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This paper examines the issue of school dropout in six communities in the Savelugu-Nanton District in the Northern Region of Ghana. The study focused on 89 children (64 boys and 25 girls) aged 7–16 years, who had dropped out of school. A snowballing sampling method was employed to recruit participants to the study. Two researchers interviewed the children using semi-structured interview schedules over a period of three weeks. School dropouts were asked to tell their own stories about their schooling experiences and the factors which led to them leaving school. From their accounts dropping out of school appears to be the result of a series of events involving a range of interrelated factors, rather than a single factor. The complex nature of the processes leading to dropout demands input from various actors (i.e. teachers, head teachers, parent-teacher associations, school management committees and community members) to detect and address at-risk factors early in order to reduce the likelihood of dropout.

Introduction

Education is a key to developing the economic, social, scientific and political institutions of nation states (Lockheed and Verspoor 1991). Hence access to education is at the centre of the development agenda of most low-income countries. The United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights makes education a right for every child of school-going age, with most countries making substantial efforts to implement this right. At the Jomtien World Conference on Education for All in 1990, participants collectively affirmed the urgency to make quality primary education accessible to all and to stem the rise of out-of-school children (UNESCO 1991). As a result, national educational agendas and international development agencies have become increasingly focused on primary education. This focus is linked to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), and in particular goal two which states that by 2015 children everywhere will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling.

Enrolments in basic education worldwide have increased and there has been a sharp drop in the number of out-of-school children worldwide (UNESCO 2007). The total number of primary school-age children not in primary or secondary school is estimated to have fallen by 21% between 2002 and 2005 compared to only 5% between 1999 and 2002. In spite of these promising trends, sub-Saharan Africa accounts for about 45% of all out-of-school children (over 72 million globally in 2005) (UNESCO 2007). Ghana has nearly a million children out of school against a

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little over 4.1 million enrolled in primary and junior secondary school (MOESS 2007). In 2004, the median primary school survival rate was lowest (63%) in sub-Saharan Africa and in most countries in sub-Saharan Africa fewer than 50% of the pupils reached the final grade. In comparison, median survival rates were 94% in the Arab States, 97% in Central Asia and above 98% in Central and Eastern Europe, North America and Western Europe (UNESCO 2007, 15).

In Ghana more than 20% of all children of school-going age (6–15 year olds) have either dropped out or never enrolled in school (MOESS 2007). According to the Core Welfare Indicator Questionnaire data more than 30% of children aged 6–11 years dropped out of school after completing primary one (GSS 2003). The problem of dropout is particularly acute in the northern regions of Ghana. The Ghana Education Management Information System (EMIS) data shows that in the 2006/2007 academic year, the completion rate at primary 6 was 76.8% in the Northern Region compared to the national average of 85.4%. For junior secondary completion rate was only 46.8% in the Northern Region compared to the national average of 67.5%. Clearly, for Ghana to achieve universal basic education by the 2015 target, considerable policy attention needs to shift to address the incidence of dropouts from school. Few studies in Ghana have examined in detail how dropout comes about. A study of three districts conducted by the National Development Planning Commission/UNDP in 2004 and cited in Akyeampong et al. (2007) lists critical single events such as illness, marriage, lack of interest in education, inability to pay school fees and child labour as reasons for dropping out of school. What the study does not dwell on is what the common interactional factors that lead to dropout are. If dropping out of school is considered to be a process, then understanding the configuration of decisions, events and interactions that shape exclusion from school is important for policies and practices that could reduce the risk of children dropping out.

This study attempts to explain why and how children drop out of school before the age of 16 (the age for completing basic education in Ghana). It focuses on zones 2 and 5 of The Consortium for Research on Educational Access, Transitions and Equity (CREATE)'s zones of exclusion (see Lewin 2007); that is those children who drop out of primary or junior secondary school before completion. The study uses an interpretive research approach focusing primarily on the real-life experiences of dropouts to understand how dropout comes about and what factors influence this outcome.

