

HIGH SCHOOL DROP-OUTS: CHARACTERISTICS OF THEIR POST SCHOOL LEARNING*

CRESSY A.M. McCATTY

University of Toronto

and

ALBERT E. VIRGIN

Board of Education, Borough of North York

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate the extent and some of the characteristics of learning by high school drop-outs. Subjects were 70 men and 71 women who were resident in the Borough of North York and who had left secondary schools without graduating.

An intensive, highly structured interview was used to collect the data. Findings support the view that drop-outs engage extensively in learning. The majority of the learning was planned by the learner himself; only 11% of the learning projects were carried out in a group setting. Nearly one-quarter of the learning projects were job-related.

Résumé

Dans la présente enquête, nous avons tenté de déterminer l'étendue et les caractéristiques des études entreprises par des adultes ayant autrefois abandonné l'école. Pour ce faire, nous avons considéré le cas de 70 résidents et 71 résidentes de la Municipalité de North York qui ont quitté l'école secondaire sans obtenir de diplôme.

Les données ont été rassemblées à partir d'entrevues intensives et très structurées. Les résultats montrent que les "non-diplômés" du secondaire retournent avidement aux études. Il s'agit le plus souvent d'activités que le sujet a organisées lui-même. Le reste de l'apprentissage, seulement 11%, a lieu en situation de groupe. Près d'un quart des projets étaient reliés à l'emploi des étudiants.

Adult learning is not a recent phenomenon. There is, however, some suggestion that there are certain factors in modern society which might stimulate the extent to which adults undertake deliberate learning efforts. One of the major factors has been the necessity of re-learning job skills. Other factors which may be acting as a stimulus to adult learning are the increased amount of leisure; current emphasis on group effort; and the demands of operating a democratic society.

Johnstone and Rivera (1965) were the first researchers to undertake a national survey to determine the extent of adult learning. They discovered that, in the United States, in one year, just over 20% of adults were actively participating in some educational activity.

Many other researchers (Armstrong, 1971; Blackburn, 1968; Brown, 1964; Coolican, 1973;

Denys, 1973; Ingham, 1964; Johns, 1973; Johnson, 1973; Litchfield, 1965; McCatty, 1975; Tough, 1971) have been concerned with adult learning. Areas of concern for these researchers have included the extent, content, and methods of adult learning, as well as some of the motivational factors related to the learners' participation. The research techniques used by these investigators involved questionnaires and interviews. The early research instruments elicited only that learning which the respondent could recall fairly quickly and easily. Tough (1971) introduced an intensive, probing type of interview which appeared to be remarkably successful in uncovering a large number of learning efforts. In his interviews, Tough (1971) stimulated recall by presenting the interviewee with long lists of subject matter and learning methods. Instead of asking only one general question, he tried several different ways of asking the respondent to recall his various learning projects.

Since Tough's (1971) study, there have been six

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major studies which employed adaptations of his techniques by examining the learning efforts of specific groups of the adult population. The six groups investigated were: mothers (Coolican, 1973); adult high school graduates (Johnson, 1973); pharmacists (Johns, 1973); professional men (McCatty, 1975); African teachers and businessmen (Denys, 1973); and physical education teachers (McCatty, 1976). No study could be found which scrutinized the learning efforts of school drop-outs. Since this segment of the population has demonstrated a disenchantment with formal learning, it is sometimes conjectured that these adults are non-learners. One objective of the present study was to investigate the validity of this bias.

PURPOSE

The learning participation of *high school drop-outs* was the focus of this research. There were several questions regarding this learning participation which this study attempted to answer. They were:

To what extent do high school drop-outs participate in learning?

What is the content of drop-out learning?

What proportion of drop-out learning is motivated by the desire for credit (towards a degree, diploma, or certificate) and what proportion is motivated by considerations other than credit?

How much drop-out participation in learning occurs: (1) in a group, (2) with an individual on a one-to-one basis, (3) with a non-human resource (such as a *programmed instruction* book or a set of tape recordings), (4) when the learner is directing his own learning, and (5) in a mixture of two or more of the previous sources?

METHOD

Population

The population of this study consisted of the drop-outs from the secondary schools of the Borough of North York who had been out of school for a minimum of one year and a maximum of two. The drop-out was defined as any student who had been enrolled in a secondary school and attended at least one class and who subsequently left school for any purpose, other than to transfer to another secondary school, without gaining a graduation diploma.

The Borough of North York is one of the six member municipalities of Metropolitan Toronto. It has an area of 69.5 square miles and a population of approximately 500,000.

North York offers numerous opportunities for educational participation. It possesses Canada's third largest educational system; there are 116 elementary schools, 29 junior high schools and 19 secondary schools. A wide variety of adult educational programmes is offered by the Board

of Education, York University, the YMCA, and 17 community centres.

Sample

The names of all students who had left North York secondary schools in the 1973-74 year were obtained from the master file of drop-outs recorded on the computer of the North York Board of Education. The total number of names obtained was 982. In the total list, there were 569 males and 413 females.

