

Early leaving at university level: An explanatory model

Oscar Manuel Narváez Trejo

Facultad de Idiomas Universidad Veracruzana

Early leaving at University Level: an Explanatory Model

Abstract

Based on a qualitative study that aimed at finding out students' perceptions of school practices, the research unveiled some aspects of classroom practices that might influence students in their decision to leave their studies before completion. This article outlines an exploratory model that aims to explain the phenomenon of early leaving at university level.

Introduction

Early leaving, or dropping out, is, together with educational delay and the low number of students who graduate, one of the most frequent and complex problems that Mexican universities face nowadays. Nonetheless, dropping out is an international concern and a very common phenomenon at all levels of education (be it compulsory education, higher or further education) as evidenced by papers published in a wide range of journals from different disciplines. Most studies on the issue have taken place mainly in the USA (Tinto 1975), the United Kingdom (Martinez and Munday, 1998; Hodgkinson and Bloomer, 2001) and Australia (Smyth and Hattam, 2001). In Mexico, there seems to be no published evidence of a study on this problem from a qualitative stance; the few published papers on this topic in Mexico are quantitative in nature (Chain et al, 2001) or reports from educational authorities (SEP 1996). This paper outlines the main approaches employed in a qualitative study of dropping out in order to frame an emerging exploratory model.

Early leaving in Mexico: review of studies

Although the problem of early leaving affects all spheres of education, it is surprising to see the scant number of published articles related to the issue. From a review on the scarce literature available on the Mexican context, the following have been recognised as factors that influence early leaving:

- ✓ A lack of interest in the degree, time dedicated to studies, study methods, study and work at the same time, low high-school average and lack of training among teachers (Carrillo-Flores, 1993).
- ✓ Low academic levels with which students arrive at university, the marital status of students and the need to split time between studying and working (SEP 1996).
- ✓ Income, type of housing, family composition, parents' occupations, parents' educational level, value of education, linguistic patterns, study and leisure habits, access to cultural goods [books, magazines, games], (Chain, 2001).

In short, these studies consider dropping out as a consequence of multiple factors, including previous academic background, personal characteristics (mainly socio-economic ones) and deficient vocational orientation. Perez-Franco (2001:9) recognises, though, that "it is not possible to explain the

phenomenon by only one of these dimensions". Moreover, these studies have been carried out primarily from a qualitative perspective, with survey-like instruments, using statistical correlations and variable control. The work of Tinto (1975) seemed to have greatly influenced research done on this issue in Mexico. In fact, Tinto's work is quoted as setting standards in the study of such phenomenon. I shall return to Tinto's model of dropping out below, when discussing international research.

In order to explore this issue more deeply within the Mexican context, I will take the liberty of analysing and commenting on the most comprehensive (and perhaps only published) study on early leaving in Mexico. In this study (Chain et al, 2001) several specialists were invited to contribute to the analysis and discussion of the most problematic phenomena of HEIs in Mexico: dropping out, educational delay, and terminal efficiency. Although intimately related issues, I will limit myself to the discussion of dropping out.

In the introduction to their book, Chain et al(2001) express several concerns. Their prime concern has to do with the passive role adopted by HEIs in terms of researching the phenomenon. That is to say, HEIs recognise the existence of the problem but take no (academic) action to respond to it. The second concern relates to the difficulty in providing accurate data on the phenomenon due to the different ways in which the term is used and also because of the inconsistencies in statistical information from the Higher Education Institutes, ANUIES (National Association of Higher Education Institutions) and the SEP (Mexican Ministry of Education). The authors have taken action regarding this problem, proposing a set of definitions as an effort to unify criteria. It will be the responsibility of HEIs to provide educational authorities with reliable data, taking into consideration the proposed set of definitions. Lastly, but perhaps most importantly, there is a worrisome lack of systematic studies on the issue or a lack of dissemination of the results. Chain et al (*ibid*) highlight that there have not been sufficient studies on the issue or that the results of such studies (had there been any) are not within reach of researchers and educators. Concisely, early leaving is part of the political and educational discourse but not a part of the academic agenda.