Why dropout occurs: perspectives from the literature

The situation of non-school attendance and dropout has become a worldwide concern, in both rich and poor countries. In either context, children from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds are the most vulnerable to dropping out. For example, in the US and the UK, children who drop out or are at risk of dropping out of school are mostly from socio-economically disadvantaged and minority backgrounds (Nesselrodt and Alger 2005). In many developing countries, dropping out is most prevalent in rural areas. Poor children are much more likely to be out of school than their wealthier contemporaries (Filmer and Pritchett 2004; Akyeampong 2009; Rolleston 2009). In much of Africa the problem is about children starting school and dropping out rather than not starting at all (see Dumas et. al. 2004). In the case of Ghana, repetition and dropout trends have fluctuated rather than maintained a simple trend (MOESS 2007). From 1998 to 2006 there has been a consistent reduction in the number of dropouts similar to trends 1984–1994 but progress towards very low

dropout has been slow. According to the Ministry's own assessment there has been a lack of 'consistency and sustainability in policies and strategies meant to address the problem of dropouts and repeaters' (MOESS 2007, 91). In 2005, all school levies were abolished, and capitation grants introduced for all children and a school feeding programme piloted in one school each in all the 138 districts. This resulted in a sharp rise in enrolment across the school cycle, but dropout and grade repetition remains substantial (MOESS 2007).

A number of researchers have attempted to investigate the factors which lead to low educational attendance and attainment in developing countries (see Ramachandran et al. 2003; Palmer 2005; Verspoor 2005). Some of the factors which have been identified relate to household income and parental education and others reflect school conditions (see Hunt 2008). Grimsrud and Stokke (1997) identify factors such as community/traditional culture with loose family structures which allow children to be left on their own to care for themselves, or to feel unsupported in their quest to attend school. Other literature points to the fact that children from poor socio-economic backgrounds, particularly in rural areas, never enrol or drop out of school mainly because of family poverty, with its attendant survival strategies, and Al Samarrai which encourages child labour and a low value being placed on education. Many of the reasons for dropping out of school are also similar to those for non-attendance (Rose 2001, cited in Hunt 2008). Hunt's (2008) review of the literature on dropout, provides detailed analysis of studies that have all cited poverty, with all its many forms and related issues including physical, social and psychological disempowerment in different contexts, as one of the reasons for parents' and guardians' inability to pay for their wards' direct and indirect educational costs, thus forcing them to terminate their education (e.g. Colclough et al., 2000; Brown and Park 2002; Dachi and Garrett 2003; Hunter and May 2003, all in Hunt 2008).

Poverty is also closely related to poor nutrition, resulting in low energy levels which directly have an impact on children's ability to concentrate in school, thereby acting as a barrier to attendance and educational achievement. Ramachandran et al. (2003) found that childhood disability, chronic illness, the frequency, duration and severity of illness and extreme malnutrition of children are often the outcome of poverty, and are associated with irregular attendance and dropout. Similarly, Hartwell et al. (2006) noted that malnourished children in poorer health are not only more often absent from school, but are less able to concentrate and retain information.

Although some studies attribute non-school attendance and dropout to supply factors such as lack of schools, Filmer and Pritchett's (2004) analysis of household survey data from 35 countries, however, casts some doubt on the notion that physical availability of school facilities at the primary or secondary level is the key issue to address with respect to dropout. They argue that in classes of 100 or more, with no materials, indifferent (or worse) teaching, and deteriorating buildings, it is not surprising that there will be high dropout, not due to lack of physical availability but to lack of access to quality education. Lavy's (1996, cited in Nielsen 1998) analysis, however, shows that the quality of schooling has a relatively weak effect on the probability of school attendance, and that other factors may be more important in explaining why children drop out of school.

Teachers have also been cited in some studies as bearing some responsibility for why some children dropout. From her description of the teachers she observed in her study, Nestvogel (1995) suggests that in Pakistan, teachers' lack of adequate initial training translates into their poor teaching methods, their low morale for work due to

low, salary and their involvement in additional jobs and lack of lesson preparation. These factors lead to low commitment to children's learning and progress and ultimately affect their interest in schooling and the value they place on education. Children affected by this begin to attend irregularly and eventually dropout. Fobih et al. (1999) arrived unannounced in 60 public schools in Ghana and found that about 85% of teachers arrived late. Lateness ranged from five minutes up to one and half hours. This meant teaching time was lost, teachers taught fewer school lesson periods, and the school day for pupils was shortened. They found a close relationship between teacher attendance/absenteeism and pupil attendance and absenteeism. Teacher absenteeism and lateness, according to Bennell and Akyeampong (2007) are symptomatic of education systems that are unable to manage teachers effectively, have weak management structures and are unable to provide incentives for teachers to improve their attitudes to work. These conditions make schooling unproductive for children and weaken commitment to education from both children and parents.

