

## SCHOOL DROP OUT DURING ADOLESCENCE IN AMERICA

Yard. Doç. Dr. Ali YILMAZ  
*Ondukuz Mayıs Üniversitesi*

*Şehir kesimi ile kırsal kesimde farklı olmakla birlikte, hemen hemen otuz yıldır Amerikan toplumunda lise seviyesinde eğitimi bitirenlerin genel nüfusa oranı %75 civarındadır. Bekleneninin aksine, şehir kesiminde çeşitli nedenlerle okuldan ayrılanların oranı, kırsal kesimden daha yüksek olup, %50'ye yaklaşmaktadır. Okulu bırakanların oranının bu derece yüksek olması eğitimcileri, araştırmacıları, ve yöneticileri bu konunun üzerine gitmeye yönlendirmiş, geçen yıllarda bu konuda birçok çalışmalar yapılmıştır. Gelecekte de bu konunun eğitimcileri, yöneticileri, ve araştırmacıları meşgul edeceği açıktır. Okulu terk etmenin yalnızca tek bir sebebi olduğunu düşünmek yanlış olur. Araştırmalar, birçok faktörün etkili olduğunu göstermiştir. Bu faktörler; a) demokrafik faktörler, b) aile ile ilgili faktörler, c) arkadaş ve arkadaş guruplarıyla ilgili faktörler, d) okulla ilgili faktörler, e) ekonomik faktörler, ve f) bireysel faktörler olmak üzere altı grupta toplanabilir.*

*Even though there is a difference between rural areas and urban areas, the high school completion rate has remained about 75% for almost thirty years. Contrary to the expectations dropout rates are higher in urban areas than the rural regions of America and approaches 50%. The enormosity of this problem has caused great concern among educators, researchers and poliey makers. There have been many studies undertaken in recent years and it seems that many more will be conducted in the fütur e. There is no one specitkç reason for dropping out of school. Research has shown that numerous factors interact to make a student drop out. These factors can be summarised in six basic categories which are; a) demographic factors, b) family related factors, c) peer group related factors, d) school related factors, e) economic factors, and f) individual factors.*

**The high school completion rate had increased in every decade from 1900 until 1965, when it reached 75 percent. Today the national completion rate remains at about this percentage, having shovvn no improvement for almost över thirty years. The completion percentage changes from rural**

districts to urban area schools. For example, in most urban districts, the non-completion rate is over 50 percent. Current demographic trends indicate that future public school student bodies will increasingly consist of poor, minority students. That is, the non-completion rate will most probably be increasing. Therefore, in recent years, interest in the dropout issue among educators, policy makers, and researchers has substantially increased, and will be increasing in the future.

There would be many different reasons for increasing attention to dropout issues. Raising academic course requirements for high school graduation, might be considered as one of them. Because many states have been passing legislations to increase academic requirements for high school graduation. As pointed out by Mc Dili, Natriello, and Pallas, (1986) although increasing academic demand could help to motivate some students, others might be more inclined to drop out. Another reason for increased concern about dropouts might be the increase in the educational requirements of work. It seems that it is going to continue to increase in the future. increased use of new technologies and structural changes and the composition of jobs in the industry will require more educational skills. While these visions of the future have yet to be substantiated, they do suggest that dropouts will be even more disadvantaged in the future job market than they have been in the past. (Levin and Rumberger, 1986)

Whatever the reason for this concern, the dropout issue is likely to command increased interest from educators, policymakers, and researchers throughout the nation for the future. Educators and other policy makers and program officials have started to examine why youths drop out of school.

The purpose of this article is to examine many issues in trying to understand and solve this complex educational as well as social problem. Both dropouts and those students who are "at risk" of dropping out will be discussed. What I mean by "at risk" is that students who are still in school, but are in danger of dropping out because of one or some of the reasons which will be discussed later in this article. Social, economic, psychological, and educational causes of dropout problem will briefly be analyzed. Then, it will be tried to point out the individual and social consequence of dropping out. And, at the end of the article, some recommendations for the solution of this important problem will be made.

