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Dropping Out: What Are Schools Doing To Prevent It?²

Abstract

This paper approaches the occurrence of dropout as a consequence of social and academic disengagement from school. Starting from this theoretical position, we analysed responses made by employees (principals, teachers, school counsellors) from primary and secondary schools regarding intervention actions undertaken when there is a risk of a student dropping out of school. The analysed data were collected by in-depth interviews and focus groups. Responses were then classified using thematic content analysis. The existing system of prevention programs are most often not aimed at all aspects of this phenomenon and in the course of their implementation unsatisfactory level of cooperation between different institutions has been observed. The preventative actions constructed at school level, sometimes take the shape of pseudohelp for

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students in the form of justifying their absences from school or awarding them higher marks than they deserve. Prevention programs listed by employees are not aimed at increasing students' social engagement despite a significant number of findings that prove the importance of this kind of integration.

Key words: dropout, thematic analysis, prevention, primary and secondary school

1. Introduction

Early school leaving is in modern society defined as quitting education before obtaining minimum qualifications for work (De Witte, Cabus, Thyssen, Groot, & van den Brink 2013: 14). Apart from dropping out, the following expressions are also used to describe premature voluntary termination of one's education: early school leavers (ESL), "withdrawal", "attrition", "youth not in education, employment or training (NEET)". It is a phenomenon associated with decades of research (in papers by Tinto 1975; Finn 1989) and it regularly features in current affairs from the perspective of education policy planning.

It is possible to single out at least three interrelated sources of interest in this phenomenon. Firstly, in the 1970s, a need to increase the level of education at the national level was observed in Western countries (Wehlage & Rutter 1985: 2), which resulted in an increase in the number of qualified workers. Efforts were made to have more students completed secondary education. Describing that motivation, Finn (Finn 1989: 117) declares the increase in the interest in the phenomenon of early school leaving as a national obsession which was present in America in the 1980s. The trend of increasing the percentage of population with at least secondary school completed is a characteristic of contemporary society also (Marginson 2016: 249). In accordance with this national policy common in numerous countries, there has been a linear increase in the number of papers dedicated to dropping out of high school and investigating various factors that can be related to it.

Another source of motivation resulted from education fairness concept created somewhat later, at the end of 1990s and the beginning of 21st century (Castelli, Ragazzi & Crescentini 2012: 2245; Espinoza 2007; Hutmacher, Cochrane & Bottani 2001: 345; Pešikan & Ivić 2016: 103). Propagating accessibility of education to all the children and supported by the convention on child rights (e.g. No Child Left Behind Act, 2001), a significant number of epidemiological research works appeared, with the primary emphasis on purposeful intervention. They point out inconsistencies in including children in mandatory education. These

studies, contrary to previously mentioned ones, most often examine dropping out of primary education, and even complete absence of a child's inclusion in the system. Their conclusion is that *those who need most get the least*, namely that there is an expected inequality reflected in unsatisfactory rate of inclusion in education when it comes to children from minority ethnic groups, as well as those from marginalised, socially disadvantaged groups (Castelli, Ragazzi, S., & Crescentini 2012: 2247, Pešikan & Ivić 2016: 110). Apart from insufficient inclusion, it can be observed that organisation and functioning of school system is such that it makes it more difficult for children from vulnerable groups to achieve academic success. In the field of educational sociology, Bernstein's, Bourdieu's and recently Apple's works contribute to critique of education as a mechanism for reproducing social inequalities (Bourdieu & Passeron 1970; Apple 2010, 2011, 2013). For example, in Bourdieu's theory, which is classified as reproduction theory, it is pointed out that practices in the field of education are such that they decrease chances of success for children from families with less cultural capital (Radulović 2014: 90). Anticipating that chances of success are slim, children from working families will give up on further education, never properly understanding the function of educational system in reproducing and legitimising class differences. In other words, what is in fact pushing a student out of school is disguised and comes across as pulling out.

