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CiCe
Institute for Policy Studies in Education
London Metropolitan University
166 – 220 Holloway Road
London N7 8DB
UK

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Gender discrimination and learning disabilities as the main reasons of dropping-out of basic education: A retrospective study in the context of Second-Chance School in Greece

*Domna Michail and Dimitris Anastasiou
University of Western Macedonia (Greece)*

Abstract

This pilot study examines the dropping-out reasons of basic education over the last four decades in Greece. Participants of our study were 102 adult students at two Second-Chance Schools (SCSs) in the region of Western Macedonia. Ethnographic data gathered through students' interviews and participant observation, as well as school records and writing assessments were combined in a mixed methods design. The findings suggest that the reasons of dropping-out can be classified in two major categories, related to gender discrimination and learning disabilities (behaviour problems included), and two minor ones, related to socioeconomic factors and an inhospitable school environment. Suggestions for future research are considered.

Key words: *dropping-out, basic education, gender discrimination, learning disabilities, Second-Chance Schools*

Introduction

The dropping-out phenomenon

The importance of high school education has increased over the last decades and the attainment of a basic education degree has been considered as an important asset in the labour market (European Commission, Directorate-General for Education and Culture, 2001). Dropouts usually experience high unemployment levels and receive lower earnings than basic or high school graduates. Thus, the problem of dropping-out of school represents a serious educational and social problem. For this reason it has become a major concern for policy makers and educators, and also has generated increased interest among researchers in recent years (Psacharopoulos, 2007; Rumberger, 1995). It is worth mentioning, that even nowadays, the current school leaving rate in Greece is estimated to be around 15.3% of the population aged 18-24 (European Commission, Ref. DG EAC 38/04, 2005).

Dropping-out is not usually an accidental phenomenon of school failure. The decision to drop out of school is affected by individual, family, school and socio-cultural factors. In other words, different risk factors are responsible for dropping-out. Not so rare, dropouts cite

reasons across multiple domains (Campbell, 2003-4; Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson, 2007; Hammond, Linton, Smink, & Drew, 2007).

Moreover, dropping-out of school is not an instant or impulsive personal action but a rather cumulative long-term process of disengagement from school (Alexander, Entwisle, & Kabbani, 2001). Individual factors (e.g., learning disability, behaviour problems), family factors (e.g., low socioeconomic status, low contact with school, family instability, physical, sexual or emotional abuse) and negative school experiences of early school leavers (e.g., academic failure, grade retention, poor attendance, school transition or move) are very relevant to the phenomenon of dropping-out (Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson, 2007; Hammond, Linton, Smink, & Drew, 2007; Martin, Tobin, Sugai, 2002, Munns, & McFadden, 2000; Rumberger, 1995).

The importance of studying the dropping-out phenomenon is great. By identifying risk factors for dropping-out, it is possible to design prevention programs or strategies to address the problem of dropping-out (Hammond, Linton, Smink, & Drew, 2007). Besides, the identification of dropping-out factors may be used to enrich the curriculum and literacy practices of implemented adult basic education programs, such as SCSs, and increase their effectiveness.

The dropping-out phenomenon in Greece has not been extensively studied so far, mainly because there were difficulties in tracing adequate sample. However, in a Greek study, Paleocrassas, Rousseas and Vretakou (1997) found that the main reasons for dropping-out were “low school achievement coupled with economic or domestic demands within family” (p. 12). The present pilot study aims at examining the dropping-out reasons of basic education over the last four decades, using a sample from SCS students.

The Second-Chance Schools in Greece

Second-Chance Schools (SCSs) were launched in the White Paper of the European Commission in 1995 with the title “*Teaching and learning: Towards the learning society*”. The purpose of this initiative has been to address the social exclusion and promote the inclusion of socially disadvantaged groups in the labour market (European Commission, Directorate-General for Education and Culture, 2001). By the end of school year 2008-09, 57 SCSs were operating in Greece, covering the majority of the 54 prefectural districts of the country (General Secretary for Life Long Learning, 2009).

SCSs constitute a specific type of education provision for adults who have not completed their basic education (primary and lower secondary grades in school) and consequently lack basic skills and formal paper qualifications (European Commission, Directorate-General for Education and Culture, 2001). The distinctive character of SCSs in Greece when compared to other European countries is mainly detected in the students’ age composition. In most of the European Union Member States, SCSs were directed to tackle youth unemployment and enhance the basic educational skills of young workers. Among EU countries the upper age

limit is commonly considered to be that of 25 years and the lower one that of 16 years (European Commission, Directorate-General for Education and Culture, 2001). SCSs in Greece, however, are generally recruiting a much more diverse population in terms of age, including considerable numbers of students at their 50s and 60s or more, with the age of 25 being closer to the ‘age floor’.

