



Major factors contributing to boys dropping out of secondary schools

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This article reports the factors which contribute to boys dropping out of secondary schools in Namibia and other countries of the world. On average male students drop out of school in greater numbers than female students. Major factors that contribute to boys dropping out of school are: poor parental support in both academic and social lives of boys, failure on the part of boys to value and appreciate education, and the influence of peers. Another factor that influences boys to leave school early is financial difficulties of families. This factor drives boys to seek employment to supplement family income.

Keywords: students dropping, education statistics, attitude of students, parental education, parental support, peer influence.

Introduction

Namibia education statistics on enrolment figures at the Ministry of Education from 2004 to 2007 shows that there are more girls in schools than boys, both at primary and secondary schools. The phenomenon is prevalent in all but two regions of the country, namely Caprivi and Kavango. The other eleven regions (Ohangwena, Oshana, Omusati, Oshikoto, Kunene, Otjonzondjupa, Erongo, Khomas, Omaheke, Hardap and Karas) show a significant increase in the number of boys dropping out before completion of year twelve (Ministry of Education, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007; National Planning Commission, 2004). More girls than boys are completing secondary school despite that more boys than girls are enrolled in grade one (Ministry of Education, 2007). According to education statistics, there were 33,963 boys and 32,247 girls enrolled in grade one in 2005 (Ministry of Education, 2005). In the following year (2006), a total of 33,959 boys and 32,034 girls were enrolled, and in 2007, there were 35,659 boys and 32,202 girls (Ministry of Education, 2006, 2007). Though more boys are enrolled

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in grade one, later on in schools girls outnumber boys especially as students move from primary to junior and senior secondary levels. At junior and senior secondary levels, girls' enrolment remained higher than that of boys (Ministry of Education, 2003, 2005 & 2007).

From 1994 to 2003 school enrolment was biased in favour of boys at both primary and secondary school levels (National Planning commission, 2004). Girls generally drop out of school because of teenage pregnancy. Several interventions were put in place, such as to allow pregnant girls to continue with schooling. The tide has now turned, and it is now boys drop out of school. Following this statistics our study attempted to explore the factors contributing to boys leaving school earlier than girls in secondary schools in the Khomas Region. The objectives were to:

- identify factors which affect the progress of boys in secondary schools, and
- find out what could be done to increase retention of boys in secondary schools.

The study was conducted in the Khomas Region, a region which comprised mainly of the capital city, Windhoek. Windhoek schools have a rich mixture of cultural and ethnic diversity (Shaningwa, 2009). Furthermore, several industries and social amenities are located in Windhoek and attract a large population to this region. Schools enrol children from different ethnic groups, races, and socioeconomic backgrounds (Mowes, 1997).

Theoretical framework

Rumberger (2001) suggested two theoretical frameworks to elucidate the phenomenon of students dropping out of school. One framework focuses on “the contextual factors found in the students’ families, schools, communities and peers,” which contribute to boys and girls dropping out of school (Rumberger, 2001, p.10). The European Commission (2010) found that contextual factors such as poor family background, child vulnerability, change of place of residence or school, mental disability, history of disengagement from school, poor performance in school, the need to contribute to family income or caring for family members, etc. are likely to contribute to learners dropping out of school in Europe. In Africa, poverty is one of the major factors causing boys and girls to drop out of school, hence African states are trying to abolish school fees (The World Bank and UNICEF, 2009).

Another framework focuses on attributes of learners such as “values, attitudes, and behaviour” (Rumberger, (2001, p.10), and how the attributes influence learners’ decision to withdraw from school. For example, in the United Kingdom boys express their masculinity through “laddishness”, a culture which is anti-school (Jackson, 2002). They perceive undertaking academic work as feminine and therefore need to be avoided or at least one must appear to avoid it even if it means that one has to drop out of school.

