Szandra Szverle[1]

Tibor Szarvák

University of Debrecen,
Doctoral School of Humanities
Debrecen, Hungary

Levels of early school leaving – relationship between parents, teachers and academic achievement

A korai iskolaelhagyás szintjei – kapcsolat a szülők, tanárok és a tanulmányi eredmények között

Nivoi ranog napuštanja škole – odnos roditelja, nastavnika i akademskih rezultata

Abstract

According to Schmitsek, Early School Leaving (ESL) became a significant societal concern in many EU countries during the 1980s and 1990s. Mazrekaj and De Witte (2020) argue that early school leaving results in numerous adverse social consequences, such as crime, unemployment, and early childbirth. Therefore, it is essential to investigate the factors that contribute to early school leaving. Russell Rumberger (1995) categorized the influences on early school leaving into three levels: (1) family, (2) school, and (3) the community of the students. This research aimed to gain a comprehensive understanding of the factors that may lead to early school leaving from the students' perspectives, focusing on three key areas: parental support, relationships with teachers, and the class community. The questionnaire designed by Hanna Tomaszewska-Pekala and her colleagues (2017) aligned closely with the research objectives and comprised 40 items. Our results indicated that students who communi-

[1] szverleszandra@hotmail.com

cate their issues with teachers tend to achieve better academic performance (0.657**). Additionally, the study revealed a significant relationship between parental involvement and academic success (0.586**), as well as a strong connection between students' future aspirations and parental support (0.407**). Overall, the findings underscore the importance of enhancing family support, improving school environments, and fostering positive community influences to effectively address early school leaving.

Keywords: early school leaving, social consequences, family, school, community of students

Introduction

School dropout is a significant issue globally, impacting education systems across the world, albeit to varying extents. In developing nations, the number of individuals with only primary education or no formal education at all is substantially higher (Szverle 2021). Schmitsek notes that Early School Leaving (ESL) became a critical societal concern in many EU countries during the 1980s and 1990s.

The OECD (2012) indicates that over the past thirty years, early school leaving has remained one of the most pressing challenges in education systems worldwide. Studies conducted in recent decades emphasize that early school leaving should be regarded as a gradual process rather than a singular event, as it often stems from academic difficulties starting in early childhood, sometimes even before formal schooling begins. Thus, early school leaving is a significant issue not only in Hungary but globally. A UNESCO report reveals that 26 million people worldwide have only completed primary education, a concerning figure that leads to various negative outcomes, both economically and socially.

Early school leaving is a multifaceted issue and cannot be addressed from a single perspective. It represents a complex and multidimensional challenge, which requires a solution that goes beyond the responsibilities of schools or welfare systems alone. For this reason, we must adopt a holistic approach to tackling early school leaving. Identifying students who are at risk—those from low socioeconomic backgrounds or with parents who have lower levels of education—is crucial to providing timely and appropriate support. This study aims to present findings on primary school students who are at risk of early school leaving.

1. Definitions of early school leaving

Gaustad (1991) highlighted the difficulty in defining early school leaving or school dropout. Dekkers and Driessen (1997) identified two key perspectives: social inequality and educational qualifications. These researchers argue that early school leaving can be defined based on the minimum educational and training levels employers

deem acceptable for young people. According to Rumberger (1987), there is no universally accepted definition of high school dropout. One major distinction between the US and European definitions is school completion. In the US, early school leavers are students who do not complete high school, while in Europe, the term 'early school leaver' is more commonly used. Different European countries apply varying definitions of early school leaving, partly due to differences in the upper age limit for compulsory education.

2. Theoretical background

The economic background of a family plays a significant role in education (Szverle, 2021). Sokunrith et al. (2022) argue that socioeconomic status and parental education are strong indicators of school dropout rates. Mazrekaj and De Witte (2020) suggest that early school leaving leads to various negative social outcomes, including crime, unemployment, and early childbirth. Therefore, it is crucial to examine the factors contributing to early school leaving. Gaining insight into why students exit school without qualifications is essential. Russell Rumberger (1995) identified three levels of early school leaving: (1) family, (2) school, and (3) the community surrounding the students. Empirical studies on early school leaving have uncovered several factors within the families, schools, and communities of students that may predict early school exit. Both family and school environments are key settings for developing social skills and becoming a productive member of society.

