

*Innovations for Education
Иновации за образование*

THE EFFECTS OF STUDENT-TEACHER AND STUDENT-STUDENT RELATIONSHIP ON SCHOOL ENGAGEMENT: AN EMPIRICAL RESEARCH IN BULGARIA

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Abstract. School dropout is an important social and economic problem that affects society as a whole and is strongly tied to family psychopathology, individual characteristics and school related factors. Studies show that conflicting teacher-student and student-student relationships are closely related to students' decision to drop out of school. The aim of this study was to examine the effects of teacher-student and student-student relationships, as perceived by students, on willingness to attend school, academic achievement, and prosocial behaviours. The sample consisted of 152 students (53,3% male and 46,7% female) who are studying in low secondary schools, including Roma schools. Results from statistical analysis support the significance of student-students and student-teacher positive relationship as an important factor for school engagement. In conclusion, supportive and caring teacher-student relationships and conflict free peer relationships are related to increased school engagement, motivation for learning, and academic performance. In contrary, children who experience lower quality relationships with teachers and peers (feel rejected or socially excluded) tend to become dissatisfied with school and are at a higher risk for dropping out.

Keywords: school dropout; teacher-student relationship; conflicts; academic performance; peer relationships; school engagement

Introduction

School dropout is an important social and economic problem that affects the entire society. Despite the increasing social significance of education, multiple studies have shown that many children (up to 12.7%) leave the education system prematurely in Bulgaria¹⁾ (Fig. 1). Compared to the rest of the EU countries, Bulgaria reports the earliest average age of dropouts with a low level of education: it is as low as 14.3 years, i.e. almost 2 years before reaching the end of compulsory school age (Zahariev, et. al, 2013).

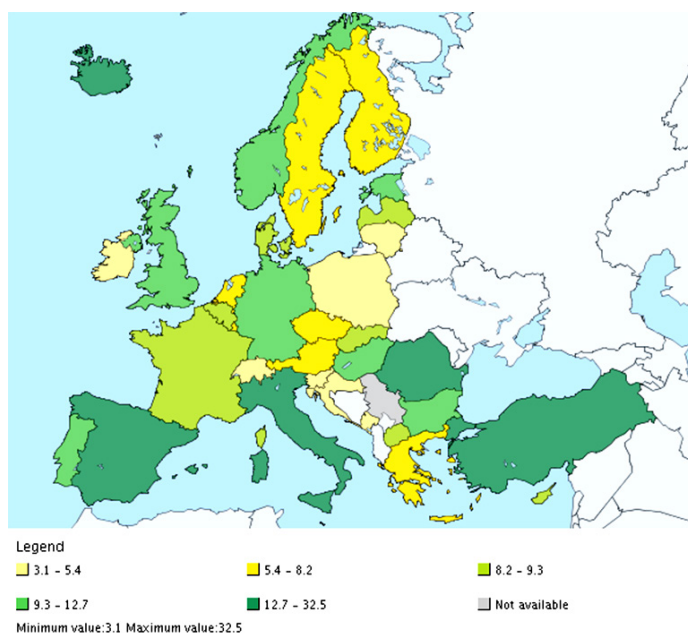


Figure 1. Early leavers from education and training.
Percentage of the population aged 18 – 24 with at most lower secondary education and not in further education or training²⁾

Few studies have examined the predictors of dropping out of school and their data have been analysed. Research shows that school dropout is strongly tied to family psychopathology, individual characteristics and school related factors. Studies also show that conflicting relationships between teacher-student and student-student are closely related to students' decision to drop out of school (Göksoy & Argon, 2016; Chirtes, 2010). Conflicts with teachers were reported by dropouts as one of the reasons motivating their decision to leave the school before reaching the end of compulsory school age.

