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## **Gifted and yet a dropout?**

An empirical study on the phenomenon of dropouts among gifted adolescents in Switzerland

### **Summary**

*The current discussion surrounding dropouts is concentrated exclusively on the group of low-achieving risk students. However, it is known from dropout research from the Anglo-Saxon area that approximately 10% of school dropouts are of above-average intelligence. The study presented here focuses on a group of 52 school dropouts. The participants were presented with a questionnaire in order to obtain specific information on their reasons for dropping out of school, the reactions of their parents, their characteristics, and on differences between boys and girls. The findings can be condensed into four main statements: School dropout (a) is primarily grounded in school problems (poor achievements, school distance and inadequate teacher-student relationships), (b) in the majority of cases is a solitary decision made without the parents, (c) is subject to much greater risks for boys than for girls, and (d) in most cases is not a definitive dropout but rather the basis for a return to an education or training situation.*

The problem of dropout is growing in importance. After the Council of the European Union resolved to decrease the high average rate of 18% of dropouts in Europe to 10% by the year 2010, many European countries launched respective projects to this aim (Commission of the European Communities 2002). In contrast, academic discussion on this issue is practically nonexistent. This is at least the case – with a few exceptions (Blaug 2001; Drinck 1994; Schreiber-Kittl/Schröpfer 2002; Thimm 2000; Stamm 2007a) – for the German-speaking countries and is particularly astonishing in view of the fact that the available statistics indicate that the population of dropouts is anything but small. For instance, in 2003, approximately 7.6% of adolescents in Germany were registered as dropouts (Statistisches Bundesamt 2006). For Austria and Switzerland, no official data are yet available, necessitating a reliance on studies that establish a connection to dropout. Riepl (2004) speaks of a rate of 5% for Austria, while a study by the Swiss National Science Foundation suggests 6% to 9% of dropouts in Switzerland (Eckmann-Saillant/Bolzmann/De Rham 1994). Although such figures lie clearly below the average strived for by the EU, they are nevertheless alarming, and certainly exceed the level of tolerance that can be accepted as an outcome of our education systems. However, it would be too simplistic to consider the effectiveness of an education system solely according to the quantitative question of how many dropouts it produces. The concern is equally with its efficiency. Dropouts also cost the state a great deal of money. Anglo-American studies suggest that the unemployment rate is many times higher among dropouts, that they more frequently suffer from health problems, and are more often involved in deviant activities and become dependent on social welfare and state support programmes (Alexander/Entwistle/Kabbani 1997; Garnier/Stein/Jacobs 1997).

The sole focus on this risk group, however, completely disregards the fact that there are also dropouts with other backgrounds and motivations: those dropouts who are deemed

as gifted. Research from the German-speaking domain knows nothing at all about this group, and the Anglo-American research only very little. Although it is well known that the majority of gifted persons show successful educational paths, a not to be underestimated number are confronted with social, emotional and achievement-related problems. This phenomenon is predominantly dealt with using the term underachievement (Reis/McCoach 2000; Sparfeldt/Schilling/Rost 2006; Stamm 2007b). Respective studies assume dropout rates of gifted pupils to lie between 12% and 18% (Renzulli/Park 2002). Moreover, case studies have shown that dropouts in this group are frequently associated with later notable reorientations. The educational paths of persons such as Bill Gates, Gerard Dépardieu or Thomas Edison provide us with impressive illustrations of this (Prause 2007).

The current article examines the phenomenon of dropout with regard to the question of why adolescents dropped out of and which factors are linked to this behaviour. First of all, it presents the international status quo of general dropout research, and then looks at the research focusing specifically on gifted dropouts. In the empirical part, analyses will then be presented which can be used to answer the research questions. Finally, the findings will be discussed against the background of the question of what might be done to better tackle the dropout behaviour of gifted adolescents.

