

TORKOS KATALIN

MANAGING EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING AND SCHOOL DROPOUTS IN CANADA

KORAI ISKOLAEELHAGYÁS, ISKOLAI LEMORZSOLÓDÁS KEZELÉSE KANADÁBAN

ABSTRACT

Finishing schools and obtaining qualifications or professions at school is prerequisite for the individual's advancement in life and social usefulness in knowledge-based societies. Education plays a fundamental role in personal and social development, and in reducing unemployment and social exclusion. A strong correlation can be shown between early school leaving and social repression. The member states of the European Union have been fighting with the problem of early school leaving for many years with more or less success. This paper attempts to provide an outlook outside the EU, namely on Canadian education policy in this area and the best practices in the fight against early school leaving and school dropout.

Key words: early school leaving, school dropouts, Canada

ÖSSZEFOGLALÓ

Az iskolák befejezése, az iskolai végzettség vagy szakma megszerzése előfeltétele az egyén életben való előrehaladásának és társadalmi hasznosságának a tudásalapú társadalmakban. Az oktatás alapvető szerepet játszik a személyes és társadalmi fejlődésben, valamint a munkanélküliség és a társadalmi kirekesztés csökkentésében. Erős összefüggés mutatható ki a korai iskolaelhagyás és a társadalmi elnyomás között is. Az Európai Unió tagállamai több-kevesebb sikerrel évek óta küzdenek a korai iskolaelhagyás, a lemorzsolódás problémájával. Ez a tanulmány megpróbál kitekintést adni az EU-n kívülre, és egyfajta képet adni nevezetesen az e területre vonatkozó kanadai oktatáspolitikáról, a korai iskolaelhagyás és iskolai lemorzsolódás elleni küzdelem bevált gyakorlatáról.

Kulcsszavak: korai iskolaelhagyás, iskolai lemorzsolódás, Kanada

1. Introduction

Finishing schools and obtaining qualifications or professions at school is prerequisite for the individual's advancement in life and social usefulness in knowledge-based societies. (European Commission Eurostat 2023, European Commission European Education Area 2024, Delors 1997). Moreover, developed countries of the world must be well positioned to take advantage of the emerging opportunities offered by the knowledge-based economy. If there is

no labour base with adequate knowledge, the knowledge-based economy and the knowledge-based society will not work at all.

Rapid technological and scientific developments are transforming the nature of work (Carnoy 1997), and it presupposes and at the same time requires a high level of knowledge, skills and qualifications. A more educated and a better qualified population is more likely to adapt new technologies, increase its own productivity, find its place in the labour market and produces an increasingly large GDP. (OECD 2022)

There can be many reasons for dropping out of school around the world, depending on special local characteristics, or the reasons may be different even in developing and developed regions of the world, but one thing is for sure: there are also reasons that appear everywhere. (European Commission Eurostat 2023, European Commission European Education Area 2024). Some local research in Hungary have already pointed out that personal and family problems, learning difficulties, and socio-economic problems can all play a role in school dropout (Torkos, Barabásné & Nyilas 2022). Overall, a strong correlation can be shown between early school leaving and social repression.

It should be noted here that this study mainly focuses on school factors, e.g. the structure of the education system, the atmosphere of schools, the relationship between teachers, students, parents and local communities, the impact of state education policy (including education laws and regulations), etc. Since students who drop out of school often do not complete their secondary education or never return to school because of complex and interrelated reasons, therefore policy measures aimed at reducing school dropout must combine both educational policy and social policy instruments.

EU countries have committed themselves for decades to reduce the average share of early school leavers to less than 10% by 2020 (EC 2020). Earlier, in 2001, as one of the five main objectives proposed by the EU, all member states wanted to reduce the proportion of early school leavers by at least 50% by 2010 to reach the ideal dropout rate of 9 percent (EC 2001). There has been improvement, but not to a great extent, because there are still those groups in the society who have not improved in this sense, for example people of immigrant backgrounds, belonging to a minority, permanently unemployed parents, living in rural areas, having personal or family problems, having learning difficulties, or having a fragile socio-economic situation being more likely to end their education before compulsory school leaving age without a certificate of completed education or professional qualification (EC 2020). It must be noted that there are still significant differences between individual countries and social strata.