2.1. Family background

The connection between family background and early school leaving is closely linked to Rumberger's research. Rumberger (1983; 1995; 2020) identified that both the economic and social conditions of a family, along with the educational attainment of parents, can serve as predictors of academic success and the likelihood of early school leaving. It is important to recognize that these families often face not only low income but also a lack of social and cultural resources related to education. Students from low-income families may encounter disruptions in their schooling, leading to feelings of alienation as they struggle to adopt broader economic and social values (Szverle, 2020). In their study, Tárraga García et al. (2017) emphasized that school performance and achievement cannot be attributed solely to the school environment; the family also plays a crucial role in a child's educational journey. They categorized school success into two subgroups: structural and dynamic variables. Structural variables encompass parents' educational levels, occupations, and the family's social status, whereas dynamic variables pertain to the home environment, communication, involvement in the child's education, and parental expectations (Tárraga García et

al., 2017). These variables are interrelated, making it impossible to analyze dynamic factors in isolation from structural ones. According to Jung-A Oh & Young-Joo Lee (2018), both family and school are essential contexts for acquiring social skills and becoming productive members of society. The family, beginning from birth, serves as a fundamental developmental environment (Goulet et al., 2020). The significance of family background as a crucial factor in educational success is well recognized. McDermott et al. (2018) noted that economic status and relationships with family, friends, and schools, which are elements of the microsystem in the ecological model, are directly linked to early school leaving. Additional research has indicated that students from single-parent or foster families are more likely to drop out of school compared to those from two-parent households (Rumberger, 1983; Rumberger, 1995; Teachman et al., 1996, as cited by Rumberger, 2001). While adolescents often distance themselves from their families due to peer influence, the impact of familial experiences during this developmental stage remains significant (Goulet et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2015). Negative family experiences during adolescence—such as controlling parental behaviors, social isolation, and parental depression—are associated with early school leaving and an increased risk of substance dependence.

2.2. School Environment

It is widely recognized that schools significantly impact student achievement, including the rates of early school leaving. The cultural framework and available opportunities within schools may also contribute to early school dropout (Koc et al., 2020). This impact is particularly pronounced when school rules and norms are unclear, creating an environment that can negatively influence socialization (Koc et al., 2020). Adolescents spend a considerable amount of time in school, which constitutes a larger and more structured community than their families (Jámbori et al., 2019). Various factors also contribute, including mental health, social relationships, the overall school atmosphere, teacher-student dynamics, classroom climate, disciplinary measures, equitable rewards, and school attachment (Jámbori et al., 2019). Engagement in school activities can serve as a strategy to mitigate low academic performance, boredom, dissatisfaction with school, and early school leaving (Tomás et al., 2019). Tomás et al. (2019) describe school engagement as a three-dimensional construct. The first dimension, emotional commitment, refers to the lack of interest and positive feelings associated with learning, as well as the absence of stress, anxiety, and negative emotions. The second dimension, behavioral commitment, encompasses the activities students engage in and the perseverance and effort they exert to reach their goals. The third dimension, cognitive engagement, involves the mental processes and learning strategies students employ to comprehend and solve tasks (Tomás et al., 2019). Sociocontextual factors can affect cognitive engagement, including the teaching style of the instructor, the classroom environment, and relationships with peers (Tomás et

al., 2019). Koc et al. (2020) found that this holds especially true when school rules and norms are unclear or when the school acts as a negative socializing agent. Students typically spend the majority of their time within the structured setting of the school, which is significantly larger and more formal than their family environments (Jámbori et al., 2019). Rumberger (2020) also linked the student composition to early school leaving. It is a well-established fact that schools exert considerable influence on student achievement, including dropout rates. A significant challenge is distinguishing the school-related factors from those stemming from the students' family backgrounds. Rumberger (2020) identified four types of school factors that impact students' academic performance and, consequently, early school leaving: (1) student composition, (2) school resources, (3) structural characteristics, and (4) processes and practices.

1. **Student Composition:** The makeup of students within a school affects performance not only on an individual level but also on a broader societal scale (Rumberger, 2020). In other words, the social composition of students in a school can influence overall performance.

2. **School Resources:** Numerous studies (Mac Iver & Mac Iver, 2009; Tarabini et al., 2019; Rumberger, 2020) indicate that resources significantly affect early school leaving. Research shows that the ratio of students to teachers positively correlates with lower rates of early school leaving, even when accounting for various individual and group factors that may also impact dropout rates (Rumberger, 2001).

3. **School Structure:** The type of school (public, private, or religious) plays a crucial role, with Rumberger (2020) finding that dropout rates are generally lower in religious schools compared to public or private institutions.

4. **School Practices:** The final category pertains to school practices. According to Rumberger (2020), factors such as the social climate of the school, educational outcomes, and the number of students pursuing further education can help predict dropout rates. Rumberger (2020) argues that schools can influence early school leaving in two primary ways: (1) by creating conditions that lead students to voluntarily dropout, and (2) through explicit decisions made by school staff regarding policies and actions, such as frequent absenteeism and behavioural issues.

Nouwen and Clycq (2019) emphasized that teacher support can be a crucial preventive measure against early school leaving. A strong and positive teacher-student relationship, fostered by educators, can enhance a student's commitment to school and help prevent dropout.

