

Understanding the Process and Impact of School Dropout among Early School Leavers in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

The study sought to understand the school dropout phenomenon in Zimbabwe from the perspectives of early school leavers. The missing voice, in the existing literature, of those who have lived experiences of the phenomenon motivated the investigation. While there is growing evidence in literature that dropping out cannot be an event, not much has been documented to show the process and impact, hence this study. Focus was, thus, on establishing how early school leavers in Zimbabwe experience the phenomenon. Twenty-two early school leavers purposively selected from three sites participated in a case study. Data were collected through focus group discussions; semi-structured interviews and documented life stories. The findings confirm the view that dropping out of school is a process. The results revealed that unpleasant home experiences, especially the loss of significant persons in the life of a learner, mark the beginning of multiple problems resulting in gradual disengagement from school and finally leaving prematurely. The decision to dropout is, however, not easy. It is characterised by escape-avoidance, coping and defence mechanisms and the strain and pressure of facing the inevitable fate. The traumatic process negatively impacts the psychological well-being of the learner resulting in a severed self-concept, a low self-esteem and a compromised self-efficacy. The participants recommended effective guidance and counselling in and outside the school for early school leavers and learners at the risk of dropping out of school.

Introduction

Global trends in education indicate that school dropout is cause for concern (Burrus & Roberts, 2012). In Zimbabwe school dropout has become one of the major causes of attrition at secondary school level (Chinyoka, 2014). Many learners are leaving school before attaining a General Certificate in Education, Ordinary Level which is almost equivalent to Grade 12 in other education systems globally. The future of such learners may be bleak. It also means loss of a critical human resource to the government and society.

Literature review

Current literature shows that school dropout has been fairly researched on and attempts to address the problem documented at global level. Be that as it may, there is growing evidence from literature that school dropout cannot be an event (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morison, 2006; Burrus & Roberts, 2012; Hunt, 2008). Globally, however, documented evidence to explain the cumulative experiences which culminate into school dropout is not explicit. The gap is wider in the Zimbabwean situation, hence the present study.

The research approaches used so far have consisted predominantly of surveys (Zengeya, 2011; Machingambi, 2012; Mawere, 2012; Shadreck, 2013). Where qualitative approaches were used, data was collected mostly from secondary sources such as parents, teachers and learners at the risk of dropping out (Cross, 2010; Hunt, 2008). The present study, thus, argued that the process of dropping out cannot be meaningfully explained by quantitative means and secondary sources of data. There is need to involve those with direct experience of the phenomenon. Early school leavers (EScLs), whom I believed could be rich in information about lived experiences which culminate into premature school exit have not been reached (Brown, 2010; Rumberger & Lim, 2008), thus their perspectives are missing.

In the present study, EScLs were required to describe their experiences, including specific events. This enabled testing Rumberger's (2011) claim that school dropout is a culmination of experiences over a long time. In this sense I concurred with Byrne's (2001) opinion that the truth about and understanding of life emerge from people's lived experiences. Direct experience of a phenomenon and mere telling of it may, thus, never be the same. A more comprehensive and deeper understanding of school dropout was essential and bridging this knowledge gap was, therefore, a key justification for my study.

Researchers generally agree that learners who leave school prematurely are either pulled or pushed out or, in certain cases, simply fall out ((Ananga, 2010: Doll, Eslami, & Walters, 2013; Sigei & Tikoko, 2014). In all cases, there seems to be a pattern that is characterised by erratic school attendance which is an early sign of disengagement (Bridgeland et al, 2006). Results of Finn's (2005) study indicated that continuous failure in class is an antecedent to withdrawal from school. Bridgeland et al and Finn's findings are indicators of dropping out, however, the decision – making process and impact remained unclear.

In the present study I, therefore, asked the following direct and explicit questions concerning the process: At what point did the EScL start thinking about dropping out? How did it all start? What could possibly have triggered the idea? Who could have influenced the decision? I also asked questions about attitudes formed, if any, and how the learner possibly felt about the experiences he/she was going through. I, thus, sought to find out if a pattern of premature school exit in Zimbabwe could be established. It was also important to establish underlying influences and unveil the impact of dropping out of school. The two objectives were important for coming up with suggestions that could possibly plague loop holes so that learners complete school. My contention was that if school dropout has been labelled an epidemic in developed countries, its effect on a developing country like Zimbabwe might be worse, threatening an already weak economy.