Ramachandran et al.'s (2003) explored the intersection between successful primary school completion or non-completion among children living in diverse poverty conditions and key related parameters (for example, poverty, class, gender, birth order, ethnicity, lack of schools or transportation, poor health, etc.). The study ranked factors that influence dropout and implied that dropout was caused by an event rather than through a series of events or conditions that made dropout a likely outcome (see Hunt 2008). Very little effort has been given to identifying events in context and the conditions that lead progressively towards dropout becoming very likely to occur. Understanding more deeply what children say are the interrelated factors that contribute to dropout has not received much attention in the literature. Such knowledge is important if schools, communities and education managers are to identify and respond appropriately to the advanced indications linked to likely subsequent drop out. This study was interested in both the specific events which contributed to dropout as well as those conditions in schools and households which increased the risk of dropout from school.

Other studies have found that failure in examinations and grade repetition is associated with irregular attendance, poor progress in learning and low quality of instruction, all of which increase the risk of dropout. For example, Dumas et al. (2004) report that in Senegal, over one-half of the boys between the ages of 14 and 20 who dropped out did so as a result of failure in the secondary entrance examination. Kane (2004) found that boys are more likely to repeat whilst girls would often be withdrawn if they made little progress in school.

Method of this study

Participants

This study is based on one district, the Savelugu-Nanton district, in the Northern Region of Ghana. It is the fourth most deprived of the 53 deprived districts in the Ghana. The district has a population of 91,415, made up of 49% male and 51% female (MOE 2002). There are 149 communities out of which 143 are in rural locations where 80% of the population resides. The average household size is about 9. The district has a land area of 1790.7sq. km., with a population density of about 61 persons per sq. km. The main occupation is agriculture with about 97% of the active population (18–54 years) involved in farming staple food crops such as groundnuts, maize, rice, yam, cow pea and soya beans. These characteristics, especially farming and

scattered community settlements, make the district particularly vulnerable to factors which promote dropping out of school.

Gross Primary Enrolment (GER) increased from 68.4% in the academic year 2002/03 to 79.9% for 2005/06 (MOESS 2007). Enrolments showed gender disparities in favour of boys. Challenges facing effective enrolment and attendance include the incidence of *kayayei* [child porters] and early marriage for girls. The district was selected for the study on the following reasons: (1) its status as a deprived district, (2) livelihood and demographic characteristics that pose challenges to schooling, and (3) its accessibility in terms of location. Interviews of 89 children were conducted in 6 communities (4 semi-urban and 2 rural). The 6 communities were from 4 out of 19 towns and had vibrant market days every week, located in Savelugu town. In the semi-urban communities, subsistence farming and trading activities are the main occupations of community members and in the rural areas it is mainly farming. There are also public and civil servants, such as teachers, who have farms and engage in petty trading to supplement their incomes, especially in the semi-rural communities. There is migration of both children and adults to Tamale, the capital of the Northern Region, and to the southern part of Ghana, especially Kumasi and Accra, the two largest cities in Ghana. The communities selected are typical of other communities in the district.

The study was able to identify 7–16 year-olds (the school-going age) who had dropped out of school and were still in the communities at the time of the study. Snowballing sampling methods were employed to recruit participants for the study. Two researchers made initial contacts with a small number of participants by visiting lorry stations and market places and establishing contact with other children in each community. Eighty-nine participants made up of 63 boys and 26 girls were contacted by this method within a period of 21 days and this constituted the sample for the study. Each researcher interviewed 6 or 7 children each day.

Data collection

On the first day of data collection, researchers arrived in each community at about 8 o'clock in the morning when children of school-age would be expected to be in school. This made it easy to identify school-age children loitering as absentees, out of school or had never enrolled. Once these were identified, consent was sought from older relatives or households by explaining the purpose of the study before they were interviewed using a semi-structured interview schedule. If they were self-dependent their consent was also sought before interviewing. None refused to be interviewed. The interviews were completed within two weeks. The first interviewees helped identify other out-of-school children by showing interviewers where they could be found. This approach was used in each community to recruit and interview the participants. This snow-balling approach proved very effective as often these dropouts formed a community with a common set of circumstances that bonded them. Consent was always sought either from parents of dropouts or the participants themselves if they were self-dependent.

