

## Investigating factors that lead to school dropout in Namibia

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### ABSTRACT

*Although schools report a variety of reasons why learners leave school prematurely, these reasons do not reveal the underlying causes, especially multiple factors that influence learners' attitudes, behaviours, and performance prior to dropping out. In order to understand the underlying causes behind learners' decisions for dropping out, using a quantitative approach through document analysis this study first analysed the Education Management Information System (EMIS) reports for 2005 to 2009. The findings revealed that Kavango, Kunene and Omaheke regions were the regions with the highest dropout rates in the country.*

*Using a qualitative approach, with a phenomenological design, the researchers interviewed school principals, school counsellors and teachers at randomly selected 20% of schools with the highest dropout rate for each region. This resulted into 58 schools in the Kavango region, 10 schools in the Kunene region and 5 schools in the Omaheke region. At the same schools, and using the snowball sampling procedure, the researchers selected and interviewed learners who have dropped out at some point during their schooling days but came back to school.*

*The study found that, for all the learners interviewed, 50% of learners dropped out due to pregnancy, 20% dropped out due to economic factors, 15% due to system factors, 11% due to lack of parental involvement, and 4% due to cultural factors. On the basis of the findings a number of recommendations are made to mitigate the dropout phenomenon.*

**Keywords:** *dropout, teenage/learner pregnancy, child labour, parental involvement, child-headed households*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

This paper is an extract of a national study on dropout conducted towards the end of 2011 by the authors. The aim of the dropout study was to investigate the factors influencing school dropout in Namibian public schools, and be able to offer constructive and alternative ways of dealing with the school dropout issue. Even though many studies

on the phenomenon of dropout and its causes had been carried out in many countries across the globe (Finn, 1989; Evans, Chicchelli, Cohen & Shapiro, 1995; Hunter & May, 2003; Grant & Hallman, 2006; Lamb, Markussen, Teese, Sandberg & Polesel, 2011; Reddy & Sinha, 2010; Ananga, 2011), in Namibia, no published study of this nature could be located. The study tried to establish the extent to which learners drop out of schools, determine the scope, volume and nature of the school dropout in Namibia, identify who these learners are and explore the causes and factors contributing to school dropout. It was anticipated that the findings would assist in defining the dropout problem because it is only when we understand the dropout problem that we can address it better.

Like other researchers on this subject, the Namibian researchers undertook this study with the belief that dropout is a process and that before learners actually drop out of school, a lot of critical events would have taken place that would finally led to the decision to drop out (Lamb et al, 2011). It is these events that were investigated and provided information regarding dropout challenges in our public schools.

## **2. THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF SCHOOL DROPOUT**

It is a well-known fact that school completion is a milestone of an individual's attainment in any society (de Cos, 2005). According to Keith Lewin (2007, p. 2) *"lack of education is both a part of the definition of poverty and a means of its reduction"*. It has also been proven that *"those with more education, and the qualifications that validate what has been learned, enjoy high living standards, greater incomes and accumulate more assets"* (Lewin, 2007, p. 3). It is for these reasons that access to education, especially to basic education, lies at the heart of achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and Education For All (EFA).

Generally, dropout is understood by many researchers as a developmental process, starting in earliest grades (Finn, 1989; Evans, Chicchelli, Cohen & Shapiro, 1995; Lamb et al, 2011). Similarly, these researchers noted that dropout is the inability of the learner to continue with school, usually due to learners own capability (performance and behaviour) or socioeconomic conditions. There are also circumstances where the system is responsible for not enabling the learner to continue in school, what some researchers call pushout as opposed to dropout (Reddy & Sinha, 2010; Ananga, 2011).

Nonetheless, researchers have over the years established that school withdrawal reflects a complex interplay among learner, family, school, education systems and policies as well as community variables (Finn, 1989; Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko & Fernandez 1989; Newmann, Wehlage, & Lamborn, 1992; Rumberger, 2001; Christenson & Thurlow, 2004; Reddy & Sinha, 2010; Ananga, 2011). Although a number of theories and models have been advanced to explain the dropout phenomenon among primary and secondary education students, the theoretical framework employed for this study is a combination of individual and institutional models of school dropout developed during the 1990s



(Wehlage et al, 1989; Rumberger, 2001). The researchers chose these perspectives because they take into consideration the complex interplay as well as the developmental process and nature of school dropout.

