

## Dropout Syndromes:

### A Study of Individual, Family, and Social Factors, in Two Montreal High Schools

*It has generally been considered a fair test of an institution that is intended to serve the public, to take note of the number of people who continue to use its services once they have begun. The dropout rate in high schools was the subject of general concern in the decade of the sixties, but no single solution appeared to be found; the rate has continued to be rather high, and higher in some schools than in others. Zamanzadeh and Prince, persisting with the problem, collected data of four kinds — personal, family, attitudinal, and academic — from the students in two such schools, and then returned the following year to interview those who had since left before graduating. They report no fewer than five separate socio-psychological patterns, common and distinctive among the dropouts, and illustrate them here with case examples. For one or two of these groups, dropping out may have been the right step, given the circumstances; towards the others there would appear to be some obligation on the part of the system, to adjust.*

It is a widely held belief in the Western world that a high school education is a bare minimum for contemporary survival. There has therefore been concern about the significant proportion of young people who leave high school before graduating. Research studies on dropouts began to appear only in the middle sixties, however, and largely in the United States (Casella and Shrader, 1975; Cervantes, 1965; Gallion, 1976; Greene, 1966; Hammer, 1970; Lichter, et al. 1962; and Schreiber, 1964). Canadian studies are few. Drummie (1965) examined the dropout problem in New Brunswick, Guest (1968) in Winnipeg, Barnes (1973) in the South Okanagan region of British Columbia, and Reich and Young (1975) in Toronto.

With a few exceptions these studies have been demographically oriented and retrospective — studying the features of students after they have already left the school system. They have also, for the most part, lacked comparable data on control groups. The findings indicate that in recent years from 20 to 50 per cent of students who enter the

first year of high school drop out before they graduate. More boys than girls drop out. Variations in dropout rates are associated with social class: the lower the class level the higher the proportion of dropouts. Cultural factors may also be involved. Barnes (1973), in British Columbia, found that a significantly higher dropout rate occurred among non-English, non-Canadian-born students. Amerindians in Canada have an exceptionally high dropout rate (Berry et al, 1971). Studies in the U.S.A. indicate that integrated schools generate about equal rates of black and white dropouts, whereas rates are much higher among blacks in non-integrated schools (Bachman et al, 1971).

What is a dropout? Since not all students have an equal educational potential, one definition would be that he or she is a student who leaves the educational system before reaching full potential. A student with a very low potential who left in the middle of high school would, by this definition, not be a dropout, whereas a student with a very high potential would be called a dropout unless he or she persisted through university. But for research purposes the identification of high and low potential students is too controversial and difficult to be practical. Another difficulty is that of what we might call functional dropouts. Many students with adequate potential attend school in body but with minds elsewhere, and probably they should be called dropouts. But again their identification is difficult. Similarly there are perhaps a few actual dropouts who obtain a high level of education in the outside world, perhaps superior to the education they would have received in our high schools. Again, these pseudo-dropouts present grave identification problems. Most dropout research defines a dropout simply as a student who leaves high school before receiving his or her graduation diploma. We too used this definition.

Our aim in the present research was to obtain accurate figures on dropouts in Montreal and to contrast the dropouts with the non-dropouts according to personal, family, and social characteristics. We hoped to get some clues as to causes of dropping out, and perhaps some ideas for control strategies. In brief, we surveyed the entire populations of two Montreal high schools in contrasting socio-economic areas in January, 1971. The questionnaire covered demographic and social data, and included a psychosocial stress measure<sup>1</sup> and a scale which purported to identify potential dropouts.<sup>2</sup> Over the following year the actual dropouts were identified, and as many as possible were interviewed. A random sample of non-dropouts was also interviewed as controls.

### **The high schools and their populations**

The two high schools studied were alike in that they served about 1000 students each, and the teacher turnover rates per year were both about 20%. The basic curriculums were the same, although the higher income area school offered a richer variety of academic electives. But the students in the schools presented some interesting contrasts.