Nevertheless, not only is this the responsibility of educational researchers, but educational authorities are also to blame for this lack of information. They seem to have failed both in the promotion of such studies but also in the disclosure of information for educational researchers with the aim of supporting this kind of research. The writers of the report agree that there is not sufficient and/or reliable information on the issue to back up decisions aimed at tackling the problem (Chain et al, 2001). In the introduction, they call attention to an analysis on HE policies carried out by the SEP (1996) in which the lack of studies on attrition in HEIs is indicated. Such studies could throw light on the real rates of attrition and actual causes of this phenomenon, they argue. It is evident from the report that there is a serious lack of systematic qualitative analysis of the phenomenon that could help educators change such simplistic assumptions into more 'grounded', realistic descriptions of the phenomenon. I see no point in making studies into early leaving to compare universities or even schools within a university, as the authors suggest. They would only serve as indicators for the distribution of funds, or to encourage schools deliver 'disguised' reports on the issues. What is necessary is the creation of a culture of investigation that takes students into the spotlight, a student-centred research orientation that allows making educational policies more pragmatic, more student-friendly, and more humanistic.

Chain et al (2001) reflect on how socio-economic factors may influence students in their decision to stop or continue studying. These are presented in two chapters devoted to the problem of dropping out and academic delay. Chain et al's contribution provides an excellent account on how socio-economic factors may influence academic delay and dropping out. Perez-Franco (2001) calls HEIs' authorities attention towards the role they should adopt and their responsibilities to improve retention rates. Perez-Franco writes:

It is important that the results of research go beyond academic or specialised sociology and become part of the practical and comprehensive

knowledge of social and political life, from the own actors' perspective: students and their families, and educational policy designers (2001:3-4, my translation).

Although Perez-Franco makes it clear from the start why socio-economic factors are an important precursor of dropping out, she recognises that schools cannot do much in order to overcome this; schools cannot change the social status of their students. Yet, she proposes using the available information to 'know how students really are' so as to adopt better educational approaches that result in higher retention rates. So far, institutions operate on the commonsensical idea of how students 'should be' instead of making all efforts at hand to 'know them as they are' and accept them as such. Perez-Franco states,

... the students who have arrived at this level are not a wrong choice; they are the best possible choice. ... Considering this, it is possible that educational institutions need changing, which may imply a deep understanding of the conditions with which their students arrive at university (2001:8, my translation).

Despite this description of the problem, it seems that what Perez-Franco proposes to do in order to understand the phenomenon falls short. Although there may be some counterarguments, it is very difficult to 'predict' whether a student will leave just on the grounds of their socio-economic characteristics. Such characteristics might help in identifying possible future academic deficits and/or problems but there are many other factors affecting students' academic trajectory, which is something Chain *et al* recognise when they state that the phenomenon is multi-faceted. If socio-economic factors were so significant, how could it be explained that amongst students who share similar educational background and economic circumstances there are students who finish their degrees brilliantly, while others drop out.

Romo and Fresan's (2001) contribution to how curricular and administrative factors may influence early leaving seems very appealing as they take into consideration aspects which are usually ignored by researchers and educational authorities. However, the approach they use appears to be limiting as they only take into consideration the previous educational experience of the students, how they blend into the university life (an aspect explored by Tinto, 1975), evaluation procedures, social service, and the 'graduation' (*titulación*) process. Although the authors discuss how these bureaucratic procedures may hinder students from completing their studies, trying to explain early leaving on these grounds appears to leave issues unanswered, given the recognised idea that early leaving is more complex than usually considered.

Chain (2001) proposes the analysis of information for diagnosis and prediction purposes; that is to say, what it means to know the students, how to systematize and organize available information and how to analyse data. According to him, analysis of the data obtained from the entrance examination (average grade in High school, grade in the entrance exam, and socio-economic information) could be used to predict who may find university studies more challenging or who may leave before completion. After a thorough description of the process he and his associates have designed for the implementation of such an approach, in the conclusions Chain *et al.* admit that too many factors intervene in the learning process to depend reliably on such predictors (Chain, 2001: 66).

It seems that the explanations so far discussed are rather naïve, considering the multifaceted phenomenon under study. The perceptions of the problem offered in the Mexican literature seem very narrow; the research approaches followed might not be the most appropriate ones to research attrition. If any attempt to solve this problem is to be successful, it will require a multi-theoretical approach not only to understand the phenomenon, but also to develop institutional programmes to reduce rates of student departure

The study

This paper is the result of an investigation on students' perceptions of school practices, undertaken at a Mexican university English department. The participants were all members of a BA degree in English and in their early twenties.

The table below presents an approximation of the dates, phases and research participants used in the generation of research data.