Investigating the perspectives of EScLs, I believed, could generate important data not only on the phenomenon but also on broader education-related issues in sub Saharan Africa and beyond. In this regard, in the context of Sustainable Development Goal No. 4 (SDG 4), which focuses on ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and providing life-long learning opportunities for all (United Nations Report, 2017), researching on the phenomenon at this point in time makes sense globally. Tied to this argument, is the fact that school dropout is a cyclic phenomenon which is not confined to any one education system or level, hence, the significance of the study.

Finally, I regarded my study as an important and unique response to calls/recommendations in existing literature for learner participation in decision-making processes and/or policy-related activities. Targeting EScLs was a means to uncover the missing link regarding possible ways of dealing with school dropout. These arguments provided the impetus to develop a study focus on the process and impact of dropping out of school.

Method

The study was guided by the interpretive thinking which Luttrell (2010) views as “grounded knowledge generated from the field” (p. 68) I, therefore, went into the field with an open mind and respect for participants’ views on how dropping out happens among Zimbabwean secondary school learners. I considered Bronfenbrenner’s Bio-ecological theory and Ajzen’s Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) relevant to inform the study. Bronfenbrenner’s theory helped to explain the relationship between the experiences of the EScLs and the network of

systems in which they are situated (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). The TPB model, on the other hand enabled the elucidation of the decision-making process which EScLs went through in the dropout behaviour (Ajzen, 2012; Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010). The two theories, thus, facilitated analysis of the experiences learners go through, their influence on attitudes in the decision-making process and the impact of dropping out.

I employed a qualitative multiple case study design which enabled me to get an in-depth understanding (Yin, 2014) of the process and impact of dropping out of school. The study was, thus, descriptive in nature in that it had both the potential to enable me to extract the unique characteristics of participants and the power to generate depth and richness of the experiences of EScLs under study, a necessary ingredient of social science research (Silverman, 2013).

Twenty-two early school leavers purposively selected from three sites in Zimbabwe participated in the study. I heeded to Creswell's (2012, p. 207) observation that "one characteristic of qualitative research is to present multiple perspectives of individuals to represent the complexity of our world". I used a maximal variation sampling strategy as suggested by Creswell (2012). All the participants chosen to participate in the study had dropped out of school, which was the main criteria for their inclusion, but represented different dimensions of the features of this main characteristic. For example, in terms of age, EScLs ranged between 17 and 22 years; dropout points ranged between Form 2 and Form 4, in terms of context, they represented urban- high density, peri- urban and rural settings. Evidence from the study was, thus, robust and reliable because of the multiplicity of representation of the school dropout experiences encountered (Yin, 2014).

My role as a qualitative researcher was merely to interpret the participants' views as described from their lived experiences. No expression was taken for granted; nor would I, as a researcher, claim to know what notions ESLs had about the phenomenon unless the participants themselves expressed it (Lichtman, 2010). Everything was understood from the perspective of the participants. I also took heed of the need to pay attention to related psychological issues, such as emotion and prejudice, as participants narrated their stories. This was critical, especially for purposes of seeking answers to the question on the impact of school dropout behaviour on those who had experienced it (Willig, 2001).

To further satisfy issues of inclusion and exclusion, sampling started with the sites as I considered those organisations who were legitimately working with EScLs. I then defined my sample pool/ unit of analysis. Key criteria which guided the selection were that participants

had to have dropped out of school between Form 2 and Form 4 within the last five years, and that they had to show that they were interested in participating in the study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). The distribution of participants by gender was determined by the numbers available for selection at each site and the willingness of EScLs at these sites to take part (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011) in the study. I anticipated that a mixed sample of boys and girls would give me an opportunity to ascertain the impact of premature school exit on both sexes. Finally, I employed simple random selection to involve only the required number of participants (Kumar, 2014; Silverman, 2013) because I wanted a small number to facilitate the in-depth study of the school dropout phenomenon. However, as Silverman (2013) argues that in case studies that are qualitative, the focus is not on populations; my findings therefore would not be generalized in terms of a population but in terms of theoretical propositions.

Data were generated through focus group discussions, semi-structured interviews, documented life stories and field notes. Triangulation, thus, strengthened the trustworthiness of the data. Audio-recording was used for FGD and interviews to which participants had consented. The transcription of participants' verbatim accounts and concrete descriptions, though tedious, contributed to the trustworthiness of my findings by effectively controlling the effect of researchers bias during the data analysis stage. I kept an audit trail of the study by maintaining a researcher's diary and field notes for reflection (Yin, 2014). Thematic analysis with the aid of NVivo computer package was used to analyse the data (Hilal & Alabri, 2013). For purposes of confidentiality and data presentation, participants were allocated codes. Ethical behaviour, such as seeking participants' consent and allowing them the freedom to withdraw at any point of the study, was observed throughout the study. I guarded against coercing participants to reveal more than they were comfortable with, either during or after a session, and throughout the entire study (Luttrell, 2010).

