

REASONS FOR SCHOOL FAILURE AMONG ETHNIC MINORITY STUDENTS

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The high school dropout rate among minority students is often much higher than that of their peers belonging to majority groups. Emotion as well as the success strategies of the student's social environment and culture strongly determine the decision to drop out of school. If in the minority culture school success is unimportant or undesirable factor, the likelihood for ethnic students to drop out from high school might increase significantly. This paper analyzes minority dropout ratios in Australia, Austria, the USA and Hungary and tries to identify the influence of the same minority peer group on high school failure of minority students.

Keywords: acting white, castelike minority, dropout, ethnic identity, ethnic minority students, high school, peer influence

Ethnic minority students are often more likely to drop out of high schools than their peers belonging to the majority groups: in the USA the Hispanic and Black students, in Australia the indigenous, in Germany and Austria the Muslim students and in Hungary the Romas drop out of high schools, including vocational schools, more frequently than their majority peers.

However, when taking a closer look, it becomes obvious, that the minority status itself does not determine the likeliness for dropping out of high schools. The most commonly referred minority group being an exception for minority's low achievement and high dropout rates from high school is the Asian-Pacific minority group in the United States: vast majority of first and second generation immigrant children of this minority group are performing well at schools and earn their high school diploma, so we can assume that belonging to a minority group in itself has little if any influence on school success.

To be able to predict whether children belonging to minority groups may perform better or worse on the course of their education several factors have to be considered, and the reasons for dropping out are also widely varied. The reasons for minority dropouts from high schools are primarily frequently not connected to the minority student's low achievement; the values of the family and the minority seem to play here a very important role: often students receive very few motivation for learning well from home, they have no or extremely few positive models in the family or community they live in and their perspectives for social mobility through learning are practically non-existent, so they do not consider learning a way to success in life.

School dropout rates

The term *drop out* in this paper will be used to refer the case of leaving any high school early, without obtaining a high school diploma, not considering, whether later on the adolescents complete their secondary education or not. To examine the likeliness of reentering the educational system and completing the secondary education is not our present topic.

According to the analysis of Psacharopoulos (2007) the percentage of early school leavers varies between 4.5 and 40 percent in the states of the European Union, (12.4% in Hungary) leading to private, social and fiscal costs later on, including higher unemployment rate and duration, lower income, lower rate of economic growth and lower social cohesion and higher social expenditures. He argues that already just one extra year of schooling can drastically reduce the chances of being unemployed and also indicates better earnings. Slightly contradict to this argument the findings of McMillan-Marks (2003), who found that shortly after leaving school, early school leavers might be in better position on the job market than their peers obtaining a high school diploma, however this distinction may disappear on the long run.

Table 1.

Country	Non-completers			Year of Research (source)
Australia	All	Early leavers	Late leavers	1995-2000 (Australian Youth Research Report)
Indigenous	46%	20%	26%	
Non-indigenous	20%	8%	12%	
USA				2000 (US Census)
Hispanic	22%			
Black	12%			
White	8%			
Asian/Pacific	4%			
USA				2005 (US Census)
Hispanic	22%			
Black	11%			
White	6%			
Asian/Pacific	3%			
Austria				2004/2005 Steiner and Wagner (2007)
Austrian	7,2%			
2 nd /3 rd generation immigrant	15.6%			
Non-Eu Immigrant	19.8%			
Hungary	class 9		class 10	2001 Liskó (2006/a)
Roma	36%		30%	
All	13%		10%	

Table 1. compares minority dropout rates from secondary education in Australia, the United States, Austria and Hungary. According to the data minority dropout rates are far higher than the average dropout rates. In Australia, the indigenous students are more than two times more likely to drop out, then their non-indigenous peers. The survey (McMillan and Marks 2003) compared numerous factors influencing the likeliness of completing school, and the trend they found was that of all social and ethnic groups indigenous adolescents were the most likely to drop out of secondary education and they had the less chance to ever enter the higher education. The same trend can be observed in the USA at the Hispanic and Black

