

Early school leavers and the dropout issue in Europe



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The outline

The paper attempts to focus briefly on a number of issues related to school dropouts as we see the discussion in Europe. We think all of the issues discussed below pertinent to the discussion; indeed we think that if they are not attended to it will become unfocused and of little comparative value. We will very briefly address the following issues concerning dropout:

- The European perspective
- Clarification of terms
- The comparative problem
- The issue of perspective
- Back on what track?
- Is there a European issue?
- Is there something to be done? Yes
- Why?
- What and by whom?

The European perspective

There is an intense discussion in Europe about education and the educational systems both along quantitative and qualitative dimensions, from both the social perspective, with emphasis on

a) social concerns, in particular social cohesion, social equality and self-respect, and

b) participation in democratic processes; but also from the economic perspective, in particular with reference to the Lisbon strategy. Thus there clearly is a European perspective, or rather perspectives and it is from the two perspectives, a) and b) that we will discuss the so-called school dropout phenomenon, which is also called the dropout problem.¹

Clarification of terms

Many different definitions of school dropout exist (see e.g. Fossey, 1996). In very general terms dropouts refers to a) those individuals who don't complete the education that the norms define as being good for them and for society (Viadero, 2001; Finn, 1989) and b) those individuals that don't complete the education they have started (see e.g. Montmarquette, Mahseredjian, and Houle, 2001; Morrow, 1986). Category b) is

obviously a narrower definition. For compulsory education, those who discontinued would be in both a) and b) category while those who discontinued at the tertiary level would only be in category b). The situation at the secondary level is gradually approaching that of the primary level, i.e. the norm is approaching that everybody obtains some secondary education in many European countries. The distinction between these two categories is also important, as the first is normative and may have nothing to do with actually dropping out of a programme, but rather refers to the part of a cohort that never registers at a certain level.

It is evident that the terms used in this discussion must be clarified. We will start with a brief reference to some of the terms commonly used in this discussion.

- Completion, retention, non-completion, survival rate
- School leaving, a) the system, b) a school
- Dropout: leave school without graduation
- Stop-out: those who leave and come back later
- Those who do not ever begin? Non-starters?
- Formal completion, but effective dropout (see group 1 in the following)

But it is not only the different terms being used (and consequently the different emphasis they call for). The different levels of the school system must also be taken into account. It is for example very different discussion about *stop-outs* at the adult level from those at the secondary level. In Figure 1, we suggest eight different groups, of dropouts, even though there are only two categories at each level.

In Figure 1, note the different lines from a) to i); it must be decided which group is being concentrated on in any particular discussion. This needs always to be clarified. It is often thought to be implicit but it certainly is not. Furthermore it also needs to be clarified how narrowly defined the term dropout is; would C1 for example be counted with S2? Or from a very different perspective: would a person who does not attend school for two years but then returns in full force qualify as a dropout? Furthermore, is a dropout always defined in administrative terms, totally irrespective of the reason or circumstances in which it occurs?

¹ The distinction is important, because the discontinuation in an educational programme may in some circumstances be well advised and should not without qualification be labelled a problem.

Emerging classification of different school-leaving groups

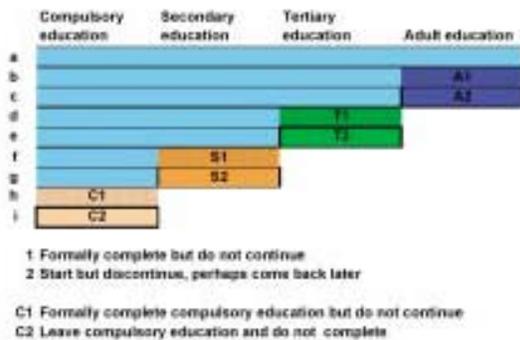


Figure 1. A schematic description, indicating one aspect of the complexity of the dropout definitional challenge.

We suggested that at least three orthogonal dimensions of explanatory concepts are involved. These are (see Figure 2):

- I The school level, e.g. compulsory, upper-secondary, tertiary education.
- II The type of dropout, i.e. not beginning, discontinuing, stop-out students.
- III The causal agents or reasons, e.g. another school is chosen, a job offer comes along, disinterest, problems at school, personal problems or social problems (Jordan, Lara and McPartland, 1996).