## **1. The status quo of dropout research**

Traditional dropout research attributes the decision to drop out of as being the individual's responsibility and assumes that personal characteristics are primarily responsible. In particular, poor achievements, repeating years (including being older than one's classmates), low cognitive abilities, change and absenteeism are seen as strong predictors (Frazer 1992; Grisson/Sheppard 1989; Roderick 1994; Rumberger/Larson 1998; Ricking 2006). There is general consensus that dropping out constitutes a male phenomenon. According to Rumberger and Lamb (2003), boys drop out of three times more frequently than girls. Moreover, family factors also count as important indicators for dropping out. Coleman et al. (1987) discovered that in addition to the cultural and economic capital, the social capital in particular is indirectly manifested in children's school achievements through the school-oriented commitment of the parents, consequently influencing decisions of whether to stay or leave. Ever since this realisation was made, the parent-child relationship has repeatedly been examined from this focus. More recent studies confirm that features of parenting style (Baumrind 1991) are linked to dropout. An authoritative parenting style has the effect of reducing dropout, while authoritarian or permissive behaviour is conducive to dropout (Glasgow et al. 1997; Jacobsen/Hofmann 1997). Furthermore, various studies have reached the conclusion that the loss of a family member due to death or divorce or other family problems can fundamentally influence the decision to drop out (Rumberger 1987; Croninger/Lee 2001). Many studies also show links between dropout and behavioural or discipline problems and increased delinquency, leading to the assumption that dropout is primarily associated with social problems (Farrington 1980; Azzam 2007). Further meaningful factors include frequent changes of or place of residence (Rumberger/Larson 1998), part-time jobs outside of school (Rumberger/Lamb 2003) and teenage pregnancy (Anderson 1993). Finally, the relevant research points to a great importance of the social world of the adolescents. Particularly noteworthy here are the findings by Ellenbogen and Chamberland (1997) or French and Conrad (2001) as well as Cullingford and Morrison (1997). These studies demonstrate that adolescents who are at risk of dropping out of school more frequently have similarly minded friends

than adolescents who are not at risk, and belong to the more rejected, less popular students, meaning that as a consequence, they are barely integrated in social networks.

Recently, an interesting research perspective has arisen that focuses not only on the individual, but also on the institution of school, and consequently also outlines an understanding of dropout that is particularly controversial in terms of educational policy (Lee/Smith 1999; Lee/Burkam 2003). It provides evidence for the assumption that certain school conditions, in combination with student characteristics, can lead to premature school dropout. Thus, schools appear to influence dropout behaviour through their organisation, their structure and their school climate, and possibly practically push students towards a gradual exit (fade-out) or to leave school (push-out). However, the most unanimous finding from all of the dropout research is that dropout should not be understood as a singular, sudden event, but rather as the result of a process of disengagement that lasts for many years and involves many factors (Finn 1989; Alexander/Entwistle 1991; Tinto 1993; Alexander et al. 1997). Thus, studies such as those by Cordy (1993), which look at resilience factors that might prevent dropout, are also of great interest. These include factors such as caring behaviour of adults, a supportive peer group, targeted support programmes, a motivating, versatile instruction oriented towards the learning styles and life worlds of the adolescents, as well as participation in religious groups (Edgar/Johnson, 1995).

## **2. Findings on gifted dropouts**

Our knowledge regarding gifted dropouts is minimal. For the German-speaking area, no publications are available at all on this subject. A small number of studies have emerged from the USA, for instance by Stephenson (1985), Sadowski (1987), Robertson (1991), Seeley (1993) or Renzulli and Park (2002). However, these studies present very different findings, particularly regarding the percentage of gifted dropouts, which can range between 5% and over 20% based on the respective investigation. The reasons for such differences lie in the different definitions of “gifted” and “dropout” used in the studies. Usually, although in the USA the term dropout is used to refer to an adolescent who leaves school without a school leaving certificate, both the methods of measurement and the state examination systems are so different that the information on dropout rates can fluctuate enormously (Kaufman 2004; Swanson 2004). The same applies for the different definitions of giftedness. Traditionally, giftedness is understood as the entirety of personal dispositions, but it is measured in different ways. Rost (2000) exclusively uses (general) intelligence measures, while many other others apply a multifactorial cluster of variables (Gagné 1993; Heller 2000). It is only logical that a study which is based on a multifactorial definition of giftedness will reach different results to one which chooses a narrow definition (Lajoie/Shore 1981).