While going from room to room in conducting the initial survey, we found the atmosphere in the middle income school more authoritarian and the students rather passive and compliant. They had few questions and simply followed instructions. The higher income students were more verbal and critical. They demanded full information and asked searching questions. Similar contrasts in attitude were registered on the Demos Scale. Attitudes towards parents and towards school were significantly more critical ( $p < .01$ ) in the high income school, though, as we will see, there were significantly fewer dropouts from the high income school. The higher income students verbalized their dissatisfactions, but the middle income students acted them out.

Table I

SOME DEMOGRAPHIC FEATURES OF STUDENTS OF TWO MONTREAL HIGH SCHOOLS			
	High income area school	Middle income area school	Chi-Square
	%	%	
Sex of students	(N = 1078)	(N = 1027)	
Male . . . . .	53.7	53.1	
Female . . . . .	46.3	46.9	.007 (N.S.)
Family income per year (1971)	(N = 923) <sup>1</sup>	(N = 694)	
Less than \$5,000 . . . . .	3.6	12.9	
\$5,000 to \$10,000 . . . . .	20.4	62.4	52.68***
\$10,000 or more . . . . .	76.0	24.7	
Mother's occupational status	(N = 994)	(N = 973)	
Housewife only . . . . .	64.3	65.6	
Working outside home part-time or full-time . . . . .	35.7	34.4	.037 (N.S.)
Education of father	(N = 964)	(N = 930)	
Elementary or some high school . . . . .	11.8	65.3	
Completed high school . . . . .	28.2	20.9	67.13***
Some or completed university . . . . .	60.0	13.8	

\*\*\*  $p < .001$

<sup>1</sup>Numbers vary because of incomplete data

Table I demonstrates the important contrasts in family income and father's education in the two schools. It is interesting that the proportion of mothers working outside the home is not different.

Table II

ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE AND STRESS IN TWO MONTREAL HIGH SCHOOLS			
	High income area school (N = 1038)	Middle income area school (N = 1027)	
Student's number of years behind	%	%	
No years.....	91.6	80.2	$X^2 = 5.494$ (N.S.)
1 year.....	6.4	15.9	
2 years.....	1.9	3.4	
3 or more.....	.1	.5	
Number of subjects failed	%	%	
None failed.....	69.5	46.3	$X^2 = 11.355^*$
1 or 2 more.....	21.1	33.9	
3 or 4.....	5.9	11.8	
5 or more.....	3.5	8.0	
Langner Stress scale score <sup>1</sup>			
Mean.....	2.77	3.14	$t = -3.01^{**}$
Standard deviation.....	2.63	2.91	

\* $p < .05$     \*\* $p < .01$     <sup>1</sup>The higher the score the greater the degree of stress

Regarding academic performance we examined school records for indicators: the number of years the student was behind what would have been expected for his or her age, and the number of subjects he or she had failed. Table II indicates that although the two student bodies do not differ significantly in the number of years behind, the trend is in the expected direction. The high income students fail significantly fewer subjects, and their Langner stress levels are significantly lower than the lower income students.

Table III

THE FATE OF THE POPULATION OF TWO HIGH SCHOOLS OVER A ONE-YEAR PERIOD		
	High income school (N = 1038)	Middle income school (N = 1027)
Graduated.....	22.3	27.5
Dropouts.....	5.2	14.1
Transferred private school due to school or family problems.....	4.6	0.0
Moved or transferred to other school or district.....	13.4	6.3
Left but returned to same school.....	0.9	1.1
Left school, no contact possible.....	1.5	1.5
Remained in same school.....	52.1	49.5

To determine the actual number of dropouts we compared the names of all students who had completed the original questionnaire in February, 1971, with the attendance list as of February, 1972. Telephone calls were made to students or their families whose names failed to appear. In the high income school, 5.2%, and in the middle income school 14.1% of students of the total populations of each school, in one year, dropped out (Table III). One might also want to estimate the proportion of students who enter high school but do not get their graduation certificate. Based on our present figures, we would estimate that for the high income school 19% leave before graduation as compared with 34% in the middle income school.

