

Dropout or Pushed Out?

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In recent years, citizens of Trinidad and Tobago have been increasingly voicing their concerns about the public school system and, in particular, about the ability of schools to educate and prepare youth to assume the responsibilities of national and global citizenship. It is generally acknowledged that one of the most crucial issues facing education systems in the Caribbean is the problem of school dropouts. It is also common knowledge, supported by a large body of research that, in Trinidad and Tobago, like the rest of the Caribbean, a disproportionate number of youth, predominantly boys, leave school prematurely.

Currently, it is estimated that between 20 and 30 percent of students do not complete school. This, at a time when 60 percent of the jobs being created in the Caribbean need at least a secondary school education or some form of specialised training. Given such figures, this subject has generated intense interest and a great deal of discussion within academic circles, as well as within the public domain. It has been pointed out that school dropouts constitute a great cost to local taxpayers in terms of their weak earning power, the lower taxes these individuals pay, and the additional costs of unemployment benefits, health, and policing.

Traditionally, we have attributed dropping-out to individual failure, or have associated it with specific situations such as pregnancy, substance abuse, and family troubles. I would like to suggest that the problem is more complex, and that dropping out is a developmental process influenced by a series of in-school and out-of-school experiences.

Why do students leave school prematurely?

Research findings have suggested that one of the reasons why students drop out of school is because of frustration and lack of self-esteem. The frustration/self-esteem model views dropping out as a developmental process that begins in the earliest grades. According to this position, students who do not do well become frustrated early in school. With time, their frustration can result in a lower self-image, which eventually leads them to drop out. The problem with this position is that it fails to adequately explain why some students do not do well in school in the first place. The notion of low self-esteem is used to blame students, thereby masking the structural and institutional inequalities and contradictions these students have to deal with, and which engender the phenomenon of dropping out.

Another model that has been advanced to explain the dropout phenomenon is the participation-identification model, which is a distinct, yet related, theoretical approach to explaining dropping out. This model postulates that involvement in school activities usually results in identification and social attraction to a group. Conversely, the lack of participation results in a lack of identification. It is argued that the likelihood of a youth successfully completing secondary school is maximised if the student maintains multiple, expanding forms of participation in school-relevant activities. Marginalised students can become isolated from the mainstream student body; they may feel alienated from the

school system as a whole and subsequently drop out. This model has some utility for understanding the impact of marginalisation on student performance.

Similarly, the deviance theory of dropping out maintains that by failing to support and respect the existing institutional norms, values, ethos, and rules of the school, students run the risk of being branded deviants. Consequently, these students may be denied privileges and rewards that the institution accords to well-behaved students. With time, the deviants internalise such institutional labels by redefining themselves in terms of their deviant behaviour. As they drift towards behaviour that offers its own rewards, rather than the institutional sanctions of the school, their oppositional behaviour acquires some legitimacy of its own. But because the school system does not tolerate frequent absenteeism, poor academic performance, and truancy, the perpetrators of such behaviour are eventually pushed out of school. The deviance model is particularly relevant for steering attention to institutional structures and processes that rationalise school decisions to “push out” students who are nonconformists.

Another theory that explains school dropout is the structural strain and alienation model, which postulates that if societal changes reduce the fit between school and society, then teachers and students are likely to perceive their efforts and participation as purposeless. The outcome of such a situation is burnout for teachers, and alienation and dropping out for students. The relevance of this position is the introduction of key concepts such as “alienation,” “powerlessness,” “meaninglessness,” and “isolation” to explain why students give up on school when their lived realities do not match the expectations that society and schooling have created.

Other educators use the cost-benefit analysis model, which focuses on local economic conditions to explain the causes of dropping out. According to this position, students are more likely to stay in school and graduate if there is a good chance of gaining employment and improving their incomes with a completed education. On the other hand, if students feel that local conditions make employment unlikely, regardless of education level, then there is a good chance of students leaving school prematurely.

These positions provide additional insights into students’ decision to stay in or leave school, with reference to the rational calculations students make in light of their social circumstances.

In sum, it is absolutely crucial for all stakeholders in the education system in Trinidad and Tobago to acquaint themselves with the problems faced by students. It is only by doing this that they can be in a position to provide recommendations for structural changes to deal with the dropout problem. For any meaningful changes to be effected to address the dropout phenomenon, all stakeholders of the education system need to be conversant with and understand the reasons why students leave school prematurely

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