The individual theoretical perspective which focuses on individual factors associated with dropping out is based on students' attributes, including their value systems, attitudes and behaviours regarding school engagement and how they contribute to the decision to eventually drop out of school (Wehlage et al, 1989; Newmann et al, 1992; Hunter & May, 2003; Grant & Hallman, 2006). According to Rumberger (2001), the advocates of this perspective believe that dropping out is influenced both by the social and academic experiences of students. They see dropout as a result of failure in school, including the three factors of academic achievements - reflected in students' performance; educational stability - whether students remain in school and educational attainment - reflected by years of schooling completed (Rumberger, 2001). The researchers contextualised this study into the individual framework to be able to understand the role that students play in their dropping out of school.

While the individual perspective tries to understand the role that students play in their own dropout, advocates of the institutional perspective believe that individual attitudes and behaviours are shaped by institutional settings where students live, *learn* and play (Rumberger, 2001). The institutional theoretical perspective, focuses on contextual factors found in institutions such as students' families, communities, schools as well as education systems and policies, also plays a major role in students' decision to dropping out of school (Wehlage & Rutter, 1989; McNeal, 1999; Rumberger, 2001; Hunter & May, 2003; Grant & Hallman, 2006; Reddy & Sinha, 2010; Ananga 2011). According to Rumberger, the social environment and contexts in which behaviour takes place is shaped by a number of factors including:

- (1) "family factors such as family background and status;
- (2) school factors which include student composition, resources (including quality teachers) as well as processes and practices;
- (3) community factors which include peer groups and neighbourhood characteristics" (2001, pp. 10-21).

Even though there are newer theoretical models of explaining school dropout, the researchers employed a combination of the individual and institutional viewpoints because they believe both perspectives are important in understanding the student, socioeconomic, cultural factors as well as the pedagogical practices, routines, and administrative procedures responsible for the dropout phenomenon.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

Due to the fact that the study looked at many variables influencing school dropout, it followed a mixture of qualitative and quantitative approach, even though the findings discussed in this paper are based on the outcome of the qualitative part of the study. The process and methodology used was divided in two phases. First, during phase 1 the document analysis method was used in analysing the 2005 to 2009 EMIS reports obtained from the Ministry of Education for all thirteen (13) regions in order to establish the dropout rate for each region over the past five years and table 1 below shows the dropout rate for all thirteen (13) regions:

Region	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	Total	Avg Annual dropout rate	Rating
Caprivi	7%	5%	4%	4%	5%	25%	5%	9
Erongo	7%	2%	4%	4%	3%	20%	4%	12
Hardap	7%	8%	6%	8%	7%	36	7.2%	5
Karas	5%	6%	7%	8%	6%	32	6.4%	7
Kavango	12.9%	8.8%	10.3%	9.9%	9.6%	52%	10.4%	2
Khomas	5.8%	1.1%	3.7%	0.2%	4.1%	15%	3%	13
Kunene	17.4%	6.5%	13.3%	10.7%	9.3%	57%	11.4%	1
Ohangwena	6.8%	7.1%	5.5%	6.9%	6.8%	33%	6.6%	6
Omaheke	10.8	10.8%	10.8%	6.8%	8.5%	48%	9.6%	3
Omusati	7%	6%	6%	6%	6%	31%	6.2%	8
Oshana	5%	4%	5%	4%	4%	22%	4.4%	11
Oshikoto	5%	4%	6%	3%	5%	23%	4.6%	10
Otjozondjupa	8%	7%	6%	17%	6%	44%	8.8%	4

*Table 1: Regional dropout rates over a five year period (2005-2009)*

As can be seen from table 1 above, through analysing the EMIS data of the past five years the researchers identified 20% of the regions with the highest dropout rate in the country which resulted into three (3) regions; namely Kavango, Kunene and Omaheke. According to the Namibia Household Income and Expenditure Surveys (NHIES) 2009/2010 report, these regions are mostly rural, vast and with many of their schools located in rural areas. They are also the regions with strong traditional practices because they are home to Namibian's indigenous groups; the San and Ovahimba communities who are known to be nomadic residents.

For the second phase therefore, the qualitative study was conducted by purposively selecting 20% of the schools with the highest dropout rates from each of the three regions

with the highest dropout rate in the country. This resulted in 58 schools for the Kavango region, 10 schools for the Kunene region and 7 schools for the Omaheke region. The open-ended interviews and focus group discussions were used to collect data during the second phase of the study. Using a phenomenological research design, for each school visited the researchers interviewed the principal, a number of randomly selected dropout learners and held focus group discussions with teachers (usually grade 1, grade 5, grade 7 and grade 10 teachers) and either with a school counsellor or life skills teacher. It should be noted that the study only interviewed learners who dropped out and returned, and included some learners who dropped out and stayed out of school even longer than a year. The following five questions guided the interview and focus group discussions:

- Which students have dropped out of school;
- What are the causes of school dropout;
- What are the consequences of school dropout;
- How do schools deal with dropouts; and
- How do parents deal with dropouts?

