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The Role of Parenting in Dropping Out of School: Contributions and Limits of Qualitative Research Methods

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Abstract

Dropping out of school has been the theme of much research, speculation and controversy around the supposed factors, which explain it. Interviews of related actors in the field reveal that several convergent and divergent causes are put forward. Based on semi-structured interviews carried out with teachers and employers and on writings about families, different points of view on dropping out were analysed, with a special focus on parenting. In a second phase these results were tested with a quantitative survey done with students in secondary education. We conclude on the contributions and limits of qualitative research methods in the understanding of a phenomena where points of view are multiple and never neutral, but which can however be linked to the strategic positions of the actors in their fields.

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1. Introduction

The role of parenting in dropping out of school gives rise to much speculation and diverse opinions. How often do we hear that if pupils drop out of school, it is because they have not had sufficient parental supervision, parents fighting or divorcing, or because they come from single-parent families? These opinions are not only voiced by laypersons, but also often by experts in the field of education. But are these the real reasons, and how can these questions be resolved by scientific methods and so lead to "evidence-based" conclusions?

2. Qualitative or Quantitative Methods?

The relationship between researchers using qualitative and quantitative methods is often characterized by mutual ignorance. The first invariably produce new "narratives" often closer to novels than to science, and the second create and experiment with dozens of new scales of which the usefulness is not always obvious. However both approaches are indispensable for a science of human phenomena. A rigid separation between both methods is unproductive. For

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example, the use of a psychometric scale cannot ignore what is called content validity, i.e. the meaning of the items, neither the cognitive processes which subjects go through when they are presented with the task to score items (Rosenbaum & Valsiner, 2011). If research is undertaken, hypotheses must be formulated, which is the result of some reasoning. And at the end of the research, some meaning must be given to the quantitative results, which will again require some rationale.

A specificity of qualitative methods is that it is often inductive, which means that theories or hypotheses are generated from gathered information. The most developed method may be the grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), which has largely developed and theorised this point of view. But the blind spot of most of these approaches is that they don't pass onto a second phase, which would be to empirically test these hypotheses and theories (Thomas & James, 2006). The systematic critic of purely inductive methods has been done by Popper (1959) half a century ago and should now be well known.

An example provided by Levitt and Dubner (2005) may illustrate some of the limits of purely qualitative approaches. The importance of sumo in Japan is well known; it is the typical national sport in that country. The importance of the code of honour is also central to their cultural traditions. The question, which was posed, by Levitt and Dubner was whether sumo wrestlers ever cheat during a match? Interviews done with wrestlers would likely result in denial and appeals to the code of honour. However if you were to consult statistics of the matches, an interesting anomaly would appear. The sumo wrestlers are ranked much like cyclists or tennis players. One tournament has 15 matches, and if one wrestler reaches 8 victories, he climbs in the ranking and otherwise he falls. Therefore, the match after the 7th victory is crucial for progression. By examining the statistics of 32000 bouts fought by 281 wrestlers, it was found that the theoretical probability of a 7-7 wrestler to win against an 8-6 wrestler is .49, based on all the past bouts they had fought together. Based on the real 7-7 against 8-6 fights, it was found that the real probability for the 7-7 wrestlers to win was .80, but fell to .40 for the following match between the same adversaries. Statistics show something that qualitative methods could not have shown, namely that under certain conditions, sumo wrestlers do cheat. There are likely agreements of the type "letting me win this time, I will let you win next time".

Confronted with the growing distance between the two research approaches, it has been proposed to use mixed methods (Bergman, 2008). But it is not enough to "mix" the two types of methods, hence a large number of combinations have been proposed (for a review, see Sandelowski, 2000). We want to present our view of mixed methods and illustrate it later on in the paper using a study on the causes of dropping out of secondary education in Luxembourg. First of all, qualitative methods can be used for exploratory studies in domains where there is still little knowledge. For example, if no study on employment search strategies of unemployed people has been carried out, it is possible to do some initial qualitative interviews to get a first overview of the possibilities before organising a large-scale questionnaire-based survey to test these elements more systematically. Furthermore, qualitative research methods would allow results found with quantitative methods to be refined. For example, if a statistical cluster analysis made on the results of a large-scale questionnaire survey would show that there were 5 differing job search strategies, in-depth interviews with a sample of 10 people in each of these clusters would make it possible to gain new insights and hypotheses, which could again be tested more systematically (Sandelowski, 2000).