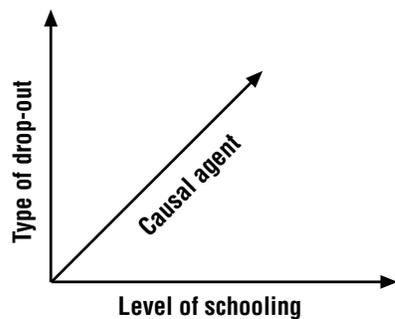


Figure 2. The three orthogonal explanatory dimensions concerning the dropout problem.

The comparative problem: the normal ones

We suggest that in the dropout discussion we have all the normal comparative problems, related to different educational systems, different construct definitions, different attitudes of the student population, different employment situations and different statistical procedures, to suggest a number of common problems that comparative education has to deal with. In addition we have problems at a more detailed level, at the school-level, e.g. the different starting points and duration of compulsory school, similarly different starting ages and duration of secondary and vocational education. Even the terms vocational and general education may not be attributed the same meanings. These comparative problems may, however be overestimated, and we suggest that as long as we are aware of

them they need not disturb a comparative discussion.

The issue of perspective

We suggest that the perspective adopted while discussing the dropout problem is of substantial importance. As an example it may be the case that the system thinks it is a problem that a student drops out of school, while neither the individual school, nor even the student, think so (Dwyer and Wyn, 2001). Similarly the system may think that it is a problem if student wants to return ten years later, even though the school may not think so, and even not the student (even though there may be logistic problems). We suggest that in particular there is a peculiar "system problem" as far as perspectives go. If one adopts an old fashioned system perspective a student should finish secondary school at the age of 17-19 in most countries, and that is it; he has in some way forfeited his chances within the system if he doesn't complete his studies at that time. Then the system has to design cumbersome alternative structures in order to enable him to return (e.g. second chance schools). From a life-long-learning perspective this problem does not necessarily arise. The student goes and comes. In Figure 3, we attempt to convey these different perspectives. Box A exhibits the traditional perspective (which Europe seems to have some difficulties detaching itself from) whereas Boxes B and C exhibit what we want to label the life-long-learning perspective. The figure shows a student leaving and coming back faces very different situations depending on the two different perspectives. (We suggest that perhaps the Icelandic system is more kindred to the BC setting than many other European countries.)

Perspective on educational system school leaving and back on track

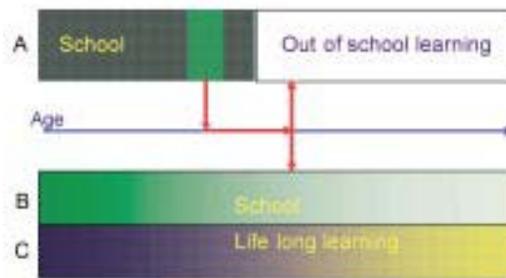


Figure 3. Attempts to display two different perspectives and attempts to show a student returning into very different situations depending on the basic outlook of the system in question.

Thus we propose that it should always be determined from which of the following basic perspectives the dropout discussion is conducted, i.e.

- The system perspective
- The school system perspective versus the LLL perspective
- The preventive - facilitative perspective
- The school perspective
- The social perspective
- The individual perspective

Even though we have in the above only discussed two of these.

Background Papers presented at introductory plenary session

Back on what track?

We think that the conference theme is a very important one, but is perhaps somewhat coloured by the system perspective. And it literally raises the question: back on what track? Does it refer to the school system, or into another system? Or do the students have to return into the same special field in the same school? How specifically kindred has the new option to be to the one they dropped out of, in order for the student to have got back on track? This furthermore begs the question about credentials versus competence. Does the student need the credentials, or does the competence suffice? Does he literally have to return to the system? Would the system be content if the student obtained the desired competence? This discussion brings us into the area of academic drift, where students need consistently higher credentials to be accepted or counted as completers, i.e. not as dropouts (Dwyer and Wyn, 2001).



Dr. Jón Torfi Jónasson presenting his paper

Is there a European issue?

