

Psychological, Economic and Academic predictors of the Intention to Leave School Early among a sample of Irish students

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Thus study was funded ...

- / By the Combat Poverty Agency.
- / Flagship Research Award made in June 2008.
- / Supplementary funding provided by UCD's seed-funding programme 'Horizons'

## Putting Early School Leaving in context

- / It both reflects social inequalities as well as reproducing and amplifying them.
- / A decision made at a challenging time in a young person's life can have lifelong consequences.
- / Teenagers - their thinking shows "high horsepower" but "poor steering", (OECD, 2007).

## Presentation Overview

- / The costs of Early School-Leaving the International and Irish Literature
- / Predictors of Early School-Leaving
- / Rationale of this study
- / Questionnaire and Measures
- / Ethics and Survey Protocol
- / Sampling, Sample and Sub-Sample Characteristics
- / Results
- / Key findings and concordance with the literature
- / Concluding Reflections

## Literature Review

- / Early School Leaving (ESL): end of a long process of disengagement
- / 20% Irish students leave school early (DoES, 2008)
- / Profound impact on employment prospects, literacy levels and quality of life (CSO, 2006)
- / Widespread education means less people living below poverty line (Oreopoulos, 2006)

## Personal Consequences

- / Unemployment & lower earnings
- / Visible form of failure (Rumberger, '87)
- / Poor social & interpersonal skills (Pallas, '86)
- / Delinquency (Jimerson et al., 2002)
- / Poor mental & physical health (US Census Bureau)
- / Alcohol & drug misuse (McCaul et al., 1992)
- / Lower self-esteem (Dooley & Prause, 1997)

## Social Consequences

- / Long-term unemployment
- / Greater reliance on social welfare
- / Forgone national income & tax revenue
- / Increased demand on social services
- / Increase in crime
- / Poorer levels of health (Hayes et al., 2002; Levin, 1972)

## Focus on Ireland

- / ESLs highest levels of unemployment (Byrne et al., 2008).
- / Educational disadvantage increases chances of living below the poverty line.
- / Reliance of male early school leavers on construction sector (Byrne, McCoy & Watson, 2008).

## Predictors of Early School Leaving

- / Individual factors
- / Socioeconomic Status
- / Family of Origin
- / School Characteristics

## Individual Factors

- / Gender: Males more likely to leave school early (Byrne et al., 2008).
- / Apprenticeship route
- / Self-discipline (Duckworth & Seligman, 2006)
- / Intelligence & literacy difficulties (Jimerson et al., 2000)
- / School engagement: Behavioural, affective & cognitive components (Fredricks et al., 2004)
- / Truancy, suspensions, expulsion

## Rational Choice Model

- / Rational choice: decisions around school completion centre on the individual's perception of the costs and benefits associated with continued participation
- / Non-cognitive abilities (persistence, willingness to wait; Heckman et al., 2006) E.G. study, long-term goal setting
- / Delay Discounting: extent to which the value of the reward decreases as the delay in obtaining the reward increases

## Socioeconomic Status

- / ESL higher among lower SES groups
- / Lower income: costs associated with educational participation.
  - / Children can feel humiliated, excluded (Boldt & Devine, '98)
  - / Hunger & tiredness are barriers to motivation & concentration (Downes et al., 2006)
- / Attracted to labour market at earlier age, firstly, on a part-time basis (McCoy & Smyth, 2005)

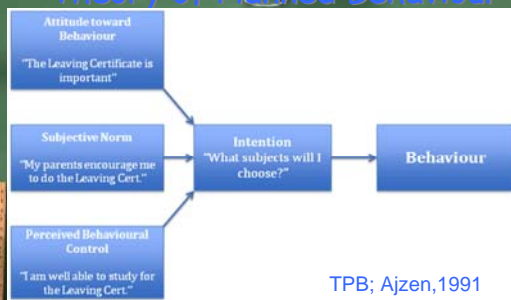
## Family of Origin

- Parents with higher levels of education have greater understanding of the benefits of education. Provide more encouragement and support.
- Early experiences in the family (pre-school) predict dropout many years later
  - Poor parenting
  - Poor family organisation
  - Lack of support and involvement
  - Inadequate supervision (Garnier et al., 1997; Fortin et al., 2006)

