

Voices of Primary School Dropouts' about their Decision to Leave School

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Abstract

Primary education is not only the bedrock for other levels of education and social wellbeing of individuals but also serves as a key determinant for societal and national economic growth. The main purpose of this study was to explore the causes of dropout by documenting the voices of primary school dropouts in order to assess and prevent this phenomenon. This study was qualitative in its nature because there was no such available exploration from the dropouts. Data were collected from 104 children who dropped out from primary schools by using interview schedule. These dropouts were identified by using snowball technique. Their responses were documented and thematic approach was applied for analysis. These data helped in understanding the circumstances that led them to the dropout point. The majority of the dropouts reported that school based problems such as, unfriendly environment of primary school, un-attended difficulty in learning, lack of interest in studies, lack of interest in school, corporal punishment, class repetition and lack of co-curricular activities as causes of their dropping out. The other causes were family based such as child labor and family crises. Some dropouts reported personal causes such as poor health and mental dullness. In the light of dropouts' voices the study tries to justify inclusive education system, as the most appropriate solution for prevention of dropout of at risk students in primary schools in Pakistan.

Keywords: Primary education, dropouts, primary schooling, dropout phenomenon, dropping out, school improvement.

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Introduction

Education is the most powerful tool for human progress and development. It not only guarantees the socio economic uplift of masses but also contributes significantly in the economic growth of the country. Primary education equips the younger population of the state with the insight to the present world and enables them to cope with the challenges of the future life. It also provides them a foundation for onward learning through elementary and higher levels of education. It is considered as the basic human right in the civilized world. Today the nations are worried about the millions of the children who are out of school but the retention of students in primary schools is also a very serious concern. Elementary education was declared as a basic human right of all individuals in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights irrespective of their different belongings (United Nations, 1948).

Being the part of international community, right to basic education is also acknowledged by the government of Pakistan as mentioned in National Education Policy 1998-2010 of Pakistan. Every child has the right to education and the state is responsible for the provision of free and compulsory primary education as highlighted in the Convention on the Rights of Child, 1989 (United Nations, 1989). The government of Pakistan by considering education not only as right but also as the key apparatus for national integrity and prosperity has placed education at its top reform agenda (Ministry of Finance, 2006).

The state is paying its highest concern for educating masses by developing National Education Policies time and again since Pakistan came into being. Different short term and long term plans were formulated and implemented to provide equitable educational services at different levels and in different dimensions.

Review of Literature

The reforms program in the education sector is changing the educational situation in Pakistan, as the population who ever attended school was 61% in 2012-13 and 62% in 2014-15. The literacy rate at national level in 2015 was 60% (Male=70%, Female=40%) as compared to the 58% (Male=70%, Female=47%) in 2014. The literacy rates gap of 25% in urban (76%) and rural (51%) areas of the country and the gap of 21% between male and female literacy rates needs to be addressed efficiently and the equal opportunities be provided to the male and female population for bridging this gap. The literacy rate comparison among the provinces indicates that Punjab stands (63%) at the top position followed by Sindh (60%), Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (53%) and Balochistan (44%) at the lowest rank (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2015).

The constitution of Pakistan 1973 approved the commitment that “The state shall remove illiteracy and provide free and compulsory secondary education within minimum possible period (Article 37-b, Chapter No. 2) and as part of the 18th constitutional amendment it is added in the Fundamental Rights that ”The State shall provide free and compulsory education to all children of the age of five to sixteen years in such manner as may be determined by law” (Article 25-A, Chapter No. 1: Fundamental Rights) (Constitution of Pakistan, 1973). Besides all the efforts and initiatives, students are dropping out continuously from the primary school across the country.