2.3. Community

Beyond family and school, community and peer groups significantly impact early school leaving. Thus, early school dropout is not solely a product of school-related factors; out-of-school experiences also play a role in the dropout process (Gao et al.,

2019). In economically disadvantaged communities, the lack of resources and supportive peers adversely affects the development of children and adolescents (Rumberger, 2020). Young individuals residing in these areas are at a higher risk of early school leaving, particularly if those around them are also dropouts (Rumberger, 2001). Rumberger (2020) found that neighbourhoods with high unemployment rates correspond to increased rates of early school leaving.

Koc et al. (2020) noted that students who have already dropped out of school pose a risk to those living in the same environment. During adolescence, young people are inclined to emulate the behaviours of their peers to foster a sense of belonging and group identity. Consequently, those surrounded by peers who engage in drug use are at greater risk, as they may lower their own academic expectations and ambitions.

3. The Aim of the Research and Hypotheses

The objective of this research was to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the relationships that may lead to early school leaving from the students' perspectives. The key areas of focus included:
1. Parental assistance
2. Relationships with teachers
3. Class community

The study targeted individuals who had already experienced early school leaving. To draw meaningful conclusions regarding the psychometric properties of the questionnaire, it was essential to formulate specific hypotheses:
1. We hypothesize that a positive relationship with teachers correlates with strong academic performance.
2. We hypothesize that there exists a positive correlation between parental expectations regarding educational achievement and parental involvement.
3. We hypothesize that there is a significant relationship between students' future aspirations and parental support.

3.1. Methods

The questionnaire took approximately 40-50 minutes to complete and was administered online. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. The questionnaire comprised 39 statements rated on a 5-point Likert scale, allowing respondents to indicate their level of agreement, with 1 signifying strong disagreement and 5 indicating strong agreement. Alongside these statements, general background questions were included. The study sample consisted of 741 primary school students, primarily from disadvantaged backgrounds. The questionnaire was developed by Hanna Tomaszewska-Pekala et al. (2017).

The instrument created by Tomaszewska-Pekala and her colleagues closely aligned with the research objectives. The original questionnaire consisted of 40 items, all of which were utilized in this study. The instrument had previously been validated on a sample of 120 individuals. The questionnaire focused on areas such as future aspirations, parental control, parents' expectations, school environment, teacher-student relationships, and peer interactions. The items were categorized into two groups. The first group assessed the level of social and emotional support provided by parents and their involvement in educational processes. The family environment plays a crucial role in student outcomes, as students who experience positive interactions with their parents are more likely to engage in their education and achieve success (Tomaszewska-Pekala et al., 2017). Various aspects of the school environment can also influence educational success. The second group of the questionnaire examined how much respondents felt they could participate in school life, assist their peers, and expect support from teachers. Three items specifically addressed disruptive learning environments, which do not foster conducive conditions for learning; in such cases, teachers may feel overwhelmed and unable to provide adequate individual support for all students (Tomaszewska-Pekala, 2017).

3.2. Sample

The questionnaire was completed by elementary school students in grades 5 through 8, with the majority coming from disadvantaged backgrounds. Information regarding the students' ethnic backgrounds was not collected. A total of 741 students from 16 schools participated in the survey, with boys comprising the majority of the sample (N=411). The distribution of participants by grade level was as follows:

Classes	Number of participants
5th graders	N=246
6th graders	N=166
7th graders	N=165
8th graders	N=164

Table 1. Number of Participants

Prior to the questionnaire administration, the heads of institutions and class teachers reviewed the survey, and the study was conducted with their consent due to the sensitivity of the topic.

4. Results

The reliability of the instrument is satisfactory (Cronbach's alpha = 0.612). In this study, the findings from the questionnaire are presented along with a description of correlation analyses. While analyzing the data gathered from the questionnaire, we investigated which variables exhibited significant correlations with one another.

We explored the correlations of certain statements that align with the research objectives.

Scales	Poor performance in tests	Easy follow-up of lessons
Relationship with teachers	,657**	,570**

Remark: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$.

According to the correlation analysis, students who feel comfortable sharing their problems with teachers tend to follow lessons more easily, and in turn, teachers are more aware of the reasons behind students' poor performance in assessments.

As previously noted, a disruptive classroom environment negatively impacts student performance. The responses from students who completed the questionnaire revealed a significant correlation between a disruptive classroom atmosphere and poor test results.

Scales	Poor performance in tests
Disturbing classroom environment	,618**

Remark: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$.

Parental praise serves as a motivating factor for children. Parental involvement in their child's educational journey can influence various aspects, enhancing both academic performance and relationships with teachers.

Scales	Easy follow-up of lessons	Relationship with teachers	Trust in parents
Parental praise	,586**	,657**	,538**

Remark: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$.