### Dropouts and controls

Of the 199 actual dropouts from both schools during the one year of our study, 158 had completed the original survey questionnaire. Fifty of these dropouts were finally interviewed face-to-face. These interviews were often very hard to arrange! A few entered psychotherapy, but none were motivated to continue beyond a few sessions. For the other 108 dropouts who were contacted (or who could be traced) but refused to be interviewed, we at least obtained the answer to one question: What had they been doing since they left school? Table IV demonstrates their stress levels (Langner Scale administered a year earlier) according to their work status. Some 38% of these had found jobs, and they had been the least stressed (and therefore, perhaps, the healthiest). Their mean score was 3.1, which is close to the average for the total population (high income school 2.77; middle income school 3.14). The most stressed students were those who became "drifters" after leaving school — they were not living at home, and as far as the parents knew, were not working. The drifters (30.5%) had had a Langner Scale score of 5, and the remainder (31.5%), who were not working but were either in residential care or at home, had had scores of 3.4 and 4.3 respectively.

Table IV

CURRENT STATUS AND STRESS LEVELS OF NON-INTERVIEWED DROPOUTS			
(N = 108)			
Current status	Number	Percent	Mean Langner Score
Working . . . . .	41	38.0	3.1
Not working			
At home . . . . .	19	17.5	4.3
Residential child care institution . . . . .	15	14.0	3.4
Drifting (not at home, not working) . . . . .	33	30.5	5.0

Finally, there were 41 dropouts who could not be contacted, but some of these had completed our initial questionnaire. It is interesting to note that their mean Langner Scale was 4, indicating that they were roughly similar to the sample contacted insofar as stress level is concerned. Since we were able to interview only 25% of the dropouts, and since we have minimal information on an additional 50%, we feel that our findings may not be entirely representative of dropouts in general.

Let us turn now to the 50 dropouts and 32 controls<sup>3</sup> who were interviewed. For the dropouts, these interviews took place from three weeks to three months after leaving school. All the interviews were semi-structured and of approximately forty-five minutes duration. The following areas were covered — chief complaints, family relationships and family difficulties, student's childhood development and health record, details of primary and secondary education, family attitudes towards education, student's attitudes towards teachers and school administration, student's habits and future plans. I.Q. measures (Henmon-Nelson) were obtained from school records.

To analyse the data we clustered the information into four categories: (1) personal characteristics, (2) characteristics of the family, (3) attitudes towards school administration and teachers, and (4) academic difficulties.

### *1. Differences in Personal Characteristics*

As other studies have shown, males predominate in the dropout group. Our dropout group was 65% male. As Table V indicates, a variety of characteristics showed significant differences between the two groups. The dropouts had more childhood anxiety symptoms (bed-wetting, nail-biting, nightmares, and so on); had more frequent periods of illness; had less self-confidence; and were more likely to day-dream. As regards peer-group relationship, the dropouts were either more isolated, or on the other hand more than normally involved.

Although the mean I.Q.'s of the dropouts are significantly lower (101.4 for dropouts as compared with 113.4 for the others), the majority came from the average I.Q. range (91-110) and slightly more were from the over 111 I.Q. level than from the under 91 level. Future planning also significantly distinguished the two groups, as did the use of marihuana.

### *2. Characteristics of the Family*

In this section we consider the families of the students. Some of these characteristics are relatively subjective, such as the attitude of the student towards his family, or his appraisal of his parents, while others are more objective, such as the father's and mother's education, or family income. Looking at the most objective of these characteristics

Table V

SOME DIFFERENCES BETWEEN DROPOUTS AND NON-DROPOUTS (INTERVIEW DATA)			
1. PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS			
Personal Characteristics	Dropouts (N = 50)	Non-Dropouts (N = 32)	Chi-Square
	%	%	
Three or more childhood anxiety symptoms.....	80	23	36.1**
Reported "often being sick".....	78	30	28.7**
Reported having very little self confidence.....	58	10	23.9**
Having a few friends.....	7	85	
Having no close friends.....	30	5	
Being constantly with friends.....	63	10	49.5**
I.Q. Categories			
(below 91).....	17	4	
(91 - 110).....	61	24	
(111 and above).....	22	72	25.9**
Marihuana use "few times" or regularly.....	67	35	13.4**
Future Planning:			
Definite ideas.....	23	80	
Unrealistic ideas.....	13	0	
No ideas or some ideas.....	64	20	31.9**

