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School Completion/School Achievement as Outcomes of Early Childhood Development: Comments on Vitaro and Hymel and Ford

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Introduction

As the economies of advanced nations become more dependent on an educated workforce, students who fail to complete high school will find it more and more difficult to secure meaningful employment that leads to social well-being. Therefore, it is more important than ever to understand and address the factors that contribute to early school withdrawal.

Research on school dropouts has examined a myriad of factors that predict why some students fail to complete high school. These factors fall into two distinct perspectives: one is an individual perspective that focuses on individual factors – such as demographic characteristics, experiences, attitudes and behaviours – associated with dropping out; the other is based on an institutional

perspective that focuses on the contextual factors found in students' families, schools, communities and peers. Both perspectives are useful and indeed necessary to understand this complex phenomenon.[1] In addition, research has examined both proximal factors to dropping out – typically those associated with the high-school years when most students leave school – and distal factors associated with the experiences and backgrounds of students before they enter high school, but which may contribute directly or indirectly to their early withdrawal from high school.

Research and Conclusions

The two papers by Hymel/Ford and Vitaro[a] focus on one important and understudied area of research on school dropout: identifying the early childhood experiences of students that may contribute to their later success or failure in high school. After briefly reviewing research on the proximal factors associated with dropping out, particularly academic skills and family characteristics, Hymel/Ford focus on one specific factor that they argue is critical to academic success: socio-emotional competence. They review a number of studies that suggest children with poor social skills and emotional control have more difficulty getting along with peers and with adults, and experience early academic failure, which leads to later academic and social problems and, eventually, early school withdrawal. Yet, as they rightly point out, the relationship between socio-emotional and academic competence may well be reciprocal, which suggests the need for more extensive longitudinal studies. Vitaro also focuses on social behaviour as an important precursor to early and later school failure, but he links these problematic behaviours to disadvantaged families and some cultural communities. He then reviews a number of rigorously evaluated preschool programs that have been effective in improving the cognitive, social and emotional development of children and even reducing high-school dropout rates.

These two papers support the idea that attitudes, behaviours and experiences of young children can contribute to their long-term success or failure in school. They also support the idea that failure to complete high school is not simply due to academic difficulties, such as low test scores or grades, but may be directly related to social and behavioural problems in school. Both of these ideas are supported not only by the literature cited in these two papers, but also by other theoretical and empirical literature that is not cited. Rumberger,[1] for example, reviews several theories of school dropout that suggest withdrawal from school, as well as a related phenomenon, student mobility, are forms of disengagement with an academic dimension (e.g. doing school work) and a social dimension (e.g. getting along with others) that are reflected in both the formal

(e.g. school activities) and informal (peer and adult relationships) aspects of school. In addition to the studies cited in these two papers, a number of other long-term studies of cohorts of students have examined the predictors of dropping out from as early as first grade.[2-7] These studies found that early academic achievement and engagement (e.g. attendance, misbehaviour) in elementary and middle school predicted eventual withdrawal from high school.

One additional indicator of early school performance has received considerable attention of late, at least in the U.S.: school retention. Historically, a large number of students are retained in each year of school. Data from the U.S. suggest that about one in five eighth-graders in 1988 had been retained at least once since first grade.[8] As more states end social promotion and institute high-school exit examinations, this number will no doubt rise. Already in Texas, which has instituted both policies, one out of every six ninth-grade students was retained in 1996-97 (see Appendix A[9]). Although some recent studies have suggested that retention may have some positive effects on academic achievement,[10,11] virtually all the empirical studies to date suggest that retention, even in lower elementary grades, significantly increases the likelihood of dropping out.[8,12-17] For example, Rumberger[8] found that students who were retained in grades 1 to 8 were four times more likely to drop out between grades 8 and 10 than students who were not retained, even after controlling for socioeconomic status, eighth-grade school performance and a host of background and school factors.

Although the two papers and the research reported above underscore the importance of identifying and addressing individual attitudes and behaviours in early childhood that may contribute to high-school failure, this research does not address the role that schools play in promoting or addressing these attitudes and behaviours. Recent statistical models have demonstrated that between 20 and 50 percent of the variability in achievement and other outcomes among students can be attributed to the schools that students attend.[18] Research studies have shown that the characteristics of schools as well as characteristics of individuals predict dropping out of school.[8,19,20] For example, research has demonstrated that several types of school characteristics have been found to influence school dropout rates, including student composition, school resources, school structure and school processes and practices (see Rumberger[1] for a review).

Implications for Policy and Services Perspectives

Both of these papers suggest that sufficient research exists to support the expansion of preschool and early-childhood programs to help address the early precursors to school failure and high-school withdrawal. Both papers also stress the need for programs that address the social and emotional as well as the cognitive needs of the child. At the same time, they caution that complex relationships between these needs, especially among children from different social class and cultural backgrounds, require more research. They also stress that all programs require thorough evaluations to demonstrate their effectiveness.

All of these recommendations are reasonable. Rigorous evaluations of existing preschool programs have demonstrated that they can produce long-term benefits in reducing high- school dropout rates directly and indirectly by reducing early precursors to dropping out, such as referral to special education.[21] Moreover, such programs typically address all the needs of the child – cognitive, social, and emotional.

In addition to preschool programs, other interventions will be needed to prevent early difficulties in children that lead to high-school failure and early withdrawal. These include parental training programs, after-school programs, summer-school programs and in-school programs. These programs have the potential to help these difficulties whether they are due to children's academic, social or emotional needs. Yet despite the existence of many programs in each of these areas, for the most part, existing programs have not been rigorously evaluated.[22-24] Such evaluations are important before governments and local providers invest money in early intervention programs.

At the same time, policy-makers need to examine existing school policies and practices to see to what extent they may be contributing to early school difficulties that eventually lead to high-school withdrawal. Retention policies are but one example. A more fundamental problem, at least in the U.S., is ensuring that all students have the same opportunities to learn and achieve success in school by providing a safe learning environment, adequate textbooks and learning materials, and fully qualified teachers.[25]

Only through a comprehensive effort that focuses on students, families, schools and communities will it be possible to address the problem of high-school dropouts.

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Note:

[a] Comments on original paper published by Frank Vitaro in 2003. To have access to this article, contact us at cedje-ceecd@umontreal.ca