Dropping out of school is not purely an academic issue and has important implications with respect to various social, economic, and health outcomes. Compared to high school graduates, high school dropouts are in higher risk for job instability (Day and Newburger, 2002), economic hardship (Chapman et al., 2010), mental health problems and chronic health conditions such as asthma, diabetes, and heart disease (Muennig et al., 2010; Vaughn et al., 2014). Research also has highlighted the relationship between school dropout and criminal behaviour including violence, assault, and drug-related crime (Maynard et al., 2015; Olate et al., 2012; Vaughn et al., 2015, 2014). Of particular relevance to this study,

numerous studies suggest that individuals who drop out of high school may face higher risk for problems related to use of tobacco, alcohol, marijuana, and other illicit drugs (Bachman et al., 2008; Maynard et al., 2015; Townsend et al., 2007). While it is generally acknowledged that school dropout can lead to substance use, the contributory role of substance use in the pathway to dropout is less recognized than other risk factors. The ongoing discussion of the question “What comes first: substance use or school dropout” suggests undoubtedly that the association between substance use and school dropout is bidirectional (Valkov, 2018).

The reasons children drop out of school are usually multiple and complex and can be classified into four groups: personal-related, school-related, family-related and community-related. Although there is rarely one single factor (or event) leading to dropping out, the risk increases if several factors coexist for a longer period of time (Charmaraman & Hall, 2011).

The factors identified under *personal-related* cluster include but not limited to: cognitive and non-cognitive characteristics of students (persistence, motivation, self-esteem), entering adolescence, which involves a complex redefinition of their personalities, student’s anxiety depression and will, that includes personal choice and decision to leave school (Erikson, 1968; Blos, 1988; Gazelle, 2006; Fortin, et. al., 2004).

School-related factors consist of high level of racial or ethnic discrimination of students, school phobia, school violence, conflicts (with teachers, peers), negative attitude of the teachers, failure in individual subjects, low motivation of certain teachers to interact with students, poor quality of teaching, deficit of learning and emotional support and lack of positive teacher-student relationships (Teneva, 2018; Simić & Krstić, 2017). The unsatisfactory relationships with teachers and negative climate in the classroom are among the main causes for dropping out of school (Fortin et al., 2013), particularly for boys (Lessard, et al., 2004).

Family-related factors include excessive consumption of alcohol by the parents, parents’ lack of interest, divorce, concubinage, domestic violence, siblings dropping out and chronic illness, including mental disorders within the family (Chirtes, 2010, Ajaja, 2012, Farahati, et. al., 2003)). The parents’ low level of education may also lead to a low family support for education and low motivation in student to attend school (ibid).

Community-related factors for school dropout consist of living in rural areas, especially in small and remote localities, unemployment among the adults in the family, leading to unsatisfactory social, and housing conditions, the limited cultural and educational opportunities, as well as the lack of convenient transportation. Marginalized urban neighbourhoods also generate conditions that can lead to school dropout (Lavrentsova & Valkov, 2017). They are characterized often by low income and risk environment in socio-cultural terms: social isolation, close ties with the criminal world and widespread substance abuse (alcohol, drugs) and socialization with peers with low motivation for education and early school leavers.

The research shows that positive relationships with peers, sense of belonging, lack of peer violence, as well as participation in extra academic activities and different kinds of dialogue in the classroom and school are related to lower rate of school dropout (Simić & Krstić, 2017; Erkin et. al, 2010; Fortin et al., 2013; Pooley et al., 2008).

This study is part of a university scientific project investigating the problem of school dropout in Bulgaria, district of Stara Zagora. This research aimed at examining the effects of teacher-student and student-student relationships, as perceived by the students, on willingness to attend school, academic achievement, and prosocial behaviours. It was hypothesised that conflicting relationships between teachers and students and their peers are closely related to one's decision to drop out.

Method

This research study was an attempt to identify the risk factors that lead to student dropout, as seen from the students' perspective. For this purpose, a questionnaire was developed, assessing students' views about various aspects of school, family, health and important relationships in their life. The questionnaire includes demographic information, socio-economic status, questions about student-teacher and student-student relationships, participation in extracurricular activities and questions about the reasons for dropout.

Data analysis included statistical processing of empirical data using SPSS.V. 18.0, descriptive statistics and cross-tabs.

Participants

The sample is comprised of 152 students (81 male and 71 female) who are studying mostly in low secondary schools, attending different schools in Stara Zagora region. The participants were recruited from city and village schools, including the so-called segregated Roma schools.

Demographic Characteristics

The distribution of respondents by ethnic group is shown in Table I. It should be noted that the majority of those respondents who choose the "other" option in terms of their ethnicity are representatives of a specific sub-group "Turkish Roma" (Roma who identify themselves as Turks). Thus, it is no coincidence that their answers are similar to those of Roma children.