\*\* $p < .01$ 

Table VI

SOME DIFFERENCES BETWEEN DROPOUTS AND NON-DROPOUTS**		
2. FAMILY CHARACTERISTICS		
Characteristic	Dropout (N = 50)	Non-Dropout (N = 32)
	%	%
Parents separated or divorced.....	27	5
Either or both parents dead.....	15	2
Students living with both parents.....	54	90
Family Income (1971)		
Above \$10,000 per annum.....	11	62
\$5,000 - \$10,000.....	64	35
Below \$5,000.....	25	3
One or more sibling dropout.....	43	10

\*\* $p < .01$  or better ( $X^2$ )

Table VII

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN DROPOUTS AND NON-DROPOUTS**		
3. ATTITUDE TOWARDS SCHOOL ADMINISTRATION AND TEACHERS		
Attitude towards school	Dropouts (N = 50)	Non-dropouts (N = 32)
	%	%
Had difficulties with teachers in elementary school.....	63	12
Having difficulty with teachers in high school.....	88	15
Difficulty with high school authorities.....	88	18
Paying attention in class.....	8	74
Not critical of school administration.....	2	85

\*\* $p < .01$  or better ( $X^2$ )

Table VIII

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN DROPOUTS AND NON-DROPOUTS		
4 ATTITUDE TOWARDS EDUCATION		
Attitude towards education	Dropouts (N = 50)	Non-dropouts (N = 32)
	%	%
Two or more subjects failed in high school	59	17**
One or more years failed in elementary school.....	45	10**
One or more years failed in elementary and high school.....	80	12**
Skipping school regularly.....	97	7**
Six hours or more study per week.....	3	44**
Having difficulty only with subjects (not with authorities or teachers as well)....	8	28*

\* $p < .05$

\*\* $p < .01$



(Table VI), we find that the dropouts' families differ from the non-dropouts' in a number of important features: for example, 27% of the dropouts are from families in which the parents are separated or divorced, and 15% from families where either or both parents are dead, whereas only 5% and 2% of the controls, respectively, come from such families. Similarly, only 54% of the dropouts compared to 90% of the non-dropouts are living with both parents. As regards family income, it is clear that there is a definite trend for the dropouts to come from low income families.

The more subjective remarks of students emphasized also the importance of the emotional climate of the family in the dropout phenomenon. Some 60% of the dropouts feel that one or both of their parents were emotionally disturbed, or mentally ill, whereas only 15% of the control group saw their parents as emotionally disturbed. It is also clear that how a student feels about his or her parents (regardless of how they actually are) is an important aspect. Eighty per cent of our dropouts reported that they do not feel close to their fathers, whereas only 15% of the non-dropouts have this feeling. Of the 10 dropouts who feel close to their fathers, 7 have dropout fathers, a situation which may tend to foster dropping out if identification is strong.

### *3. Attitude Towards School Administration and Teachers*

Dropouts usually blame their schools for their failure. In our interview we tried to clarify their attitudes by separating the educational from the administrative aspects of the school. As Table VII demonstrates, 63% of the dropouts began to have difficulty with their teachers in elementary school (12% in non-dropouts). These difficulties rose to 88% in high school (15% for non-dropouts). Only 8% of the dropouts paid attention in the classroom as compared to 74% of the non-dropouts. The others stated that they were bored, restless, or caused trouble in the classrooms. The most significant factor was a negative attitude towards school administration. Ninety-eight per cent of the dropouts were critical of the way they were handled, whereas only 15% of the non-dropouts felt this way. Most dropouts seemed to be asking for more control, in the sense of more attention, care, and understanding with firmness; others only demanded individual care and affection, but no discipline, and they believed they would have done well if they had received that.