The dropout rate for primary school students in Pakistan in 2001-02 was 43%, and was decreased by 02% in 2007-08 (Ministry of Education, 2009). There is no single cause of primary school dropping out but is an array of causes that lead them towards dropping out (Farooq, 2016). Different people and agencies defined it in different ways. “Dropout is defined as a pupil, who was enrolled in the beginning of the school year and has left before the end of the school year and was not enrolled elsewhere” (UNESCO, 2005). A student may also be called as a dropout if he/she remains absent from school without any intimation or approved transfer to other institution and does not return back to school during the following year (Texas Education Agency, 1995). The dropout also means withdrawing from education to complete a minimum expected amount of schooling (US Department of Education, 2004). It may be a student who leaves public school before graduation from primary school (Hondo, 2005).

The dropping out phenomenon is a premature disengagement or termination of a student from education. It is a serious concern for the school authorities as well as for students (Valerie & Jacki, 2004). Any student who does not indicate to school authorities at the time of admission that he is leaving school without intention of joining any other alternative educational program or school in any institution or at any location is a dropout (Hemecourt, 2005). The dropout is an individual who withdraws from school without any completion certificate (Orr, 1987). A student at risk of dropping out is a student who is in danger of leaving school before graduation (Levy, 1991). There is no agreed upon uniform definition of dropout (Hamby, 1989; Pallas, 1987). Different people give different definitions of dropouts. All these definitions lead the researcher to the fact that the dropout is a student who was enrolled in school and has left before completion of primary school education without any intimation to the school. This definition was followed by the researcher in this study.

This lack of uniform definition restricts the experts from collecting reliable data about dropouts and designing prevention programs (Rumberger, 1986; William, 1987). Commonly there are three different ways to measure dropout, Event rate “The percentage of students who dropout in a single year without completing high school”, Status rate “the percentage of the population in a given age range who have not finished high school or are not enrolled in school at one point in time” and Cohort rate “The percentage of a single group of students who dropout over time” (Hollinger, 1996). This inefficiency and difference in styles of collecting data and compiling statistics make it impossible to arrive at such a conclusion that how much at risk population is in all the states (Feather & Olson, 2000). Having no uniform definition for dropout and inaccessibility of databases make profiling of dropout a very difficult task.

Identifying the factors contributing in decision making for leaving school is the basic key to respond this serious problem. It is very difficult to solely identify the factor which is the main cause of dropping out because there is not only a single factor but this phenomenon is influenced by an array of different factors related to school, family, community settings and the student himself (Remberger, 2001). A lot of research has been conducted for exploring the causes and reasons for school dropouts.

Rumberger (1986) organized causes of dropout as, demographic, individual, peer, economic, family and school related categories. However the factors influencing on student's decision to drop out from school identified in different studies discussed above were summarized according to the categories given by Duckenfield (1998) for this study. These factors are Individual or Student Related Factors, Community Related Factors, School Related Factors and Family Related Factors.

These characteristics or attributes that influence students to quit school may be the behavior, attitude and values of student. Student's academic achievement, educational attainment and educational stability are the leading characteristics (Rumberger, 2001). Different researchers and experts identified different causes for different situations. They reported different demographic factors as causes of dropouts. The most common factor associated with dropping out is individual's family belongingness (Hahn, 1987). Students belonging to ethnic and racial minorities are more likely to pass through the experience of dropping out (Frazer, 1991).

Several other factors also contribute towards decision of dropping out. One of them is psychological vulnerability. Among Virginia's children and youth, there are a lot of students with serious emotional handicaps and mental illness. These students experience a dropout rate of 73 percent (Nimmo, 2000). Psychological vulnerability was also related to students, having low self-esteem. They shield themselves by less participating academic activities. This gave them a wrong justification that they are better instead of failure in common tasks. Due to their low self esteem they cannot face the other peers. Their sufferings may be due to poor academic achievement or some physical characteristics, like wearing eyeglasses or being too shorter, too tall, too thin, or too fat (Fears, 2004). These individual characteristics also include low self-esteem, feeling deficient in control on their lives and low professional aspirations (Earle, Roach & Fraser, 1987). Most prospective dropouts are capable of managing schoolwork but have become routed learners because of a lack of self-confidence or problems at home (Deschapms, 1992).