#### 4. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

This study tried to explore factors that influence learners to drop out of school by looking into the types and characteristics of school dropouts. An in-depth analysis was conducted on the data collected from schools across the three regions to determine the factors that causes learners to dropout. In this study a dropout learner was defined as a learner who left school before completing a grade or phase and that learner does not come back to school within a particular year. This article contains children’s own accounts why they dropped out of school. These accounts are collaborated by opinions of school authorities and teachers interviewed for this study. Like the Ghanaian study by Ananga (2011), the researchers found the dropout phenomenon in Namibian schools to be highly complex. However, from the repeated statements echoed by learners, principals and teachers from school to school, the researchers were able to classify statements into categories as summarised in the pie chart below:

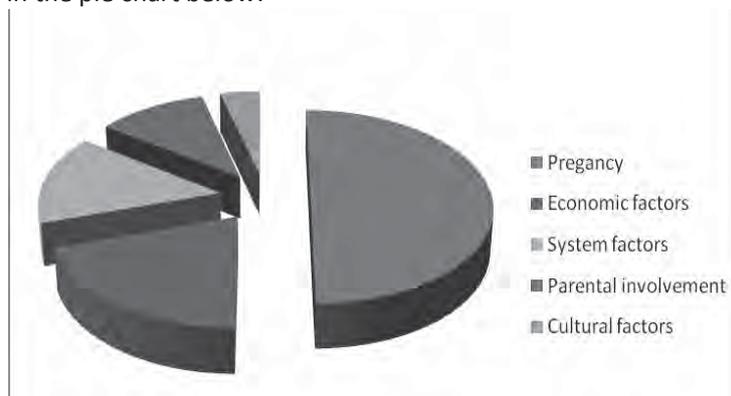


Figure 1: Factors that influence dropout in Namibia

Before discussing these categories, it should be noted that absenteeism is not recorded in this study as a reason for dropping out. A learner is said to have dropped out of school if he/she was absent for more than the allowable days as stipulated by the education policy. The reasons why the learner has been absent for more days than is allowed is therefore taken as real reasons for dropping out. On the basis of the individual and institutional perspectives of school dropout (Rumberger, 2001) the findings are presented as a classification system for dropout and grouped under the following five (5) categories:

#### 4.1 System factors

The researchers classified all those factors that are school and education systems related as system factors and these entailed the following:

(a) *Being absent from school for twenty (20) consecutive days*

As a school policy, learners are dismissed for staying out of school for more than 20 consecutive days. This means that it is not possible for a dropout learner to come back to school at any time other than the beginning of the following year. There was only one school in the Kavango region which allowed learners back in school during the same year, after staying away for more than 20 consecutive days. While the rule was established for good intentions, learners find it a perfect reason for dropping out, especially boys. One boy who was found loading thatching grass on a lorry during school time reported that he was already 'kicked out' of school. When he was asked whether the school authorities actually expelled him, he answered "**I just know it because I stayed away from school for more than 20 consecutive days**".

School authorities are now realising that the system does not serve the intended purpose. It has been observed by many principals interviewed that '*learners who have stayed away for 20 consecutive days tend to repeat this behaviour year after year and eventually drop out permanently*'.

(b) *Academic reasons*

Learners who repeat a grade more than once tend to lose interest in school and decide to drop out because "**I am always failing**". Some children drop out because they dislike school or find school boring, as one boy stated, "**I do not like school, I am just back because my parents forced me to**". Colclough, Rose and Tembon (2000) state that poor academic performance results are associated with higher levels of dropout and grade repetition. Plank, DeLuca & Estacion (2005) on the other hand found that learners are likely to drop out of school if they have one or more years of retention in a grade.

This study also discovered that learners who keep repeating a grade become too old for the grade, which results in them becoming undisciplined and disinterested in learning, and instead resorting to bullying younger learners. Teachers reported that in large classes such learners have succeeded to disrupt teaching and learning for other students. As one



teacher reported **“it is very difficult to control these learners and we are usually happy when they drop out by themselves”**.

*(c) Learning resources and teaching approaches*

Learning materials that are difficult to understand and learning information which is biasedly presented as well as teachers who speak too fast and do not allow opportunities for questions are perfect reasons for learners to drop out. In the Kavango region, schools that have bigger numbers of San learners reported that the history textbook that has a picture of San people in their traditional attire has caused a number of San learners to drop out because **“I do not dress like that”**. Other learners are also found to tease San learners in class regarding their traditional attires, **“hey John, look at your ancestors”**. Such teasing behaviour is reported to continue after class, even at the playground, until the San learner is fed up and decides to leave that environment. Most researchers on participation and dropout provided examples of how unexciting teaching approaches and practices, inadequate or inappropriate learning resources as well as educational facilities of poor quality have led a number of learners to drop out (Colclough et al, 2000; Grant and Hallman, 2006; Hunt, 2007; Ananga, 2011).

