Research Article

From “Social Integration” to “Class Integration”: Applying Durkheim’s Sociological Thought to Hidden Dropout of Junior Middle School Students

Limin Jia, Liangfei Ji, and Wenjing Zhou

School of Education, Huazhong University of Science and Technology, Wuhan 430074, China

Correspondence should be addressed to Limin Jia; d201881158@hust.edu.cn

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1. Introduction

With the continuous and powerful implementation of the policy of controlling the dropout to ensure compulsory education, the phenomenon of students’ dropping out of school has almost disappeared in various regions in China. However, the phenomenon of “hidden dropout,” such as teenagers’ weariness and unwillingness in study, remains common. Hidden dropout, when first introduced, refers to the situation of leaving school early without deprivation of the status as a student; subsequently, researchers have also included phenomena such as “being bodily but not mentally present,” “being bodily present with a lack of love,” “being bodily present with a lack of power” [1], and “being present in the school education scene, but wandering away from class and classroom all day long” [2] in the research of hidden dropout. At present, China’s academic circles have made some research results on the hidden dropout of junior middle school students, but they have not formed a relatively mature theory. Based on Durkheim’s “social integration” theory, this paper studies hidden dropout from the perspective of class sociology and puts forward the influencing mechanism of “class integration” of junior middle school students’ hidden dropout behavior. By class observation, this paper obtains the hidden dropout theoretical model of the interaction between individuals and class organization.

2. Durkheim’s “Social Integration” Theory

Durkheim, in his research on suicide, first proposed the concept of “social integration.” Based on the concept, social integration refers to a process in which social individuals form the collective consciousness based on social division of labor to maintain social order. He refers to “social integration” in a broad sense, namely, the process in which an individual establishes and maintains close relationships with others or communities. The term “social” here includes various social connections, such as friends, relatives, and colleagues [3]. Social integration reflects the integration level and cohesion of a society. Durkheim drew the following conclusion in his On Suicide [4]: better social integration levels can reduce the suicide rate; both religion and family are, in essence, a communal life, and what really matters is how cohesive the community is and how involved individuals are in the community. Figure 1 shows Durkheim’s view of two social forces.

Durkheim’s On Suicide is a classic of sociology. Different from the traditional perspective of individual psychology, Durkheim, from a sociological group perspective, established the theory of analyzing suicide by the causality of a social fact, and expounded the relationship between the
society and individuals, considering that suicide occurs when the connection between individuals and a social group or the society is impaired or alienated. Durkheim pointed out that the suicide rate in a society is regular, and each suicide, no matter how different the stories behind them, is related to the solidarity and cohesion of the society. There are two social forces behind suicide, namely, social integration and normative integration. In the case of too low or high social integration, egoistic or altruistic suicide occurs; in the case of insufficient or excessive social normative integration, anomic or fatalistic suicide occurs. Both integrations act together on the suicidal tendency and behavior in a society, and their moderate and balanced state restrains the suicidal tendency and stabilizes the suicide rate.

3. From “Social Integration” to “School Integration”

In the 20th century, Western sociological circles began to apply the social integration theory to the adaptation issue of immigrants, and later developed two rival theoretical factions, assimilation and pluralism [5]. The applicability of the Western immigrant integration theory in China (which mainly applies to the research of social integration in rural areas with migrant population) has been confirmed by some empirical studies [6]. School integration, as an important part of social integration of migrant children, began to be studied by China’s academic circles (mainly sociology).

In this paper, however, the “school integration” continues the broad meaning of the primitive notion of Durkheim’s “social integration,” and is studied in larger groups, in addition to migrant children. The “school integration” here refers to a process and state in which all students participate in school life normally and live in harmony with natural, social, and cultural environments of the school. ZHOU [7] divided school integration by operationalization into seven dimensions, i.e., satisfaction evaluation, collective identity, relations between students and teachers, relations between classmates, academic performance, code of conduct, and interpersonal conflict. School integration reflects the integration and cohesion of a school.

