The influence of family and community on school dropout among rural adolescents in Zambia

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Abstract
Annual surveys conducted by the Ministry of Education in Zambia have repeatedly indicated that school dropout is most rampant among rural adolescents. Apart from these annual surveys, no study has been conducted in Zambia to ascertain why school dropout is more common among rural adolescents. Therefore, the aim of this study was to find out how families and communities in which adolescents live influence school dropout. A qualitative sample of five female and five male dropouts aged between 18 and 22 years, who dropped out of school at adolescence was purposively selected for the study. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect the data, which were analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological analysis. The following themes emerged as factors which led adolescents to drop out of school: lack of role models; education is a waste of time; bad influence from peers; lack of parental involvement in the education of their children; and low socioeconomic status.

Keywords: family and community; interpretative phenomenological analysis; rural adolescents; school dropout

The study of school dropout in Zambia is still in its infancy. Apart from the annual surveys that are conducted by the Ministry of Education to determine the dropout rates in various locations of the nine provinces of the country, it seems no other study has been conducted to obtain an in-depth understanding of the school dropout problem. What seems repeatedly to emerge from these surveys (e.g., Ministry of Education, Republic of Zambia, 2002, 2003) is that school dropout is most rampant among rural adolescents. Therefore, the aim of this study was to find out how the families and communities in which rural adolescents live influence the decisions that they make about schooling.

Among many other aspects, researchers who have studied school dropout by linking it to circumstances surrounding families and communities have found that school dropout is related to– socioeconomic status; family composition; parents’
level of education; peer networks; and neighbourhood quality. Coleman (1987), for instance, studied school dropout in relation to social capital. He defines social capital as the help or guidance that adult members of society give to children to help them make appropriate choices as they pursue their school careers. According to Coleman, social capital exists both at family and community level. In his study, Coleman attributes school dropout to the decline in the social capital at family and community level. Fagan (1995) and Fine (1986) also report that a lack of family support often pulls children out of school.

In another study, Crane (1991) examined the impact of neighbourhoods with social problems on school dropout and adolescent childbearing. In this study, Crane proposed, ‘... ghettos are neighbourhoods that have experienced epidemics of social problems’ (1991, p. 1227). The findings largely confirm Crane’s assertion that adolescents who drop out of school and fall pregnant are those that stay in neighbourhoods that are riddled with social problems. Based on these findings, Crane (1991) made the following recommendation:

Neighbourhood improvement strategies might be very effective in reducing dropout and teen childbearing rates in ghettos and perhaps in bad neighbourhoods outside of large cities. (p. 252)

In one of the earlier studies on school dropout, Rumberger (1983) investigated the influence of race, sex, and family background on school dropout. Among other things, Rumberger found family background to be a strong indicator of school dropout. Specifically, students from poorer families were found to be having a tendency to drop out of school than their counterparts from families with sound financial backgrounds. Other studies (e.g., Abu-Rabia-Queder, 2007; Alexander, Entwistle, & Horsey, 1997; Ensminger & Slusar, 1992; Lemrini, 2000; Seth, 2001), yielded similar findings. Dekkers and Claassen (2001) and Barton (2005) indicate that some students got lured out of school into the job market. Consequently, Bridgeland, Dilulio, and Morison (2006) and Voelkl (1997) argue that if schools provided opportunities for real-world learning, they would improve the students’ chances of staying in school until graduation.

Rumberger, Ghatak, Poulos, Ritter, and Dornbusch (1990), examined school dropout from the family perspective. They specifically wanted to investigate the influence of parenting styles on school dropout. Their study concurred that parenting style influences the tendency for adolescents to drop out of school – the study found that most dropouts came from families where parents are permissive. This finding seems to link well with what Coleman (1987) found – that the lack of social capital in families and communities tends to exacerbate school dropout. Rumberger et al. (1990) also found that parents of dropouts reacted more negatively to the poor academic performance of their children than the parents of non-dropouts. Finally, Rumberger and colleagues report that parents of dropouts were less actively involved
in the educational activities of their children. Fobih’s (1987) study, conducted in Eastern Ghana also reports that parents’ attitudes towards education have a significant influence on the manner in which their children will pursue education.

