

AGE OF SCHOOLING IN CP1, SOCIOECONOMIC LEVEL AND RISK OF DROPPING OUT OF SCHOOL AMONG 4TH GRADE STUDENTS IN IVORY COAST

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SUMMARY

The aim of this study is to examine the relationship between the age of enrolment in the first-year preparatory course (CP1), the socioeconomic level and the risk of dropping out of school among 4th grade students in Ivory Coast. To this end, a sample of 96 students from the 4th grade class is constituted. This sample was subjected to an identification questionnaire and filled in the Evaluation Kit for Potential Dropouts (Janosz M., Archambault I., Lacroix M. & Lévesque J., 2007). These students also took part in a semi-structured interview. The results obtained at the end of the statistical processing and the analysis of thematic content show that the risk of dropping out is greater among pupils who start CP1 early than among those who start this class at the officially indicated age. However, this age effect is modulated by the socioeconomic background of the students. These results raise questions about the need to enrol children prematurely in primary school, especially in disadvantaged areas. Thus, the present study suggests that the age of enrolment should be taken into account in the prevention of the risk of dropping out of school. It also provides guidance on the intervention programs to be recommended in situations of risk of school dropout.

Keywords: School age, Risk, Early school leaving, Students

1. INTRODUCTION

Early school dropout, formerly known as school dropout, is now referred to as early school leaving. It is generally defined as interrupting one's schooling, without having obtained the diploma that certifies the cycle or without having completed the training (Biyouda S., Zahid A. & Zineb O. T., 2021; Bruno F., Félix C., & Saujat F., 2017). This phenomenon is understood in different ways, giving rise to several theoretical points of view. Some authors perceive school dropout as a one-time event, an act that occurs spontaneously (Bernard P.-Y., 2013). This author conceives of school dropout in terms of behaviour that appears independently of the student, at a specific moment in his or her life or school career. This phenomenon is perceived as an objective reality. From this perspective, school dropout is likely to be objectively evaluated and constitutes a social fact.

In contrast to a one-off event, school dropout is conceived as a process, i.e. the result of a transformation that takes place over a long period of time, particularly throughout the school career due to interactions between many factors (Yao K. C., 2023). In this paradigm, early school leaving is studied by taking into account the perceptions, attitudes and behaviours of pupils, especially

bearing in mind the differentiated aspect of the school trajectory. Dropout students can be identified by observing factors such as unexplained changes in behaviour, a self-effacing attitude, poor results that are difficult to explain, lack of integration and socialization in the classroom, refusal to seek help, lack or loss of personal investment, and when risky behaviors, deviant and delinquent, for example, appear (Remmas R. Z., & Cherif H., 2018). As a result, the onset of the stall occurs slowly, gradually and insidiously (Bernard P.-Y. 2021). In order to better analyze and understand its origins and manifestations, particular attention should be paid to the educational trajectory of each student in difficulty, as they find their fullest meaning in a temporal perspective (Alexander, K., Entwisle, D. & Horsey, C., 1997). For these researchers, the first warning signs can be seen as early as primary school.

With regard to this level of education, a great deal of research has focused on the characteristics of new learners. They have shown that health, physical development, social and emotional development, language acquisition, literacy and cognitive skills are necessary for school adaptation (Raver, C., 2002; Zill, N., & Resnick, G., 2005). The social and emotional development of children has also been identified by these authors as an important aspect for the easy achievement of learning in primary school. Ladd (2009), on the other hand, proposes that the elementary school curriculum be opened up to attractive tasks that promote children's adaptation.

In the same vein, Biyouda S., Zahid A. and Zineb O. T. (2021) find that sociodemographic determinants should be considered as risk factors for dropping out of school among Moroccan middle school students. Dhuey E., Figlio D., Karbownik K. and Roth J. (2019), for their part, highlight a positive correlation between the age of entry into school and the cognitive development of children aged 6 to 18 in the state of Florida. In the same perspective, Sakic M., Burusic J. and Babarovic T. (2013) highlight the relationship between school entry age and academic achievement during primary education among Croatian children. Urruticoechea A., Oliveri A., Vernazza E., Giménez-Dasí M., Martínez-Arias R. and Martín-Babarro J. (2021) index a large number of variables that affect school career, and in particular the influence of age on children's cognitive development.

