

# **Combating early school leaving: A qualitative study of compulsory training in Italy**

By

**Silvia Cervia**

Department of Social Sciences, University of Pisa, ITALY.

## **Abstract**

*The rate of early school leavers became a benchmark for the European Union in 2008, as part of the strategy to make the EU the world's most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy by 2010 (Lisbon Agenda). The objective to decrease the average share of early school leavers by at least 10%, and to guarantee a high number of 22 year-olds who have completed their secondary education, stated in 2008 during the Lisbon Council was re-confirmed in the Europe 2020 Strategy, when it was used as a proxy for social inclusion. The scientific literature on the subject shows how the phenomenon of early school leaving is influenced by education-related factors, individual circumstances and socio-economic conditions. To date, research studies have focused on the characteristics of dropouts or the characteristics of their schools. However, relatively few qualitative studies on the phenomenon in a specific setting have been carried out. The paper presents a small-scale qualitative study based on the concept of "Dropout Factories" (Balfanz, Letgers 2004). Our study finds as the Local Community Dropout Factories influences the translation process (Czarniawska, Joerges 1996) of the regulations dedicated to combating early school leaving, without hindering their positive effect, and increases the risk of becoming dropouts: this seems to have been confirmed by the presence of not-at-risk young people within the group of dropouts.*

**Keywords:** *early school leaving, dropouts, Local Community Dropout Factories, qualitative approach*

## **1. Introduction**

The rate of early school leavers became a benchmark for the European Union in 2008, as part of the strategy to make the EU the world's most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy by 2010 (Lisbon Agenda). During the Lisbon Council in 2008, a number of goals were set, including to decrease, by at least 10%, the average share of early school leavers – defined as people aged 18-24 who have only lower secondary education or less and are no longer in education or training; it excludes anyone who participated in some form of education or training in the four weeks prior to the date of the survey (see Eurostat). This objective was re-confirmed in the Europe 2020 Strategy, in which the estimation of early school leavers was used as a proxy for social inclusion. It is in times like these, during a financial crisis, that a high level of education becomes especially important from an individual, social and economic point of view.

The aforementioned is corroborated in scientific literature, which may not adopt an unambiguous operational definition (Lehr et al., 2004), but which has showed how the phenomenon can be influenced by education-related factors, individual circumstances and socio-economic conditions (Kaufman et al., 1992; Alexander et al., 2001; Rumberger & Lim, 2008; Fortin et al. 2013; De Witte et al. 2013). To date, research studies have focused on the characteristics of dropouts, their family background (Astone & McLanahan, 1991; Alexander et al., 2001; Mapp, 2004; Fall & Roberts, 2012) or the characteristics of their schools (Goldschmidt & Wang, 1999; Balfanz & Letgers, 2004), which appear to be both risk factors and protection elements (Hammond et al., 2007; Rumberger, 2011). However, relatively few qualitative studies on the phenomenon in a specific setting have been carried out (European Commission, 2013), although there is an increasing amount of evidence based on international literature about a link between the characteristics of the local community and school dropout rates (Rosenthal, 1998; Henderson & Mapp, 2002).

For the purposes of this study, this link deserves to be investigated more thoroughly. Indeed, data show a considerable variability in school dropout rates, not only in European countries, but also at sub-national level. Moreover, in recent years key differences in trends have been identified thanks to monitoring work, revealing very different responses despite a Common Strategic Framework (European Commission, 2014). This is the reason why the Final Report of the EU Thematic Working Group on 'Early School Leaving' stressed the need to focus research on small-scale, qualitative studies (European Commission, 2013: 16-17).

From the perspective of neo-institutional theory, this small-scale qualitative study intends to analyse how the socio-economic and institutional characteristics of the local community could influence the translation process (Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996) of the regulations dedicated to combating early school leaving (ESL), without hindering their positive effect.

The study has been carried out according to a series of research questions, which may be summarized on the basis of the following hypotheses:

1. The link between dropout rate and poor communities (with low employment rates, increased instability and poverty; Rosenthal, 1998) could be used to identify those hot spots where the policies for combating early school leaving are likely to be underpowered or entirely useless.
2. The characteristics of such communities are very similar to those cited in American scientific literature to identify "Dropout Factories" (Balfanz, Letgers 2004). Said concept can therefore be used to identify Local Community Dropout Factories, in line with the European (and Italian) education system.
3. Lastly, we assumed that the "Dropout Factories" in the local community would not only influence the numbers related to school leavers but also the profile of the dropouts. This seems to have been confirmed by the presence of not-at-risk young people within the group of dropouts.

