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**Investigation into the Reasons for Secondary School Dropouts in
Iceland**

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Abstract

The purpose of this investigation is to examine different facets of Iceland's culture to determine the reasons for its high secondary schools dropout rates. This study deconstructs what factors in a Nordic society effect academic performance. Reviewing literature on the subject yielded potential factors such as childhood health and parental behaviors, Iceland's abundance of accessible jobs, and the low accessibility for higher education in rural parts of Iceland. A limited number of personal interviews and firsthand observations indicated that most secondary school dropouts were due to a lack of family support and incentive – especially for male students, due to the type of unskilled labor available.

Keywords: Iceland, education, dropouts, secondary school

Introduction

The Icelandic education system includes a pre-compulsory level (Leikskoli, or playschool) for ages below 6, a compulsory (required) level (Grunnskoli, or basic school) for ages 6-16, and secondary level (Haskoli, or high school) for ages 16-20 (Eurydice, 2018). Secondary school is not required and schools of this level are applied for, but free to attend. Students may pursue further academics or attend a vocational school and eventually take internships and apprenticeships for their jobs. Students may take longer than four years to complete secondary school, but a large number drop out. In 2012 30% of students in Iceland dropped out from secondary school, and this statistic may be increasing (Svansdottir, Arngrimsson, Sveinsson, & Johannsson, 2015). This investigation examines childhood health and parental behaviors as well as the accessibility of employment, and the accessibility of education as potential contributing factors to high dropout rates in Iceland; these factors were determined by a review of literature to be compared with results of field research. The findings of this study could help to focus Icelandic efforts to reduce dropout rates and could also be applied to other societies, given common circumstances.

Literature Review

Parental behaviors and general home-life can have a large effect on academic performance in compulsory school students. A major determining factor in whether a student will graduate from secondary school, and even pursue higher education can be found in the educational attainment of their parents. A study conducted in 2011 of 23 year-old Icelanders who had been approached to participate in their 10th grade of primary school (roughly age 15) showed a strong connection between a student's mother having pursued higher education and lower dropout rates in those

students (Svansdottir et al. 2015). The mentioned study also shows health habits of students are a cause and a product of dropping out of secondary school – behaviors such as smoking, time spent watching television, and drinking alcohol during adolescence were large predictors for increased odds of secondary school dropouts. Most students who had not completed secondary school by the age of 23 noted more somatic complaints, lower physical activity, and poorer sleep (Svansdottir et al. 2015). In many cases, these health behaviors (good ones just as well as bad ones) could also be learned from the parents of these students, just as educational attainment tends to be.

Another potential contributing factor to these dropout rates is the abundance of accessible jobs Iceland enjoys. According to a survey conducted in 2017 by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), Iceland's employment rates are the highest of any of the organization's countries, sitting at roughly 80%, and this statistic is the same as it was in the 2005 survey (OECD, 2017). Another study performed by the OECD stating that the wages of unskilled labor in Iceland is approximately 87.5% of that of skilled labor (2012). This implies that Icelanders have little incentive to finish anything past their compulsory education, as dropping out poses little risk to their financial security. However, there does seem to be a condition to this security, as secondary school dropout rates tend to be much higher for the male Icelanders than the females (UNESCO, 2017). This could be due to perceived gender roles for particular jobs, as a good portion of the accessible jobs in Iceland include physical labor such as construction, fishing, and maintaining geothermal plants.

All Icelandic citizens have equal rights to education, but this does not mean that education is equally accessible for all citizens. All towns in Iceland have primary schools to cover the entirety of compulsory education, and these schools are run by the Icelandic municipalities; not all towns

have secondary schools, which are governed by the Ministry of Education, and tertiary schools are even fewer (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2016). Students living in towns without secondary schools may have to commute hours to attend a school in a neighboring town, which may not be completely viable for some families, and may not seem worth it to some students, especially if they can easily get a job in their hometown. Schools supporting those with special needs are even sparser than secondary or tertiary schools, as there are only three special-needs compulsory schools in the country as of 2016, and other schools only have particular classes for such students, with even less support being given at the secondary level (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2016). Additionally, secondary school curricula are widely viewed as being very compressed over its four year span (Jóhannesson & Bjarnadóttir, 2015). This leads to a buildup of stress in students, causing many to dropout.

Method

A review of relevant literature to Iceland's education system and dropout rates was conducted before a week-long trip was taken to Iceland to conduct field research. Three primary themes arose from the literature review – health behaviors, the abundance of jobs, and the accessibility to education. It was inferred from these themes that the primary reason for these high dropout numbers is a lack of motivation and incentive. Data was gathered via firsthand observations, and personal interviews – interviews were conversational and open-ended and interviewees were chosen by convenience sampling. The information gathered from these sources was then analyzed for common themes and compared with those found from the literature review to test the hypothesis.