Students are either engaged or disengaged in school academic and/or social activities at school. A student may drop out of school because of disengagement from both school academic and social activities or from one of these activities. Dropping out of school is viewed as the last event in a long

23 *Boys dropping out of secondary schools*

process of disengagement from academic and social activities (Plank & DeLuca, 2008).

According to Rumberger (2001) both frameworks are useful and necessary to understand the students drop-out problems. By examining boys' dropout problems in the light of the two perspectives, the researchers were able to identify student attributes and factors from learners' families, the school, peers and the community which are linked to dropping out.

General features that contribute to school drop-out in the world

Poor economic performance of a country is one of the major features contributing to a myriad of factors causing children to drop out of school. Hillman and Jenker (2004) found that school enrolment mirrors a country's economic performance. In many developing countries, "governments lack either the financial resources or the political will to meet their citizens' educational needs" (Hillman and Jenker 2004, p. 1), hence students drop out of school. A survey of gender and education carried out by Silova and Magno (2004) in Eastern Europe and Russian Federation shows that due to economic hardships boys were pressured to leave school. Either they dropped out of school or parents pulled them out to earn an income or to work in family farms.

In the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region, much attention has been given to girls' than to boys' educational issues. Because of this, boys drop out of school. And because of poverty, some of them look for jobs especially in South African mines so they can remit money to their home countries. Sometimes boys in SADC region leave school because they are required to look after family cattle (UNICEF, 2004; Chipita, 2007). In some African countries like Lesotho, it is a tradition of boys to herd livestock and is regarded as a good way to socialize the boys and make them "responsible members" of family and society (Jha and Kelleher, 2006).

During war times, boys voluntarily or forcefully leave school to fight in the war. Countries such Angola, Columbia, Liberia, Mozambique, Democratic Republic of Congo, Sierra Leone, Sudan, and Uganda have recruited children in armed forces (Sendabo, 2004; Brett and Specht, 2004).

Jackson (2002) highlights the fact that developed countries especially in Western societies place high value on 'ability', and in the school settings it is academic ability that is highly valued. In the United Kingdom, some poor performing boys adopt strategies that divert attention from their academic inability. Some of the strategies are procrastination, deliberate withdraw of effort, avoiding appearance of working, and act out disruptive behaviour (Jackson, 2002), which may culminate in school drop-out.

In the U.S.A. boys appear less motivated with school than girls and are more likely to disengage from school than girls. Boys' disengagement from school affects different groups in the Blacks, Asians, Hispanics, the wealthy, middle-income and low income (Sax, 2007). Black boys are most affected and more likely to be suspended and expelled from school, diagnosed with some learning disability or classified as mentally retarded, arrested within the school premises, and fewer black boys as well as Latinos enrol for college or university (McCready, 2009 and Weaver-Hightower, 2003). Similarly, the Aboriginal boys in Australia are more affected by problems of leaving school early (McCready, 2009 and Weaver-Hightower, 2003).

Factors that contribute to boys dropping out of school

Attributes of students

Some factors in this category have been identified which contribute to boys dropping out of school. Gurian and Stevens (2005, p.243) explain that undermotivation in schools may lead to dropping out of school. A school-based research in Britain at four schools, conducted among working class' boys who had been excluded from school, suggests that the behaviour by which boys express their masculinity sometimes leads to their exclusion from school (Kane, 2006). In Kane's (2006) study the boys were excluded for offences such as persistent disobedience, aggression towards their teachers, aggressive and threatening behaviour, and verbal abuse. Schools may discharge students especially boys if their behaviour is contrary to the school norms and is a threat to other learners and teachers.

The attitude of boys towards school is another source of dropping out. Some boys find school boring and feel that it is a waste of time to be in class, therefore put little effort in school work resulting in achieving low grades. They do not appreciate education and think that education does nothing for them and are more concerned with finding a good job after school (Rayment, 2006).

