



The peer relations of dropouts: a comparative study of at-risk and not at-risk youths*

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Little research has been devoted to exploring the relationship between high school disengagement and friendship network changes. In this study, the characteristics of friends, the environments of the friendship network and the nature of peer relations of students at-risk and not at-risk of dropping out of high school were compared. A questionnaire was given to 191 high school students (109 males, 82 females) from a middle class environment at the beginning and end of the school year. Results indicated that at-risk students had more dropout friends, more working friends, fewer school friends and fewer same-sex friends. Sex differences were discovered in several areas. Findings are discussed in relation to research and theories pertaining to dropouts and adolescent development.

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Introduction

In recent years, the problem of high school attrition has concerned school professionals and researchers alike. Lack of success in school not only places severe limits on the career options and earning potential of a young person; there are also potential social and psychological repercussions from failing at something so highly regarded in conventional society, and these may affect the growth of an individual long before they leave school. In this study, the peer relations of students at-risk and not at-risk of dropping out were followed over the course of a school year, in the hope of gaining a better understanding of the social aspects of the process that leads young people to leave school before obtaining a high school diploma.

The possibility that the peer group plays a role in the school disengagement process has been debated (Elliott and Voss, 1974; Newman and Newman, 1976; Ekstrom *et al.*, 1986; Valverde, 1987; Finan II, 1991; Kelly 1993). Due to the relative paucity of research in this area, the present authors have expanded their literature review to include studies of actual dropouts, future dropouts (students who were followed until they either graduated from or dropped out of high school), as well as students at-risk of dropping out. Research can be categorized into three trends.

The first has demonstrated that actual dropouts (Alpert and Dunhan, 1986; Finan II, 1991) and future dropouts (Elliott and Voss, 1974; Horwich, 1980) tend to have more dropout friends. The difficulty rests in interpreting this association. It may be that lack of success at school predisposes one to seek friendships with similar others, thus the discovery

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of an association between dropping out and having dropout friends is of little importance to the fundamental question of why youths choose to quit school. Conversely, it could be that having a social network of friends where school is not valued accelerates or consolidates the disengagement process. The peer group may reinforce attitudes or behaviour not conducive to success at school.

The second trend illustrated that future dropouts tended to have been rejected by their school peers (Parker and Asher, 1987; Kupersmidt *et al.*, 1990). Again, this may be a contributing factor to the disengagement process or simply a byproduct of it.

A third and related trend of research suggested a lack of integration into the social network of school on the part of the dropout. Ekstrom *et al.* (1986) discovered that future dropouts tend to feel less popular at school, and that their friends are less popular as well. In an ethnographic study, Valverde (1987) determined that actual dropouts tend to lack naturally formed mutual support groups to assist in their studies and sense a disconnectedness with school.

In a field study of high schools which cater to school returnees and potential dropouts, Kelly (1993) identified numerous ways in which the peer group may be involved in the disengagement process. Citing student testimonials, she recorded instances of (a) conflicts with other students leading to expulsion, (b) disassociative feelings with the crowd at school motivating a quiet withdrawal from that environment, and (c) relationship and pregnancy domains taking precedence over school.

Taken together, the literature indicates that the friendship networks of future dropouts tend to include a greater proportion of young people of similar orientation and fewer school friends. Furthermore, it is possible that an active rejection of these future dropouts by their school peers may be contributing to these tendencies.

Much remains to be explored of the characteristics of the friendship network of students who leave school prematurely. Firstly, there is little research into when this process of affiliation with other dropouts emerges. Secondly, there has been little examination of other characteristics of the friends of future dropouts and at-risk students, such as their work status. Though there are several indications that future dropouts tend to have few school friends, the environments of their friendship network has never been subjected to detailed examination using mapping techniques. A recent study (Claes and Simard, 1992) employing such techniques to examine the social networks of delinquents, a group known to have a high dropout rate (Elliott and Voss, 1974), revealed a high concentration of out of school friends.

The characteristics of the friendship network of future dropouts and at-risk students, and the characteristics of the relationship to their friends remains largely unexplored. The peer rejection studies suggest conflictual or precarious peer relations, but Parker and Asher (1987) questioned whether rejected youths make up for their lack of popularity at school with a larger out of school friendship network.

There are indications that students at-risk of early departure from school may be more open to peer influence (Leaseberg *et al.*, 1990). Radford and King (1989) found that actual dropouts tended to have sexual relations at an earlier age, while Ekstrom *et al.* (1986) discovered that future dropouts tended to go out on dates more often. The quality of social relations of delinquents has received considerably more attention, but findings have not always been consistent. There appears to be a trend for delinquents to have a smaller network of close friends, more opposite sex friends (Claes and Simard, 1992) and a greater vulnerability to peer influence (Giordano *et al.*, 1986). The latter authors also found a

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