In terms of the question of why gifted children become dropouts, the investigations by Seeley (1993), Renzulli and Park (2002) as well as the metaanalysis by Kaskaloglu (2007) are the most fruitful. All of these authors come to the conclusion that the effective predictors are similar to those available from general dropout research. The most important are failure at school, an unstable family background, drug and alcohol consumption, lack of interest and achievement motivation, poor teacher-student relationships, negative and rebellious behaviour towards the school including lack of social integration, an inadequate curriculum as well as low levels of interaction between parents and school. According to Renzulli and Park (2002), these predictors can be seen

as particularly pronounced for gifted adolescents from families with low levels of education or with a migration background. In contrast, Lajoie and Shore (1981) report on gifted dropouts from ambitious parental homes. These dropouts have extensive leisure activities, which play a role in determining the decision to drop out of school. According to Kaskaloglu (2007), the same findings as those from general dropout research are also apparent in terms of gender differences. Accordingly, gifted male dropouts are found more frequently than gifted female dropouts. The findings on underachievement are particularly noteworthy. According to Seeley (1993) or Kaskaloglu (2007), gifted adolescents who are underachievers are at particular risk of dropping out of school. The authors assume that the causes for this lie in the fact that the gifted adolescents' talents are not recognised due to their poor school grades, meaning that they are not individually fostered, which in turn leads them to develop a distanced behaviour with regard to school early on in their school career. Finally, of particular interest is the argument of Robertson (1991) concerning the fundamental differences in the structure of motives between gifted and average dropouts. This argument claims that while average dropouts attempt to flee from an academic world, gifted dropouts frequently have supportive families with value systems that foster self-determination and self-responsibility and understand dropping out less as fleeing and more as a specific coping pattern on the path towards the adolescent's own identity.

### **3. Consequences and research questions**

The research overview has shown that on the theme of dropout in general, and with a specific focus on gifted dropouts, almost no specialist literature is available in the German-speaking area, meaning that recourse has to be taken to findings from the Anglo-American domain. Firstly, it could be deduced from the literature analysis that although there is no developed, consensus-building concept on dropout, a minimal consensus can be assumed that recognises the multidimensional nature of the phenomenon. Accordingly, dropout appears to be based on a diverse dynamic which develops early on and endures over a long period of time. Moreover, a new and interesting research perspective was referred to, which posits associations between dropout and school quality, meaning that schools appear to influence dropout behaviour through their organisation, their structure and their school climate. With regard to the gifted dropouts, it was possible to show that many of the predictors that are well known from general dropout research also apply to this group, and are located in the areas of the individual, family and school. As, in general, the concern is with a very new area that is difficult to access in terms of the research field, many questions have understandably not been even remotely sufficiently clarified. For this reason, an explorative study in the German-speaking area appears to be of particular interest. It examines the following questions:

- (1) What are the reasons why gifted adolescents drop out of school?
- (2) What parental reactions are associated with dropout?
- (3) How can gifted dropouts be characterised?
- (4) Are there differences between male and female dropouts?

### **4. Experimental design**

#### *Sample*

The sample referred to here is based on the samples of a longitudinal study and a survey of dropouts from advice centres in German-speaking Switzerland. The project "Hoch

begabt und ‘nur’ Lehrling?” (“HBL”) [Gifted and yet ‘only’ an apprentice?] examines the development of excellence of 214 gifted apprentices during their professional training/apprenticeship. Based on a licentiate dissertation, which looked at underachievers during their professional training (Hurschler 2007), it was possible to recruit nine dropouts. The basis for their identification was the definition of dropout according to which a student had left school prior to completion of the obligatory school period without switching directly to another school. 46 further dropouts were recruited through advice centres. These persons had been identified as gifted in the course of their school career through cognitive ability tests. Each of the 55 dropouts was matched to a person from the HBL project who possessed comparable cognitive abilities but had not dropped out of school. The same applied for the persons recruited from the advice centres. Matching variables were gender and age in each case. Both groups were presented with a written questionnaire. The response rate amounted to 94.5%, which led to a dropout group of N=52 and a stable group of N=50. The dropout group consisted of 38 boys and 14 girls, and the stable group contained 37 boys and 13 girls. At the time of the survey, the adolescents were between 16 and 19 years old.

### *Measurement instruments and evaluation*

In order to measure patterns of attitude and behaviour, the variables presented in table 1 were applied.