Astone and McLanahan (1991) examined the relationship between the structure of a family and school dropout. The researchers found that children who did not live with their biological parents as well as children from broken families received less help and guidance in their school work. In addition to this, Atone and McLanahan report that children from single-parent homes and children who are raised by stepparent were more prone to disengaging themselves from school and eventually dropping out.

Peer networks are an important aspect of community, especially in the lives of adolescents. For this reason, some studies (e.g., Janosz, LeBlanc, Boulerece, & Tremblay, 1997; Parker & Asher, 1989) have focused on examining the influence of peer networks on school dropout.

In Canada Ellenbogen, and Chamberland (1997) compared friendship patterns between students who were seen as potential school dropouts and those who were not associated with dropping out. The researchers report that students who were on the verge of dropping out were found to have had friends who were dropouts. Apart from that, students who were potential dropouts tended to have friends who had graduated from school. Also, the researchers report that students on the trajectory of dropping out of school had more friends who were in full-time, gainful employment. Most importantly, Ellenbogen and Chamberland report that youth who were likely to drop out of school were those who were more likely to be rejected by their classmates. Based on this and other findings, the researchers argue that ‘... development of an out of school friendship network may become a salient factor in the disengagement process during adolescence’ (Ellenbogen & Chamberland, 1997, p. 363). In a study conducted in Botswana, Makwinja-Morara (2007) found peer pressure to be one of the factors that influenced young people to drop out of school.

Janosz et al. (1997) examined factors which predicted school dropout and how these factors played themselves out over a period of time. Among many other things, Janosz and colleagues found that students on the verge of dropping out of school tended to prefer loitering around with friends to attending class. The researchers also report that students who were about to drop out of school were friends with adolescents who engaged in deviant behavioural patterns within the school environment and outside of school.

Parker and Asher (1987) reviewed some studies to establish the authenticity of the all-too-common claim that problems associated with childhood peer pressure are indicators of behavioural problems in later life. Researchers such as Ellenbogen and Chamberland (1997) found that young people who were not accepted by their school peers tended to drop out of school. Parker and Asher (1987) argue that peer networks are an important source of academic support for students. They indicate
that through peer groups, students are able to come together and tackle complicated educational challenges which they would not otherwise be able to tackle on their own. Students who are rejected by their peers, the researchers argue, tend to perform poorly academically because they do not benefit from these peer academic support groups. For this reason, students who are rejected by their peers do not look forward to going to school; they disengage themselves from school, as Voelkl (1997) points out.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Most of the annual surveys conducted by the Ministry of Education (e.g., Ministry of Education, Republic of Zambia, 2002, 2003) have repeatedly indicated that the problem of school dropout is most rampant among rural adolescents. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to establish how the families and communities in which rural adolescents live influence the choices that they make about schooling.

METHOD

The study used a qualitative research methodology in order to arrive at an in-depth understanding of what school dropout meant to the participants. The researcher was drawn to the qualitative approach in order to try and capture the voices of the participants as regards the experiences they had with school dropout (Cohen & Manion, 1980; Patton, 1999, 2002).

Research participants

A sample of 10 dropouts (five males and five females) was purposively selected from Maanzi Village (pseudonym), a rural setting in the Southern Province of Zambia, which is inhabited by the Tonga-speaking people. The male dropouts were aged between 18 and 22, while the females were aged between 18 and 21. The participants were selected on the basis of them having dropped out of school at adolescence. As with all qualitative research sampling, a small sample was selected to enable the researcher to gain a more in-depth understanding of the school dropout issues under study (Bauer & Gaskell, 2000). Most people in Maanzi Village live below the poverty line; survival is mainly through peasant farming, selling at the market, gardening, and doing odd-jobs.

Procedure

For this study, semi-structured interviews were used to collect the data. Apart from providing depth in the data generated due to their flexibility, semi-structured interviews were chosen because data collected in this manner are suitable for
Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (see Elliot, Fischer, & Rennie, 1999; Reid, Flowers, & Larkin, 2005).

Interviews were first conducted with the five female participants, followed by interviews with the five male participants. Each interview lasted about 50 minutes. For each of the interviews, various forms of probes were used in order to follow up on a number of important issues that emerged from the interviews (Patton, 1990).

