

# THE PROBLEM OF SCHOOL DROPOUTS AMONG WHITE YOUTH IN THE REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA: SOME RESEARCH FINDINGS

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the present summary an account is given of the nature, scope, methods and findings of a comprehensive, long-term research project on the problem of school dropouts undertaken by staff and students of the Faculty of Education at the University of Pretoria with financial support from the Human Sciences Research Council and the University. This account is an integrated summary of 18 research reports produced in the form of publications, M. Ed. theses, and Ed. D. dissertations. The project began in 1964 and the last report was completed at the beginning of 1981.

## 2. EXPLORATORY STUDY AND STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM OF THE PROJECT

The project was initiated with a study by Du Plessis<sup>(6)</sup> in which, as a statement of the problem for the project, the alarming gravity of the phenomenon of school dropout by youths was indicated as well as the fact that no longer can it be allowed that so many White youths prematurely leave the school situation. In this publication there was consideration of the anticipated approach to the problem and the necessity for a qualitative analysis of the person-structure and situatedness of the potentially early school leaver was argued for. The data obtained from such a qualitative analysis must directly indicate a solution to the problem.

Five research focuses were proposed for a phenomenological-qualitative determination of the extent to which the following

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factors might possibly be reasons for dropping out of school, namely:

- (i) factors outside of school such as the home situation and the milieu;
- (ii) factors such as the structure, dispositions and aspirations of the person;
- (iii) factors within the education system;
- (iv) factors within the school situation;
- (v) the possible influence of having a job on a teenager within the framework of a work structure.<sup>(6)</sup>

### 3. SCOPE OF THE RESEARCH PROJECT

The research themes of the project link the school dropout problem to the following situations, factors and related problem areas:

- (i) The lifeworld and educative situation of the school dropout (or potential dropout); an exploration of the lifeworld of the school dropout<sup>(11)</sup>; the inadequate realization of the educative event (pedagogic relationship, sequence and activity structures) as reasons for dropping out of school<sup>(8 and 13)</sup>; inadequate experience of meaningfulness in the potential school dropout's becoming (adult)<sup>(18)</sup>.
- (ii) The family: the family as a factor in the etiology of dropping out of school<sup>(16)</sup>.
- (iii) The school: the duality in learning relationships of the potential dropout – the blocked potentiality of the dropout in the school situation in terms of disturbed learning relationships<sup>(3 and 7)</sup>; the relationship of understanding between the potential dropout and teacher<sup>(1)</sup>; the inadequate actualization of learning by the potential dropout in a lesson situation<sup>(12)</sup>; the neglect of reading instruction as a fundamental reason for leaving school too early<sup>(2)</sup>; inadequate actualization of sociopedagogic tasks at school as leading to dropping out<sup>(10)</sup>.
- (iv) Social factors: social factors giving rise to dropping out<sup>(5)</sup>; the connection between the milieu-

- “deprivation” and dropping out as well as giving assistance to this type of potential dropout<sup>(9)</sup>.
- (v) Misuse of drugs: possible connections between youths misusing drugs and dropping out of school<sup>(17)</sup>.
  - (vi) Youth alienation: alienation as a problem with respect to the potential dropout<sup>(14)</sup>.
  - (vii) Identity problems: the connection between identity confusion by the youth and dropping out<sup>(15)</sup>.
  - (viii) Pedotherapy: a study of the possibility of pedotherapeutic assistance for potential dropouts<sup>(4)</sup>.

#### 4. PERSPECTIVES AND METHODS OF RESEARCH

The studies were undertaken from the following part-perspectives of pedagogics: psychopedagogics, orthopedagogics and sociopedagogics. Some of the studies were undertaken from a joint or general pedagogic perspective. Of the 18 studies, 8 were purely theoretical studies of the literature while 10 also included empirical research—mostly in the form of obtaining person-images or family-images of potential dropouts by employing the methods of orthopedagogic diagnostics. Two studies investigated the course and results of pedotherapeutic assistance for the potential dropout.

The studies of the following researchers also contained empirical research: Bondesio<sup>(1)</sup>, Botha<sup>(3)</sup>, Crous<sup>(4)</sup>, Ferreira<sup>(7)</sup>, Gouws<sup>(8)</sup>, Joubert<sup>(9)</sup>, Louw<sup>(11)</sup>, Putter<sup>(13)</sup>, Redelinghuys<sup>(14)</sup> and Visser<sup>(17)</sup>.