Results and discussion

Exploring the at-risk factors preceding drop out from school

The 89 children had an average age of 12.8 years with a standard deviation of 2.1 years. Over one-half of them were aged between 12 and 15 years. A little over 60%

had dropped out of school between 2004 and 2007. About 47% dropped out in lower primary (Primary 1–3), 35% in upper primary (Primary 4–6), and 18% in junior secondary school. Thus, the majority (82%) dropped out before junior secondary. Seventy-two of them were from 6 schools in the 6 communities, 4 from schools outside the 6 communities but within the Savelugu town, and 13 from schools outside Savelugu but within the district.

Initially the dropouts were encouraged to tell researchers about their lives especially in relation to schooling and household life. Later they were asked to describe what factors had influenced their decision to leave school. The proportion of dropouts who gave responses related to known factors is summarised in Table 1.

Irregular weekly/monthly attendance

Dropouts were first asked whether there were some days in the week when they were absent from school more than other days. About 38% indicated Thursdays and Fridays were days in which they more likely to be absent. Of this number, only 26% were from the semi-urban communities. The majority were from two schools in the rural communities. For the rest of the children there were no particular days on which they were absent from school more than other days. Being absent was not an event they could predict because of the unpredictable nature of their circumstances. Of the dropouts who absented themselves regularly on the two days, about 80% gave reasons that were school-related whilst the rest cited household related factors. According to the dropouts these were days when teaching and learning hardly took place because of teacher absences, especially on Fridays when some teachers travelled to Tamale (the regional capital) and other bigger towns to spend their weekends. It is not uncommon to find teachers working in rural areas who live with their families in the major town nearest to the school community in which they teach. With time, these dropouts had come to realise that Friday was not a good day to go to school because of high teacher absence. Muslim prayers on Friday afternoons also affected the last two school lessons as Muslim teachers left to participate in Friday prayers. Reasons for irregular attendance related to the household varied but mostly included the need for labour on farms, running errands for parents, looking after livestock, and being required to accompany parents to markets. As one respondent put it 'I didn't use to go to school on Thursdays and Fridays, simply because those are the days I have to help my mother prepare items for the market'.

Table 1. Proportion of children who cited key at-risk factors.

No.	Factors	Total N=89		Boys N=63		Girls N=26	
		No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
1	Difficulty in learning	84	94.4	59	93.7	25	96.2
2	Corporal punishment	58	65.2	40	63.5	18	69.2
3	Irregular weekly attendance at school	34	38.2	22	34.9	12	46.2
4	Irregular monthly attendance at school	32	36.0	20	31.7	12	46.2
5	Repetition	23	25.8	13	20.6	10	38.5
6	Over-age/under-age	30	33.7	19	30.2	11	42.3
7	Teachers	10	11.2	6	9.5	4	15.4

There was also the farming season, which could spread from June to September, when attending school became more irregular. Dropouts said they missed school to engage in weeding, planting and harvesting ground nuts and other cash crops. About 62% of boys and 37% of girls, mostly from the two rural communities, said this was a major reason for missing school most times. Others said they were required by their families to care for livestock. According to the dropouts because they were not attending so regularly they found school work difficult even though they were keen on learning.

Household level factors

In some households, children said they were expected and encouraged to contribute to family subsistence by providing labour on farms for their parents and other relatives. Some also worked for other farmers to generate income for their own upkeep. Involvement in farming activities during school times occurred more frequently in rural areas than in the semi-urban communities, especially during the months of June and July, when farming activity was at its peak. For households and children facing financial difficulties the farming season required their full participation. During this time school took on secondary importance.

Household poverty was often cited as a factor contributing to drop out. Over 20% cited this as an important contributory factor to eventual dropout. The dropouts said they felt compelled to work, either to contribute to family income or for their own upkeep. Loss of a child's labour has become an indirect cost of schooling, and for some poverty seems to legitimise their non-attendance at school in order to support the household livelihood or for their own economic survival. Analysis based on data from the Ghana Living Standards Survey (GLSS 3, 4 and 5) by Rolleston (2009) in this volume, highlights the substantial impact of child labour on school attendance; see also evidence from the Ghana Child Labour survey (GSS 2003). In asking children to skip school to help on farms, look after livestock or run errands, limits were being placed on the duration and amount of education (and learning) that these children could receive. Added to increasing teacher absences, it is not surprising that with time schooling was losing its appeal and value to both children and their parents.

