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Dropping Out Of School: Risk and Protective Factors

Porzucenie szkoły: ryzyko i czynniki ochronne

Introduction

The large-scale development of the processes of modernization in the world of today is creating the conditions for an innovative transition from the industrial to a new type of society, which is commonly referred to among the scientific community as a knowledge-based postindustrial (information) society characterized by an economy undergoing globalization processes. Within this postindustrial societal system, the creation of intellectual products and services is acquiring prime significance as a factor of system formation, while education is becoming one of the key factors in the formation of the human capital needed for the development of intellectual production and of society as a whole.

Nevertheless, despite the increasing social significance of education and of the educational and qualification resources acquired by the individual, multiple studies have shown that many children in Bulgaria and in a number of other countries leave the education system prematurely. "School dropout" can be regarded as a phenomenon resulting from a combination of causes that

also reflects back on the general social context. It is accompanied by many negative consequences that change significantly the life of a child and a family and negatively affect his future (Tilkidzhiev et al., 2009). This transforms the problem of school dropout from an internal school issue into one that affects society as a whole. It also determines the need for the development and application of effective strategies for prevention and reintegration of school dropouts.

Consequently, several dropout studies have been commissioned and several workshops and conferences have been organized on this topic (Zachariev et.al., 2013; Success at school (SAS) Project, 2014). The reasons a child stays at school or drops out of it are usually complex and require a multifactor approach in order to understand them.

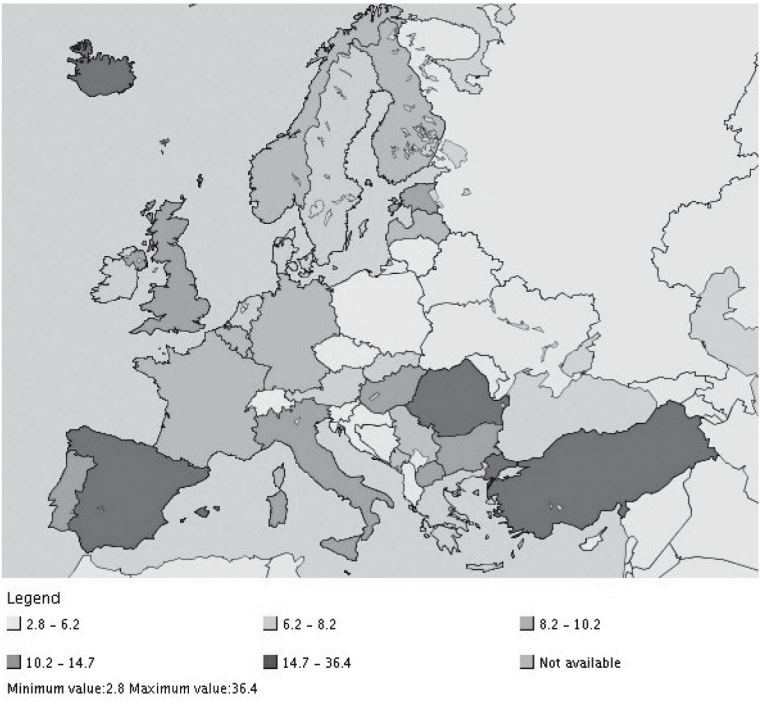
Research also suggests that high school dropout is a gradual process of disengagement that occurs over several years (Archambault et al., 2009; Wang & Fredricks, 2014), beginning as early as kindergarten (Alexander, et.al., 1997; Janosz et al., 2013).

In this article, the terms "school dropout", "school failure" and "early school leaving" will be used interchangeably.

Targets for and monitoring of school failure

In Bulgaria the percentage of early school leavers in 2015 is 13.4, where the highest is Spain (20.0), lowest is Croatia (2.8) and the average percentage for ESL in EU - 11.00 (Eurostat, see also Figure 1). The official purpose in Bulgaria is to reduce early school leavers (ESL) to 11% through a set of measures. The Bulgarian government aims to meet the EU-benchmark of at most 10% early school leavers (ESL) outlined in the Europe 2020 strategy.

Figure 1. Early leavers from education and training. Percentage of the population aged 18-24 with at most lower secondary education and not in further education or training. Data for EU, EEA, Switzerland and Turkey (2015), retrieved from http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/ Copyright 2015 by EuroGeographics Association for the administrative boundaries



Compared to the EU countries Bulgaria reports the earliest average age of dropouts with a low level of education (lower secondary school at most): it is as low as 14.3 years, i.e. almost 2 years before reaching the end of compulsory school age (Zachariev et.al., 2013).