#### 5. FINDINGS

5.1 The problem of the school dropout is primarily a pedagogic problem: a pedagogic value judgement regarding the youth's becoming adult (and preparation for life) is made in that the youth leaves school before he/she is in a position to have reached adulthood<sup>(3)</sup>.

5.2 A number of relevant factors in the family situation can give rise to leaving school. These are factors that affect the “we-ness” structure of the family in its essence. Disparities in the primary (home) educative situation are the greatest single factor giving rise to dropping out of school<sup>(16)</sup>.

5.3 An exploration of the lifeworld of the dropout provides the following findings: the relationship between the dropout and his parents is characterized by: disturbance and mutual non-acceptance; lack of responsibility by the parents and the dropout; insecurity; recognition, acceptance and exercise of authority miscarry; the normative life of the dropout is disturbed; the dropout is in affective distress (labile affectivity – tension, anxiety, insecurity, aggression, frustration, etc.) with the consequence that his/her and emancipation are actualized inadequately; pedagogical communication with the dropout is disturbed and alienation arises; the dropout is further characterized by a weak identification with his/her parents, a deficient directedness to school work, a negative self-image, poor learning achievement as well as underachievement and an obscure future perspective<sup>(11)</sup>.

5.4 A child whose educative event in the family and school is inadequately actualized becomes restrained in his/her growing up; his/her psychic life is disturbed and he/she under-actualizes his/her potentialities concerning learning achievement at school and on this basis becomes a potential dropout. Such a child experiences uncertainty, aggression, insecurity and disturbed interpersonal relationships, a deficient focus on school work, disorientation, anxiety and feelings of inferiority<sup>(8 and 13)</sup>.

5.5 With respect to the relationship of understanding between the teacher and potential dropout, the following appear:

- \* When an adequate relationship of understanding exists a teacher readily can identify potential dropouts in his/her classes.
- More than half of the potential dropouts studied were not school ready when they began school.
- Symptoms indicative of leaving school especially are a sudden drop in achievement and the avoidance of homework.
- The current *in loco parentis* system in the schools doesn't meet the expectations regarding fostering the relationship of understanding between teacher and potential dropout because of the large number of pupils,

the turnover of personnel, the purely organizational “flavor” of guidance periods (home room), because of the administrative duties of personnel, the lack of personnel, aids and services and then inadequate contact between home (parents) and school.

- The potential dropout shows him/herself as colliding with the intellectual demands of the school situation and does not optimally actualize his/her learning potential; he shows a labile directedness and a negative attitude toward learning activities and is not emotionally ready to exert him/herself on an intellectual level.
- In many ways the cognitive accompaniment (instruction) of the child to adequate school achievement is insufficient.
- School dropouts are inclined to flee from demands, to be alienated and to be socially isolated.
- Potential dropouts hang together in small groups in the school situation.
- Choices made by dropouts often do not occur in terms of acceptable values and norms.
- Many potential dropouts are unknown, unseen and unidentified in high school.
- The guidance teacher (counselor) must be schooled in orthopedagogics and orthodidactics to be able to identify and help the potential dropout<sup>(1)</sup>.

5.6 A potential dropout is identifiable by the following criteria:

- \* A minimum IQ of 100 as the established lower boundary;
- \* a negative attitude toward school and all aspect of learning there;
- school work is neglected for the sake of sports and social activities;
- the child withdraws from extra-mural school activities;
- the child already has failed or is very probably going to fail in his school career.

The potential school dropout is characterized by the following:

- A duality in his learning relationship;
- being blocked in the school situation;
- affective (pathic) flooding that unfavorably influences cognitive (gnostic) achievement;

- a labile focus on school work;
- strongly dependent on emotional support;
- rejection and non-realization of the norms of the adult world—also of learning norms;
- a boundary situation—he is on the border between leaving school early and successfully completing his/her school career;
- experiences insecurity;
- unfavorable learning relationships with parents, teachers, classmates and things (books, apparatuses, learning material);
- tendency to flee from school demands by establishing a world-in-opposition to the school—the world of modern youth as an emotionally colored room for escape with an emphasis on pleasurable experiences and possessive relationships;
- rejection of the traditional (especially regarding youth activities);
- displays a “false-I”<sup>(3)</sup>.