Date	Phase	Who	How
August 04 → December 04	Finding the voices	Scheme members, freshers, footballers and former students	involvement with student community successive informal conversations,
September 04 → March 05	Capturing the voices	Conversational partners & diarists	35 recorded purposeful conversations, diaries, incalculable hours of involvement,
January 05 → March 05	Examining the voices	Xochitl, Rubi, Juana, Maria, Ramon, Dizzy	15 targeted conversations, 4 diaries, countless hours of involvement

My involvement with student community lasted for as long as the research took place. The focus of the conversations evolved to find out more about the emerging issues; also noticeable is that the number of participants as well as the number of conversations reduced towards the end of the fieldwork. Even though I tried to represent my research in table form, it is hard to present a chronological description of the research because many of the strategies for data generation were closely interwoven. For instance, I cannot clearly mark boundaries between my involvement with student circles and the conversations since they occurred all at once; they were feeding on each other, and this extended throughout the 8 months of the fieldwork.

In keeping with the conventions of the ethnographic tradition, I employed the strategy of 'making the familiar anthropologically strange' (Holliday, 2002: 93). I was wary of preconceived ideas deriving from my previous experience as a teacher at the research site, so I avoided imposing predefined categories on the data. Instead, I sought to leave my vision open to the discovery of the unknown and the unexpected. Having decided to solely investigate and present students' experience and perceptions made me see things from a different perspective. This approach 'forced' me out of my 'world' to inhabit one I had experienced but had forgotten existed.

Unlike conventional research, VR is difficult to define in terms of steps and results. That is, given the approach that VR uses, in which several things happen simultaneously, it is difficult to 'pack' into easily identifiable 'stages'. During fieldwork, I was juggling with the different methods employed. Because of its intrinsic nature, the only method of data collection that had a clear beginning and end was the writing of diaries. However, looking retrospectively, I can now identify that there was a phased sequence to this research, which went as shown in the following table.

Phase 1 'finding the voices'	Phase 2 'capturing the voices'	Phase 3 'examining the voices'
open ended conversations	conversations with a purpose	targeted discussions to follow up the gaps
getting at the issues	sharper focus of questions	seeking clarification

providing reassurance	seeking the details	sounding out hunches
building mutual respect, gaining students' trust	establishing non-authoritarian relationship,	close relationship with participants,
maximum interaction with students' circles	involvement with smaller number of students	more personal interaction with selected participants

My starting point was to engage a group of young people in telling me about their academic lives—and not to pre-judge them. By conversing extensively with students I was able to perceive that there were other issues more relevant to them than the issue from which my research originated. In order to establish authentic communication patterns with these students, I adopted a 'casual conversation' style. In order to gain students' trust, most conversations took place in informal settings: hallways, school square, school cafeteria, and/or nearby cafes. I was cautious enough to provide a genuine space within which students could talk about their issues and concerns, their dreams, aspirations and struggles. In order to accomplish this, I based the initial conversations with informants on 'orienting' questions (Smyth and Hattam 2001: 409), such as the following:

- Tell me what was going on in your life when you decided to stop studying English.
- Tell me what you think of this school.
- Tell me what it is like to be a learner of English here at this school.

Answers to these orienting questions provided many ideas of what students considered important. Nevertheless, at this early stage of the research, I was able to identify broad areas of interests and organise students' answers accordingly. For instance, most of their voiced insights had to do with the way the school is perceived as an institution, their own role within the educational organization and teachers' influence on their attitude to learning. Thus, out of the initial conversations I had three broad categories of data: Institutional Constraints, Students Matter and Teachers Matter.

In the second phase, I maintained purposeful conversations about the emerging issues with a smaller number of students, mainly those who showed interest in providing their insights and who were eloquent enough to do so. In this phase, I sought details by sharpening the focus of the questions. Although the conversations became more focused, it was vital to keep them informal, in order to explore the problem in depth. Although I was at times tempted to invite informants to my office, I thought that changing the setting could influence students' behaviour; I maintained the initial forms of interaction in their usual spaces. At this stage, I was in a position to ask more specific questions based on the issues mentioned by the informants. For example, when narrating their experiences at school, students usually referred to the teachers and the type of relationships they established. This issue was further explored by asking them more directly:

- How are teacher-student relationships carried out in the classroom?
- How do you feel about it?
- Have you ever felt uneasy with a teacher?

Answers to this question took the form of what I termed 'Uncaring attitude' to describe how teachers appeared neither to care about their teaching nor about establishing positive relations; some students explained how some teachers tend to establish distant relationships with them. This was later confirmed by other participants, adding that some ways of interacting with them were even harsh.

The third phase was used to check back; I used this phase to follow up gaps, seek clarification, and sound out hunches; in this sense, I had more 'targeted' discussions. This was the phase in which I had more contact with the selected students. By this time, I asked specific questions on the issues from the previous conversations that needed clarification. I had several other conversations with each informant until I covered all the angles of the issue under study. For instance, I asked,

- You mentioned that teachers set a barrier between them and students. Can you tell me about a specific time in which this happened? How did you feel?
- Last time we met, you mentioned that a teacher put down a student, can you describe what happened? How did you react? How did your classmate react?