Unfortunately, time limited contact with primary sources and the amount of information gathered. Only two interviews were conducted, and news sources (being in Icelandic) had to be gathered and summarized by the very kind tour guide of the trip, Baldur Gylfasson. The data gathered from the two main interviews insightful; one interviewee was a pool patron attending secondary school at the time hoping to be an electrical engineer, and the other was the tour guide for the trip, whose daughter was attending secondary school at the time. Firsthand observations involved Iceland's infrastructure, effecting how students may get to school; these observations inherently have some cultural bias, being from a Floridian perspective on a mountainous Nordic island.

Results

General themes that emerged were that family support is crucial in academic performance, Icelanders are not incentivized to pursue higher education, and that the circumstances for dropping out are very different between males and females. Health habits and parental behaviors do not have as large of an impact as first thought from the literature review.

An offhanded comment from the tour guide on Icelandic divorce rates raised the question of how important family support is to academic performance in Iceland. According to Gylfasson divorce, remarriage, and single-income families are quite common in Iceland. In many Western countries, being raised in a single-income family would cause significant economic stress on the family, posing a challenge for a student's academic performance. Gylfasson later clarified that though Iceland faces a high divorce rate, the social systems in place give support to single-income families; this implies family income may not be a major factor in secondary school dropouts. However, due to a high standard of living and high taxes in Iceland, living can get very

expensive, as the standard pay for a single job rarely supports living in Iceland. Regardless of marital status, most parents work multiple jobs; parents are not often home to directly support and help children with school, which may lead students to feel helpless and lose motivation (Gylfasson, personal communication, March 15, 2018).

Additionally, Iceland's population outside of its two largest cities is very sparse, with towns being separated by rivers, mountains, and hours of driving. Though Iceland's infrastructure has developed rapidly in the past decades, many Icelanders in rural towns would have at least an hour's commute to get to a neighboring town to attend secondary school. In many such cases, students will instead move in with extended family (Gylfasson, personal communication, March 15, 2018). If students wishing to pursue higher education cannot attend secondary school locally or move in with extended family, they would have to move out independently at the age of 16 – daunting for someone at that age in comparison to working in their hometown.

It is as economically viable for the 16 year old to work in their hometown as it is to pursue higher education. Though unemployment is low, high taxes and a culture of spendthrift encourage Icelanders to work multiple part-time jobs (Gylfasson, personal communication, March 15, 2018). Students are also encouraged to start working in conjunction with their school work early-on relative to other Western nations, and those who cannot or do not want to balance it see work as the more immediate gratification. However, students of this generation seem to see dropping out as short-sighted, as with higher education they could find better pay outside of Iceland (pool patron, personal communication, March 11, 2018).

Trends show it is currently more viable for the males in Iceland to drop out of school and get work immediately than females. Despite cultural differences from most Western countries in

social stigmata and equality, Iceland still holds some Western views on gender roles and behaviors, explaining the disparity in retention between males and females. Icelanders missed the era of “stay-at-home parents,” and instead both parents consistently work most of the day (Gylfasson, personal communication, March 15, 2018); however, physical labor has been viewed (until very recently) as work for men, so much of the unskilled labor is considered more accessible to males. Because of this trend, more men drop out earlier in secondary school than women. This trend continues even more drastically into tertiary school according to literature, as a significant percentage of secondary schools in Iceland are specialized vocational schools from which students seek apprenticeship and internship.

From the analysis of field research, health habits are not as major of a factor in academic performance as the literature suggested. Though this is likely a minor contributing factor to secondary school dropouts in Iceland, this was not largely corroborated by primary sources, and was only discussed by one secondary source. While Gylfasson mentioned that single-income families seem to have more drug-use and alcoholism than married families, he emphasized that drug-use is rare in Iceland (personal communication, March 15, 2018). Both interviewees mentioned a rise in computer-addiction, particularly in males, in the recent generations. Essentially, male students would tend to be more inclined to play on their phones or computers than focus on their school work, though the ubiquity of this is questionable. The interviewed pool patron mentioned having a better understanding of English from growing up with computers and the internet than he did with Icelandic through his schooling (personal communication, March 11, 2018). In terms of health habits this is comparable to the television-addiction mentioned in the literature.

Conclusions

Through the analysis of information gathered from field research, and the comparison of that information with the relevant literature, a number of themes arose in regards to the reasons for high secondary school dropout rates in Iceland, from which conclusions can be drawn:

- 1. Family Support is Crucial in Academic Performance**
- 2. Icelanders aren't incentivized to pursue higher education**
- 3. The situation is very different between males and females**
- 4. Health habits were not as major a factor as literature suggested**

These conclusions can be used to further focus endeavors by the Iceland Ministry of Education to bolster their retention rates. These have additional applicability with other countries – conclusion 1 is nearly ubiquitous due to humanity's natural sociability, conclusion 2 lends insight into the relationship between employment and education in Western societies, and conclusion 3 is pertinent to cultures with defined gender roles.

Future avenues of research could easily improve upon this investigation by obtaining information from more primary sources – interviews with teachers and students, firsthand observations of Icelandic schools and the school system, etc. Future investigations could also make comparative studies between Iceland's education system and its dropout rates and those of other countries with similar circumstances, such as the nearby Scandinavian countries.

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