The community in which the student lives has an effect on his/her decisions and trends directly or indirectly. It has a penetrating effect on the individuals of that society. It differs in nature because the rural and urban community has different sort of resources of engagement for the student. The libraries, mosques, markets, theaters, sports and other job opportunities affect the individuals. Peers are the best predictors for school dropout phenomenon. They affect a lot on the school going children towards their decision for dropping out (Texas Dropout Information Clearinghouse, 1989).

According to research, it is not yet possible to gauge this effect that how much it affects. The common observation is that dropouts have usually such friends who have already dropped out (Rumberger, 1986). The community for which the dropout is a part influences a lot to shape his decision for termination of the education cycle. Academically marginalized students are usually affected by such storms. Rural and urban communities are different in their intensity of influence on the dropouts. Urban community has different attention diverters like theaters, museums, sports and job opportunities as compared to the rural communities. Non availability of spiritual orientation in schools also becomes the cause of school leaving.

A school is a basic unit and hub of all the activities for the training and teaching of students. By birth children are not failures but it is the school to fail them. Unfortunately in some circumstances it affects a lot on the decision process for leaving school. Dissatisfaction with educators, poor interest in school, lack of interest in the school activities, poor academic environment and poor academic achievements are the predictors of dropouts (Strother, 1986). School experience is the most common reason for some dropouts (Hahn, 1987a).

Another factor for student's dropout is retention in the same class (Duckenfield, 1998). Almost 80% of the students who were retained in the same class dropped out ultimately (Stephenson, 1985). Obviously, when student is retained in the same class, he will be older than his peers. He is more likely to dropout than his other peers (Hahn, 1987; House, 1989; Kronick, Peterson, Morton & Smith, 1989; Obasohan & Koterling, 1999; Peng & Taki, 1983). Being older than average age for grade level is the number one overall factor for predicting dropping out (Frazer, 1991).

Different researchers reveal that when students like their school they show better performance in studies and as a result less dropout. When they are not satisfied and facing problem their performance goes poorer and poorer and result is dropout. In a study conducted by Obasohan & Korterling (1999), 34% feel that they could not get along with their teachers, and 25% thought that they are not part of the school system and functioning. These feelings of not belonging and not getting well along are suggestive by the old response psychology (Glasser, 1997). Lack of access to primary education, tribal, ethnic, social groups and minority belongingness are the major hurdles in enrollment. Generally, not only enrollment rate is low but also disparities are noticed across the provinces, genders and urban rural belongings (Shami & Hussain, 2005).

Above and beyond demographics, community and school related characteristics there are also family related characteristics which cause a student to leave school. Parental commitment to education and education stages are important determinants of dropout rate (Levy, 1991). Many of the students terminate their education due to the impact of parents' poverty, broken homes and having been held back in the same grades for years and years (Mann, 1986). Socioeconomic status of students is also an extremely powerful predictor for dropouts (Barro & Kolstad, 1987; Steinberg, Blinde & Chang, 1984).

Poverty is a basic cause of dropout problem (Hahn, 1987). It stands out as the most striking of all the characteristics associated with the propensity to drop out of school. It along with cultural differences plays a most important role in shaping of dropouts (Gage, 1990). Literature on youth at risk witnessed that low parental education level and low income have significant effect on the decisions of potential dropouts.

Family factors affect student's rate of dropout. In different societies divorce rate, single parent family and parents' poverty rate are increased. These factors often result in low motivation of parents in their kids' education. This poor parents' support pulls the students out of primary schools (Wittenberg, 1988). In a study conducted by Hanushek (1995), 374 urban dropouts quoted 'family reasons' as a one out of the top three reasons of dropouts. The dropout's family may face the reasons like split of family unit, limited educational background of family and parents low economic resources (Tidwell, 1988). In such situations children are not being expected for their graduation and negative attitude towards school is usually exhibited by the family members (Obasohan & Kortering, 1999).