Answers to this type of questions served to enrich the emerging themes and to illustrate the issues.

The role of the people involved in this research evolved from 'students' in the initial phase, to conversational partners in phase 2, to research participants in the last months of the fieldwork. The voiced research approach developed from open-ended conversations to conversations with a purpose to targeted discussions used to re-examine the main issues. My involvement and relationship with students grew from gaining students' trust and building mutual respect to the establishment of non-authoritarian relationships, and to the creation of a close relationship with few participants. Overall, the number of researchees was greatly reduced according to the phase of the study. During the initial phase, I had contact with many students and learned many of their concerns through the daily interaction within their circles. The number of students became smaller as the research progressed to the establishment of personal interaction with the selected participants. Diary writers were invited to participate during the second phase, once there was enough confidence among us.

Methods of data generation employed

In order to address the issue in depth, it was necessary to employ a multi-method approach. Thus, the research design resulted in three sources and several interconnected stages of data generation over the period of the study. The methods of data generation evolved as the field research progressed; these included:

- Involvement and Participation. My involvement with and participation in the student circles enabled me to perceive students' behaviour to school; this became rich 'experiential data'.
- Purposeful Conversations. Successive conversations with students and dropouts provided invaluable oral accounts of their perceptions of school practices.
- Diary analysis. Diarists provided a different type of account of school life, a version more intimately linked to events within the classroom. Analysis of diary entries helped me sharpen the focus of subsequent conversations.
- In-depth conversations. These were more targeted discussions of the issues brought up (or perceived) at initial stages. I used this type of conversations to seek for details, to follow up the gaps, to clarify issues and to sound out hunches.

Although in the original research design I intended to use classroom observation as a method to obtain data, I deliberately omitted this as the research progressed because of several reasons:

- Data generated with methods in use was consistent and rich enough to draw interpretations and generate theory;
- There were many interesting issues emerging in student voices obtained;
- Diaries provided an unobtrusive way of obtaining students' interpretations of classroom practices;
- The presence of 'an observer' might have influenced (and possibly altered) both teachers and students' behaviour.

Thus, the data informing this study took the form of and was limited to the following:

- experiential data¹;

- oral accounts of students' school experiences;
- written accounts of classroom practices.

What follows is a detailed description of the strategies employed to generate data.

Experiential data

Experiential data (Strauss, 1987:10) was generated from my involvement with students during the time I indwelt their circles. I spent innumerable hours involved with students, joining casual conversations with them during breaks in the class schedule or after-school gatherings. I was always open to them, sharing my own history as a student at Façade School. This sharing that I brought to the interactions with students created opportunities for successive casual conversations and revealing purposeful conversations. As they could identify me as a person with a similar background as themselves, many students turned to me as a source of information about how to navigate their way through the degree. All encounters fostered a sense of friendship between the author and the students, which allowed for the development of personalized relationships with some of them.

Conversations and informal interviews

Research of this kind requires the research site to be approached from a perspective in which both language and behaviour could be captured. One of the simplest ways to achieve this is by consulting the people involved. Drever puts it succinctly: "In the teaching profession, when you want to get information, canvass opinion or exchange ideas, the natural thing to do is to talk to people" (Drever, 2003:1).

One of the most prominent methods of data collection in the ethnographic tradition is that of 'interview'. This technique was used in this study to infer perceptions from students' statements and intentions. The ethnographic 'interview' has been recognised as the most direct method of gaining knowledge on and about the research setting (Gillham 2000, Kvale 1996, Drever 2003). Interviews have been classified into formal or informal, requested or unrequested, considering the length and type of contact made, context, types of questions and so on. Qualitative research literature has also tended to differentiate between different kinds of interview strategy such as structured, semi-structured and unstructured interviews (Hammersly and Atkinson, 1995, Roberts 2002, Gillham 2000) which indicate the level of control the interviewer takes over the content and direction of the interviews.

However, a more extended variety of 'interviews' takes place in fieldwork than researchers often recognize. In my experience, I could not keep track of all the verbal encounters I had with the student community. The closest classification in which I can locate the exchanges I had with them is Burgess' (1998) definition of 'conversations with a purpose'.

The study comprised fifty (50) recorded conversations. Most of them took place on a one to one basis but there were also some other conversations with groups of students (4-6) or in pairs. These were conducted in Spanish, as I wanted students to be able to express their ideas without risking getting short of language, as may have occurred had they been in English. My main objective in these encounters was to find out about issues that could not be directly perceived in their behaviour. I also used the exchanges for crosschecking 'facts' and for checking hypotheses that I had formulated in the course of previous conversations, my involvement with their social circles and from reading diary entries.