## School Characteristics

- Account for 25% variance in dropout rates (Rumberger & Palardy, 2005)
  - Classroom Climate (Pierce, 1994)
  - Pupil-teacher interactions (Christle et al., 2007)
  - Disciplinary procedures (Christle et al., 2007)
  - Subjective norms (Cairns & Cairns, 1994)
  - Class size (Ehrenberg et al., 2001)
  - Quality of school buildings (Christle et al., 2007)
  - Excessive focus on / inconsistent rules (Fortin et al., 2004)
  - Streaming (NCCA, 2007)

## Theory of Planned Behaviour



## TPB applied to ESL

- Davis et al. (2002)
  - Intention to stay in school determined by:
    - Attitude towards staying in school. Depends on beliefs of and value placed on consequences.
    - Perceived expectations of significant people around the individual. Motivation to comply with these expectations.
    - Control beliefs including the ability to overcome obstacles.

## Davis et al., (2002)

- Longitudinal study of 166 African-American students
- Graduation from high school predicted by intentions to complete school and perceived behavioural control
- High school completion predominantly related to beliefs about long-term rather than short-term consequences, e.g., being prepared for college & job training.

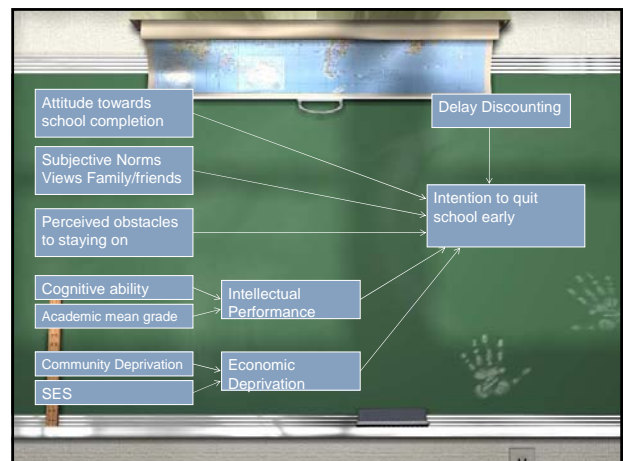
## Rationale for Current Study

- ESL has profound impact on people's lives
- Study examined:
  - The beliefs of secondary school students about the consequences of school completion
  - Perceived views of their family & peers about the usefulness of completing secondary school
  - Control factors such as academic ability and background
  - Identified the proportion of students from disadvantaged schools intending to leave early



## Current Study

- / Main sample of Junior Certificate students. 4% students leave school before the JC but the rate increases to 18.7% after the JC (DoES, 2003).
- / A sub-sample of fifth year students:
  - / Lessens chances of biased findings due to less homogenous sample
  - / Allows for a further comparative element of analysis
  - / Allows for the assessment of the validity of measures.



## Ethical Clearance

- / UCD Human Research Ethics Committee
- / Students under 18 years of age fall into vulnerable category
  - / Parental / Guardian consent essential
  - / Emphasis on voluntary nature, freedom to withdraw & confidentiality
  - / Researchers present to help students
  - / Helpline details included
  - / No way of identifying individual students
  - / Secure data storage

## Surveying Procedure

- / Information & consent packs sent in advance
- / School kept record of returned consents
- / Researchers visited school and administered questionnaires.
- / Verbal instructions delivered and help given to students who were struggling.
- / Students thanked verbally & in writing

## Sampling

The school was the sampling unit. Sampling frame was post-primary schools listed on the Department of Education website. We aimed for 1,042 cases (students) as this is the standard research norm for findings with a 95% confidence level and +/- 3% confidence intervals. With 57,000 Junior Certificate (J.C.) students across 731 schools, there is a mean of 79 students per school. Assuming a response rate of 66.6% per school, 20 schools were required to generate a sample of 1,052.

