



High school dropouts: Interactions between social context, self-perceptions, school engagement, and student dropout[☆]

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A B S T R A C T

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Research suggests that contextual, self-system, and school engagement variables influence dropping out from school. However, it is not clear how different types of contextual and self-system variables interact to affect students' engagement or contribute to decisions to dropout from high school. The self-system model of motivational development represents a promising theory for understanding this complex phenomenon. The self-system model acknowledges the interactive and iterative roles of social context, self-perceptions, school engagement, and academic achievement as antecedents to the decision to dropout of school. We analyzed data from the Education Longitudinal Study of 2002–2004 in the context of the self-system model, finding that perception of social context (teacher support and parent support) predicts students' self-perceptions (perception of control and identification with school), which in turn predict students' academic and behavioral engagement, and academic achievement. Further, students' academic and behavioral engagement and achievement in 10th grade were associated with decreased likelihood of dropping out of school in 12th grade.

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Almost one-third of all public secondary students in the United States each year dropout of school (Snyder & Dillow, 2010; Stillwell, 2010). Dropout rates vary across groups and settings, with Hispanic (36.5%) and African American (38.5%) students dropping out at higher rates than Asian (8.6%) and White (19%) students (Stillwell, 2010). High rates of dropout affect individuals, families, and communities (Dynarski, Gleason, Rangarajan, & Wood, 1998; Orfield, 2006). Nongraduates are more likely to be unemployed (Sum, Khatiwada, McLaughlin, & Palma, 2009), to earn less when employed (Levin, Belfield, Muennig, & Rouse, 2007), to receive public assistance (Waldfogel, Garfinkel, & Kelly, 2007), to suffer poor health (Muennig, 2007), and to have higher rates of criminal behavior and incarceration (Moretti, 2007). Additionally, children of parents who did not complete high school are more likely to perform poorly in school and eventually dropout, creating an intergenerational dynamic (Orfield, 2006).

Considerable research has addressed factors associated with dropping out of school. Early attempts to identify risk focused on student factors associated with an elevated likelihood of leaving school prior to graduating. This research consistently reports that students from poor or single-parent households, or whose parents did not graduate from high school, are at

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greater risk of dropping out from school than students from families without these risk factors (Alexander, Entwisle, & Horsey, 1997; Goldschmidt & Wang, 1999; Rumberger, 1995; Rumberger & Larson, 1998; Swanson & Schneider, 1999). The earlier research also suggests that students with adult responsibilities (Cairns, Cairns, & Neckerman, 1989; Gleason & Dynarski, 2002; Goldschmidt & Wang, 1999; Neild & Balfanz, 2006), with a sibling who has dropped out (Teachman, Paasch, & Carver, 1996), who have been retained (Goldschmidt & Wang, 1999; Roderick, 1994; Roderick, Nagaoka, Bacon, & Easton, 2000; Rumberger, 1995; Rumberger & Larson, 1998), or who have changed schools (Astone & McLanahan, 1994; Rumberger, 1995; Rumberger & Larson, 1998; Swanson & Schneider, 1999) are more likely to dropout of school.

Although this early work centered on person-level characteristics that tend not to be amenable to change, more recent research addresses dynamic factors related to risk status and has led to a growing interest in the construct of engagement (Appleton, Christenson, Kim, & Reschly, 2006; Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Sinclair, Christenson, Lehr, & Anderson, 2003). School engagement is considered the primary model for understanding and predicting graduation from high school. Conceptualizations of school engagement vary in their details (Appleton, Christenson, & Furlong, 2008; Finn, 1989; Fredricks et al., 2004; Jimerson, Campos, & Greif, 2003). However, they share a premise: that poor school engagement hinders academic achievement (Caraway, Tucker, Reinke, & Hall, 2003; DiPerna, Volpe, & Elliott, 2005; Finn & Rock, 1997; Wu, Hughes, & Kwok, 2010), which, over time, increases the likelihood that students will dropout of school (Alexander et al., 1997; Sinclair et al., 2003).

Theories of school dropout (Appleton et al., 2008; Fredricks et al., 2004; Rumberger, 2006) and a growing body of research also suggests that contextual (Dotterer & Lowe, 2011; Hong & Ho, 2005; Patrick, Ryan, & Kaplan, 2007; Ryan & Patrick, 2001; Wang & Holcombe, 2010; You & Sharkey, 2009) and self-system (Caraway et al., 2003; Furrer & Skinner, 2003; You & Sharkey, 2009) variables influence school engagement and dropping out from school. However, it is not clear how aspects of social context influence multiple forms of engagement simultaneously or how different types of contextual and self-system variables interact to affect students' engagement and lead to decisions to dropout from high school (Fredricks et al., 2004). The self-system model of motivational development (SSMMD) integrates contextual and self-system variables and provides a framework for describing processes that initiate and sustain a decline in student engagement (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Skinner, Furrer, Marchand, & Kindermann, 2008; Skinner, Kindermann, Connell, & Wellborn, 2009; Skinner & Wellborn, 1994). Using the SSMMD, the central objective of the present study is to empirically test the mechanism involved in the dropout process.

Self-system model of motivational development

SSMMD posits that individuals possess an innate need to connect with others and interact effectively with their environment. It also asserts that the relationship of a given social context (e.g., family support, teacher support, peer support) and an individual's self-system processes (e.g., perceived identification with school, perceived control) is influenced by the extent to which the social context meets or ignores (fulfills or neglects) these basic needs. Further, self-system profiles differentially influence engagement-related behaviors, which directly contribute to educational outcomes such as student achievement and dropping out. That is, SSMMD suggests that 1) self-systems mediate the relation between a social context and school engagement and that 2) engagement mediates the relation between self-system processes and student outcomes. This model is shown in Fig. 1.

Studies have provided empirical support for SSMMD, as applied to academic achievement (Connell, Spencer, & Aber, 1994; Skinner et al., 2008; Wang & Holcombe, 2010). For instance, Connell et al. (1994) conducted path analyses among a sample of 10- to 16-year-old African American youth. Nearly all proposed relations based on SSMMD were significant. In particular, students' perception of parental involvement predicted self-system processes (a composite measure of perceived competence, perceived relatedness to self, and perceived relatedness to others), which in turn predicted students' emotional and behavioral engagement. Engagement predicted educational outcomes (a composite measure reflecting the degree of risk for school

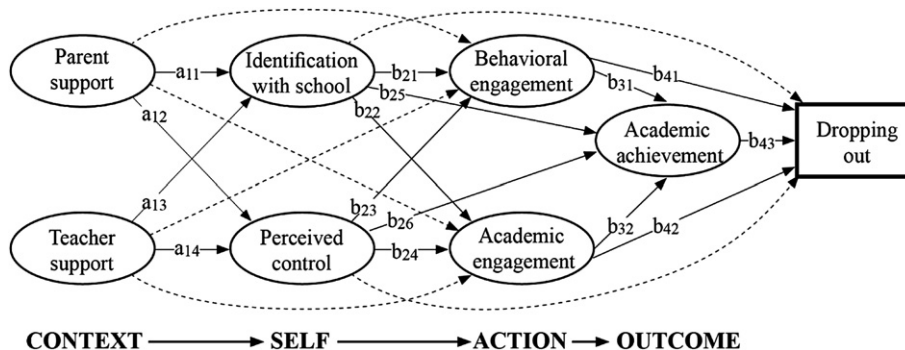


Fig. 1. Self-system model of motivational development applied to dropping out of high school. Dotted lines represent significant indirect effects, and solid lines indicate significant direct effects. Adapted from Connell and Wellborn (1991); Skinner et al. (2008); and Skinner et al. (2009).

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