It is a common phenomenon in the world that the dropouts are not passed through any exit interview. So the real causes according to the dropouts are not documented regularly. It is also hard to have access to the dropouts in any locality because they usually absorb in the community and are not accumulated anywhere. To trace them is difficult so the available studies are usually on the other stakeholders rather than the dropouts. In Pakistani context there was hardly any available study that has directly been conducted on dropouts to explore them qualitatively. It was highly needed to explore the dropouts qualitatively and document their voices that they articulate regarding their decision of dropping out from primary schools without completion of their primary school education. This study is unique in a sense that the dropouts in person are qualitatively explored and their voices are not only documented regarding the factors leading to their dropping out but also their expectation from school to prevent at risk students from dropping out.

Statement of the Problem

In spite of all the efforts made to decrease the dropout rate and increase the retention of students till the completion of primary education, students are leaving primary schools before completion at a constant rate. Different programs were launched time and again to improve this situation but in vain. Our primary school is not welcoming for diverse student population. Low retention and high dropout rates at the primary school are the primary focus of this study. Keeping in view the causes of drop out, a plan for prevention of drop out is presented, which is need of the hour for Pakistan.

Objectives of the Study

The main objectives of the study were to:

1. identify factors of primary school dropping out phenomenon through documenting the opinions of the dropped out students that force them to take decision of leaving school.
2. document suggestions of dropouts to prevent at risk students from dropping out.

Research Questions

The study answered the following question:

1. According to primary school dropouts what are the factors that influenced on their decision to leave school before completion of primary school education?
2. How at risk students can be prevented from dropping out in the opinion of dropouts?

Significance of the Problem

The primary beneficiaries of this study will be the primary school students, teachers, decision makers and the parents of the dropouts. They may benefit from the findings of this study because there is rarely any study documenting the voices of dropouts regarding their decision of leaving school. This study may help the policy makers to take steps for prevention of at risk students from dropping out.

Method and Procedure

This qualitative investigation was done to explore the factors effecting the decision of dropping out of primary school dropouts through in-depth inquiry from them. This study was delimited due to different societal, time and financial constraints to only male dropouts from primary schools in only one District Gujrat, Punjab-Pakistan. The female dropouts were not included in this study.

This endeavor was qualitative in nature where interviews were conducted for collection of data from primary school dropouts about the phenomenon that forced them to drop out from school before completion. Meanings were derived out from their statements with reference to their specific settings and conditions. There were different methodological choices for the conduct of this study. Unfortunately, none of the choices was robust enough to explore all aspects of the problem. In a quantitative

survey, for example, the real voices of respondents could hardly be heard because of the limitations imposed by the structure of questionnaire based on a priory theory of teachers' perceptions. Because of limitations of different choices the researcher decided to adopt qualitative method of inquiry.

Interviews were conducted in an interactive way because dropouts were not literate enough and hence were not able to understand the technical jargon of dropout phenomenon. The interview was the best method for collection of data because it is useful for getting the opinion based on the participant's personal experiences (Kvale, 1996; McNamara, 1999). It helped the researcher to unfold the mindset of the respondents to reach at the factual situation of making decision to drop out. There was also need to document the voices of the dropouts specially the ways they reflected on their experience. They constitute the primary source of data.

The dropouts were the crucial primary source for this study because their opinions were of special importance and revealed first hand information about the causes of dropout. Some ethical issues were also involved in this research activity. Benefit to society and the subjects involved, legal and moral values of the society, protection of subjects from any sort of harms on being part of this study were the major concerns. Similarly, confidentiality, privacy, anonymity, willingness, informed for purpose of data collection, respect for subjects and sound research design to avoid from wastage of time of subjects involved were specially considered during the conduct of this study. The respondents were informed about the purpose of the study and the use of data. Their willingness and volunteer participation were ensured. Special attention was paid to the respect and moral values of the society. The anonymity of the respondents was maintained. Their responses were kept confidential. The collected data were only used for realization of the purpose of this study.