### *4. Academic Difficulties*

We have separated the attitude towards education from the attitude towards school in order to be able to see how many of the dropouts' difficulties are academic and how many are interpersonal and disciplinary. As Table VIII shows, 59% of the dropouts failed two or more subjects in high school (non-dropouts 17%); 45% of the dropouts failed once or more in elementary school (non-dropouts 10%); 80% of the dropouts, but only 12% of the non-dropouts, failed one year or more in their school careers.

The most important factors related to educational attitudes seem to be skipping school regularly, and the amount of time spent studying per week: 31% of dropouts did not study at all as compared with 8% of non-dropouts. We found that when non-dropouts reported difficulties, it has to do with specific subjects rather than with the school administration or with teachers; thus 28% of non-dropouts reported that they found some subjects to be hard for them, whereas only 8% of dropouts reported finding some subjects hard. The difficulties of the dropouts tended to be global, which suggests that changes in the curriculum alone would not be of too much help.

### A classification of dropouts

After examining the data from our interviews with the 50 dropouts and 32 controls, we found that they separated out into five main clusters according to the most important single cause of dropping out.

Dropout from homes broken by parental separation	12 (24%)
Dropouts from homes broken by parental deaths	7 (14%)
Dropouts with personality disorders and family pathology	10 (20%)
The "black sheep" dropout	12 (24%)
Family tradition dropout	9 (18%)

In interviews with the control group (N=32) we of course found some students who also derived from broken families, pathological families, and so on. The proportions of these were as follows:

Controls from homes broken by parental separation	2 ( 6%)
Controls from homes broken by parental deaths	1 ( 3%)
Controls with personality disorders and family pathology	3 (10%)
The "black sheep" control	0 ( 0%)
Family tradition control	0 ( 0%)

It is to be noted that 26 of the control group (81%) could not be placed in any of these categories, and we feel that, on the basis of our interviews, they appear to derive from healthy families. In the further presentation of these findings, one case example of each of these five dropout syndromes will be given.

#### 1. Dropouts From Homes Disrupted by Parental Separation or Divorce

Twelve of the dropouts were found to come from families where the parents were so incompatible that they had separated or divorced. Most of these children were currently living with their mothers, but the important factor was that they reported feeling unwanted and unsupported; in only one of the 12 cases did the dropout report that the parent he was living with was "loving." The others described them in terms suggesting rejection, punitiveness, "weakness," or over-protect-

tion. It must, of course, be remembered that these descriptions are based on the students' reports only.

The mean Langner score on this group of dropouts (8 of the 12 where it was available) is 7, indicating a high level of stress. The mean I.Q. of the 8 that were available is 103.

Case No. 48  
Grade: 11  
High income high school  
I.Q.: Unknown  
Langner Scale: 7

This 18-year-old girl was very unhappy from age 8 when her parents separated after a life of constant conflict. She hated high school, started on heavy drugs at 15, left school for a commune and ended up in jail. Her father, a 40-year-old university graduate, whom she describes as a weak person, took her home. Then she moved in with her mother, also a university graduate, whom she describes as emotional and illogical, only to be disappointed again; she disliked her mother very much and returned to her father. A brother, 14, a good student and dependable person, lives with his father. A sister, 12, and brother, 8, who is very sensitive, live with the mother.

She sucked her thumb until age 8, and felt that she was an unwanted child. She feels that she doesn't belong in school, and since her parents never really cared about children and she has no attachment, she's been searching for a place where she really belongs, and so joined the commune.

## *2. Dropouts from Homes Broken by Parental Death*

In this group the death of one or both parents had such an adverse effect on the family that it seemed to be the main reason for the student's dropping out. Again, as in the case of dropouts from homes broken by separation, the remaining parent had not been able to provide sufficient emotional support for the child to reach his or her full potential. The average Langner Score of this group is 5. They are thus less stressed than children from homes broken by separation.