Another major problem that largely affects school education is so-called *Hidden actual dropout* owing to fictitious school attendance, toleration and non-registration of vast absenteeism. The expert assessments of schoolmasters, teaching staff and municipal education experts indicate that the number of children who are affected by these phenomena is severalfold the number of children who form the annual non-enrollment and dropout statistics (Ibid).

Major causes of educational failure
Economic and socio-cultural causes of school dropout

The reasons children drop out of school are usually multiple and complex. One of the most important factors affecting the school attendance and dropout rates is *poverty.* It is the result of systematic financial and material deficiencies in the family, which often force children to work from a very young age in order to provide for the family budget in some small capacity. Besides the work that interferes with the children's school attendance, another manifestation of poverty can be seen in the lack of necessary clothing, footwear, student books, notebooks and other educational materials, as well as the lack of financial resources in the family to cover all school-related expenses, including the pocket money for the day.

The assessment of poverty in relation to the household size shows that the problem is mostly found in *large families.* The large number of family members significantly increases the risk of school dropout not only as a result of the accompanying issues, such as the difficult material and financial situation in family, but also because of the commonly occurring involvement of children in family in the upbringing of their younger brothers and sisters, as well as in other household activities. Children of single parents are also subjected to a higher risk of early school leaving because *single-parent families* are highly susceptible to the threat of poverty and social exclusion.

The size of the settlement has an impact on the school dropout phenomenon as well. The most vulnerable children in this regard are those living in rural areas, especially in *small and remote localities.* The severely limited employment opportunities, which often lead to long-term unemployment among the adults in the family, especially in minority ethno-cultural communities, the unsatisfactory social, living and housing conditions, the limited cultural and educational opportunities, as well as the lack of convenient transport options are only part of the difficulties and challenges faced by children residing in this type of settlements. *Marginalized urban neighborhoods* also generate conditions that can lead to school dropout. They are characterized by a risk environment in socio-cultural terms, which is plagued by confinement and social isolation, close ties with the criminal world, widespread substance abuse (alcohol, drugs) and, in many cases, a brutal lifestyle. It is not an accident that the data obtained from different studies show that almost half, and in some

cases two thirds of children living in ghettos and other low-status residential areas, leave the school system early. Evidence of the same is provided by a number of other studies demonstrating that the following identifiable groups are less likely to continue their formal education beyond statutory school leaving age:

- Children from ethnic minorities – Roma, migrants etc.;
- Children form socially deprived families;
- Children form isolated rural areas;
- Children from marginalized city quarters (SAS, 2014).

Another risk factor contributing to school failure is *the migration of population,* which is occurring on a global scale under the contemporary geopolitical and socioeconomic conditions. Both – internal migration which results from the performance of seasonal activities, family mobility, urbanization, etc., and the external, international migration which appears mostly due to socio-economic reasons – often lead to children's long-term disengagement from the school community. Even if children do not accompany their parents in their travels, they are still placed in a vulnerable living situation regarding their psychological and emotional health, which can trigger a number of processes that negatively affect their upbringing and development, including early school leaving caused by the disruption of family connections and the absence of one or both parents.

Some of the deeper issues that can result in school dropout are the complex socioeconomic and socio-structural transformations of the social system (which have an especially profound effect on transitional type societies), the fact that working with the family is not a priority and the devaluation of education in the social consciousness. It can be clearly seen that the phenomenon of early school leaving, which is a consequence of various factors in the environment, depends on the economic and cultural state of the whole society and is strongly correlated with the cultural capital and value orientation of low-status social strata – refugees, migrants, representatives of other minority ethnocultural communities.