In higher education, the development of dropout theories is profoundly related to Durkheim’s “social integration” theory. In American higher education, the paradigm of the dropout behavior has undergone the transition from the individual psychological paradigm of “blaming the victim” to the sociological paradigm of “serving disadvantaged students” with interactions between individuals and environments. As early as the 1960s, college students’ dropout behavior became the focus of American higher education research, and researchers mainly analyzed the motives for staying at school, learning capacity, willingness of employment, and other aspects of dropouts from the psychological paradigm, believing that the dropout behavior is an individual behavior, and the dropout phenomenon is caused by the failure of individuals rather than those at the school. This is the view of “blaming the victim” [8]. Since the 1970s, this view has changed, and a college dropout theory based on Durkheim’s “social integration” theory has been gradually formed, which clarifies the relations between individuals’ dropout behavior and the college environment, and theoretically describes the reasons for dropout by sociological paradigm; that is, the integration between college students and the school is insufficient.

3.1. First-Generation Dropout Model: From “Social Integration” to “College Integration”.

William Spady (1970) first applied Durkheim’s “social integration” theory to dropout in the Dropouts from Higher Education: An Interdisciplinary Review and Synthesis. Spady argued that there was somewhat a lack of “conceptual clarity, methodological rigor, complexity of design, breadth, clear theoretical basis” and other aspects in most of the studies on college dropout at that time [9]. He argued that we must try a method with “a more interdisciplinary-based, theoretical synthesis.” Durkheim’s “social integration” theory provides a fruitful theoretical tool to summarize most of the existing studies, and focuses these studies on the interaction between students’ personality (namely, deposition, interests, attitudes, and skills) and the college environment forces (such as influence, expectation, and requirements). By combining Durkheim’s “social integration” theory with dropout studies, Spady tried to establish a more dropout process-focused sociological model, namely, the first-generation longitudinal dropout theoretical model of interaction between individuals and environments. According to the model, the decision to leave a specific social system is the result of a complex social process, as shown in Figure 2. The factors of norm consistency and friendship support are parallel to moral consciousness (normative integration) and collective belongingness (social integration), two factors that Durkheim used to explain the high integration of individuals and the society in common life. Spady also asserted that if there is a lack of sufficient “norm consistency” and “friendship support” between students and the school, students will break their connection with the school system and produce the dropout behavior [10].

3.2. Second-Generation Dropout Model: From “Social Integration” to “Student Integration”.

Vincent Tinto (1975) pointed out, in the Dropout from Higher Education: A Theoretical Synthesis of Recent Research, the ignorance of the responsibility and role of institutions in keeping students complete their studies in early research on dropout [11]. To build a dropout theoretical framework, he, by citing Durkheim’s “social integration” theory and revising on the basis of Spady’s, formed the second-generation longitudinal dropout theoretical model, as shown in Figure 3. The model
analyses the interaction between students and the environment (college) in more detail, believing that there are two subsystems (academic system and social system) in the school system, of which the academic system represents students’ academic performance, intellectual development, school achievement, and other comprehensive performance, and the social system represents students’ relations with peers, relations with teachers, social behaviors, and other comprehensive performance in the school [12]. According to Durkheim’s description on how individuals integrate in the society, Vincent Tinto defined two types of integration: academic integration and social integration. In Vincent Tinto’s dropout model, the college dropout process can be regarded as a longitudinal process of interaction between individuals and colleges in academic and social systems, during which what a student has experienced in these systems (measured by academic integration and social integration) constantly changes his goal commitment and institution commitment, and eventually leads to perseverance or dropout. Vincent Tinto found that dropout is attributed to the failure to effectively realize “academic integration” and “social integration” between students and colleges [13].

Nowadays, Vincent Tinto has become a prestigious expert on college dropout in the United States [14], whose research results have had great influence on dropout research in the past four decades. Vincent Tinto’s longitudinal dropout theoretical model contains several key factors, which have been recognized as a prominent focus of student dropout research. For instance, inspired by Durkheim’s
“social integration,” he proposed the “student integration” (academic integration and social integration), which led to a large number of subsequent studies on student integration (Bamber and Tett 2001; Berger and Milem 1999; Mannan 2007; McQueen 2009; Pascarella and Terenzini 1979a, 1983; Severiens and Schmidt 2008). In addition, Vincent Tinto analogized college students leaving school with Durkheim’s egoistic suicide, which also greatly influenced the research on student dropout [15].