5.7 A pedoclinical investigation of the lifeworld of the school leaver, as experiential world, brings to light the following learning images in terms of the modes of learning and learning relationships of the school dropout:

*Modes of learning:*

- School dropouts commonly show a poor intentional directedness.
- Because of experiencing being blocked in their learning world, they are not able to adequately actualize their learning potentialities.
- Affective (pathic) lived experiences indicate an unfavorable preformed field for actualizing the modes of learning on a cognitive (Gnostic) level.
- There is mention of an under-actualization of their primordial learning potentialities because of emotional (pathic) flooding.
- Their ways of constituting their modes of learning testify to an attenuated venturing attitude.

- Their experience of being blocked (the modes of learning) results in a fleeing from this activity and a distancing an actuality as unreality.

*Learning relationships:*

- The school dropout's learning in relation to things testifies to an attenuated cognitive attitude and this learning relationship manifests itself on an emotional (pathic) level.
- The learning relationship to other children testifies to an experience of loneliness, isolation and lack of support.
- Learning in relationship to adults (parents and teachers), as in all learning, appears as very important, but here there is mention of a serious deficiency in and lack of emotional (pathic) support, especially from the parents.
- The learning space at home and at school are experienced as unfavorable for establishing learning relationships.
- Each school leaver's historicity is of essential importance for constituting learning relationships as well as for the level of lived experience on which he/she is able to actualize his/her learning potentialities.
- School dropouts commonly are pedagogically neglected and in affective distress.
- There is mention of an aggressive-being-in-the-world and a rebelliousness against authority because of a need for pedagogically accountable accompaniment.
- The children experience their future as obscure and their future perspective is confused.
- The school leaver's distress is usually an existential distress<sup>(7)</sup>.

**5.8** The following factors perform disharmonious lesson situations in the school and give rise to the inadequate actualization of learning by the potential dropout in a lesson situation:

- \* The inadequate actualization of the pedagogical essences;
- \* the inadequate actualization of lesson structure essences;
- \* the inadequate unlocking of reality by the teacher;
- \* the inadequate selection of the lesson content;
- \* overload of the curriculum.

This means the inadequate pathic-affective, gnostic-cognitive and normative accompaniment of the child by the teacher to self-

actualize his/her learning potentialities and modes of learning. This results in a tendency for the child to leave school<sup>(12)</sup>.

**5.9** Undesirable reading material can have a bad influence on a child by not contributing to his/her becoming and learning but leads the child to alienation, degeneration and the under-actualization of his/her psychic life and by which the child can become a potential dropout. The potential dropout usually is confronted with the mass communication media (also bulk reading material) with its objectionable and poor quality. From this study it seems that the potential dropout is particularly open to “decadent” reading materials. There is a connection between the neglect of teaching reading and the problem of leaving school too early<sup>(2)</sup>.

**5.10** Inadequate actualization of sociopedagogic (socialization) tasks by the school means for the pupils in such a school a performing to leave school too early. Important aspects of the socialization task of the school are the following: person-forming, conveying culture, true to life instruction, awakening valuing work, learning to organize, learning to work and live together, learning to relax (educating for the meaningful use of free time), learning to compete, learning to relate with the opposite gender, awakening respect for values, establishing expectations, actualizing the child’s social-communicative potentialities, learning to manage societal influences, social-societal orientation, accompaniment to identity acquisition. In this connection, standards for a “good” school can be laid down that enables the school to exercise a strong influence on its pupils by adequately accommodating them<sup>(10)</sup>.

**5.11** The following youth problems can give rise to dropping out of school because they can influence the youth to be inadequately directed to school work: massified youth, a search for a counter culture by youth in contemporary social-societal situations, misuse of drugs, youth alienation and meaningless use of free time.

The following societal conditions can give rise to leaving school too early: permissiveness and hedonism in society, milieu deficiencies, the attractiveness of the labor market, educatively impeding societal factors such as prosperity and materialism<sup>(5)</sup>.



5.12 Children in a milieu deficient situation are exposed to serious pedagogical neglect. In most cases the schooling of the parents was inadequate and their school achievement was weak. Milieu-deficient children receive defective educating to task acceptance regarding the school and also are inadequately educated regarding positive learning relationships. Parents convey their negative attitudes toward school to their children because they themselves had failed to achieve in school. Too little time is spent on the course of educating so opportunities for it are lacking. In addition, educating the milieu-deficient child is disturbed and attenuated. Also, in general, these children have a poor, narrow world of experience. They do not come into contact with “finer” cultural creations. Owing to financial considerations, valiant parents allow their children to leave school as early as possible. The milieu-deficient child’s language acquisition and use are on a low level and this means he/she will be impaired in the school situation. Milieu-deficient children generally develop a negative self-image (feelings of inadequacy). Because of a disturbed family life, the milieu-deficient child, in most cases, is unfavorably prepared emotionally for adequate school achievement. In light of the above findings (factors), it is stated that in most cases a milieu-restrained child also is a potential school leaver<sup>(9)</sup>.