*(d) Lack of motivation and/or care guidance*

Learners attending a school where there are no higher grades (for instance schools ending with grade 4, 7 or 8) tend to think that *‘this grade is the end of school’*, no prospects and plans for secondary and post-secondary education. This happens at some rural schools where education is not a higher priority on parents’ agenda. Apart from that, learners who have no family members who have gone beyond a certain grade, tend to think that that grade becomes the *‘end of school’* for them as well. By listening to children narrating what motivated them to remain in school and complete their education, Ananga (2011) concluded that adult influence plays a major role in children’s decision to return to school to complete their education. This study also found that learners do not get a lot of homework because teachers feel that learners have no electricity at home. While this is a noble consideration it also leaves teenagers with a lot of time to their disposal with nothing to do in the afternoon and this leads to lack of motivation.

*(e) Long distances to school*

Due to the fact that some *schools are far* for children to walk, for instance more than 3 kilometres for grades 1 – 4 in all three regions, young children tend to drop out of school because *school is too far* (see figure 1). For Kunene, parents are usually ‘on the other side of the mountain’, which is not accessible by car and this is too far for the learners to walk to school. As a result of long distances from home to school, children in these regions tend to start school older, on average 9 to 10 years of age.



*Figure 2: The road to school, Kavango region*

The picture above is a road the researchers drove to get to a school in the Kavango region. Some 7 to 9 year old learners go through this thicket to school on daily basis. Furthermore, the grass in the picture is the one used for thatching by leading lodges in the country and elsewhere in the Southern African region. For the 10 year olds and older learners this can be a distraction for going to school, as this is the thicket that provides employment to many local young people in the region. If one finds people busy cutting grass for money one joins the party instead of going to school and parents will be told later, '*yes I went to school today*'. Parents have no way of verifying this because their contact with the school is irregular or non-existent. Schools on the other hand will not contact the parents to enquire of the whereabouts of the child because, in many cases, they do not know the parents of their learners.

#### **4.2 Social factors**

The study found that the social factors category is the major contributor to dropout in the country. Learners are dropping out of school to engage in social activities. This category includes:

##### *(a) Teenage pregnancy*

Data from this study and reported in a paper by Nekongo-Nielsen and Mbukusa (2013) found that 50% of the learners interviewed dropped out because of pregnancy. By the time of the interview (July – August 2011) one school in the Kavango region had already recorded 19 pregnancies for the year. Learners, as young as 13 years old, get pregnant and drop out of school to be fulltime mothers. The study found that school dropout due to pregnancy mainly affects female learners. Out of all learners interviewed and who dropped out due to pregnancy there were only two male learners who were dismissed



from school, because they made girls pregnant. Also, unlike some studies that found that girls with poor performance are the ones who get pregnant (Grant & Hallman, 2006), the majority of teachers interviewed for this study reported a **“high number of bright students dropping out due to pregnancy”**.

Teachers’ attitudes towards pregnant learners were found to contribute to more numbers of pregnant learners dropping out of school. The findings indicate that, after giving birth, teenage mothers lack support both at home and school. Students reported that teachers allow other students to continue to *‘make fun of them and embarrass them’* in class. They expect the teachers to say something or discipline such learners but nothing happens. **“Many a time, you are left to defend yourself. Sometimes fellow female learners come to your rescue but that is all”**, said one teenage mother. The stigmatisation and the negative teacher interactions at school as well as the lack of support tend to demotivate teenage mothers and contribute to their decisions to drop out of school. These findings are similar to studies conducted in South Africa by Grant and Hallman (2006) and Hunt (2007).

*(b) Peer pressure and indiscipline*

According to Lamb and others (2010; 2011), dropout is the inability of the learner to continue with school, usually due to learners own capability (performance and behaviour) or socioeconomic conditions. This study found that due to *peer pressure and indiscipline* learners tend to engage in destructive behaviours such as alcohol consumption, chilling out as well as bullying activities which lead to dropout. Teachers reported *talking back to teachers* during class and not completing homework as the other behavioural problems experienced at schools. With the school system not having a good referral system, children who are underperforming or with social and personal challenges do not receive adequate assistance. Instead, they continue to misbehave until they are forced to drop out of school by their circumstances.