Students seemed to have lots of free time and being in their spaces allowed me to take advantage of that, initiating conversations with them or participating on their own. I tried to talk informally with as many participants as I could; these were opportunistic exchanges that mostly arose at the students' private places: in hallways during recess, at the school cafeteria in 'sandwich hours', while they were waiting for a teacher or, simply, when they decided to skip a lesson.

As I wanted to maintain the flexibility of informal conversations, I did not plan the exact sequence of questions, nor did I prepare the exact wording of them. I just followed the flow of the conversation and inserted them when I considered it suitable. Sometimes the conversation flowed in such a direction that it was not possible for me to ask the questions which I had intended to ask. Other times the conversation would flow in unexpected, but equally educational, directions.

In accordance with the conventions of Voiced Research, I used a non-directive style. I gave priority to what the participants wanted to say. I made every effort not to dominate the interaction so that researchees could talk about issues that they considered of interest or significance. I was concerned with listening to and learning from them. When I was able to talk to a person in private and at length, I had more opportunity to insert questions into the conversation, thus steering the interaction towards my research interests. Nevertheless, even then, I tried to phrase questions in an open-ended manner, so that the informants could pursue their own areas of interest and express themselves in their very own way.

As the research progressed, some of the initial questions became redundant and new questions emerged. For example, the phrase 'Tell me about a time in which you wanted to stop studying' was used in the initial stages of the research but became redundant after some time as several students' answers pointed towards what was happening in their classrooms. That is, there were indications, even from early conversations, that there was a feeling of dissatisfaction with certain institutional and classroom practices. For instance, students mentioned that what they were learning was not enough, as bluntly put by Dizzy:

And well, regarding school there are many things I am not very happy with. I think that in a year and a half, there has been no great progress. I think learning is taking place very slowly, too disperse, and sometimes students are 'pampered' by teachers. I don't know, I believe it is deficient.

Doing the transcriptions and early analysis while still in the field helped me sharpen the purpose of my questioning in later encounters. These interwoven activities proved very important in pursuing the issues in more detail as it made me frequently review and update the questions so that even when I was not preparing for a conversation, the questions were always fresh in my mind.

In the later phase of the fieldwork, I tended to use more 'targeted' conversations, by which I mean I prepared a set of themes around which I wanted the participants to talk, and some possible questions within each theme. For instance, following Dizzy's views, I began asking questions like these:

- How do you feel about X subject?
- Tell me about your level of English.
- Are you happy with what you have learnt this semester?

By this time, the theme of the teacher's influence began to emerge as significant so I asked informants to describe what a teacher they had liked did or did not do to make him/her 'special'.

- Tell me about your favourite teachers. What do they do? What's so special about them?

One interesting issue in the data was that students often said they did not have enough opportunities to talk to someone about their learning; when they are provided with these opportunities, they find the experience helpful. They like to discuss their problems and progress in private on a one-to-one basis with somebody they feel confident with. Students like talking to teachers who show real concern for them, not only as students but also as individuals. I found in all informants a desire to speak, a need to be listened to. I was able to witness that when someone cares to listen, students open up and speak out their concerns, struggles, aspirations and dreams, their voice flows easily.

Students' diaries

The way the research progressed made me aware of the potentials of using a research tool that could provide more insightful information. Although not a method intimately linked to VR, I decided to ask some students to keep a diary as a way of accessing what was happening within the classroom without obstructing the regular flow of classroom dynamics. In other words, I wanted to access the classroom without possibly affecting either the teacher's or the students' behaviour.

In social research, sociologists have taken seriously the idea of using personal documents to construct pictures of social reality from the actor's perspective. Diaries are used as research instruments to collect detailed information about behaviour, events and other aspects of an individual's daily lives. Diaries present certain advantages over other data generation methods. Self-completion diaries (Corti, 1993) can provide a trustworthy alternative to the traditional interview for events that are difficult to recall accurately or that are easily forgotten. They can also help to surmount the problems associated with collecting sensitive information by personal interview when not sufficient trust and rapport has been established. Ethnographers Pole and Morrison (p. 58) recognise the value of using diaries in ethnographic research:

"Diary provides access to particular, parochial and time bound data. ... often provide a level of personal detail not available through other methods. ... it may also offer a degree of reflexivity on the part of those responsible for writing the diary."