3.3. Summary: Sociological Explanation of Suicide and Dropout Behaviors. In the above dropout models, dropout can be analogous to suicide, and the school environment to the society. Both dropout and suicide behaviors can be construed as individuals’ divortement from the society due to their inability to integrate into the group [16]. People escape from the society by giving up their lives, and teenagers escape from the school by giving up their studies. We can say that suicide and dropout are consistent in inadequate integration between individuals and organizations, and there is a mandatory social fact at work behind an individual behavior. Table 1 shows the analogy of influencing mechanisms of suicide and dropout.

4. From “Social Integration” to “Class Integration”

Compared with college students, junior middle school students have their communal life in the class, and spend most of their school life in the class. The class is the basic organization unit of the school, where the class teacher, students, and subject teachers constitute a close and united collective life, with class norms and rules that must be followed, and fixed curriculum activities and hours made. The more powerful the class organization is, the more dependent the students’ life and study are in the class. As the basic form of education activities, the class is the main object and field of research of educational sociology.

The problem of junior middle school students’ hidden dropout can be solved in a more targeted way by further focusing the school environment of junior middle school students on the classroom environment and studying the problem from the perspective of class sociology.

Durkheim thought that suicide is an individual phenomenon in terms of its results, and yet its causes are essentially a social one; the degree of social integration (social integration and normative integration) influences the suicide behavior. The class integration influencing mechanism of junior middle school students’ hidden dropout behavior is proposed by analogy with the social integration influencing mechanism of the suicide behavior proposed by Durkheim [16].

Despite family, social, students, and other related reasons for junior middle school students’ hidden dropout behavior, there are differences in hidden dropout behaviors and rates in different classes. Take, for example, 14 classes of Grade 2017 in S Middle School in L City. Every two classes are a pair of parallel classes, in which the major subject teachers (Chinese, Math, and English) are the same. However, differences in hidden dropout rates become more obvious over time in two parallel classes with basically the same subject teachers and students’ admission levels, such as Class 2 and Class 9, Class 4 and Class 11, Class 5 and Class 12, and Class 7 and Class 14, as shown in Table 2. Comparison of parallel classes suggests that the class teacher’s style and management influence the class culture and thus students’ sense of belonging and integration into the class, and the hidden dropout rate can be explained from the perspective of class integration.

In Table 2, there are two semesters in an academic year. With mid-term and final examinations in a semester as the statistical time nodes, there are 4 statistical time nodes in an academic year and totally 12 statistical time nodes in the three years of junior middle school. For coding and analysis, the 12 examinations in the three years are marked as 1, 2, 3, . . . , 12.

Based on the concept of Durkheim’s “social integration,” the class integration in this study refers to the process of adaption and integration of junior middle school students into their classes. The class integration is an interaction process, mainly including two aspects from the perspective of interaction subjects: the class teacher’s acceptance of junior middle school students with poor academic performance or discipline, and the degree of junior middle school students’ acceptance and adaptation to the learning requirements of their classes and the junior middle school, including their adaptation to class life, recognition and acceptance of class culture, situation and willingness to make friends with classmates, self-efficacy, and recognition of the value of junior middle school curriculum. This study shows that students may have hidden dropout behaviors in the case of insufficient class integration.

From the perspective of the class teacher, class integration can adjust students’ cohesion through class culture. Class culture can be broken down into the two basic factors of class solidarity and class norms, corresponding to “social integration” and “normative integration.” Class solidarity reflects the connection and combination between members and the class, which is essentially a cohesion and can provide support for class members. Class norms are, in essence, an external control force, which limits and adjusts class members’ desire and behaviors, helps students transform their desires into achievable goals, and defines the ways to achieve the goals. Class solidarity and class norms together affect a class’s hidden dropout tendency, and their balance can restrain the hidden dropout to a certain extent, where the hidden dropout rate will be at a low and stable level if they are in a moderate and stable state. Table 3 shows the decomposition of class integration force.