### **4.3 Economic factors**

Below are some economic factors that were found to contribute to school dropout:

*(a) Child labour*

While the country has a high unemployment rate for young adults, the under 15 years are actively employed. Depending on the location of the school, children as young as 10 years leave school for employment purposes, earning an income to spend on other necessities and not necessarily on school related commodities. However, a study by the Government of Ghana and UNICEF (2012) found that children find it difficult to manage both work and going to school. Akyeampong, Djangmah, Oduro, Seidu, and Hunt (2007, pp 67-68) also found that *“depending on the nature of the work ... child labour can increase the pressure to or cause drop outs from school ...”* This is the same in the three regions of Namibia and as a result, these *paid activities* take learners away from school for some time, usually

more than 20 consecutive days and will be unable to come back once the employment is over. Unlike the Government of Ghana and UNICEF (2012) study however, this study found that boys are more likely to leave school for employment purposes than girls.

While school uniforms are not enforced by school authorities in the three regions, learners demand their parents to provide them with school uniforms, because learners without school uniforms feel out of place if they go in different clothes than the rest of their classmates. Some boys who were found working on a school day claimed that they needed the money to buy school uniforms. With parents not attending teacher-parent meetings there is no way school authorities can educate parents and work with them in addressing the dropout problem. Researchers on parents' involvement in the education of their children concluded that parental involvement enhances academic achievement and motivation for school work (Walker, Wilkins, Dallaire, Sandler, & Hoover-Dempsey, 2005).

The researchers agree with other researchers on this subject that allowing school-going children to work instead of attending school is a parental neglect. Some studies in Africa (Ghana and South Africa) found that child neglect is a survival strategy used by parents facing economic difficulties (Hunt, 2008; Ananga, 2011). This fact could however not be investigated further in this study as it was very difficult to locate the parents of learners and establish their socioeconomic circumstances.

This study however, further found that it is well-to-do people in society (politicians, commercial farmers and business people) that employ most of the school going children. The researchers are in agreement with Hunter and May (2003) and Reddy and Sinha (2010) that job markets should be depressed to serve as a deterrent to dropping out and to encourage children to stay in school. Reddy and Sinha (2010) further advise that governments should focus on *"improving the adult labour market as this would have an impact on reducing the market for child labour"* (p. 14).

*(b) Poverty as a cause of child labour and dropout*

Studies on dropout and child labour found poverty to be the main cause of child labour (Ananga, 2011, Ghana & UNICEF, 2012). In the Kavango region some learners drop out to *fish and sell or supply* fish to somebody's business or *cuca* shops in order to earn an income for their families. For all three regions some school learners work on commercial farms as teams with their parents for the sustenance of the family. A learner who is at a school along the Grootfontein-Rundu road in the Kavango region occasionally works on a commercial farm in the Grootfontein district where his father is also employed. When he comes back to school it is almost the end of the term or school year, and teachers have covered many topics in the syllabus. Academically, such a student would not catch up and will ultimately fail to be promoted to the next grade. Teachers reported that for many learners *'this pattern is repeated year after year'*. As the children become too old for that grade and other learners begin to laugh at them, such children drop out altogether. As stated elsewhere in this paper and concluded by other researchers, school dropout is not



an event is a process of events, situations and contexts which work together to produce dropouts (Hunt, 2008; Lamb et al, 2011)

Additionally, a number of learners were found to drop out because they had *no appropriate clothes* to wear to school. The study found that many learners in rural areas lack appropriate clothing for the rain during the rainy season, for the cold weather during winter and shoes for protection against the hot sand during the dry season (*see figure 3 below*).

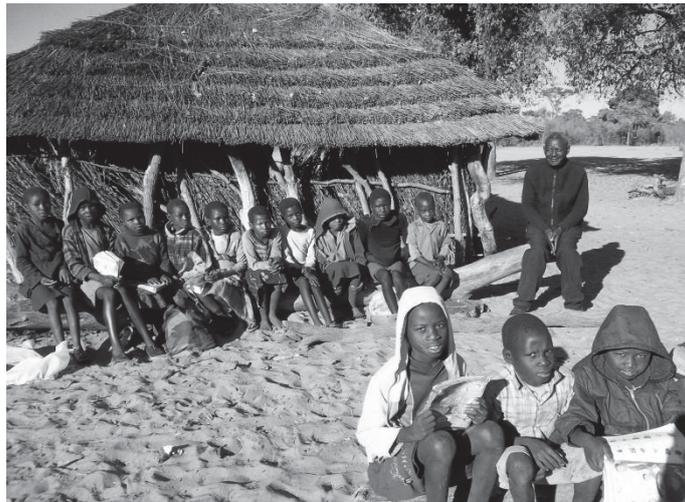


Figure 3: Grade 3 learners basking in the sun with the head of department, Kavango region