School level factors

Dropouts were asked what they disliked most about school. About 65% cited corporal punishment. Of the 58 children who complained about corporal punishment, about 72% were from the two rural schools and 28% were from two semi-urban schools. About 11% said they disliked being asked to work on teachers' farms and fetch water for them, whilst 2% were unhappy about fighting and bullying in school. The rest (22%) gave no specific reasons for disliking school.

Corporal punishment is a contentious issue in Ghanaian education as it is not entirely prohibited. According to the regulations, if a teacher finds it necessary to administer corporal punishment then this has to be done under the strict supervision of the head teacher. However, in reality 'corporal punishment is frequent, routine and not administered according to official guidelines. Though accepted as normal, it is very unpopular with children' (Pryor and Ampiah 2003, ix). It is often used indiscriminately – some teachers would cane children when they failed to answer questions in class, when they were late to school, or showed the slightest unruly behaviour (Pryor

and Ampiah 2003). It is, therefore, hardly surprising that about two-thirds of dropouts cited corporal punishment as the most disliked aspect of their school experience.

Of the 22 dropouts who answered the question about who decided they should repeat a grade, surprisingly about 54% said this was their own choice. About 32% said their decision to quit was influenced by their teachers, whilst 14% said their families had influenced this decision. According to those who had opted to repeat, teachers and family members were instrumental and justified the decision on grounds of poor progress in school. More or less, parents and teachers had forced them to repeat. Of all those who had repeated at least a grade, just about a fifth felt this had been beneficial in terms of improving their learning. Most saw no benefits. Although repetition due to poor performance is not encouraged in the Ghanaian school system, a common understanding is that in 'exceptional cases', and with the consent of both parents and children, a school year could be repeated. The accounts revealed that repetition, once it happened, increased one's risk of dropping out. Children repeating more than once were at risk of dropping out, especially with pressure from teachers and households to quit school. Coupled with household labour needs to support economic survival, chances of dropout increased even further.

In this section, some contributory or at-risk factors to dropping out of school have been explored. They include poor performance, poor attendance, corporal punishment, repetition and child labour. Responses from the dropouts suggest that these were key factors which influenced decisions to drop out. However, children did not single out any one factor as being the main cause of dropout. What emerged from the interviews suggested that in most cases a combination of factors preceded the critical action to drop out. In the next section we explore these final critical events or reasons.

Final critical events or decisions resulting in dropout

Having explored through interviews some of the factors which dropouts cited as cumulatively influencing their attitude to schooling, we asked them to tell us whether there were any specific events or reasons which led to them finally dropping out of school. The following were cited by the respondents: child labour (on farms to support their household or to earn a living for themselves), acute poverty, death of a parent, fosterage, poor performance, parents' lack of commitment to their education, teachers' harsh treatment (especially if they were finding learning difficult), pregnancy, frequent illness, and other miscellaneous factors such as violence, migration, and long distances to school. Table 2 summarises these reasons.

From Table 2, child labour (31.5%) and poverty (22.5%) seem to be the main critical factors accounting for why more than half of the children eventually dropped out of school. In the case of child labour, the proportions of boys and girls were similar. However, poverty appears to a bigger trigger for boys (28.6%) than for girls (7.7%), and girls appeared more likely to be affected by death in the household and fosterage though the sample was small. The other events accounted for why 46% of the children eventually dropped out. Two dropouts could not point to any critical event or specific reason for dropping out. Parents' lack of interest in their education, the death of a parent, and fosterage are all critical household-related factors. But generally many of the key factors were school related. These factors have been reported in the international and Ghanaian literature on dropouts as either single or a mix of factors responsible for dropping out of school. What we classify as contributory factors or final critical events are in most cases lumped together in the literature as factors or reasons

Table 2. Final critical events, reasons or decisions cited for dropping out of school.