Sampling

Population of this study comprised of primary school dropouts from public sector schools in a District Gujrat from Punjab Province of Pakistan. There were 13 Markaz (Administrative Unit) in district Gujrat. From each Markaz, eight dropouts were identified. Total 104 primary school dropouts were selected. By identifying initially one dropout from each locality, he was used to identify other dropouts. This exercise continued for tracing next and next respondent with the help of former one. The students who drop out from school tend to join the work force in the low paid job market. The majority can be seen working as apprentices or child labor. It was very

difficult to identify and access these dropouts at the same place. To move in the unfamiliar social settings was also a serious issue for the researcher.

Data Collection and Analysis

In the light of related literature review about the causes of primary school dropouts an interview schedule for dropouts was developed. This schedule was consisted of the questions regarding the demographic information of respondents, factors influencing on the decision of drop out, their present engagements, and suggestion to improve school to minimize dropping out of at risk students. Before administration of this interview schedule, it was validated through opinion of five experts of the field. It was also field tested on a small sample to study its technical aspects regarding its reliability and effectiveness. The revised interview schedule was used for large scale field administration. The interviews were recorded through video tape and then were transcribed accordingly. Data analysis was conducted in two phases. Initially the transcribed data were passed through thematic analysis. Different possible themes were derived from the documented voices of the respondents. At later stage the derived data were analyzed by using Descriptive and Inferential statistics. Results and recommendations were made on the basis of results of data analysis.

Results

The items were related to dropouts' demographics, causes of dropouts, their engagements, suggestions for school facilities and expectations from school. Initially 118 dropouts were interviewed and then after the data sorting 104 dropouts' data were processed and used.

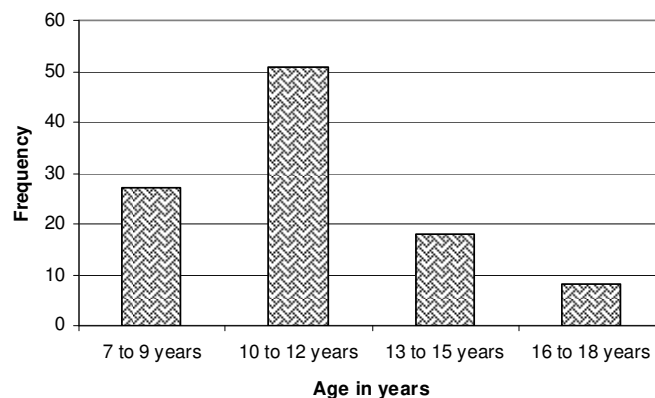


Figure 1 Age of dropouts

Figure 1 shows that most of the dropouts were of age group 10 to 12 years. It means that they have terminated their education in a near past.



Figure 2 Class from which, they left school

Figure 2 show that most of the sample dropouts terminated their education from Class 4 and Class 5.

Table 1
Responsible for their Dropout from School

Factors	Frequency	Percent
Friends	4	3.8
Parents	28	26.9
Community	11	10.6
Teachers	14	13.5
Personal reason	47	45.2
Total	104	100.0

Most of dropouts considered themselves as responsible for their decision to drop out. Some dropouts reported that their parents were responsible for their dropout from school. A few said that their teachers and friends influenced them to dropout (Table 1).

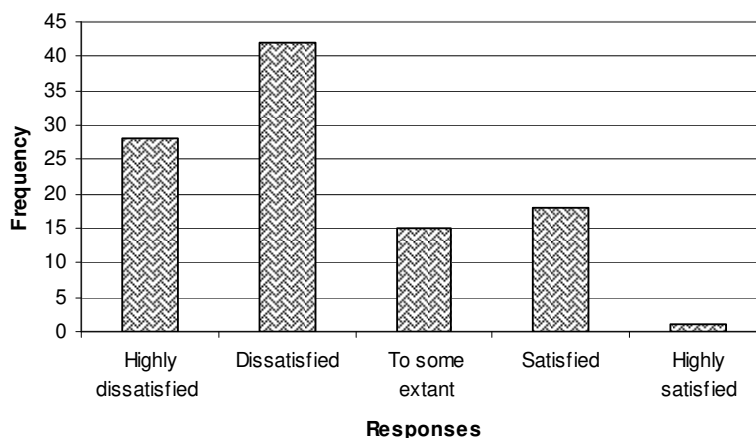


Figure 3 Satisfaction with the decision of leaving school

The majority of dropouts were highly dissatisfied or dissatisfied with their decisions of dropping out from school while a few were satisfied or to some extent satisfied or highly satisfied with their decisions (Figure 3).

