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School Completion and Academic Success: The Impact of Early Social-Emotional Competence

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Introduction

The vast majority of Canadian youth (aged 18 to 20) graduate from high school (75.8%), and another 12.8% go on to higher education.[1] However, 11.4% of Canadian youth leave school early, with a greater proportion of male than female dropouts (14.7% vs. 9.2%). Although dropout rates have declined over the past decade, from 18% in 1991 (*School Leavers Survey*) to 11.4% in 1999, current figures represent over 137,000 youth who fail to complete a basic education. Early school withdrawal represents a loss for both the individual and community, in terms of reduced potential as contributors to society as well as costs for unemployment, welfare, and other social services.[2,3] In economic terms, Cohen (1998)[4] determined that a single high school drop out can cost $243,000–$388,000 (US$).

Subject and Problems

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What distinguishes school graduates from dropouts? Research suggests that the paths toward academic success and school completion begin at birth and are likely attributable to many different factors, both biological and environmental.[5,6] However, research on school completion has focused primarily on the school years, and on risk factors associated with early school withdrawal and academic failure, with particular attention to student academic skills and family characteristics. For example, we know that students who drop out tend to be less intellectually competent, receive lower grades and achievement scores, and are more likely to have been "held back."[1,7] Dropouts are also more likely to come from lower income and single-parent homes.[1,8] Their parents tend to be less involved and demanding with their children, provide less educational support,[9-13] and are less likely to model educational attainment.[1,8] Academic ability and family support are only part of the picture, however. Although dropout rates are higher among lower income and single-parent families, the majority of dropouts come from 2-parent, middle-income homes.[1,8,14] Similarly, although school dissatisfaction tops the list of reasons given for dropping out,[15,16] difficulty with schoolwork is cited by less than one-third of dropouts.[14] Instead, students cite difficulties in teacher and peer relationships, feeling unsafe or that they did not belong at school, and having friends who already left school as their main reasons for dropping out. Thus, in addition to academic difficulties and limited family support, students who drop out fail to develop a sense of connectedness to the school milieu, citing social-emotional factors as being equally important considerations in understanding academic failure and school dropout.[17,18]

Research: Context and Recent Results

A growing body of research has found that socio-emotional competence is critical for both academic performance and life success,[19-23] and that caring relationships and support within the school community are essential for optimal student learning.[24-27] A recent social policy review by Raver[22] shows that children who have difficulty socially (eg, getting along with peers) and/or emotionally (eg, controlling negative emotions) demonstrate poorer school adjustment and performance. In fact, children's early interpersonal behaviour predicts academic performance as well or better than intellectual factors,[28] and even after the potentially confounding effects of academic behaviour and IQ are taken into account.[29,30] These links are evident early on, with children's social behaviour (eg, aggression) as well as low socio-economic status and early academic difficulties being associated with decreased likelihood of graduation.[5,11,13] Moreover, recent longitudinal studies[31] suggest that these associations are likely causal, with performance

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during the early school years being based on early social and emotional development.

Positive peer relationships can be a protective factor, supporting a child's academic pursuits, with studies showing that peers can serve as effective socialization agents for school engagement and motivation.[31-35] As early as kindergarten and throughout school, having a friend and being well liked are associated with higher academic performance, more positive attitudes towards school, and less school avoidance.[36,37,31] In contrast, being rejected or friendless at school, as well as being aggressive, places children at risk for poor academic performance, grade retention, absenteeism, and truancy, both concurrently and in subsequent years.[7,36,38] However, the impact of early peer relationship difficulties is multifaceted, with poor school adjustment associated with both peer victimization[39-41] and peer aggression/antisocial behaviour.[42-44] It should be noted that this process appears to be a gradual one. For example, being unpopular and rejected during the *elementary* school years predicts subsequent school dropout, with rejected children being marginalized and ostracized, gradually disengaging from the school milieu.[7] Given their failure to integrate with mainstream peers, it is not surprising that early school leavers are less involved in school extra-curricular activities[1] and more likely to associate with other marginalized peers, who place little value on educational success[8,10,45]

Equally important are relationships with adults. Even after controlling for cognitive ability, later school performance is linked to the early influences of teachers as well as parents.[46] Positive relationships with teachers are associated with better academic performance[29,30] and more positive attitudes toward school,[47] even as early as kindergarten.[36] As Raver[22] points out, children with social-emotional difficulties can be "tough to teach" and problematic relationships with kindergarten teachers are strong predictors of academic difficulties and school adjustment both concurrently[48] and across the elementary years.[49] Thus, failure to establish positive relationships early on may begin a downward cycle of school (dis)engagement. Indeed, fewer dropouts (60%) report that they get along well with teachers than do graduates (88.6%).[1]

Conclusions

Research on the early social-emotional underpinnings of academic performance and school completion is limited. Most studies involve school-aged children, with few studies focusing on the earliest years of school.[36] Moreover, the links between school performance and social-emotional difficulties may well be reciprocal,[22] with early learning problems contributing to negative social behaviour, and vice versa. Children's transition to full-time schooling as well as their progress

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over the first years of school (kindergarten to grade 2) are believed to constitute a critical periods for academic and social development,[46] which, in turn, contributes to school success. Given the interface of social-emotional and academic competence, however, it becomes important to understand the precursors of early social-emotional behaviour *before* children enter school, during the 0 to 5 period. Social-emotional competence is believed to have its roots in children's early temperament and language ability, as well as their earliest relationships with caregivers, which provide a foundation for subsequent interpersonal relations.[50] To fully understand the factors that contribute to school success, therefore it is imperative to broaden our focus and consider an ecological and developmental perspective on the problem, considering biological, academic, familial, and social-emotional factors and their interplay. To date, few studies have examined early social-emotional markers in relation to academic outcomes, although longitudinal studies such as the *National Longitudinal Study of Children and Youth*[51] hold great promise in this regard.

Implications

From the studies that do exist, we know that a significant number of children display social-emotional difficulties that interfere with their relationships with both adults and peers, affecting their school engagement, performance, and their potential to become competent adults and productive citizens.[52] One in five youth display problems severe enough to warrant mental health services.[53-55] In light of these findings, dealing with social and emotional problems in the schools is one component of a larger educational mandate — to prepare students to function effectively in a complex social world. British Columbia's Ministry of Education has taken a unique step in this regard by making *social responsibility* one of four "foundational skills," as important as reading, writing, and numeracy. Evidence-based, early intervention programs that enhance social-emotional development are needed,[22] along with efforts to evaluate the efficacy of new, promising programs (eg, Mary Gordon's *Roots of Empathy*). Provision of adequate teacher training in social-emotional development is also critical. We have long recognized the importance of early intervention (eg, *Perry Preschool Project, Head Start*), but such efforts need to be based on a solid understanding of the early precursors to social and emotional behaviour and the complex ways in which characteristics of child and family interact with the social context in which a child functions, recognizing the importance social-emotional functioning in facilitating school completion and academic success across the school years.

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