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UNDERSTANDING DROPOUTS IN THAI PRIVATE VOCATIONAL SCHOOLS: A CASE STUDY

SITTIPORN PRAWATRUNGRUANG

PREVIEW

A Dissertation Submitted in
Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Department of Educational Administration and Foundations

ILLINOIS STATE UNIVERSITY

2002

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UNDESTANDING DROPOUTS IN THAI PRIVATE VOCATIONAL SCHOOLS: A CASE STUDY

Sittiporn Prawatrungruang

211 Pages August 2002

The purpose of this study was to examine the factors, processes, and perceptions associated with students dropping out from a private vocational school in Thailand in their first year of a certificate program. The study also examined the reasons for dropping out of school from the perspectives of the dropouts, their parents, teachers, and school staff.

The vocational school selected for this study represented the national average of students who drop out from vocational school in Thailand. Six dropouts, five parents of dropouts, and four school teachers and staff participated in this study. Data were gathered using in-depth interviews with the dropouts, parents of the dropouts, teachers, and staff members. School documents related to the dropouts were also used for this study. The data were analyzed using the computer package NVivo, which was used for coding and developing categories and themes from the interview transcripts.

The study found that vocational schools had the highest dropout rate among all categories of schools in Thailand. Factors contributing to school dropouts were categorized into four groups: family background, student characteristics, within school factors, and outside school factors. Students who lived in single-parent or restructured

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families and who had a history of repeating grades were much more likely to drop out of school. Peer influence was a significant factor leading to misbehaviors and dropping out of school among vocational students. The study also found that substance abuse and disciplinary problems were among the critical problems causing students to drop out of school in the recent years.

Parents of the dropouts perceived their children's reasons for dropping out of school were similar to what their children reported. Similarly, teachers and staff members also concurred with the reasons that students gave for dropping out of school. The study found that dropouts did not receive enough supervision in their study from their parents. Based on the findings that dropping out of school is a fundamental problem in Thai schools and society, it was recommended that steps should be taken to resolve this problem so that positive changes envisioned in the Thai Educational Reform of 1999 can become a reality.

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Finally, I am sincerely grateful to my parents, brothers, and sisters who always supported my education and provided encouragement throughout this study. I dedicate this study to the memory of my father, Sengngon Seikho Prawatrungruang, who inspired me to pursue knowledge.

S. P.

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CHAPTER I

BACKGROUND

Dropping out of school is a significant problem for education in Thailand, as it is in many other countries. The dropout problem causes significant losses in many areas, such as limited government budgets to provide for education, low productivity for the country, falling tax revenues, loss of family expenses, and low earnings for these dropouts (Sherman & Sherman, 1991). It also creates other problems in society, such as high unemployment and higher crime rates. Therefore, measures used to decrease the rate of dropouts will benefit any country and its people.

Thailand is a developing country that has limited budgets to provide for education and to develop the country. It is also the case that many children do not have a chance to study in schools. Reducing dropouts is a necessity in order to use the government budgets effectively and to give children more opportunity to study in schools.

Comparisons across all levels of schooling in Thailand have shown that vocational schools have the highest student dropout rate of any level of education. According to Somsak Prisananantakul, the Thai Vice Minister of Education, in a December 8, 1998, speech to the Campaign for Empowering Education for Thai Children, the dropout rates in the years from 1991 to 1996 were as follows: 12.3% for elementary school, 7.4% for junior high schools, 17.3% for high schools, and 21.2 % for vocational schools ("The Number of Dropouts Increases," 1998).Vocational programs constitute one of the major

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educational programs in Thailand. Vocational schooling comprises two levels of study: a lower level, which offers a 3-year certificate and is equivalent to high school completion, and an upper level, which is a 2-year diploma and is equivalent to an associate's degree. Private vocational schools share about half and half with public vocational schools in terms of the number of students enrolled. Each year about 200,000 students enroll in vocational schools.

In principle, vocational schools should have lower dropout rates than high schools, because studies at the vocational level are easier and more practical than studies at the high school level. As Naylor (1987) found in his study entitled "Reducing the Dropout Rate Through Career and Vocational Education," the more vocational classes that students took, the less likely they were to drop out of school. However, in another study, Alspaugh (1998) mentioned that social climate and participation in athletics were more important factors in dropping out than participation in vocational or technical courses. For Thailand, the dropout rate for vocational students is higher than that for high school students, as mentioned above. This dilemma should be studied to find what factors are causing the higher dropout rate.

