self-control Scale, Academic Self-efficacy (SEQ-C), Mathematics Self-efficacy and Maths Goal. Cognitive

ability was measured using the WAIS composite score, administered individually.

Findings demonstrated that grit and self-control only made negligible and statistically non-significant contributions to the prediction of academic achievement in GCSE examination grades, national examinations taken by students aged 16 in the UK. As expected, WAIS composite score as a measure of cognitive ability was a significant predictor of academic achievement. These findings were aligned with previous research showing that grit and self-control fall short of predicting performance in standardised tests, despite making a contribution to predicting GPA (Duckworth & Quinn, 2009).

As a trait-level construct, grit is likely to predict academic achievement, only if the learner's superordinate goal is aligned with academic achievement in GCSE exams. To address this, the students' declared intention to continue with studying mathematics beyond GCSE and in their future careers (termed Maths Goal) was drawn upon. It was found that even after controlling for the students' Maths Goal, as a representation of the alignment of their superordinate goal with academic performance in mathematics, the trait-level measures of grit and self-control failed to contribute to the prediction of Mathematics GCSE grades.

Academic self-efficacy and mathematics self-efficacy were found to be stronger predictors of overall academic achievement and achievement in mathematics respectively, in agreement with previous research (Steinmayr et al., 2018; Muenks, Wigfield, et al., 2016; Pajares, 1996). These findings demonstrate the need for measures of perseverance that are designed to capture perseverance in *academic* settings in adolescents, rather than trait-level measures of perseverance. It was found that academic self-efficacy accounted for 5.9% of all variance in the average GCSE score, while mathematics self-efficacy accounted for 16.5% of GCSE mathematics grade. In line with self-efficacy theory, these findings suggest that the predictive validity of self-efficacy measures improves by narrowing their specificity to the domain (Bandura, 1997; Pajares, 1996).

Operationalising Academic Perseverance in Mathematics

Moving away from trait-level measures of perseverance, previous research was drawn upon to identify a mathematics-specific facet of perseverance, namely effort regulation in mathematics (Cormier et al., 2019; Steinmayr et al., 2018;

Muenks et al., 2017; Muenks, Wigfield, et al., 2016). Mathematics effort regulation was found to be conceptually and operationally sound for capturing perseverance in mathematics amongst adolescents.

1448 students (M age = 14.0 years, SD = 1.1) were recruited though their schools. The students completed a pen and paper survey containing demographic information, as well as a series of self-report scales (Effort Regulation in Mathematics (MSLQ), Mindset about Intelligence, Academic Self-efficacy (SEQ-C), Mathematics self-efficacy and Mathematical Mindset). With the parents' and students' written consents, the school provided the students' cognitive ability scores, and their grades at the time of data collection as well as nine months later. As hypothesised, effort regulation in mathematics was the key predictor of mathematics achievement and perseverance as measured by mathematics grades and progress over the nine-month period.

The Underlying Mechanisms of Academic Perseverance in Adolescents in Mathematics

Further, it was found that mathematical mindset and mathematics self-efficacy positively predicted effort regulation in mathematics. This finding (see Figure 1) provided support for the relationship between mathematical mindset and effort regulation in mathematics as a key process, mediated by mathematics self-efficacy (Roney et al., 2019). These results contribute to the current understanding of perseverance in mathematics amongst adolescents and are also indicative of the underlying mechanisms for perseverance in mathematics. Most promising, these results highlight possible ways to cultivate academic perseverance in adolescents.
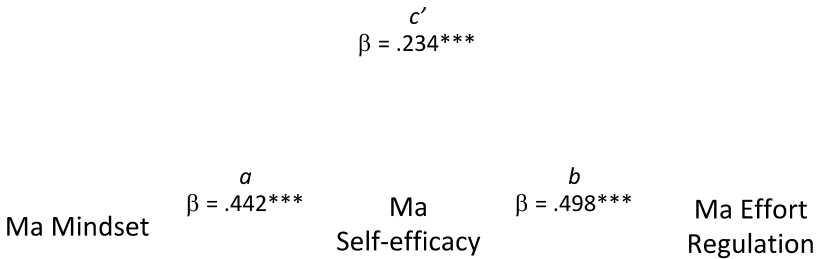

Figure 1. Obtained model for mathematics self-efficacy mediating the relationship between mathematical mindset and mathematics effort regulation

Cultivating Academic Perseverance in Mathematics – An Intervention Study

The intervention study aimed to examine the question of malleability of mathematics perseverance and to provide additional insight into whether perseverance in mathematics can be enhanced through an intervention that manipulates the learners' mastery experience in mathematics. There is substantial empirical evidence supporting self-efficacy's theoretical predictions in academic settings (Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2016). Self-efficacy beliefs are important since they impact motivation, behaviour and influence the actions that can affect academic achievement (Bandura, 1997). The impact of enhanced mathematics self-efficacy on mathematics effort regulation and perseverance in a mathematics-specific task were investigated in a randomised field experiment (N = 152).

It was found that effort regulation in mathematics was the key predictor of mathematics grades, including future grades and performance against personal targets, with mathematical mindset making a limited contribution to these predictions. Further, the total effect of mathematics self-efficacy on effort regulation was found to be greater than the total effect of mathematical mindset on effort regulation. It was, therefore, concluded that to improve students' perseverance in mathematics, the intervention needed to target the students' self-efficacy in mathematics which should in turn impact mathematics effort regulation (Roney et al., 2019).

In addition, mathematics self-efficacy is a strong predictor of students' choice of STEM subjects as college majors and degree retention (Hackett & Betz, 1995; Hackett, 1985; Betz & Hackett, 1983). It has also been shown that adolescent students' mathematics self-efficacy specifically influences their STEM-related career choices (Dweck et al., 2014; Farrington et al., 2012; Dweck, 2012; Blackwell et al., 2007). In fact, it has been suggested that targeting mathematics self-efficacy may potentially improve participation in STEM fields (Dweck et al., 2014; Nagaoka et al., 2014; Farrington et al., 2012; Dweck, 2012). Since mastery experiences are the dominant source of mathematics self-efficacy (Roney et al., 2019, Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2016; Usher & Pajares, 2009), the intervention was focused on enhancing mathematics self-efficacy by targeting students' mastery experiences in mathematics.

When appraising self-efficacy, a student makes inferences by weighing the "relative contribution of ability and non-ability factors to performance successes and failures" (Bandura, 1997, p. 81). This is dependent on several factors: the student's perceived ability, task difficulty, effort expenditure, the degree of external help received, the specific circumstances, the patterns of recent successes and failures, and the student's organisation and reconstruction of these patterns in the individual's memory (Bandura, 1997).

Succeeding in easy tasks does not require the reappraisal of one's self-efficacy. However, mastering a challenging task carries information about new capabilities. To infer task difficulty, individuals draw on perceived similarity of the task to other experiences and their difficulty level and skill requirements (Trope, 1983). If a student succeeds in a task that is deemed as difficult by others with minimal effort, high ability is inferred. On the other hand, struggling to achieve the same level of success infers lower ability and is less likely to improve self-efficacy beliefs (Bandura, 1997, p. 85). It is only after students feel convinced of their ability to succeed that they are likely to persevere when faced with setbacks and adversity. Overcoming obstacles and setbacks contributes to the cultivation of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997). This, in turn, results in the development of generative skills required for effective performance, such as effort-regulation (Bandura, 1986). It is for this reason that mastery experiences are believed to result in stronger efficacy beliefs that are more generalisable. This provided further support for the chosen approach of manipulating mastery experience in mathematics in this study.

As a social-psychological intervention, a tangram activity was designed using an iterative approach, by incorporating the underlying theoretical assumptions of this research and by building on recent social-psychological intervention research (Yeager & Walton, 2011; Lazowski & Hulleman, 2016; Rosenzweig & Wigfield, 2016). The tangram activity is an example of visual mathematics tasks which require no prior knowledge and are easy to engage with. More specifically, the intervention was refined for optimal implementation with secondary students in their schools, following a small-scale pilot study. Figure 2 demonstrates the hypothesised theory of change.
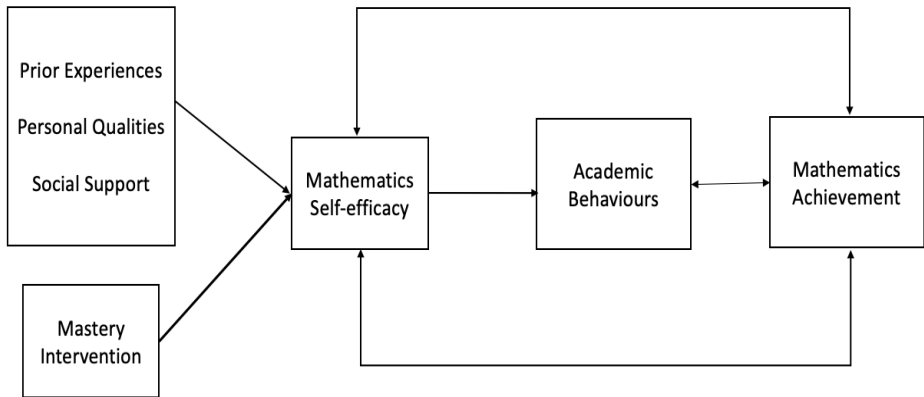
Figure 2. Proposed model of change

Bandura (1997) suggests that to develop robust self-efficacy beliefs, individuals need to overcome obstacles through "perseverant effort" (p. 80). This was the reason for the design of the two experimental conditions: *success* versus *challenge conditions*. These conditions were designed such that it could be assumed that students in the *success condition* were likely to breeze through the task (despite finding it non-trivial and effortful to some degree), while those in the *challenge condition* were likely to struggle through the task but nevertheless solve each tangram. The students' mindset may also impact their interpretation of effort expenditure, with those with a fixed mindset interpreting the need for perseverant effort as a sign of low ability (Dweck, 2012). This could, in turn, negatively impact their self-efficacy appraisal. Having both the success and challenge conditions facilitated a nuanced analysis of the interaction of students' mathematical mindset with the experimental condition as a predictor of their perceived self-efficacy.

Prior to taking part in the randomised field experiment, the students were given a cover story by the researcher. The cover story played a key role in the efficacy of the intervention and as such needed to be informed by evidence from prior research. As in similar intervention studies (Galla et al., 2014; Yeager et al., 2016; Yeager & Walton, 2011), the participants were told that doing well in the tangrams activity would have a positive impact on their overall mathematics performance. The reason for this cover story was twofold. Firstly, self-efficacy beliefs are task specific. It was, therefore, hoped to increase the generalisation of the students' self-efficacy appraisal from the tangram

activity to mathematics as a subject. Secondly, by the researcher placing great importance on the tangram activity and emphasising its power to predict future mathematics achievement, it was hoped that even despite the students' prior successes and failures in mathematics as a subject, there was a chance that the students' interpretations of success in this task impacted their mathematics self-efficacy.

The participants for this study were 152 students from a secondary school in England (M age = 14.2 years, SD = .62). These students had already taken part in the large-scale survey nine months earlier and had also consented to taking part in the intervention study. Prior to data collection, participants were randomly assigned to the control and treatment conditions.

In recent years, use of more ecologically valid measures have been promoted amongst educational researchers to overcome some of the shortcomings of self-report surveys (Lazowski and Hulleman, 2016). Therefore, a behavioural task (puzzle sets A and B) was used prior to and after the intervention, along with self-report measures. The puzzles in each set were matched according to type and level of difficulty to create the highest level of similarity between sets A and B.

The participants were first presented with a maximum of 10 questions from puzzle set A. They were told that as "there are lots of puzzles, you can stop at any point, and I would not be offended" and that "you can skip any puzzles that you do not want to do". After working through the puzzle set A (as a behavioural measure of perseverance), the participants were given the cover story for the intervention and then completed the experimental treatment, or the active control activity based on their condition assignment.

Before starting on the tangrams intervention task, the students were told: "You are doing this activity because it can help you in maths. Research shows that this activity makes you a better problem solver . . . The better you do in solving these tangrams, the better you will do in maths in the future.".

The participants were then presented with the seven tangram pieces cut out of coloured card (Figure 3), and for the first two tangrams the participants in both experimental conditions were shown the solution presented to them as an outline used for the success condition (Figure 4). After the first two tangrams, the two conditions diverged.

The 7 Tangram Pieces
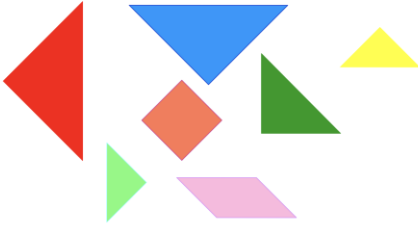
Figure 3. The seven tangram pieces used
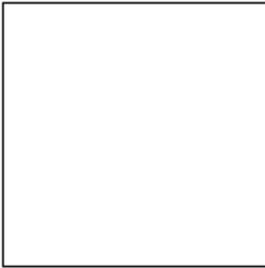
Challenge Condition   **Success Condition**
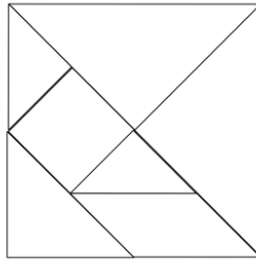
Figure 4. Example of the tangram activity for the challenge (outline of the square) versus the success (the lines showing how the pieces fitted together to create the square in this case) condition
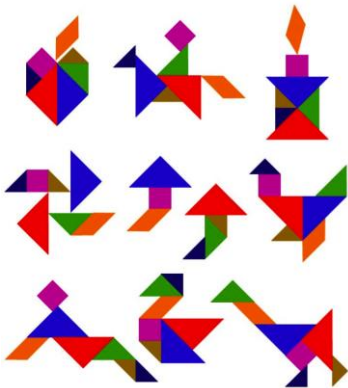
Figure 5. The tangram activity for the active control group

Condition 1: *Success Condition* – in this condition, the participants completed three further tangrams (total of five) with outline solutions presented to help them solve the tangram (see Figure 4).

Condition 2: *Challenge Condition* – in this condition students completed the same three further tangrams (total of five) with no outline solutions and only the shape presented to them (see Figure 4). If the students were stuck, they could ask for a hint and were given a single strategy: "It would be easier to solve this, if you first deal with the two big triangles".

Condition 3: Active Control Group – the students in this group were first shown possible patterns that can be made from the tangram pieces. They were then asked to play with the tangram pieces to create patterns of their choice and give their final pattern a name. It was emphasised that no specific rules applied and that they could create designs similar to those as shown in Figure 5 or to simply create abstract patterns of their own.

Immediately after completing the tangram activity, the participants completed the pen and paper survey. Finally, the participants were presented with puzzle set B to measure behavioural perseverance after the intervention.

Hierarchical regression analyses showed that after controlling for demographic characteristics, prior mathematics attainment, cognitive ability and the initial mathematics self-efficacy measured nine months prior to the intervention, the experimental condition significantly predicted mathematics self-efficacy. Moreover, a one-way between-groups analysis of variance (ANOVA) showed moderate differences between the mean of the participants in the *challenge condition* and the other two groups, further demonstrating the impact of the *challenge experimental condition* on participants' mathematics self-efficacy. These results suggest that only the *challenge condition* impacted mathematics self-efficacy.

Similarly, it was found that the intervention condition significantly predicted mathematics effort regulation (after controlling for demographic characteristics, prior mathematics attainment, cognitive ability and the initial mathematics effort regulation). Analysis of variance of the mathematics effort regulation scores between the *challenge* and the *success conditions* showed a moderate difference between the mean of the participants in these two groups.

In line with self-efficacy theory, these findings show that the *challenge experimental condition* resulted in students reporting higher mathematics effort regulation compared with those in the *success condition*. Self-efficacy theory asserts that engaging in "easy" activities can negatively impact self-efficacy and subsequently perseverance (Bandura, 1997, p. 80). In this study, the mean score of effort regulation for the students in the *success condition* was lower than

the active control group, although this difference was not significant. This provides some evidence that using teaching materials that feel challenging can positively impact self-efficacy and subsequently effort regulation, whereas, giving students teaching materials that they perceive as easy can negatively impact their self-efficacy and effort regulation, yet this is a practice commonly used with students in lower ability mathematics groups (Francis, et al., 2017).

Hierarchical regression analyses showed that after controlling for demographic characteristics, prior mathematics attainment, cognitive ability and the number of correct puzzles answered before the intervention, the experimental condition significantly predicted the number of correct puzzles answered after the intervention. Moreover, a one-way analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was conducted to explore the impact of the intervention condition on participants' performance on the puzzles post-intervention, using performance on the pre-intervention puzzles score as a covariate. The results indicated large to moderate differences between the mean of the participants in the *challenge condition* and the other two groups. Significant differences were observed in all pairwise comparisons. These findings suggest that both experimental conditions positively predicted post-intervention performance on the puzzles task. The puzzles behavioural task was used as a more ecologically valid way of capturing perseverant behaviour before and after the intervention.

The degree of generalisation of self-efficacy from the tangram activity to other tasks or mathematics as a subject relies on the appraisal of similarity. As previously discussed and demonstrated in prior research (Boaler, 2016; Kim & Park, 2000; Bong, 1999; Bandura, 1986), students were more likely to see greater similarity between the tangram activity and the puzzles behavioural task which are both classed as *visual mathematics*, than with mathematics as a school subject, despite the cover story. For this reason, it was hypothesised that the impact of enhanced self-efficacy in the tangram activity would better generalise to self-efficacy and perseverance in the puzzles task (due to the greater perceived similarity) than to self-efficacy and perseverance in mathematics as a school subject. This hypothesis was supported by the results, further demonstrating the efficacy of the *challenge experimental condition* over the *success condition* and the active control.