Finally, what makes this topic popular today is the fact that, despite decades of research and significant interest, early school leaving still poses a problem in contemporary educational systems, which is associated with negative outcomes, both for individuals and for society as a whole. People who dropped out of school encounter more difficulties in finding employment, are at risk of getting involved in criminal activities, often have to resort to benefits as a source of income, which increases country's expenditure (DeWitte et al. 2013: 14; Rumberg 2001: 86).

1.1. Dropout as a form of disengagement from school

A numerous studies view early school leaving as a dynamic, cumulative and multidimensional process of gradual disengagement from school (Finn 1989:118; Rumberg 2001: 48; Rumberg & Lim 2008: 2). Dropping out of school can be described as double failure (Finn 1989: 117). On the one hand, this represents a failure for educational system because it failed to keep its students in school. On the other hand, it is an individual's failure for failing to adopt academic competencies necessary for entering the job market. In other words, dropout occurs as a result of interaction between students' characteristics (individual factors) and

school characteristics (institutional characteristics) (Bradley & Renzuli 2011: 523). Recent research indicates that results of these interactions can take different forms, so it is possible to typologically differentiate between students who drop out of school (Videnović & Lazarević 2017: 77; McDermott, Anderson, Zaff 2017: 14).

We can point out a common characteristic of viewing disengagement from school as two-dimensional, i.e. social and academic, which is observed in numerous models. Thus Tinto, the creator of one of the first models of the occurrence of dropout in higher education, differentiates between academic and social integration of students (Tinto 1975: 95). The former refers to fulfilling explicit standards and identifying with the implicit norms of the given academic system (Tinto 1975: 104). On the other hand, social integration involves connectedness with the social milieu of the college (primarily informal peer groups, extracurricular activities, teachers and other staff) (Tinto 1975: 106). Similarly, Wehlage and Rutter differentiate between social bonding and educational engagement (Wehlage & Rutter 1985: 5). Finn's model is associated with two early school leaving scenarios (Finn 1989: 117). According to one, due to their lack of success a student exhibits low self-esteem, which leads to further failures. According to the other, lack of identifying with school causes ever-decreasing participation in school activities (classroom participation, homework, and participation in the social, extracurricular, athletic, and governance aspects of the school), which ultimately leads to poor school performance and even weaker identification with school. As Rumberg points out, sometimes it is enough for only one dimension of integration (social or academic) to be present in a student for dropping out not to take place (Rumberg 2001: 152). Consequently, preventative interventions should also be aimed at increasing students' academic achievement and towards better social integration.

The importance of academic integration and educational engagement is emphasised in studies in which early school leaving is considered an extreme form of educational failure (Rumberg 2011: 160; DeWitte et al. 2013: 15), as well as those that point out the significance of low student motivation, poor discipline in class, low teachers' expectations, absence of individual approach for students with learning difficulties (Bridgeland, Dilulio & Morison 2006: 25; Christenson & Thurlow 2004: 36; Kaufman, Bradbury & Owings 1992: 15). Another course of action was confirmed: factors at school level are in correlation with dropping out. Research has shown that positive school atmosphere, good relationship with teachers and other students, fewer breaches of discipline, have positive impact on social integration, identifying with the school

and developing social bonding, and therefore they represent protective factors for dropping out not to occur (Christle, Jolivet & Nelson 2007: 327; Erktin, Okcabol & Ural 2010: 111; Lee & Burkam 2003: 355).

As we can see, particular emphasis was given to the importance of factors at school level for the occurrence of dropout (Lessard, Poirier & Fortin 2010: 1638; Simić & Krstić 2017: 53). A question that arises is whether school staff shares this perspective and what they think about the opportunities for organising preventative action within school. The assumption we deem justified is that individuals directly involved in educational system have less trust in the efficiency of interventions applied at school level, than is the case in scientific paradigm. The reason why we would expect the importance of school to be oversight lies in the fact that, despite constantly emphasising the complexity of this phenomenon, there is still belief that students are the only ones to blame because they proved not to be capable of completing a certain level of education (Smyth, & Hattam 2001: 403). Research shows that when it comes to attributing blame for children's lack of success in school, teachers and parents sometimes exhibit a simplified perspective, so the majority of them believe that children themselves are mostly and/or solely to blame (Videnović & Lazarević 2017: 81; Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Balfanz 2009: 20; Simić & Krstić 2017: 59). Describing this phenomenon, LeCompte uses the expression "blaming the victims" (LeCompte 1987: 232). Findings from Serbia follow the same route, i.e. teachers primarily point out the significance of familial factors for the occurrence of dropout and consider themselves powerless to change anything, even occasionally as those who should not change anything because there should be a selection of students who complete a certain level of education (Simić & Krstić 2017: 59).