According to the new Thai National Education Act of 1999, the government has to provide at least 12 years of education free of charge for all Thai people, beginning within the next 5 years. The government will need to spend a large portion of the national budget to increase the capacity in public schools and to subsidize students in private schools. The director of UNICEF for East Asia and the Pacific stated that the number of students studying in high schools in Thailand is only 57% (as cited in "The Number of Dropouts Increases," 1998, p. 16). Therefore, the number of students in high schools and

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vocational schools will almost double in the next 5 years due to the new National Education Act. Because the high dropout rate is still a significant problem in both vocational and high schools, the concern about dropouts will possibly increase in the future.

Moreover, Thailand has faced a serious economic recession since the end of 1997. This recession is thought to be one of the major causes of the current increase in the dropout rate among students. The number of unemployed is estimated to have increased to over 3 million persons. Many families had to let their children drop out of schools because they themselves were unemployed or had a reduced salary and could not afford the educational expenses of their children. The government has attempted to alleviate this problem by providing low-interest-rate government funds for students. The funds, however, are not sufficient because the government also has its own financial problems and more families are now in need of financial assistance.

If these economic difficulties continue, the dropout problem in Thailand could become more serious. A decrease in the number of students enrolled will continue to exist in the near future due to the economic recession. Therefore, school management and the policy makers in education should truly understand the dropout problem and the major factors that cause dropping out, as well as which strategies should be implemented to reduce the problem. No published research study in Thailand is available at present that addresses factors associated with dropping out and strategies to prevent potential dropouts from leaving schools. Therefore, this study investigated the major factors associated with the high dropout rate among Thai vocational students. The study sought to identify characteristics and perceptions related to dropouts. In addition, this study examined and then suggested appropriate strategies to prevent students from dropping out of school.

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Statement of the Problem

Dropping out is a significant problem in Thai vocational education, as this level has the highest dropout rate among all educational levels. To manage the problem, schools need to develop appropriate dropout prevention policies. Without a deeper understanding of the various issues and problems associated with dropouts, educators and administrators cannot create effective strategies that can help prevent potential dropouts.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to understand the factors and processes associated with dropping out of Vittaya Commercial School during the academic year 2000. The study examined differences in perceptions and reasons for dropping out from the perspectives of students, teachers, staff, and parents.

The study also provided information and recommendations to school administrators, teachers, and staff that might be used to help guide the improvement of school practices and to develop intervention strategies to prevent students from dropping out.

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Conceptual Framework

The problem of student dropouts has been of keen interest to researchers for a long time. Many theories and models of student departure have been developed by researchers, especially psychologists. These theories and models can be categorized generally into five types: psychological, societal, economic, organizational, and interactional (Clark & Nerve, 1992). Of these categories, the interactional theory of student departure, which has focused on both individual and institutional attributes, has been implemented the most in research on student retention since the early 1990s. In the present research, a conceptual framework was derived from Tinto's theory of student

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departure, which is a famous interactional theory.

Tinto's theory of student departure, a complex interactional view of student departure, is one of the most widely accepted theories of student dropouts. Based on Spady's work and Durkheim's theory of suicide, Tinto formulated a theory explaining that student retention and attrition are functions of the interactions between students and the educational environment during their stay in educational institutes. The theory hypothesizes that persistence is a function of the match between a student's motivation and his or her academic ability and the institution's academic and social characteristics. Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) pointed out the following about Tinto's theory:

> Tinto theorizes that students enter college or university with varying patterns of personal characteristics and skills, including initial dispositions and intentions with respect to college attendance and personal goals. These intentions and commitments are subsequently modified and reformulated on a continuing basis through a longitudinal series of interactions between the individual and the structure and members of the academic and the social systems of the institution. Satisfying and rewarding encounters with the formal and informal academic and social systems of the institution are presumed to lead to greater integration in those systems and thus to retention. (p. 51)

According to Tinto's longitudinal model of institutional departure, as shown in Figure 1, students come to school and make departure decisions through processes related to pre-entry attributes, goals and commitments, institutional experiences, and academic and social integration (Tinto, 1993). First of all, students enter into school with widely different personal attributes and backgrounds. The initial entry characteristics of students consist of personal attributes, family and community backgrounds, skills and abilities, and prior schooling. Student personal attributes might be demographic characteristics such as the student's gender, age, race or ethnicity, and religion. Family and community background could include parents' occupation, parents' education, family size,