The situation with the *Roma minority* is especially indicative of this problem in Bulgaria. It shows exceedingly high level of school dropout among students from the Roma minority in comparison with children from the dominant ethnic group in the country. For instance, among Romani youth aged 12-19 years, those who have never attended school or have left early without

completing their primary education account for 21.9%, while among the same age group in the Bulgarian ethnic group, the percentage of early school leavers is 2.3% (Zahariev et al., 2013). The main reason lies in the *traditionalism* typical for Romani society. It affects the distribution of social roles within the community and the family, the way of life and the value orientation, which relegates education to a position of secondary importance in the hierarchy of values. Many Roma parents have obtained only low-level education and they do not believe that their children need to attend school, because on the one hand, education does not contribute to a higher status of the individual within their community and on the other - it does not guarantee better opportunities and perspectives for successful realization in the world outside the community. Such parental attitudes negatively affect the students' motivation for learning. Furthermore, the active use of child labor as a source of subsistence in Romani families and the tendency for early marriage and childbirth, especially among girls, contribute to the school dropout rates.

Another causes of educational failure for Roma children are personal deficits leading to dropping out such as the lack of language skills (Bulgarian). In addition to this, the narrow social experience among Roma children, their lack of basic school skills and the prevalent anti-Roma sentiments in mainstream schools make their "survival" within the environment of the school community fairly problematic.

The specific key factors for very early dropout from the education system (before finishing primary school) are *non-attendance of preparatory groups in kindergartens,* movement to the next grade for which the minimal standards have not been covered and the bullying of children into different forms of beggary.

Early school leaving and health issues

Disparities in health and in educational achievement are closely linked (Freudengerg & Ruglis, 2007). Recent studies in Bulgaria show that a significant number of school-age children do not go to school for reasons of bad health – every sixth child in the 10-19 age bracket who did not enrol in a school was a child with a certain degree of disability (Zachariev et.al., 2013). Besides severe forms of chronic diseases and disabilities, student health problems associated with dropping out are mental illness (Brindis & Philliber, 1998),

substance use, pregnancy, psychological, emotional, and behavioral problems (Haynes, 2002).

In Europe, a few recent studies have explored early school leaving in terms of mental health. Jonsson (2010) pointed out that Swedish adolescents suffering from depression were less likely than their non-depressed peers to have graduated from higher education.

Several studies in North America and Canada explored the impact of mental health factors on academic attainment. They concluded that school dropout is not necessarily associated with motivational or institutional factors, but with serious social and cognitive impairments caused by mental illness. Meldrum (2009) confirmed the above hypothesis by revealing that up to 15% of Canadian students interrupted their studies for reasons of mental health, whereas a recent study of a US national sample confirmed that 12 out of 17 psychiatric disorders were associated with subsequent failure to complete secondary education by the age of 18 (Breslau, 2009). After controlling for potential confounders, the authors established that bipolar and conduct disorders were most consistently related to early school leaving.

In fact, several studies concluded that there was a significant association between school dropout, Attention Deficit (Hyperactivity) Disorder (ADHD) (Currie & Stabile, 2006) and disruptive behaviour disorders, also known as externalizing disorders (Breslau et.al. 2011; Egger et. al. 2003). For Kessler, the association with externalizing disorders was significant for males only, whereas so-called internalizing disorders (anxiety, mood disorders) were the most important psychiatric determinants of school dropout for females (Kessler et. al., 1995).

In addition to the disorders mentioned above, substance use disorders have significantly correlated with school dropout as well (Breslau et.al. 2011, Bryant, et. al. 2003, Fergusson, 2003). In France, Legleye (2010) considered daily cannabis use to be associated with early school leaving. In their literature review, Townsend et al. (2007), analyzed 46 studies on the correlation between substance use and school dropout, and concluded that alcohol, tobacco and cannabis use are correlated with school attendance and vice versa.

Health problems also affect dropout rates indirectly by forcing young people, especially young women, to cope with family physical or mental illness, often imposing on teenagers responsibilities that can lead to their school leaving (Weis et. al., 1989).

Family psychopathology and early school leaving

Using a sample drawn from the National Comorbidity Survey (1757 women and 1632 men), Farahati, Marcotte and Wilcox-Gök (2003) have found that parents' mental illness can increase the likelihood of a child dropping out of high school. First, the findings suggest higher rates of high school dropout for children whose parents suffer from substance or non-substance abuse mental illnesses. Second, in their multivariate models they found that some parental mental illnesses increase the dropout risk, but the magnitude, significance, and direction of these effects depend on the type of illness and the gender of the child. According to these authors, women are more likely to drop out of high school if their mothers have depression or abuse alcohol, especially if the abuse is comorbid with anxiety disorders. Overall, the results of this research show that mental illness among mothers has more substantial negative effects on children than mental illness among fathers, and that girls are more negatively affected than boys. Fortin, et. al. (2004) observed that the risk factors associated with the dropout risk vary according to gender. For boys, the factors which contributed the most to the dropout risk were depression, family cohesion, family conflicts, lack of affective support from parents and negative attitudes from teachers. Thus, there are personal, family and school-related variables. However, the variables which affected the risk for girls were essentially personal and family-related: depression, the lack of family cohesion and organization problems within the family.