## But not a simple random sample

- / Of 731 schools listed on Department of Education website, 202 (27.6%) are categorised as 'disadvantaged'.
- / In our sample, 10 of the 20 schools were selected from the disadvantaged list - so roughly half the schools in this study versus roughly a quarter nationally.
- / Why? Because deprivation is (positively) associated with early school-leaving and (negatively) associated with participation in social research.
- / Stratified sampling used to ensure geographical coverage: five schools from central Dublin, seven schools from greater Dublin and Leinster, five schools from Munster, and three schools from Connaught-Ulster.

### School Access: Try, try and try again

- A list of 20 schools drawn up meeting geographical, size and designation criteria.
- A reserve list of 20 'substitutes' also drawn-up.
- 12 (60%) of schools from initial list agreed. Eight either refused on grounds of being 'over-researched already' or else did not reply to repeated telephone calls, email, letter, registered letter. More designated disadvantaged schools refused (6) than non-disadvantaged (2).
- Sub-sample of a fifth year group were drawn from five of the schools, of which three were designated as disadvantaged.

### Sample Characteristics - Size, Deprivation, and Sex

- Actual sample size of J.C. (main) group was 1,131. Response rate was 68.8%. Eleven (55%) of the schools were in most deprived 20% of communities (CSO Ebs).
- Or 39.3% students attended schools that were designated disadvantaged versus 27.6% nationwide. Designated disadvantaged group over-sampled by a weight of 1.4
- Male-female ratio was 3:2 roughly. Why?
- Of 20 schools generated in sample, 11 were co-ed, 5 were boys only, and 4 were girls only.
- Co-eds in Ireland have more boys than girls.
- Boys' schools in this sample were bigger (mean population = 496) than girls' schools (mean population = 357.)

### Sampling continued ...

- Sub-sample - 188 fifth year students included of whom 48.9% attended a designated disadvantaged school. Gender ratio was 65:35 male to female.
- Fifth year mean age was 16 years and one month with a standard deviation of eight months.
- J.C. group had a mean age of fourteen years and seven months with a standard deviation of under seven months.
- Overall the main sample appeared representative of the Junior Certificate population geographically with a deliberate over-sampling of students from disadvantaged schools, and unintentionally, a significantly greater proportion of male students.

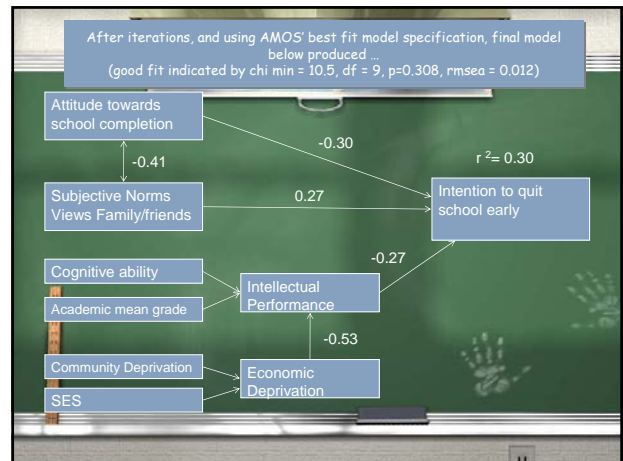
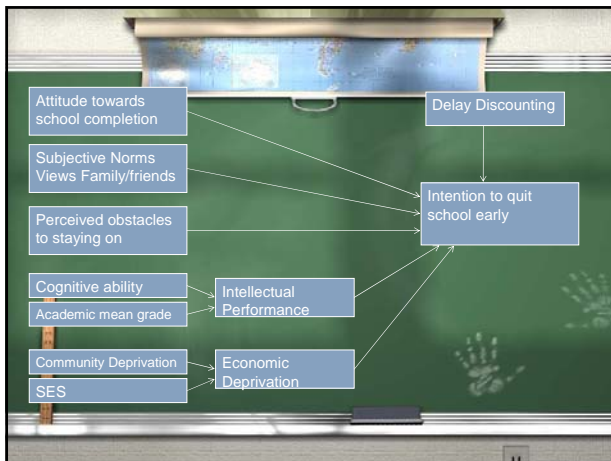
### Results: Intention to Leave Early - Distribution of Scores