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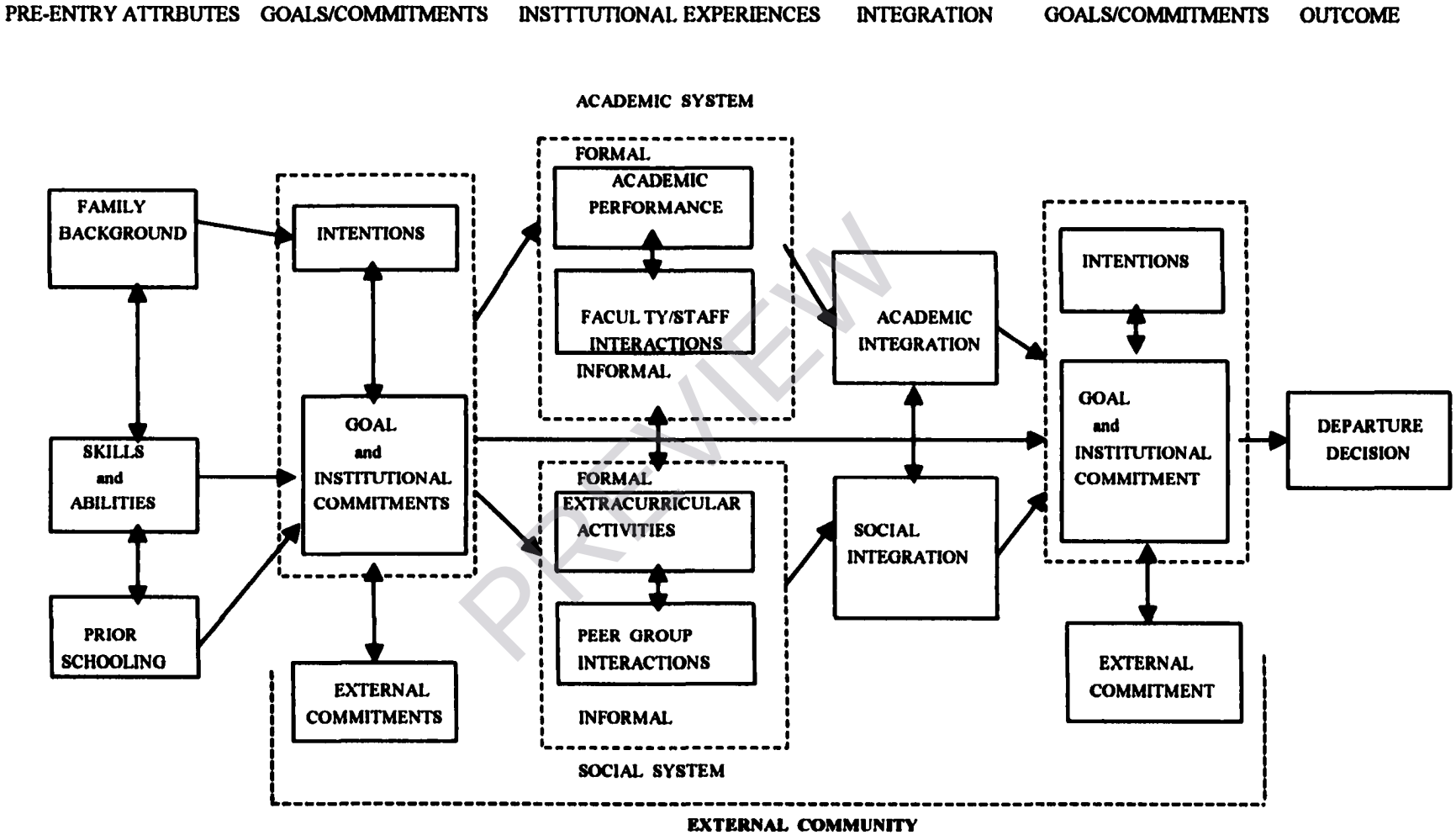

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Figure 1. Tinto's longitudinal model of institutional departure

Note. From *Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cares of Student Attrition* (p.114) by V. Tinto, 1993, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, reprinted with permission

community size, place of residence, and parents' financial and social status. In addition, students are varied both their intellectual and social skills. These skills vary by type of educational experience and achievement. Some might have higher GPAs from previous schools and high scores on standardized admission tests than others.

Furthermore, students will bring in a variety of aspirations, expectations, commitments, and goals. Many research studies have found that when they enter, students already have set goals and have intentions about the specific levels of education they would like to achieve, what major field of study they desire to select, and how much commitment they need to make to attain their educational goals. Some of these initial conditions might change over time, but all of them have a certain degree of impact on students' departure decision from their institutions.