Table 1. Ethnic background

	Ethnicity	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Roma	72	47,4	48,0	48,0
	Bulgarian	62	40,8	41,3	89,3
	Other	16	10,5	10,7	100,0
	Total	150	98,7	100,0	
Missing	System	2	1,3		
Total		152	100,0		

Ethical approval and consent to participate

All data was managed in a way that ensures confidentiality and privacy. The study was approved by the Regional Department of Education – Stara Zagora and was conducted under their written permission. The survey of students at school required a written consent from the parents of participants. The teachers and parents were informed that the data of this study will be used for scientific and educational purposes only.

Results and discussion

The research question “Do you enjoy going to school” indicates that 86,8% of students enjoy going to school while 13,2% of the sample don’t enjoy school, are indifferent or annoyed from it (Fig.2). The results show that the greater part of students who enjoy going to school are those who don’t have or rarely have conflicts with peers and teachers. Most students, no matter of their ethnic background are motivated to go to school and want to feel engaged at school. They want a teacher who greets them by name, as well as reassurance that what they are learning matters and is actually going to improve their life for the better. When this doesn’t happen, the kids find their own motivation for coming to school: to get free meal, to connect with friends, etc. Perhaps the most important finding in research concerning dropout prevention, attendance and student engagement is that students enjoy most going to school when teachers care about them, respect and support them (Benard, 2004; Wimberly, 2002).

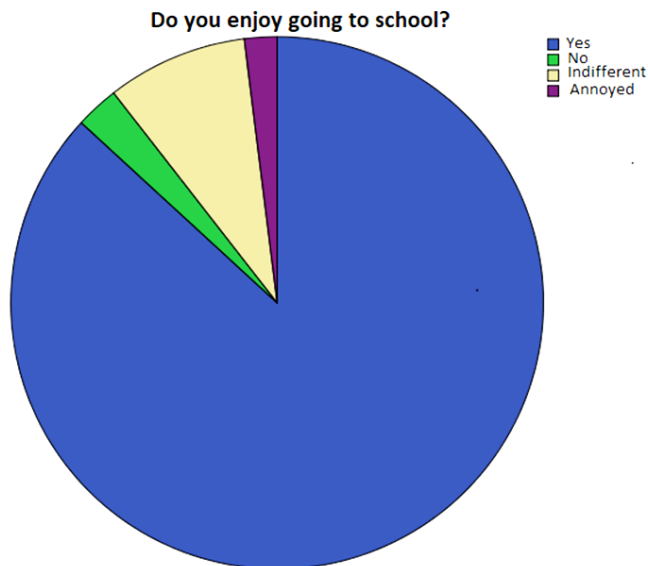


Figure 2. Do you enjoy going to school?

For the question “Do you have absences from school?” 33,6% of students answered they don’t have absences, 58% of them are rarely absent from school while 7,9% of respondents are often absent from school (Fig. 3). The results show no significant difference between sexes regarding the school absenteeism. As many as 61.7% of boys and 54.9% of girls are rarely absent from school. At the same time 11.26% of girls and 4.9% of boys responded they are often absent from school. The percentage of those who don’t have absences is equally distributed between the sexes. Overall the proportion of early school leavers in 2017 in the EU-28 was 3.2 percentage points higher for boys (12.1%) than for girls (8.9%) 5). Nearly all EU Member States reported a higher proportion of early leavers for boys than for girls. However, in Bulgaria the proportion of early school leavers is 1.5% higher for girls than for boys. Reasons for school absenteeism varied and are described in the next question. The results of this study show that students with higher rate of absenteeism are those who are more likely to have conflicts with teachers and peers. However, it is not clear if the conflicts with teachers are a consequence or a cause for school absenteeism. Another finding suggests that absence rates were highest for Roma ethnic groups and the amount of absentees increases with age.

