Giftedness and High School Dropouts: Personal, Family, and School-related Factors

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ABSTRACT

While the issue of high school dropouts has received much attention, the subject of dropouts among gifted and talented students has not been adequately addressed in research studies. Moreover, some research studies focusing on gifted dropouts used only IQ to identify gifted students. Using such a restricted definition of giftedness may cause a misunderstanding of gifted dropouts. This study was conducted to obtain more comprehensive information about gifted high school dropouts and to examine factors related to gifted students' dropout behavior using a more flexible definition of the gifted.

For this study, the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS:88) database, which was a longitudinal study conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), was used to address research questions. The NELS:88 began in 1988 by collecting data on approximately 25,000 eighth grade students, including data from their parents, teachers, and school administrators, and then followed up at 2-year intervals. Two computerized database studies were conducted using different samples. In Study 1, the Second Follow-up Dropout Questionnaire was directly analyzed to obtain specific information about gifted dropouts regarding their reasons for leaving school, parents' reactions, use of time, future career plans, relationships with parents and peers, and self-concepts. In Study 2, student questionnaires were analyzed mainly to examine personal/educational factors related to the gifted students' dropout behavior.

The results from Study 1 indicated that (a) many gifted students left school because they were failing school, didn't like school, got a job, or were pregnant, although there are many other related reasons, (b) most parents whose gifted child dropped out of school were not actively involved in their child's decision to drop out of school, (c) many gifted students who dropped out of school participated less in extracurricular activities, (d) few gifted students who dropped out of school had plans to return to school, and (e) gifted students who dropped out of school had higher self-concepts than non-gifted students who dropped out of school. The results from Study 2 indicated that (a) many gifted students who dropped out of school were from low SES families and racial minority groups, (b) gifted students who dropped out of school had parents with low levels of education, (c) gifted students who dropped out of school had used marijuana more than gifted students who completed school, and (d) dropout behavior for gifted students was significantly related to students' educational aspirations, pregnancy or child-rearing, gender, father's highest level of education, and mother's highest level of education.
model was found to be statistically significant, $\chi^2 (31, N=1,505)=332.45, p<.001$, accounting for the highest percentage of variance (42%). The results indicated that overall, five variables significantly predicted gifted students' dropout behavior: students' educational aspirations ($F=8.60, p<.0001$), pregnancy or child-rearing ($F=6.15, p<.01$), gender ($F=9.87, p<.01$), father's highest level of education ($F=12.86, p<.0001$), and mother's highest level of education ($F=3.52, p<.01$). In addition, the results of SUDAAN statistical analysis are very conservative in dealing with design effect; SES could be considered a significant variable at the $p=.07$ level.

Examination of the odds ratios reveals the influence of the significant variables. The results revealed first that gifted students who wanted to finish college had significantly lower odds of dropping out of school than other students. Second, gifted students who did not have a child had significantly lower odds of dropping out of school than gifted students who had or were expecting a child. Third, gifted male students were about 5 times more likely to drop out of school than gifted female students. Fourth, White gifted students were significantly less likely to drop out than other ethnic groups. Fifth, gifted students with fathers who did not finish high school were about 3 times more likely to drop out of school, while gifted students with fathers who had a Master's degree were significantly less likely to drop out. Interestingly, gifted students with mothers who did not finish high school or had graduated junior college were less likely to drop out. These results indicated that father's highest level of education was more related to the gifted student's dropout behavior than mother's. Finally, results showed that SES was one of the important predictors of dropout. Gifted students who were in the low quartile and medium-low quartile of SES were much more likely to drop out of high school.

Conclusions

Analyzing the nationally representative longitudinal data provided comprehensive information regarding characteristics of gifted students who dropped out of school, their family backgrounds, their problems, and the reasons that they dropped out of school. These results can aid in developing prevention programs. Understanding the characteristics of gifted students who drop out of school enables teachers to identify potential gifted dropouts. Several characteristics specific to gifted students who dropped out of school were found in this study, suggesting some implications. First, the study results confirmed that many gifted students who dropped out of school were from low SES families and racial minority groups, had parents with low levels of education, and participated less in extracurricular activities. Findings from the present study indicated that Hispanics and Native Americans are more likely to drop out of school, while White gifted students were less likely to drop out than other ethnic groups. In addition, the study results clearly indicated that SES and parents' educational levels were significantly related to the gifted students' dropping out of high school. Findings also revealed that many gifted students who dropped out of school had very limited experience with computers and seldom engaged in hobbies. The results also showed that parents whose gifted child dropped out of school were not actively involved in their children's decision to drop out of school.
In this study, gifted students who dropped out of school reported a variety of reasons for dropping out of school. Although gifted male students’ reasons were more related to economic factors and gifted female students’ reasons were more related to personal factors, school-related reasons such as "I did not like school" or "I am failing school" were common between both groups. In addition, study results indicated that gifted students’ educational aspirations were significantly related to dropping out of school. Low educational aspirations were often reported because of personal or school-related problems.

"Gifted dropouts" is a group that has attracted less attention in research than other groups but that should not continue to be ignored. The dropout rate of gifted and talented students from high school constitutes the loss of a national resource that must be addressed.