In order to allow the research participants to participate freely, all the interviews were conducted in the Chitonga language, the mother tongue of the participants. The researcher (a PhD psychology student at the University of Cape Town), who is also of Tonga origin) conducted all the interviews in order to maintain consistency in data collection, analysis, and interpretation. All the interviews were audio-recorded to allow for translation and more thorough transcription, and analysis afterwards. The researcher did the translation, transcription, and analysis of all the data.

**Data analysis**

The IPA method was used to analyse the data. This method was found to be ideal for this study due to its combination of the phenomenological and hermeneutic principles of data analysis (see Smith, 2004; Willig, 2001). I first read through the transcripts several times so that I could familiarise myself with the data and identify the emerging themes. Then I spent some time looking through the data to identify patterns of themes which were emerging as family and community school dropout factors (Willig, 2001).

**RESULTS**

A number of themes indicating the factors which led rural adolescents to drop out of school emerged after the data analysis. The following themes became notable—lack of role models; the perception that education is a waste of time; bad influence from peers; lack of parental involvement in their children’s schooling; and low socioeconomic status. To identify the participants, I have used numbers and gender designation. For instance, the identification of a female participant number 1 would appear as follows: F/Dropout 1, while that of a male participant with the same designation would appear as, M/Dropout 1. I have used this format to identify participants in order to preserve confidentiality and anonymity, both of which are critical ethical requirements.
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Lack of role models

Most participants indicated in the interviews that they did not feel encouraged to further their studies because there were no educated people in their families and in communities where they lived who they could look up to for inspiration. The following two excerpts typify the responses that were given here:

*M/Dropout 4*

‘... in many families there are no educated people who children can look up to for inspiration … ’ (Interview, August, 2006).

*F/Dropout 1*

‘When there is one who is educated in the family, they will be able to help pave the way open for their young brothers and sisters’ (Interview, August, 2006).

These two excerpts seem to suggest that the participants would have been encouraged to pursue their studies had they had people who they could look up to for inspiration. Consequently, it seems that the participants had resigned themselves to repeating the vicious cycle of illiteracy in their families.

Education is a waste of time

Closely connected to the theme of lack of role models, participants indicated that they were not encouraged to complete their schooling because education did not seem to improve the lives of those people who had completed school. To cite one participant:

*M/Dropout 5*

‘A lot of educated people in this community do not have anything; in fact, in a lot of cases the uneducated are leading better lives than those who are educated. This has made a lot of parents stop applying themselves in the education of their children’ (Interview, August, 2006).

In this excerpt, the participant seems not to see any value in being educated by indicating that those who were educated were leading worse lives than those who were not educated. The next excerpt from another participant seems to amplify the message in the previous excerpt:

*F/Dropout 4*

‘There are very few people who have completed school and have jobs; a good number have completed grade twelve but have no jobs. As a result of people who completed school not finding employment, those who are still in school do not get motivated to complete school- they do not see the point. If those who complete
school could have good jobs, students in schools would be attracted to aspire after their status’ (Interview, August, 2006).

**Bad influence from peers**

Participants indicated that young people got swayed away from school due to the pressure to indulge in unwanted activities such as drinking, smoking, sex. The following two excerpts typify the responses that were given here:

_F/Dropout 5_

‘Girls mostly roam around with boys, even those who are still at school, they do not want to read; most of the time they are at the market roaming about…. Most boys also drink beer and a good number of these are still in school’ (Interview, August, 2006).

_F/Dropout 2_

‘Girls and boys do all sorts of horrible things like drinking beer, stealing. Some do other disgusting things like chasing after people’s wives’ (Interview, August, 2006).

**Lack of parental involvement in the education of their children**

Participants also cited lack of parental support in their pursuit of education as one of the factors that lead young people to drop out of school. According to one participant:

_M/Dropout 3_

‘Parents want their children to do what they (parents) do; if they are farmers, they will want their children to be farmers as well. Because of this, parents do not really push their children into school and the children also tend to follow the line of their parents’ (Interview, August, 2006).

In the next excerpt, the participant seems to indicate that the allocation of duties at home by parents did not permit girls to study or revise their work at home:

_F/Dropout 2_

‘Girls usually do not have time to do their school work at home because they get home from school at 5pm. When they get home, they have to start cooking, after that, they have to do the dishes and then sweep the house. You could only study late at night when you were already very tired’ (Interview, August, 2006).