It was further hypothesised that since students with fixed mathematical mindsets were likely to interpret high effort expenditure (required in the *challenge condition*) as a sign of low ability (Blackwell et al., 2007), that the *success condition* would positively impact their mathematics self-efficacy while the *challenge condition* would negatively impact it. To investigate this

hypothesis, the interaction term experimental condition x mathematical mindset (using standardised scores) was entered into the regression model. This was found not to make a significant contribution to the prediction of mathematics self-efficacy following the intervention. Closer examination of the distribution of students' mathematical mindset showed that virtually all students in this study would be categorised as having a growth mindset (the mean scores for the conditions are 3.95 for the active control, 3.94 for the *success condition* and 3.87 for the *challenge condition*). This may explain why the interaction term was not making a statistically significant contribution to the prediction. Mindsets are a buzzword in schools today and the students' response to these items was likely to have been affected by the social desirability of espousing a growth mindset. In effect, this research has highlighted the difficulties faced for future researchers in capturing the students' true implicit theories of intelligence and avoiding false mindsets, as warned by Dweck (2012).

Overall, the findings from this study demonstrated that self-efficacy in mathematics can be enhanced by targeting mastery experience using a specific task when the similarities between the intervention and the subject are highlighted through a cover story. Consistent with self-efficacy theory, it was found that the *challenge condition* resulted in the greatest boost in mathematics self-efficacy and mathematics effort regulation.

These results were very promising as they established the efficacy of the *challenge* experimental treatment for generalising task self-efficacy to mathematics self-efficacy, resulting in improvements in perseverance amongst adolescents. Further research needs to focus on effectiveness trials that help extend the intervention's performance under 'real-world' conditions in mathematics classrooms.

Implications for Practice and Conclusions

While considerable progress has been made in increasing enrolment in STEM subjects and specifically in mathematics in recent years, the high dropout rates continue to undermine these efforts globally (Pinxten et al., 2015; Lamb et al., 2010). The research in this chapter has contributed to the body of work on academic perseverance, by examining its domain-specificity, its underlying mechanisms and whether perseverance in mathematics can be enhanced amongst adolescents. This is of utmost importance given that adolescence is "the final period of development … during which talents, reasoning and complex adult behaviors mature" (Crews et al., 2007, p. 189).

The backdrop of this research was the growing public interest in academic perseverance, with many educators and policymakers aiming to address academic dropout (Clark & Malecki, 2019; Farrington et al., 2012; Muenks, Wigfield, et al., 2016). This research clearly demonstrated that domain-specific measures of perseverance such as effort regulation in mathematics provide a meaningful lens for thinking about the challenges facing educators today: the problem of low course enrolment/ retention, as well as the problem of some students not working hard enough day to day/ persevering in school.

Further, the underlying mechanisms for perseverance in mathematics were explored, with the results providing initial support for the relationship between mathematical mindset and perseverance in mathematics as a key process, mediated by mathematics self-efficacy (Roney et al., 2019). Most promising, these results highlight possible ways to cultivate academic perseverance in adolescents by designing educational experiences that provide challenge and support to adolescent learners.

At its core, the tangram social-psychological intervention relied on generalising self-efficacy from the tangram activity to mathematics as a subject. The nature of the tangram activity, its similarity to other mathematical problems encountered in mathematics lessons and the cover story (which further emphasised the notion that doing well in this activity predicted future achievements in mathematics) were designed to improve this generalisation.

Bandura (1997) sees success as vital for developing self-efficacy, although it is believed that those who only experience easy successes are more likely to be discouraged by failure. The *challenge* treatment required the students to master a challenging task, overcoming obstacles through "perseverant effort" and therefore cultivated the students' self-efficacy beliefs (Trope, 1983; Bandura, 1997, p. 80). On the other hand, since succeeding in easy tasks does not require the reappraisal of one's self-efficacy, the impact of the *success condition* on the students' self-efficacy was found to be limited. It is, therefore, not surprising that the students' perseverant behaviour on the puzzles task showed the greatest improvement for the students in the *challenge condition*. This further demonstrates the effectiveness of the *challenge* experimental treatment for enhancing perseverance, providing the most promising results in this research. The findings from this research highlight the positive consequences of feeling challenged in mathematics and are important in providing educators with guiding principles for practice. By experiencing challenge and rising above it, students became more resilient. This, in turn, results in the development of generative skills required for effective

performance, such as improved effort regulation (Bandura, 1986), providing further support for the assertion that mastery experiences result in more generalisable efficacy beliefs (Usher & Pajares, 2008, 2009).

Establishing that enhancing students' self-efficacy in a given mathematics task can be generalised to mathematics as a school subject is promising and bears direct implications for practice in mathematics classrooms and is a key contribution of this research. These results demonstrated that a brief social-psychological intervention has the power to impact students' mathematics self-efficacy and mathematics effort regulation. This research succeeded in broadening the educational application of promoting self-efficacy in mathematics tasks amongst adolescents.

These findings have implications for mathematics educators and policy makers. In the UK, post-16 Mathematics examinations have two tiers of entry: foundation and higher. Almost all mathematics departments have policies to help them game the system to achieve the highest possible grade for each student by choosing the tier of entry (Jadhav, 2017). Students may be entered for the foundation tier, if it is believed that they are likely to achieve a higher grade. For some of these students, the very easy questions on the foundation tier can negatively impact their self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986). Furthermore, in the UK, students are often put into ability groups in mathematics. The students' assignation to an ability group or carries strong messages about the fixed nature of ability in mathematics (Francis, Archer, et al., 2017; Francis, Connolly, et al., 2017; Boaler, 2016; Boaler et al., 2000). It has been found that students in lower ability groups are often given easier work to help them feel successful (Boaler, 2016). This, in turn, can negatively impact their self-efficacy and perseverance in mathematics. It is only when students feel challenged and convinced of their ability to succeed that they are likely to persevere when faced with setbacks and adversity (Bandura, 1986). These findings suggest that all students may benefit from feeling challenged in mathematics.

This chapter highlights key implications for educators and policymakers to address the growing challenges of school dropout. Moreover, it offers researchers a great sense of agency by highlighting the power of brief social-psychological interventions to address big challenges. By using interventions, researchers can become activists and impact change more directly.

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ACADEMIC MOTIVATION OF BLACK WOMEN AND BLACK GIRLS IN EDUCATION: CHALLENGING MASLOW'S AND BANDURA'S THEORY WITH A BELL HOOKS TWIST

Zakia GATES[*]

Abstract

Feminist scholar, author, and social activist bell hooks left behind a legacy of work that explored liberating, theoretical and practical forms of engaged pedagogy. Her work in the academy before her passing in 2021 emphasized the importance of individuals reaching levels of self-actualization stemming from the roots of motivating factors that attribute to success and academic achievement. Her book *Teaching to Transgress: Education as a Practice of Freedom* centralized the argument that educators are challenged to enhance levels of critical consciousness and liberate transformations of thoughts onto the psyche of current and future generations. hooks (1994) argued that classrooms should be safe spaces where equitable opportunities are facilitated to push young minds to challenge systemic forms of racism, sexism, and classism. The authorship of bell hooks purported assertive ideologies and commonly critical aspects of education spaces for marginalized students. However, hooks (1994) argued that this one lens of attribution theory to success also questions levels of racial and gender systemic barriers where motivation and success are hindered from reaching self-actualization or collective actualization. However, critical interrogations of education of marginalized students, particularly young African American women, force society to address this invisible group regarding school drop-out and academic motivation issues. Bandura's triadic reciprocal causation model, a social cognitive view of motivation where personal characteristics and behaviors are a result of the environment, and Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs theory, a humanistic view of motivation, guide

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the centralized argument presented by hooks. The tier - self-esteem and love and belonging - emphasizes the flipped version of Ralph Ellison's *The Invisible Man*. Ellison's manuscript written in 1952 documents the accounts of a gifted African American male public speaker who lives in society who refuse to see and understand his experience. The character goes on to live in an underground society using resources to help him survive where feelings of outcast begin to surface. The tier - self-esteem and love and belonging are disguised as the outliers of black women/girls who are excluded from the dropout argument and academic motivation argument where the experiences are viewed as outcast similar to the character from Ellison's novel. The literature supports the notion that factors may or may not act as attribution theories of academic motivation of black women/girls. However, other literature fails to address how needs theory and the reciprocal causation model include Ellison's invisible woman/girl twist. This chapter presents a conceptual analysis counter-narrative of both theories to examine how black women and black girls fit into this argument. The author uses the terms black women to describe the biological and cognitive stages of adulthood over age 18 whereas black girls are described as a demographic under the age of 18 who are students in PK-12 spaces. The problem addressed is the issue of the exclusion of black women and black girls from the Western ideology of academic motivation and how sociological contexts of this demographic can help and hinder academic motivation.

Introduction

A study from the *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* notes that a strong racial identity correlates with academic motivation, academic achievement, and academic curiosity among black girls and black women (Butler-Barnes, et al., 2017). Other studies explore how intrinsic and extrinsic motivation play roles in self-concept, self-image, self-esteem, and academic achievement (Snowman & McCown, 2015). One question inquires how this transfers to practice within the sociological context of black women and black girls in education spaces and the larger society. A tenet of intersectionality — "social identities are not independent and unidimensional but multiple and intersecting" (Bowleg, 2012, p. 3), is used to explore academic motivation further through a lens of social justice where black women and black girls' motivation and academic achievement are paramount. Guiding questions for this chapter

include: (1) How does the social context of black women and black girls play a role in academic motivation, and how does it maintain their academic status while dealing with challenges of self-image, self-esteem, and self-worth from their social context? (2) How do Maslow's Hierarch of Needs theory domain of self-esteem love and belonging relate or not relate to this demographic and their academic motivation to succeed? (3) What role do schools, administrators, educators, and community activists play in disrupting the meta-narrative of black women and black girls in education and academic motivation? The objectives of this chapter are (a) describe the academic motivation of black women and black girls through literature analysis and synthesis. b) Address the social injustice of black women and black girls' position in education as the invisible group to school dropout (c) Use the reciprocal causation model to describe the sociological context that shapes the academic motivation of black women and black girls in education spaces (d) Address intersectionality as a lens to describe the academic motivation of black women and black girls in education spaces.

Even though the United States dropout rate has declined, the data only represents an optical illusion into other factors within PK-12 spaces. Sections of the chapter include claims from the literary works of bell hooks as prophetic charges to understand the context of an educational crisis among black women and black girls as the invisible group in the argument of school dropout and academic motivation. Lastly, recommendations for further and continuous research included in this chapter hopefully will bridge the gap between academic motivation among black women and black girls in education and the goals of social justice in education.

A Review of the Literature - Maslow's Hierarchy of "Inequity" Needs

"The classroom remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy."
~ bell hooks

Inclusivity and the public space of education juxtapose contrasting ideas of equity, expectations, and motivation. Educators in the public space have the moral and social responsibility to ensure the equal accessibility of resources that help create and maintain life-long learning journeys. This public educational space purports systems of unique energies where educators can hinder or help situations of their students. The public space of education

perpetuates the Ancient Chinese Philosophy of Ying and yang, where ideas, perspectives, and expectations can sometimes clash. Motivation becomes a deterrent to achievement goals for Black women in higher education. The seminal research of Abraham Maslow's humanistic view of motivation theorized that cognitive theories were not the only lens to understand "overt behavior" but asserted that these theories were more subjective than objective to examine the full spectrum of behaviors (Snowman & McCown, 2015, p. 406). Maslow's hierarchy of needs proposed that individuals' sense of motivation attributes to how one satisfies their needs (Cherry, 2014). Maslow's observation of behaviors, particularly behaviors of people who reached self-actualization, found that people were more driven and determined to reach their full potential based on their motivation, whether intrinsic or extrinsic, to fulfill those talents and goals (Snowman & McCown, 2015). Other studies that focus specifically on intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, from a Western ideology, found that "intrinsic motivation and learning engagement declined across elementary school years and secondary years" (Andermann & Maehr, 1994; Lepper & Hodell, 1989; Ahmed et al. 2010; Bouffard et al. 2003; Corpus et al. 2009; Opdenakker et al. 2012; Maulana et al., 2013, p. 1350). Further studies indicated a decrease in extrinsic motivation across all sectors (Otis et al. 2005; Ratelle et al. 2004). These findings regarding academic motivation without specification to Black women and black girls are assumed to theorize that extrinsic motivation surpasses intrinsic motivation because of the absence of self-efficacy. However, there are gaps in the current education literature regarding the influence of the sociological context, including media, and how this may contribute to declines in intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Skinner, McHale, Wood, and Telfer (2018) pointed out the differences in how boys and girls function in the school context as implications of "gendered-typed personality qualities" (p. 683).

Maslow concluded that "healthy individuals" motivation sought to fulfill their potential in society (Snowman & McCown, 2015, p. 406). Equally important, the humanistic view of motivation in Maslow's hierarchy of needs is based on a single-axis lens's Western philosophy and ideology to success, achievement, and self-actualization. Nevertheless, it is a highly recommended framework for understanding motivation and needs for success and achievement in PK-20 spaces. On the contrary, Maslow's theory should only be used in teaching practices and other societal practices as a guide to gaining more insight into

the motivation and the factors within the 5-tier hierarchy that may or may not attribute to self-actualization. The theory serves as a foundation to the academic motivation of black women and black girls in education spaces instead of solutions to systemic changes in education. I argue that the sociological contexts that embody black women and black girls can attribute to academic motivation.

One study of women in academic positions in higher education examined the relationship between the "imposter phenomenon" (IP) and motivation in the academy (Vaughn et al., 2020, p. 780). Imposter phenomenon (IP) describes experiences where individuals' trepidations of their intellectual and professional work are perceived as fraudulent from the perceptions of others (Clance and Imes, 1978; Matthews and Clance, 1985). This can result in fears of being evaluated by peers or colleagues. Vaughn et al. (2020) reported that participants (*n=1326* academic women) in the academy expressed feelings of "self-doubt," "lack of belongingness," and "incompetence" (p. 780). Based on the demographic of the institution, most of the participants were white and Hispanic women, where White women participation was paramount. These expressions across participants were measured by the "Expectancy-Value theory," "Attribution Theory," and "Self" Determination Theory" (Vaughn et al., 2020, p. 780). These operational variables of the study - Expectancy-Value theory, Attribution Theory, and Self Determination Theory - share comparable and distinctive interpretations. Vroom (1964) noted Expectancy Theory of Motivation as an individual's personality, skills, knowledge and experience is linked to how well an individual performs on a certain task. In this case of the study, tasks in academia and professional qualities are questioned. Attribution Theory examines factors to which individuals identify that attribute to their successes or their failures in academia or work-related situations (Weiner, 1972). Lastly, when individuals' needs of connection, competence and autonomy are achieved, such as the participants of the Vaughn et al., 2020 study, then their sense of self-determination is satisfied.

Vaughn et al. (2020) found that women in the academy had high levels of "imposter phenomenon" (IP) which were statistically significant with motivation (p.780). Implications of Maslow's theory are that the probability of a person making wise choices depends on their self-actualization being activated to do so (Snowman & McCown, 2015). Limitations of Maslow's theory with the predisposition of patriarchy maintain academic women in

second-class citizen roles questions their self-actualization or collective actualization in specific environments, i.e., the academy. Women collectively in academia reached self-actualization goals, yet their collective responses state otherwise. At the same time, the Vaughn et al. study measured the responses by three theories: the "Self-Determination Theory" (p. 780). As part of the theory of motivation, self-determination theory (SDT) is linked to a "perceived locus of causality" (Maulana et al., 2013, p. 1350). A perceived locus of causality frames the argument that individuals attribute events caused by internal and external factors as a determinant to behaviors. The Vaughn et al. study emphasizes the responses of the women participants as determinants of behaviors, proving their premise regarding the "imposter phenomenon" (IP) (p. 780).

Bandura's triadic reciprocal causation model of personal factors, behaviors, and environmental factors may not be enough for women in higher education to be successful in their achievements when perceived beliefs of others play a role in their ability to be successful. Several considerations are (1) how women on a systemic level are viewed in society and in the academy and (2) how women are socialized. Contrary to popular belief, many comments from women on how others view them or perceive their success and credentials are always questioned to the highest degree about their performance and how they attained their positions. Another limitation to Maslow's theory is where black women in higher education fit into the "imposter phenomenon" (IP) effect. hooks (1994) noted that institutions have made it "painfully clear that biases that uphold and maintain white supremacy, imperialism, sexism, and racism have distorted education so that it is no longer about the practice of freedom" (p. 29). The centralized argument of hooks' claim and the Vaughn et al. study is that Black women have a multitude of social identities that intersect with race, creating discriminatory and exclusionary systems of oppression and racism (Crenshaw, 1989). As mentioned earlier, the tenet of intersectionality — social identities are not independent and unidimensional but multiple and intersecting" (Bowleg, 2012, p. 3), purports the notion that race, gender, class, culture, and other identities are not considered when it comes to the "imposter phenomenon" where expressions of self-doubt and lack of belongingness among Black women in the academy are indeed absent. Crenshaw (1989) argued that intersectional identities of Black women create distinct experiences through a single-axis view of White supremacy and

patriarchy. Experiences of Black women derived from sociological contexts such as institutions are expressed through micro-aggressions, which could lead to higher levels of "imposter phenomenon" and lower forms of motivation in the academy. Other compelling arguments regarding systemic socialized stereotypes and stigmas of the "welfare Queen" (Luckoo, 2018, p. 38) towards Black women in general from media outlets and other forms could also hinder motivation and create self-doubt within the "imposter phenomenon" paradigm.