Table 1: Scales used, with example items and internal consistency

Construct	Source	Example items and coding	Item no.
Reasons for dropout	Renzulli & Park (2002)	“Here are some reasons that other young people have given for leaving school: My school achievements were poor.” Answer ‘yes’ or ‘no’	16
Parental reaction	Renzulli & Park (2002)	“In the final period of time before you dropped out of school, did your parents behave like any of the examples cited?” They told me that they didn’t agree. Answer ‘yes’ or ‘no’	12
Use of leisure time	HBL project, own development (Stamm, 2006a; b)	“How much time do you spend on the following activities? A: On the PC at home, without video or computer games; B: Doing sports, handicraft, art, making music; C: Social work to care or support others (babysitting, visits/caring for relatives, grandparents, the elderly, asylum seekers etc.)” 4-point Likert scale: 1= never/rarely; 4=every day/almost every day	1
Participants’ educational aspirations	Renzulli & Park (2002)	“According to how you see things today, how far do you think you will get in life in terms of education?” 1=I don’t want to complete any more school education; 2=I want to gain at least an upper secondary level leaving qualification (Matura [university entrance-level qualification] or vocational training); 3=I want to gain a higher vocational qualification; 4=I want to go to university/university of applied sciences; 5=I want a university degree; 6= I want to pursue an academic career (professorship).	1
Conversations with parents	Renzulli & Park (2002)	“How often do you spend time with your parents, either chatting or doing something together?” 4-point Likert scale: 1= never/rarely; 4=every day/almost every day	1
Peer relationships	FLR and HBL project, own	“How often do you spend time with your friends, either chatting or doing something together?”	1

	development (Stamm, 2006a; b)	4-point Likert scale: 1= never/rarely; 4=every day/ almost every day	
School absenteeism	FLR, HBL and SAB project, own development (Stamm,2006; b; 2007)	“In the last year before you left school, how often did you play truant?” Coding: 1=never; 2=one or two days; 3= three or four days; 4=more than five days.	1
Drug consumption	HBL project, own development (Stamm, 2006a; b)	“How often in your life so far have you taken the following drugs (smoked hash, taken marijuana, cocaine)?” 4-point Likert scale: 1=never; 2=once or twice; 3=between three and fifteen times; 4= more than fifteen times.	1
Socioeconomic status	SAB project (Stamm, 2006a; b; 2007)	Index of five variables: Occupation of father; education of father; occupation of mother; education of mother, living situation.	5
Gender	--	Dummy-coded: 1=male; 2=female.	1
Nationality	--	Answers coded with 1=Switzerland; 2=Central Europe; 3=Eastern Europe; 4= USA; 5=Asia	1

To answer the four research questions, various descriptive data analyses were conducted (questions 1 and 2) as well as  $\chi^2$  analyses (questions 3 and 4). The findings are presented below according to each of the questions.

## 5. Results

### *Question 1: What were the reasons for dropping out of school?*

In order to answer this question, various descriptive analyses were carried out. The basis of the questions was the questionnaire that had been sent to all dropouts, which obtained the following information: (a) the reasons for dropping out of school and the reactions of the parents, (b) leisure activities, and (c) the time spent with friends.

Table 2: Reasons for dropping out of school

Reasons for dropping out of school	Boys (N=38)		Girls (N=14)	
	N	%	N	%
I found a good job.	2	4.2	0	--
I didn't like school.	11	29.5	3	23.5
I didn't get along with the teachers.	13	35.2	3	23.5
I didn't get along with the other students.	8	22.5	2	12.2
I got pregnant.	0	--	1	5.9
I was expelled from school.	2	7.0	0	--
I didn't feel comfortable at school.	9	25.3	5	39.2
I wanted to do something completely different.	5	12.7	3	23.5
My friend/friends also dropped out of /left/ gave up school.	1	2.8	2	12.2
I felt like an outsider at school.	3	8.5	4	29.4
I couldn't cope with the homework.	7	18.3	2	12.2
I was failing at school.	11	30.9	4	27.4
I had to repeat a school year.	2	7.0	1	5.9
I changed school and didn't like the new school.	5	12.7	2	12.2
I had an alcohol/drug problem.	6	14.1	1	5.9
I had another problem.	7	18.3	2	12.2

Note: Multiple answers; because the respective statements could be answered with yes or no, the sum percentages do not = 100.

The questionnaire developed by Renzulli and Park (2002) on the reasons for dropping out of school contained 16 items. The participants were required to give their view on the extent to which the respective statement had influenced their decision to drop out of school or not. The results, differentiated according to gender, are presented in table 2.