No.	Critical final event/reason for dropping out	Boys (N=63)		Girls (N=26)		Total (N=89)	
		No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
1	Child labour	21	33.3	7	26.9	28	31.5
2	Poverty	18	28.6	2	7.7	20	22.5
3	Parents' lack of interest in formal education	5	7.9	2	7.7	7	7.9
4	Death	5	7.9	3	11.5	8	9.0
5	Fosterage	1	1.6	5	19.2	6	6.7
6	Poor performance	4	6.3	2	7.7	6	6.7
7	Blame on teachers	4	6.3	0	0.0	4	4.5
8	Sickness	2	3.2	1	3.8	3	3.4
9	Pregnancy	–	–	2	7.7	2	2.2
10	Miscellaneous	1	1.6	2	7.7	3	3.4
11	None	2	3.2	0	0.0	2	2.2

why children drop out of school (Grimsrud and Stokke 1997; Yeboah 1997; Yidana 2000; Boateng 2005; Hunt 2008). However, in this study dropouts often made a distinction between the at-risk factors and a particular set of circumstances which ultimately influenced their decision to leave school. The 'at-risk factors' stemmed mostly from negative school or family experiences which were seen as precursors to the eventual dropout from school.

Critical events/reasons and at-risk contributory factors

In this section, we explore the relationship between the critical events or reasons which caused children finally to drop out of school and the at-risk contributory factors already discussed. In Table 3, we have listed examples of some final critical events/ reasons, and the preceding at-risk-factors. It provides examples of some of the qualitative statements from dropouts which highlight the most important critical events/ reasons leading to their eventual dropout from school. The risk factors can be seen as a series of events which, given their occurrence, increase the chances of dropping out of schooling. The final critical events/decisions/reasons were, however, what the dropouts cited as the main reason for dropping out of school.

The two cases of Joseph and Paul seem to suggest a logical connection between the reasons for dropping out of school and the preceding at-risk events. In the case of Joseph, both parents were illiterates. The reason for stopping school at the age of 8 years in Primary 3 was that his name had been taken out of the register for irregular attendance and long absence from school. He therefore blamed his teacher for his decision to stop schooling, and not his father or himself. According to Joseph, his irregular attendance prior to dropping out was due to the fact he had to run errands on Fridays for his father, and also helped on his farm with planting and harvesting of groundnuts which took place between the months of June and August. The school's response was to strike his name off the register and in effect dismiss him from school.

Paul, on the other hand, struggled with school work, was unhappy with persistent corporal punishment and had already repeated four times in 2002, 2004, 2006 and 2007.

Table 3.   Final critical events/decisions/reasons and specific examples of reasons for dropping out of school.

Final critical event/ decision/reason for dropping out	Specific examples of reasons for dropout	Preceding at risk factors
Child labour	My mother asked me to go to a certain village for food harvesting (Katherine*)	None
Parents' lack of interest in formal education	I did not have school materials and I was sent to learn how to recite the Quran (James)	Difficulty learning science and environmental studies, under-aged, repeated once
Poor performance	Because of poor performance (Paul)	Difficulty learning English, corporal punishment, irregular weekly and monthly attendance, repeated four times
Death	Because of the death of my mother (Rose)	Difficulty learning English, corporal punishment, under-age, irregular monthly and weekly attendance, repeated once
Blame on teacher	I was asked to go home as my name was not in the register (Joseph)	Difficulty learning technical drawing, corporal punishment, irregular weekly and monthly attendance
Miscellaneous	The distance to school was too far me (John)	Difficulty learning technical drawing, corporal punishment

Over-aged here refers to children aged 8 years and above when they started school in primary one.
*All names in the table are pseudo names.

Repetition had not improved his learning, partly because his attendance was still irregular. Paul became frustrated with schooling because of his lack of progress and decided to quit. Unlike Joseph, in Paul's case there was no final critical event that precipitated his dropout from school. In some cases, no reasons were given by the children as to what made them finally drop out of school, but their accounts of what they disliked about schooling would suggest that its harsh conditions and exploitation in some instances had reduced considerably their interest in schooling. In effect, these dropouts had many negative things to say about their experience of schooling and often did not see their continued absence as detrimental to their social progress and development.

In John's case, it seems reasonable to assume that the preceding at-risk factors compounded the effect of the critical decision point to discontinue schooling. John was only 7 years old and he cited the long distances he had to walk to school as the factor which ultimately drove him to drop out. The distance he had to walk to school meant that he often arrived at school late, which led to punishment (caning), and made him miss school for fear of further punishment, so affecting his academic progress.

