

0616

Leaving school early - and making it! Evidence from two British Birth Cohorts

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Background

Leaving school early (i.e. at minimum school leaving age) is generally associated with relative poor adult outcomes, as indicated by relative low social status, reduced earnings, and poor mental health. Yet, not all young people leaving school early are failing to make it. Some are able to find continuous employment, are mentally strong, and are socially engaged.

Research Questions

The aim of this study is twofold: First we want to assess the factors and processes associated with early school leaving in a changing socio-historical context; and secondly we aim to identify what are the factors and processes that support a successful transition to adult roles for early school leavers.

Methods

Using path analysis and regression models we compare the experiences of two British Birth cohorts born in 1958 and 1970 respectively, comprising nationally representative samples of 9123 individuals born in 1958 and 6060 born in 1970 who left school at age 16 (62% of the total sample born in 1958 versus 54% of the sample born in 1970). The study examines the antecedents and trajectories of young people leaving school early, and identifies factors associated with a successful transition.

Frame

While the majority of young people born in 1958 left school at age 16 to enter the labour market, increasing numbers of young people born in 1970 are participating in further and higher education, reflecting changing norms and transition strategies. In an increasingly competitive labour market, academic credentials are becoming a passport to a good job and a successful career. The study adopts a developmental-contextual framework to assess the role of multiple interacting influences shaping transition experiences of young people in a changing socio-historical context

Research findings

The major reason for leaving school early is to gain financial independence and to earn a wage. Early school leaving is more likely among males and those young people whose families are experiencing socio-economic adversities. The study furthermore suggests different types of students leaving school early, i.e. those who leave school early although they like school and enjoy learning, and those who are disengaged and consider school a waste of time. There are differential experiences for men and women, with women facing a greater risk of financial dependence on social welfare compared to men. On the other side, women who leave school early are more likely to vote than men with a similar transition. In both cohorts, and particularly in the later born cohort those young people who left school early and who succeeded in finding continuous employment and who voted in the last election, were more likely to have higher cognitive abilities and showed higher school motivation than those who failed to make it.

The study highlight the importance of building up cognitive capacities and a love for learning in early life, as these capacities have long term beneficial effects and promote social engagement, even for those who are leaving school early. The findings furthermore suggests that a critical view of early school leaving is called for, taking into account different needs and preferences of young people

making the step into adult roles. Not all early school leaving is associated with negative consequences, and policies should focus more on the needs of young people who want to get into work sooner, providing opportunities for life-long learning and training on the job.