Despite the ambivalent attitude of the staff, results of empirical studies indicate that the number of possible preventative actions organised at school level is not small. Rumberg (Rumberg 2011: 208) differentiates target approach intervention which involves identifying students at risk and organising a special course of academic and social support so as to make them more successful, from comprehensive or school-wide reform. The advantage of the first approach is in its organisational simplicity, because it is aimed at fewer students, and the support they receive is specific and adequate for their individual needs. Comprehensive approach involves a reform of the entire system or adopting programs at school level, which also influences students not at risk, thus developing a peersupport system. In the empirical part of the work, measures for preventing dropout listed by school staff will be analysed in terms of

being a systematic solution or an attempt by school to help an individual student.

2. Method

2.1. Problem

The aim of this study is investigating which preventative actions for reducing dropout teachers, counsellors and principals perceive as available, as well as how they would rate their usefulness. In a previous research (Simić & Krstić 2017: 59), performed on the same sample, factors operating at school level that can contribute to dropout were analysed.

2.2. Subject

The sample included staff from 8 primary and 13 secondary schools. Schools were chosen so that, according to the official data (The data from the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia) they belong to poorer municipalities and report higher incidence of dropout (Nova Varoš, Negotin, Grocka, Belgrade, Bosilegrad, Boljevac, Beočin, Kladovo, Prijepolje, Merošina, Brza Palanka, Sokobanja).

Table 1 shows the number of school principals, teachers and counsellors examined on the basis of working in primary or secondary schools.

Table 1: Sample structure

	Primary school	Secondary school	Total
Principals	8	13	21
Counsellors	12	13	25
Teachers	25	27	42

2.3. Procedure

A semi-structured interview was performed with principals and counsellors. When it comes to teachers, in order to include as many of them, in every school we organised focus groups with teachers and heads of the years or individual classes with cases of students quitting their education without completing it. Topics included in talks are: a) whether schools encountered the dropout phenomenon and when, b) what preventative actions the school applies in those cases, c) which of them are prescribed and regulated as school's duty, and which ones represent alternative preventative actions, i.e. do not belong to school's legislative obligations, d) how they rate the efficiency of these actions, e) what they think of the dropout phenomenon, f) what contributes to its occurrence.

With the aim of singling out which preventative actions the employees consider as ways of reducing dropout, we applied thematic content analysis (Mayring, 2014: 39). First we deductively classified the stated interventions into two groups. Selection was made on the basis of whether actions represent existing **systematic solution**, i.e. prescribed ways in which a school is obliged to react in the event of a higher dropout risk, or whether they are **extra-systemic** attempts made by school with the aim of reacting using available resources at its disposal. Within these two groups further classification of responses was performed inductively. The classification was done using Maxqda programme for qualitative data analysis. Apart from classifying intervention actions, we also analysed employees' assessment of how efficient the existing systematic solutions are.

3. Results

We classified a total of 82 responses by employees mentioning programs and actions their school implements with the aim of not letting a student leave school early. Responses were first grouped on the basis of whether they represent a systematic solution or a specific extra-systemic attempt to solve the problem. A slight majority of answers (60%) belongs to the first category.

Systematic solutions to the dropout phenomenon stated by employees are classified into seven categories. Table 2 shows all the interventions the employees listed and their frequency.