### ***Definitions of High School Dropout***

Before discussing the causes of the problem, it would be better to define the problem of high school dropout, and to understand the incidence of dropping out of high school. In fact, no one knows what the high school drop out rate is, because there is neither a consensus definition of a high school dropout, nor is there a standard method for computing the dropout rate. The most critical factor in measuring dropout rates, however, is determining whether or not a person is a high school dropout. Therefore, it is important to have a common definition of dropout.

A dropout is usually defined as a residual status: someone who has not graduated or is not currently enrolled. California State Department of Education (1986) on the other hand, defines a dropout as:

...any student who has been enrolled in grade 10, 11, 12 but who left school prior to graduation or the completion of a formal education, or legal equivalent, and who did not, within 45 school days, enter another public or private educational institution or a school program, as documented by a written request for a transcript from that institution (p. 33)

Both of these definitions have some shortcomings. The first one is a very broad and includes all persons except those who are known to have received regular high school diploma. By this definition, persons who have completed high school by returning to school in the later ages or through a 'General Education Development' (GED) examination are considered as dropouts.

If we use this definition, we will reach a high rate of dropout. Therefore, in order to reach a more realistic rate, we should use a much narrower definition of dropout. Persons who have a regular or equivalent high school certificate or who are still attending a program such as General Education Development (GED) programs should not be considered as dropouts.

The biggest problem with the second definition is that it puts the burden of proof for establishing continued enrollment status on the student's original school district and specifies the manner and time interval for obtaining that proof from other school districts (Rumberger, 1986). Many school leavers cannot be easily traced and even those who reenter may not have their transcripts requested. As seen, this definition of dropout also has some shortcomings. That is, there is no consensus on the definition of a high school dropout. My definition of a dropout in this article is a student who withdraws from high school without a diploma and without enrolling elsewhere.

### ***Causes of the High School Dropout***

There is no one specific reason that students dropout of high school. A large body of empirical research has indicated a wide range of factors that are associated with dropping out. Dropping out is most often associated with poverty, urban settings, families with parents who lack diplomas, and minority status. These factors have been grouped by Rumberger (1986) into several major categories, such as: a) demographic, b) family related, c) peer related, d) school-related, e) economic, and f) individual. Within each of these categories, there can be a large number of specific factors. Some may be well-known whereas others are not.

In the remainder of this chapter, some of those factors which are associated with dropping out will be analyzed,

**Demographic factors:** Such demographic factors as ethnicity and gender are well-known factors that are associated with dropping out. Members of social and ethnic minorities are much more likely to dropout of school than white students. Moreover, whites in the South and West are more likely to drop out than those in the Northeast and North Central states, while the reverse is true for blacks. Hispanics, in particular, are more likely to drop out than blacks. As outlined by Steinberg et al., (1984) black youngsters drop out of high school at a slightly higher rate than white youngsters whereas that Hispanic youngsters drop out at about twice the rate of other youth. One reason for this large proportion of Hispanic youth to drop out of school is that their native language is not English. The lack of proficiency in English is a major determinant of dropping out.

Regarding to gender, males are more likely to drop out of school than females. There might be some specific reasons why boys drop out more than girls. For example, males are twice as likely to report leaving high school because of behavior problems, including not getting along with teachers, and being suspended or expelled. But there is a controversy for blacks and Hispanics. Black females are more likely to drop out than black males (Eckstrom et. al., 1987). In his analysis of the 'High School and Beyond' data, on the other hand, Barro (1984) found that males and females drop out of school at approximately the same rate.

**Family-related factors:** There are large number of factors associated with family background and structure. Perhaps the most important one is the socioeconomic status of the family. Numerous studies have found that dropout rates are higher for students from families of low socioeconomic status. In her book, Orr (1987) reports that twenty-two percent of students from low-income families, but only seven percent of those from high-income families, drop out of school.

Another family related factor associated with dropping out is educational and occupational attainment levels of parents. As Barro (1984) points out, the relationship between an adolescent's educational attainment and that of his or her parents cannot be ignored. Those students whose fathers or mothers never completed high school are about twice as likely as other students to drop out.