The literature reviewed suggests that school age may influence the process of dropping out of school. Indeed, research on children's school age has mostly focused on cognitive development and academic performance (Ibiye O.-D., 2022; Kouabena N. J.-C., 2020; Nalova E. M., & Etomes S. T., 2019; Sibanda T., 2023). By examining children's ability to adapt to their early school experiences, other researchers have highlighted the consequences of this on cognitive and social development, and in turn on long-term academic performance (Allechi Y. M., 2019; N'douba B. F., 2014).

It is therefore important to note that many studies have attempted to highlight elements that could increase the risk of dropping out of school. These studies have highlighted relationships between academic achievement, performance and engagement and age-related characteristics, in this case the age of entry into primary school (N'chot A. J., 2022; N'dri K. A., 2020; Oussou A. Y. T. & Kramo Y. V., 2024). However, the explanation for the high risk (21.25%) of dropping out of school noted by the Ivorian Directorate of Scholarships and Guidance in 2023 among 4th grade students in secondary education does not seem to have been understood from this angle. Indeed, at this school level, the discrepancy between the academic requirements in terms of skills and the overall level of development of children who attend school early is likely to generate cognitive, emotional and behavioural disinvestment. In addition, many studies show a strong correlation between socioeconomic level and academic performance (Danhi A., Koffi M. V. & Youan Bi B. J., 2023; Gaudonville T., 2017; Hassane T., Mamadou O. & Goza N. A. 2023; Sib S. L. W., Yapi C. D. E. M.

& Agnissoni K.S., 2021; Touré Y. E., 2019). Given that the sustainability or otherwise of schooling depends on these performances, one could assume a link between socioeconomic level and the risk of dropping out of school.

In short, it appears that while at the theoretical level it is possible to admit relationships between the age at which compulsory schooling began, the socioeconomic level and the risk of dropping out of school in the 4th grade, the joint examination of these variables does not seem to have been carried out empirically, particularly in the Ivorian context. This leads us to formulate the following questions. Is there really a relationship between the age of entry to CP1 and the risk of dropping out of school among 4th grade students? If this relationship exists, is it not modulated by the socioeconomic level of these students?

The answer to these questions leads us to formulate three hypotheses. The first postulates that children enrolled in CP1 at 4 years have a higher risk of dropping out in the 4th grade than their classmates who attend school at 6 years. The second shows that children with a low socioeconomic level have a higher risk of dropping out of the 4th grade than their school-going peers with a high socioeconomic level. The third stipulates that child with a low socioeconomic level, and enrolled at 4 years in CP1, have a higher risk of dropping out in 4th grade than their counterparts of the same age with a high socioeconomic level.

2. METHODOLOGY

The part devoted to methodology specifies the approach that made it possible to verify the hypotheses formulated.

2-1. Variables under study

The present study has three variables, two of which are independent variables, consisting of the age of entry into CP1 and the socioeconomic level, and the dependent variable represented by the risk of dropping out of school.

2-1-1. Risk of dropping out of school

By analysing the trajectory of the dropout, we have been able to identify the one who presents a risk compared to the one who has dropped out. The student who dropped out is the one who broke off all contact with the educational institution. On the other hand, the student who is at risk of dropping out is the one who continues his or her schooling with a profile that has a high probability of dropping out of school. This category of students is of interest to us in this study because we can still take action to reorient their trajectory. The risk of dropping out of school is assessed in this study using the Potential Dropout Assessment Kit developed by Janosz M., Archambault I., Lacroix M. & Lévesque J. (2007).

2-1-2. Age of enrolment in CP1

Age is defined as the time elapsed between the birth of a living being, of a thing and the current date (Heslon, 2021). It is usually expressed in whole number of years. Thus, the age of enrolment in CP1 is the time that elapses between birth and the first day of schooling at this level of study in terms of years.

The education system is composed of four major cycles of education in Ivory Coast. There is nursery education, primary education, secondary education and higher education. Since nursery education is optional, compulsory education begins with primary education and in particular with the CP1 class. And according to the regulatory provisions in force in Ivory Coast, the age of entry

to CP1 is set at a minimum of 6 years old. However, for various reasons, children are enrolled earlier, in this case at the age of 5 or even 4 years in the primary cycle. In order to compare contrasting groups of students, the age of enrolment in CP1 includes two modalities: 4 years old and 6 years old. This variable is determined using an identification questionnaire, including sociodemographic and economic information, that we designed.