5. Excellent Cases of “Class Integration”

Through ethnographical observation, interviews with teachers, list of students taking an examination, results analysis, and other methods, it is found that Class 8 of Grade 2017 in S Middle School in L City, led by Teacher W, has maintained a zero hidden dropout rate for five consecutive
years [1]. Teacher W, who is good at summarizing and reflecting on education, has released more than 400 original stories on education in his or her WeChat Official Account “Story of Grassroots Gardeners” [2]. Teacher W has been committed to the development of class culture and is able to consciously organize class activities to improve students’ collective belongingness and learning motivation to make them feel loved and be well-disciplined so that the class solidarity and class norms are in a moderate and stable state. Teacher W also pays close attention to the changes in students’ status, and intervenes in those with a tendency toward dropout.

5.1. Colorful Class Activities. Class activities can enhance the class cohesion and the mutual understanding of teachers and students and friendship between students, and are also a rare education opportunity. Teacher W attaches great importance to the organization, implementation, and summarization of class activities, especially extracurricular activities, which require teachers to motivate the parent committee and keep activities safe and educational. The extracurricular activities of Teacher W’s class are so colorful that students have had many precious memories.

When first taking over Class 8 in September 2017, Teacher W said to students: “You must study willingly. I’m not here to force you study, because I paid a heavy price for forcing students to study. Some students in Grade 2014, who were forced to study, were admitted to an ideal senior middle school, but they were not doing very well in their school. What should I do while I’m not forcing you? I will focus more on the construction of the class. How can we build a fighting and cohesive group? Class activities. I will organize colorful class activities each semester. I look forward to your excellent performance.”

In the first semester of the seventh grade, class activities have been held four times by Class 8 of Grade 2017, including military training, hands-on inquiry-based learning.
activities of *Seek the Source of Yi River in Yimeng*, broadcast exercise competition, and campus tour in target senior middle schools. Students thoroughly enjoy class activities based on those held. “To build a cohesive class with colorful class activities” is Teacher W’s concept for class team building. Particularly, Teacher W is proud of making so-called “poor students” gain valuable confidence in class activities.

5.2. Discipline Development and Cooperative Management. Students’ habits are developed in the seventh grade. If it fails, more efforts will be needed to ensure good class operation in the eighth and ninth grades. If a good learning and living habit is formed, students in the class will benefit from this atmosphere and the class teacher will spend more time and energy in leading students’ study and ideological and cultural construction.

In the first month of school, what Teacher W mainly does in the class meeting course is to discuss and set class rules with students. The problems in being late, morning reading willingly, failing to finish homework, school uniforms, snacks, self-study courses, midday rest, and class recess discipline have been basically controlled after the first month of school.

The class teacher’s education and guidance are essential, but Teacher W does far more than these. First, Teacher W attaches importance to students’ self-education, since only those who can educate themselves are able to overcome difficulties in the future. Second, Teacher W pays attention to peer education, while relations between students and teachers are less influential than peer relations in the school. Third, Teacher W lays stress on parents’ involvement, such as allowing parents to give lectures in the class, a move benefiting parents, students, and teachers. Fourth, the class teacher strengthens communication and cooperation with subject teachers to form the resultant force of school education, which helps timely discover and properly resolve problems in the class.

5.3. Means of Education with Reasonable Rewards and Punishments. In student education and management, two powerful measures used by educators and managers are rewards and punishments, which are two sides of means of education.

Rewards used by Teacher W include material rewards (such as preparing some delicious food for students with good grades or great progress after the examination to remember the glory of students) and mental rewards (such as public praise and awarding the certificate).

Punishments used by Teacher W include common criticism, criticism in a circulated notice, written self-criticism, written guarantee, standing, public apology, contacting parents, and push-up. The corresponding disciplinary measures are also discussed while class rules are made. Teacher W believes that the disciplinary measures should be reasonable and acceptable to students; educational punishments are not imposed arbitrarily, and punishment sheets may be used.

5.4. Tolerance and Acceptance of “Poor Students”. We have learned that Teacher W is a master, who graduated from a normal university directly under the Ministry of Education. As a new teacher full of dreams of education, Teacher W can tolerate and respect “poor students.” When speaking of Teacher W’s tolerance of “poor students,” a math teacher in the same class said, “It’s lucky for ‘poor students’ to have such a caring class teacher as Teacher W. In a class with more ‘poor students’, these students will form a group and find a sense of belonging and joy in their own way. It is also a happy thing to have their own partners in the school. However, in a class with more good learners and several bad ones, the latter will feel lonely and hardly find their sense of existence. With no common interests with other students, they may not talk to others and find no peers, and may finally give up before finishing the three years of study in junior middle school.”

