

The Triggering Role of Stressful Life Events in Early School Leaving

KEYWORDS

early school leaving, psychosocial stressors, Quebec

RESEARCH SUMMARY

DESCRIPTION

Early school leaving is linked to various negative individual and social consequences. However, the immediate circumstances triggering this process are not well understood because research has focused on long-term and background risk factors.

The goal of this study was to examine if experiencing one or more severe stressors precipitates early school leaving over and above, or in interaction with, existing vulnerabilities.

Three groups of Canadian high school students were compared: recent non-completers, matched “at-risk” students who remained in school, and average students. The results show that in the few months before leaving school exposure to severely stressful events spiked among students who dropped out, but not among matched “at-risk” or average students.

The findings have theoretical, practical, and policy implications. They emphasize the need to address not only early, persistent vulnerabilities, but also the immediate stressful circumstances surrounding early school leaving.

METHODOLOGY

Twelve public high schools in and around Montreal participated in the study between 2012 and 2015. All schools exhibited high rates of early high school leavers.

At the beginning of the school year, all students 14 years of age and older were invited to participate. They were given a screening questionnaire, including questions regarding sociodemographic information and risk factors associated with early school leaving.

Throughout the school year, a subset of participants was asked to complete individual interviews assessing stressful life events. The adolescent version of the Life Events and Difficulty Schedule, a semi-structured interview-based instrument, was used to measure stressors occurring 12 months before the decision to leave school or the interview. Two types of stressors across various domains were assessed: discrete events (i.e. a car accident, death of a grandparent) and chronic problems lasting at least a month (i.e. incapacitation due to a concussion, interpersonal conflicts).

In total, 545 students (52% male, average of 16.3 years

old) were interviewed: 183 students who choose to leave school early, 183 matched “at-risk” students who did not drop out, and 179 students not considered “at-risk”.

Short vignettes describing each stressor were prepared by the interviewers. Two research assistants blind to the adolescents’ status rated the stressors on three dimensions: nature, severity, and independence. The percentage of exposure to mild, moderate, and severe stressors was calculated for the three groups. Additionally, multiple regressions were used to predict early school leaving and take into account differences between students who dropped out and those who were matched “at-risk” but did not drop out. Robustness checks of main findings were also conducted.

One of the limitations of the study is that the screening procedure and the assessment of stressors could have been more comprehensive. Additionally, generalizability is limited because the schools are all located in one region and many students who left school early did not participate in the study.

KEY FINDINGS

The results support the hypothesis that for those who left school early, severe stressors spiked within three months of dropping out, relative to the comparison groups.

It was also hypothesized and confirmed that recent exposure to severe stressors remained strongly associated with dropout even after statistically accounting for background characteristics and vulnerabilities such as lower socio-economic status, gender, or level of parental education. Furthermore, even stressors not caused by the adolescents themselves were associated with dropping out.

These findings are consistent with, and expand upon, prior research. They also align with the vulnerability-stress model, which proposes that negative outcomes, such as mental health problems, result from an interaction between long-standing vulnerabilities (i.e. cognitive issues, genetic predispositions) and exposure to stressors. The findings also align with models of adolescent risky decision-making. Adolescents are more likely to make risky decisions (choosing not to continue their high school education, for example) when they are under stress, even if they are aware of the negative consequences.

WHY THIS MATTERS

This study contributes to the theoretical understanding of early school leaving. The

ABOUT THIS SUMMARY

This study compares three groups of Canadian high school students in order to determine the precipitating role of recent psychological stressors in early school leaving.

evidence that recent stressors have a strong influence gives support to a new model, which explicitly includes such stressors. This is an important contribution because prior models of early school leaving did not formally include proximal stressors.

On a practical level, the article emphasizes that school staff need to be aware of the role of stressors in early school leaving in order to provide additional supports to those in need, and to better identify students who are likely not to finish high school. The results are also relevant to school policies about conflict management, as certain disciplinary policies could amplify students’ alienation and stress.

“Stressors emerging late in high school are also important, both because they can precipitate dropout among those already at risk or unexpectedly inflect trajectories among those with comparatively moderate levels of risk.”

Dupéré et al., 2017, p. 12

RECAP

Adolescents who left school early were much more likely to have experienced recent severe stressors (i.e. discrete events or chronic difficulties lasting at least a month) across a variety of domains. This highlights the need to address immediate circumstances surrounding dropout.

APA CITATION

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