Through this way of proceeding, social sciences could progress through a fruitful iteration between qualitative and quantitative methods, knowing that finally it would be the task of quantitative methods to decide the case. The role of meta-analyses must be emphasised as a rigorous technique to come to generalizable results, which go beyond local and anecdotic contexts. It also gives a level of certainty, which while imperfect is somewhat reliable (Hunter & Schmidt, 1996). It is also noteworthy to mention that the importance of quantitative approaches is a cornerstone of the scientific character of a field. Compare for example the psychoanalytic approach of parenting (Meyer, 2005) with the one offered by behaviour genetics (Harris, 1998; Rowe, 1994).

3. Results from Interviews on School Dropping Out

We are going to present an illustration of a mixed method in the context of dropping out of secondary education in Luxembourg (MENFP, 2009). The scientific literature distinguishes two broad varieties of dropping out. Internal

dropping out refers to young people who are still at school, generally at the end of compulsory education, but who are not learning anything. They are those found "at the back of the classroom". External dropouts have left school, generally after the end of compulsory education, without any qualification (Millet & Thin, 2005). The literature also shows that the causes of dropping out are multifactorial (Battin-Pearson & Newcomb, 2000). We will concentrate on the role of parenting in dropping out. We first studied it through qualitative interviews with teachers and employers, supplemented with a literature review on families. We then carried out a large-scale quantitative survey through standardised questionnaires with a sample of pupils.

The interviews about the causes of dropping out were done with 18 teachers of technical secondary schools in Luxembourg. If one extracts the answers related to family issues, there are three types of explanations which were regularly put forward: lack of regular home work; insufficient monitoring at home and absence of control by parents; and especially concerning immigrant families, the difficulties with the languages which are taught in Luxembourg (Meyers & Houssemand, 2011). It was also interesting to note that none of the teachers mentioned teaching methods at school or potential competency deficits of teachers.

Interviews were also conducted with 18 employers, who were drawn randomly from a list of businesses who hire people in the framework of a job creation programme called "adult apprenticeships". These are people who are in charge of youngsters who have left school without any certificate. For this reason their point of view on dropping out is interesting to consider. These managers speak little about families; they focus mainly on the inadequacy of the school-based training in preparing these youngsters for work in enterprises. They were also asked about the profile of competencies of these young people and we summarised their answers into four domains.

a) Scholarly competencies are about the knowledge of languages, reading, writing and arithmetic skills. The employers consider that the acquisition of these competencies is somewhat mixed, more or less adequate in languages but insufficient in arithmetic.

b) Professional competencies are those, which are necessary to function on the work place, to do the job. As mainly unqualified professions are concerned here, it is about executing elementary tasks like cleaning, filing or handling cash. The employers consider that these skills are not developed sufficiently, but that they can be learned on the job.

c) Self-regulation competencies are the skills necessary to choose objectives and to persevere in their attainment (endurance, stress resistance, etc.). The employers clearly stated that these competencies were under-developed by these young people.

d) Socio-affective competencies are individual qualities like punctuality, self-presentation skills, honesty, helping behaviour, interpersonal communication skills, respect due for superiors, etc. The employers also stated that these competencies were lacking.

Finally, what are the points of view of the families on dropping out? We did no interviews with family members for reasons of confidentiality. We did however consult reports produced by the Ministry of Education which provided some information. These revealed the phenomena of pupils leaving to pursue their secondary education in neighbouring countries. For the school year of 2007-2008, there were a total of 205 students who left the Luxembourg school system to continue their education in a foreign country (MENFP, 2009). This trend, which has been going on for decades is well known in Luxembourg. One could interpret this school emigration as the symptom of a calling into question of the Luxemburgish school system by parents.

4. Results from the Quantitative Survey

Based on the results of the qualitative interviews, several variables were selected in order to operationalize them with questionnaires. The tool was administered to two different groups of pupils. The first group were probable non-dropping out students (n=585) from the age groups of 2nd, 3rd and 4th grades of secondary technical education. They were our control group. The second sample were the probable dropping out students of the same classes (n=196). For reasons of ethics and confidentiality, we could not register the name of students to see if they would drop out or not. Therefore both groups anonymously selected by the main class teacher (who monitors progression of pupils in all subjects) on the basis of their anticipated school outcomes. Teachers received 4 different packages of anonymous questionnaires, two identical French versions and two identical German versions. Students could choose

their preferred language. This is a similar approach as used by PISA. The only difference between two same-language versions was a small mark on the first page for probable dropouts and a different one for probable school finishers. Students were not aware that two anonymously marked versions were distributed for each language and that a differentiation in two groups took place. No personal data on individual pupils were collected at any moment.