In the field of Applied Linguistics and English Language Teaching (ELT), diaries have been widely used as a pedagogic device aimed at encouraging authentic language practice and in initiating learning autonomy by increasing students' reflection on their learning. Nunan (1992: 118) considers diaries, logs, and journals as 'important introspective tools in language research'. Furthermore, diaries can be used to supplement interview data to provide a rich source of information on researchees' behaviour and experiences on a daily basis. Other researchers have highlighted the value of keeping diaries in language learning environments (for example Nunan, 1992; Bailey 1980; Schumann, 1980; Howell-Richardson and Parkinson, 1988; Carroll, 1994; Halbach 2000). Using diaries may bring an added benefit to diarists, that of becoming more critical thinkers (Moon, 1999) and more aware of their learning (Nunan, 1992).

In this study, diary keeping constituted first-person descriptions of learning experiences. The diaries provided a window through which I could access their classroom without possibly affecting its natural environment and thus provoking the so-called 'observer's paradox' (Labov, 1972). Diaries written for research purposes will usually focus on particular activities or occurrences involving guidance by the researcher as opposed to those written for personal reasons. In this case, I asked diarists to record their views, opinions and feelings about classroom practices. As it turned out, later discussion of the diary entries with informants proved an invaluable source of first-hand information.

This collection of diaries became central to my research. I acquired these written artefacts in an opportunistic manner: taking advantage of the excellent rapport established with key participants who, literally, opened the possibility of contacting other informants. Once the contact had been made, I simply asked if they could keep a diary of their lessons, describing what they did and how they felt doing it. Later on, noticing that they considered their lessons quite disappointing I asked them to describe their lesson activities in as much detail as possible and how they felt when in class. Although this could have been too demanding for them, the participants did it very well, providing not only descriptions of the activities carried out in all their subjects but also describing how they felt doing them and grading them according to how useful they were.

I usually requested the diaries whenever there was a vacation period so I could have a look at the sort of things about which they were writing. I did not provide them with any feedback; I just gave the diaries back to them on the first day after the break. Something interesting to note here is the students' low

levels of confidence in what they did as they kept asking me whether what they were writing was what I expected or if it was OK.

One of the risks of having people writing diaries is that of loss of interest or lack of time to write, as well as attrition (people who stop writing because of the reasons above). As in the case of application of questionnaires, there is a risk of not getting each and every one of them back. Out of the seven people asked to write a diary only four gave them back.

Explanatory models to students leaving school

It is assumed in this paper that when young people start their studies, they do so because they have all intentions of obtaining a BA degree. However, something happens along the way that makes a lot of students leave their studies before completion.

Throughout my academic life, I have witnessed many instances of how students change attitude towards the degree in terms of commitment. In informal chats with my fellow teachers, we have called this phenomenon of attitudinal change '*growing negative*' ('*se malean*'). During the first semesters, students are eager to learn and excited about their new learning situation: they have reached university, which can be considered quite an accomplishment. However, after some time they start '*growing negative*'. This idea of growing negative is closely related to similar phenomena in education such as disengagement and disaffection. The similarity resides in that it tries to explain a concern of students being eased out of school. Who initiates this vicious circle is difficult to determine with a study of this type, but there is no doubt that such phenomenon exists and is affecting teaching and learning.

Some students will vacillate in their commitment to their studies and will probably consider giving up for reasons that are entirely to do with their perceptions of events, with how they think and feel about their experience of university. Early leavers may be no less academically able than their peers, equally up to date with their work, attending well, but for some reason that is not currently understood, they feel they cannot continue. This is evidence of some sort of failure in adjustment to university; in some way, students may not feel supported and secure, or do not have the necessary motivation to continue.

It is argued in this chapter that in educational contexts such as the one discussed here, students' affective experiences of the teachers and school might have a crucial influence on retention since early leaving decisions depend entirely on the students. Mention must be made that, so far, neither sanctions are applied to schools that present high rates of student abandonment nor an agenda to solve the problem has been established. At higher education level, early leaving is just another figure in the statistical reports. Thus, little is done to prevent this from happening; school abandonment is part of the educational discourse but not an actual component of the authorities' agenda. Consequently, little work has been done on the causes leading students to abandon their studies, let alone the connection between affectivity and dropping out of higher education level in Mexico.

Non-conflict scenarios

The *ideal* scenario

In an ideal educational situation, both affective and effective aspects complement each other. That is, careful consideration is given to aspects that aim at catering for the affective well-being of students as to aspects that have to do with effective teaching methods that promote learning. This links back to the idea of how students expect teachers to be not only professionals who promote learning but also people who care for their students. If there is a harmonious relationship between both aspects, a favourable learning environment is created: students learn and teachers are satisfied with their job. This is an ideal scenario, the ideal situation of any school. This is the façade presented in university discourse.