(c) *Absence of feeding schemes* at lower primary schools

Researchers on dropout concluded that child hunger in the classroom and the parents' inability to ensure the child is fed before school leads to lack of attention and interest as well as impair long term cognitive development and learning capabilities in the child (Ainsworth, Beegle, & Koda, 2005; Hunt, 2008; UNESCO, 2010; Lamb et al, 2011; Government of Ghana & UNICEF, 2012). These will result in the child having to repeat a grade more than once and causes children to drop out especially poor children. In Namibia, even though there is a feeding scheme at primary schools, food does not arrive on time even though ordered on time. This study found that the absence of feeding schemes contributed to dropout as young learners who came to rely on the scheme drop out to stay at home where there is food. According to school principals '*the majority of children who depend on the feeding scheme are mostly from poor families. They therefore drop out of school and go in search for food somewhere else when the feeding scheme is not there*'.

(d) *Family mobility and seasonal migration*

There were cases reported of families moving during the middle of the school year, taking their children out of school. All schools visited were found to record mobility cases as dropouts, even those that have succeeded in relocating their kids into private schools, since some private schools do admit learners at times other than the beginning of the year.

On the other hand, seasonal migration, practiced mainly in the Kunene region where families move to the river during the dry season and inland during the rainy season, were found to have pulled children out of school before the holidays. Learning is thus affected by seasonal absenteeism as children miss quite a lot of what is being taught throughout the year. Such learners are found to repeat grades and eventually drop out as they become *too old for that particular grade*. Reddy and Sinha (2010) as well as Ananga (2011) in their studies also found seasonal migration to be disruptive to children's learning and results in high grade repetition and decreased educational opportunities. The findings also concur with Hunt (2008) who reported that seasonal absenteeism increases the likelihood of dropping out permanently at some point of the learner's life in many countries.

#### 4.4 Parental involvement factors

Poor parenting and guardianship practices play a critical role in children's decision to drop out of school. Taking care of sick relatives, child headed households and children under relatives guardianships are some of the parental factors that lead to dropout and teenage pregnancy.

(a) *Parenting and the education of children*

The study found that the majority of parents do not take *parenting seriously*. Many parents do not show up at school meetings even when they are called regarding their children's behaviours or academic performances. Children who are given letters by school authorities that summon parents to attend cases of their children's misbehaviour remain unattended since the parents do not turn up. Researchers on parental involvement in education believe that responding to communication from-school-to-home by parents reinforces children's academic performance and motivates teachers to support learners (Ringenberg, McElwee, & Israel, 2009).

This study also found that for school going children who do not live with their biological parents, no one makes an effort to find out how they are doing at school. Furthermore, parents who live away from schools do not care whether their children have gone to school or not (daily or weekly). When called in by the school to discuss the whereabouts of her child one parent is reported to have responded, "**that child, I am also tired of him,**



**just dismiss him from school”**. When teachers enquired what is going to happen to the child after being dismissed from school, the parent apparently responded, **“I do not know, he will know himself”**. In many cases these children are younger than 15 years of age, how can they be left at the mercy of nature to make a decision about their lives and futures? Ananga in the Ghana dropout study has found that poor parenting practices *“play a critical role in pushing children away from school”* (2011, p. 16) and even though many children enroll in schools, not many of them complete school.

*(b) Learner-headed households and guardianships*

This research found that learners with *low economic status* are usually not living with their parents. They are either living by themselves or with a relative. A number of learners were found to live alone, in *child-headed households*, taking care of themselves and their younger siblings. Children who are heading households had their parents living somewhere else, far away from schools, busy minding their crop fields and livestock. A 15 year old girl, heading a household, was in tears while describing her struggles that in many cases she did not have food to provide for her three young siblings and she has to take young siblings to the clinic when they fall sick, even on a school day. Ananga also reported about a learner who had to drop out of school to take care of siblings – *“I was going to school until my mother passed away and my father travelled ... I stopped school to work for money to take care of my brothers and sisters”* (2011, p. 17).

Moreover, Grant and Hallman (2006) in a South African study on participation and dropping out reported that children who live with their biological parents are likely to stay in school, while those living with relatives, because their mothers were living somewhere else or due to bereavement, showed high incidences of dropping out before completing an educational phase. They also found that children who were living with relatives while attending school were not better off than those living in learner-headed households (Grant & Hallman 2006). In this study, learners under relatives’ guardianships reported that they are usually made to do all the household chores and are not allowed sufficient time to study and many a time feel that it is better for them not to go to school. Children whose parents were absent from the household had to make up for work which was supposed to be carried out by the missing parent. Such work has taken away time from the school work such as completing homeworks and doing extra reading prescribed by the teacher. Such learners eventually drop out either because of the pressure at work, poor academic performance or feeling that nobody was showing interested in supporting their schooling any way (Ananga, 2011).