6. Conclusion

Based on Durkheim’s “social integration” theory, this study proposes the “class integration” influencing mechanism of junior middle school students’ hidden dropout behavior from the perspective of class sociology. From the perspective of class integration, the hidden dropout is essentially caused by the failure of students to properly integrate into class life. The internal factors influencing the urban junior middle school students’ hidden dropout mainly include students’ personality and cohesion of class life.

6.1. Influence Factors of Hidden Dropout Rate in a Class. The cohesion of class life is mainly reflected in class culture by observation and analysis of real classes. Class culture can be divided into class solidarity and class norms. Students are attracted by class solidarity and suppressed by class norms, thus resulting in the cohesion. Influenced by the cohesion of class culture, students have their activities in a range allowed by the class organization. Benign class culture, the internal force that restrains students’ hidden dropout behavior and keeps the balance of students’ learning environment, tends to maintain the class’s hidden dropout rate at a steadily low level. In the case of inadequate ability to adjust class culture, a class’s hidden dropout rate will rise at key transition points such as changes in the grade and study phase.
6.2. Students Prone to Dropping Out in the Class Structure. For a class, the hidden dropout rate is low when class solidarity and class norms are at a steadily moderate level. For students in the class, central students are less likely to drop out, while marginal students have a stronger tendency to drop out. In a class with more students, the class cohesion plays a less disciplinary role in marginal students. This suggests that marginal students in a class of a larger size are prone to dropping out in the class structure.

Class culture is divided into core values and practical activities, of which students’ academic performances and disciplinary behaviors are observable practical activities. Teaching is the central work of a school and a center of class culture. Therefore, study is the core of a class’s practical activities. The integration of students’ personality and school collective life mainly reflected the matching of students’ personality and class culture, while such matching is reflected in students’ contribution in promoting the study of the class. A student with poor academic performance or disciplinary behavior will drag down the learning speed and level of the class. Thus, such students are likely to be excluded and gradually marginalized in the class. According to the theory of structuration of Anthony Giddens, a British sociologist, the structuration process has the two natures of action and structure, of which the social structure defines people’s social activities, and people’s social activities produce and regenerate a new social structure. Similarly, the formation of the class’s “central and marginal” structure also has dual natures. On the one hand, the marginal position of a student decides the degree of the tendency of dropout and the student’s hidden dropout action; on the other hand, the student’s action affects his or her position in the class. That is, practical activities in the class also produce and regenerate a new class structure.

6.3. Hidden Dropout Theoretical Model of Interaction between Individual Students and Class Organization. According to the cohesion of the class and students’ position in the class, the hidden dropout theoretical model of interaction between students and the class organization is obtained in the study, as shown in Figure 4.

This study shows that students’ “positive personality” and “negative personality” are a pair of neutral concepts. From the perspective of the consistency in students’ personality and the direction of school culture, “negative personality” refers to a personality contrary to the direction of mainstream values of the current education. Under certain conditions, positive personality and negative personality can be mutually transformed. For example, hair coloring is prohibited in the code of conduct for primary and secondary school students, and thus, this behavior is a negative personality in primary and secondary schools; however, in the work focusing on arts and fashion, this behavior is a positive personality. We can see that “positive personality” and “negative personality” are divided mainly according to the degree of matching with the current organizational culture. For the same personality, its strengths in one organization or scenario may become its weaknesses in another organization or scenario.

Proper class culture can reduce the hidden dropout rate. However, it should be noted that students’ hidden dropout behaviors cannot be completely eliminated in a cohesive class, which is because students’ hidden dropout behaviors are also related to students’ “negative personality” from the perspective of individual dropouts. When the attribute value of a student’s “negative personality” exceeds a certain mean range, the greater the deviation of the attribute value is, the more antisocial the student is, and the farther the student is from the center of the group; when a student is in the marginal position, the class is less cohesive to the student. The class teacher can accept more students with “negative personality” by inclusive class culture.

Data Availability
The dataset used to support this study is available from the corresponding author upon request.

Conflicts of Interest
The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

References