minority. On the other hand, the so called "Model Minority" – the Asian-Pacific students are the less likely to drop out of all, including whites. In Austria the immigrants are far more likely to drop out of high schools, even if they belong to the second or third generation of immigrant workers, invited to the country in the second half of the 20th century. And last, in Hungary Roma students are 3 times more likely to drop out of schools than an average student. Roma students, who belong to the biggest ethnic minority in Hungary, in 2000 were most likely to continue their studies in vocational schools after completing primary schools: 70.5% of them enrolled in these institutions (Liskó 2006/a). (To compare:16.5% did not continue their studies and only 13% of them enrolled high schools offering the possibility of entering higher education.) According to Liskó's findings, Romas gave 13,9% of all 9th graders, In the school year 200/2001 the 13.2% of students dropped out from class 9 and 36.1% of them were Roma students, which means that Romas are three times more likely to drop out in Hungary than an average student. Interestingly, Roma students studying in schools with relatively big Roma student body (over 20%) are less likely to drop out, then those who study in schools with smaller Roma student ratio.

Reasons for dropping out

Throughout the international literature of the issue there is an interesting trend in the results of surveys: if they are qualitative studies based on interviews (Liskó 2006, ÚPSZ Roundtable 2007), not long after the dropout, the main reasons school related, like discrimination in school, being dissatisfied with school, teacher's not adequate expectations or the minority students' low achievement (Torgyik 2005). These results suggest that leaving school has few to do with preparing for the adulthood, adolescents are leaving schools because of their negative experiences.

Table 2. The most common reasons for high school dropout among Romas in Hungary

Reasons for Dropout	%
Not Feeling Good in School	33,1
Poor School Achievement	23,7
Starting a Job	21,8
Financial Reasons	20,9
Disciplinary Reasons	17,8
The Quality of the School	8,7
Illness	6,7
Fitting in the Schools' Society	4,3
Family problems	4,1
Starting a new family	3,4
N	729

Source: Liskó Ilona (2006/b): *Szakképzés és lemorzsolódottak képzése*.
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In Table 2. we can see the results of a 2002 Hungarian research (Liskó 2006/b) on dropouts of adolescents in Hungarian vocational high schools. More than one reason could be named by students that indicated their dropouts. The most frequently chosen reason was *not feeling good in school*, which blames the school's atmosphere for not being able to complete it. *Disciplinary problems* and *poor school achievement* might be closely related

to this factor. The other significant group of reasons has a financial approach: *being unable to finance the studies* and *starting a new job*.

On the other hand, quantitative studies, based on questionnaires, especially long after the dropout, bring out causes determined by the community's success strategy, like getting a job or starting an independent life (Australian Social Trends, 2005; Ball 2004, Fry 2003).

In an Australian quantitative survey (McMillan and Marks 2003; Table 3.) the researchers asked dropped out students to specify any important factors, that made they leaving school. *To get a job* and *To have an independent life* were the two most commonly chosen reasons. Parallel to this, school related reasons were also frequently named, like they *didn't like school*, *there were no useful subjects in school* and *students were not doing well at school*. When researchers asked the dropped out students to choose the one main reason for dropping out, *getting a job* was chosen by the vast majority.

Table 3. Reasons for dropouts

Reasons	School Leavers	
	Early Leaver	Late Leaver
Important Reason		
To get a job	82	76
Have an independent life	78	75
Didn't like school	50	49
No useful subjects in school	48	41
Not doing well at school	40	40
Main Reason		
To get a job	52	44
Have an independent life	5	6
Didn't like school	12	13
No useful subjects in school	10	11
Not doing well at school	7	11
Other reasons	14	15

Source: McMillan and Marks 2003.

High ratio of minority dropouts

There is a wide range of factors influencing the probability of dropping out. Very important minority-specific factor is the language gap between teacher and minority students, that may influence the likeliness of failing in school and dropping out. In his analysis Lofstrom (2007) argues that while gender, nativity, and school size do not, poverty, student-teacher ratio and grade-retention just partially affect the dropout gap between Blacks, Hispanics and whites in Texas, US. He argues that the most determining factor concerning school dropouts is the students' racial proportion in school. However this factor may work different ways, depending on the ethnic group: in the case of Black students the proportion of same ethnicity peers in school and their dropout rates shows positive, while in case of Hispanic students negative correlation. Hanushek, Kain and Rivkin (2001) also point out that school composition has a very strong influence on the student's achievement and emphasize that high proportion of Black students has a strong negative effect on school performance of high achieving Black students. All this calls the attention to the importance of peer influence. Fordham (1985) in her analysis of a predominantly Black high school in Washington D.C. shows how strong

conflicts are generated between high and low achieving Black students, based on their communities ecological structure.

