Research in Brief:
The downward spiral of mental disorders and educational attainment

HAMILTON-WENTWORTH DISTRICT SCHOOL BOARD

The Downward Spiral of Mental Disorders and Educational Attainment

Early school leaving is a concern both for the educators and society as a whole. Young people who leave secondary school prior to graduation are more likely to find themselves without jobs and may be unsure of how to improve their lives. This may often lead to mental health problems, including anxiety disorders. These mental health problems may then contribute to other issues within their lives.

To help reduce the risk of students dropping out prior to graduation, it is important to understand both the reasons why students leave school early and the common consequences of early school leaving.

If key factors can be identified as to why students are dropping out, the youth who are at risk for those factors can be identified and intervention programs can be developed and put into place to reduce early school leaving. As well, once the consequences of early school leaving are identified, then programs, policies and help can be aimed towards individuals to help prevent the negative consequences of dropping out.

School leaving and mental health problems

The relationship between mental disorders and the abuse of various substances, as well as the association with high school leaving has recently been a topic of interest. Researchers have investigated which type of psychiatric disorders seem to have

Why does this matter?

⇒ Early dropout research has focused primarily on demographic and scholastic risk factors related to educational attainment.

⇒ Recently, a link between mental health and early drop out has been studied.

⇒ Most psychiatric disorder symptoms cause impairment to emotional, cognitive and social aspects which may lead to students being unable to carry out their academic potential.

⇒ The interrelation between psychological issues and negative school experiences can peak and cause the student to drop out of school.

E-BEST Evidence-Based Education and Services Team

The downward spiral of mental disorders and educational attainment

the strongest link with early school leaving. They have also investigated the psychiatric disorders that may develop after early school leaving.

Researchers have studied both internalizing disorders, such as anxiety and mood disorders, and externalizing disorders, such as disruptive behaviour disorders including conduct disorder, oppositional defiant disorder and antisocial personality disorder, to help them find a link between mental health and early school leaving.

What is a meta-analysis?

A meta-analysis is a study that combines the results of several other studies. It involves selecting several high quality studies in a specific research area and analyzing the findings collectively. This method provides researchers with a larger sample size and allows them to draw stronger conclusions than those based on individual studies.

The meta-analysis we are summarizing in this document was conducted by Esch et al. (2014). Their objective was to combine data and results from a number of studies that looked at mental disorders and early school leaving in order to strengthen the results, as well as to discuss the implications for educators and stakeholders in youth's academic achievement.

What did they do?

A meta-analysis was conducted with 51 published, peer-reviewed studies from 4 different databases. All studies were published from 1987 to 2014. For each study, dropping out of school had to occur during secondary education and is defined by having left prior to graduation. Assessment of psychiatric disorders were based on the criteria set by the American Psychological Association (DSM IV-R, DSM IV, DSM III-R. DSM III).

What did they learn?

- Results indicated that disruptive behaviour and substance use disorders seemed to be the most disruptive towards completing graduation whereas internalizing disorders has a weaker effect on school dropout.
- For girls, mood disorders and to a lesser extent anxiety disorders were significantly related to school dropout.
- Teens who began using cannabis before age 16 were more likely to dropout of secondary school.
- Compared to total abstinence, cannabis experimentation enhanced high school graduation
- Smoking, or nicotine dependence was strongly related to secondary school dropout whereas alcohol was not.
- Externalizing disorders (disruptive behaviour, attention problems and inadequate social adjustment) were a strong and independent predictor of secondary school dropout.
- Internalizing disorders were a consequence of school dropout, especially mood disorders and suicidal ideations. Anxiety disorders did not develop until years after dropout.
- Early school leavers who already consumed cannabis were more at risk of developing a substance use disorder.

This brief summary was prepared from:
Esch, P., Bocquet, V., Pull, C., Couffignal, S., Lehnert, T., Graas, M., ... & Ansseau, M. (2014). The downward spiral of mental disorders and educational attainment: a systematic review on early school leaving. BMC psychiatry, 14(1), 237.

Please see the original document for full details. In the case of any disagreement between this summary and the original document, the original document should be seen as authoritative.