The results clearly indicate that parental praise is strongly correlated with students' ease of following lessons, their relationships with teachers, and parental trust. For every child, parental expectations are crucial, but for those from disadvantaged backgrounds, the involvement of parents and their expectations in the educational process are vital factors that can enhance academic performance (Fejes, 2013).

A moderate to strong correlation can be observed between students' future aspirations and parental support. Fejes (2013) notes that students who have a clear vision for

their future or who receive adequate motivation and discussions from their parents about their future are more likely to continue their education and demonstrate greater motivation for improved academic performance compared to peers whose parents do not encourage them and who lack a future outlook. Many disadvantaged students' parents have had negative experiences with the education system, and these experiences, along with their distrust toward schools, are often communicated to their children. They do not engage in their child's school life or assist them in achieving better academic performance.

Scales	Parental support for academic achievement
Future vision	,407**

Remark: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$.

This study explores the factors influencing early school leaving, focusing on the roles of family background, school environment, and community.

5. Summary and verification of hypotheses

Family Background: The research highlights that a family's economic and social status significantly affects educational outcomes. Rumberger's findings indicate that low-income families often lack essential resources, leading to potential alienation from the school environment. Furthermore, parental involvement and expectations are crucial for students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Positive relationships with teachers and parental support correlate strongly with students' academic performance and motivation.

School Environment: Schools play a pivotal role in student achievement and early school leaving. A negative classroom environment and unclear rules can hinder students' learning experiences. The study found significant correlations between effective teacher-student relationships and better academic performance. Student engagement, which includes emotional, behavioural, and cognitive components, is essential for preventing early school leaving.

Community Influence: The influence of community and peer groups is also critical. Young individuals from low-resource communities are at higher risk of dropping out, particularly if they are surrounded by peers who have also left school. Social interactions during adolescence can shape students' academic ambitions and overall attitudes toward education.

Validation of Hypotheses

1. Hypothesis 1: A positive relationship with teachers results in strong school performance.

Validation: Correlation analysis supports this hypothesis, showing that students who share their problems with teachers tend to perform better academically (Correlation with Relationship with Teachers: 0.657**).

2. Hypothesis 2: There is a positive correlation between parental expectations regarding educational attainment and parental control.

Validation: The study indicates a significant relationship between parental involvement and students' academic success (Correlation with Parental Praise: 0.586**).

3. Hypothesis 3: There is a strong relationship between students' future aspirations and parental support.

Validation: The correlation analysis confirms this hypothesis, as a moderate to strong relationship was found (Correlation with Future Vision: 0.407**).

Overall, the findings suggest that strengthening family support, improving school environments, and fostering positive community influences are crucial in addressing early school leaving.

Keywords: early school leaving, elementary school students, family background, school environment, community, teachers

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A korai iskolaelhagyás szintjei – kapcsolat a szülők, tanárok és a tanulmányi eredmények között

Szverle Szandra, Szarvák Tibor

Debreceni Egyetem, Humán Tudományok Doktori Iskola, Debrecen, Magyarország

Absztrakt

Schmitsek szerint az iskolai lemorzsolódás (Early School Leaving, ESL) az 1980-as és 1990-es években számos EU-országban jelentős társadalmi problémává vált. Mazrekaj és De Witte (2020) szerint az iskolai lemorzsolódás számos kedvezőtlen társadalmi következménnyel jár, például bűnözéssel, munkanélküliséggel és korai gyermekvállalással. Ezért elengedhetetlen megvizsgálni azokat a tényezőket, amelyek hozzájárulnak az iskolai lemorzsolódáshoz. Russell Rumberger (1995) az iskolai lemorzsolódást befolyásoló tényezőket három szintre osztotta: (1) család, (2) iskola és (3) a diákok közössége.

Ez a kutatás arra irányult, hogy átfogó képet nyújtson az iskolai lemorzsolódáshoz vezető tényezőkről a diákok szemszögéből, három kulcsfontosságú területre összpontosítva: szülői támogatás, a tanárokkal való kapcsolatok és az osztályközösség. A Hanna Tomaszewska-Pekala és munkatársai (2017) által tervezett kérdőív szorosan illeszkedett a kutatás céljaihoz és 40 tételt tartalmazott.

Eredményeink azt mutatták, hogy azok a diákok, akik megosztják problémáikat a tanáraikkal, jobb tanulmányi eredményeket érnek el (0,657**). Emellett a kutatás kimutatta a szülői részvétel és a tanulmányi siker közötti jelentős kapcsolatot (0,586**), valamint erős összefüggést a diákok jövőbeli céljai és a szülői támogatás között (0,407**). Összességében az eredmények hangsúlyozzák a családi támogatás növelésének, az iskolai környezet javításának és a pozitív közösségi hatások elősegítésének fontosságát az iskolai lemorzsolódás hatékony kezeléséhez.

Kulcsszavak: korai iskolaelhagyás, szociális körülmények, család, iskola, diákok közössége