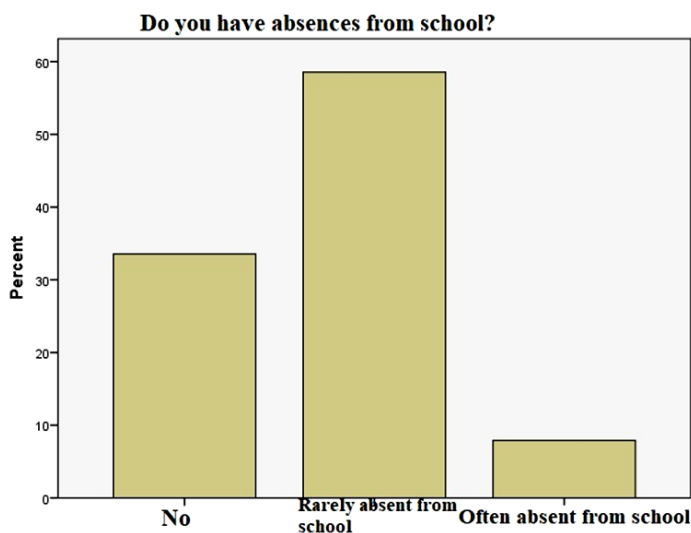


Figure 3. Do you have absences from school?

On question No 13 “What are the reasons for being absent in school?” 17.8% of students answered they are absent in school because of family reasons, 61% - because of illness, 2.7 % - because they have to work, 2% because of conflicts with classmates, and 13.4% – due to other reasons (Fig. 4). The family reasons, related

to school non-attendance include excessive consumption of alcohol by the parents, frequent home relocations, divorce, poverty, lack of child supervision, domestic violence, siblings' history of dropout and chronic illness in the family. It should be noted that students who are chronically absent with no excuse are at higher risk for having more serious behavioural issues such as violence, substance abuse and involvement in criminal activity (Valkov, 2018). Particular attention must be paid to the relationship between school truancy and the dropout rate.

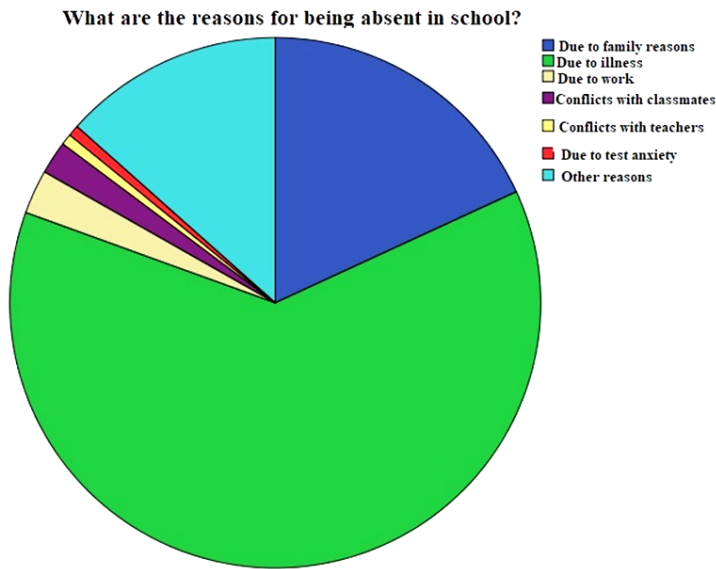


Figure 4. What are the reasons for being absent in school?

Regarding participation in extracurricular forms of work (*question 16*), the data show that 57.8% of the students are involved in some extracurricular activity while the remaining 42.1% don't participate in any extracurricular activity. Here are some very worrying trends can be highlighted. Firstly, the great number of students who are not active in extracurricular activities. Secondly, the extremely low number of respondents who participated in the social-psychological trainings or counselling (3 persons in total, 2 of which are of Roma origin). This is the group that has the highest dropout risk because, for obvious reasons, they are less involved in the school life and fail to develop enough trust and interest in the school community. Unfortunately, extracurricular activities remain mostly unrecognized as a resource for dropout prevention in Bulgaria.

Question 18 analyses student-student relationships. The data shows that 33.5% of students declared they have no conflicts with classmates while the greater number of respondents (66.5%) answered they have sometimes or oft conflicts with

their classmates due to exclusion, lack of understanding and bullying. Hostile or rejecting interactions with peers erode feelings of belonging. Research shows that hostility or rejection from classmates erodes feelings of belonging and contributes to adolescents feeling lonely and alienated (Guay et al., 1999) as well as increases anxiety and distress in students' life (La Greca & Lopez, 1998). Peer rejection has been associated with indifference and losses in academic motivation and performance (Buhs, Ladd & Herald, 2006).