### Results: Bivariate relationships with Dependent Variable (Intention to Leave Early, Positive scores indicate greater intention to leave early)

- Correlates:**
- Subjective Norm,  $r = 0.45^{**}$
- Attitude towards Leaving Cert Completion,  $r = -0.35^{**}$
- Academic Mean,  $r = -0.25^{**}$
- Delay Discount,  $r = -0.20^{**}$
- Obstacles (or PBC),  $r = -0.10^{**}$
- Cognitive Ability,  $r = -0.09^{**}$
- SES,  $r = 0.05$
- Gender - females somewhat, though not significantly, less likely than males to intend to leave early

But correlates are difficult to decipher meaningfully and holistically. To think causally, we need a multi-variate analysis (since we can't do true experiments). Here's our initial model ...



A powerful composite predictor was 'Attitude'.  
What does this mean?

Correlations of the fourteen attitude products (Likelihood x Evaluation) with intention to leave school early were examined. The most important were:

- the Leaving Certificate (L.C.) is not a step towards college;
- L.C. completion will not contribute towards a more positive life;
- continuing school is a waste of time;
- L.C. completion will not help in securing me a well-paid job;
- L.C. completion will not give me a sense of success.

'Subjective norms' were also important.

- ✓ This refers to the individual's perceived views of those of family, friends and peers, towards L.C. completion.
- ✓ A factor analysis revealed two distinct forces at work - one was family, relatives and teachers, and the other was peers - classmates, friends and boy/girlfriends.
- ✓ Best predictor of intention to quit was (surprisingly?) the former, not the latter.

**Analysis of fifth year sub-sample (n=188)**

- ✓ As expected, and compared to their own respective school Junior Cert groups, the intention to quit had declined (significantly less in 2 schools, slightly less in 2 schools, and more in one school).
- ✓ Intention to quit still predicted well by 'attitude' and 'intellectual performance'. Deprivation and 'subjective norms' less powerful than for the Junior Cert main sample.

Study findings in a nutshell - what are determinants of intention to stay on?

- ✓ Positive attitudes about the potential of the L.C. to enhance one's life
- ✓ Having parents, relatives and teachers one perceives to be strongly pro-L.C. completion
- ✓ Performing well intellectually is also a contributing factor.
- ✓ Economic deprivation does not exert a direct influence on intention but it strongly shapes intellectual performance.
- ✓ Factors thought to be of great importance in the literature but which proved less significant in this analysis were peer pressure, practical obstacles to continuing in school, and an inability to defer gratification.



## A possible scenario

- / Some young people, disproportionately from more deprived backgrounds find themselves struggling to keep up academically.
- / This produces a sense of disengagement from the school process and a desire to separate themselves from a chronic source of disappointment in their lives.
- / To maintain consistency, they devalue the potential of education and educational qualifications.
- / The figures of authority in their lives like parents and teachers are *perceived* as failing to challenge their negative verdict on education.

Agreement with the literature on school-leaving associated with:

- / 'Attitude'
  - / Intellectual performance
  - / Views of teachers and parents
- And partially on indirect effects of deprivation. (though see Harding, 2003)

## But disagreement with literature on

- / Gender
- / Deprivation (somewhat)
- / 'Peer' pressure
- / Perceived short-term obstacles

## Policy implications - the negatives

- / Data were gathered at culmination of Celtic Tiger growth (late 2008) but still deprivation and inequality playing a powerful role.
- / Probable that perceived views of parents shaping intention to stay or leave school early. May be indication of powerful and intractable generational 'cycle of poverty'.
- / Intellectual performance is important. Always be winners and losers in the classroom. How do we stop the 'losers' from disengaging?

## Policy implications - the positives

- / Most students in a sample disproportionately drawn from deprived communities fully intend to stay on to Leaving Cert
- / Gender gap is narrow, not because many girls want to leave as well, but because few boys do.
- / Parents and teachers exert greater (perceived) force on views about staying in school than do peers. Former group generally want what's best for student in the long-term.
- / While not every student will excel academically, in 'multiple intelligences' model (Gardner, 1983) education system needs to be broad enough to channel many different types of skill and ability.