Minority students may consider work or school related explanations adequate grounds for leaving school sooner than their majority peers because of their culturally different approach to school success. In some ethnic cultures reaching success through learning has low social prestige, their success strategies for social mobility prefer different ways from being successful in school. John Ogbu (1978) uses the term "caste-like minorities" or "involuntary minorities" to describe ethnic minorities who have internalised oppression rooting from institutionalised racism and are faced with job achievement ceilings and no or few opportunities for social mobility.

These minorities tend to underrate individual success and consider family and community success more important. Oftentimes, the culture of castelike minorities not only differs from the mainstream culture, but consciously refuses its values and norms, developing a subculture oppositional to the mainstream culture. It also develops certain strategies of coping with limited opportunities, which may be incompatible with working for individual school success and the learning and achievement-centered attitude of the majority culture.

Flyer (2006) analyzes the relations between school achievement and popularity in the own ethnic peer group. He compared popularity of Black, White and Hispanic students plotted against their school achievement, reflected in their grades. According to Flyer's findings, popularity of Whites is in direct proportion to their school achievement: the higher grades they achieve in school the more popular they are. The popularity of Blacks and especially Hispanics shows a profoundly different pattern: it drops drastically after exceeding a certain grade level. In case of Blacks, the popularity is in direct proportion with school achievement up to a certain grade level (around 3.5; on a grade-scale of 4, where 1.0 = D; 4.0 = A, based on the USA grade system.) On the other hand, the popularity of high achieving students drops if they have better average of grades than 3.5. This drop in popularity is much earlier and greater in case of Hispanic students: if they exceed the average of 2.3, their popularity drops, and becomes clearly negative if their average grade is higher than 3.1.

Low achievement, according to Ogbu's theory can be an adaptation to mobility ceilings, but also can be interpreted as adaptation to ethnic subculture, which refuses individualism and high achievement. In case of high school students popularity or simply being accepted by their peers can be especially important: this phase of life, when the majority culture confronts the ethnic culture of their peers, probably coincides with the first stages of ethnic identity formation labeled *Encounter* (Cross 1991) or *Foreclosure and Moratorium* (Phinney 1990), which are about the realisation of being ethnic and finding the bonds to one's ethnic group.

High achieving minority adolescents are perceived by their peers as if they refused their ethnic peer's culture, and consequently will not be accepted by their same-ethnicity peers, because they do not respect the ethnic group's subculture, nor by the peers belonging to the majority group, since they are ethnic.

Because of having different values, the high achieving minority students are often the target of all ethnic groups, and as a result become lonely and alienated. This phenomenon in the United States is called *acting white* – the phrase is used to tease high achieving ethnic minority (especially Black) students by their same ethnicity peers.

Fordham (1985) describes some strategies that are developed by high achieving students who consciously decide for school success to keep their attitude to school but try to keep it invisible, to protect themselves from being isolated by peers. These strategies are often sex specific: both girls and boys choose to be a clown character, boys are likely to choose protective friends, and girls try to stay invisible. Those, who choose underachievement, impose restraints on themselves: they spend more time with their peers and achieve consciously low grades in school while their achievement in standardised tests is often much higher than what their grades would predict.

Besides culturally determined success strategies of ethnic families and communities and their attitudes to learning, peer-influence is also an important factor in determining how important school achievement and actually obtaining a high school diploma can be for a student belonging to an ethnic minority group, and how easily he or she responds to difficulties in schools and community with dropping out, which might be the most harmful response for the student himself and also for the society, since it may generate a number of social and economical problems. In the process of making the decision for staying in or dropping out of school, the values of the same minority peer group do have an extremely strong influence, along with the available role models in the close community and the minority groups success strategy.

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