Methodology and Study design

Participants

The participants were 102 Second-Chance students (36 male, and 66 female) in two out of the three SCSs operating in the geographical region of Western Macedonia. All participants in the study had completed their formal elementary education (Grade 1-6) but not the lower secondary education (Gymnasium [High School]), which now constitutes part of the compulsory education (Grade 7-9). Their ages ranged from 25 to 67 years old with a mean age of 40.98 years ($SD = 8.98$ years). In order to study differences in reasons for dropping-out, subjects were classified either as younger students ($n = 52$), (ranging from 25 to 40 years old) or as older students ($n = 50$) (ranging from 41 to 67 years old). All participants had left school in the ages between 12 and 16 with a mean age of 13 ($M = 12.96$, $SD = 1.18$). Regarding the time depth of the dropping-out, 3 participants (2.9%) dropped-out in the period 1950-1959, 11 participants (10.8%) dropped-out in the period 1960-1969, 32 participants (31.4%) dropped-out in the period 1970-1979, 41 participants (40.2%) dropped-out in the period 1980-1989, and 15 participants (14.7%) dropped-out in the period 1990-1999.

Among the SCS-students 31 (or 30.4%) were unemployed, and 52 (51.0%) were low-skill workers or at risk of unemployment. More specifically, there was a high level of unemployment (34.8%) among the women. Also four women (3.9%) reported that they were housekeepers (see Table 1).

Occupations	Gender				Total	
	Male		Female			
	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%
1. Housekeeper	0	0	4	6.1	4	3.9
2. Unemployed	8	22.2	23	34.8	31	30.4
3. Low-skill worker	20	55.6	32	48.5	52	51.0
4. Civil worker	2	5.6	2	3.2	4	3.9
5 Free lancer or merchant	6	16.7	5	7.6	11	10.8

Total	36	100	66	100	102	100
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Instrumentation and Procedures

We used a mixed-methods design combining a quantitative approach and qualitative data, retrieved through school ethnographic research. The main data collection was conducted during the academic years 2006-2007, 2007-2008 and 2008-2009, but participant school observation had started one year earlier (2005-2006). Ethnographic research included participant observation in class and observation of the teachers' gatherings. Ethnographic participant observation was carried out at one of the two SCSs (Kastoria), during a period of two academic years (2005-2006 and 2006-2007) by the first author who also served as a teacher at this school. Participant observation helped us to:

- a) establish good contact with most of the students long in advance, and
- b) cross-check information provided in the interviews.

The in-depth interviews were conducted during the second year of the research project. Individual interviews were conducted with 102 students of the SCSs. Open-ended questions were asked in the interview for assessing reasons of dropping-out. More specifically, we addressed issues related to family, school environment and personal factors that influenced the dropping-out decision. The time of dropping-out was examined in parallel to the socio-cultural and historic context. Also, questions addressed SCS students' employment status. Students were encouraged to compare SCS with the "traditional" school as they knew it. Interviews averaged 20 minutes.

The students' writings were collected at the end of each academic year. Participants were given 30 minutes to produce short texts on the following topics: (a) Their reasons for dropping-out of school in the past, (b) Their opinion about the Second-Chance School (organization, importance, school climate, motives and expectations. Students produced texts of up to 170 words; texts varied considerably in length, structure and other writing dimensions. Writings were scored independently by the second author -after all identifying information had been removed- and an experienced teacher of Greek language, unaware of the research purposes and the scores of the first rater. Scoring was based on holistic methods described by Cooper (1985), Shell, Murphy and Bruning (1989). Scoring categories included: (a) organization, (b) content, (c) spelling, (d) conventions. Each scoring category was assigned a score of 0 to 10. Writings were used as a source for identifying academic performance and/or learning disabilities.

School records were also examined. They provided information about students' time of dropping out as well as an evaluation of their school performance at that time. Moreover, school records and writings were both valuable in cross-checking information given by the students at the interviews in relation to the reasons that led them to dropping-out.

For classifying purposes of the present pilot study, when some dropouts cite more than one dropping-out reasons, cross-checking of information was used to identify the main dropping-out reason.