Results

Data showed that dropping out of school was a gradual, painful process. Each participant had a story to tell concerning the circumstances which led to finally dropping out. It was clear that experiences comprising situations that take their toll on an individual's life at specific points in time pull or force them out of school (Bronfenbrenner & Bronfenbrenner, 2009; Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Tudge, 2008). EScLs' descriptions of the ripple effect of loss of a significant person in life was not only evidence of the trauma associated with the loss, but

that certain experiences were stronger indicators than others eventually leading to premature school exit.

Excerpts from participants' responses contain evidence of school dropout as a process.

It started when I was in form two, second term. The fees were being paid in parts. When I was in Form 3, I was sent back to bring outstanding fees for Form 2 (uhm)" P16/C/In>.

I would be sent back home quite often since I would spend the whole year without paying fees. So, in the end, I just decided to sit at home and I saw that it was better for me to do some other activities that help me to buy my own clothes (P20/C/In>.

Sometimes learners at the risk of dropping out tried to cheat the system but attempts were short lived.

You would try to wait maybe up to eight o'clock and you will realise that the gate is still manned and so you return home. ... P13/B/In>.

Sometimes we had to cheat, by exchanging receipts with my friends (alright) so that we could get into classes. P09/B/In>.

In an effort to avoid embarrassment, learners sometimes sought temporary leave from home or resorted to denial.

I went to stay with my uncle temporarily. ... so that I can be away from home to reduce the stress... (okay) P13/B/In>.

I have to work with what is there. Problems cannot stop me from living, you do not die just because you failed to become a soldier... P20/C/In>

The strain and pressure of leaving school prematurely also created anxiety for those at the risk of dropping out.

Most of my time I would be wondering about the kind of person I was going to be in the future should I dropout. What kind of a father I would be? Sometimes I would cry because I lost my dreams, I would die jobless. ... P20/C/In>.

The tone used by EScLs during interviews and group discussions reflected their frustration and desperation – suggesting the possibility of perpetual emotional instability which could easily result in perpetual psychological maladjustment (Bruce, Meggitt & Grenier, 2010).

Defence mechanisms, such as blame shifting, particularly in cases where secondary caregiving was involved, were evident from the data sets. On the one hand, therefore, the process of dropping out, according to the EScLs, has the potential to either weaken or destroy

social relationships. I observed that there was a marked difference between decision-making by learners who stayed with a relative and those with biological parents. Those staying with a relative would be told to dropout either because there was no money for school or to care for a sick member of the family. EScLs described such an experience as unfair creating in them, a sense of rejection. For example:

I did not decide myself to leave school but it's only about money. ...I asked my aunt for money but she said she did not have (umm). Our relatives don't just like us since the death of my father [P13/B/In](#).

However, where a biological parent was involved, the learner kept on getting empty promises and assurances that the parent would pay the fees. In such scenarios, participants indicated that the final decision to drop out came after a long period of hoping, albeit in vain. For such learners, the process of dropping out thus took longer than for those who stayed with secondary caregivers (relatives). Two excerpts confirm the argument:

I could easily see that there was no money in the family since we needed money for my father's hospital bills, so my mother's promises to send me back to school were out of hurt. She did not want me to withdraw [P20/C/In](#).

When I told my mother that I was going to drop out of school... I saw her eyes filled with tears. ...My mother told me that she wished to do good things for me. But I knew she could not afford but she kept on promising [P20/C/LS](#).

These results, I noticed, confirm the validity of Ainsworth's (2010) Theory of Attachment which postulates that primary caregivers usually facilitate a stronger bond of attachment which is usually painful to undo/ break. From EScLs' perspectives, allowing children to drop out constituted a breach in emotional ties, while parents feared direct heartbreak. As claimed by Keenan and Evans (2009), the weakening or loss of trust built between parent and child results in the child feeling betrayed and disowned. Where a biological parent was involved, persuasive language to maintain a positive parent-child relationship was used.