As a result of the EU countries making serious efforts to reduce the average rate of school dropouts to below 10 percent by 2020, between 2011 and 2019,

the proportion of early school leavers across Europe decreased from 13.4 percent to 10.2 percent on average (EC 2020). Most of the education systems are trying to provide real equality of opportunities or chances, in many cases even extra ones, but despite all the efforts made in this direction, not with much success. For everyone to have a chance to fully participate in society, the phenomenon of dropout also highlights the difficulties of implementing quality education and providing adequate education for everyone at the same time. Therefore, further measures are needed to deal effectively with this complex problem and to reverse the unfavourable trends. This study tries to contribute to this with the Canadian perspectives.

2. Different interpretations of the concept of school dropout

As for the databases and definitions, the data of the European Union cannot be exactly compared with Canadian ones, because the interpretations of dropout and early school leaving are quite different. In Canada, different views overlap, so it is difficult to define precisely what is considered school dropout or early school leaving.

In Canada, the definition and the concept of dropout is in some ways different from the European ones, although even EU member states often interpret this differently due to the different individual characteristics of their education systems. In Canada, just like in the United States, in most cases primary school dropout is not included in the statistics, because in the provinces of Canada students are not obliged to repeat a school year in the case of failure. Another difficulty is that the lower and upper limit of compulsory schooling can vary from province to province from time to time.

The relativity of the concept of school failure, i.e. its dependence on the education system, is illustrated by examples of different definitions. The express or implied standard of performance may differ depending on educational tradition, curriculum requirements, and assessment and orientation procedures. According to that, deviation from the norm - which manifests itself in the form of failure - can take several forms. There is considerable actual difference between the definitions, depending on whether the focus is on child development or reference to an established level. In this way, in countries where the practice of annual repetition is not typical, the child's lack of development is understood to mean that he did not realize his potential or did not achieve individual progress. On the other hand, in countries that have retained the selective type of examination and evaluation system, school failure is defined in the number of annual repetitions and the number of people who leave education without a certificate.

3. Dropout in Canada

3.1. Dropout interpretations in Canada

The Canadian literature, like the American one, does not deal with dropout at the elementary school level, only with high school dropout, and a student who leaves the high school level without a diploma is considered a dropout (Richard-Willms 2001). At the primary school level, they cannot leave education yet, because compulsory schooling is 16 years old. A student who repeats a year or changes schools is not considered a dropout. The application of the dropout definition is independent of the number of academic years the high school can offer. In the province of Ontario, for example, high school can be completed at the earliest at the age of 19, while in the province of Québec at the age of 16-17. As a result, an 18-year-old student is considered a dropout in Ontario, but not in Quebec, because the only thing that matters is whether the individual has a high school degree from the school they previously enrolled in.

3.2. Dropout rates in Canada

Based on this, the dropout rate in Canada in 1997 was 25 percent (EI Canada 2000) and twenty years later it was about 14 percent, but it could increase to as high as 25 percent in low-income families and communities (Canadian Census 2016). Canadian experts mention that this 25 percent does not include students who repeat a year, who attend high school one or two years longer, because according to the definition, they receive a certificate at the end by enrolling every year, not missing a year, they did not interrupt their studies. Yes, but it is typical of Canadian dropouts that they mostly stop their studies only temporarily and return to school after a few years and finish it. That is why there are many people in the country who complete their secondary school education later than expected. In 1991, only 63 percent of 18- to 20-year-olds had a high school degree, and of the remaining 37 percent, 16 percent said they would never return to complete a secondary school education (SLS - School Leavers Survey 1991, SLFS - School Leavers Follow-up Survey 1995). Therefore, the dropout rate of 21 percent is not authoritative either, because it is unclear how many more will finish school in the years to come.

In Canada, therefore, it is not possible to precisely determine the dropout rate, because there are various interpretations surrounding the concept of dropout. According to them, anyone who intends to ever return to school and complete it is not essentially considered a dropout. Based on this, it is in principle impossible to determine the number of dropouts, but in general, all figures

apply the dropout definition mentioned in the very first section, that is, anyone who once stopped their secondary school studies and did not complete them, is considered a dropout.