Quality of the teacher-student relationship has a significant impact on the student's school adjustment and on their decision to stay or drop out (Shadreck, 2013). The answers on *question 19* indicate how participants perceive teacher-student relationship as related to dropping out. Overall most of the students don't have any conflicts with teachers (73.6% of respondents) while 26.4% of them responded that they have conflicts with their teachers. As Stearns and Glennie (2006) have pointed out, factors internal to the school, such as disciplinary policies or conflicts with students or teachers, might increase the risk for drop out.

The *question 24* required students to indicate the causes for yearly school leaving. Students believe school dropout is a result of a low interest in learning (almost 37% of respondents have chosen this option). Another common reason stems from the serious difficulties in learning (23% of the total). A more significant difference is evident in this case, when the reason for early school leaving is related to the attitudes to early marriage (10.5%) - such an opinion is shared mainly by the respondents of the minority origin (12 Roma students in comparison with 4 of the Bulgarian ethnicity), which is in line with the cultural-specific prerequisites for school dropout. The Roma tradition of bride kidnapping puts young women at higher risk for school dropout. Kidnapping has been seen as a way to avoid a bride price or a way for a girl to marry a boy she likes, but the parents disapprove of (Pamporov, 2006).

Table 2. Causes of dropout from students' perspective

Cause	Views (in percentage %)
Low interest in learning	37%
Serious difficulties in learning	23%
Lack of support from parents	13,1%
Problems with teachers	12,5%
Problems with classmates	11,8%
Health problems	11,1%
Attitudes to early marriage	10,52%
Financial difficulties	10,5%
Problems with drugs/alcohol use	5,26

The findings above are consistent with the previous studies of Simić & Krstić (2017) and Fortin et al. (2013), who found that conflicts (with teachers, school

mates), lack of positive teacher-student relationships and negative climate in the classroom are among the main causes for dropping out of school. On the contrary, positive relationships with peers and teachers, the sense of belonging, absence of peer bullying, as well as participation in extracurricular activities and different kinds of dialogue in the classroom and school are related to lower incidence of dropping out of the educational system.

The student engagement in school life and extracurricular activities is not only a predictor of student retention and graduation from high school, it might serve as a protective factor that buffers adolescents from deviant behaviours, including substance use, delinquency, and risky sexual behaviour.

Limitations

While this study has its strengths, there are certain factors that are difficult to account for when using a survey. We have not been able to test the specific mechanisms that potentially link school dropout to conflicting relationships with peers and teachers, and this will be an important dimension for future studies to address.

Another limitation is related to the sample size. The number of subjects in the total sample was limited to 152 students and the research was conducted on a relatively small sample of schools. A future study with a larger sample is needed in order to check the findings of this study. The participation of a greater number of students and teachers from different schools in more regions in Bulgaria would lead to a more thorough understanding of the impact of school factors on dropout risk.

Conclusion

Dropping out of school is only the end of the more general process of school disengagement, a process that typically begins earlier in school years. Findings indicate that the promotion of family involvement and positive school and social behaviours can reduce the risk for school dropout.

In Bulgaria, the focus on school dropout has been put mainly on the students and their families and how they contribute to this phenomenon. However, school dropout is rather a social problem where the teacher and peer contribution deserves to be better investigated.

Positive relationships with teachers and peers, good climate at school and involvement in extracurricular activities are important protective factors that prevent school dropout.

In conclusion, supportive and caring teacher-student relationships and conflict free peer relationships are related to increased school engagement, motivation for learning, and academic performance. In contrary, children who experience lower quality relationships with teachers and peers, who feel rejected or socially excluded tend to become dissatisfied from school and are at a higher risk for dropping out of school.

The implementation of conflict resolution programs can be used for reducing school dropout in secondary education.

NOTES

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2. Data for EU, EEA, Switzerland and Turkey (2017), retrieved from <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/> Copyright 2018 by EuroGeographics Association for the administrative boundaries.
3. European Commission, Eurostat (2018). Early leavers from education and training, retrieved on 6.November 2018 from: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Early_leavers_from_education_and_training#Analysis_by_sex
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