Students enrolled in CP1 at 4 years old are enrolled early because they have not yet reached the age required to be there. As a result, they would not have the level of cognitive development necessary to carry out the tasks of the concrete operative stage as defined by Piaget (1964), which is not the case for their 6-year-old elders. In the same vein, these students could later be confronted with a mismatch between their abilities and the very high demands in the 4th grade, which could increase their risk of dropping out of school compared to their 6-year-old peers.

2-1-2. Socioeconomic level

Socioeconomic level refers to all the financial and material resources of a family (Claes N., 2022), which enable it to meet the food, health, housing, education and leisure needs of its members. According to this author, the socioeconomic level is apprehended by the monthly income of the parents, their socio-professional category, the number of people in their household, the location and the type of their housing. The socioeconomic level generally has three modalities. These are the high, medium and low socioeconomic levels. However, for the same reasons mentioned above, in particular the formation of contrasting groups, we opt for the comparison of students from low and high socioeconomic levels.

In the present study, a student belongs to the high socio-economic level when his or her father and/or mother is a public or private administration executive, has a monthly income greater than or equal to 500000 CFA francs, lives in a high-standing house, and has no more than five dependent children in the household. On the other hand, a child belongs to the low socioeconomic level when his or her parents are enforcement agents, have a monthly income of less than 100,000 CFA francs, are housed in common courtyards or precarious housing and have many dependents. These indicators of socioeconomic level are determined using the identification questionnaire mentioned above.

Unlike the environment of the low socioeconomic level, that of the high socioeconomic level is rich in amplifiers of physical, cognitive and social development (quantity and quality of food, didactic tools, family library, television, educational games, good relational environment, etc.). This could increase their lifelong commitment to school activities, and decrease their risk of dropping out of school, compared to their peers of low socioeconomic status.

2-2. Participants

The study population is made up of students from the modern high school of Cocody. The choice of this school is motivated by the fact that there are students of both socioeconomic levels considered. This public school located in an upscale district of Abidjan also receives students from disadvantaged backgrounds who are assigned by the State at the end of the examination for the Certificate of Primary and Elementary Studies or the Brevet of the first cycle of second-degree Studies. In order to form homogeneous groups, we applied selection criteria to the population of 4th grade students of this School, estimated at 437 individuals. This is mainly aimed at controlling for other likely sources of variation in the risk of early school leaving. These include school curriculum, physical and mental health, gender and type of family (single-parent or two-parent). Thus, the students taken into account in the sample are equally distributed according to gender, all

have a regular curriculum (without repeating a year), are all from two-parent families, live with their biological parents and all have no physical or mental ailments.

In short, the use of the purposive sampling, in this case-oriented sorting, consisting of the gradual and systematic elimination of students who do not meet the inclusion criteria, allowed us to arrive at a sample of 96 4th grade students from the modern high school of Cocody. This selection was made using the identification questionnaire. Submitted to the Evaluation Kit for Potential Dropouts and a semi-structured interview, the results of these students are as follows.

3. RESULTS

The analysis of the quantitative data was performed in the SPSS 21 software using Student's t for the simple hypotheses and the Levene test for the interactive hypothesis. As for the qualitative data, they were processed using the thematic content analysis of the participants' discourse. In order to be more expressive, the results obtained are presented in the form of figures according to the hypotheses formulated.

3.1 - Age of entry to CP1 and school dropout of pupils in the 4th grade

Figure 1 summarizes the results obtained in the comparison of the risk of dropping out of students enrolled at 4 and 6 years.