In summary, the academic motivation of black women and black girls in PK-20 spaces includes a distinct twist of liberation, history, culture, class, ideologies, perceptions, and behaviors. The sociological context of academic motivation among black women and black girls in education explains how families, communities, schools, and the larger society play a role in motivation by using the top tier of Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory of self-actualization. At the same time, Maslow's 5-step tiers of physiological, safety, love, and belonging, esteem fail to see how and where black women and black girls' narrative of needs and motivation commune. It inquires to challenge the notion of self-actualization or collective actualization and how black girls and black women's experiences are viewed, observed, and examined from personal and professional contexts. Although the literature does not explicitly address black women and motivation, nor does it include black women and motivation into the "imposter phenomenon" paradigm, the Vaughn et al. study indicated that most women in the academy had a higher "imposter phenomenon" that linked to motivation. However, the sample size of White and Hispanic academic women was based on the "current racial demographics within academic institutions," and expressions were "self-reported" (Vaughn et al. 2020, p. 783). This is not an indication that the study was flawed, but an enlightened social awareness to further studies of black women, motivation, and perceptions of abilities. I propose that intersectional identities of black women and coupled with distinct societal and institutional experiences based on those intersectional identities would add to the descriptive data other than family, ability, and other factors that could increase their imposter phenomenon (IP). This would include socialized stereotypes linked to abilities or lack of abilities and other stigmas such as "welfare Queen" or the "strong black woman" trope. The literature shows that black women's motivation in institutions can

be hindered through various concepts from societal expectations, community expectations, academic expectations, systemic stereotypes, and other stigmas.

Moreover, my premise for further research hypothesizes that black women in academia will have a lower "imposter phenomenon" (IP) than their White female counterparts when they have a stronger connection to their other social identities, in particular gender and race. To put this more succinctly, the implication of Maslow's theory proposed that individuals' sense of motivation attributes to how one satisfies their own needs. This postulates behaviors of people who reached self-actualization, which leads to a more driven and determined person to reach their full potential based on their motivation (Cherry, 2014; Snowman & McCown, 2015). It is argued that Maslow's theory, particularly the tiers of love and belonging, counter the study of Vaughn et al. It also counters the work of bell hooks and her assertion of "practice of freedom." Her philosophy of educational freedom as a practice and not a routine describes education and the classroom as a counter-strategy to the customary model of society. She further asserted that the education model should be a "practice of freedom" where teachers' pedagogical practices and students' learning theories co-exist, even in a political and social surveillance culture. Hooks believed critical analysis and critical thinking ideas are evenly transformed (hooks, 1994).

Furthermore, hooks (1994) noted that educators have the professional moral responsibility to use engaged pedagogy as a process to help students reach "self-actualization." Again this counters the theory proposed by Abraham Maslow, which emphasized motivation and needs as a pathway to self-actualization (Cherry, 2014). However, one counter to this claim is how educators further support marginalized students within marginalization — i.e., black girls. In other words, has this theory, along with other theories, supported educators' pedagogical practices and the learning process and motivation of black girls as students, and how does the societal context play a role in this motivation of black girls in PK-12 spaces?

bell hooks ~ "To hear each other … to listen to one another, is an exercise in recognition."

How does the sociological context of families, communities, and media play a role in academic motivation for black girls and women? While some

researchers argue that media plays a significant role in the motivation in academics of black women and black girls, other researchers claim that the racial identity of black women and black girls plays a more prominent role. Black women and black girls with a predisposition of a solid or weak racial identity can attribute to more motivation or lack of motivation academically. It was found that a solid racial identity was linked to academic curiosity and academic persistence (Butler-Barnes et al., 2017). This was conducted through a survey of 733 black girls from various socio-economic backgrounds and school districts where factors such as racial identity and school climate were examined (Butler-Barnes et al., 2017). It was noted that a strong racial identity was a protective precursor within the dynamics of the school climate (Butler-Barnes et al., 2017). This means that black girls and their racial identity work as a protective shield, even in environments where hostility is paramount. Therefore, Maslow's tier of physiological needs implies that basic needs are the foundation to reach self-actualization. Nevertheless, this tier does not include nor indicate how racial identity and ties to cultural identity are important factors in reaching self-actualization. Furthermore, Maslow's theory of needs does not address how other intersectional identities of black women and black girls correlate with expectations of academic motivation from a larger context. One counter to this claim implies the tropes given to black women and black girls as precursors to resilience in education spaces and the larger society.

As stated earlier, hooks asserted that education should be a place where multiple epistemologies arouse transformational knowledge where students are pushed to challenge the systemic inequities that maintain their marginalized positions (hooks, 1994). In addition to this, hooks' argument, coupled with Maslow's theory and Bandura's theory, could be viewed as complex if other perspectives and other societal experiences are absent from the frameworks. With both arguments, academic motivation studies have shown that both boys and girls face challenges, as supported by hooks, but other findings found that black girls have "higher overall academic achievement and motivation compared to boys" in the school context (Epstein et al., 2017; Skinner et al., 2018, p. 683). However, I argue that the "higher overall academic achievement" concept of black girls adds intrinsic and extrinsic motivation domains and questions how "higher overall academic achievement" is defined through other epistemologies. Other epistemologies conceptualize pedagogical practices from a Western world ideology. However,

these epistemologies are used as distractions from other foundations used to study the origin of knowledge. These other forms are described as "inclusive metaphysical epistemology," where black girls in education thrive beyond the scope of racism, sexism, classism, disabilities, and other marginalized intersectional identities (Belgrave and Allison, 2019, p. 45; Bell, 2003). As mentioned earlier, inclusivity in the public space of education is an essential part of the holistic development of black women and black girls. It is a necessary component as part of the black female journey to achieve the highest accomplishments in these spaces, which can be detrimental to the overall psyche of academic achievement.

This is where Bandura's social learning theory of self-efficacy of black girls is explored. Bandura believed that learning is influenced by "observation and modeling," conditioned to set determinants such as memory and attention (Cherry, 2021, p. 1). Based on this, it is argued that environment — i.e., family and community-plays a primary role in protecting the psychological safety of others, in this case, black girls and that certain behaviors can be influenced through media. This claim could either help or hinder overall academic motivation. Albert Bandura's social learning theory of self-efficacy for black girls in education spaces aligns with the idea of socialized stereotypes of resilience where expectations of the "strong black woman" trope are emphasized (Abrams, 2019 et al., p. 1). If we explore media as part of the triadic reciprocal model of Bandura, it would be defined as a communicative process and device that purports narratives (*Merriam Dictionary,* 2022*)*. These narratives project false perceptions of individuals in the larger society. Butler-Barnes et al. argued that a strong racial identity in black girls leads to academic curiosity and achievement, yet media displays false interpretations of black girls and black women that contradicts the study of Butler-Barnes et al. but highlights the Vaughn et al. study regarding the "imposter phenomenon" (IP) (p. 780). One example of false narratives projected as false perceptions occurs in the public sphere as cyberbullying. Research correlates higher incidents of cyberbullying to lower levels of self-esteem and self-worth, resulting in depression (Pennington, 2017). What is equally essential for educators to be socially aware of are constant false narratives regarding images and representations of their black female students through media. Some examples of these false narratives range from aggressive behaviors to undesirable physicality based on skin tone (Llo, 2021). False media images and comments

made on social media platforms could cause a detriment to the self-concept of black girls, where determinants such as memory and attention are voids to academic motivation. Even though studies contradict this theory, it would be argued that racial identity was the only construct examined in the Butler-Barnes et al. 2017 study, where other identities were obsolete.

Berger and Riojas-Cortez (2020) argued the role educators play in not only understanding the family dynamics of students — in this case black girls and academic motivation — but also how "changes in policies may affect children and families" (p. 10). Furthermore, Berger and Riojas-Cortez (2020) asserted that educators become familiar with policies from larger systems that may impact their students and families, but how they will respond in a call to action manner in the microcosm of the PK-20 space. In other words, these impacts for educators must be understood from distal systems to more proximal paradigms.

To explore this further, academic motivation, and factors such as self-esteem and self-worth, and images is examined through the seminal work of Urie Bronfenbrenner's Ecological theory. Bronfenbrenner (1992) describes how societal and cultural norms from distal environmental systems can influence the interactions, relationships, and practices within proximal environments. However, an implication of the framework is the conjecture that environmental systems are not predictors of human development, but rather a way to understand how systems could influence human development. Bronfenbrenner (1992) recognized how human development is influenced by systems as shown in Figure 1.1.

Figure 1.1 Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory (*Source: Cormac 404,* "Some Thoughts on Ecological Perspective of Social Media Research"
https://cormac404.wordpress.com/2017/05/18/some-thoughts-on-an-ecological-perspective-of-social-media-research/)
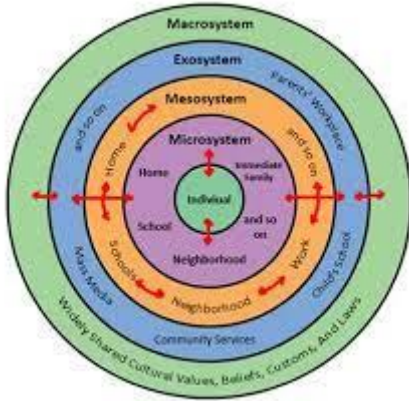
What this framework shows are 5 systems that have distinct roles on how it influences human development — in this case black women and black girls and their academic motivation. The outer part of the framework known as the chronosystem includes how children develop overtime within their environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1992; Berger & Riojas-Cortez, 2020). Examples of this could include a child's biological and social changes in cognitive and physical developments to experiencing deaths within families, in particular to COVID-19 and its impact on academic motivation among black women/girls. The inner parts of the framework of the macrosystem includes the cultural norms and traditions where ideologies and perspectives are shaped through a single-axis lens through policies, politics, and other trends (Bronfenbrenner, 1992; Berger & Riojas-Cortez, 2020). Furthermore, the exosystem becomes more personal than academic because children are influenced by changes in parents' work schedule or parents' levels of employment and changes in government actions (Bronfenbrenner, 1992; Berger & Riojas-Cortez, 2020). The mesosystem and microsystem become more proximal and major influence where children form "face-to-face" relationships with their social groups (p. 10). Examples of these social groups include families, peers, communities, schools, and other services.

The Bronfenbrenner theory systems model was based on a Western ideology of distal and proximal influences on human development; therefore, the

examples used to describe this influence on human development is questionable and should be compared to other theoretical perspectives. However, a more Vygotskyian ideology indicates that our learning comes through historical and cultural contexts (Snowman & McCown, 2015), therefore, terms such as "families, peers, etc" may be defined and presented more distinctly through different cultural contexts. Social trends from the chronosystem impact black women and black girls' academic motivation as families, peers and other services — sociological contexts — of the microsystem influence their human development on views of self-image and self-esteem. In summary, these false narratives as presented above through media and other public platforms could hinder the academic motivation for black women and black girls who are faced with images of themselves shown as adverse behavioral problems of society but also viewed as undesirable within physicality in skin tones. What this means for educators of black girls in is to take into account the sociological context that influences behaviors and attitudes and how Bandura's triadic reciprocal model of causation can help educators to understand how media also plays a role in how this demographic in PK-12 spaces views themselves compared to their other counterparts. This conceptualizes how both theories - Maslow and Bandura - shape the experiences of others. However, Maslow's theory needs more deep dives from educators, administrators, and the larger community to expand our knowledge of social justice in education for black women and black girls in education spaces. In closing, educators must be cognizant of these issues among black women and black girls in PK-20 spaces where assumptions of their resilience or the "strong black woman" trope is misleading.

In summary, bell hooks' quote regarding hearing listening, which leads to recognition, can be described as the "emotional testimony" (Bell, 2003, p. xix) of black girls in education. It is a prophetic charge that forces educators to hear black girls and black women in education and become active listeners of social change—being cognizant of the issues that black girls face and experience more than any other marginalized or privileged group should open up floodgates of viewing education as a social action instead of education as a form of imagined theoretical practice.

Conclusion

Academic motivation for black women and black girls involves an understanding on how triadic reciprocal models and needs hierarchies based on Western philosophies and ideologies shape attitudes, behaviors, and motivation across PK-12 spaces. These spaces also extend to institutions of higher learning where experiences and expressions of black women in particular are devalued or not included into the Western ideology of expectations and notions of self. As mentioned earlier, hooks (1994) argued that classrooms are spaces where equitable opportunities of conscious critical thoughts of transformational knowledge are exchanged to help generations to challenge systemic inequities that main their marginalized status on a global paradigm. Within this context, hooks (1994) deep dive analysis of education spaces provides implications where classroom canons may or may not serve black women and black girls effectively and efficiently. Data on school dropout has declined according to the research, but the data fails to mention the expressions and experiences of black women and black girls within their sociological context — i.e. perceptions in media — and how this may help or hinder their motivation academically. To add to this, hooks (1994) noted the classroom as "the most radical space of possibility in the academy" (p. 12). Questions arise to challenge the traditional role of these spaces opposite to hooks assertion. These spaces for black women and black girls must be examined closely to ensure a sense of resistance against systemic barriers which impact the demographic on all levels of "isms". The Butler-Barnes et al., 2017 study revealed that black girls who have a strong racial identity have higher achievement and higher academic curiosity. However, it is essential to also consider Bandura's triadic reciprocal causation model – i.e., environment — to bridge the gap among false media images where families provide the positive reinforcement of the "black is beautiful" concept, but more so promoting the black women and black girls are beautiful effect instead. Since the research concludes that positive affirmations of self leads to self-acceptance, education spaces must consider this a major role in academic motivation and success. Black women and black girls whose other identities are not surfaced to explore coupled with motivation academically, socially, and culturally, then educators and families are faced with perpetuating more social injustices where authentic ally ship becomes more performative.

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TRAUMA-INFORMED ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION FOR AT-RISK YOUTH

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Introduction

Educational equity involves inclusive and fair practices for all students, regardless of personal circumstance. Schooling should allow students to achieve their educational potential and develop basic skills that will help them succeed in life. True equitable education requires a systemic understanding of the complicated challenges confronting students. Some learners face significant educational disadvantages due to trauma, resulting in deficiencies in academic and behavioural outcomes. The impact of complex trauma has created an emerging demand for alternative educational pathways for youth at risk of school drop-out.

Alternative education programs are intended to reduce truancy, behavioural and academic issues, increasing student achievement which has positive impacts on society (Adams, 2018). These programs may decrease rates of early school leaving and minimise adversity by providing a learning environment that is safe, structured and nurturing where students can flourish. Within a mainstream education context, students from lower socio-economic areas report higher instances of negative teacher interaction and punishment, increasing the risk of school drop-out (Loftus, 2017). Effective, trauma-informed alternative education programs can engage students by providing a supportive non-traditional classroom setting and practical curriculum that develops student success resulting in school completion.

Adolescent school drop-out

The perceptions of early school leaving, disengagement, non-participation, and school drop-out is diverse worldwide, as the consideration of appropriate student completion age is varied. Regardless, school drop-out rates are influenced by external factors such as social and economic issues including

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culture, family and financial pressures (McGregor & Mills, 2012). Familial risk factors for non-completion include coming from a non-nuclear family and low-skilled parent occupation, or parent non-completion of further education (Curtis & McMillan, 2008). Other contributing factors for disengagement from education include school-related issues, including issues with low achievement, pedagogy, policies, and relationships (McGregor & Mills, 2012).

For decades, it has been recognised that academic and social problems in school are associated with ongoing aggression and violence, failure to achieve outcomes, and truancy that may lead to school dropout (Maguin & Loeber, 1996). This behaviour that can lead to early school leaving causes a range of cascading impacts including societal costs (Dodge & Pettit, 2003). School drop-out rates may be attributed to complex trauma, including child abuse. There are multiple worldwide studies that note the significant societal burden that child abuse can cause (Conti et al., 2021; Fang et al., 2015; Peterson et al., 2018; Wada & Igarashi, 2014). An Australian study estimated the annual cost per child as $AU176,437, totalling a yearly government expense of $AU9.3 billion (McCarthy et al., 2016). In addition to this, there is also evidence that the outcomes of unaddressed complex trauma can be passed on through generations, leading to further economic burdens on society (Babcock Fenerci et al., 2016).

The negative outcomes of school-drop out are not only limited to societal cost, but may extend into other adolescent behaviours such as drug use, delinquency, and teen pregnancy, all of which can greatly impact the community and larger society. Acknowledging the importance of understanding why misbehaviour occurs is pivotal as this understanding influences our response (Edwards & Watts, 2004). Adolescents at-risk of behaviour with serious consequences indicates the incredible need for effective educational programs implemented universally to reduce and prevent these negative outcomes (Bailey, 2009). Preventative education programs have been used for many years, and Hawkins & Catalano (1990) have suggested that they are particularly useful before the onset of risk behaviour and attachment to school has been proven to reduce drug involvement and delinquency. However, exposure to multiple traumatic events is a predictor for increased youth delinquency and psychological concerns (Ford et al., 2010). Buffering the effects of adolescent trauma through suitable educational opportunities is not only an appropriate response, it is an effective method to promote

protective factors and reduce the risk of reckless behaviour and early school disengagement.