The results show that the boys had primarily dropped out of school for three reasons: first, because they did not get along with the teachers (35.2%), second due to poor school achievements (30.9%), and third due to a general aversion to school (29.5%). The girls reported somewhat different reasons: 39.2% did not feel comfortable at school, and 29.2% saw themselves as outsiders, while 27.4% indicated having dropped out for reasons of achievement. On the whole, the boys became dropouts above all due to poor teacher relationships, while for the girls the triggering factor was general unease in school. It is notable, by contrast, that failure to achieve constituted a crucial reason for both sexes.

*Question 2: What parental reactions were associated with dropping out of school?*

It is also interesting to ascertain how parents reacted to this decision and to what extent they were involved in the process. The results can be seen in table 3. It is apparent that the decision to drop out was accompanied by strong emotional reactions on the part of the parents. According to the information provided by the dropouts, 96.4% of the parents were distraught about this decision, and 91.1% tried to persuade their child to stay in school. Quite astonishing, by contrast, is the finding that 79.5% of the parents left the decision to leave school to the child. This finding gives rise to the assumption that the child's dropping out of school was linked to a certain helplessness on the part of the parents, which was reflected in the fact that they assigned the decision-making competence to the child.

Table 3: Parental reactions to the decision to drop out of school

Parental reactions	N=52	%
They offered to get me some advice outside of school.	6	10.7
They contacted the School Psychological Service or another advice centre.	8	16.1
They told me it was my decision.	35	67.5
They punished me for it.	17	32.1
They told me they were distraught.	50	96.4
They told me it was OK for me to leave this school.	10	20.0
They tried to convince me to stay at school.	47	91.1
They tried to help me with my personal problems.	41	78.5
They offered me special support from a tutor.	7	13.4
They tried to put me in another school.	16	30.4
They tried to put me in a support programme.	13	25.0

Note: Multiple answers; because the respective statements could be answered with yes or no, the sum percentages do not = 100.

*Question 3: How can gifted dropouts be characterised?*

The dropouts were questioned with regard to various variables and their statements were compared with those of the stable group. With respect to the sociodemographic background variables in table 3 (socioeconomic status, gender, nationality), the dropouts do not differ from the stable group. Both the dropouts and the stable students are primarily of Swiss nationality (78.2% and 75.4%, respectively) and only a small proportion of the adolescents are of other nationalities (21.9% and 24.6%, respectively). The same applies for social background. 84.8% of the dropouts and 81.5% of the stable group belong to the mid-upper or highest percentile. The fact that no significant

differences emerged between the groups in this regard can be explained by the fact that the majority of participants were recruited from advice centres. This clientele is known to be pre-selected, i.e. as the concern is mostly with well-educated families with a native cultural background who are seeking advice and support for their child due to school problems. Our clear finding that dropping out is a male phenomenon is in accordance with general research findings. With a proportion of 70.9%, there are more than twice as many male as there are female dropouts, at 29.1%. The fact that the stable group shows a similar distribution is due to the matching of the samples according to gender. Despite the unambiguousness of this finding, it should therefore be strongly qualified in light of the recruitment of our sample (higher proportion of male apprentices in the HBL project; higher proportion of boys in advice centres).

Table 4: Differences between dropouts and stable group

Feature		Dropouts (N=52)	Stable group (N=50)	$\chi^2$
Socioeconomic status	Highest percentile	56.5	52.7	5.203
	Mid-upper percentile	28.3	28.8	
	Mid-lower percentile	15.2	18.5	
	Lowest percentile	--	--	
Sex	Male	70.9	63.5	6.445
	Female	29.1	35.5	
Nationality	Swiss passport	78.2	75.4	6.301
	Foreign passport	21.9	24.6	
Hobbies	Daily	40.3	33.5	6.254
	Once or twice/week	33.6	39.6	
	Less than once/week	20.2	25.5	
	Never	5.9	1.4	
Peer and friend relationships	Daily	41.0	51.2	8.928*
	Once or twice/week	33.5	39.4	
	Less than once/week	15.3	7.2	
	Never	10.2	5.2	
Conversations with parents	Daily	22.8	35.9	9.256*
	Once or twice/week	23.2	35.2	
	Less than once/week	36.9	19.2	
	Never	18.1	9.7	
School absenteeism	More than 10 days	8.3	2.5	16.204**
	5 to 10 days	19.4	10.2	
	1 to 4 days	38.8	42.7	
	Never	33.5	45.6	
Educational aspirations	School leaving certificate	9.6	2.0	10.124*
	No school leaving certificate	2.1	0.0	
	Vocational qualification	31.3	22.5	
	Matura (university entrance- level qualification) or vocational Matura	32.3	31.9	
	Degree	25.7	43.6	
Drug consumption	More than 15 times	5.4	1.8	10.223*
	3 to 14 times	24.2	15.7	
	Once or twice	23.6	16.0	
	Never	46.8	66.5	