Problems such as getting married, being pregnant, needing to work, speaking a language other than English in the home and having a single parent family might be considered as other family related factors associated with dropping out. The absence of learning materials and opportunities in the home is also identified by Ekstrom et. al.,(1987) as a family-related factor.

**Peer-related factors:** The influence of peers has not received much attention in previous research on the dropout problem, although it is a subject of considerable interest in other areas of educational achievement (Rumberger, 1986). Dropout peers encourage their friends to be dropouts. Many dropout adolescents have friends who are also dropouts. However, as

has been mentioned above, there is no research indicating that to what extent and in what ways an adolescent's dropout friends and peers influence the decision to drop out of school.

***School-related factors:*** School related factors associated with dropping out are well known by educators, policy-makers and researchers. They have received considerable attention particularly because many of these factors are ones that can be manipulated through practice and policy. The most recognized school related factor that affect dropping out is low academic achievement. Poor academic performance in school, as measured by grades, test scores, and grade retention, is associated with dropping out. Poor academic performance and poverty encompass many personal and social pressures that have long been known to be impediments to educational achievement. These pressures might be causes of dropping out.

As outlined by Wehlage and Rutter (1986), behavioral problems in school are also associated with dropping out, including absenteeism, truancy, and discipline problems. Having poor grades, not getting along with teachers and administrators, and not liking school might be added to school related factors. According to Orr (1987), students who score low on achievement tests are six times as likely to drop out as those whose scores are high. Those who have been suspended, have been put on probation, or have had serious trouble with the law are three times as likely to drop out as are those who have not.

Most research on school-related factors has focused on students' behavior and performance in school. Little attention has been given to the influences of schools' administrators and teachers on students' decision to drop out. According to Mann (1987), for example, schools send signals to poorly achieving students and those who have discipline problems, in a sense urging them to drop out. This lack of encouragement may compound a student's personal, peer, and family related problems. In addition, factors as poor facilities and inadequate teaching staff also influence students' decisions.

***Economic factors:*** Economic factors also influence students' decisions to leave school. Ekstrom et. al. (1987), reports that about twenty percent of dropouts left school because they wanted to or felt they had to work to help out their families. Barro (1984), also reports that students who work fifteen or more hours per week while attending school are at least 50 percent more likely to drop out than those who work less or not at all. It is evident that a low income background has a great influence on dropping out. Students who come from families with low-income are more likely to drop out than those who come from rich families.

***Individual factors:*** Finally, there are a great number of individual factors associated with dropping out. The low self-esteem of adolescence is one of these well known factors. Dropouts have lower levels of self-esteem and less sense of control over their lives than other students. Ekstrom et.al. (1987)

reports that they have poor attitudes about school and low educational and occupational aspirations. The age of student is also considered as an individual related factor associated with drop out. Those students who are overage when beginning ninth grade are far more likely than their classmates fourteen and younger to leave school without graduating (Orr, 1987). Getting married, and for female students, being pregnant are also some of individual related factors associated with dropping out.

There is no doubt that the factors mentioned above are not all of them. There might be many others that have not been mentioned here. It is also evident that it may be a combination of problems, the severity of a single problem, or the absence of alternatives is the deciding factor in leaving school.

### ***The Consequences of Dropping Out***

Dropping out of high school is viewed as 'bad'. However, dropping out could be beneficial for some adolescence as well as for the school they attend. Some students are not able to or willing to alternatives that in some cases can be more fulfilling and rewarding. In some cases, at risk students who remain in school can be very disruptive to those who want to be there and want to learn.

On the other hand, most evidence, however, supports the notion that dropping out has many negative consequences. For most youth dropouts, the lack of a diploma limits employment options and thus future economic and social conditions. They have difficulty finding steady, well-paying jobs not only when they first leave school, but also over their entire lifetimes. Even though they have jobs, they are more likely to have semiskilled manual jobs and to earn less. Berlin (1984) points out that the expected lifetime earnings of high school dropouts are about one-third lower than those of high school graduates and half those of college graduates.