Participants' responses also bore evidence that the process of dropping out generates frustration, dishonesty, embarrassment and pain, all of which bring forth feelings of hopelessness, despair, boredom, inadequacy, shame and, ultimately, result in the creation of a withdrawn character. They then finally dropped out in a bid to escape the increasing psychological trauma. According to Ajzen (2012), intention is key to the way in which the decision-making process unfolds while to Bronfenbrenner, the nature of experiences determines the decision to be taken. In my study, therefore, the intention to leave school

developed from unpleasant circumstances which formed a negative attitude (feelings and beliefs) towards one's status (Ajzen, 2012): It means the more negative the attitude, the stronger the intention to leave school. Decision-making is, thus, influenced by the reciprocal relationship between a person and his environment. In this regard, participants in the study concluded that the decision to dropout was not easy to make.

Coping mechanisms, such as waiting patiently at school gates to get a chance to sneak into class, hiding in unpleasant places such as toilets, and getting notes from friends after missing classes in a bid to delay premature school exit, involved both physical and mental facets of being. One participant expressed:

Yes, I asked friends to bring me notes and I would copy them but would never get the explanations. I realised you will need the help of the teacher. So, it was very painful for me P09/B/In>.

Results also revealed that the EScLs used the semi-permeable system in schools to temporarily provide a leeway for those on the verge of dropping out to push on until the situation simply proves too difficult to manage. For example, one participant said:

I think I spent almost two weeks standing at the gate and returning home every day. I would spend about two days without going, maybe I would get a chance to get in for about three days. So sometimes I would skip one day and go the day after but you would find SDC waiting again at the gate. P09/B/In>

I established, however, that the final exit was usually unannounced. The EScLs, indicated that, due to their frustration and bitterness, they simply stayed at home. They never reported their dropping out to either the school authorities or their friends:

At first when they (friends) did not see me coming to school, they thought that maybe I was sick or it was something temporary. With time they got to know that it was an issue to do with unpaid school fees. P05/A/FG>.

Escape mechanisms also formed part of the process of dropping out. Indications from the data were that EScLs believed that they had no option but to engage in unacceptable behaviour which gave them temporary relief from nasty experiences. It would, thus, prevent or delay their premature exit from school since it was not their choice to drop out. The issue was mostly non-payment of school fees and related school requirements. As a result, they utilised a range of escape mechanisms such as taking risks to avoid school authorities and/or negotiating with a paid-up friend to use their receipts to gain access to school premises and classes as indicated in the following excerpt:

In our group of friends, if we had one who would have paid, we would exchange that receipt to pass through the school gate. If we are caught we would be told to go back home or told to bring our parents.... P09/B/In>.

EScLs confirmed claims in existing literature that the dropout phenomenon is a complex and cumulative process of disengagement from school life (Rumberger, 2011). Accompanying EScLs' panic about having to leave school were desperate attempts from their side to avoid this from happening. Consequently, a deep sense of despair formed as one experienced the strain and pressure of dropping out. Again, the limited to non-existent opportunities for these learners to speak out amid the pressure mounting from home and school further complicated the situation ,hence, EScLs mooted that going through the process of dropping out demands resilience and the strength to manage traumatic experiences. According to the EScLs, dropping out was detrimental to their psychosocial lives. One of them so succinctly put it:

No one wants to be associated with school dropout, you just find yourself a victim P06/A/FN>.

Put differently, the act of dropping out carried a stigma in society, hence EScLs' repeated emphasis on the conspicuous dent it had caused in their lives. So they would engage in behaviour which would relieve them of these feelings and/or help them avoid or escape from an inevitable situation which was leaving school prematurely. Regardless of whether or not the decision was theirs or not, most of the EScLs were unwilling to accept the blame for what happened to them. Instead, they blamed other people, specifically relatives, who were intrinsically part of their lives.

The impact was felt during and at post dropout phase:

Right now my life is very difficult. ... P16/C/In>

If life was for sale I would buy back my dead parents so that they can be there... without all these problems like not going to school, , rejection by relatives and being abused by my uncle... P01/A/LS>

...aah you may even reach that point where you die or may get old without achieving anything in life (ok) P20/C/In>.

Haa, what is happening to me and what I have been planning do not match, (uhm). (P09/B/In>).

The findings on impact indicate that the school dropout phenomenon is destructive to the mental health and well-being of the youth. Participating EScLs indicated that society has a

low opinion of those who have not completed secondary school. They are regarded as social misfits. Negative psychological feelings are also triggered by their sense of incapacitation due to reduced job opportunities. Other negative traits include idleness, low social status, lost sense of belonging and destructive peer pressure exerted by society. The EScLs ultimately envisage a bleak future, a state of helplessness which could result in consistent wishful thinking, memories filled with regret, and endless blame-shifting. Since their efforts to remain at school by way of using the semi-permeable school system worked negatively against them, their experience of the impact of dropping out was phenomenal and traumatic.