Table 2: Systematic programs for preventing dropout

Intervention	f	%
Increased student monitoring	16	33%
Cooperation with social services	15	31%
Switching from regular education to taking exams only	6	12%
No systematic preventative programs	5	10%
Informing the local juvenile court	3	6%
Sending the student to another school	3	6%
Primary school expulsion	1	2%
Total	49	100%

Respondents most often mentioned the preventative action of increased student monitoring as the school reaction to situations where there is a greater risk of early school leaving or observed breaches of discipline. That usually includes intensive talks with parents, the student and teachers when the number of unjustified absences from school becomes significant or when there is a noticeable drop in academic attainment. In such situations school counsellors often become involved. Employees believe that establishing cooperation and working together represent an advantage (*The idea is to establish cooperation with parents by talking to them and advising them and then that together they do all they can to prevent a child from dropping out of school*). Parents are repeatedly invited to come to school, first over the phone and later in writing. One disadvantage of this action is that parents can refuse to come to school, do not show up or refuse to cooperate. It is also thought that this is not a proper action but “only” an advisory talk. Thus one school pedagogue stated that school *has no other mechanisms for preventing dropout except talk*.

Contacting social services and magistrates are systematic actions undertaken by schools, and they also involve contacting other institutions and cooperation between different departments. The school contacts social services when frequent absences from school or poor academic attainment are connected with other difficulties: extreme poverty, a child from a foster family, or “behaviour in school becomes extremely problematic”. Respondents express divided opinions when it comes to the cooperation between the school and social services. They believe it is not always up-to-date and it is not always clear whose duty it is to react and provide financial help to the family. The school contacts magistrates when a child does not come to school for an extended period of time. Employees think that in that case the magistrate should start court proceedings against the parents. However, they cannot remember a single case where the trial actually took place and the magistrates’ court had them punished. Bad experiences in cooperation with other state institutions indicate the absence of networking between institutions dealing with children from vulnerable groups.

Changing schools or switching to not attending the classes but taking exams only is an act that employees see as a way for a child to continue their education after all and not drop out. Employees believe that a child is thus given a second chance and that it can benefit from that change of scene. The problem is though that a student then becomes invisible for school, i.e. there is no systematic daily monitoring of student’s attendance, and the school is not required to check how the child adapted to a new school or at new way of attending it.

Around 10% of answers (5 answers) represent denying the existence of a single program in school. One answer describes a situation in which a 15-year old child dropped out of primary school because he or she no longer had to attend. Employees saw this measure as a systematic one, but actually that is a case of wrongful interpretation of the law because the child had to be allowed to continue their education in another institution.

Table 3 lists categories of actions employees see as alternative ones, i.e. attempts made by schools to do what they can outside the prescribed ways of tackling this issue in order to prevent a child from dropping out. Most answers belong to the category of reducing criteria, which represents a way to help students improve their academic attainment (*Schooling has been so simplified that it is impossible not to finish it*). On a number of occasions the employees stated that this action is particularly common when school is at risk of being closed down or having to let off some of the teachers due to a decreasing number of pupils. In other words, the source of motivation for implementing this measure sometimes is not the desire to help a child but to keep jobs. A similar preventative action is justifying student absences in which there is a cooperation between several individuals (doctors from a local doctors' surgery issuing fake sick notes, parents who ask for such a solution to the problem, teachers who pretend not to notice that problem) who act with the aim of hiding a significant number of student absences.

Providing financial help where it is needed usually involves school establishing cooperation with local authorities in order to secure funds for student transportation, a place in students' residence or provision of meals. Sometimes the employees themselves collect money so as to provide a short-term financial help for a student who *fainted in school due to malnutrition*.

Alternative ways of getting parents to cooperate are visiting their home (*Since they do not want to come to school*) in order to motivate them to take part in their children's education. It is not entirely clear how competent the school staffs feel when they visit parents. One of the ways to react is to threaten parents (*We usually threaten that we will report them and that they will lose their child and social benefits. That is why you should consider whether it is worth it not sending your child to school*) or to help the family by providing clothes and shoes.

Early identification of children at risk of dropping out represents a preventative action that has a huge potential to be efficient, but in the course of our talks was only mentioned twice. Helping through projects was mentioned once, but the problem with them lies in the fact that

project activities usually cease following the end of project financing.