Statistical analyses were performed on the answers of both groups to find probable causes of dropping out. For this presentation, only answers linked to parenting are presented. Based on the preceding interviews, the following questions were asked about the monitoring they received at home (Table 1). Pupils could answer on a 5-point Likert scale going from "I don't agree at all" to "I completely agree". A Chi² test performed on the answers showed that only the first ($p < .01$) and the 4th question ($p < .001$) differentiated the group of the probable dropping out from the non-dropping out students. Questions about the family environment were also asked, but there were no differences between single parent and two-parent households. The socio-economic status of the father was also not significant, contrary to the one of the mother ($p < .05$).

Table 1. Items on Parenting

1. When I come home from school I am alone
2. My parents are interested in my school results
3. My parents control my homework and my classwork
4. My parents participate in the parents' association of my school
5. During the week, my parents force me to come home at a certain time
6. During weekends, my parents force me to come home at a certain time
7. My parents allow me to do what I want during the time outside of school

It can be seen that the points of view of the actors who stress the role of parenting in dropping out are only very partially confirmed by our statistics. It would appear that if parents are interested in the school results, control homework and classwork, force pupils to come home at a certain time, allow them to do what they want during the time outside of school, it has no significant impact on dropping out for most of the students. Factors that play a role are the following: pupils being alone when they come home and parents participating in the parents' association of the school. The fact that being alone at home plays a role is not due to single parenthood, as we tested this factor, which made no difference. And finally it is not the socio-economic status of the father - a factor often put forward in sociology - which made a difference, but the status of the mother. We have no explanation for these results, further research with new hypotheses would be necessary, but they do show that these phenomena are not as simple as is often thought.

5. Viewpoints of Actors and Scientific Viewpoint

Based on results from sociology, especially from organisational studies (Crozier & Friedberg, 1977) and sociology of fields (Bourdieu, 1980), the answers of the actors may be interpreted in relation to their positions as strategic actors in social fields where conflicts and alliances arise depending on circumstances and power relations. Therefore we have schematised the strategic positions of the actors concerned with dropping out, the families, the schools and the enterprises (Table 2). The main activity, which has the authority (which must not be mistaken for the power), the production of subjects through the institution and the main dysfunctions are highlighted. It must be noted that young people have a temporal journey through the three institutions. They have to partly leave the family to enter school, and then they have to leave school when they enter regular work (Houssemand & Meyers, 2012). Even if somewhat schematic, these analyses help to describe the issues at hand.

Table 2. Strategic Games of Actors Concerned With Dropping Out

	Families	Schools	Enterprises
Main Activity	Socialisation, relationships, consumption	Education and training in scholar disciplines	Production of goods and services
Authority	Parents	Teachers	Employers
Produces ...	Youngsters with socialisation	Youngsters with qualifications	Competent workers
Dysfunctions	Bad socialisation	Dropping out	Resignations, dismissals due to lack of integration

From the point of view of teachers, it is easy to understand that they see themselves as educators and trainers in the scholar disciplines for which they are responsible. They will have a tendency to attribute the dysfunctions to the instance which is "up the supply chain", namely the family. The latter is perceived as failing in the socialisation of the children, precisely because traditionally the family is seen as the main socialisation instance. Families will often see the problem in the schools, because it is towards this instance that they delegate the task of training and preparing their children for employment. Finally, enterprises will mainly insist on the inadequacy of school training for the work environment and they will designate both families and schools as being responsible for the lack of socialisation in youngsters, that is to say the deficits in self-regulation and socio-affective competencies.

6. Conclusions

The presented results are useful to think about the respective contribution of qualitative research methods (here interviews with field actors) and quantitative methods (collecting large-scale data with a standardised questionnaire and using a control group). It was shown that the verbal declarations of the actors are points of view which converge and diverge, depending on the place they hold as strategic actors in action systems. It was also shown that these points of view could be in conflict with research results using more accurate methodologies. It is as if the position of an actor close to the field can both sharpen and cloud the vision of the problem at hand. That gives an insight into the contributions and the limits of some qualitative approaches. They are interesting for collecting the points of view of the field actors, generating new hypotheses, but they must also be subsequently submitted to more rigorous scientific tests. The position of the researcher appears therefore as a position of relative exteriority to the field under scrutiny. This is also the double condition which allows the research to help the actors and society: at the same time report and accurately reflect the opinions of the different actors - by this facilitating educational alliances (Gilles, Potvin, & TiècheChirstinat, 2012) - and adopt the position of an exterior witness from which a cumulative knowledge can be constructed.

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