Contextual factors

Excessive corporal punishment in schools can affect class attendance and learning among boys and girls. Students may miss classes or decide to drop out of school because of excessive punishment. Dunne, Humphreys and Leach (2006) and Humphrey (2008) reported the practice of truancy in schools among low achieving boys in response to excessive corporal punishment. Truancy sometimes leads to permanent dropping out of school. A study in Ghana by Ananga (2011) found that boys dropped out of school to avoid corporal punishment while most of the girls preferred to endure it.

A study conducted by Slade and Trent (2000) in Australia at 61 secondary schools reveals that the declining rates of achievement and retention among boys was due to the presence of 'bad teachers' and boring, repetitive and irrelevant school work. Work was boring because it comprised of theory, and teaching and learning which followed the same procedures all the time. When school work is not challenging enough, and the content is irrelevant to their aspirations, boys disengage. Boys also prefer teaching and learning which involve interesting practical work (Askew and Ross, 1988; Slade and Trent, 2000). The kind of curriculum offered and what happens in the classroom are important because they determine whether learners will be engaged in schooling or will drop out.

The family background and the experiences in the home have a strong influence on whether students will complete their education or drop out of school. Some of the family factors that contribute to dropping out of school are: low socioeconomic status, high family mobility, low educational level of parents, large number of siblings, not living with both natural parents, family disruption, sibling has dropped out, low contact with school, lack of conversations about school, and low educational expectations (Hammond, Linton, Smink and Drew, 2007).

25 *Boys dropping out of secondary schools*

Rankin and Aytac (2006) found that there is a link between the boys' and girls' education and parental education in Turkey. Parents' attitudes, values and beliefs about education and their level of education influenced the education of their children. High rates of dropouts have been associated with low parental educational expectations (Hammond, et al., 2007). On the other hand, high parental educational expectations inspired children to higher educational attainments in high school and beyond (Patrikakou, 2004). Educated parents are more aware of the value of education therefore they encourage their children to remain in school and study. Scott-Jones (2002) states that educated fathers or male family members are likely to encourage boys to complete their education. Beekhoven and Dekkers (2005) investigated the early school leaving among boys in the lower vocational track in secondary schools using large longitudinal studies. The frequency of reading books among parents was used to measure cultural capital in the families of boys who dropped out of school. The parents of boys who had dropped out of school were found to read few books than the parents whose boys were still attending school. Furthermore, most boys who dropped out of school were from single-parent families.

A study by Ananga (2011) found that in Ghana older boys between ages 12-17 dropped out of school because of pressure to contribute to household income. They worked on the farms or went to catch fish to sell. The study conducted by Cardoso and Verner (2006) in the neighbourhoods of Fortaleza in Brazil found that more boys than girls dropped out of school. Attendance dropped to 80 percent at age 13 for boys then at age 17 school attendance dropped to 60 percent and decreased to 50 percent at age 18 (Cardoso and Verner, 2006). The attendance rate for boys dropped as they grew older. School abandonment in Cardoso and Verner's (2006) study was mainly attributed to extreme poverty.

During war times some boys voluntarily drop out of school to join armed forces in order to earn an income. Sendabo (2004) and Brett and Specht (2004) report cases of boys who have dropped out of school and joined armed forces because they were expelled from school, did not like school, or they were mistreated by teachers, due to the presence of other push factors in the school, desire to take revenge for loss of a loved ones, exerted peer pressure or being abducted. Countries like Angola, Columbia, Liberia, Mozambique, Democratic Republic of Congo, Sierra Leone, Sudan and Uganda have recruited children in armed forces (Sendabo, 2004). During conflicts more boys than girls are recruited in armed conflicts (Sendabo, 2004; Brett & Specht, 2004).

Methodology

This study used a qualitative case study approach. This was necessitated by the nature of the research objectives, the form of data that was required, the forms of data collection strategies employed, and the need for in-depth discussion and understanding of the phenomenon of boys dropping out of school.