## 2. Methods

A case study approach, specifically triangulation (Yin, 2003), was adopted to verify the hypothesis. After reproducing the Italian policy for combating ESL, we tested the enforcement of the laws and regulations by analysing documents, and interviewing expert witnesses or privileged observers. We then analysed the profile of the dropouts, from a qualitative point of view, by means of interviews with expert witnesses and a survey on dropouts.

### *Case study choice*

To identify our case study we used a complex indicator of poverty, which is one of the key indicators when identifying School Dropout Factories (Balfanz & Legters, 2004). It is also seen as the main condition in communities likely to increase student dropouts (Rosenthal, 1998; Henderson & Mapp, 2002). We used what the Italian financial newspaper *IlSole24Ore* refers to as the "quality of life index" as an indicator of territorial well-being. It is a complex and multidimensional index, calculated on the basis of six important factors (lifestyle, business and labour, environment and health services, public order, population, free time; *IlSole24Ore*, 2011). We deem this index to be the most suitable for the purposes of this case study, in light of the significance of territorial deprivation, as identified in international literature on early school leaving.

When analysing performance at provincial level for 2011 (the most recent statistics available at the time of the study), we singled out the province of Massa-Carrara in Tuscany for our case study, as it is a territorial enclave, with fewer resources than the adjacent areas (*IlSole24Ore*, 2011), making this local community particularly suitable for our analysis.

### ***Semi-structured interviews***

Semi-structured interviews were carried out with Tutors working at provincial level in second chance education, and with privileged observers from the local education system (education representatives, school directors and teachers, for a total of 9 interviews).

These face-to-face, semi-structured interviews took place between November 2012 and January 2013, usually at the interviewee's workplace. Typically, interviews lasted between 1hr and 1h30'. They were recorded and transcribed for analysis. Interviewees were anonymised.

In view of the goal of the study, the questions for the interviews were articulated according to the services offered, to verify the translational process at local level (interviewees were asked to identify the most effective elements, as well as the worst, and the innovative solutions adopted to manage them). The information gathered during each interview was used to organise subsequent interviews.

### **Structured interviews**

Structured interviews were carried out with the dropouts. The aim was to verify if the profile of these early school leavers matched that of the *dropout's ideal type*, identified in international and national literature, and if not, what the differences are. This method was chosen to gather standardized data, to be compared with national and regional evidence. As Italian legislation on the privacy of minors is rather restrictive, the database of the education system could not be used for sampling. It is for this reason that a specific target group was interviewed, i.e. dropouts in training, as they could be contacted without violating the Privacy Act. This alteration has been considered during the interpretation of the data (indeed, the target group is less problematic than the total dropout population, due to individual and family characteristics and the support received for their reintegration and insertion in training courses; Hammond et al., 2007; De Witte et al. 2013). The structured interviews, which were self-administered in the presence of a researcher, took place between November 2012 and January 2013, usually during course lectures or internships, in accordance with the provincial service for second chance education (26 surveys were filled in; 23% by women). In conformity with the Privacy Act, the survey did not call for any sensitive data, so as to ensure the anonymity of the respondents.

## **3. Results**

### **The translation process**

#### ***The Italian policy for combating ESL***

In accordance with the European Union's strategy, Italy has taken action to modify its legal framework for education and training. Indeed, Law No. 53 of 2003 was introduced to change the structure established only a few years earlier, defining new obligations and institutionalizing a service dedicated to tackling the phenomenon of school leaving.

Currently, we have two different phases in education in Italy: a) the first is compulsory education: from 6 to 16 years, and covers the first eight-year cycle of education (5 years of primary school and 3 years of lower secondary school) and the first two years of the second cycle (Ministerial Decree 139/2007); b) the second is compulsory training or second chance education. This obligation has been redefined by Legislative Decree No. 76/2005 as: the right and duty to education and training to receive a qualification of at least three years before the age of eighteen (Article 1).

The obligation can be fulfilled in three different ways: by finishing high school and graduating; by attending a professional course; by working with an apprenticeship contract in a company (Consolidated Law on Apprenticeship No. 167/2011).