5.13 There is a close connection between the misuse of drugs and leaving school early. The following are conspicuous correspondences between a youthful misuser of drugs and a potential school dropout: disturbed social life; disturbed experienced meaning; non-acceptance of norms, authority and traditions; pedagogically unaccountable forming of groups and search for amusement; an extreme image of “modern” youth regarding appearance, music, hostility toward the existing social order of life, etc.; the underactualization of potentialities and underachievement in school.

Drug use and misuse is often an ensuing step of escape for the potential school dropout.

It seems that the (potential) school dropout indeed is involved in a boundary situation, while a youthful drug user has already

exceeded this boundary and has already made a choice in favor of a lifeworld-in-opposition<sup>(17)</sup>.

**5.14** Moments of alienation are continually evident in the primary (home) and secondary (school) educative situations—in the relationship between the school leaver and educators. This means that pedagogic communication (pedagogic we-ness) as well as the socialization, social-community orientation, identity acquisition and realizing values of the school dropout are actualized inadequately. The school leaver is not accountably directed to participating in the community; he cannot deal with relevant social situations and quick changes in society. He then withdraws him/herself as an alienated youth from fellow persons and things. His/her social isolation means labile social experiences such as, e.g., loneliness, distrust, resentment, anxiety, rejection, pessimism, etc<sup>(14)</sup>.

**5.15** In the case of the identity-confused youth, the following essences of the event of identity acquisition are inadequately realized: fundamental trust, communication, identification, the establishment of a self-image, social-community orientation and the meaningfulness of one's own existence. Identity confusion by a youth can exercise such a restraining influence on school achievement that it can give rise to dropping out of school. In this connection, the educator has the following tasks of accompaniment:

- \* conveying norms and values
- \* making the child aware of his/her being addressed as a person
- conscience forming
- forming responsibility
- help with accepting independence and acquiring freedom
- help with interpreting the sense of world events and also the sense of one's own life
- an adequate religious education<sup>(15)</sup>.

**5.16** The results of pedotherapeutic assistance to potential dropouts has brought to light that in 60% of the cases there was an improvement in achievement. Thus, it is possible to support potential school leavers with pedotherapy to an improved actualization of their intellectual potentialities<sup>(4)</sup>.

5.17 Childlike attribution of meaning essentially is actualizing the psychic life of the child. The potential school dropout proceeds to the act of dropping out because his presence in school has become meaningless for him. He/she experiences the school situation as inadequately meaningful because the actualization of his psychic life progresses inadequately in terms of inadequate learning and becoming. His/her sensing and attending are labile and his cognitive learning is diffuse and unstructured. His/her possessed experience is attenuated because he/she perceives the school content as meaningless. Thinking progresses inadequately as does willing (will to exert himself cognitively) and remembering. In addition, his/her exploration, emancipation, , acceptance of responsibility, distancing, differentiating and objectifying are inadequate. The inadequate attribution of meaning restrains the becoming adult of the potential dropout that lead him to drop out of school<sup>(18)</sup>.

5.18 Finally, the following recommendations are made with respect to the problem of leaving school too early:

- \* The necessity for the early identification of the potential dropout cannot be stressed too much.
- This early identification of the potential dropout must be done by implementing an orthopedagogic program of diagnostics.
- Parents must be oriented regarding their role in their child's involvement in school so that they also can identify in a timely way the symptoms of a potential dropout.
- Adequate contact and cooperation between school and home are necessary.
- The child must be educated to the meaningful use of free time.
- The school, the family, the community and the School Auxiliary Pedagogical Services have the potential school dropout as a task.
- Compensatory programs are required for the milieu-restrained child, especially regarding preschool educating and teaching.
- Those involved in the situation of the potential dropout are committed to the following forms of providing help:

- pedotherapy, parental guidance, family therapy, orthodidactic help and guardian teaching.
- The potential dropout must be taught regarding literature of accepted value that fulfills pedagogical and Christian philosophy of life criteria and in this way are brought to insight into norms, values and demands of propriety in terms of which he can make responsible choices. Strong approval and censure must occur regarding the reading material.
  - Reality must be effectively unlocked for (presented to) the child and thus contribute to his/her learning and becoming, more specifically to the optimal actualization of his/her psychic life.

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