The population comprised of secondary school teachers, principals and boys, including boys who have dropped out of school in the Khomas Region. The following purposeful sampling strategies were employed to select the sample: stratified purposeful sampling, convenience sampling, and purposeful random sampling.

The sample consisted of the following stratified purposeful sub-samples: five principals as managers of schools, five most experienced teachers, five focus

groups of boys currently in school, and 25 boys who had dropped out of school (five boys per school). Document analysis and semi-structured interviews were used as data collection instruments.

Document analysis and interviews combined together facilitate triangulation (cross-validation) (Patton, 2002). Using these methods ensured that the different types of sources of data provided insights into the phenomenon (De Vos, 2002). According to Patton (2002, p. 307) "... document analysis ... provides a behind-the-scenes look at the [phenomenon] ... about which the interviewer might not ask appropriate questions without leads provided through documents". In order to obtain information that could help to ask appropriate questions on the phenomenon, the researchers reviewed relevant literature on the topic, then analysed the following documents: Term Dropout reports at the Khomas Regional Education Office; dropout reports, Form C (document that a principal completes for each learner that drops out of school).

Term Dropout reports were examined at Khomas Regional Education Office to identify schools (sites) with more boys that have dropped out of school from 2006 to 2009. (The Ministry of Education only started keeping Term Dropout reports of students who dropped out of school in 2006; therefore the researchers examined records beginning from 2006). According to the available data, eleven schools were identified as having most boy drop-outs. From the eleven schools, six schools with more boys who dropped out were selected as information-rich sites for the study. Boys in these schools were identified and selected to participate in the study using class registers and the drop-outs were identified using drop-out reports kept in the schools. A pilot study was conducted at one of the six schools, and the main study was conducted at the other five schools.

Findings

Our study identified the following problems to be associated with boys dropping out of school: poor parental support in both academic and social lives of boys, peer pressure and failure on the part of boys to value and appreciate education.

Poor parental support: Poor parental involvement in the education of their children was echoed in all the five schools. The focus groups, teachers, and principals in the schools pointed out that most parents were not proactive in the education of boys instead were more active when their sons had disciplinary cases at school. Teachers and principals reported about parents' apathy towards school meetings and events. One principal explained that some "... parents never take time to find out what their sons do at school or even simple things like finding out whether their sons' exercise books are marked". In his view both boys and girls should be taken care of. A teacher said, "... Just because a boy does not get pregnant, the society feels a boy will succeed without much monitoring. The society needs to pay attention to the boys' needs because there are other things that can go wrong". The teacher further said that some parents replaced their needed supervision and care by giving their children lots of money to spend. According to him, it was better that parents personally supported boys both in academic and social areas. Another teacher said that usually it was the mothers who were more active in the life of boys. A female principal was of the

27 *Boys dropping out of secondary schools*

view that the cultural practice of the man being the provider while the mother took care of the children contributed to this pattern. Mothers continued to participate in the lives of the children while the fathers seemed to be satisfied with just providing material support.

In another school the acting head pointed out the problem of insufficient parental involvement in boys' education and explained that sometimes parents did not have understanding of the value of education or at best did not understand that they also needed to earnestly participate in their children's education. She stressed the importance of parental involvement in the education of boys "... in order to motivate them in doing their school work". The acting head also believed that "... the lack of parental involvement partly stemmed from the fact that parents were deprived of a good education during apartheid regime". She added that "... educated parents are more likely to appreciate the need to participate in the education of their children than parents with little education or no education at all". She explained that in order to prevent boys from dropping out of school, parents were expected to support their sons, monitor and supervise them, and ensure that they attended school and did their homework. She concluded that "... parents need to be educated and reminded of the importance of their role in supporting the boys. The most effective way for parents to help boys is to academically support them by communicating to them their expectations, speaking about their potential, discussing learning strategies, encouraging career aspirations and talking about college education."