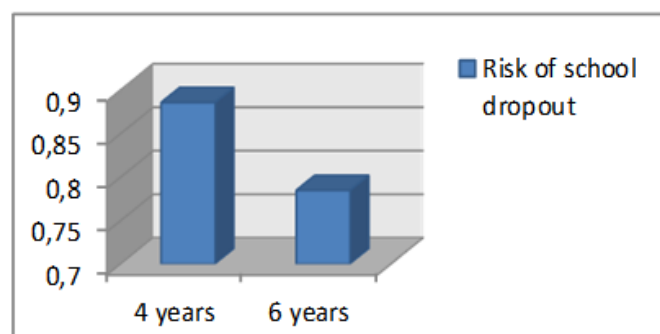


Figure 1: Risk of dropping out of school in 4th grade according to age of entry into CP1

Figure 1 shows that the histogram relating to the risk of dropping out in 4th grade for pupils enrolled in CP1 at 4 years is greater than that of their peers enrolled in 4th grade at 6 years. Statistical processing of the data using Student's t shows a significant difference between the groups compared ($t = 0.889 > p = .05$). Consequently, hypothesis 1, postulating that children enrolled in school at 4 years in CP1 have a higher risk of dropping out in 4th grade than their classmates enrolled in school at 6 years, is confirmed. This can also be seen in the answers provided by the students to the interview guide. What about the relationship between the socioeconomic level and the school dropout rate of students in the 4th grade?

3-2 - Socioeconomic level and school dropout of pupils in 4th grade

Figure 2 presents the data collected from students with a low or high socioeconomic level regarding their risk of dropping out of school in 4th grade.

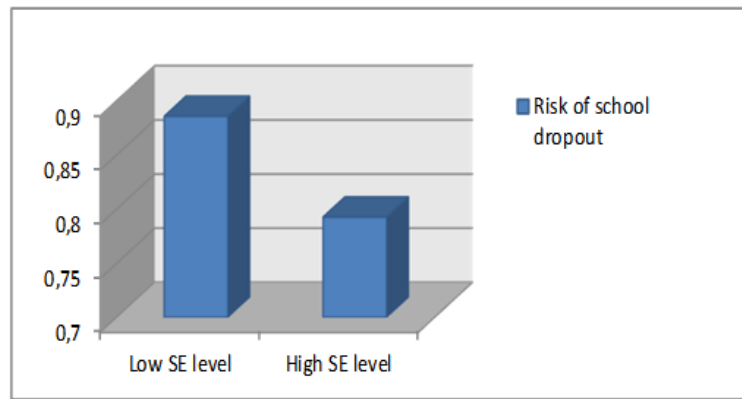


Figure 2: Risk of dropping out of school in 4th grade according to socioeconomic level

Figure 2 shows that the risk of dropping out of school is not the same in the two groups in comparison. Indeed, the histogram relating to the risk of dropping out of school for students with a low socioeconomic level is larger than that of their counterparts with a high socioeconomic level. Statistical analysis using Student's t indicates a significant difference between students at the two socioeconomic levels examined ($t = 0.889 > p = .05$). Hypothesis 2 is therefore confirmed. This result is corroborated by the comments collected from the participants during the interview. Are the results the same for early schoolchildren with low and high socioeconomic levels?

3-3 - Age of entry to CP1, socioeconomic level and school dropout in 4th grade

The average risk rates of dropping out of school for students of different socioeconomic levels enrolled at 4 years in CP1 are confined to Figure 3.

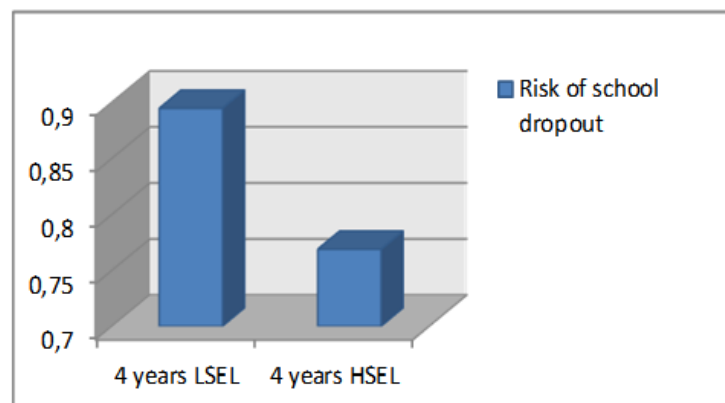


Figure 3: Risk of dropping out of school in 4th grade by age of entry to CP1 and socioeconomic level