In their study of 205 families, Gamier et al. (1997) found that the problems leading to early school leaving originate from the family. For example, the marginal values of parents who chose to lead non-conventional lifestyles, such as having drugs in their home, are strongly associated with school dropout of the child. In terms of family structure, the dropping-out children often come from broken homes or single-parent families (Pong & Ju, 2000; Walker et al., 1998). Regarding the parent-child relationship Potvin et.al. (1999), found that parents' poor parenting practices, including lack of emotional support, lack of involvement in the child's school activities and inadequate supervision, were strongly associated with school dropout risk. Gillock & Reyes (1999) and Walker et al. (1998) reported frequent conflicts between adolescents who are in risk of drop-out and parents, or among family members. Moreover, McNeal (1999) suggests that parents do not always adequately supervise their

children's activities and their low expectations regarding school achievement were a variable strongly associated with the child's dropout (Battin-Pearson et al. 2000; Rumberger, 1995).

Research shows that dropping out is also associated with some personal characteristics, mainly problems associated with social withdrawal, high anxiety levels and depression (Marcotte, et. al., 2001). In their study of 810 Grade 7 students, Fortin et. al. (2006) found a scientifically significant relationship between dropout risk and depression with the symptoms of sadness or irritability, low self-esteem, social isolation, concentration difficulties, loss of interest in usual activities, insomnia, constant fatigue, psychomotor agitation and suicidal thoughts. They reported that students with depression tend to be ignored by school personnel because they are not disruptive, do not exhibit externalized behavior problems and their academic performance is good. This study also found that most of these students come from problematic family situation, in terms of the parents' parenting skills and difficult relationships among family members.

Besides these parental illnesses, dropouts often come from families in which the parents have had less education, were unsuccessful in school themselves, and less strongly support the school or encourage their children's academic interests (Liddle, 1962).

School dropout rates are also affected by a number of factors connected with the learning environment, the interactions within the school community, the curriculum, the teaching methods, as well as the material, technical and financial situation in the educational institution. The main factors of the school environment itself, associated with early school leaving include lack of close relationships between students and school staff, including support staff, with consequent lack of attention to the students' social and emotional wellbeing, a school culture which could be more young-people friendly, unjust and oppressive practices, unrelated learning experiences and social and academic exclusion (Cefai & Cooper, 2010).

Prevention

The high variability of the risk factors and conditions that contribute to dropping out of the system of education determine the acute need for development and application of complex and carefully planned prevention

programs and intervention measures designed to combat the issue of early school leaving. From the perspective of the main structural components that constitute the system-forming framework of prevention, the effective programs usually involve the following: 1. the family; 2. the school (type, structure, vision on long-term development, managerial and administrative staff); 3. the classroom (teacher, support staff, curricula, teaching methods); 4. the children, their classmates and peers; 5. the social services (agencies, centers); 6. the larger social community (NGOs, businesses and other institutions).

Regarding the first component of this framework, namely the *family*, it is imperative to completely shift the current focus of its relationship with the school – from separation and distancing to intensive interaction and cooperation between the two institutions. This requires the involvement of parents in school life of their children within the educational community. Their inclusion and involvement, however, should not be an obligation and a formality for them. Instead, it should be based on flexible use of the most appropriate forms of participation, accounting for the specific conditions in the area and the school. Research has confirmed that parents involvement is effective when there are specific roles such as paid aide positions, voting membership of committees, or bringing cultural expertise to the classroom. These responsibilities require support and training to be effective (Martin, 1994). Such responsible parental participation actively supported by school, including by means of specialized training and services provided to parents, has produced excellent results in many cases as confirmed by the evidence provided in a number of different studies. For example, a British project for school-based *family social services* has demonstrated a 50% reduction in truancy (Pritchard & Willams, 2001).