In terms of combating early school leaving, the law has introduced two tools, one for monitoring and a second for actively combating early school leaving. The first tool is still being implemented and aims to create a National Student Registry, which will gather information on students' academic careers in a single national database. This means that, at the moment, we have no reliable data on the phenomenon, especially when looking at regional and/or local level. The second tool is for actively combating early school leaving. I am referring to compulsory training, as first established in 1999 (under Law No. 144) and reinforced by subsequent reforms. This analysis is focused on the translational process of the service and its implementation. This is why a more detailed description of the regulatory framework of the service is provided below.

### **Service for second chance education**

This service (or second chance education) is organized at provincial level, as is the case with the Italian education system as a whole. Specifically, it is part of the educational services offered by local Job Centres.

The service is guaranteed by Tutors working in the field of compulsory training, in other words, qualified professionals who are dedicated to working with dropouts. The names of these dropouts must be given or reported by schools so that they can be reintegrated into the world of training (accessing the service on their own is also an option for dropouts). Tutors also participate in the activities related to the programming of integrated professional courses provided by education agencies and in monitoring activities.

The school dropout is helped by a Tutor who, following one or more interviews with the minor and his family, sets up a plan of recovery involving compulsory training. The minor has three options: he can enrol at a different school; he can sign up for a professional training course; or, he can start working, through an apprenticeship contract.

The Tutor shall remain the dropout's coach and/or mentor for as long as he is a minor and regardless of the reintegration path chosen. The aim is to help the minor overcome any difficulties and stop him from dropping out again.

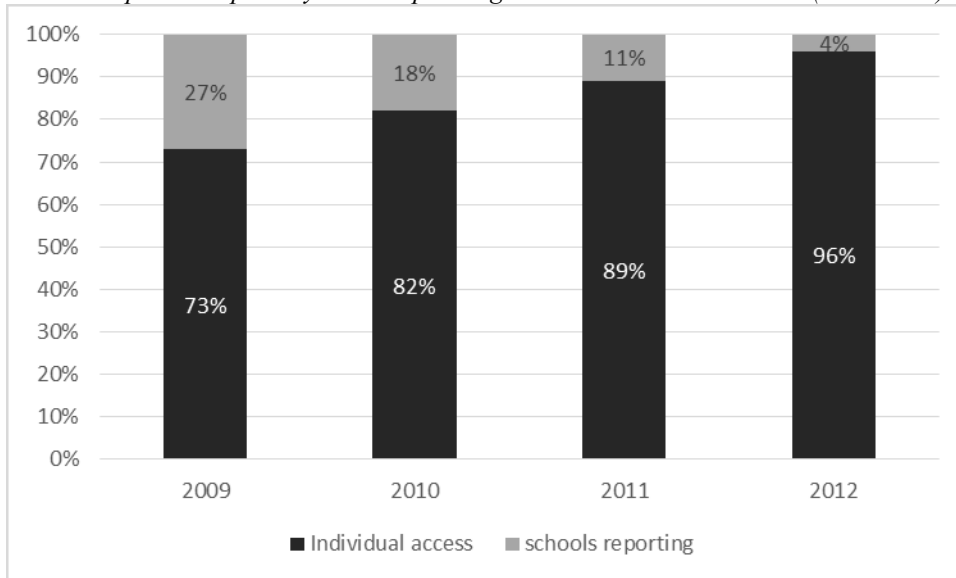
### **Some critical issues in the translation process**

Our analysis of the translational process highlights certain critical elements concerning the *reporting phase*, the *planning phase* and the *recovery phase*.

Regarding the *reporting phase*, we noticed that the number of school reports on dropouts is at a critical lowland that in recent years, the reports have dwindled and all but disappeared (Figure n.1). Semi-structured interviews with privileged observers have helped to identify the reason for this: it is not that there are no early school leavers; on the contrary, but reports are not compiled because the national laws that govern the allocation of economic resources and personnel to schools are based on the number of students registered. In a poor community, where there are no other resources (i.e. private resources), schools cannot afford to lose their students. This behaviour, besides being a violation of the law, is particularly serious because it prevents us from knowing the true extent of the phenomenon. Indeed, because of this, we are only aware of the early school leavers who, of their own volition, contact the service (we are unable to determine how many are lost in the system). Moreover, as stated in this paper, this behaviour hinders the recovery of the dropouts. We do not know how much time elapses between a minor dropping out of school and reaching out to the compulsory training services offered.