In 1991, 18 percent of twenty-year-olds dropped out of secondary school, 22 percent of boys and 14 percent of girls (1990: boys - 19.4 percent, girls - 17.4 percent, 1999: boys - 14.7 percent, girls - 9 percent). There are more dropouts among boys. Dropouts return to secondary school after an average of two years to complete their studies. Four years later, in 1995, when examining the same 24-year-old age group, the dropout rate was only 15 percent, and in 2020 it was about 10 percent (SLS 1991, SLFS 1995, SRD 2021).

According to the statistics of the last three decades, of those who ever interrupt their studies, only a few will be most likely finish school. In 1991, almost a third of the dropouts were in the 9th grade, and two-thirds were in the 10th grade. 40 percent of dropouts dropped out of some school by the age of 16. These data are worrisome because the earlier a child drops out of school, the less knowledge he will get, and the more underdeveloped his skills will be, and, as a result, the child is less likely to be able to take part in some kind of retraining or further training in the future, and will have worse chances of participation in the labour market.

By 1997, there was a significant drop in the dropout rate (1990: 17.1 percent, 1997: 11.9 percent), which, despite all the education policy efforts, can be attributed to the fact that high rate of unemployment appeared in the Canadian economy and that students were seen as better off if they stayed in school because they would not have been able to find a job on the labour market. In addition, it also contributed to the fact that in connection with the economic recession and unemployment, they realized that the higher their education and the more qualified they are, the more likely they will be able to find a job on the labour market in the future. (Today, the exact opposite of this trend is taking place.) Overall, it can be said that the dropout rate in Canada has decreased significantly over the past decades. In 2000 less than 14 percent of the 20-year-olds and 15 percent of the over-30s did not finish high school, in 1991 18 percent of the 20-year-olds and 39 percent of the over-30s, in 1981 29 percent of the 20-year-olds and 50 percent of the over-30s, and in 1951 more than 50 percent of the 20-year-olds year group did not even make it to the end of the ninth grade. (Profile 2000)

3.3. Dropout research in Canada

In Canada, a national longitudinal survey of children (NLSCY - National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth) began in 1994, in which the Canadian Human Resources Development Department (HRDC - Human Resources

Development Canada) and the National Statistics Office also participated. Since then, for a time the examination had been continuously repeated every two years, and in the meantime, the current results were always made public, some of which provided information on school dropouts.

Besides, there is also the “Statistics Canada”, which is the national statistical office. The agency ensures Canadians have the key information on Canada's economy, society, education and environment that they require to function effectively as citizens and decision makers.

According to Canadian experts concerning the research, school dropout is a process that begins at birth and lasts for years until the interruption of school studies occurs. According to Wagenaar (1987), dropping out is determined by personality, social situation and home environment factors.

3.4. The predictive factors and causes of dropout in Canada

Based on national and international research, Canadian dropout researchers distinguish five categories (Richard-Willms 2001) that predict school dropout: individual effects, family effects, peer group effects, school effects and community effects. By individual influences are meant the factors that are under the influence of the individual, for example school attendance, performance, health, participation in school activities and integration into the community. Family influences include the parental background, the family's social and economic situation, the parents' relationship with the school, the home environment and the extent and quality of the parents' involvement in the school. The effects of the peer group are nothing more than the influencing role of the individual's circle of friends, as well as its effect on dropping out or falling behind in school. School effects include the material and personal conditions of the school, efficiency and equity. The community effects include the degree of influence of the neighbourhood, the living environment, the social, economic and historical background of the community, the participation of the community in the labour market, which can affect the individual's school goals.