Defining Trauma

Trauma is an individual experience of fear and vulnerability, overwhelming the brain and resulting in the body's perception of extreme danger (Van der Kolk, 2014). Traumatic events are those that can adversely affect a person's emotional, social, mental and physical wellbeing. Many people will be exposed to some level of trauma at one or multiple times in their life, and it is estimated that up to two-thirds of children before the age of 16 are exposed to a traumatic event (National Child Traumatic Stress Network, 2020). Trauma can cause physical and psychological stress responses, can be experienced in various ways, can be physically and/or emotionally damaging, having a lasting negative impact on an individual's wellbeing (SAMHSA, 2014). It is important to note that trauma is categorised in various ways and that there are different types of trauma, with definitions and categorisations varying slightly; however all types of trauma can have damaging neurobiological, psychological, and sociological impacts.

Trauma can generally be broken into one of two categories, simple trauma or complex trauma. Simple trauma, also known as Type I trauma or single incident trauma, may occur after one singular stressful event such as an accident, natural disaster, or medical procedure. Even though this trauma is often referred to as simple trauma, there is nothing simple about it. The 'simplicity' comes in being able to trace the traumatic event to a singular incident and understand how this has impacted the individual, family and sometimes an entire community. Complex trauma, or Type II trauma, spans over a period of time and includes multiple and ongoing threats to personal safety. Complex trauma may include being exposed to family violence, sexual or physical abuse, and neglect. This type of trauma is ultimately concerning for students as complex trauma can lead to shame and disconnection from the community (Brunzell & Norrish, 2021), which may increase the likelihood of school drop-out. Complex trauma can significantly delay a child's development, which could considerably impact learning and behaviour. Complex trauma can be categorised into three groups: developmental trauma, adverse childhood experiences, or intergenerational trauma.

Developmental trauma, sometimes called childhood trauma, originates from attachment theory (Bowlby, 1978). The association between the behaviour of the parents and child development was first understood by John Bowlby who recognised that physical closeness determines psychological safety (Holmes, 2014). Attachment theory was later expanded on and further developed by Mary Ainsworth, who coined the term *secure base* (Van Rosmalen et al., 2016). Attachment theory reveals the importance of the early years of a child's life in creating a sense of safety and a secure relationship with a primary caregiver. Children who grow up with a secure base understand how to interact with the world around them. Securely attached children understand the difference between situations they can control and those where they need help, whereas children with insecure attachment understand that nothing they do can bring help, therefore 'being conditioned to give up when they face challenges later in life' (Van Der Kolk, 2014, p.113).

The association between poor health outcomes and complex childhood trauma has been clearly identified in the 'Adverse Childhood Experiences' (ACE) study (Felitti et al., 1998). This study highlights consistent linkages between childhood trauma and multiple problems that manifest in adulthood, such as unhealthy behaviours, socialisation issues, intellectual ability, mental health and wellbeing, and physical ailments (Brown et al., 2009). There is a correlation between the amount and extent of adverse childhood experiences and the risk factors for the leading causes of death in adults (Felitti et al., 1998). The impacts of trauma do not only affect children throughout their childhood, but rather throughout their entire life. Behaviour problems in adolescence has also been linked to the ACE study (Greeson et al., 2014). The interest in trauma-informed practice in school has revealed the extent to which marginalised learners, for example at-risk youth within alternative programs, have been exposed to adverse childhood experiences (Spratt et al., 2019). Therefore, understanding a trauma-informed approach to education is quintessential, and offering alternative systems is favourable.

Intergenerational trauma is passed through generations from parent to child. Inherited phenotype changes can be passed on through generations, particularly within certain people groups affected by trauma. Survivors of war and other historical atrocities are at increased risk of PTSD (Ryan et al., 2016). Linkages have been made between extreme stress endured and such challenges like compromised immunity and neuroendocrine alterations, which

may have psychological and biological intergenerational impacts (Ramo-Fernández et al., 2015). Although this type of trauma is passed unintentionally (O'Neill et al., 2018), it can inevitably lead to attachment and coping issues, cumulatively impacting the culture and society (Mazor & Tal, 1996). O'Neill et al. (2018) notes that survivors cope with unspoken and unidentified trauma, and a psychoeducational understanding of the discrimination of minority cultures can inform those impacted by transgenerational trauma. Intergenerational trauma should be studied at a meso and macro level, as the transgenerational transmission of cultural trauma not only impacts the individual, but also resonates within the wider community and affects society as a whole (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). A neo-liberal understanding of education may not be adequate to suit the needs of all students within a society, particularly those impacted by intergenerational trauma. There needs to be a greater understanding of the impacts of cultural and intergenerational trauma amongst educators, as this affects not only their classroom, but also the wider school community and the entire educational system.

The Impacts of Complex Trauma

The extent to which complex trauma may affect an individual is multi-dimensional. The research conducted by sociologists and psychologists in the ACE study has reported the frequency of childhood abuse and the resulting long term consequences (Felitti et al., 1998). The plethora of research around stress and trauma demonstrates that prolonged or continuous exposure to harm has exceedingly negative consequences for the health of a child both physically and mentally (Schneiderman et al., 2005). The negative impacts of complex trauma can include, but are not limited to, changes in brain structure and functioning, attachment difficulties, health problems, and socialisation and behavioral issues that can manifest both internally and externally (Cross et al., 2017).

The consequences of chronic childhood maltreatment are permanent neurobiological alterations, significantly heightening the stress response, commonly known as the fight, flight, freeze response (Thompson et al., 2014). When an individual is in survival mode, higher order brain function is temporarily suspended and blood flow is selectively diverted to body parts necessary for survival (Wolpow et al., 2009). A child's executive functioning skills are susceptible to genetic and environmental factors due to brain

neuroplasticity, which highlights the importance of socio-ecological systems, including a child's family community and school, in developing executive functioning skills (Center on The Developing Child at Harvard University, 2011). Neuroplasticity of the brain supports constructing behaviour, emotions, and physical wellbeing, and allows for modification throughout one's life, whether that be in a negative or positive way (Leitch, 2017). Brain malleability can be considerably influenced by the surrounding environment, emphasising the need for effective schooling practices.

Environmental influences and experiences of children can significantly impact their development. A young child's experiences and surroundings affects their developing brain and physiological systems responsible for both physical and mental health (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2020). The science of epigenetics indicates that environmental and behavioural factors can affect how an individual's genes work by leaving markers that are not embedded within the DNA sequence, but affect how one's body interprets a DNA sequence (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). Epigenetic changes do not change your DNA sequence and the effects are reversible. This is particularly important to note because this means that although some students may have the propensity towards behaviour that cause disengagement from education, the situation is not despairing. With effective trauma-informed educational practices, the environmental and behavioural supports offered in alternative education can be hugely beneficial to the life trajectory of young people and reengage them in education.

Trauma affects a student's abilities, both academically and socially (Downey, 2008). Downey (2008) suggests that trauma can affect a child's sleep, memory, capacity for language, and cognitive ability, all of which significantly impact a student's ability to learn in the classroom. In addition to this, Downey (2008) reports that children with trauma may have notable social issues including attachment difficulties, poor peer relationships, and a need for control. Complex trauma from long-term child abuse has long term effects, leading to dysfunctional behaviours (Corrigan et al., 2011), including depression, dissociation, anxiety and arousal difficulties (Williams, 2006). Stress hormones can trigger a student's fight, flight, freeze response which can manifest in aggressive, avoidant, or anxious behaviour. A student in fight mode may display aggression towards peers or teachers in the classroom, whereas a student in flight mode may unexpectedly walk out of class. Students

who go into freeze mode may be more difficult to detect, as they may remain calm externally, but internally they may have a heightened heart rate and be unable to engage effectively in classroom activities. The effects of complex trauma are multifaceted and therefore students impacted require a holistic educational support where they are understood and included in a safe and inclusive learning environment. Trauma-informed schooling practices can play an important role in offering appropriate educational practices that can help a child's participation and engagement, inevitably having a positive overall effect on a student's brain malleability.

Disengagement from Education

Adolescents suffering from ongoing abuse often display a decreased capacity for socialisation, and increased presentation of internalised and externalised behaviors, along with disengagement from the school system (Shonk & Cicchetti, 2001). The adverse effects of complex trauma inhibits a student's capability for self-regulation and therefore prevents successful behavioural and academic adaption to a school setting (Howard, 2019). A child's exposure to violence has been connected to a lower grade point average (Hurt et al., 2001). This is significant because schools have the capability to improve the educational outcomes for students suffering from traumatic stress (Crosby, 2015). There is an undeniable demand for intervention programs focused on redressing trauma due to high rates of traumatised students (Amin et al., 2020). The psychosocial challenges that children who suffer complex trauma endure may allow for poorer engagement with school and relationships when compared to their peers. The impacts of this will not only affect the individual with trauma, but also the teacher, school support staff, and the entire system (Chafouleas et al., 2018). Conflicts may arise between the school, external support services, and the student's home when it comes to managing the behaviour of a student with complex trauma (Howard, 2013).

Traditionally, schools have taken punitive approaches in managing student behaviour because of behaviour management policies in schools that often lead to suspension or exclusion. Hickey et al. (2020) have reported that the lack of understanding and support for behavioural and other issues, such as undiagnosed learning difficulties, has led to more trauma for learners with an already traumatic background which fosters a negative relationship with schooling. This negative relationship with the school system results in

students disengaging from school. Repeated disengagement from students affected by complex trauma can be seen in a physical, emotional, or cognitive sense. Students may have issues with truancy, engaging with their peers, or participating in the curriculum. This can leave large gaps in their learning, affecting students psychosocially and academically. Therefore, it is essential that school staff are educated on the effects of trauma and that there is a larger organisational approach to support these learners within the education system. Conventional education systems may not always address the socioemotional needs of students who do poorly in mainstream education, whereas staff in alternative schools are trained to build empathetic relationships with students and offer a sense of belonging with the approach of unconditional acceptance (Edgar-Smith & Palmer, 2015). Alternative education settings strive to offer youth at risk of disengaging from education a supportive environment and adapted curriculum so they can complete their education and continue on a positive life course.

Alternative Education

Alternative education programs are developed in response to community problems (Carpenter-Aeby & Aeby, 2001). These programs include a variety of non-traditional approaches to education and may include such facilities as reengagement or learning support centres in public schools, independent schools specifically aimed at at-risk youth, and juvenile justice education within the prison system. Though the research in the field of trauma-informed practice in alternative education is on the rise (e.g. Hickey et al., 2020; Morgan, 2015; Pronk et al., 2020), it is difficult to make comparisons due to the large variety of programs considered *alternative* (Pronk et al., 2020). However, regardless of this, there is much that can be learned from the current research conducted thus far.

Students within alternative pathways come from a variety of backgrounds including residential homes, domestic violence and substance abuse situations, households with poverty, parental and family incarceration, and the juvenile justice system. In addition to these, students may also come from culturally diverse backgrounds (indigenous, refugee and migrant children) where cultural and language issues may have impacted their ability to conform to the public education system. As previously noted, there is a pervasiveness of adverse childhood experiences among marginalised learners (Spratt et al.,

2019). These experiences can cause these learners to disengage from education through early school leaving. The complex trauma these disadvantaged children have suffered can result in cognitive and behavioural impairments making a traditional classroom unsuitable. Alternative education delivers non-traditional programs that aims to reengage at-risk youth in education. However, there is a systemic issue of labeling students *at-risk* or *disengaged* because these terms create an individualisation of the problem, essentially putting blame on the students instead of the education system (Te Riele, 2006). Te Riele (2006) suggests that these students should be considered marginalised, focusing the attention from individual to society. This societal issue can be addressed through alternative education since these programs are designed to reduce behavioural issues, truancy, academic failure, and provide successful interventions that may increase student achievement and reduce recidivism.

The marginalisation of students with complex trauma within the education system is concerning, and marginalised students are those greatest at risk for leaving school prior to completion. The key issues remain with curriculum, teaching strategies, and teacher-student relationships (McGregor & Mills, 2012), which should be considered when engaging students in education. Alternative programs are intended to prevent school drop-out and negative life outcomes through creating a safe, structured environment allowing adolescents to flourish (Pronk et al., 2020). The creation of an alternative, or non-traditional, school environment aspires to build key relationships with students and have them achieve educational engagement until graduation. For the effective engagement of marginalised youth in an alternative program, a relational pedagogy from a trauma-aware approach is imperative (Morgan et al., 2015). Teachers can build the capacity for resilience by fostering a nurturing and supportive environment that promotes healthy development in students' lives (Masten & Barnes, 2018). Research shows that a supportive adult assists in the development of a child's executive functioning skills, and children who lack this supportive connection at home can create a healthy relationship to a teacher (Riley, 2010).

Positive classrooms that empower learners are created by teachers who make it their priority to develop caring relationships with their students (De Jong, 2005). A relational approach with learners from a trauma-background is important as these students require extensive support from their teachers.

Rosanbalm and Murray (2017) advocate for co-regulation techniques through providing a warm and responsive relationships, teaching self-regulation, and structured environments. Although co-regulation practices are discussed from an early childhood perspective, they can also appropriately be applied to learners suffering from complex trauma. This is particularly important in an alternative education setting as specialised staff can help students better engage with their peers, teachers and curriculum. Developing relationships and pro-social behaviour is vital, as the foundation of learning is centered on building effective relationships and social connections. It can be difficult for a teacher in alternative education to foster attachment and build positive relationships with their students. The defiant behaviour of their students should not be taken personally, and teachers in this setting must be enthusiastically dedicated to nurturing a positive teacher-student relationship, utilising a fresh start approach every day (Howard, 2013). Negative displays of behaviour is trauma-related and not a personal attack on school staff. It can be difficult to endure defiant behaviour, but each student deserves the chance to have an advocate inspiring their success. Because of the unique and complex nature of alternative education programs, a trauma-informed approach is essential for success.

The field of trauma-informed education is emerging, and the research is continuing to grow. Though this field is steadily growing, there are large gaps in the frameworks that are largely decontextualized (Gherardi et al., 2020). This is true in the context of alternative education since there is a need for more research to be done on trauma-informed practice within these programs (Hickey et al., 2020; Morgan, 2015; Pronk et al., 2020). With this in mind, trauma-informed alternative education may benefit learners with complex trauma and lead to reductions in symptomatic behaviour (Fondren et al., 2020). An effective trauma-informed alternative program would train staff in practices that would promote positive educational outcomes and student wellbeing (Craig, 2016), helping learners reengage in education. Features of trauma-informed educational practices include a dedicated staff that embodies teamwork, effective curriculum and instruction, school-wide behaviour management and a supportive management team (Horsford & Powell, 2016). Students can feel supported in building self-regulation skills and be able to better engage with learning when teachers and school staff are patient and understand that a student's behaviour may be the result of underdeveloped

neural networks (Brunzell & Norrish, 2021). Respectful and non-judgemental trauma-informed language should be used system-wide and should be clear and understandable. Further research on trauma-informed education is necessary to fully recognise the best approach in classrooms with trauma-affected students (Brunzell et al., 2016).

Conclusion

Trauma-informed alternative education is one societal response that could reduce school drop-out rates by providing an unconventional means of education for students with complex trauma backgrounds. Alternative educational programs are holistic and could decrease the negative long-term impacts of complex trauma by offering a range of protective factors. Through this safeguarding with trauma-informed approaches to education, the expectation is that the trajectory of a student's life with complex trauma can be brought closer to their peers who do not suffer the same burdens. The first objective of alternative education is the milestone of graduation, however the impacts that these programs can have will last a lifetime. Alternative education is an equitable approach to education that can provide key opportunities for those students with significant disadvantages that inhibit school completion.

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EXAMINING TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE POSSIBLE LINK BETWEEN BULLYING AND HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUT RATES

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Bullying is fast becoming a worldwide epidemic among school-aged children. One-third of school-aged students across the world are bullied (UNESCO, 2018). Some argue that there is a reported link between bullying and drop-out rates (Hernandez, 2016; US Department of Health & Human Services, n.d.). Many victims of bullying suffer in silence while experiencing a decrease in self-esteem, self-efficacy, and a heightened increase in anxiety. There have been reports that link bullying within schools to dropout rates. In this chapter, we share data from teachers and their personal experience with bullying for purposes of the following: a) how bullying affects their role as a teacher; b) how does it affect school drop-out rates; and c) what suggestions do they have in reducing drop-out rates caused by bullying. Consequences are severe who drop out of school including higher rates of unemployment, higher risk of criminal activity, poorer health, and lower living standards (Ogresta et al., 2018; McDermott, et al., 2019). In addition, children of individuals who dropped out of school are more likely to face similar problems than those whose parents completed high school (Ogresta et al., 2021; McDermott, et al., 2019; McDermott et al., 2018).

Introduction

Bullying is a worldwide epidemic that affects millions of individuals, specifically children, and teenagers. Not only can bullying affect individuals in the present but can later in life in life, leading to physical injury, emotional problems, social problems, and health problems (US Department of Health & Human Services, n.d.). Although bullying happens in every demographic age group, it is most prevalent among children and teens. At this age, individuals

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are going through different developmental stages, emotionally and physically. Victims might not have the tools necessary to combat bullying on their own. In addition, social media platforms have been a haven for cyberbullying raising the stakes in which individuals can mask their identity or use a fake online identity to bully others (Williford & De Paolis, 2018).

US Department of Health and Human Services (2021) defines bullying as the following:

Bullying is unwanted, aggressive behavior among school-aged children that involves a real or perceived power imbalance. The behavior is repeated, or has the potential to be repeated, over time. Both kids who are bullied and who bully others may have serious, lasting problems (US Department of Health and Human Services, para 1).