Case No. 36  
Grade: 9  
Middle income high school  
I.Q. and Langner Scale not available

This 18-year-old boy was doing well up to grade 6 when he started to lose interest in studying and finally left school before entering grade 10. His father died of a brain tumour at the age of 36, when the boy was one year old. The 42-year-

old mother, a housewife, is emotionally ill. She has a disturbed family background and has suffered from depression from time to time. The boy never lived with her and is presently in an institution. He describes his mother as being extremely bossy and domineering: "a person to whom it is hard to be kind." He has a good relationship with his aunt. He tried returning home to live with the mother, but after four months she developed a depression and he returned to the institution. His 22-year-old brother also left school in grade 8, joined the U.S. army and went to Viet Nam.

He still bites his nails and was sucking his thumb until last year. He started telling lies at the age of 9 and always felt very much deprived. At present he works in a car body shop and likes it.

### *3. Dropouts with Personality Disorders and Family Pathology*

In this group we included dropouts whose main problem seemed to lie in their own personality disorder and/or in marked family pathology. The personality disorder is of the type which makes adaptation to school very difficult. They tend to be non-conformists (either passive or active). They are not able to develop positive cooperative personal relationships. Usually one or both parents are emotionally disturbed, and the child is involved with them. The average Langner Score for this group is 3.3. They often do not show signs of anxiety, their behaviour being an accepted part of their personality. They are the most difficult dropouts.

Case No. 41  
Grade: 11  
Middle income high school  
I.Q.: 98  
Langner Scale: 7

This 19-year-old girl disliked school from the beginning. In high school she began having difficulties with her teachers. She feels that her 37-year-old father, a railway yardman with elementary school education, is too rigid and strict and has ignored her since she was 9. The father admits that he hates seeing females getting their own way and has always pushed her to study, telling her she is like his own mother — fat, lazy and useless. Since the age of 11, when she claims he made incestuous approaches, she has avoided him and is scared of him or any man. She said: "I still have nightmares that my father is coming to my room to make love to me." The 36-year-old mother, a housewife with elementary school education, is a quiet, sensitive and affectionate woman, but the daughter doesn't feel close to her either. The 11-year-old brother, in grade 5, is a very nervous boy.

The subject wet her bed up to age 12. She still bites her nails, has nightmares, is scared of the dark, and tells lies. She daydreams a lot and spends the rest of her time out with her friends. She finds it difficult to get along with males. This girl has been traumatized by the rejection of her father and is still struggling to have him accept and love her for herself rather than for what she can achieve.

#### 4. The "Black Sheep" Dropout

This type of dropout appeared to be selected for special negative treatment by one or both parents. In some cases the child is cast in the role of "the stupid one of the family," or the "trouble maker." This selected child seems sometimes to represent some other person from the past of either parent for whom there was a special dislike, rivalry, or jealousy. In other cases the child may represent some unacceptable personality facet of one of the parents.

In any case, the child finds himself or herself treated differently from the other children for no reason that he or she can ascertain. The child often goes on to fulfill the negative role in which he or she has been cast. If this role involves "being stupid" or "being a failure in school," the result may be a dropout. Our case histories tend to indicate that the father may have a special importance in this kind of dropping out. The father's academic values, expectations, and ambitions are vital nourishment for the teenager's interest, motivation, and school functioning, and his negative expectations seriously influence the student's potential abilities and adaptation.

In our 12 cases, 10 felt rejected by their fathers, one had a weak father, and one a mentally ill father. Among their mothers, five were rejecting, five were overprotective, one was detached, and one was affectionate. The average Langner Score for this group is 7.5, which is higher even than the score of children from separated families. It seems that the student in such cases is constantly being reminded of how worthless he or she is.

Case No. 49  
Grade: 11  
High income high school  
I.Q.: 84  
Langner Scale: 9

This 19-year-old girl hated school before she was old enough to go. The 62-year-old father, a university graduate, whom she describes as nervous, rigid and unsympathetic, tried to teach her mathematics when she was very young, and when she couldn't understand he used to get angry. The 43-year-old mother is only superficially close. She had been hoping

for another son. The brother, 21, is a postgraduate student, a brilliant scholar and the family favourite.