The literature on the individual effects of dropping out of school is very large and they mostly agree on what can cause dropout: poor school performance, low self-esteem, lack of self-control, lack of interest, alienation from school, lack of time for studying due to work outside school, frequent absences and the unfriendly attitude towards schools. As a result of these reasons, boys and native students (students of aboriginal backgrounds) tend to drop out. All literatures agree that early experiences that accumulate have a decisive role in life. According to Ensminger and Slusarcick (1992), even the earliest experiences, such as the financial situation of the family, determine whether the individual will drop out of the school system. According to Alexander, Entwisle

and Horsey (1997), the child's personality is also decisive, because according to their studies, the child who behaved aggressively in the first grade is more likely to leave the school system early. It was also shown that the fact that parents read to their children or not, or whether they discuss what happened at school with their children had a particular effect on school dropout. It has also been proven that children whose parents are actively involved in school activities and strictly follow school progress? at home are less likely to drop out. Barrington and Hendricks (1989) found - in addition to the fact that they also consider early aggressive behaviour to be decisive - that students who dropped out were absent quite a lot from the beginning of school, had a lower intelligence level than their classmates, performed more poorly, and often received negative feedback from the teachers. According to them, it is possible to determine who will drop out of the system already in the first years of school, mainly by inferring from behavioural problems and the number of absences. Bernstein and Rulo (1976) demonstrated that frustration also promotes dropout. Students who are most likely to drop out of school are those with poor performance, low self-esteem, and deviant behaviour that worsens when learning problems are not recognized and addressed. It has been shown that the more time the teacher spends disciplining, the less time is available for teaching and learning, and at the same time, the child becomes even more frustrated and confused due to constant disciplining. And the direct consequence of this is that sooner or later he wants to leave school. According to Bloom (1976, 1981), early success and encouragement (from both the teacher and the parents) and the inclusion of the child in the school community can strengthen the child enough to overcome later obstacles more easily. Berrueta-Clement, Schweinhart, Barnett, Epstein, and Weikart (1984) showed that children's strong social connections stimulated them to perform better. Students who dropped out participated in far fewer school activities and talked less with teachers and family members. According to Cervantes (1966), students who left school could not talk about personal matters with their parents and often felt that no one understood them or that they were misunderstood. Based on Radwanski's (1987) research, the dropout problem occurs at the secondary school level because it is here that students realize that the school cannot do much against social inequalities. LeCompte and Dworkin (1991) also believe this, especially in the case of those belonging to minorities. According to them, the student realizes in secondary school that the school does not provide them with the means by which they could enter a higher social class.

The literature dealing with family effects has found that home conditions, i.e., the socio-economic situation of the family, have a great impact on school performance. Poor financial conditions, special family structures, such as broken families, extended families, and the unemployment status of parents can

be interpreted as unfavourable effects. In connection with their research, Entwistle and Hayduk (1988) found that the family background has a great influence on the child's school performance, and that patterns of parents' education are passed on to children. Mare (1980) also showed - he studied white boys - that the external effects of the environment, especially the socio-economic situation of the family, have a great impact on the child's performance in school. Rumberger (1983) investigated the labour market situation of young people and realized that students from poor families are more likely to drop out than those living in average or better financial conditions. He also observed that the dropout rate strongly depends on the gender and ethnic origin of the child. Dolton, Hutton, Makepeace and Audas (1999) found that early dropout was mostly related to family social status and family structure. Audas (1994) even found a significant relationship between early dropout and family socio-economic status. According to him, the students who dropped out often came from an environment where the head of the family was unemployed, from which it can also be concluded that the child left school due to economic pressures to get a job and earn money. A poor family environment prevents children from having access to cultural tools that money can buy, such as books, newspapers, magazines, computers, the Internet, private tutors, etc. Rumberger, Ghatak, Poulos, Ritter, and Dornbusch (1990) pointed out that parents' relationship with school basically determines whether a low-achieving child will drop out over the years. Extreme attitudes contribute significantly to dropout, such as when parents are very permissive or, at the other extreme, when parents sanction too strongly and respond to poor performance with severe punishment. According to Hess and Holloway's (1984) studies, parents should pay close attention to five areas in order to prevent school dropout: the verbal relationship between mother and child should be balanced, parents should have a positive influence on their children, parents should believe in their children, should use appropriate educational strategies at home, and parents' expectations should be realistic.