Discussion

The findings confirm the view that dropping out of school is, indeed, a process (Rumberger & Lim, 2008). For the study sample, it was a culmination of a helpless situation after the learners had, to no avail, tried all means to remain at school. Dropping out was, thus, a gradual process involving painful experiences. The common factor in most cases, if EScLs' reminiscences are correct, was their inability to pay the required school fees on time. The process was characterised by unpleasant experiences of vulnerability and high though short-lived levels of resilience and perseverance. The study established that the decision to stay on at or quit school takes centre stage as the learner goes through the process of dropping out. Ajzen (2012) opines that individuals make rational decisions based on their belief about undertaking certain behaviour and its consequences. Intention becomes the precursor to decision-making. Relatedly, Bronfenbrenner (2005) argues that individuals' mental and emotional characteristics make them react in certain ways to specific stimuli. Based on the two arguments, I concluded that learners who dropout in Zimbabwe go through a process of unpleasant and unbearable experiences. The actual length of the process differs in accordance with individual learners' circumstances.

The impact of dropping out is, thus, more pronounced and causing concern at personal than systemic level, causing learners to endure a severed self- concept. Points of desperation were evident through instances of wishful thinking, giving up, talking to supernatural powers, blaming others and being angry with self (Huang, 2011). It is likely to leave a learner with negative regard for self and attitudes such as self- pity, self- blame, blame for others, regret, denial and disorientation of life goals. EScLs in the study developed coping and defence mechanisms (attitudes) which helped them go through the process. Lastly, Ajzen (2012) says that one's ability to perform a certain action and the confidence one has that one is able to

manage the behaviour, influence intention. By implication, the more in control the person feels about his/her ability to overcome obstacles the more determined he/she is to act. In this regard, the research results indicate that even though the EScLs in the study did not have the needed confidence to manage the behaviour, they nevertheless, albeit reluctantly, left school because of increased pressure exerted by the systems surrounding them.

Findings indicated that premature school exit had a negative psychological impact on the lives of participating EScLs, affecting the individual not only during the dropping out process but also in his/her post-dropout life, thus imprisoning them in a vicious circle. While existing literature emphasizes the impact of school dropout on the system - wastage of resources and a source of immorality, such as criminal acts (Bridgeland et al, 2006; Dahl, 2010) – my findings were skewed towards negative impact on the individual's well-being. From the EScLs' perspectives, it is not easy to get over the negative impact of premature school exit as they indicated that could not help comparing themselves with their counterparts who completed school and are doing well in life. My findings suggest that the EScLs in the study sample left no room for the possibility that even those who completed Form 4 might fail to do well after school. They overlooked the fact that some learners might complete school but fail to do well because of poor planning, wrong choice of career or lack of discipline.

Conclusion and recommendations

In conclusion, dropping out entails moving from the point of the learner's interaction with his/her social and physical environments through to his/her post-dropout life. As verbalised by Tudge (2008), all human beings are susceptible to change at certain times of their lives, thus life is regulated by time. Dropping out is, thus, triggered by life circumstances. My study established that dropping out is a process characterised by painful experiences, enduring memories and high levels of resilience and perseverance. The biggest impact of school dropout identified in this study is associated with self- concept, self- efficacy, self- esteem, another aspect which previous studies have not emphasised. The in-depth study unveiled psychological damage where the impact is on the inward person while the results of previous studies identified, mostly, impact related to the outward person (placement in society) (Huang, 2011). Psychological wellbeing is critical in personality development and the optimal functionality of an individual in society (Schultz & Schultz, 2013).

The pattern of the findings suggests implications for guidance and counselling among learners at the risk of dropping out to ensure a positive personality development. Furthermore, gender differences in the process and impact of dropping out of school was beyond the scope of my study. Further research could, thus, be done to compare male and female experiences in the process and impact. Culture could also have a bearing on how people react to situations. Similar research could be done in other cultures to see whether there would be differences in the pattern of the decision-making process and the impact of both the process and product of dropping out at personal level. Critical to note, however, is the fact that issues relating to decision-making as a concept, the role of significant people in a child's life, resilience, coping and defence/ escape mechanisms, self-concept, self-esteem and self-efficacy and mental health which featured in the present study are psychological issues that cut across cultures. While the study investigated EScLs' experiences in a developing country, I hoped that the findings were important as they could inform related researches and discourses globally in the field of Educational Psychology and education in general, particularly in response to Sustainable Development Goal No.4.

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