She bit her nails up to age 12 and still sucks her thumb, has nightmares and is afraid of the dark. From early childhood she had headaches and stomach pains and was often sick. She was always compared to her brother, and as her efforts to reach his level failed she started accepting the role of a failure which was assigned to her. She dislikes everything the family likes and does exactly the opposite of what she is told. The mother (who was also interviewed) dislikes girls, perhaps due to jealousy of her own four sisters. The father wanted to have a son who would be a scholar. From the daughter's point of view, there was no room for her in the family, so she left it.

### *5. Family Tradition Dropout*

In this category we have placed a group of dropouts who seemed to drop out because it was a family tradition. They are all from the middle income high school. Their families are intact, and they often have a reasonably good relationship with at least one parent. Their mean Langner Scale score is 3.6, which is not significantly different from the mean for the entire middle income population (3.14). We might call them normal dropouts. The mean I.Q. for the group was 99 (as opposed to 101 for the total dropout group and 113 for the controls).

They have the following common characteristics:

1. Almost all the parents are themselves dropouts: of the 18 parents of our 9 cases only one of the mothers had completed high school.
2. Most of their siblings are also dropouts: of 23 siblings, 21 did not complete high school.
3. Often a double message is given by the parents: although they encourage their children to work hard at school, they accept their poor performance and failure in a very matter-of-fact way, as if it was expected. There was almost the feeling in some families that the child would be disloyal to the family if he got through high school. The fathers are all lower-level blue-collar workers.

Case No. 25  
Grade 8  
Middle income high school  
I.Q.: 76  
Langner Scale: Not done

This 17-year-old girl was an average student and did well up to grade 5. She quit school after 3 years in grade 8.

She describes her 61-year-old father, a carpenter with some elementary education, as a very good man who is active and does not lose his temper. The 52-year-old mother, with some elementary education, sews part-time. She is a domineering, unaffectionate woman. The parents get along with each other, but the daughter is afraid of both of them. A 33-year-old sister left home at 15, finished high school after leaving home, is married and has one child. Sisters 31 and 27 both left school after grade 8 and are married. Brothers 29, 27, 21 and 19 left school at grades 7, 8, 8, and 9. A sister, 15, and brothers, 13 and 10, are still in school.

She is a nail-biter. She had many bad dreams and wet her bed up to age 10. She has no friends and is extremely tense with people, feels shy and inferior, and her only interest is in cooking. She is hard working and has a job in a restaurant. In this family there are obviously many elements to cause 6 out of 7 children to drop out of high school, and in this particular case the main reason is limited intelligence.

## **Discussion**

In our early thinking about the problem of dropping out, we expected that we would find a fair number of healthy students of good intelligence who were leaving school because they found it stultifying; who were in fact making a rational judgement about what was best for themselves and were leaving from a position of strength rather than weakness. Reich and Young (1975) indeed reported finding 3% of dropouts in this category in their Toronto study. We failed to find such students. As our research unfolded it became increasingly clear that dropping out was most often a symptom of disturbance, the locus of which was primarily in the family. We found that there was a continuous spectrum of dropouts, with relatively healthy students who drop out on the basis of family tradition at one extreme, and at the other, students with serious personality disorders. Both extreme groups had adapted to life with minimal subjective distress. Ranged between were those who have higher levels of subjective anguish and disability, and who are probably more open to therapeutic intervention.

As compared with the control group, many more of the dropouts derived from broken or disturbed families. In the few controls who suffered similar family problems, the important saving feature seemed to be that there was one parent or guardian who was very positively regarded by the student. This was so in almost all cases. Occasionally, the factor that held the student in school was a special friend or teacher who tipped the balance in spite of familial difficulties. It was clear that most successful students saw themselves as working for someone they esteemed and wanted to please. It should also be pointed out that not all of the controls were in good mental health or without family

problems. In fact, 10% of the controls were placed in the category of "personality disorder and family pathology." It should, of course, be noted that over-achievement may be as much a symptom of psychiatric disturbance as under-achievement or dropping out.