Scenario 1: Trapped within

If, by whatever reason, an educational institution lacks either the affective or the effective aspect, certain conflicts may result. That is, favouring the effective over the affective may result in placing too much emphasis on the cognitive aspect of learning at the expense of the affective. This might result in students learning but feeling unhappy or, in the worst case, feeling unhappy and not learning. If, on the contrary, the school focuses too heavily on the affective but fails to keep teaching to an effective standard, students might be equally unhappy as their academic expectations are not met. In the best possible scenario given this circumstance of one aspect being missing, students may conform to the given learning conditions. Conforming students may have strong motivations to carry on their studies despite the poor effective or affective learning conditions. These students are the ones that usually finish their studies by obtaining passing grades; some of them with exceptional grades while others with the minimum required. Some of them might have learnt a lot whereas others just enough to obtain their degree. Under these circumstances, there are no evident conflicts. However, some drawbacks such as the scarce number of students who finish and the poor level of preparation with which they finish, a fact that some teachers have anecdotally signalled at Façade School, are evident.

Scenario 2: Two ways out

In the real situations where teachers and students meet, things may be not so agreeable. Needless to say that ignoring what the students expect, want, and aim to learn affects the way institutions (and teachers) approach delivery of services and teaching. If the university has in mind a certain type of student while the actual cohort is actually quite dissimilar, then there is a conflict of interests or a clash of expectations. Judging by the increasing number of people who do not finish their degree, it might be concluded that something in the educational provision of Mexican public universities is not working properly.

A reading of the data in the study may indicate that the situation depicted very much resembles a scenario where both affective and effective aspects appear to be mostly absent. This is the hidden or ignored reality of the university. If students' expectations are not met or if students fail to comply with existing conditions, there are two possible negative results, for students.

The academic way out

Because of the scenario described above, students' first reactions might be of disappointment, and they may start to lose interest in attending lessons. This might lead to a frustrating feeling of disillusion towards the degree and their studies. As they advance in their studies and as students realise that things might not change for the good, this disillusionment might lead to disengaging them from educational practices. The phenomenon of growing negative, as discussed above, seems to be a manifestation of a counter culture to express their disappointment and disengagement with their learning conditions. Disengagement may give way to disaffection, a term that has been recently used to provide explanation to several of the behavioural problems in education. Students seem not to be aware of the fact that the only ones really affected by this laid-back approach to learning are themselves. The result of poor teaching and a poor approach to learning cannot be other than poor quality learning or non-learning (Illeris, 2002). Consequently, students may fail one or several subjects per semester, passing them in last chance exams but carrying with them an incomplete baggage of knowledge or skills or competencies. This may suffice to pass examinations in the basic levels; however, in the end, knowledge is not enough to finish the degree successfully. Many students are victims of this, as evidenced by the high number of people who fail and have to repeat semester, yet the institution has failed to address the problem.

The academic way out is usually explained by school authorities (including teachers) as students' inability to cope with the demands of the programme. That is, students are said to fail because they are incapable of keeping up with the workload that studying a BA involves, implying that the fault resides entirely with the students. This route to leaving school appears to be a scenario very much taken for granted, one of educational losses and gains. It appears as if the university, being immersed in managerial procedures, is not concerned about making all their students finish whatever level they are studying. It appears as if teachers have been accustomed to students failing because they could not reach a minimum level of knowledge; we consider it part of the process of educating: some people are competent; some are simply not. We hardly ever question whether it was entirely the student's fault or if the school is failing to complete its prime function of broadening students' chances to succeed. Let us now explore the dropping out way in more detail as many aspects are closely related and, in a way, this answers the original research question.

The dropping out way

This evolves in a similar way as the academic way out; however, while in the academic way out students linger until their grades are not enough to pass, the dropping out way may occur very early in the process. Immersed in a downward spiral, schools and teachers gradually contribute to increasing disaffection in students. Once on the limit, any incident perceived as damaging to their well-being may trigger students' decision to abandon their studies. Evidently, several aspects contribute to the formation of each of the phases and each phase in turn builds up to the next one; once in the disaffection phase, a 'critical incident' might occur which may make students decide to leave, as expressed by Maria, who preferred to leave school rather than facing her teacher. It is obvious to state that not all the people who drop out go through this process of deterioration: there may be as many causes as there are students. Nevertheless, there seems to be enough evidence in this study to consider this as one of the reasons why students leave.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have provided an overview of the literature on early leaving in the Mexican setting. It can be concluded that the study of early leaving has evolved both in terms of research approach and in ways of naming the issue. More recent studies tend to use qualitative approaches in order to provide an *emic* perspective of the phenomenon. These approaches have expanded our understanding of early leaving with the increasing recognition that factors influencing the decision operate at institutional and societal levels and not only at an individual one. It should be pointed out that results from a myriad of studies now recognise the effects of educational institutions on students' decision to leave. Consequently, researchers have changed the way they refer to the phenomenon of leaving school before completion, providing 'neutral' terms such as early leaving and student withdrawal.