In the next excerpt, the participant seems to indicate that his father had a choice of sending him to school or keeping him at home so that he could help with farming:
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**M/Dropout 1**

‘... my father wanted me to manage things on the farm since I was the only one who could do that at the time. Because of this, my father was reluctant to find me a place in school’ (Interview, August, 2006).

**Low socio-economic status**

Finally, the participants indicated that they found it difficult to continue with schooling due to economic constraints in their families. As one participant observed:

**F/Dropout 3**

‘The way we live especially us women, survival is through selling at the market. This is the kind of life I have always led, even when I was a young girl, I used to all the time go to the market to sell things... I would go in the bush to dig some edible roots (lusala) and sell them at the market. Sometimes I would be sent to sell fresh milk after the cows had been milked. That has been my life’ (Interview, August, 2006).

This excerpt seems to give a typical example of what goes on in Maanzi Village, where due to the high poverty levels, even school-going children get involved in raising income for the family. A similar message is communicated in the next excerpt:

**M/Dropout 5**

‘I stopped because my mother could not afford to pay my school fees, my father died. To get where I got, I used to grow and sell vegetables at the market. As time went on, however, it became increasingly difficult for me. Eventually, I just decided to stop school. When I stopped school, I went to work on the farms; I worked for one of these white farmers who just came from Zimbabwe’ (Interview, August, 2006).

In this excerpt, the participant makes reference to his widowed mother’s inability to pay school fees. The participant indicates that he had to grow and sell vegetables to pay for his school requirements.

**DISCUSSION**

As a way of understanding the meaning of the experiences that the participants had with regard to school dropout, an interpretation of the emergent themes was done by relating the participants’ accounts to the available literature and by making social comparisons between and among participants’ assertions (see Smith, 2004).
Lack of role models

Most participants indicated that the lack of role models in families and communities, who could inspire young people to aspire to study further influences the youth’s decisions to drop out of school. These findings seem to corroborate what Abu-Rabia-Queder (2007) found in her study among the Bedouin female dropouts, where most of the dropouts she interviewed had parents who were themselves dropouts and unemployed. Rumberger (1983) also argues that parents who have attained a higher level of education may have a positive influence on the education of their children.

Education is a waste of time

With regard to there being no visible benefits from education, participants indicated that they were discouraged from continuing with schooling due to the considerable number of educated people who were languishing without jobs. It would appear, in fact, as indicated by M/Dropout 1 and F/Dropout 4, that the community does not attach any value to education. Barton (2005) seems to support these findings—he argues that clarifying the links between schools and getting a job may convince more students to stay in school. In the current study, it seems the participants had reached a point of disillusionment about the value of schooling. Having lived in their communities with people who were leading impoverished lives in spite of being educated, most of these participants seemed to have started regarding education as a waste of resources. Similar findings were reported by Dekkers and Claassen (2001), where they argue that some students in the Netherlands were lured out of school because they found the subjects that they learnt at school not to have much relevance to the kind of jobs that they wanted.

Bridgeland et al. (2006) also argue that if schools provided opportunities for real-world learning, they would improve the students’ chances of staying in school until graduation. Voelkl (1997) indicates that students identify themselves with their schools more if they see that the subjects that they are studying at school will enable them to attain a higher social stratum when they graduate.

Bad influence from peers

The participants in this study cited bad influence from peers as one of the factors that led the youth to drop out of school. Activities such as drinking beer, smoking, truancy, and engaging in sex as indicated by F/Dropout 5 and F/Dropout 2 were cited as the most common activities that peer groups engaged in at the expense of schooling. Makwinja-Morara (2007) seems to corroborate these findings. In her study, she found that among the youth in Botswana, peer pressure was responsible for a number of students getting involved with the opposite sex and becoming sexually active at a young age. Ellenbogen and Chamberland (1997) reported that actual dropouts and those students who were on the verge of dropping out of school had more friends...
who had dropped out. The finding by Ellenbogen and Chamberland also seems to indicate that peer groups had some influence on the decisions that young people made on whether to continue with school or to drop out. Janosz et al. (1997) also argue that potential dropouts tend to have friends who were not interested in school.