There are several forms of bullying. Many researchers have agreed on the following: Verbal Bullying, Physical Bullying, and Social Bullying (Stubbs-Richardson & May, 2021; Kennedy, 2020; US Department of Health & Human Services, n.d.) as shown in Table 1 which is modified from the US Department of Health & Human Services (2021). We have also included Cyber Bullying with the continuous increase of social media which some say has increased as a prevalent type of bullying since the COVID-19 Pandemic (McNamera, 2021).

Table 1
Types of Bullying*

Types of Bullying	Definition	Examples
Verbal Bullying	Saying or writing mean things about the victim	Threats Slander Teasing
Physical Bullying	Hurting a victim or their possessions	Hitting Punching Pushing Stealing/breaking victim's possessions
Social Bullying	Harming a victim's reputation	Excluding individuals Starting/spreading rumors Embarrassing someone
Cyber Bullying	Bullying though digital devices	Embarrassing victim on social media platforms with photos and/or posts.

*Modified from Stopbullying.gov (https://www.stopbullying.gov/bullying/what-is-bullying)

There has been much research on the possible causes of bullying and victimization including rejection by peers, social background experiences, and home environment (Sykes et al., 2017). Bullies tend to be negatively influenced by society, have trouble resolving situations, have negative attitudes toward others, and tend to lack parental support (Cook et al., 2010). Victims tend to lack social skills, tend to have negative attitudes toward themselves, and are also negatively influenced by peers (Cook et al., 2010).

Teachers' Personal Experiences with Bullying

As shared, we wanted to examine novice teachers' past experiences with bullying and if it impacted their role as a teacher. Although there is a plethora of literature examining how teachers perceive bullying (Baraldnes, 2020; Mishna et al., 2020), there is limited research on teachers' personal experiences with bullying. We wanted to see if their own experience transferred to their role as a teacher, specifically if it makes them more sensitive to victims and therefore more proactive in eliminating bullying. In addition, we wondered if they were a victim, did it help them understand the effects of bullying? In addition, we also wanted to know what possible suggestions they had for other teachers, schools, and even teacher preparation programs to help teachers in dealing with school-age bullying. We share our findings in this chapter that can help the educational community, specifically teacher education programs.

Teachers' Role in Bullying

Many researchers have stressed the importance of the role teachers play in modeling appropriate behavior toward others (Murphy et al., 2018; Butera et al., 2021). In addition, the attitude teachers display toward bullying by either being passive or active can affect if the bullying will continue (Casas et al., 2015). Students are perceptive of teachers' actions or inaction in responding to bullying (Casas et al., 2015). The teacher is a pivotal role in preventing and eliminating bullying (Murphy et al., 2018; Butera et al., 2021).

Direct bullying is obvious and apparent while indirect bullying is covert, subtle, and or even anonymous which might be harder for teachers to identify. It is important to be aware of these two types of bullying because it affects the degree of the teacher's action in intervening. Blain-Arcaro et al. (2012) found

that teachers were more impacted and likely to intervene when victims were experiencing physical distress. Carbone-Lopez et al. (2010) found that girls were less likely to be overlooked as victims of bullying because they were targets of indirect bullying versus direct bullying.

Connection Between Bullying and Dropping Out of School

Some researchers have suggested a possible link between bullying and dropping out of school (Cornell et al., 2013; Ogresta et al., 2021). In other words, victims of bullying have a higher risk of dropping out of school. Cornell et al. (2013) found a direct link between bullying and drop-out rates in the study of 9th graders in which the prevalence of bullying as perceived by both teachers and students was predictive of the dropout rates for this group of students 4 years later. Victims of bullying see the school as an unsafe environment, a place where they endure physical and emotional hurt (Maluleke et al., 2021).

There is no argument that those that drop out of high school are faced with negative consequences including being at a higher risk for unemployment, inaccessibility to adequate health care services, and poverty to name a few (Orgesta et al., 2021). As Orgesta et al. (2021) share it can be multigenerational in which the children of high school dropouts are more likely to experience similar outcomes which can ignite the cycle of poverty. This cycle of poverty can play host to substance abuse, mental health problems, and crime (Sanders et al., 2020).

As shared there is a strong connection between bullying and drop-out rates as the effects of bullying can be short-term and long-term (Juvonen et al., 2011; Ladd et al, 2017). Not only can it affect individuals mentally (lower self-esteem, social isolation, anxiety), but it can also affect them academically. In their study of 2,300 sixth graders, Juvonen et al. (2011) found that the students who were categorized as the most bullied performed academically lower than their peers. Ladd et al. (2017) found similar results with their longitudinal study following 383 kindergartners through their twelfth-grade year. They found that students who were victims of chronic bullying had lower academic achievement, increased dislike of school, and lower self-efficacy in their abilities (Ladd et al., 2017). When students have lower self-efficacy and lower academic achievement, they are more likely to drop out of school.

Methodology

We surveyed novice teachers (with 1-3 years of experience) focusing on these areas. The survey was administered online and focused on the following areas.

- Personal lived experience(s) with bullying
- How prior bullying experiences might affect their role as a teacher in dealing with bullying issues in the classroom/school
- What suggestions do they have for preventing bullying
- Perception of there is a link between bullying and dropping out of school
- Suggestions they have for teachers, schools, and teacher preparation programs to help eliminate bullying

Participants

Participants were novice teachers with 1-3 years of teaching experience. They are currently graduate students obtaining their Masters of Teaching and Learning. Of the 22 teachers who completed the survey, 91% were female and 9% were male. Sixty-three percent were Caucasian, 14% were African American, 9% were Hispanic and 14% were Two or More Races. Fifty-five percent of the teachers teach in Kindergarten through fifth grades, 27% teach in sixth through eighth grade and 18% teach in ninth through twelfth grades.

Results and Discussion

Participants' Personal Experience with Bullying

Several survey questions pertained to the participants' personal experiences with bullying. Eighty-six percent of the participants shared they have experienced bullying. Of that percentage, participants experienced bullying at a variety of ages with some indicating they were bullied in more than one age range. Thirty-two percent shared they were bullied from ages 5-to 10 years of age. Eighty-nine percent shared they were bullied at the ages of 11-15 years of age. Seventy-four percent shared that they were bullied at the ages of 16-17 years of age, while 11 percent shared that they were bullied as an adult. As shared some indicated that they were bullied at different age ranges. Sixty-three percent indicated that they were bullied at two different age ranges. Twenty-one percent indicated they were bullied at three different age ranges and 5 percent indicated they were bullied in all age range groups.

One hundred percent of the participants that had shared they had experienced bullying had shared that they had experienced social bullying. Some participants indicated that they experienced more than one type of bullying. Eighty-nine percent had experienced verbal bullying and 32% experienced physical bullying. Sixty-three percent indicated that they are experienced two of three types of bullying and 32% all three types of bullying.

Eighty-seven percent of participants shared they have been a bystander to bullying. A bystander is someone who witnesses bullying but does not take action. Of the participants who shared they experienced being a bystander to bullying, all the participants shared they were a bystander of social bullying, 95% were a bystander of verbal bullying and 42% were a bystander of physical bullying. Some of the participants shared that they had been a bystander of more than one type of bullying with 47% experiencing two types of bullying and 42% experiencing three types of bullying. There were a variety of age ranges that participants were bystanders: Ages 5-10 (32%); Ages 11-15 (74%); Ages 16-17 (63%); Adult (26%). Several of the participants chose more than one category.

Fifty-nine percent of participants currently witness bullying on their campus. One hundred percent of those participants witness bullying by students and 54% by teachers/adults. Participants chose more than one category. The majority of the participants shared they witness bullying incidents in the less supervised areas such as hallways and bathrooms. This is consistent with research that suggests that these areas are targets allowing bullying to continue and should be very evaluated by school officials for bullying initiatives to be effective (Migliaccio, et al., 2017; Lehman, 2020).

Effect of Bullying on Teachers' Roles

In asking how has bullying or their role as a bystander affected their role as a teacher, all the participants shared that their experience impacted their role as a teacher. Participants shared that their experience has helped them in identifying potential bullying situations as well as being constantly aware of what is going on with their students. They were more aware of signs of bullying including students' change of mood, an unexplained increase in absenteeism, and withdrawal in class discussions and/or in recess. With their

lived personal experience, they were able to identify these signs in their students causing them to be proactive in intervening.

Many shared the importance of creating a safe place for their students. One shared specifically about how her class is like a family and they are there for one another. Several also shared that their classroom environment is all-inclusive and welcoming for all students. Empathy was also a recurring theme regarding the importance of modeling and instilling it in the classroom environment.

In addition, several participants shared their students know that bullying will not be tolerated in their classroom. As shared, teachers need to be proactive in their role in preventing bullying. As Murphy and Van Brunt (2018) stress, it starts in setting up the classroom environment focusing on clear expectations as well as focusing on mutual respect.

Perceived Link between Bullying and Dropping Out

Eighty-two percent of participants feel there is a connection between bullying and dropping out of school. As one participant shared "Why would one want to return to a place that felt harmed and isolated?". We thought this was a very powerful statement.

Researchers have also pointed to the effect the role of the relationship between teacher and student can have on high school dropouts (Noble et al., 2021). Noble et al (2021) shared that a positive relationship between teacher and student can help prevent high school dropouts but a negative relationship can have the opposite effect in being a contributing factor. Students need positive as well as consistent individuals in their lives. Teachers can play this role and can be a very powerful resource.

Suggestions from Teachers

Participants shared suggestions to help in eliminating bullying for both school administrators and also for teacher preparation programs. Regarding providing suggestions for school administrators, many stressed the need for effective anti-bullying programs at their campus that are accessible for students and teachers. Only 41% of the participants shared that there is an anti-bullying program at their school/campus. Furthermore, several shared that there is little information for students on how to use these anti-bullying services and if

they are available, they are ineffective in their perception. In addition, several shared the need for a support system for students and teachers regarding providing guidance on the proper channels for reporting bullying.

Although, many school districts adopt bullying programs as a short-term effort to eliminate bullying. But for them to be effective, they must change the school climate and student behavior producing a long-term effect (US Department of Health & Services, 2021). There are many resources for schools and districts to utilize. We have provided a table that includes organizations and their links that provide statistics, resources, and strategies to help school administrators implement and or improve anti-bullying programs at their campuses.

Table 2
Anti-Bullying Resource

Organization	Website Link
US Department of Health and Human Services	https://www.stopbullying.gov/resources/external
Kidpower International	https://www.kidpower.org/bullying/
PACER's National Bullying Prevention Center	https://www.pacer.org/bullying/
Committee for Children	https://www.cfchildren.org/resources/bullying-prevention-resources/

Teachers also shared the importance of teacher preparation programs in providing training in preventing and stopping bullying in the school environment. Teacher preparation programs need to increase their effectiveness in educating teachers in helping put an end to bullying in schools. The teachers can be a powerful source if adequately trained and prepared.

A recurring theme regarding what teacher preparation programs can do is providing professional development that is realistic and understandable for the teachers to incorporate into their classroom. Several participants shared the importance of providing de-escalating training as well as focusing on socio-emotional skills. In de-escalating behavior, teachers should be trained in selecting the best approach for a variety of situations (Murphy & Van Brunt, 2018).

Participants also shared the importance of self-reflecting and being aware of one's self-biases ensuring they are not unintentionally modeling bullying. Researchers have shared the value of incorporating culturally relevant

pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Walker & Hutchison, 2020). Culturally relevant teachers create an environment that has high expectations for the entire class, stresses the importance of connectedness as well as community and incorporates students' cultural values and beliefs in learning (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Walker & Hutchison, 2020). Crownover and Jones (2018) recommend that teacher preparation programs incorporate relational pedagogy encouraging humanity and social aspects of teaching such as modeling empathy for students. In addition, Burleigh and Wilson (2020) recommend that teachers also received professional development in identifying microaggressive behaviors which can be a precursor to bullying and if identified as well as addressed can help prevent bullying.

In their study with preservice teachers, Rose et al. (2018) found that there was also a need for teacher preparation programs to focus on bullying and victim identification as well as prevention. Most importantly, the participants shared the importance of ensuring training was realistic and could be applied in classrooms versus using textbooks as examples warranting a need for tangible training that is engaging and woven through their program.

Concluding Thoughts

Bullying and dropping out of school are serious issues facing school-age students across the globe. Bullying can have long-term consequences affecting victims emotionally and physically. There are also negative consequences for those dropping out of school including an increased risk for a reduced quality of life, criminality, an increased risk of poverty, and poor health care (Morrow & Villodas, 2017; Sanders et al., 2020). In our study, we examined teachers' perspectives on the possible link between bullying and dropping out of school. Participants agreed that there is a strong link between the two and although bullying may not be the sole cause for dropping out of school, it can be a contributing factor for some students. For the majority of the participants that have been bullied or have been a bystander of bullying, it affected their role as a teacher and how they established their classroom environment. Surprisingly, very few of the participants shared that their campus and/or district had a viable anti-bullying program for students. As an educational community, this is an area that we need to strengthen in ensuring teachers have effective professional development and schools have an anti-bullying systematic program. Teacher education programs, need to incorporate training and skills

in courses to help teachers understand how to identify bullying, provide strategies for de-escalating situations, and also create a culturally competent classroom (Murphy & Van Brunt, 2018).

Bullying can be a contributing factor for some who drop out of school. For those who drop out, there are a plethora of factors but bullying is one that the educational community can help in minimizing. We share this data in hopes to help teachers, school administrators, and teacher preparation programs eliminate bullying in hopes to decrease high school drop-out rates. The data highlights teacher perceptions of the damaging effects bullying has on students and school communities. The awareness emphasizes the need for the educational community to be proactive in the prevention of bullying.

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A CRITICAL ANALYSIS ON THE FACTUAL BASIS OF THE CURRENTLY MOST ACCEPTED EXPLANATORY MODELS OF DROPOUT IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract

There is much empirical evidence that shows that in the last forty years in much of the Western world, dropout rates in higher education have remained almost unchanged. Although student retention seems to be the most studied and discussed aspect, nearly every empirical study on the causes of dropout in higher education and even more the impact of retention actions carried out by universities, in most cases has achieved modest results. This paper argues that this fact finds its explanation, to a certain extent, in the nature of the methodological approaches and factual supports of the empirical studies that most of those actions were based on. In this regard, there are strong arguments and empirical evidence that reveal the deficient nature of the factual basis of the most accepted models, theorizations and measurements on the dropout in higher education. Among them are those that underlie the models proposed by Vincent Tinto and Adam Seidman, the main current references on the subject. The most significant questions point to the low reliability of the inferences produced from the application of surveys, especially the National Survey of Student Engagement, very recurrently applied throughout the Western world in empirical studies on dropout in higher education.

Key words

Higher Education, Dropout, Surveys, Methodological Approaches, National Survey of Student Engagement

Introduction

The high magnitude of dropouts in higher education (hereinafter, HE) is ubiquitous (Cabrera, Bethencourt, González, and Álvarez, 2006). Currently, the dropout rate in HE in the countries that make up the *Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development* (OECD) is of the order of 40% (OECD,

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2012), and a substantial proportion drops out in the first year (Acevedo, 2015; 2020; Torenbeek, Jansen, and Hofman, 2010). Dropout rates are even higher in Latin America and the Caribbean, at around 50% (Rodríguez-Gómez, Feixas, Gairín, and Muñoz, 2015). Indeed, according to a study carried out at the end of the last decade (García de Fanelli and Jacinto, 2010), Argentina and Mexico registered dropout rates in HE of the order of 50%, and Chile and Peru 30%. A more recent study (Lastra and Mihal, 2016) establishes that in 2009 the dropout rate in the first year in Argentine public universities was 60%. In Uruguay, the dropout rate in HE estimated by the main study in this regard (Boado, Custodio, and Ramírez, 2011) for the period 1997-2004 is practically the same as that corresponding to the average registered in the OECD countries; 36% of students who access HE in Uruguay drops out, half of whom do so between the first and second year.

The phenomenon of dropping out of studies in HE began to be a matter of concern in the Western world from the last third of the last century – especially in countries where the massification process in HE was already beginning to consolidate in the 1970s (Cambours and Gorostiaga, 2016) – and it has been accentuated over the last two decades. In addition, the interest in reducing dropout in HE received a strong boost from the growing relative weight that various national and supra-national organizations attribute to it in their university rankings (Cabrera, Tomás, Álvarez, and González, 2006; Corominas, 2001). The dropout rate was taken as a key indicator of the performance of universities (Bricall, 1998; OECD, 2012) and of the quality of education, both at an organizational and institutional level (Johnston, 2013; Yorke, 1998), tangible in the case of Europe with the creation of the *European Higher Education Area* as a result of the *Bologna Declaration* of 1999. In this sense, there is consensus that a high dropout rate is indicative of low educational quality (Cabrera, Tomás, Álvarez, and González, 2006), while it highlights a certain failure in the teaching and learning processes (Luque, García Cedeño, and de Santiago, 2014) and particularly in the institutional activities of orientation, transition, adaptation and promotion of the student body (Álvarez, Cabrera, González, and Bethencourt, 2006).

The abandonment of studies in HE is a worrying problem due to its personal, institutional and social repercussions (Cabrera, Tomás, Álvarez, and González, 2006; Webb and Cotton, 2018). The students can live this situation as an experience of failure or personal frustration (Corominas, 2001), which, in addition to conditioning their ways of facing academic, professional and vital challenges (Figuera and Torrado, 2014b), could even cause psychological damage (Cabrera, Bethencourt, González, and Álvarez, 2006) and a reduction in their future job opportunities (Rodríguez-Gómez, Feixas, Gairín, and Muñoz, 2015). At the institutional level, high dropout rates produce

significant losses of economic income that compromise the financial stability of private educational centers (Morrison and Silverman, 2012) and leave them exposed to the risk of being penalized with government cuts in subsidies or funding. On a social scale, high dropout rates can lead to questioning of the authorities of the educational institutions for the waste of the money invested (Torenbeek, Jansen, and Hofman, 2010) and for the failure to meet academic and social objectives (Cabrera, Tomás, Álvarez, and González, 2006), especially those associated with the need to have a highly trained workforce in an increasingly globalized and competitive market (Morrison and Silverman, 2012; Rodríguez-Gómez, Feixas, Gairín, and Muñoz, 2015; Schuh and Gansemer-Topf, 2012; Seidman, 2012a; Serra, 2012).