Flecha & Soler (2013) also consider involving parents and the Gypsy community in the intervention programs. In fact, parents' engagement in learning by, for example, controlling and supporting children's autonomy and responsibility (e.g., by encouraging children to complete homework at home) may help children to activate their agent role by assuming their responsibilities in the learning process. On the contrary, absence of parental support of children's efforts to engage in schoolwork (e.g., by delivering children late to school, by organizing family activities that compete with school attendance) do not facilitate Gypsy children's engagement and learning or their school success.

The measures against school dropout applied at the *school institution level* most often include improvements of the material and technical school infrastructure, modernization of auditoriums and offices, opening of canteens in all schools, regular upgrades of the library stock, etc. In addition to that, it is important to pay particular attention to the vulnerable groups, which includes provision of clothing to students from socially disadvantaged families, free breakfast for children under the age of 16, more widespread application of full-day, boarding-school, as well as practical and professionally oriented forms of learning. In order to provide equal and favorable educational opportunities, it is necessary to be consistent in the fulfilment of the idea for desegregation of Roma education.

Additionally, the backbone of the educational policy of every school management needs to include fundamental strategic priorities like the establishment of a friendly, supportive and healthy learning environment; creating the conditions to make the school more appealing to the students – diverse forms of extracurricular learning and activities, additional sports activities, etc.; implementation of the system of free individual lessons for children who have not attended school for a prolonged period of time, etc. One of the strategies that could help keep young people at school is the provision of *career guidance and counseling*. It "prepares young people for an informed choice, for the practical benefit of the acquired competencies. It also presents the connection between higher levels of education and better career prospects" (Стратегия, 2013:30). In any case, all these priorities direct the school institution towards a profound transformation – deconstruction of the "rough image" of the school and improvement of its sensitivity to the realities of children's lives.

For the purpose of preventing early school leaving and facilitating the return of school dropouts to the sphere of school education, a number of important measures need to be taken at the *classroom level*. These include additional consultations for students who experience difficulties in different subjects, establishment of compensatory classes, development of specialized "catch-up" programs for this type of learning, improvement of teachers' qualifications, integration of innovative teaching methods, etc. However, all these measures would prove futile without changing the model of the relationship "teacher-student" which should be seen in terms of equality, mutual respect and empathy-based joint participation. Consensus is emerging among researchers

with respect to essential intervention components. In particular, the *"personalization" of education* is regarded as an essential component. Dynarski and Gleason (2002) identified smaller class sizes, more personalized settings, and individualized learning plans as characteristics that lowered dropout rates (Dynarski & Gleason, 2002).

The changes should also apply to the other aspect of the school community, namely the relationship "student-student": in this case the vector needs to be redirected from neglectful, suppressive and aggressive forms of behaviour towards mutual understanding, support and assistance, towards contributing to others by *cross-age and peer tutoring*.

The school dropout situation could be improved significantly by means of strengthening the connections between the school and the social protection authorities, especially in the event of the potential establishment of a *specialized social education center* or opening of a permanent position for a specialist in this field, at least in schools where the need for this kind of service has been proven conclusively – children's social background, children in risk groups, number of integrated children in urban schools, distance from the school to the child's home, etc. As indicated by a number of different sources, a good first step would be to create state or municipal inter-sector dropout prevention councils in places where there is a disproportionate number of dropouts (Gullota, 2005). It would be useful for a school with a high percentage of children from minority communities to hire teaching assistants (unfortunately this initiative has not been adequately undertaken in Bulgaria).

In regard to the school dropout issue, an expansion of the spectrum of cooperation between school and other social and business structures on general institutional grounds is viewed as a priority. Schools need to be guided towards intensification of different forms of cooperation with the community, including collaboration with religious leaders and representatives of different religious confessions. Their involvement in the search for solutions to this issue is a strategic necessity because of young people's increasing confidence in them, which has been observed in a number of regions and countries.

To summarize and add to the information presented above, it could be pointed out that an effective prevention program should include at least 6 features:

1. Instruction in academic and other learning with high quality mentoring;
2. Activities valued by youth with implied positive futures;

3. Family involvement, cultural respect and adaptations;
4. School-wide policies and emphasis on subsets of local risk and resilience factors;
5. Strategies based on theory and best practices, in which implementation is sustained and data driven with fidelity;
6. Youth choices and self-determination (Gullota, 2005).