Peer Pressure: Peer influence was identified as a factor in boys dropping out of school through associating with boys who had dropped out of school, with friends who did not value education and in participating in activities such as absconding classes, participating in drug and alcohol abuse and smoking. Boys who have friends or parents who use the substances or if the boys can easily access the substances they start using them. The use of these substances unfits the user mentally and in the case of learners, they lose concentration in class. This practice makes the concerned learner to lag behind in school work. The result of lagging behind in school work is dropping out of school because he cannot cope with studies.

Failure of boys to appreciate the value of education: Failure on the part of boys to appreciate education was pointed out as a factor in boys dropping out of school. The lack of appreciation of education on the part of boys showed itself through lack of interest in school, absenteeism, preferring to drop out in order to make money, involvement in gang activities abusing alcohol and drugs which interfere with their education. In the case of absenteeism, boys dropped out of school after missing several lessons and they realized that they were behind in many lessons, performance dropped, and then they lost hope of catching up. At that point the boys dropped from school.

In order to prevent boys from dropping out of school participants were all agreed on the need for more parental involvement in the education of their children. This was deemed significant because parents needed to monitor the academic progress of the boys, encourage, counsel and support boys. In addition boys were expected to be more responsible and take their education with seriousness hence the need to counsel, give advice, motivate and have meetings to discuss different issues that affected boys and their education.

Discussion

The top most factors which contribute towards the boys' dropping out of school are:

- (a) **Poor parental support in both academic and social lives of boys:** This was due to the fact that sometimes parents did not have an understanding of the value of education or at best did not understand that they also needed to earnestly participate in their children's education. This is partly stemming from the fact that most of the parents were deprived of a good education during apartheid regime. Educated parents understand the value of education and expect their children to attain the same level of education or more, and they are more supportive of their children in school.
- (b) **Failure of boys to value and appreciate education:** Failure on the part of boys to value and appreciate education manifests itself in different ways. Sometimes boys lost interest in education and dropped out because they did not see any connection between their aspirations and what they learnt. They overlooked the fact that education leads to stable and better wages. Some boys did not want school anymore, instead they wanted to work and make money. The notion of making "big money" through, among others, the music industry was a major factor. The result is that they lose interest in school and invest more time in making money business hoping to succeed. This is rather a common situation which needs to be addressed by school authorities and parents. The music industry, though lucrative, only few make it and this knowledge has to be made available to learners at an early age.
- (c) **Peer influence:** Peer influence was felt among boys through wrong choices of friends such as associating with boys who had dropped out of school, in absconding classes, participating in drug and alcohol abuse, and smoking. This influence was also felt through hanging out with friends who did not value education.

Conclusion

Factor (a) above directly affects the attitude that the young people take with them in school, from school activities to academic work; and factor (b) directly stems from factor (a). This complex interrelationship is woven in the fabric of society and how it imparts values to secondary school children. Thus both teachers and parents should be involved actively in social and academic upbringing of the boys.

Parental participation in the school life of boys is important because it motivates the boys and helps them to cope with both academic and social pressure. Teachers also get motivated to do a better job as they see the interests of parents in their children.

There is need to care for the "boy child" not only academically but also socially as well. Teachers as well as parents need to be more aware of the needs and challenges that boys are facing. Some of the social activities that boys

29 *Boys dropping out of secondary schools*

engage in work against their education therefore parental involvement is paramount. Boys' education needs should be addressed on national and school levels to ensure that the educational needs and opportunities for both sexes are met. This will require identifying boys that are disadvantaged and or have social problems.

In general, Namibian girls are taken care of academically and socially while boys are not attended to in a similar way. A typical example is the school which held seminars for girls once a month but had nothing for boys. During the seminars girls received information on social issues like, dating, rape, sex, pregnancy, violence against women, self-respect and setting personal goals for life. Similar programmes in schools will help boys handle pressure from both academic and social environment. Open discussions with boys would also create an opportunity to learn some of the challenges that boys face and how their school work is affected.

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