In line with my view that there has been insufficient attention given to students' voices on the phenomenon of dropping out, I have emphasised the importance of listening to student voices. I am in no position to deny the importance of external factors, but believe, like McGivney (1996), that it is important to investigate the personal meanings of the phenomenon, as voiced by students.

References

- Bailey, K. 1980. An introspective analysis of an individual's language learning experience. In R.C. Scarcella and S.D. Krashen (Eds.), *Research in Second Language Acquisition: Selected Papers of the Los Angeles Second Language Research Forum*. Rowley: Newbury House.
- Burgess, R. 1998. Conversations with a Purpose: the ethnographic interview in educational research. *Studies in Qualitative Methodology*, 1, 137-155.
- Carrillo Flores, I. (1993), "El abandono escolar en educación superior; ¿una decisión racional o un efecto multifactorial involuntario?", en *Eficiencia Terminal y Calidad Académica en las IES*, Universidad de Guadalajara, México.
- Carroll, M. 1994. Journal writing as a learning and research tool in the adult classroom. *TESOL Journal*, 4, 19-22.
- Chaín-Revuelta, R., M. Fresán, et. al. 2001. *Deserción, Rezago y eficiencia terminal en las IES*. Mexico, DF: ANUIES
- Corti, L. 1993. Using diaries in social research. *Social Research Update*, 2 (<http://www.soc.surrey.ac.uk/sru/SRU2.html>)
- Drever, E. 2003. *Using semi-structured interviews in small-scale research: A teacher's guide*. Birmingham: University of Birmingham Press.
- Gillham, B. 2000. *Case Study Research Methods*. London: Continuum
- Halbach, A. 2000. Finding out about students' learning strategies by looking at their diaries: a case study. *System*, 28, 95-96.
- Hammersley, M. and P. Atkinson. 1995. *Ethnography: Principles in practice*. London: Routledge.
- Hodkinson, P. and Bloomer, M. 2001. Dropping out of further education: complex causes and simplistic policy assumptions. *Research Papers in Education*, 16(2), 117-140.
- Holliday, A. 2002. *Doing and Writing Qualitative Research*. London: SAGE.
- Howell-Richardson, C. and B. Parkinson. 1988. Learning diaries: Possibilities and pitfalls in P. Granwell (Ed.), *Applied Linguistics in Society*. London: CILT/BAAL.
- Kvale, S. 1996. *Inter Views: an introduction to qualitative research interviewing*. London: SAGE.
- Labov, W. 1972. *Sociolinguistic Patterns*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Martinez, P. and F. Munday. 1998. 9000 Voices: student persistence and drop-out in further education. FEDA Report.
- Moon, J. 1999. 15 October. Reflect on the inner I. *Times higher educational supplement*, 34-35.
- Nunan, D. (Ed.). 1992. *Collaborative language learning and teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Perez-Franco, L. 2001. Los factores socioeconómicos que inciden en el rezago y la deserción escolar. In Chaín et al. (Eds.), *Deserción, Rezago y Eficiencia Terminal en las IES*. México, DF: ANUIES.
- Pole, C. and M. Morrison. 2003. *Ethnography for Education*. Berkshire: Open University Press.
- Roberts, B. 2002. *Biographical Research*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Romo-Lopez, A. and M. Fresan-Orozco. 2001. Los factores curriculares y académicos relacionados con el abandono y el rezago. In Chaín et al. (Eds.), *Deserción, Rezago y Eficiencia Terminal en las IES*. México, DF: ANUIES.
- Schumann, F. 1980. Diary of a language learner: A further analysis. In R.C. Scarcella and S.D. Krashen (Eds.), *Research in Second Language Acquisition: Selected Papers of the Los Angeles Second Language Research Forum*. Rowley: Newbury House.
- Smyth, J. and R. Hattam. 2001. 'Voiced' Research as a Sociology for Understanding 'Dropping Out of School'. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 22(3), 333-356.
- Strauss, A. 1987. *Qualitative analysis for social scientists*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Tinto, V. 1975. Dropout from higher education: a theoretical synthesis of recent research. *Review of Educational Research*, 45(1), 89-125.