Examining the student's relationship with his peers, it is known that the peer group plays a large role in the socialization of children. Ellenbogen and Chamberland (1997) concluded that dropout students had more dropout friends than their peers. It also showed that teenagers try to do everything they can to meet the expectations of their friends, and many of the dropouts were ostracized or outcast children in the class and mostly did not participate in any extracurricular school activities. According to Kelly (1993), ostracism can be caused by conflict with classmates and finding classmates unpleasant. Ellenbogen and Chamberlain in Montreal investigated the difference between the friendships of students at risk of dropping out and those of normal students. They found that the friends of potential dropouts included those already dropped out,

working young people who had finished high school, had few friends in class, but even more outside of school and, in the case of girls, had more friends of the opposite sex than of the same sex (Parker-Asher 1987). In another study, Janosz, LeBlanc, Boulerice, and Tremblay (1997) examined the factors affecting dropout and found that low school performance was the most influential factor, followed by less respect for school personnel and withdrawal from active activities. According to them, family and other school factors were less significant.

3.5. The role of school in decreasing dropout

Until the middle of the eighties, there had not been a large-scale survey in Canada that examined the impact of school on dropout. Although Lawton, Leithwood, Batcher, Donaldson, and Stewart (1988) conducted a small study of 58 schools in Ontario, the results of which support the American literature, as they found that dropout rates are reduced if the community is school-friendly, if the subject requirements are strong, if teacher requirements are high, if the teaching staff is cooperative, and if teachers spend a lot of time with students outside of class. According to experts (Wehlage-Rutter 1986, Audas-Willms 2001), understanding school effects is very important from the point of view that this is the area where the state can intervene the most effectively to prevent school dropout. Wehlage and Rutter (1986), who focused on the school experience, found that dropout students reported that teachers showed less interest in them than in their classmates, and that they disliked excessive school discipline. Young people who dropped out often had disciplinary problems and were usually dissatisfied with their school performance. According to Purkey and Smith's (1983) observations, the conditions for good school performance are parental support and cooperation, the involvement of teachers in decision-making, clear school objectives, strict quality requirements in the field of education, order and discipline, daily homework assignments and, in parallel, homework preparation, and clarifying the school's sense of mission. After data processing, Chubb and Moe (1990) concluded that dropout children are more vulnerable, and for them, a highly autonomous school environment relatively free from bureaucratic controls, where the school is free to use special programs for children who need special treatment, is the most appropriate. Pittman and Haughwout (1987) also investigated the effect of school on dropout and found that school size affects this process. In principle, larger schools have more opportunities to create special classes, where special programs are used for students who require different treatment, but the disadvantages are that they are unfriendly, the students are isolated in them, and they do not feel like members of the school community. Despite this, the experience in Canada

is that smaller schools tend to implement special programs, although according to experience so far, without significant results. According to McDill, Natriello, and Pallas (1985), schools with the highest dropout rates are in metropolitan areas with high rates of unemployment, poverty, crime, broken families, and where the majority of the school's students belong to some form of minority. Young people studying in such an environment, seeing the disorganization of society, adopt a similar attitude and start neglecting school. Dolton, Hutton, Makepeace, and Audas (1999) found that the quality of the school is a determinant of dropout. Pupils who attended private or fee-paying schools were less likely to drop out by the age of 16 than those who attended state schools. Even the whole educational system determines school dropout (Janosz, Pagani, Bisset & Levin 2011). Examining schools, Willms (1986) found that the social composition of the school has a strong influence on the school progress of students. Dropouts are higher and earlier in schools where parents come from lower social classes. Thus, if a child from a lower class is admitted to a school attended by children from a higher class, he is less likely to drop out. Bryk and Thum (1989) also proved this, that is, children from higher social strata have a positive effect on those children who came from schools where the socio-economic status of the parents is very low. Rumberger (1995) found a strong correlation between family education and school dropout rates. The higher the education level of the parents, the lower the probability that the child will drop out. He also added that children who attended schools where behavioral problems are common are also more likely to drop out. Based on their research, Rumberger and Thomas (2000) drew the following conclusions: the ratio of school changes is much higher than the dropout ratio, and the dropout rate is much higher among children whose school has a high dropout rate. Half of the dropout cases can be explained by individual and family reasons, and teacher-student ratio, school discipline, school size, number of absences, school structure, and school resources influence dropout to the greatest extent.