The abandonment of studies in HE is, therefore, a matter of growing concern for universities and especially for their authorities, since the survival of both depends on it. On the other hand, in a highly commercialized world like the current one, in which an instrumental vision of HE tends to prevail, knowledge and associated skills are commodities that are endowed with a high potential economic return, which impacts on the meaning and use of the knowledge that is learned in universities (Zepke, 2014).

From this perspective, within the framework of the dominant neoliberal ideology in ever-growing portions of the world and the growing drive towards the generalization and internationalization of HE, the abandonment of studies stands, then, as a huge concern of the economic system on a global, regional and local scale. In this regard, the economic implications of dropping out of HE studies have been extensively discussed (i.e., Carpenter, Hayden, and Long, 1998; Habley, Bloom, and Robbins, 2012; Schuh and Gansemer-Topf, 2012; Thomas, Adams, and Birchenough, 1996; Yorke, 1998)

It should be noted that both at the institutional and organizational level, the dropout as a problem reaches serious dimensions due, in addition, to the fact that it is a phenomenon that is difficult to approach with the usual instruments of public policies (Brunner, 2011). Despite the theoretical and conceptual advances in this regard, the very profuse accumulated research – according to Serra (2012) between 1980 and 2012 in *Google Scholar*, more than three million articles on school retention in universities were registered – and the large amount of money and resources that for decades have been invested in the implementation of programs and services to promote student retention – above all by facilitating their transition to the social and academic systems of universities – in the last thirty years have not been able to achieve a significant reduction in the dropout rates in HE (Lyche, 2010; Mortenson, 2012; Seidman, 2012b).

While it is logical to conjecture that in the absence of such actions, these rates would be even higher (Seidman, 2012b), the problem and concern remain in

place, especially because since the mid-1990s in much of the Western world, dropout rates have remained virtually unchanged (Cabrera, Pérez, and López, 2014). This seems to have been more noticeable in the case of HE in the US, where although "student retention may be the most studied and discussed aspect [...], over the last forty years, nearly every empirical study on the causes of attrition and the impact of interventions on retention has yielded only modest results" (Habley, Bloom, and Robbins, 2012, p. xiii).

A plausible explanation for this situation lies in the fact that the implementation of actions that are effective in achieving a significant reduction in the dropout rate in HE is not entirely within the reach of the university center's management. The incidence in the abandonment of some inherent characteristics of the student who enters a HE center – previous academic preparation, abilities and skills, personal attributes (of gender and class, mainly their cultural and economic capitals), attitudes and values (Tinto, 2012) – and, above all, certain contextual-structural factors – especially those associated with the structure of educational and work opportunities, of enormous relevance in the case of unfavorable socio-academic contexts – require interventions whose definition, design and implementation are, inevitably, external to the organizational sphere.

In any case, the modesty of the results achieved in the last fifty years by the school retention actions carried out by universities, according to the appreciation of Habley, Bloom, and Robbins (2012) alluded to before, also finds its explanation, to a certain extent, in the nature of the methodological approaches and factual supports of the empirical studies that most of these actions were based on.

Main Weaknesses of Quantitative Approaches in Determining Rates and Explanatory Factors of Dropout in Higher Education

The common methodological denominator of most research on the phenomena of dropout in HE is the adoption of quantitative strategies based on descriptive studies with large samples of data provided by reports from government entities or administrative offices of educational institutions.

In many cases, the dropout rates established in the framework of this type of research, in addition to lacking sufficient reliability, inhibit their rigorous comparison with rates from other institutional and territorial contexts (Acevedo, 2020). A notable example is the 36% rate established by Boado, Custodio, and Ramírez (2011) for the case of Uruguay, referred to at the beginning of this text. This rate is an estimate made based on the formula $0.5(1-E)$, where E is the degree efficiency of the system, defined as "the proportion of students 'T' who graduate in a year 't' in comparison to new enrollment in the first year 'N' in the time corresponding to a duration 'd' of

the established careers [...]. That is to say: E = T(t)/N(t-d)" (*idem*, p. 50; author's translation). The application of the coefficient "0.5" was based on a report by the UNESCO *International Institute for Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean* (IESALC): "IESALC argued in its Latin American study of university dropouts that 50% of the laggards of a generation – those who are not received within the expected period – could be expected to be received in any way" (*idem*, p. 57; author's translation). In short, this dropout rate of 36% is an estimate formulated for Uruguay based on another estimate formulated for Latin America and the Caribbean as a whole. It should be noted that the estimate that 50% of the laggards will have to complete their university studies, in addition to not being precise, is an average that, by its very nature, overlooks the existence of notable structural, contextual and institutional differences within Latin America and the Caribbean, among which free or non-free studies and access to university, with or without restrictions, play a very significant role. In fact, a recent empirical study (Acevedo, 2020) determined, with absolute precision, that the average dropout rate in three tertiary organizations in northeastern Uruguay in the 2014-2016 period was 48%. In other words, almost half of the students who entered HE in these educational centers in March 2014 dropped out of their studies before October 2016. (The certainty that the 48% rate is endowed with absolute precision lies in the fact that its calculation was made from the information produced in a census applied in 2016 to students who had entered one of these three HE centers at the beginning of 2014, which included both people who were still in their studies at the time of the census, and those who had dropped out; in contrast, the 36% rate established in the Boado, Custodio, and Ramírez study was estimated exclusively on the basis of secondary information.) Prima facie, this is a considerably high rate, at least if the 36% estimated by Boado, Custodio, and Ramírez (2011) for Uruguay is taken as a reference, which is 50% lower.

Beyond these considerations, the comparison between the two is irrelevant, since, among other limitations, in both cases, the factual bases and methodological operations used for the measurement were very different. Even less relevant would be the comparison of any of these dropout rates with those registered in educational centers in other social, political, territorial and institutional contexts, since the existing differences between university systems in different territorial contexts and, above all, the different access policies to each of them, significantly limit the comparability of dropout rates.

On the other hand, a considerable amount of the most recent sociological research aimed at determining the main explanatory factors for dropping out of HE – academic factors (curricular structure, organizational climate, teaching practice, academic demands, equipment and physical infrastructure of the educational center, among others), external or extra-academic factors

(demotic, socio-cultural, political, economic), personal factors (intrinsic motivation, expectations, preferences, interests) – has made privileged use of the production of primary information through the application of the survey technique, almost always according to a self-administered modality, and its corresponding statistical analysis.

In general terms, there is no doubt that the survey technique allows the production of a large amount of standardized and organized information in a short time (Pérez Juste, coord., 2011) and, in addition, at a minimum economic cost (Cea D'Ancona, 1996). No other primary information production technique could offer such capacity; here lies the great comparative advantage of its application: a lot of information in a short time, operating facilities, economy of resources. Indeed, the survey is a "semantically poor but pragmatically rich device. Although not theoretically justified, it is practically justified" (Ibáñez, 1994, p. 111; author's translation). Furthermore, the application of this technique, based on the standardization of the questions and categories of analysis and on the quantification of the responses produced, facilitates the subsequent comparison of results and their generalization (at least within the limits set by the sample design carried out). These are the main advantages, of a clear pragmatic nature, of the application of the survey technique in social research.

But if, based on the opinion of the respondents, what is intended is to determine the main explanatory factors for student dropout or persistence in HE, these advantages are nullified when it is admitted that "there are indicators and variables that, although they may be relevant and very incidental to the phenomenon of dropping out of studies, quantitative approaches do not explore due to methodological difficulties (for example, operationalization and/or measurement)" (Rodríguez Espinar, 2014, p. 64; author's translation). There may also be methodological difficulties associated with certain forms of statistical analysis, such as those corresponding to descriptive statistics. As Cabrera, Burkum, La Nasa, and Bibo (2012) have pointed out, "the real danger of using descriptive statistics […] is that the choice of variables automatically defines the problem and the solution" (p. 191). But this danger does not exist if one uses, for example, multinomial logistic regression models. In the application of surveys, such difficulties emerge together with others of an equivalent nature, especially those related to the validity and reliability of the primary information produced in this way.

These findings, added to the recognition of the multidimensionality and complexity inherent to the phenomena of student dropout and persistence in HE, "have promoted, more recently, complementary methodological approaches that include the use of qualitative strategies aimed at understanding the dynamics implicit in the transition processes to university

and designing contextualized studies in different realities" (Figuera and Torrado, 2013, p. 34; author's translation). Understanding such dynamics requires not only knowing the magnitude and relative importance of the intervening variables, but also, necessarily, the meanings that the actors attribute to the actions that configure such dynamics: "what matters in students' decisions to stay or leave are not their interactions, as objectively defined, but how they understand and draw meaning from those interactions" (Tinto, 2012, p. 253). The need and the convenience of a more adequate exploration – more pertinent, more meaningful, and more effective – thus drive the adoption of other types of research strategies and practices.

The Dependence on Tinto and Seidman Models, and their Deficient Factual Bases. Criticisms of the National Survey of Student Engagement

Academic production on the problem of dropping out of studies in HE also suffers from an excessive dependence on the most outstanding theoretical models – Tinto's (2012) and Seidman's (2012b), as the most frequently cited in specialized literature –, which explains the tacit and uncritical acceptance of the factual bases on which they are built and the overvaluation of some explanatory factors to the detriment of others (Aljohani, 2016). In this regard, as will be shown below, the research that motivated the present text allows us to affirm that the currently most accepted models and theorizations about dropout and student persistence in HE, both nationally and internationally, are built on deficient factual bases in terms of validity and, above all, reliability.

Among the vast spectrum of survey forms designed to account for dropout phenomena and student persistence in HE from a predominantly behavioral perspective, the model example – at least if we evaluate it based on the degree of ubiquity of their employment – is that provided by the *National Survey of Student Engagement* (NSSE), which is widely applied in the US and also used in the latest research by two of the main theoretical references on dropout in HE: Tinto (2012) and Seidman (2012b). In Australia, there is a slightly modified version – the *Australasian Survey of Student Engagement* (AUSSE) –, also of fairly widespread application (Coates, 2010; Gordon, Ludlum, and Hoey, 2008; Kahu, 2013). In many Latin American countries, from the first edition of the *Latin American Conference on Dropout in Higher Education* (*Conferencia Latinoamericana sobre el Abandono en la Educación Superior*), in 2011, the survey on dropout in HE proposed in the *Project ALFA-Comprehensive University Dropout Management* (ALFA-GUIA) began to be applied, initially funded by the European Union and currently supported by IESALC-UNESCO. The ALFA-

GUIA survey forms suffer from the same basic drawbacks as those of the NSSE and AUSSE.

The NSSE, created by a team of experts led by Peter Ewell of Indiana University, began to be applied in 2000 (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates, 2010). Soon its use for research purposes – and increasingly also as an assessment tool for universities – spread throughout the US and many countries in the Western world; in fact, in 2009, just ten years after its creation, the NSSE was applied in almost 1,400 universities (Cabrera, Pérez, and López, 2014). In one of the main investigations on student persistence in the first year of HE in Uruguay (Fernández and Cardozo, 2014a; 2014b) a longitudinal study was developed that took the NSSE as the basis for the elaboration of one of the modules of a retrospective follow-up survey monitoring of young people who had been evaluated by the *Program for International Student Assessment* (PISA) in 2003.

A recently published paper argues that it is striking that a project as complex as that of the NSSE – both the construct itself and the research that nurtures it – has received little criticism, which may be due to the fact that it is "an uncritically accepted academic orthodoxy" (Zepke, 2014, p. 702). However, Cabrera, Pérez and López (2014) affirm that "despite its popularity and the large volume of research that supports its use [...], the validity of the NSSE survey to assess the impact of the university on the student is being questioned by a growing number of researchers" (p. 29; author's translation).

A general question is that "the definition of student engagement within the behavioural perspective is limited and unclear. This restricts its usefulness as a research perspective for understanding student engagement [since it] blends institutional practices with student behaviour" (Kahu, 2013, p. 764). Furthermore, although for its creators the items and scales of the NSSE are robust, theoretically and empirically associated with good psychometric properties, and have construct validity and reliability (Kuh, 2002), other researchers consider that some items lack theoretical justification and it is appropriate to include other scales and dimensions derived from factor analysis (Kahu, 2013). Several authors (i.e., Cabrera, Pérez, and López, 2014; Gordon, Ludlum, and Hoey, 2008; Kahu, 2013) have also questioned the predictive validity of NSSE-based results. For its part, Coates (2008) emphasizes the comparability problems of studies applied by the NSSE and its Australian substitute, the AUSSE, given that the comparison of the survey results – between countries, between organizations and between "careers" – is precisely the main task of its implementation.

Another relevant criticism of the NSSE is that it focuses only on the aspects that the institution can handle, manage or control, and then "a wide range of other explanatory variables are excluded, such as student motivation, expectations, and emotions" (Kahu, 2013, p. 763). This exclusion is significant, since, as has already been emphasized, the emotional and the motivational have an enormous impact on learning (Christie et al., 2008; Zepke, 2014) and, therefore, also in the persistence or in the abandonment of studies.

Another limitation of the NSSE form is that it is like "a single wide angled snapshot and as such misses much of the complexity of the construct: engagement is both dynamic and situational" (Kahu, 2013, p. 768). Furthermore, "a single survey instrument spanning all disciplines is problematic when there is evidence that teaching and learning vary across disciplines" (idem). In a similar vein, Zepke (2014) states that the indicators included in the NSSE and AUSSE questionnaires normalize the meaning of engagement and that the research that led to both provides a totally inadequate understanding of this "one size fits all" phenomenon.

Kahu (2013) highlights some deficient aspects of the NSSE form that are in the background in terms of relevance: "the reliability of student responses regarding the skills they have acquired or used must be questioned in light of research showing students struggle to understand academic terms such as «thinking critically and analytically»" (p. 763). According to this author's argument, both certain problems with memory and recall and the predisposition to respond are potential limitations on the validity of the data produced in this way.

However, the criticisms and questions about the NSSE form on which it corresponds to emphasize here refer to the degree of validity and reliability of the answers provided by the surveyed students. In this sense, Kahu (2013) affirms that questionnaires such as the one from the NSSE "obscure the participant voice with no opportunity for a perspective that does not fit the predefined questions" (p. 763), and therefore fail to capture the dynamic nature of student engagement. All of this leads to the conclusion, as Kahu herself suggests, that qualitative measurements are more effective tools.

Another limitation of the NSSE –and, strictly speaking, of all surveys of a similar type– that restricts its usefulness for understanding student engagement and the explanatory factors for dropping out of studies in HE is that the responses provided by the respondents do not allow us to know the

underlying reasons for that response, or why they gave those answers and not others.

For example, if on the NSSE form the respondent answered that he/she never worked in a group and that outside the classroom rarely discussed ideas about his/her subject with teachers, this information is of little use to the researcher, since he/she is prevented from knowing much more relevant and significant opinions for interpretive work, such as the reasons that led to him/her not working in a group (Because he/she prefers to work individually? Because he/she was never asked to do so? Because his/her classmates were discriminating against him/her?), as well as the reasons that led to him/her leaving the classroom only rarely discussed ideas about his/her subject with teachers (Because he/she is shy? Because his/her teachers didn't enable that possibility? Because he/she lacked time to do so? Because he/she didn't want to show his/her academic shortcomings?) and, even more relevant, for what reason on some occasions it did so and on others did not.

Findings. An Empirical Study whose Results Undermine the Relevance of the National Survey of Student Engagement Form

In view of the above considerations, the research project that gave rise to this text, which was aimed at determining the main explanatory factors for the phenomenon of dropout in the three HE centers of a city in Uruguay (Acevedo, 2020), established a predominantly qualitative cutting method that appealed to observation, in-depth interview and focus group as leading techniques for the production of information, in the conviction that they are the most appropriate to fully understand the object of study and the unique characteristics of the context –social, academic, territorial, institutional– in which this object is inscribed. Within this framework, this project established, as one of its specific objectives, to test the module on student engagement of the NSSE form, according to the version adapted to the case of Uruguay that was applied in the Second Follow-up Survey of adolescents evaluated by PISA in 2003 (*cf.* Fernández, Alonso, Boado, Cardozo, and Menese, 2013), and to evaluate the degrees of validity and reliability of the data produced in this way, as well as the degree of its applicability in the case of the HE centers studied.

In the fieldwork deployed, it was corroborated that the reliability of the set of responses that the respondents produce when applying the NSSE form questions to them is deficient. This corroboration was materialized with the deployment of two methodological instances:

(a) Between July and September 2016, a census survey was applied to students who in 2014 had entered one of the three HE centers considered – both those who continued studying and those who had abandoned their studies by that date – in which a section of the aforementioned form was included: the six sets of questions aimed at determining the student's degree of engagement;

(b) As of August 2016, the in-depth interview technique began to be applied to a sample slightly larger than 10% of that universe (16 students who as of July-September 2016 were still studying and 32 who had dropped out of their studies as at that date); in the course of these interviews, the same section of the NSSE form was reapplied.