Slightly different emphases can be seen in the description given by Nation et al., which identifies five characteristics for effective programming in the prevention of school failure 1. comprehensive settings and methods (including skill training);, 2. intensive "doze" and duration (interventions are usually ineffective if they are 10 hours or less); 3. fostering positive relationships among peers and adults; 4. appropriate (developmental) timing; 5. well-trained staff (Nation et al., (2003). But despite the noted differences in recommendations and proposed measures, many similarities can be identified among the interventions, including their focus on changing the student, beginning with *a personal-affective focus* (e.g., individual counseling, participation in an interpersonal relations at classes) and then shifting to an academic focus (e.g., specialized courses or tutoring), and their efforts to address alterable variables (e.g., poor grades, attendance, and attitude toward school) (Lehr et al., 2003).

Conclusion

Preventing school dropout and promoting successful graduation is a national concern in Bulgaria, which directly corresponds to the main EU strategic priorities in the sphere of education and poses a significant challenge to schools and educational communities working with youth at risk of school failure**.** From a conceptual point of view, it fosters the need to perform additional theoretical and empirical investigations into the problem that can contribute to the development of a multidimensional model of the presented phenomenon, mostly in regard to underlying causes and from the perspective of the global, European, national, regional and local contexts. The most important action in this process becomes the analysis and systematization of the risk factors and processes resulting from the dynamic interaction between variables like the socioeconomic conditions, the family and the school environment, the student's personality, the employment prospects and the cultural influences.

As far as the practically oriented approaches to the search for a solution to this problem are concerned, the societal and institutional concern has to find its adequate expression in the establishment of specialized structures that could extensively and systematically work with the children that do not attend school. At this stage, state and local governing bodies in the field of education, schools and other educational institutions, as well as non-profit organizations have made certain efforts to deal with the problem. However, these efforts lack complexity, they are often short-term, poorly coordinated and fairly formal. For this reason, it is necessary to establish structures or centers that can perform these functions. They should be supplied with effective programs for prevention and intervention measures and should be oriented towards individual work with every student belonging to a risk group.

Streszczenie: Profilaktyka dotycząca porzucenia nauki w szkole i promowanie udanego jej ukończenia jest istotnym problemem w Bułgarii, co stanowi poważne wyzwanie dla szkół i społeczności edukacyjnej pracującej z młodzieżą zagrożoną niepowodzeniem szkolnym. W niewielu badaniach przeanalizowano czynniki warunkujące opuszczenie szkoły przed osiągnięciem etapu szkoły średniej, a ich dane zostały przeanalizowane. Badania wskazują, że rezygnacja z nauki szkolnej jest ściśle powiązana z psychopatologią rodzinną, indywidualnymi cechami i zaburzeniami rozwoju w dzieciństwie. Wreszcie, co ważniejsze, istnieją pewne czynniki społeczno-ekonomiczne i kulturowe, które determinują opuszczanie szkoły. Konieczne jest podejście wielofunkcyjne w celu zrozumienia czynników ryzyka, które mają miejsce w szkole. Identyfikacja predyktorów niepowodzeń szkolnych jest kluczowa dla zrozumienia przyczyn i procesów porzucania szkoły, co z kolei może pomóc w opracowaniu skutecznych programów zapobiegania temu problemowi. W prezentowanym artykule omówiono implikacje dotyczące zapobiegania wczesnemu porzuceniu szkoły średniej. Autorzy kładą nacisk na stosowanie podejścia transkulturowego, aby zmaksymalizować potencjalne korzyści z programów zapobiegawczych.

Słowa klucz: psychopatologia rodzinna, czynniki społeczno-ekonomiczne czynniki kulturowe

Abstract. Preventing school dropout and promoting successful graduation is a national concern in Bulgaria that poses a significant challenge to schools and educational communities working with youth at risk of school failure. Few studies have examined

predictors of dropping out of school before students reach high school and their data have been analysed. Research shows dropping out is strongly tied to family psychopathology, individual characteristics and childhood development disorders. Finally, yet importantly, there are some socioeconomic and cultural factors associated with dropping out of school. A multifactor approach is needed in order to understand the risk factors for school dropout. Identifying the predictors of school failure is crucial for understanding the causes and processes of dropping out, which, in turn, can help guide the creation of effective programs for the prevention of this problem. Implications for prevention of early high school dropout are discussed. The authors place an emphasis on applying a trans-cultural approach to maximize the potential benefit of dropout prevention programs.

Keywords: Family psychopathology, socioeconomic and cultural factors

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