Every student who leaves school should be reported to the service. Yesterday, I interviewed two boys who had not been to school in one and a half years (...). Sometimes we call the schools and every year, in June, we send a letter to all schools, reminding them about the law on second chance education, which requires them to report dropouts to the service... (Tutor Interview N.2)

Figure 1: Reporting phase. An analysis of service access. Source: our analysis of data available in the annual reports compiled by Tutors operating in second chance education (2009-2012).



The second critical issue concerns the *planning phase*. Italian legislation requires that professional training courses be organized according to local labour market needs, thus penalizing poor communities with a shrinking labour market. The training courses that are organised are frequently the same, for hairdressers, beauticians, or mechanics. They are not the result of an actual analysis of labour market needs, but rather of the chance to generate self-employment. The business world rarely expresses a need for specific skills, and when these demands are expressed, the time period required to implement such courses is so long that these needs cannot be met. Furthermore, the planning phase is done at provincial level, meaning that the needs of neighbouring labour markets, which may be more dynamic and receptive, are not taken into account.

Lastly, during the *recovery phase*, Tutors have highlighted the difficulties encountered when trying to match the aspirations of dropouts and the opportunities available to them, both in terms of content and time. In terms of content, they are rather disappointed about their career prospects, they lack ambition, and little future orientation. Lack of future orientation is a common characteristic of early school leavers (Stoddard, 2011), but it seems even more evident in poor communities with very low employment rates. Dropouts tend to be quite vague about their plans and goals:

Often [they] do not know what they want to do when they grow up... up to 30% of those who come here and introduce themselves... do not know what to do, it happens to me many times... you have people tell you nothing... the... the last three that came, getting them to say something... it was like pulling teeth. I said: *Do you like mechanic work? Do you have good manual skills? Would you like to be an electrician or a plumber?* Nothing... they haven't a clue... they're lacking in vision... in short, they are focused on the present, they only care about the here and now (Tutor Interview N.1)

In terms of time, because second chance education services are accessed almost entirely on a voluntary basis (individual access; see Figure 1), it is almost impossible to take action earlier, to identify school dropouts just as they leave school. They are unable to participate in training courses offered by the service throughout the year, as access is only permitted for a limited period, just before a course starts. As

there is no adequate collaboration between second chance education services and schools, minors on the verge of dropping out or who have already left school are unfamiliar with the opportunities available to them through said services. What this means is that when they resort to second chance education services, registration for courses is no longer possible or the training courses still available do not interest them. The percentage of dropouts waiting for an apprenticeship or training placement is high, more than one in three dropouts. Considering that dropouts only have access to the service for two years (between 16 and 18), losing out on even a few months can be an insurmountable odd.

There are kids who come after a year and maybe they wanted to take the course of a lifetime... maybe she wants to be a beautician and we are forced to tell them that the course started four months ago and that registration ended a while ago. Like a girl who came last month: she told me that she left school more than a year ago, and if she had known... (Tutor Interview N.1).

### **Dropout profile: qualitative evidence**

Before considering the results of our qualitative analysis, let me reiterate that we will not be providing any quantitative evidence. The reason for this is that there is no unified storage system for the data on the early school-leaving phenomenon, both at national and at local level, given that the National Student Registry (introduced by Legislative Decree No. 76/2005) is still being implemented. Without being able to compare the data on service access and that of the Registry, any considerations in this regard would be futile. From a quantitative point of view, if we want to provide the reader with an overview of the ratio “dropout respondents to total dropouts” covered by second chance education services, then we are limited to using the data on service access and on the options available to dropouts to salvage their training paths, as provided by the law.

During our research, the second chance education service was responsible for 255 dropouts (59%M; 41%F). More than one in two (54%) were engaged in biannual and vocational training courses (approximately 140); the others were: awaiting job placement (36%), enrolled in school (8%), or on the job market thanks to an apprenticeship (2%). With our structured interviews, we interviewed about 20% of the total number of dropouts involved in a training course (the gender discrepancy between respondents and the population is due to the fact that at the time of our research, only two courses were being attended by girls: those for beauticians and hairdressers).