Only one answer stated that within the compulsory curriculum there are topics related to the importance of education for life. Besides, it transpires that inclusion of peers is underused as a preventative action since it appeared in one answer only during our talks.

Table 3: Target measures for dropout prevention

Intervention	f	%
Giving students better marks than they deserve	14	42%
Providing financial help	6	14%
Justifying unjustified absences	4	12%
Threats to parents	3	9%
Early monitoring	2	6%
Help via projects	1	3%
Visiting parents	1	3%
Involving peers	1	3%
Propagating education as valuable	1	3%
Total	33	100

4. Discussion

In the theoretical part we saw that numerous papers agree on the importance of student social integration (Finn 1985; Tinto 1975; Wehlage & Rutter 1985) for reducing dropout. However, by analysing the preventative actions school staff listed, we observe that that importance is not recognised, so there are almost no actions aimed at this aspect of education.

When it comes to systematic prevention programs, we have noticed that school staff is ambivalent towards their efficiency. The finding that there is a problem in interdepartmental cooperation with other institutions particularly drew our attention. The dropout phenomenon is complex, hence good networking between different institutions is seen as a

prerequisite for systematic efforts to be successful (Stepanović, Lazarević, Simić 2017: 91; Stepanović, Videnović, Lazarević 2015: 462). Apart from the ambivalent feeling towards existing preventative actions, it is also noticeable that they are not visible enough since some members of staff claim there are no systematic programs at all.

Systematic programs of sending a student to only take exams and not attend classes, or sending them to another school, appear to be common and accepted by staff. However, they can also represent a way of masking a problem since the difficulties those students encounter are no longer systematically monitored.

It can also be seen that there is no systematic support in cases of students from poor families, more precisely family's inability to pay for student transport or accommodation in halls of residence. The financial help is realised as extra-systemic action and only when cooperation with local authorities is established. This type of systematic support is necessary because family's poverty undoubtedly represents a risk factor for the occurrence of dropout (Krstić, Stepanović, Videnović 2017: 34; Krnjaić, 2004: 295; Stepanović, Videnović, Lazarević 2015: 462; Stepanović, Lazarević, Simić 2017: 100; Videnović & Lazarević 2017: 72).

When analysing extra-systemic interventions, our attention was drawn to the fact that the most mentioned ones are those where the problem is masked, either by justifying unjustified absences or giving students better marks than they deserve. When they are implemented, there is an easily established cooperation between multiple actors (parents – doctors – teachers) which often does not exist in other preventative actions. In order to understand this, we should take into account the specific context of our educational system. Within educational policies in contemporary society there is often an inexplicable tension. Namely, one of the aims of every contemporary educational system, particularly in the West, is an increase in standards. The pressure placed on students to improve student attainment in external evaluations is significantly higher today than ten years ago (Koretz 2015: 1). On the other hand, as Finn observed at the end of 1980s, this pressure leads to an increase in dropout (Finn 1989: 117), since children from disadvantaged environment find it harder to meet these demands. In other words, the challenge of today's educational systems lies in the issue of maintaining or increasing standards whilst at the same time reducing or keeping dropout at the same level. Similarly, some authors see increasing the quality of education and improving equality as two contradictory tendencies in education (Pfeffer 2012: 1). In Serbian educational system external evaluation is less developed than in the rest of Western Europe and the

USA, hence we cannot talk about the existence of a lot of pressure to meet quality standards. For that reason, the abovementioned tension is not as strong, resulting in an easier development of the practice of lowering criteria. Setting clear standards and insisting on them being met would lead to students developing better competencies and becoming more competitive in the job market. Furthermore, it would be easier to recognise students with learning difficulties and the possibility of them getting adequate help would be increased. Besides, lowering criteria and giving students better marks than they deserve have an unfavourable impact on school atmosphere because students do not think of teachers as fair. Finally, we feel the need to once again emphasise the importance of a wide range of preventative actions at school's disposal, as well as preventing the help a child receives from actually being in a form or a pseudofavour (doing a child a disservice).

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