\* p<.05; \*\* p<.01; \*\*\* p<.001

Table 4 illustrates, moreover, that the dropouts differ from the stable group in five of the six further variables. These are peer and friend relationships, conversations with parents,

school absenteeism, educational aspirations and drug consumption. Only random results emerge for the question of hobbies. Accordingly, the great majority both of dropouts (73.9%) and of the stable group (73.1%) have distinct hobbies, which they carry out several times per week or even daily. With regard to peer and friend relationships, the dropouts appear to be more likely to be loners compared to the stable group. Thus, they spend clearly less time with their contemporaries than similarly gifted adolescents from the stable group. Over a quarter (25.5%) indicated never or almost never having contact with peers or friends, while this amounted to only 12.4% in the stable group. Moreover, the chi-square analyses show interesting results in terms of parental contacts. 55.0% of the dropouts appear to have rather distanced relationships with their parents, indicating that they had conversations with their parents less than once a week or never, while this proportion amounted to only 28.9% in the stable group. However, the clearest differences between dropouts and the stable group were shown in school absenteeism. Dropouts were twice as likely to be severe truants (27.7%), who had played truant on five days or more in one school year, than the stable group (12.7%). Truancy therefore appears to have a clear relationship to dropping out of school. Important information is also provided by our analyses regarding educational aspirations. While 9.6% of the dropouts considered themselves satisfied with a leaving certificate from obligatory schooling, this only amounted to 2.0% for the stable group. More than three quarters of the stable group were aiming to achieve the Matura (university entrance-level school leaving examination) or a degree (75.5%), while this figure lay at only 58.8% for the dropouts. Finally, relatively clear differences are apparent in terms of drug consumption. Dropouts take drugs with clearly greater frequency than the stable group. Although 46.8% of the dropouts indicated never having consumed drugs, this lay at 66.5% for the stable group. Dropouts are three times more likely to be regular drug consumers (5.4%) than adolescents in the stable group (1.8%).

*Question 4: Are there differences between male and female dropouts?*

Finally, of great interest is the question of whether male and female dropouts differ in terms of the variables examined. Barely any findings are available in this regard from the research.

Table 5: Differences between gifted male and female dropouts

Feature		Male dropouts (n=38)	Female dropouts (n=14)	$\chi^2$
Socioeconomic status	Highest percentile	56.5	57.9	5.003
	Mid-upper percentile	33.5	27.2	
	Mid-lower percentile	10.0	13.9	
	Lowest percentile	--	--	
Nationality	Swiss passport	58.0	65.0	6.311
	Foreign passport	42.0	35.0	
Hobbies	Daily	35.6	38.2	5.432
	Once or twice/week	11.3	33.4	
	Less than once/week	14.5	19.8	
	Never	8.6	8.6	
Peer and friend relationships	Daily	40.1	30.6	8.941*
	Once or twice/week	32.1	41.5	
	Less than once/week	14.3	26.2	
	Never	4.7	1.7	
Conversations with parents	Daily	12.8	25.9	9.666*
	Once or twice/week	25.2	35.2	
	Less than once/week	44.9	32.2	
	Never	17.1	6.7	

School absenteeism	More than 10 days	14.3	2.5	
	5 to 10 days	19.2	12.5	
	1 to 4 days	23.8	40.7	
	Never	42.7	44.3	16.204**
Educational aspirations	School leaving certificate	7.6	9.0	
	No school leaving certificate	1.1	0.0	
	Apprenticeship	31.3	32.5	
	Matura (university entrance level qualification) or vocational Matura	32.3	30.0	8.120
	Degree	27.7	28.5	
Drug consumption	More than 15 times	8.2	4.8	
	3 to 14 times	32.2	19.7	
	Once or twice	23.6	21.0	
	Never	36.0	55.1	10.211*