3.6. The role of community in decreasing dropout

The impact of communities on dropout is the least discussed in the literature. Community factors are closely related to family background, school and circle of friends, which is why it is very difficult to clearly define the influence of the neighbourhood and the community. Crane (1991) created the so-called 'epidemic model', the essence of which is that the social problems of the given community are 'contagious' and 'spread' through the circle of friends, neighbours and acquaintances. For example, children who live in a community or neighbourhood with people with social problems are most likely to have a circle of friends with dropouts or those who are well on their way to dropping out.

In his research, he found that children growing up in communities with the most social problems are fifty times more likely to drop out of school than, say, those from the middle class. Datcher (1982) investigated the effect of communities on education and teenage pregnancy and found that even a ten percent increase in income within the community has a positive effect on school performance. Wagenaar (1987) found that affluent or rich families tend to live in better neighbourhoods and that these neighbourhoods have better and more diverse educational opportunities available to families. The physical and personal equipment of the schools is also much better, which contributes to a significant decrease in the dropout rate. Based on this, the experts figured out that if poorer schools are financially supported, they will also attract better teachers, who can help reduce the dropout rate by using more effective methods and strategies. In connection with measuring the impact of the community, several studies have examined the labour market situation of the population and found that most students who drop out of school start working immediately. In communities with high unemployment levels, children leave school and go to work to contribute to the family's livelihood. However, there are also many studies that have shown that in certain periods, when the unemployment rate in a community is very high, the number of people leaving school tends to decrease, because on the one hand they would not be able to get a job, and on the other hand they strive to obtain the highest possible education in order to improve their chances on the labour market. Raffe and Willms (1989) discovered that the dropout rate increases the most when there are job opportunities in the area. Rice (1987) and Dolton, Hutton, Makepeace, and Audas (1999) also demonstrated that weak labour market conditions have a positive effect on college completion. However, Audas (1994) and Micklewright, Pearson, and Smith (1990) found no correlation between unemployment rates and school leaving rates in their Canadian studies, although Rumberger (1983) found that unemployment rates are mostly related to the interruption of school studies in the case of minorities.

Looking at the reasons for leaving school overall in Canada, almost half of the dropouts cited unpleasant experiences as the reason for leaving school. The others mentioned the need to get a job and take care of the family. Significant gender differences were found in Canada. The male students tended to leave school because of employment, while the female students mostly left school because of family obligations - mostly having children. Two-thirds of girls who dropped out of school had children, and almost all were single mothers. In the case of socio-economic factors, children who have divorced parents, come from broken families, have low education, and anti-school sentiment in the family and community are most likely to drop out of the school system. In terms of school factors, the most distant factors from school are poor school

performance and problematic behaviour. These problems appear already at the beginning of school and deepen more and more over the years. It is specific to Canada that, compared to other countries, the education level of those who dropped out of school is the lowest compared to that of those who graduated from high school. This is a huge problem because it is difficult for them to find a job on the labour market and it is very unlikely that they will be able to return to school or they could participate in some kind of retraining or further training. This is the group that will be permanently excluded from adult education and will never be part of lifelong learning.

4. Summary

During the last two decades Canada has devoted increasing attention and money to reducing dropout rates. They have more or less success depending on the level of education. There were much better results at the lower levels of education. Nowadays higher education surveys are worrying. There have been several sociological research, e.g. 2022 Canadian Student Wellbeing Study (Reid 2022), on dropout and intention to leave school before finishing it without certification. They have found that two in five students, i.e. forty percent are seriously considering dropping out of their institutions, especially in Ontario. That is, up five percent from 2021. Full time higher education students were also more inclined to drop out than in the previous years. From this point of view, the age group most at risk of dropping out are 18 and 19-year-olds. The two main reasons behind considering dropping out were high stress level and future outlooks and opportunities concerning the labour market. After starting their higher education, many students decide to stop their studies and enter the labour market. The question is how to keep them in school until they get their final certificate, to delay their entry into the labour market, in an environment with a shortage of workers (Statistics Canada 2022).

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SZERZŐI ADATOK

Dr. Torkos Katalin egyetemi docens
Nyíregyházi Egyetem
Alkalmazott Humántudományok Intézete
torkos.katalin@nye.hu