In this last instance, almost all respondents provided responses different from those that they themselves had provided in the census survey; in those cases, some additional questions were asked in order to account for this difference, and it could be inferred that the reliability of the responses provided in an interview situation was significantly higher than that of those provided in a survey situation.

Two other findings contributed to explain the low reliability of the responses provided in a survey situation, as well as its low significance and semantic thickness. One of them is that the respondents revealed a notorious difficulty in answering with certainty most of the questions in the module on student engagement in the NSSE application form. This difficulty responds to the inherent limitations of the technique: the response options offered by the survey form constrain the respondent to choose one of them, which may be far from their opinion on the subject matter (if they actually have one); the few seconds that the respondents usually take to answer each question inhibits the possibility that their answers will faithfully conform to their opinion; in those few seconds the respondent must mentally elaborate a kind of average interpretation of some of his/her academic experiences, which in many cases lacks relevance, meaning and, above all, rigor.

The other finding arose as a consequence of a fortuitous event: there were five surveys that, due to tracking errors, were carried out twice (with about three weeks of difference between one and the other, and administered by the researcher, who in that instance also officiated as an interviewer); in these cases, the responses provided by these five respondents in the second survey were markedly different from those provided in the first.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the aforementioned research allowed to conclude that the school retention models formulated by both Tinto (2012) and Seidman (2012b) – undoubtedly the most accepted and currently cited – are built on factual bases that are deficient in terms of reliability, as are the responses that respondents produce when applying the form designed by the NSSE.

This reaffirms the need to provide an alternative model to those of Tinto and Seidman that, in addition to contemplating the theoretical arguments presented here, is based on more reliable factual bases.

Beyond the arguments presented, it should be emphatically pointed out that the limitations of the NSSE survey form or, in general, those inherent to the survey technique – especially the opinion poll – do not disable or invalidate its application in a research that seeks to determine the main explanatory factors for the phenomena of dropout, student persistence or student success in HE. On the contrary, despite these limitations, the application of the survey technique is relevant and useful in technical terms and, above all, pragmatic terms: operational facilities, economy of resources. However, these pragmatic advantages must be avoided in order to encourage the temptation to succumb to scientific practices that dispense with desirable theoretical-methodological criticism and careful epistemological vigilance.

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DROPPING OUT OF "FREE" EDUCATION: ANTECEDENTS AND PROMISING DIRECTIONS

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Introduction

Since the enactment of the "Education 2030" agenda which is captured in the Sustainable Development Goal Four (SDG4) and the declaration of the "Education For All" (EFA) movement, formal education has been given high status and is fast spreading with great momentum in many countries. Education is clearly articulated as a human right across the world. In the age of globalization, it is believed that a country cannot achieve sustainable development without formal education. A country that is armed with educational capabilities in science, mathematics, technology, and other relevant discipline has a higher probability of tackling its social and economic problems. Ghana is one of the countries which hopes to use formal education as a vehicle to alleviate poverty, promote development, enhance the quality of human resources, and build a technology-driven economy. To this end, a considerable number of promulgated policies has been initiated by successive Ghanaian government to promote school enrolment, attendance, and performance. The two most prominent and recent educational policies are the Free Compulsory Universal Basic Education (FCUBE) and the "Free Senior High School" policy.

The FCUBE offers free primary and Junior High School (JHS) education to all children of school-going age while the "Free Senior High School" policy offers free education to JHS graduates who enter into the Senior High Schools (SHS) in the country. It is estimated that Ghana spends over 8% of its gross domestic product (GDP) on education which exceeds the global average of 5%. In the Sub-Saharan African region, Ghana is reputable for its massive investment in the education sector and serves as a model for peer nations seeking to implement "free" education. Notwithstanding the conscious efforts of successive governments to increase educational access, an ample number of students drop out of school at an alarming rate annually. Although 71% of children complete primary education, there is a decline in the completion rate

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for both lower and upper secondary education, with just 47% completing lower secondary and 35% completing upper secondary (UNICEF, 2020). The declining completion rate has been linked to school dropout. In most developing countries such as Ghana, leaving school early is a prevailing problem. Thus, the school dropout poses a significant threat to achieving equitable and quality education in Ghana as advocated in the SDG4. School dropout, conceptualized as a premature school exit (a child who have left school before completion) in this chapter is a global dilemma and one of the critical factors hampering educational growth in Africa.

For a country that hopes to rely on formal education as an engine of growth, leaving school early without a qualification is not profitable. In this chapter, a review is conducted on some of the antecedents of school dropout in Ghana and promising solutions that can mitigate this challenge that serves as a canker to educational literacy. The points discussed in this chapter can be extrapolated to address issues relating to school dropout in other contexts to foster lifelong learning and quality education in the world.

The education system in Ghana and "free education" policies

Presently, the formal education system is divided into three levels; basic level, second cycle education, and tertiary education. At the basic level, the school duration is eleven years and comprises two years (2) of early childhood education, six (6) years of primary education and another three (3) years of junior high school education. Second cycle education includes both senior high school and technical education which are also three (3) years. Tertiary education involves university, polytechnics (technical universities), training colleges (teacher and nursing training schools), and vocational schools which is mostly four (4) years.

After gaining independence in 1957, Ghana has experienced many educational reforms to improve the literacy rate of its citizens and boost economic development through quality education. (Akyeampong, 2009) assert that the education system of Ghana when it became independent in 1957 was one of the best in the Sub-Saharan African region but rapidly declined forty years afterwards. In anticipation to promote a surge in enrolment and expand educational access, the Free Compulsory Universal Basic Education (FCUBE) was introduced in 1995. The objective of the policy was to ensure universal basic education by 2005 to all citizens irrespective of their social status, religious affiliation, ethnicity, or geographical location. (Salifu et al., 2018) mentions that there were other supplementary policies initiated to support the FCUBE such as School Feeding Program (SFP), inclusivity in education, expansion of Early Childhood Development Services (ECDS), and Capitation grant (a policy to abolish the payment of fees where every school receives

monetary support from the government per student enrolled in that year). However, the intended goal of the policy was not achieved. People from rural areas and from poor husbands were the least to benefit from the policy (Akyeampong, 2009; Salifu et al., 2018). (Akyeampong, 2009) mentioned that overage attendance, child labor, and later threatened the success of the policy. Also, aside from the "free" aspect of the policy which sought to eliminate fee payment, the "compulsion" aspect of the policy aimed to pressurize parents to send their wards to school. Parents who failed to comply were threatened with fines. Those who were not able to pay the fines had their children sent home by teachers and this made parents confused about the "free" nature of the policy. In Akyeampong's report, he opines that the FCUBE policy created conditions in the education system that widened the gap in education access between urban and rural communities. Unlike other African countries (such as Malawi, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe) who experienced a substantial increment in enrolment, the FCUBE policy generated slower, steadier growth because it was ineffective in reducing school costs for poor households (Nudzor, 2012). The FCUBE policy has failed to move beyond an increase in enrolment to achieve high completion and transition of pupils.

As Ghana worked to ensure the success of the FCUBE policy, it gave much attention to secondary education. Prior to the 2016/2017 academic year, student enrolment at the senior high school (SHS) was low (at 45%) compared to the steadier increase in enrolment in primary (95%) and junior high school (85%) (Ministry of Education, 2017). Although the strides attained in terms of enrolment at the basic level was something to be proud of, transition and completion rates to secondary education were poor. About five (5) out of ten (10) students who complete at the basic level do not get the opportunity to enter the SHS (A. K. Mohammed & Kuyini, 2021). Thus, over half a million of pupils who graduate at the JHS are unable to access secondary education. The low enrolment at the SHS was attributed to the limited financial capacity of households to pay tuition and other school fees. The incumbent government at the time considered the situation at the SHS level as unacceptable. As a result, a new policy for secondary education called the "Free Senior High School" (FSHS) was rolled out. The FSHS was enacted to replace the Progressively Free Senior High School Education (PFSHSE) which offloaded some cost at the SHS level. The FSHS promised free tuition, no examination fee, no library fee, no boarding fee, no science laboratory fee, no Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) fee, free meals to all pupils, and provision of free textbooks. However, the free SHS and its mode of implementation have been criticized by many researchers (Annim, 2018; Asher, 2018; A. K. Mohammed & Kuyini, 2021). The FSHS policy still remains illusory to many Ghanaians. Some of the challenges is impeding the success of the policy

includes overcrowding in schools, limited facilities and infrastructure, low teacher-student ratio, delay in the supply of textbooks, and insufficient funds to ensure the sustainability of the policy. The increased enrolment because of the policy led to accommodation issues which is being mitigated by an experimented Multi-Track Year-Round Education (MT-YRE), popularly known in the country as "double-track system". The difficulty accompanying the MT-YRE cannot be overstated. All the challenges arising from both the FCUBE and FSHS policies has the efficacy to result in early school leaving.
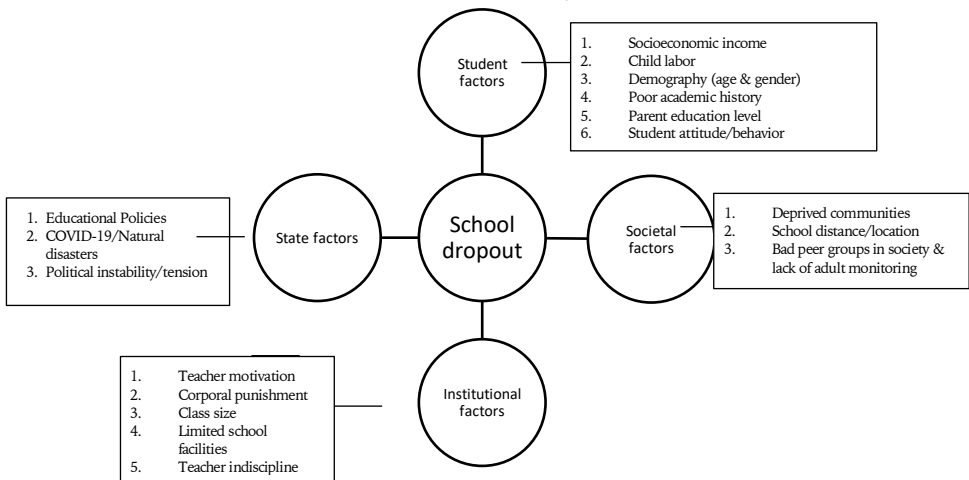
School dropout

School dropout (early school leaving) is simply defined as leaving school early prior to the attainment of a minimal credential, in many cases, a lower or upper secondary diploma (De Witte et al., 2013; Murphy-Graham et al., 2021). A "dropout student" also represents a person who has relinquished their admission at a school without returning or making a transfer to another educational facility. In this era, a new term, "hidden school dropout", has come into the limelight. "Hidden school dropout" denotes a class of students who, despite the fact that they pay tuition, have student status, have their names in the school register are absent from the classroom for a long time to participate in unrelated school activities and fail to complete their courses at the time of graduation (Bilige & Gan, 2020). The pernicious effect of school dropout manifest in psychological trauma, decreased job opportunities, poverty (Archambault et al., 2009; Fortin et al., 2013; Gil et al., 2019), high demand for welfare and intergenerational mobility (Choe, 2021). Excluding the injurious effect of school dropout on human and educational resources, it can also serve as a trigger for social problems such as crime (Bilige & Gan, 2020).

It is widely acknowledged that dropping out of school possess a grave challenge to many countries and to a larger extent rural settings. (Bzour et al., 2021) concurs that school dropout is a phenomenon that is prevalent, in varying degrees, in all schools across the globe. Bzour et al. conceptualize school dropout as a "dangerous phenomenon" because of its propensity to weaken the social and economic structures of countries and increase illiteracy levels. The United Nation's (UN) "Education For All" (EFA) agenda and the American No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) were all inspired by the idea of substantially eradicating the rate of early school leaving. Scholars accentuate that interventions aimed at combating school dropout must be applied sooner than later while students are still in school because it is easier to keep them in school than to convince them to return (Fortin et al., 2013). School dropout can serve as an indication of the educational condition and potential future challenges of a country. In many industrialized and western countries, dropping out of school early has received great attention, but this is not the

case for many developing countries in the Sub-Saharan African region such as Ghana.

Ecological theory as a lens

Numerous studies have found Bronfenbrenner (1979) ecological theory appealing in exploring the concept of school dropout (Kim, 2020; Koc et al., 2020; Ogresta et al., 2021). Bronfenbrenner (1979) posit that the developmental outcomes of people (in this chapter adolescent students) are affected by continuous complex and reciprocal interactions between them and their environment. In ecosystems, there are multifaceted structures that support or reduce a child's opportunities for development. When applied to education and in the context of early school leaving, scholars have used overlapping words to identify different systems/factors as predictors; adolescent, family, school, and neighborhood (Ogresta et al., 2021), individual level, family level, friend/peer level, school level, and community level (Kim, 2020), individual and institutional factors (Haugan et al., 2019), individual, familial, school-related, and social causes (Koc et al., 2020), and so on. All these highlighted factors can be protective or risk factors against dropping out of school. The current chapter conceptualizes the antecedents of school dropout into four main factors; student factors, societal factors, institutional factors, and economic factors. Student factors include both the individual and their family factors, societal factors refer to occurrences at the community level, institutional factors point to school-level factors, whereas state factors allude to ongoing events in the country (such as national policies, the financial situation in the country, etc.) that fosters or inhibit school completion. With the ecological theory is adopted as a lens and findings from literature, these factors are consciously selected to reflect the situation of Ghana (see Fig. 1). The next section discusses the factors in detail.

Figure 8 *Antecedents of school dropout (early school leaving) in Ghana*

Antecedents of school dropout in Ghana

School dropout is a continuous process because immediately students enter school, there is an interaction between their academic, social, and institutional system (Archambault et al., 2009). The diverse factors in the systems affect the commitment of students to their academic goals and other school-related activities. In Ghana, 60% of children of school-going age (4-18 years) are not able to complete their basic and/or secondary education to enter into the tertiary institutions in the country (Anlimachie & Avoada, 2020). Specifically, only 10% of Basic school children (aged 4-13 years) remain at school, 26% drop out, and only 40% of JHS students are able to successfully transition to the SHS. This section discusses the systems identified per the Ghanaian context that contributes to this reason why many children of school-going age are not in school in the country (Fig. 1); student, societal, institutional, and economic factors.

Student factors

The income of the household a student is coming from is one reason why many students are on the streets instead of being in the classroom in Ghana (Sottie & Awasu, 2011). Students from families with low socioeconomic income often do not enrol, absent themselves from school or attrite from school after some time. One underlying cause is the need for manpower to support family businesses such as farming and small-scale trades. The situation is worse in the rural areas which are the backbone of the agriculture sector in the country. Additionally, when there is a large family size, the likelihood of a child dropping out of school is very high. In many cultures in Ghana, families are hailed and accorded with respect when they are able to give birth to many children. There are cases of broken homes or marital conflict as a result of polygamous family structures. Large family sizes and broken homes can lead to economic hardships in the family. In such situations, some children from the same family do not get equal chances to enrol in school or must drop out to support a sibling to complete school to become the breadwinner of the family. Students from poor homes also suffer from poor nutrition resulting in low energy levels to be able to concentrate at school (Ampiah & Adu-Yeboah, 2009).

The low-income level of many households in Ghana is a contributing factor to the rise in child labor cases in the country. The (UNICEF, 2015) reports that 21% of all children in Ghana between age 5-17 years are involved in some kind of child labor. For example, there is a high involvement of children in illegal mining activities popular known as "galamsey". In many areas were where child labor is endemic, many school children are not prepared to miss out on meals at their workplace such as "galamsey" sites instead of staying in the classroom hungry (UNICEF, 2017). The economic

hardship of the economy has conditioned many of the children to value "quick" money rather than spending some few years at school. The UNICEF report indicate that more than one-third (32.5%) of school children combine school attendance with children labor or its worst forms. Many of these children (37.2% are 8-11 years and 29.8% are 12-14 years) are below the minimum employment age and should be in school according to the FCUBE and FSHS policy.

Demographic variables such as gender and age also play a role in the decision to leave school. Pointedly, on gender, it has been revealed that female students are more likely to leave school than male students in Ghana (Adam et al., 2017). This is attributed to a number of factors including the intra-family priorities that exist in some provincial households in Ghana. Thus, most families highly value the male child than the female and as a result, create ideal conditions for the male child to be educated without creating the same for the female. Even in this era of modernity, traces of such practices still reside in the hearts of some guardians. In this case, the sexual orientation of a child becomes a promoter or inhibitor of educational attainment. Also, school dropout and low attendance of millions of females are a result of menstruation and menstrual hygiene insecurity (S. Mohammed et al., 2020). The authors mentioned that some girls are compelled to absent themselves or drop out of school to escape the embarrassment that comes with menstrual accidents at school. Managing menstruation in a school environment among young girls can lead to stress. Teenage pregnancy is also one of the factors why the dropout rate of females exceeds males. Girls are also sometimes pressurized by some families to enter early marriages. In the event of childbirth, they might be hesitant to cater for a child and remain at school.

Students with poor academic history are also at risk of dropping out of school. The poor academic outcomes of students result in repetition which increase the probability of a student learning school when it happens more than once (Ampiah & Adu-Yeboah, 2009). The researchers added that although repetition is something not encouraged in Ghana, students are at times forced to repeat by their parents and teachers to be well-abreast for higher-level academic tasks. Students are sometimes pressurized to quit school when they are unable to meet family expectations.