In all three regions it was found that learners as young as nine (9) years old are usually pulled out of school to go and take care of sick parents or grandparents, babysit young siblings, especially during the farming season, and are given some other responsibilities for the families’ wellbeing. Young children denied the right to education and instead made to take up huge responsibilities such as looking after sick adults. In the Kavango region the researchers found two learners who were traumatised because they were made to look after their sick grandparents who ended up dying. It has been reported in the literature

that trauma caused by loss of loved ones is found to be the most important public health among children and usually makes children more vulnerable to dropping out, non-enrolment, late enrolment and slow progress (Ainsworth et al, 2005). According to scientists, trauma causes a release of cortisol in the brain which can disrupt critical aspects of the central nervous system functioning, causing emotional irritability and depression in children (Moroz, 2005). This results in traumatised children unable to relax or fully explore their own feelings, leading to poor self-image and confidence and eventually poor academic performance.

*(c) Educational background of parents*

Information gathered from dropout learners indicates that homes with weaker educational background tend to have their children staying with relatives or by themselves to be able to attend school. These are also the same parents who pull their children out of school to get married prematurely or to take care of sick grandparents or babysit someone else's baby. These findings are similar to those of Mike, Nakajjo & Isoke, (2008) which found that high academic achievement of a father and mother significantly reduces chances of primary school dropout for both girls and boys. This is also in agreement with Ersado (2005) and Grant and Hallman's (2006) studies which found that higher education levels of parents lead to higher attendance and low dropout rates among children.

#### **4.5 Cultural factors**

Economist Intelligence Unit (2012) reported in the Learning Curve that the cultural context in which education occurs is normally left out when analysing educational processes and outcomes. Even though culture is good and shapes the moral fibre of societies, if not well managed and carefully practised it can interfere with the educational progress of the child. A study conducted in Kenya, found that only 40% of the participants disagreed that initiation was keeping them out of school, it means initiation played a role in 60% of learners having to drop out (Mutwol, Cheserek, Boit, & Mining, 2013). In this study, about 4% of all the learners interviewed attributed their dropping out of school to culture related factors. In all the three regions culture has been found to be critical to the performance of learners (especially from age 10 to 15) and the operational conditions of Namibian schools to a certain extent. It should be noted that all three regions are home to diverse cultural groups with strong cultural beliefs, and these cultural practices and traditions are found to take precedence over the education of the child. Below are some cultural factors that were found to influence dropout in the three regions:

*(a) Arranged marriages*

It is cultural amongst some communities in the three regions to allow early or forced marriages among girls even if they are still at school. Once a girl has reached puberty, a husband is found and taken out of school to get married and have children. Once married, these young girls drop out of school permanently. One learner who got married early was



still in grade 5 and carrying her third child. She had this to say to the researchers, “**I really want some education but now with two children and this pregnancy, it is difficult.** If not provided with support both at home and school this learner will eventually drop out permanently. There are many learners reported in the literature who would like to return to school and complete their education (Ainsworth et al, 2005; Ananga, 2011).

*(b) Herding livestock and sickness of relatives*

This study found a number of learners who reported that their parents took them out of school to attend to ‘*family matters, including taking care of livestock and attending to long term sickness of relatives*’. Culturally, these matters are more urgent and are of higher priority to parents than the child’s education. In the Kunene region the study found that when parents have to go and take care of a sick relative, or to attend a funeral it is usually the school going child that has to be taken out of school to take care of the household during the time the family is away, if the child is older. If the child is too young to stay home alone, s/he will be taken with to visit the sick relative and will have to miss school.

## **5. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**

This study was limited to the three regions with the highest dropout rates in the country, Therefore, the findings should be treated with caution when applied to other regions. Also, the initial plan was to interview parents for all dropout learners but it became very difficult to locate parents as the majority of learners lived by themselves near the schools or in hostels. As a result, parental factors that influence reported in this study are from the learners’, school authorities’ and teachers’ perspectives. Research is need to thoroughly investigate parental factors from the parents perspectives to better understand the influence that parents have on the learners’ decisions to drop out.

## **6. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

This study established that the factors that lead to dropout are mirage and are as diverse as the communities of the three regions themselves. Namibian learners drop out at an early age; an average age of all learners interviewed was 13 years of age. More boys were found to drop out due to system and economic (especially employment) factors and more girls dropped out due to social (especially pregnancy) and cultural factors. In the majority of cases, girls were the ones pulled out of school to take care of grandparents, and are often requested by parents to assist the family to cope in times of difficulties.