With regard to the profile of the dropouts, this paper reveals the results of our analysis, by comparing the conclusions that emerged from our research with those identified as typical characteristics of the phenomenon, as described in international literature. The specific characteristics that emerged from research carried out in Italy were also used for the purpose of this study (O’Higgins et al., 2007; Perone, 2006). The results will be organised according to the dimensions analysed, namely: individual, school, family and social networks.

In terms of the individual dimension, the *cognitive ability* of the dropouts is not limited in any way. During the interviews, the Tutors identified operative or manual intelligence rather than theoretical or abstract intelligence in the dropouts. This consideration seems to be supported by empirical evidence. The vast majority of the respondents are from vocational or technical schools (21 cases). Indeed, it is worth noting how the secondary school performance of the interviewed dropouts was not entirely poor: 14 dropouts received a passing grade; the remaining 12 received a positive evaluation. Only 8 of them were failed (frequently more than once), and in two cases, they tried to change schools on more occasions, hoping to *find their own path*.

In the analysis provided by the Tutors, the biggest problem encountered was dropouts’ difficulty to sit and concentrate for a long time at school, but, above all, at home, i.e. to study and do their homework. One in two of the respondents admitted to having this problem in his/her school career. It would be

incorrect to attribute this problem to personal skills, because it is influenced by a lack of socialization in studying (see below, *family background*). In line with the evidence provided in international literature, the dropouts in Massa-Carrara feature a number of risk behaviours, including abuse, acting-out, teen pregnancy and eating disorders (Dryfoos 1990).

We have also had students who are petty thieves, even during the apprenticeship (Tutor Interview N.3).

In the case of teen pregnancy, it is clear that, even in the territory of Massa-Carrara, early school leaving precedes teen pregnancy, and not the opposite, as was the general belief in the past:

A girl finds a boyfriend and they go live together at 18... you know [...] compared with the number of teenagers who fall pregnant before 18, which has increased over the years. Once, we had one case a year... but now, by the time they reach 18... (Tutor Interview N.1).

With regard to their relationship with the *school*, it is worth mentioning that the dropouts tend to be highly disappointed in the school system, which is perceived as being too *theoretical*. They do not, however, deny the value or the significance of school. Often their life stories (such as them returning to school after failing repeatedly or changing their subjects more than once) are a sign of an unsuccessful *process of re-signification* (Perone, 2006).

Frequently, students encounter problems with the school curriculum they have chosen – this has emerged in the research dedicated to students who drop out of school (Perone, 2006). Often, these students choose their subjects according to a series of contingent factors: the school's proximity to their house, their friends. In other cases, their choice seems to have been marred by an initial error in evaluation regarding the type of course offered by the institute. The results we gathered in our study were quite similar: the dropouts interviewed chose an easier school (6 cases) or one without certain subjects (3 cases); they also chose according to their friends (6 cases), or job opportunities (6 cases) or, again, interest (2 cases, where the students chose vocational institutes). In these last 8 cases, the expectations of the students later clashed with reality, as the acquisition of practical skills was postponed until their third/fourth year of school.

They go to these schools, because they want to be mechanics; then they realize that they will not be taught any practical skills until their third year... so, they... they realise that for the first two years they will have to study... to study subjects that they didn't like in their previous schools, such as Math, Italian, and so on... They cannot understand, for example, why, even after choosing to become a mechanic, they have to wait some years before getting their hands dirty in a car engine. We have a lot of boys and girls from vocational schools in tourism and catering. I suppose it's because they think they will only be working in the kitchen or in catering... but in actual fact, they will only be doing that in their third year... instead, they have to study two foreign languages... [...] in addition, considering the high number of students enrolled in these types of schools... the teachers are not particularly willing to help ... (Tutor Interview N.2).

Because of these repeated failures and disappointments, these students become progressively emotionally divested from the education system. Respondents expressed a positive opinion about their schools; their experience though, was described as being *without meaning*. They gradually convince themselves that they have little aptitude for school, similarly to the results of other surveys recently conducted in Italy (O'Higgins et al., 2007).

The structured interviews revealed the high ratings given to the professional skills of teachers and school facilities, but the poor assessment of the teacher-student relationship. Our research on dropouts has shown that having a different teacher-student relationship is a common requirement: students yearn to be

understood, they desire a relationship that is more democratic and in line with the *communication style* to which they are accustomed (Perone 2006).