Results

The reasons of dropping-out

The results suggest that the reasons of dropping-out can be classified in two major categories related to learning disabilities with or without behaviour problems (41.2%) and gender discrimination (26.5%) and two minor ones, related to socioeconomic factors (17.6%) and an inhospitable school environment (13.7%). Among the students of our sample there was only one 27 year-old member of a minority group (Roma) (1.0%) (see Table 2).

Main reason for dropping-out	gender				Total	
	male		female			
	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%
1. Gender discrimination (parental prohibition + marriage)	0	0	27	40.9	27	26.5
2. Learning disabilities and externalizing behavior problems	24	66.7	18	27.3	42	41.2
3. Socioeconomic reasons (poverty and long distance from school)	6	16.7	12	18.2	18	17.6
4. School environment	5	13.9	9	13.6	14	13.7
5. Cultural diversity	1	2.8	0	0	1	1.0

Analysis of our field data has revealed forced dropping-out due to gender discrimination as a culturally determined phenomenon. Our data have revealed that this has been the major factor for dropping-out among women (40.9%). More specifically, parental prohibition on the grounds of gender and dropping out because of marriage were reported as the main reasons of dropping-out by 19 women over 40 years old that were at lower secondary age before 1980s. The same attitudes have been reported by only 8 women under 40 years old. It seems that parental prohibition as a dropping-out reason of basic education started losing ground only during the last 30 years. One female informant noted that her parents suggested: *“Girls do not need to go to school, they should stay at home, prepare their dowry and get married”*. Another informant pointed out ironically that: *“My ‘good’ father cut me off school.”* According to our ethnographic data, parental prohibition was commonly exercised by the fathers.

In addition, a latent form of gender discrimination remains hidden behind ten cases of dropping-out among women because of 'marriage' before the age of 15-16. Encouraging early marriage among women was a common practice within peasant families during the decades of 1970s and 1980s, while our sample (only two cases) does not provide sufficient data for 1990s. Our female informants suggested that marriage had been the only option, since they were not allowed to continue their studies. Sometimes, marriage was viewed by the girls themselves as an escape from a strict patriarchal family structure that overran the traditional Greek society. One of our informants stated it as following: "*What else could we the girls do, other than getting married, since we were not allowed to go to school. Fathers were strict with us at that time, and we needed to feel free from their authority.*" The gender factor has also been found as a very important one for dropping out in a study conducted by Fragoudaki (1998) in the early 1980s in the Prefecture of Ioannina.

Learning disabilities (combined with externalizing behaviour problems) accounted for 40.4% of the dropping-out reasons. All the students who fall into this category reported that they used to have very low academic achievement, while, according to their Greek language teachers' evaluation of their writings at the SCSs, they still continue to confront severe writing difficulties. Their writing skills were evaluated as not exceeding the 3rd grade level of primary school. 19 of them left their studies after their graduation from primary school (Grades 1-6), 13 students had experienced grade retention during the Gymnasium years (Grades 7-9), and 10 students were at high risk to confront grade retention at Gymnasium's grade level because of poor school performance and inadequate attendance. Many other studies (e.g., Alexander, Entwisle, & Kabbani, 2001; Eide & Showalter, 2001) have indicated that grade retention increases the probability of dropping out of school. Paleocrassas, Rousseas and Vretakou (1997) in their research among Greek secondary schools have found that drop-out rate was higher in rural and semi-rural areas than in urban areas, while "the most important reason for leaving school was learning difficulties, mainly in Mathematics, Foreign Languages and Physics." (p. 14)

Learning disabilities, as a main reason of dropping-out of school, have been found more often by male than female students (50.0% and 27.3% respectively). The ratio of male to female students regarding learning disabilities was 2:1. Nevertheless, externalizing behaviour problems in combination with learning disabilities have been found in six male participants (16.7%), and this concurrence seems to increase the frequency of learning disability category among boys compared to that among girls (66.7% and 27.3% respectively). The ratio of male to female students regarding learning disabilities combined with externalizing behavioural problems is now estimated to 2.5:1. Although the most recent epidemiological studies (Shaywitz, et al., 1990) provide strong evidence for a more balanced incidence of reading disability among boys and girls, three and more decades ago the picture for the incidence of learning disabilities among boys and girls was quite different within the scientific community (see Miles, 1978; Yule, & Rutter, 1976). Our 'retrospective' data is therefore lending support to the picture of a more frequent appearance of learning and

externalizing behaviour problems (2.0 -2:5) among male students extending in the past three decades.