Another potentially useful point emerged from this research. Although the Demos Scale failed as a satisfactory predictor of dropouts, there are a number of other indicators that would probably have proved more valid. The teacher can often pick out the potential dropouts on the basis of declining interest in the classroom, failure to do homework and, most significantly, increasing absenteeism. These tokens of flagging interest could readily serve as the basis for referral for student or family counselling, and for a dropout-prevention program.

To our knowledge no dropout-prevention programs based on such an early detection system have been developed. In the few existing programs there is an attempt to work with the dropout after he has finally given up and withdrawn from the system. One such program is that developed in the Province of New Brunswick (Drummie, 1965), under the auspices of the Youth Division of the Department of Youth and Welfare. Principals of high schools throughout the province were asked to report the names of dropouts to their head office. After indexing, a Youth Service representative in the local district visited the school principal, teacher, or student counsellor and tried to interview the dropout, often a very difficult task. The primary focus of the program was statistical, but there was an attempt to find out the reasons for dropping out and possible remedies. From a rehabilitative perspective, as many dropouts as possible were urged to discuss their problems with guidance counsellors.

Our research suggests that curriculum change would do little to alleviate the dropout problem. There are also broader issues concerning the general question of student mental health. How can disturbed children and potential dropouts in our high schools best be handled? There is considerable debate on the matter. Some advocate the management of such children within the standard school system through counselling, psychiatric consultation with teachers, and psychiatric treatment of selected students. Schonfeld (1917) feels that students with difficulties should be spread throughout the system, and not concentrated in special classes or schools, since such segregation results in feelings of alienation and "being different." Casella and Shrader (1975) describe an expanded program that included visits to businessmen and labour officials in attempting to hold potential dropouts in school.

But there are those who strongly advocate special classes or schools, even residential schools (Hammer, 1970; Long et al., 1971). They believe that consultation and treatment is not sufficient and that disturbed children do best in small, specialized classrooms within therapeutic milieux, under the guidance of specially trained educators.



There has indeed been very little in the way of evaluative research on the two approaches. Balow (reported in Vacc, 1971), after an extensive review of the literature on such programmes, concluded that "the majority of publications have been in prescriptions, subjective descriptions, and clinical studies." Vacc (1971) found that emotionally disturbed children in their regular classes achieve less well on the Wide-Range Achievement Test and Behaviour Rating Scale than do emotionally disturbed children in special classes. Further, he found that emotionally disturbed children in regular classes were less well accepted than normal children. His data seem to support and justify the need for additional classes. Gallion (1976) compared a "modular school" with a traditional school as regards achievement, attendance, and dropping out. No differences in dropping out were noted. Clearly, much more research should be conducted on this vital question.

One of the more interesting findings of our present study was that a good number of students in the higher income school transferred to private schools because they were having school or family difficulties. How effective are these private schools in holding students in the educational system? No research has been done on this important question. Such a study would have implications for dealing with the dropout problem in general.

Although our study suggests that the cause of dropping out lies much more with the family than with the school, the important question remains: how can the high school best provide aid to potential dropouts?

## **NOTES**

1. The Langner Scale (Langner, 1962) is a twenty-two item, self-report check list and provides a rough indication of where people stand on a continuum of impairment in life functioning due to common psychiatric symptoms. The scale is scored so that a higher score indicates greater stress, and most studies have found that a score of 5 or over suggests significant pathology.
2. The Demos Scale (Demos, 1965) was designed to pick out potential dropouts by measuring attitudes. It consists of 29 statements which the pupil is asked to score on a 5-point continuum. The statements cover attitudes towards teachers, education, influence of peers or parents, and school behaviour. It should be noted that we did not find this scale to be a satisfactory predictor of dropping out (Zamanzadeh, 1975).
3. Controls were randomly selected from grade eleven students of the two schools who graduated in June, 1971.

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