Regarding *family background* and contrary to the results at national and regional level, in addition to a high presence of parents with low levels of education associated with high levels of early socialization at work (this data is consistent in academic literature) we found a significant presence of: a) parents with secondary education; b) at least one white collar parent or specialised worker; c) a housewife/mother. We registered families with financial difficulties, and families with sufficient resources too.

The parents of the dropouts from Massa-Carrara often have a low level of education, and began working early quite quickly:

They began working when they were 14 years old, so basically there is this older generation... that has grown up in a working culture... they started working at a young age (Tutor Interview N.1).

Of course, there are a number of exceptions. There are more dropouts with parents who have finished high school, meaning that the education level is significantly higher. Most of them appear to have at least one parent with a high school diploma: in 12 cases, the mothers have a high school diploma, and in 7, the fathers; in three cases, the fathers have a university degree and in two cases the mothers. Even their position in the labour market is better. These parents are professionals, entrepreneurs, artisans and traders. In reference to the structure of the family, our research identified a more nuanced risk profile. Generally, dropouts come from large, extended, separated, or reconstructed families, etc. Families live in conditions of economic instability, which further exposes them to difficult living conditions, in which the adults are deprived of the time and space they need to devote themselves to their children (Perone, 2006). In Massa-Carrara, this is not the risk profile we encountered; indeed, more often than not, Tutors are dealing with stable families. This specificity is confirmed by the results of the structured interviews: only five respondents live in households resulting from separation/divorce; however, in no case do these family situations overlap with conditions of economic hardship. Unlike the findings of other studies, half of the respondents had a mother who did not work because she is homemaker.

With regard to the final dimension, i.e. *social networks*, even without specific guidelines from research conducted at national and regional level, we can consider our results to be in line with the international dropout profile (Ellenbogen & Chamberland, 1997; Rivkin, 2001). Indeed, the dropouts of the territory have peers with low levels of education, and no other social network outside of the family. The key people in their lives come from within the family and are part of their circle of friends. These boys and girls spend all their time with their friends (sometimes composed of boys and girls who are a few years older than them), who, in most cases, have also dropped out of school. Dropouts seem to have no interests or commitments, they do not do any sport, they do not play any musical instruments, they do not do any volunteer work, etc.

#### **4. Discussion, Concluding Remarks and Recommendations**

Our case study has shown that the hypothesis regarding Community Dropout Factories cannot be rejected, but we do need data at local level to produce quantitative evidence. If we are to carry out a correlation analysis, then the National Student Registry must fulfil its purpose, which is to gather students' academic information in a single national database.

Firstly, by analysing the translational process, we are highlighting the fact that preventing ESL must not only be linked to the implementation of the relevant laws and regulations, but rather it must be a priority for the education system as a whole. Specifically, we noted that there are direct and/or indirect influences. In terms of a direct approach, we have to focus on school legislation on matters of resource allocation. We saw how in poor communities this can be a powerful disincentive for the necessary collaboration



between different institutions (schools, compulsory training). Indirectly, we have to focus on: a) the legislation related to professional courses offered according to the needs of the local labour market. In poor communities, this could be a trap for young people; b) the entire education system, as it is a key factor for the engagement of students.

The results of our case study also highlight the need to create a lasting, reliable relationship between dropout and Tutor to support the former, even after he comes of age.

With regard to the qualitative profile of dropouts, said profile seems rather singular, in terms of the national and international status quo. The socio-economic variable does seem to have neither a positive nor a negative impact. Having a secondary education or parents who are skilled or white-collar workers does not seem to lower the risk of dropping out. The progressive economic recession that has affected the local community for the last 15 years has drastically reduced the demand for white-collar workers. The upward and downward bifurcation of the demands of the labour market recorded in Tuscany seems to have dropped in the community of Massa-Carrara, where the only profile in demand is one of low skills. This leads to an increase in social vulnerability, thereby favouring segregation and triggering a perverse process of radicalization. These trends are evident in the properties of the social networks that dropouts are a part of, which are closed and homogeneous. This is an additional risk factor that is even more dangerous as it occurs at a younger age; for instance, it encourages the development of the deviance phenomenon associated with a dropout's condition.

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