During the summer and fall of 1975, telephone calls were made to each of these former students to check on criteria for inclusion in the study and to ask him if he would be willing to be interviewed. The criteria checked during the telephone conversation were those which had been established in the definition of a drop-out: enrolment in a secondary school; attendance of at least one class; and severance from school without a diploma. Those who did not meet the criteria, or who could not be reached, or who refused to be interviewed, were excluded from the study. The remaining 141 individuals (70 men and 71 women) formed the final sample and were interviewed.

The Learning Project

The learning project was the central phenomenon of this study; it was the unit employed for measuring learning participation. A *learning project* was defined as a series of related episodes occupying a total time of at least seven hours. In each episode, at least one half of the person's total motivation is to gain and retain certain knowledge and skill, or to produce some other lasting change in himself.

The learning project was concerned only with sustained and highly deliberate efforts. The main purpose of these efforts was to learn, i.e., to effect a change in the individual himself. The learner had to clear as to what he wanted to learn.

There was no restriction on the type of change sought by the learner. It might have been the acquisition of new knowledge or skill, a change of personality, or an improvement in physical functioning.

Data Collection

The data used in this study were collected by means of an intensive interview. The model for the interview schedule was McCatty's (1976) schedule, which was employed in 1975 to investigate similar *learning phenomena*. Prior to its use, the interview schedule was rephrased moderately to make the oral form more appropriate for the interviewees in the present study.

A major objective of the schedule was to familiarize the interviewee with the concept of a learning project. Another very important objec-

tive of the schedule was to devise a probing technique, which would elicit as many of the subjects' learning projects as possible.

During the process of the interview, repeated oral probes were made to uncover as many learning projects as possible which the interviewee had conducted in the past 12 months. Two handout sheets were employed for the purpose of stimulating the interviewee's memory. One of these sheets was a list of things that people learn and the other, a comprehensive inventory of possible learning methods.

The subject was asked to estimate the number of hours spent on each learning project in the 12-month period prior to the interview.

The interviewee was asked if any part of his total motivation for undertaking any of the learning projects had been the desire for credit. If more than 50% of the total motivation was the desire to obtain a degree, diploma, or certificate, the learning project was categorized as a credit project.

The remainder of the interview focused on the planner of each learning project. The planner was defined as the person, group, or object which made the day-to-day decisions regarding what and how the subject learned (i.e., what specific activities the learner should undertake, such as reading or memorization, in order to learn). The subject was asked first to identify the planner for each learning project. The subject was then asked to categorize the planner in one of four categories — group, one-to-one, non-human, or self. In *group* learning, the learner was a member of a group of five or more persons (including the instructor). In *one-to-one* learning, there was one learner (or sometimes two or three) and one instructor. In *non-human resource* or *inanimate* learning, an inanimate resource (e.g., a programmed instruction book or set of tape recordings) planned the learning project. In (learner-planned) or (self-planned) learning, the learner assumed the primary responsibility for planning and conducting the learning project. A project was categorized as *mixed* if the responsibility for planning resided in two or more of the four above-defined categories.

FINDINGS

Extent of Participation

Participation of the 141 learners was assessed in terms of both the number of projects engaged in and the number of hours devoted to learning activities during the previous 12-month period.

The number of projects ranged from 2 to 26, with an average of 10 for the total sample. Females had an average of 10 projects and males had an average of 9.

Table 1

Hours of Participation

Number of Hours	Number of Subjects	
	Male	Female
0-999	24	32
1000-1999	15	19
2000-2999	14	11
3000-3999	10	11
4000-4999	4	7
5000-5599*	3	1

*Note change in size of class intervals

Table 1 shows the extent of participation measured in hours.

About 25 per cent of the subjects were found to have participated for fewer than 699 hours. Just as many drop-outs spent 700-1,799 hours as 1,800-3,099 hours in their learning projects. Twenty-five per cent indicated spending between 3,100 and 5,599 hours during the 12-month period on their projects. The average number of hours per interviewee was 1,937; the median was 1,775.

The extensive participation in learning by drop-outs revealed an incidence of involvement commensurable with the findings of researchers regarding other populations — adult high school graduates (Johnson, 1973); pharmacists (Johns, 1973); professional men (McCatty, 1975); and physical education teachers (McCatty, 1976).

Subject Matter

This study adopted Johnstone and Rivera's (1965) subject matter categories. The seven categories will now be discussed.

Hobbies and recreation. The largest segment of subject matter was in the hobbies and recreation category; 34.5% of projects were in this area. The projects in this group, by definition, were carried on in leisure time and had no work connotations. The 480 projects covered a wide range of interests, from sports to social problems.

The most popular leisure time activities that males had learned in the year were mechanics, music, and motorcycling. The most common learning activity for females was woolcraft (macramé, crocheting, needlepoint, etc.). Learning to drive, plant care, and photography also ranked high with females in this category.

Males and females reported about the same percentages of projects in this category — females, 33%, and males 36%.