\* p<.05; \*\* p<.01; \*\*\* p<.001

As can be seen in table 5, gifted male dropouts differ from gifted female dropouts in four areas: peer and friend relationships, conversations with parents, school absenteeism, drug consumption. Boys not only more frequently indicated being integrated in peer groups more often and more regularly than girls (daily: 40.1% vs. 30.6%), but also stated that they had more often severely played truant, i.e. more than 10 days per year (14.3% vs. 2.5%). The girls, in turn, show a clearly closer contact with their parents. 25.9% have conversations with them daily, while this only applied for 12.8% of the boys. No differences between the sexes emerged with regard to hobbies, educational aspirations, nationality and socioeconomic background. On the whole, these findings, which differ according to gender, give rise to a profile of the gifted male dropout who can be distinguished from the gifted female apprentices in our study above all in the areas of school absenteeism and drug consumption, which can be characterised as risk variables.

## 6. Discussion

This contribution examined gifted dropouts. The central focus was on answering questions relating to the reasons for dropping out of school, on characteristic features and gender-specific differences. Finally, the relevance of the findings should be assessed. In this regard, it should first of all be noted that there are gifted dropouts. In the HBL project, nine of 214 apprentices belong to this category (4.2%). This proportion lies at the lower end of the findings from other investigations described in Chapter 3. The fact that it was relatively easy to find 46 further dropouts in the advice centres can be seen as an indication that adolescents who take recourse to advice in problem situations were also confronted with dropout, which was also evidently linked to long, problematic previous histories.

Why do gifted adolescents drop out of school? According to our findings, school, relationship structures and school climate play an important role: While the boys indicated above all poor teacher relationships as the reason why they dropped out of school, for the girls, primarily factors relating to school climate and their general unease in school appear to have been decisive. However, it is surprising that the dropouts saw a crucial reason for dropping out as lying in their failure to achieve. It can therefore be assumed that dropping out of school was preceded by a phase of underachievement.

This confirms the findings of Seeley (1993) or Kaskaloglu (2007) that gifted underachievers are at particular risk of becoming dropouts. Moreover, the fact that the parents reacted with strong emotion, but equally with helplessness, delegating the decision-making competence in terms of dropping out of school to the child in two thirds of the cases, appears to be problematic. This should also be seen as an indicator that dropping out of school must be linked to enormous individual and inter-family stressors. Equally, our findings give rise to the assumption that school barely acted as a supporting factor in this regard.

The fact that dropout is a male phenomenon is also confirmed by our results. The reasons for these gender-specific findings, however, cannot be investigated based on our survey. This constitutes a fundamental limitation of our study. However, examining female dropouts in general appears to be a problematic issue. According to the Civil Rights Project (2005), it should be assumed that girls possibly drop out of school much more frequently than the statistics suggest, but that they are not registered as dropouts due to the concomitant phenomena accompanying the dropout, such as depression, psychotic illnesses or bullying. Girls belong to the possibly relatively large group of so-called hidden dropouts (MacMillan 1991).

Gifted male dropouts carry risk factors to a much more pronounced extent than gifted female dropouts. This is a main finding of our study. Male dropouts appear not only to be under clearly greater peer pressure than female dropouts, but they also seem to more frequently be severe truants and more regularly consume drugs. The importance of these risk factors is additionally strengthened by the fact that male dropouts have clearly less parental contact than female dropouts. This gives rise to the assumption that young male dropouts were in many respects left to their own devices and received much less support than girls who had dropped out of school.

What consequences emerge from these findings? Firstly, educational practitioners should be aware that our educational system produces dropouts, and that these include not only low-achieving, socially disadvantaged dropouts, but also potentially high-achieving dropouts from educated family backgrounds. Secondly, as school variables represent a fundamental reason for dropping out, teachers should also become much more strongly aware of bright but under-challenged students who are prone to underachievement. The decision to drop out of school appears to have a long prior history, as it does not occur suddenly but rather develops slowly. Thirdly, parents and teachers, as well as school psychological services and other advice services, should take signs of underachievement much more seriously than has been the case so far. Finally, although it is already educational folklore that a paradigm change is required and that schools should also build up relationship structures, against the background of the findings presented here, this proves to be urgently necessary.

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