A prompt to the poor academic history of students is the low educational level of parents. Some students are tempted to drop out when their parents are unable to help them to successfully complete their assignments. Students who consistently record low marks at school might be discouraged to continue their education. The literacy rate in Ghana has seen a rise over the years. The most recent (2018) data on adult literacy suggest that adult literacy (15 years and above) is 79% and (65 years and above) is 50.9% (UNESCO, 2021)

Student attitude or behavior at school influence their attendance rate at school, which ultimately results in dropping out of school. (Opoku-Asare et al., 2015) found that in Ghana, many students engage in teasing, gossiping, and exhibiting trickery or jealousy towards their peers and these contributed to school dropout. Some of these acts often result in fights, quarrels, and insults about ethnicity, color, or body image which does not create a conducive atmosphere for students to learn. Bad student behavior and student indiscipline result in bullying at school. School children who are victims of bullying absent themselves from school, change school or drop out. When students do not feel a sense of belonging or peace at school, they lose interest in academic-related tasks and subsequently leave school. Bad student behavior also manifests itself in alcoholism and drugs which deteriorates the faculties of the schoolchild and keep the person out of school.

Societal factors

Societal or community factors can also be a precipitating factor of early school leaving (De Witte et al., 2013). In many underprivileged communities in Ghana, access to electricity, internet, and basic amenities like running water and roads is a burden. This drawback creates an uncomfortable situation for teaching and learning to occur effectively. The inaccessibility to running water makes it difficult for some of the school children are to take their baths to prepare for school, and as a result postpone school for another day. Students choose to be absent from school mainly to avoid being ridiculed by friends for an offensive smell. When school postponement becomes a habit, it leads to dropping out of school. For example, in the northern part of Ghana, 50% of the population do not have access to clean potable water which creates illness affecting school attendance (UN, 2020). The lack of water in some communities in Africa has been termed as an educational crisis because it affects attendance rates and academic performance (https://thewaterproject. org/why-water/education). (M. A. Adarkwah, 2021) also adds that in this era of digitization, the disparity between urban and rural areas in terms of electricity and internet access affect student learning, and the associated anxiety has the efficacy to cause students to leave school.

Early school leavers also attrite because of school distance. Due to the underdevelopment of some communities, there is only one school which is often not near many homes. The improper layout of the community leads to the construction of schools outside the community center increasing the walking distance to school for many children of school-going age. Students who are unable to endure the long walking distance and the blazing heat eventually drop out of school. Children mobility to school is a problem in some parts of Ghana and is the reason for the migration of many families and the declining school attendance in the country (Porter & Blaufuss, 2002).

Parents or guardians who are anxious about trafficking, motor accidents or their wards getting lost on their way to school may withdraw them from school or migrate to other areas.

Another predisposing factor of early school leaving is the existence of bad peer groups and the lack of adult monitoring. The societal serenity in some towns in Ghana is threatened by bad peer groups who are often the source of fighting, bullying, stealing, and substance abuse. Bad peer groups in society are also reported to be a source of child sexual adventurism which leads to teenage pregnancy and early marriages that goes on to hamper school completion (Eyiah-Bediako et al., 2021). Bad societal peer groups also manifest in the dressing habit of adolescents which might be contrary to school dressing protocols. The vulnerability of adolescents to bad peer groups and peer gangs in society require keen parental supervision or adult monitoring. However, the working schedule of many parents makes it difficult in ensuring effective rearing practices for their children. The busy nature of most societies in Ghana makes it difficult for most adults to observe and nurture the characters of adolescents. When children feel isolated from adults in society, they form peer groups which often lead to adolescent misbehavior and dropping out of school.

Institutional factors

Teacher work motivation is a grave concern in Ghana's education system (Abonyi et al., 2021). This is evident in the strike action of teachers in successive years (Akuoko et al., 2012). The work motivation of teachers is low and in deprived areas in Ghana, many public schools do not have an adequate number of teachers to instruct students (UNICEF, 2017). Teachers abandon their posts to seek for white collar jobs or remain in the profession but with low commitment(Abonyi et al., 2021). The low motivation and job satisfaction of teachers affect their attitudes and performance. The fallen standards in teaching can affect classroom management and student engagement. The low student engagement can cause students to lose interest in teaching content/lessons and ultimately result in school dropout of the adolescent. The work motivation of teachers can affect the teacher-student relationship which can catalyze the early school leaving of the schoolchild.

Corporal punishment also gives rise to school dropout. (Ampiah & Adu-Yeboah, 2009) mapped out the incidence of school dropout in the northern part of Ghana and found that student attrition from school was a combination of several factors including corporal punishment. Currently, corporal punishment has been prohibited in schools to create a positive climate for students to study, although mild forms exist at the home (Addae & Tang, 2021). One study revealed that teachers believe the ban on corporal punishment has led to gross indiscipline among students (Dwamena, 2021). Thus, the topic of corporal punishment has been dealt with even amid the ban

since teachers feel they have been deprived of their authority in the classroom. In such situations, teachers might not forge good connections with students which can lead to dropout. Additionally, the increasing student indiscipline as a result of the ban can lead to dropping out of school.

Early school leaving is also associated with class size (De Witte & Rogge, 2013). In Ghana, many primary and secondary schools have large classes which affect the self-efficacy of teachers and the academic performance of students (Adarkwah et al., 2022). For example, Osei Kwadwo and Konadu (2020) in their study found that the 2014 teacher-student ratio in Ghana was 1:30 at the primary level and 1:14 at the lower secondary level which was not desirable in comparison with 1:17 and 1:12 at the primary and secondary level respectively of high performing countries. (Abotsi, 2013) proposed that class size is one major predictor of performance in Ghanaian schools as it affects teaching style and student interest. When teachers are not able to attend individual needs of students because of large classes, the academic growth and emotional needs of a student might be overlooked. In such instances, teachers may not be able to keep a score on every student's progress and attendance rates. Students who find the teaching, not in tune with their expectations and interests might drop out of school. Small classes promote collaboration between teachers and foster good relationships between teachers and students.

The lack of school resources and facilities also present a unique challenge that expedites dropping out of school. In analyzing the dropout factors in a municipality in Ghana, the lack of school facilities and resources such as teaching and learning materials influenced students' decision to leave school (Perprem & Yiridomoh, 2020). (Kumbeni et al., 2020) associates the lack of washing facilities to maintain the menstrual hygiene of girls to the alarming absenteeism and dropout rates of girls during Junior High School in Ghana. (Pov et al., 2020) attest that research findings from both developed and developing countries indicate that school facility distribution is a significant predictor of school dropout. Most pre-tertiary schools lack basic infrastructure such as school desks for students, information communication technology (ICT) labs, textbooks, latrines, chalkboards, and so on which make teaching and learning more attractive and engaging.

Teacher indiscipline in Ghana which comprises absenteeism and harassment also accelerates early dropping out of students. First and foremost, teacher absenteeism denies schoolchildren in Ghana quality education because teachers arrive at school late, leave early, or may not show up (Opoku et al., 2020). Although the Ministry of Education in Ghana has "zero tolerance" for teacher absenteeism, many teachers, especially those in the rural areas where there is less monitoring absent themselves or leave school before closure to attend to other school-unrelated activities. Students in such schools might lose

interest in their studies or perform abysmally in a district or state exams, which can affect their desire to remain in school. Also, there are reported cases of sexual harassment in some high schools in Ghana which also causes school dropout. A study in Ghana revealed that 20% of the respondents believe that sexual harassment from male teachers account for some of the reasons why school girls drop out of school (Ussif et al., 2020).

State factors

The promulgated educational policies in Ghana aim to boost the economy by making its citizens knowledgeable and technologically driven. As reviewed earlier, at the heart of both the FCUBE and FSHS policies is achieving universal education. Nonetheless, the policies still remain illusory to many schoolchildren in Ghana. (Adarkwah, 2022) and (Salifu et al., 2018) reports myriad challenges in the aftermath of the policies. For example, emerging challenges of the FSHS include inadequate infrastructure which has led to overcrowding in classrooms and dormitories, increment in teaching hours which puts more stress on teachers and behavioral problems among students, high administrative cost because of the need to employ teachers to instruct many students, and the delay in the release of funds and supply of textbooks. To supply the deficiency in the FSHS with respect to infrastructure and limited physical space, the government of Ghana (GoG) subscribed to a Multi-Track Year-Round Education (MT-YRE) system (popularly known in Ghana as "double track"). In this approach, the student body is separated into two groups where they alternate with each other every semester. Thus, one group stay at home and wait to replace the other after the end of every semester. All the aforementioned problems have the potential to cause adolescents to drop out of school. In the case of the MT-YRE, students might lose interest in school during the holidays and commit themselves to business ventures. The increase in contact hours can also lead to boredom and fatigue which translates into misbehavior of students. (Salifu et al., 2018) also reports problems with the FCUBE such as insufficient funds to ensure the sustainability of the policy. Also, poor households which the policy aimed to relieve the burden of cost still experience challenges with financial constraints because of other charges at school (e.g., procuring school uniform). Since students lament about "extra charges" at school at both the Basic school level and secondary school level, a question to ask is; how free is the "free education"?

Also, educational policies in Ghana have not been inclusive enough. Many students with disabilities (SWDs) quit school prematurely because the school environment is not friendly in mainstream schools in Ghana. The lack of assistive devices for adolescents in special and mainstream schools are all accelerating factors of early school leaving.

There are other policies that promised to promote the welfare of teachers to increase their motivation but have failed to succeed. This is evident in the trend in strike actions of teachers over the years. As reviewed earlier, a decrease in the motivation of teachers can negatively influence their attitude towards students and teaching style which all can cause a student to abandon school.

Unforeseen and unfortunate national disasters such as the COVID-19 which disrupted education delivery globally hampers school completion. During the COVID-19 crisis, the social distancing guidelines and lockdowns jeopardized the educational careers of the world's student population. It is projected that the global level of schooling and learning will fall substantially because of the COVID-19-related school closures (Azevedo et al., 2021). The World Bank report by (Azevedo et al., 2021) estimates that there is a likelihood that nearly 11 million students from primary up to secondary education will drop out of school as a result of income shock from the pandemic crisis. A national project to investigate how the COVID-19 affected dropout rates in Ghana found that in comparison to the 2018 survey data, dropout rates remained the same, falling from 2.1% to 2.0% (Abreh et al., 2021). However, despite efforts from the government to promote a smooth transition to new levels, it was observed that repetition rates were high across all grades from an average of 3.5% in 2018 to 10.5%. These projections suggest that there is a need for a high readiness to tackle natural crises such as the COVID-19 to prevent a setback in achieving universal education.

Tensions created in the country by political actors or parties can also impede the graduation rates of schoolchildren. Ghana has relatively enjoyed peaceful elections for about two decades now. However, political rivalry associated with ethnic groups in the country has the potential to cause political tension and social discrimination among school children. The published data by UNICEF suggest that dropout rates vary by ethnic groups in the country, and this allude to social discrimination arising from multiple sources such as politics (https://data.unicef.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Ghana_Fact _Sheets_Digital.pdf). The politicization of the distribution of school resources and facilities also affect some areas in the country by reducing school attendance and completion rates. Also, the politics of school reform also affect dropout rates. An example is the change of the school years at the secondary level to four years by the New Patriotic Party (NPP) and the subsequent change to three years by the National Democratic Congress (NDC) when they assumed power. Such infrequent changes which are often politically motivated can affect school attendance and graduation rates of schoolchildren in the country.

Table 1 Completion – Rates & headcounts by various socioeconomic characteristics

		Completion rate (%) (children who do not complete)			Headcount (children who do not complete)		
		Primary	Lower secondary	Upper secondary	Primary	Lower secondary	Upper secondary
	Total	71	47	35	526,500	920,700	1,104,800
Sex	Male	69	45	35	288,600	505,500	531,700
	Female	73	50	34	238,000	415,200	573,200
Area	Urban	79	61	47	167,300	309,400	444,500
	Rural	65	36	22	359,200	611,400	660,400

Source: UNICEF
(https://data.unicef.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Ghana_Fact_Sheets_Digital.pdf)

Promising Directions

Undeniably the FCUBE and FSHS policies are admirable and a noble cause. Statistical projections indicate increased enrolment at the basic and secondary school level (Adarkwah, 2022). However, the target goal of the "free education" policies in eliminating gender disparities, provision of quality education, and achieving universal pre-tertiary education remain an "unfinished business" because of alarming dropout rates. Consolation can be taken from the investment in education by the Ghanaian government and the increasing realization of the need for education by many citizens. This section of the chapter discusses ten (10) ways of enhancing the education system in Ghana to alleviate premature school exit which is a real handicap of the "free education" policies.

Public education: There is a need to synthesize the public on the importance of education. Teacher educators should be deployed to the deprived areas in the country where education is not valued to enlighten citizens on the benefits of education to the family and society. Specifically, the diverse courses taught in schools such as "agriculture" and "vocational skills" can be introduced to the community members on how it can help them in improving their farming methods. It is believed that when people see the real help of education in their lives, they will be eager to embrace it. As reviewed earlier, the "free education" policies remain illusory to many Ghanaians. There

is a need to educate the public on what it means and bring it to the table. The public should be aware if there are any costs involved to be prepared for it and help in their budget allocations.

Reform school curricula: Since the school curriculum can trigger a disinterest in a subject and cause a schoolchild to leave school, educators should formulate a curriculum that is practical, situational, and interesting. Policymakers should not wholly adopt the curriculum of other western countries or contexts but design a curriculum that reflects its own context. Also, a problem teachers have to deal with in schools is curriculum overload which can make teaching not interesting and lead to dropout. The curriculum should be flexible for teachers to make adjustments when necessary.

Reducing repetition rates: Improving school flow is a way to reduce dropout rates in school. When students enjoy a smooth transition to the next level in their education, they are less likely to drop out. An award scheme can be instituted for higher academic achievement to encourage students to dedicate their time and efforts to their studies. Struggling students should be identified early and aided to attain good scores in their respective programs to maximize their chances of passing.

Teacher deployment: More teachers should be trained, employed, and deployed to schools with high number of students and less teachers. Educators can increase pupil: teacher ratios (PTRs) to a maximum of 40:1 in lower secondary schools and 35:1 in upper secondary schools.

Motivating teachers: An effective way to retain teachers, improve teacher attendance and their productivity is to ensure working conditions are favorable to them. Motivated teachers are more likely to enhance the academic performance and well-being of students. Also, motivated teachers often are able to forge good relationships with their students and keep their interest at heart. Teachers who are satisfied with their jobs help maintain a good atmosphere and a positive school climate that all help in keeping students at school. Hence, education policies should not only be student-centered but also teacher-centered.

Improving school infrastructure: A mapping exercise should be done to identify schools in need of resources and facilities. Such schools should be prioritized when planning for resource allocation and procurement for schools. Accommodation facilities, ICT centers, libraries, and other basic amenities should be made available to school to make the learning experience of students better and interesting.

Counselling and disciplinary units: Guidance and counselling units should be established to perform a judicial function in schools. This will help in nurturing the attitude of students and in meting out disciplinary measures

at the school. Students who have intentions of dropping out because of a need or a challenge can be assisted by the unit to ensure their retention.

Monitoring situation in schools: One major inhibitor to "free education" is extra charges at school aside from other fees catered for by the policy. Some of the additional fees include the cost of school uniforms, food, and textbooks. Using Ghana as a case, there are reports of teachers selling "handouts" and having extra classes for students at a cost although the policy prohibits such practices. Policymakers in education should monitor the supply of funds, teaching and learning materials in schools, school feeding programs, and other relevant aspects of the school to ensure students are free from extra charges that impede their studies and is contrary to the "free" nature of the policies.

Cost recovery in schools: An emerging problem of both the FCUBE and FSHS policy is its financial burden on the state. To make the policy sustainable and lessen the financial constraints on the economy, students who are from rich homes and are willing to pay for their education should be charged. Waivers should be made available to students from poor households who cannot afford the cost of education. In this way, money can be spared to develop facilities and other aspects of the school which contribute to early school leaving of the adolescent.

Annual evaluation of the policy: The issues arising in the aftermath of the FCUBE and FSHS policies relating to the release of funds, school feeding, accommodation issues, and so on all testifies that the policies are far from perfect. An annual evaluation of the policies by policy experts can help spot issues that needs to be tackled to ensure its sustainability and improvement. The policy process cycle can serve as a guideline for policymakers to identify and solve all challenges.

Conclusion

The chapter discussed some of the various reasons why students prematurely leave school considering that pre-tertiary public education is free and proposes ten (10) interventions to promote the success of the "free education" policies in Ghana to help reduce dropout rates. The ecological theory of Bronfenbrenner (1979) was used to explore the inhibiting variables of school dropout in the Ghanaian context. Four main factors (student, societal, institutional, and state factors) were identified as the antecedents of early school leaving. Promising directions in the reduction of school dropout includes the high enrolment in schools because of the two "free education" policies. Suggested interventions to promote graduation rates in public basic and secondary schools comprise of motivating teachers, synthesizing the public on the benefit of education and what the policies entail, improving the flow of students, reforming the school curriculum, monitoring situations in schools, and annually evaluating the policies. It is observed that although pre-

tertiary education is free in Ghana, there are challenges involving additional costs, the release of funds and materials to school, limited physical space and facilities in schools, teacher-student ratio, and curriculum that all hamper the target of achieving free universal basic and secondary education. Because of the agrarian and developing nature of Ghana's economy, many families (especially those in the rural areas) are low-income earners. This makes it difficult for such families to sponsor the education of schoolchildren. Emergent challenges in the aftermath of the policy implementation should be mitigated to reduce dropout rates. Thus, if the policies are to achieve their intended goals, they need to address the myriad of challenges for dropping out.

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