In addition to these economic problems, there would be some other consequences of dropping out. These would include effects on psychological well being and health. It might be possible that dropping out of school leads to poorer mental and physical health through its direct and indirect effects on employment and income. Because of these, they would suffer greater rates of mortality, suicide, and mental disorders.

Dropping out of high school not only affects those who leave school, but also society at large. That is, society suffers as well since unemployment and lost of earnings lower tax revenues and increase demands on social services. Dropouts require more social welfare, health care, and unemployment subsidies. They are more likely to involve in criminal activities that cause social disorders in society, and become costly for judicial and penal services. As pointed out by Catteral (1985), public expenditures for welfare, health care, and police that can be attributed to school dropouts are estimated to be from \$ 10 to \$ 29 billion annually.

In the future, the relative economic disadvantage to dropping out of high school could be even greater than today. Because of the increased use of new

technology, the skill requirements of many jobs could be altered. It could be more difficult for dropouts to learn new skills and adapt to a changing work environment. Therefore, there should be some actions to be taken for this important problem. In the remainder of the article, some probable solutions to this important problem will be examined.

### ***Some Probable Solutions to the Problem***

As many other social problems, the problem of high school dropping out may not be completely solved, but there would be some substantial headways that can be made by educators, policy makers, and researchers.

First of all, some further comprehensive studies on the causes of dropping out should be conducted because they will help to better identify the factors associated with dropping out. Necessary legislative interventions should be enacted to fund local, state, and federal efforts for drop out prevention and recovery programs. New studies should be undertaken to identify and characterize successful dropout prevention programs. Different programs might be designated for different types of dropouts. In order to do that, accurate and timely identification of students with a high risk might be important. It might help to design efficient and effective programs for early prevention, late prevention, and recovery.

Finally, educators have perhaps the most important role to play. Teachers and administrators are most responsible for implementing new programs designed to help dropouts. They are closest to the problem and therefore play the most crucial role in improving the educational experiences of students at risk.

### ***References***

- Barro, S. M. (1984). *The Incidence of Dropping Out: A Descriptive Analysis*. Washington D. C. SMB Economic Research, Inc.
- California State Department of Education, (1988). *California Dropouts: A Status Report*. Sacramento: California State Department of Education.
- Catteral, J. S. (1985). *On the Social Costs of Dropping Out of School* Palo Alto, CA: Stanford Policy Institute, Stanford University.
- Ekstrom, R. B., Goretz, M. E., Pollack, J.M., and Rock D. A. (1987). Who Drops Out of High School and Why? Findings From a National Survey. *Teachers College Record* 87, 393-409.
- Levin, H., and Rumberger, R. (1986). *Educational Requirements for New Technologies: Vision, Possibilities, and Current Realities* Stanford: Stanford Education Policy Institute.
- Mann, D. (1987). Can We Help Dropouts? Thinking About the Undouble. *Teachers College Record*, 87 (3), 3-19.

- McDill, E., Natriello, G., and Pallas, A. (1986). A Population At Risk: Potential Consequences of Tougher School Standards for Student Dropouts. *American Journal of Education*, 94, 135-181.
- Orr, Margaret T. (1987). *Keeping Students in School: A Guide to Effective Dropout Prevention Programs and Services*. San Francisco: CA, Jossey - Bass Publishers.
- Rumberger, R. (1986). High School Dropouts: A Problem for Research, Policy, and Practice. *California Public Schools Forum*. v. 1. Fall 1986.
- Steinberg, L., Blinn, P., and Chan, K. (1984). Dropping Out Among Language Minority Youth. *Review of Educational Research*, 54, 113-132
- Vehlege, G., and Rutter, R. (1986). Dropping Out: How Much Do Schools Contribute to the Problem. *Teachers College Record*, 87, 374-392

### *Author*

ALİ YILMAZ is Assistant Professor and Department Chair, Department of Psychology, Faculty of Science and Literature, Ondokuz Mayıs University.