Vocational. Nearly 1/4 of the learning projects (332) were of a job-related nature. Since most of the subjects had limited formal training or preparation, many had completed or were, at the time of the interview, engaged in on-the-job instruction. Occasionally, such projects were continuous. More frequently, the learning was terminated with the acquisition of a skill (such as the operation of a machine) or a routine task (e.g., billing, shipping, or processing customers' accounts).

Personal development. Of the 1,395 projects, 237 (17%) were in the personal development category. This category was divided into two groups: (1) projects dealing with health, physical fitness, and appearance, and (2) projects aimed towards personality development and interpersonal and social skills.

The interviewees showed most concern within the second group. In fact, 72% of projects in the whole category were directed towards improvement of self-awareness and social skills. In the first group, 10 females and 9 males listed physical fitness as a project.

Home and family life. In the home and family life category, there were 188 projects. These projects included topics pertaining to the establishment, maintenance, and improvement of a home or to the carrying out of household duties and family responsibilities.

Budgeting, money matters, and comparative buying were the major areas of learning in this category; together they accounted for 20 per cent of the projects.

Academic and general education. In the academic and general education category, 85 projects were reported. These were academic subjects normally studied as part of a high school or college education and excluded all job-related subjects.

The projects reported here included languages (Hungarian, French and Spanish), sciences, and philosophy.

Current events. The current events category contained 48 projects. Most of the projects were aimed at a general knowledge of current social, political, or economic affairs. Several interviewees were more specific in their focus (e.g., urban problems, Israeli current affairs, and immigration).

Religion, morals, and ethics. There were fewer projects (a total of 25) in the religion, morals, and ethics category than in any other. Included were projects concerned with traditional religious training, religion applied to everyday life, and all other aspects of religion, morals, or ethics. Several

interviewees were interested in learning about a variety of religions.

Credit Motivation

Of the 1,395 projects, only 177, or 13%, were credit-motivated. Eighty-six of the interviewees reported one or more credit projects. Of these, 58% were females.

Planner

Four distinct types of learning were identified on the basis of the planner of the learning — group, one-to-one, inanimate, and learner-planned. When the planning of a learning project resided with one of these four planning types, the project was assigned to that category. If the planning was conducted by a mixture of planners from two or more of the four categories, the planner was termed mixed.

The interviewees were asked to specify the planner of each project and to assign the planner to one of the four categories. When a project was planned by planning from more than one category, it was assigned to the mixed category. Table 2 shows the result.

Table 2

Number and Per Cent of

Projects in 5 Planner Categories

Planner Category	Projects No.	%
Learner	708	50.7
One-to-one	290	20.7
Mixed	213	15.3
Group	157	11.3
Inanimate	27	2.0
All 5 Categories	1395	100.0

The learner-planned category was by far the most popular method. Taking both credit and non-credit projects into consideration, the learner-planned category contained 51% of the projects. Ninety-two per cent of the females and 89% of the males had projects included in this area.

The second most commonly used category was the one-to-one planner method. Twenty-one per cent of the total projects were planned in this way.

The inanimate category was smallest, with only 2% of the projects listed. This is the only area where there were more credit than non-credit projects.

The widest divergence between males and females was observed in the group category. Forty-five per cent of females had at least one project in this class, while only 37 per cent of the males reported a project that would be listed here.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The data support the major premise in this study regarding the extent of learning by high school drop-outs. The drop-outs who were interviewed had learned extensively. The average number of learning projects over a 12 month period was 10. On the average, each drop-out had spent 1,937 hours in deliberate, sustained learning.

The data also show that the vast majority of the learning was planned by the learner himself; this method of participation exceeded all others combined. Only 11% of the learning projects were carried out in a group setting.

These two findings regarding drop-out learning are analogous to the pattern disclosed in studies with six other adult populations (Coolican, 1973; Denys, 1973; Johns, 1973; Johnson, 1973; McCatty, 1975; McCatty, 1976). In all of these studies, adults were found to have conducted an extensive amount of learning, most of it self-planned. There are implications here for the practice of education. Since the major part of an adult's educational efforts are self-planned, the schools and colleges should place emphasis on teaching the student how to learn rather than what to learn. A major aim of educational institutions should be to produce learners who are competent in directing their own learning. Skills in setting goals, evaluating progress, and locating resources for learning should be an important part of the educational curriculum.

Instead of regarding the drop-out as a non-learner, teachers should recognize that the drop-out will be undertaking a lifetime of learning. A drop-out may be uncomfortable in a group-oriented type of learning situation, and would benefit from ability to initiate and carry out his own learning projects. It is important to provide for students learning experiences which will employ and strengthen the learner's skills in the various aspects of self-planned learning.

The learners in this study engaged in a considerable amount of learning as a leisure activity; 76% of the projects were non-work-oriented. The implications of this finding are particularly important as the economy finds it increasingly difficult to provide employment for all members of society. It should be recognized

that learning projects can provide a self-satisfying leisure pursuit.

This study has shown that adults plan and conduct a great deal of learning for themselves. The person who is aware of this potential for autonomous learning may be more prepared to initiate his own learning and be less deterred by lack of the availability of a teacher.

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