**Lack of parental involvement in the education of their children**

The lack of involvement by parents in the education of their children was also cited by most participants as one of the contributing factors to school dropout. Most of the participants indicated that parents were mainly concerned about teaching their children how to fulfil chores in the home. M/Dropout 3 seems to encapsulate this where he observes, ‘... parents want their children to do what they do; if they are farmers, they will want their children to be farmers as well...’ One possible reason why parents did not seem to be interested in the education of their children might be due to what the participants observed earlier – namely that education was perceived as waste of time because it made no difference in the lives of those who got educated. Thus, parents also may have gotten disillusioned about education being a means of attaining a higher social stratum in life.

Makwinja-Morara’s (2007) study yielded similar findings – she reports that parents of dropouts showed little involvement in the academic and/or non academic affairs of their children. Fagan (1995) and Fine (1986) also report that lack of family support often pulls children away from school. Bridgeland et al. (2006) indicate that one of the keys to keeping students in school is to have better communication between the parents and school personnel. Similarly, Rumberger et al. (1990), report that most parents of dropouts were not actively involved in the education of their children. Coleman’s (1987) findings about school dropout being linked to lack of social capital in families and communities also seem to provide support for these findings. Fobih (1987) also indicates that dropping out of school is linked to parents’ unsupportive attitudes towards the education of their children.

**Low socioeconomic status**

The findings in this study have also indicated that the high poverty levels in Maanzi Village had an impact on the decisions that young people made to drop out of school. As indicated by F/Dropout 3, a number of school-going children were involved in income-generating activities in order to supplement the usually low family incomes. This meant sometimes staying away from school. For M/Dropout 5, poverty made him to leave school to go and work on the farm, ‘... my mother could not afford to pay my school fees ... I just decided to stop school.... I went to work on the farms’. Apart from the responses given by research participants, the demographics show that the majority of the people in Mainz Village live below the poverty line. Most
people survive through peasant farming, gardening, selling vegetables at the market, and doing odd-jobs from time to time. Rumberger’s (1983) study yielded similar findings— he reports that students from poor socioeconomic backgrounds were more prone to drop out of school. Lemrini (2000) and Seth (2001) also indicate that the prevalence of school dropout was more pronounced in poor communities.

The situation that was found in the current study where, students dropped out of school due to engaging in income-generating activities can be explained by relating it to what a number of participants observed earlier— namely, that finishing school did not provide motivation for young people because a lot of people who had completed school did not lead better lives afterwards. Thus, income generating activities may have become pull factors that drew young people away from school, due to the fact that they seemed to offer more viable alternatives to schooling. In relation to leaving school to find jobs, Ellenbogen and Chamberland (1997) found in their study that students who were on the verge of dropping out associated more with peers who had a job and were earning an income. Similarly, in the Netherlands Dekkers and Claassen (2001) report of young people being lured out of school into the job market due to the fact that subjects that were offered in schools were not relevant to the jobs that they wanted.

CONCLUSION

This study has further underscored the observation made by earlier studies (e.g., Alexander et al., 1997; Ensminger & Slusarck, 1992) – that dropping out of school is a complex phenomenon that is influenced by numerous factors. Thus, rather than merely attributing dropping out of school to the personal attributes of the students who dropout, it seems more appropriate to look at the problem in context. In this respect, the current study has shown that the decisions that adolescents make to drop out of school can be linked to the circumstances in the families and communities where they live and cannot (or should not), be viewed in isolation. Through this study, I have also advocated the need for the study of the incidence of school dropout in Zambia to go beyond general annual surveys that merely broadly indicate the prevalence of the problem. Therefore, more in-depth studies need to be conducted in Zambia in order to understand this phenomenon. Future studies need, for instance, to investigate how cultural practices in rural traditional societies may influence the decisions that adolescents make about schooling. It is also vital for researchers to begin investigating the contribution school environments might have on influencing students to drop out of school.
LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Due to the small purposive qualitative sample that this study used, the findings that were generated from this study cannot be generalized for the whole population. In addition, because of the dearth of African literature on school dropout, this study has relied heavily on foreign literature to situate the findings. Thus, while the findings of the current study have largely been supported by the foreign literature, there is a need to exercise caution because of the inevitable cultural differences.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Ecloss Munsaka is a Zambian, born on 25 September 1973. He has been a full-time lecturer of educational psychology at the University of Zambia since January 2003. Currently, he is on study leave, finalising his PhD thesis in Psychology at the University of Cape Town in South Africa. His interests include the following areas—adolescent development, school dropout, counselling, and life coaching.

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