Yes, there is an issue in all the European countries, but is there a common European issue? (See a related discussion in Green, A., Wolf, A., and Tom Leney, T., 1999.) In the following we will use more or less the same figure twice to make a number of simple, but we feel very important points. But before we consider these, consider the following: how high does the non-completions rate at a certain school level have to be in order for the system to consider this a problem? We don't give a response to this question here but leave it as a rhetorical one. Furthermore, do we require some degree of homogeneity at the European level for an issue (or a problem) to become a European issue? We suggest that the answer to this latter question is no, but it needs to be present in a number of countries.

Figures 4 and 5 show the percentage of the population, 25-34-years of age who has not completed upper-secondary education. The lines show the change over roughly a ten year period, i.e. from 1991-2002 (OECD, 2004). In order to glean the main points from the figures notice the following. First the spread of lines, in some countries, Turkey, Portugal, Spain, Italy and Iceland, the lines lie rather high. But note also that there is a consistent decrement in most countries over this short time span: the situation is on the whole getting better.

Percentage of the 25-34 years old population that has achieved below upper secondary education

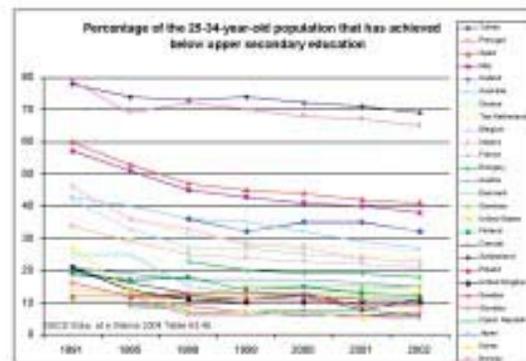


Figure 4. The percentage of the population, 25-34-years of age who has not completed upper-secondary education. The lines show the change over roughly a ten year period, i.e. from 1991-2002. Figure 5 shows roughly the same data but now we have removed some of the high dropout countries in order to see the details somewhat more clearly. Here we may notice that some of the lines are not reclining much whereas other are. The highest point in the figure for the year 2002 comes from Iceland, the lowest from Norway. The Irish line which has the highest point on the left side seems to be among those showing the sharpest drop in the dropout rate.

Percentage of the 25-34 years old population that has achieved below upper secondary education

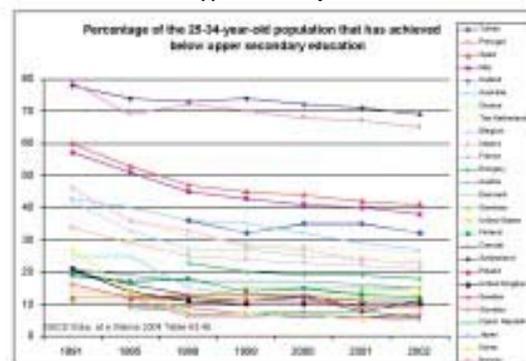


Figure 5.

Is there something to be done?

Now there are two related questions? Can something be done in order to diminish the dropout rate? And then, should it be done? The figures 4 and 5 above suggest that something can be done; at least there have been substantial changes in the situation in many countries. There are furthermore ample reasons based on arguments derived from the economic, social and individual perspectives for a variety of agents to intervene.

We suggest that "emphasis should in all cases be placed on prevention, early detection and individual follow up of those at risk" (Draft to the Commission on Lisbon and VET, p. 105.) There should be responses by three principal agents. The system should respond by ensuring diversity of options among the spectrum of options open to the population that wishes or needs to get "back on track". The individual institutions should



Participants at the plenary session

be encouraged (and given the means) to respond to those problems that are within their purview. And industry should be encouraged to play an active role, e.g. by stimulating the young to undertake some basic education.

Conclusion

We feel that the dropout phenomenon is an important one and a variety of agents within society should concern themselves with it. We also think that it is crucial to pay attention to the issues we have pointed out above in order to make the discussion transparent, intelligible and therefore more fruitful. Both in the general and the more theoretical discussion on school-dropout we have to be quite specific about the school level in question and even when we talk about the same school level we do have different kinds of dropout. Furthermore, and perhaps most importantly, we have constantly to remind ourselves that the drop out issue can be viewed differently by the education system, the school and the student.

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