Learning disabilities seem to be a hard reality in the lives of early school leavers. Some participants expressed feelings of loss and low self-esteem, while their written work, full of spelling and syntactic mistakes, revealed that their difficulties constitute a very pervasive and long-lasting phenomenon. We refer to a few of our informants' comments on this issue: "*I find it difficult to write... I can't write whatever I think about*", "*I write one sentence and make 35 spelling mistakes and this bothers me*", "*I feel badly about the spelling mistakes I make. When I was working at a furniture shop, I had to write down orders and I felt much stress*".

The two minor reasons of dropping-out are related to socioeconomic factors and an inhospitable school environment. For 18 students constituting the 17.6% of the total number of students, socio-economic reasons were reported as the main ones for dropping-out. Socioeconomic reasons were mostly reported by SCS- senior adult students (≥ 41 years of age) both male and female (12 students), and less by younger students (≤ 40 years of age) both male and female (6 students).

Abject poverty often forced families to permanently interrupt their children's studies. For families living at the edges of surviving it was an important sacrifice for the whole family to have a child studying, especially if home was at some considerable distance from school. Children, both male and female should contribute to their families by working. Studies were usually encouraged by families wealthy enough to afford them. Some interviewees often implied 'poverty' by referring to 'family reasons' (e.g. "*we were many children in the family*"), but many among them directly referred to 'poverty' or the 'impoverishment' of the family that followed the loss of one or both parents.

Long distance from school combined with lack of public transportation, was mentioned as the basic reason of dropping-out by 4 out of the 18 students who fall under the socioeconomic reasons category. Boys and girls, almost equally, were obliged to leave school because of poverty or because of the long distance between home and school. Often, long distance from school had been used by some parents as an additional excuse for not letting girls to go to school on the grounds that they would be exposed to sexual and other threats in their daily commuting. Safeguarding female sexuality, directly connected to matters of family honour and prestige, has been a major issue among traditional Greek communities. The following statement is revealing of such a parental attitude against girls: "*You being a girl should not go up and down alone.*" The improved accessibility to Gymnasium even in the remotest rural areas of the country, has decreased the importance of "long distance" as a risk factor for dropping-out over the last two decades (Paleocrassas, Rousseas, & Vretakou, 1997).

For 14 students of different ages (five males and nine females), school environment has been reported as the main dropping out reason. They stated that they dropped out of school

because they disliked the school environment at the time when they were students. They referred to violence exercised by teachers against students, extreme discipline rules, and flagrant distinctions between 'bad' and 'good' students as the main reasons for their dropping-out. It is worth mentioning that their current writings do not reveal any trace of learning difficulty.

One of our female informants quite dramatically described her personal experience that led her to dropping-out as follows: "*It is difficult to talk about this. For years after having left school, I had nightmares with our teacher being violent against us. Even now, talking about this, I feel as bad as then. I could not deal with such a violent attitude; I was a timid child, and I asked my parents to let me stop going to school.*" Until not more than two decades ago, Greek general education had been an inhospitable environment for diverse students, and at that time there was no alternative to meet their educational needs (e.g., compensatory or special education programs, psychological or consulting services). Revisiting Willis' (1977, 1983) concept of *resistance*, we approached the students' decision to drop out as an action of educational rejection, a turn of the back on the educational system at that particular moment. We refer to what one of our interviewees told us and many others have implied in relation to their participation in a Second-Chance School: "*For us this has been the first chance*".

Concluding remarks

Our research has revealed that the dropping-out reasons can be classified in two major categories and two minor categories. The two major categories are connected with the following prominent sources: a) the cultural factor which in our study is expressed in terms of gender discrimination, and b) individual-level limitations usually expressed as learning disabilities with or without externalizing behaviour problems. The minor categories include: a) the socioeconomic factor often expressed as poverty or long distance from school, and b) a repellent school environment and inadequate instruction. Historically, general education in Greece has treated cruelly diverse students thus, indirectly excluding them from school. Although the aforementioned 2+2 categories reflect past social and historical contexts, they may acquire particular importance as a frame of reference for the study of dropping-out at the present time.

The economic and socio-cultural environment is different today than at the time that the SCS-students constituting our sample used to go to school. Thus, a study of the reasons for return to basic education could shed some light on how the students' personal priorities have changed in the course of their life cycles, as well as to the role that education could play to cater for their present needs.

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