Figure 1 highlights the superiority of pupils enrolled in CP1 at 4 years of age with a low socioeconomic level (LSEL) over those with a high socioeconomic level (HSEL) in terms of the risk of dropping out of school. It appears from this figure that the histogram relating to the risk of dropping out of pupils enrolled at 4 years of age in CP1 with a low socioeconomic level is greater than that of their counterparts from privileged backgrounds. Statistical analysis of the data relating to these categories of pupils shows that the difference observed between them is significant. Indeed, the p-value of the interaction effect of the age of entry to CP1 and the socioeconomic level on the risk of dropping out of school in the 4th grade is equal to 0.434. This p-value is significantly higher than the alpha significance threshold of 0.05. This indicates that the difference observed between the groups in comparison is significant. As a result, hypothesis 3 is confirmed.

What psychological significance can be given to these results and how do they compare to those of previous work?

4. DISCUSSION

It is important to remember that we hypothesized that students who differ in terms of age at the start of compulsory education and socio-economic level have different degrees of risk of dropping out of school. Under the seal of the results we have reached, we are able to maintain that this hypothesis is confirmed. Indeed, from these results, it appears that the risk of school dropout among these students varies according to the age at which they started CP1 and their socioeconomic level. These results also show that socioeconomic level modulates the effect of the age of entry into CP1 on the risk of dropping out of school among 4th grade students. More specifically, among students enrolled early in CP1, the differences are accentuated by the opportunities offered by the environment in which they live. These results require an explanation based on psychopedagogical theories.

The influence of the age of schooling in CP1 on school dropout could find explanations in neo-Piagetian theories such as that of Case (1986). In the same way as Piaget's (1964) theoretical conceptions, from which he was inspired, Case (op.cit.) also admits that the child's capacities are gradually refined according to the different stages of development. Thus, a child who attends CP1 at 4 years does not benefit from the knowledge provided in the same way as another who attends school at 6 years, because they do not have the same level of development. According to Case, 4-year-olds are at the relational stage, while 6-year-olds are at the dimensional stage.

4-year-olds and 6-year-olds would therefore be at different levels of structuring their thinking. This would be due to their differentiated maturity. Therefore, if they were taught the same way, it is very likely that the structure that 6-year-olds benefit from would be greater than that of 4-year-olds.

In these circumstances, the variability observed between 4-year-olds and 6-year-olds could be explained by the fact that during their schooling, the selection of strategies is not mediated by the same mechanisms. For example, 6-year-olds could use specific coding techniques for coding tasks data they are confronted with, cognitive and metacognitive skills, and executive control structures that 4-year-olds have not yet acquired or mastered. In addition, some processes can only be implemented if the nerve structures underlying them have matured. It is important to note that age is a decisive factor in this regard. As a result, during school tasks performance, 6-year-olds may resort to cognitive processes that the degree of myelination of the nerve cells of their 4-year-old counterparts does not allow.

Thus, children enrolled in school at 4 years could be deficient and lag behind those aged 6 years throughout their school career, up to the 4th grade where the academic requirements become more complex. It is probably the accumulation of difficulties and frustrations that mean that at this school level, children enrolled at 4 years in CP1 are more likely to drop out of school than their peers starting their schooling at 6 years.

These observations are supported by the analysis of the respondents' discourse. Thus, for example, D who was in CP1 at 4 years thinks that: "it's not easy for me to immediately understand a new lesson, because of that I want to stop doing hairdressing". Another student, who went to school at an early age, exasperated by difficulties of all kinds, retorted in these terms: "I can succeed in life without school. When I see football players who haven't gone to school, I want to stop school to go to a training center."

This result is in agreement with those of studies highlighting the influence of school age on cognitive, affective and conative development (Çelikkol Ö., 2023; Dhuey E., Figlio D., Karbownik K. & Roth J., 2019, Urruticoechea A. et al., 2021).