The death of a parent or caregiver (family shock) was given by 8 (9%) as the reason why they dropped out of school. Although the final decision to quit may seem not to be connected with earlier experiences of schooling, unpleasant school experiences coupled with the absence of a network of family support after the child had lost a parent may make dropout almost inevitable. For example, even though the final critical event which caused Rose to drop out of school was the death of a parent, there were other critical factors (difficulty learning English, corporal punishment, irregular

attendance, etc.) that had reduced the potential benefits, and possibly also the lack of family commitment to support Rose's education once the parent had died (see Table 3). Rose was in the habit of missing school, which had contributed to her poor performance and led to one repetition. So she was beginning to fall behind with her education. With the death of her mother, who was committed to her education, hope of continuing schooling evaporated. In her case, the combined effect of household and school-level factors had weighed heavily on the decision to drop out.

In other cases the final critical event or decision to drop out of school appeared to be unrelated to any reported preceding events. Katherine is a typical example. She stopped school in primary 4 at the age of 9 years because of some need to work to support the family. Prior to this time she had no history of irregular attendance. Her mother had suddenly asked her to work on a farm in another village and was not keen on her attending school. She offered her labour for the harvesting of crops, but did not go to school again when she returned home. All the six cases of fosterage given as the reason for dropping out of school seem not related to any of the at-risk factors discussed earlier. In all cases, once the children had gone into foster care schooling took on a secondary importance. Foster parents were more interested in the contribution the children would make to family income than in their attending school.

These stories suggest that in some cases reasons for dropping out were made easier because of negative schooling experiences or household demand for child labour. In other instances a single 'shock' or unpredictable event seems to have caused dropout from school.

Conclusion

The findings of this study reaffirm some of the known factors which contribute to school dropout which have been reported across a number of developing countries. Mainly they are factors associated with child labour, poverty, death of parent, fosterage, poor performance in school, parental lack of interest in formal education, pregnancy, teacher attitudes to children, distance from school, persistent learning difficulties, corporal punishment, poor attendance, and repetition. Often, as this study shows, a combination of these factors creates a more potent force that increases the risk of dropping out than each factor on its own.

In this study, we were able to explore relationships between any kind of critical event or decision to drop out and the dropout's experiences of school and household conditions, and the contributions that these may have made to final dropout. This way of mapping out the dropout phenomena based on insights from the dropouts' own stories enabled us to understand the possible configuration of risk factors and how these might have contributed to the decision to drop out. We also found that factors which put children at risk of dropping out of school may not necessarily lead to dropout. However, they often made a decision to drop out easier and more likely. From analysing the dropout stories we were able to categorise key factors into 10 critical events or reasons which were usually associated with 6 at-risk events that had become a common and negative experience of schooling and/or household life at its root. Child labour and high incidence of poverty usually accounted for the main reason to drop out for about one-third of the children in the study. These children had also experienced some or all of the following risk factors: poor progress in learning, corporal punishment, irregular weekly school attendance, irregular monthly school attendance, and repetition. All of them were overage for the grade at which they dropped out.

Corporal punishment was repeatedly cited as one of the most unpleasant experiences of schooling. But clearly, most dropout did not happen out of the blue.

The accounts of the dropouts suggest that there are tell-tale signs that school authorities and other responsible bodies should address if dropout is to be made less likely. Making school a safe and pleasant place for children is important, and investigating why some children attend irregularly should produce actions that lower the risk of dropout. For example, it would be important for a school to know what proportion of children combine schooling with work, what kind of work they do, and what schools and local authorities and communities could do to reduce the risk of dropout associated with child labour. Schools may need to operate more flexibly to accommodate agricultural periods when families feel a strong need for support from their children on their farms. Communities would need to be educated about the harm child labour does to a child's progress in school.

The stories told by the dropouts have revealed the lack of care towards these children by some schools and teachers and how this has contributed to dropout. Teachers and their attitudes to children contribute to the chain of events leading to dropouts. Teacher absenteeism, the use of corporal punishment as a deterrent or corrective measure, and using children to offer free labour for teachers can make schools an unpleasant environment. These undesirable practices could be curtailed through effective supervision and monitoring by local education authorities and school governance bodies of what goes on in schools.

Finally, the study indicates that for some dropouts to return to school, they might need financial and material assistance to reduce the opportunity cost of schooling. Schools would also have to take on more responsibility for educating parents on practices that harm children's attendance and progress in school. They may also have to organise remedial teaching for children who miss school for reasons over which they have little control, such as absence due to family tragedy, or child labour at certain times of the year when farming activities are at their peak period. The central message from the stories is that schools, local authorities and school governing bodies would have to promote policies and practices that minimise the risk of dropout, and not simply lay the blame on children and their households. Schools may need to be more child-friendly than is currently the case.

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