According to Tinto's model, the next process which students will have in the institution is the interaction experience. Tinto's process of institutional experiences consists of two systems, academic and social. The academic system is concerned with the typical education of students. Its activities take place mostly in classrooms and laboratories of the institution and involve teachers and staff in conducting education for the students. Students will have experiences in both the formal academic structure, labeled in the model as "academic performance," and the informal structure, labeled as "faculty/ staff interaction." Formal academic experience may include learning in formal classrooms and laboratories, studying in the library, or doing assignments and exams. In the informal academic system, students could interact with teachers, staff, and friends outside classrooms, and they may have experiences with their institution's counselors and facilities. The social system is concerned with students' daily life and activities, in which

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they interact with various members of the institution outside the academic domain. The social system is classified into the formal structure, labeled as "extracurricular activities," and the informal structure, labeled as "peer group interaction."

In this manner, interaction occurs by individual integrative experiences in the formal and informal academic and social communities of the institute. Tinto stated that the academic and social systems are mutually interdependent and reciprocal. Students are integrated in varying degrees into both systems. The interplay between those systems and their impact on students, as conditioned by external events, is central to the process of departure. Positive integration helps increase students' goals and strengthen the commitments that would encourage their persistence in school. On the other hand, if students cannot integrate their social and academic goals into the institution's academic and social community, they are more likely to depart from the institution.

Related to Tinto's model showing that students' attributes have an impact on student departure from institutions, many studies have been conducted to identify specific student attributes and characteristics that have led to their dropping out. These characteristics can be classified into four major categories: (a) demographic, (b) family-related, (c) school-related, and (d) individual.

PREVIEW

Demographics

The characteristics that are included in the category of demographics are age, gender, race or ethnicity, religion, and geographic region.

Age. Dropouts seem to be older than persisters because students who were retained at any grade before will be older. Ramist (1981) mentioned that about half of the research on dropouts has found that attrition rates are similar for old and young students,

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and about half has found the older students are more likely to drop out.

Gender. McHenry (1997) stated that many studies have found that males tend to drop out of school more frequently than females; however, the research that has addressed gender has been inconclusive. For dropouts in Thai vocational schools, the gender factor should be seriously considered because the ratios of males are females are different in technical schools and in commercial schools.

Religion. Ramist (1981) mentioned that religion might have an effect on dropout rates in particular groups; for example, Jewish students were more likely to persist than other students. This religion factor may be not significant for Thai students, because most Thais are Buddhist.

Geographic region. Some studies found that dropout rates in rural areas were higher than those in urban areas. In the present study on dropouts, it should be of concern that many students move from rural areas to rental places in the school area. Thus, the higher dropout rates in this group may be because they do not live with their parents.

Family-Related Factors

Characteristics that are included in family-related factors are socioeconomic status, parents' education level, and parents' marital status.

Socioeconomic status. Socioeconomic status (SES) is a significant factor related to dropping out. It is clear that students who have a low economic status are more likely to drop out of school. Rumberger (1995) found in the National Education Longitude Study that an eighth-grader whose socioeconomic status (SES) was one standard deviation above the mean was one-third less likely to drop out than a student with a mean SES, whereas a student one standard deviation below the mean for SES was three times

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as likely to drop out as a student at the mean. Because Thailand is in an economic downturn at this time, socioeconomic status should be strongly related to dropping out.

Parents' education level. Many studies found a relationship between parents' education and dropping out. Generally, parents who have a higher level of education seem to be a role model for their children to achieve in education as well as more strongly encourage their children in study. McHenry (1997) also mentioned that studies of dropout showed that parents of graduates had a higher level of educational attainment than parents of dropouts did. It also deserves mention that a higher level of education is related to higher occupational level and better incomes.

Parents' marital status. Most research reported that students who come from single-parent families are more likely to drop out than those who do not. Brady (1996) mentioned that family structure appears to influence dropping out so that the dropout rate is higher among students coming from single-parent families. The effect of this factor in Thailand on dropping out seems to be more important because family structure and family function have been changing to include more divorced and working parents as a result of the intensely competitive environment in contemporary Thailand.

School-Related Factors

The characteristics included in the category of school-related factors are retention, academic achievement, absenteeism, and extracurricular activities.

Retention. Grade retention is considered to be a significant factor associated with dropping out of school. Students who have been retained in any grade are more likely to drop out. Rumberger (1995) reported that students who were retained in school were 11 times more likely to drop out than students who were never retained. In Thailand, many

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