The second result shows that children with a low socioeconomic level have a higher risk of dropping out of school than their counterparts from privileged backgrounds. This result can be compared to those of Meuret D. and Morlex S. (2006), Maintier C., & Alaphilippe D. (2009) and Claes N. (2022) who believe that the environment in which children live influences their academic performance and their desire to continue their studies. Because the environment is marked by diversity, children from different socioeconomic backgrounds have different experiences. In reality, children with a high socioeconomic status live in an environment where they have role models of success, which motivates them more to have high career aspirations that require long education. In addition, they have at their disposal didactic material for their school and extracurricular activities. This contributes enormously to increasing their academic commitment and their desire to continue their studies. On the other hand, students with a low socioeconomic level live in deprivation both relationally and materially. This is the cause of many deficiencies that increase over time. When they reach the 4th grade, these students are confronted with the academic demands that become higher and the behavioral turbulence linked to the period of adolescence. This cocktail is at the origin of a lack of interest, or even an intention to drop out academically. This can be seen in the comments collected from these students. For example, Y argues that: "I want to stop so that I can support myself, school is delaying me for the projects I have in mind". Another student from a disadvantaged background argues that: "School is a waste of time, I want to stop to better focus on 'bara' (cybercrime). That's what my friends do to support themselves and their parents."

As for the third result, which shows that children with a low socioeconomic level, and enrolled at 4 years in CP1, have a higher risk of dropping out in 4th grade than their counterparts of the same age with a high socioeconomic level, could be explained by the interaction effect. In fact, the risk of dropping out of school in 4th grade is exacerbated by the combined effect of age and socioeconomic level. The words of H, a precociously educated student from a disadvantaged background, illustrates this well: "Since primary school, I have not liked school days and I let my parents know this. But they insist that I continue something that tires me out and that is of no use to me."

In sum, the results of the present study show simple and interactive effects of age and socioeconomic level on the risk of dropping out of school among 4th grade students. Therefore, it can be argued that in order to motivate students and boost their academic commitment, or even their academic performance, it is important to take into account their age of schooling and their background. Thus, parents with a low socioeconomic level who wish to enrol their child at an earlier age must bear in mind that it is necessary for the child to benefit from specific and regular support.

Despite the convergences between the results we have obtained and those of previous work, there are some nuances. The conclusions according to which age of enrolment in CP11 must be respected at the risk of leading to failure, or even school dropout, are put into perspective by our observations. Indeed, given the great plasticity of the human brain, the contribution of cognitive enhancers considerably influences the developmental trajectory. This could explain the fact that among children who enrol early in school, those with a high socioeconomic level are less likely to drop out of school than their peers with a low socioeconomic level. These cognitive enhancers, for some, do not need large financial resources. It only takes creativity and ingenuity to design them.

Moreover, the discrepancies observed between our results and those of certain studies seem to relate mainly to methodological aspects. These include sample size and composition, collection tools and data collection procedures. The participants in the present study are not representative of the population of 4th grade students living in Ivory Coast, because they only come from a school located in a single commune in the district of Abidjan, which has ten (10) communes. In addition, the study did not take into account children with an average socioeconomic level. Consequently, it would be inappropriate to generalize the results of this study to all students in Abidjan in the 4th grade, or even to Ivory Coast. However, controlling for other likely sources of variation in the risk of early school leaving using purposive sampling, and in particular directed sorting, allows the observed differences to be attributed solely to the age and socioeconomic level of the students. From the above, it appears that the present study has left some grey areas that require clarification and deepening through subsequent studies.

5. CONCLUSION

The education received in the family is reinforced by specialized institutions, schools in particular. This intervention may take place earlier than the regulations allow for certain children depending on their socioeconomic origin. However, studies oriented from a developmental perspective have highlighted differentiated abilities in the acquisition of knowledge and cognitive efficiency according to age. In addition, studies have shown inter-individual differences in intellectual, emotional and social skills according to physical and human characteristics and the structure of the environment in which children live. Also, we predicted a differentiated risk of dropping out of school among 4th grade students according to their age of schooling in CP1 and their socioeconomic origin.

The main results indicate that age of enrolment in CP1 does influence the risk of dropping out of school on the one hand, and that the extent of this phenomenon varies according to students' socioeconomic level on the other hand. These observed differences in the risk of dropping out of school according to socioeconomic level are attributable, it seems to us, to the amplifiers of cognitive development, to educational practices, and to parental ethnotheories, thus confirming the idea of constructed development of cognitive, affective and conative abilities as perceived by neo-Piagetians such as Case. Drawing inspiration from the latter, we understand that the school starting age, which generates diverse school experiences depending on the socioeconomic level, can be understood as a risk factor for school dropout.

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