The rural/urban dynamics of dropout indicate that pregnancy and child headed household factors increase as you move from rural areas to urban centres. Child labour on the other

hand is more prevalent at semi-urban schools, while lack of motivation, too old for the grade and distance from school increase as you move from urban to rural areas. Poverty, hunger and academic reasons were found to be non-locational - meaning, they cut across all regions and regional terrains.

The study further found that while Namibia has a high percentage of learners enrolling, not many are completing junior secondary school. Lewin (2007) noted that who goes to school and who completes secondary education is a “*major determinant for future life chances and the mobility out of poverty*” (p. 3). It is therefore necessary for Namibia as a country to mitigate the dropout phenomenon and ensure more young people progress to secondary education and eventually graduate from secondary school.

Even though the findings are not generalizable, to address the dropout problem requires multifaceted strategies, targeting community leaders, parents and the school environment. The following recommendations are not comprehensive, but could be used to address the dropout problem systematically, within the given resources of the regions and government support:

1. The study established that dropout is a problem which is robbing Namibia of her most important resource at an early age. There needs to be a policy developed to address this problem, making sure children remain in school until they complete or until they attain the age of 16 years old as per constitutional requirement. That policy should also specify better ways of disciplining learners who absent themselves from school and provide guidelines for parental involvement in their children’s education.
2. There needs to be an assistant teacher system for grades 5, 7 and 10, the grades where learners tend to drop out in high numbers. This need should take into consideration the diversity of learners in the classroom as regards to culture, age, learning styles, special needs and their academic capabilities and recognize that there are still many parents, especially in rural areas who are unable to assist their kids with school activities (e.g. homework). The assistant teacher system will also help teachers in provide learning support to learners who need it. Within this strategy a referral system should be created to enable learners to obtain professional assistance when required and before they drop out.
3. A remedial system should be instituted to provide extra tutorials to learners who dropped out returned to school to enable them to catch up and progress in their learning endeavours.
4. There should be strategies aimed at both preventing pregnancy and assisting teenage mothers cope with their new situation, of being parents and learners. These strategies should include:
  - a. Monitoring the implementation of the learner pregnancy policy at schools with the aim to address emerging issues and gaps.



- b. Collaboration between school authorities and health professionals in the country to prioritise reducing the number of learners who become pregnant and who drop out of school due to pregnancy.
  - c. Undertaking a cohort research study to compare the educational attainment of teenage mothers to non-mothers and provide recommendations for addressing emerging issues. Research is especially needed to determine how many teenager mothers actually complete primary, junior secondary, senior secondary and eventually enter further and higher education institutions.
  - d. Providing continuing professional development to address teachers' attitudes with the aim of creating a conducive school environment in which pregnant learners and teenage mothers can live and learn.
  - e. Working in collaboration with partners, schools should create support groups for dropouts who have re-enrolled. Studies elsewhere indicate that teenage mothers and other dropout learners who receive support at school tend to remain and complete school (Evans et al, 1995).
5. There is a need for a serious campaign carried out by the Ministry of Education targeting law makers, civil servants and private companies and/or individuals who employ school going children and those who impregnate learners.
  6. Schools that have grades 1 - 5 and have learners who travel between 3 and 5 kilometers should have an effective feeding scheme.
  7. Cultural practices are ruining adolescents' lives, preventing them from starting school and for those who have managed to start, preventing them from completing. An intervention for the tribal chiefs and village headmen needs to be developed. For such a programme to make a significant impact it must be developed and implemented in collaboration with Regional Councils.
  8. The study noted that the largest dropout for all regions is in grade 10 after the JSC Examinations, as many learners are not allowed to repeat that grade. In dropout studies this is called a pushout and research is recommended in this area to establish the effects that the pushout system has on the educational achievement of Namibian children.
  9. Even though this study did not specifically look into learners from minority groups, it is a worrying fact that the three regions with the highest dropout in the country are home to the minority and marginalised groups of Namibia. Research should be conducted to determine the dropout patterns among learners from minorities and marginalised communities.
  10. A system of tracking/monitoring learners when they are making non-promotional school changes should be instituted. Every learner should be provided with a transfer letter when deciding to move schools and for every school to request such a letter from learners starting in higher grades for the first time. This will provide

better information and ensure that mobility of learners is being monitored and properly recorded.

11. The Ministry of Education needs to outline the research agenda in view of developing strategies to improve access and success within the education sector, especially as regards to basic education. Research-based methods should be developed to reduce the dropout rate, especially in high poverty and remote rural schools. The research agenda should include: (i) analysis of the effectiveness of policies and practices as well as determining policy gaps, (ii) tracking cohorts of learners at risk of dropping out, (iii) exploring best practices at schools and ensure their replication and (iv) developing monitoring and evaluation instruments to assess progress and impact of policy and practice.

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