Table 2

Specific Causes for leaving School

Causes	Frequency	%
Difficulty in learning	16	15.35
Lack of interest in studies	12	11.62
Lack of interest in school	11	10.56
Corporal punishment	11	10.56
Class repetition	10	9.61
Lack of co-curricular activities	9	8.65
Harsh attitude of teachers	8	7.70
Friendship with out of school children	6	5.77
Financial burden	5	4.80
Child labour	4	3.85
Family crises/ Broken homes	4	3.85
Preference for religious education	2	1.92
Poor health	2	1.92
Attitude of class fellows	2	1.92
Inappropriate curricula	2	1.92
Total	104	100

Table 2 shows responses of dropouts that why they left school? The majority of the dropouts reported that school based problems such as, difficulty in learning, lack of interest in studies, lack of interest in school, corporal punishment, class repetition and lack of co-curricular activities as causes of their dropping out. The other causes were family based such as child labor, family crises/ broken homes and preference for religious education. Some dropouts reported personal causes such as poor health.

Table 3

Engagements after Dropping out from School

Engagement	Frequency	%
Nothing	39	37.5
Vocational apprenticeship	34	32.7
Parents' help	14	13.5
Unskilled labour	17	16.3
Total	104	100

The majority of dropouts reported that they were engaged in vocational apprenticeships, helping their parent work and unskilled labor while others were doing nothing (Table 3).

Table 4

Suggestions for School improvement to Retain at Risk Students from Dropping Out

Suggestions	Frequency	%
Provision of Facilities	24	23.0
Loving and caring teachers	20	19.2
Suitable teaching aids	18	17.4
Co-curricular activities	15	14.4
Eliminating corporal punishment	15	14.4
Teacher's individual attention	12	11.6
Total	104	100

In response to above question the dropouts suggested that schools can be made attractive by providing physical facilities, co-curricular activities, providing suitable teaching aids and by eliminating corporal punishment (Table 4).

Table 5
Expectations of Dropouts from School

Characteristics	Frequency	%
Having neat, clean and well decorated classrooms	39	57.3
Free from corporal punishment	17	25
Full of facilities like electricity, play ground, sports, laboratory, lawns and teaching aids	5	7.3
Having sympathetic and competent teachers	3	4.4
Having a sense of safety and protection	2	3.0
Possessing environment just like a home	1	1.5
Having a discipline in school	1	1.5
Total	68	100

The majority of dropouts wanted to see the following attributes in school: Neat, clean and well decorated classrooms and free from corporal punishment. Some dropouts wanted to see school with all facilities like electricity, play ground, sports, laboratory, lawns and relevant teaching aids with sympathetic and competent teachers (Table 5).

Conclusions

On the bases of findings of the study, the researcher came to the conclusion that the school related factors (unfriendly school, corporal punishment, lack of co-curricular activities, harsh attitude of teachers, disturbing attitude of class fellows, corporal punishment, inappropriate curricula), the family related factors (family crises/ broken homes, financial burden, child labor), the individual related factors (difficulty in learning, lack of interest in studies, class repetition, mental dullness, poor health) and the community related factors (friendship with out of school children, truancy) influenced the dropouts to make decision of dropping out from school.

Recommendations

Dropouts also gave suggestions for prevention of at risk students from dropping out. They suggested that this goal can be achieved by providing facilities in the school, loving and caring teachers, relevant instructional materials, arranging co-curricular activities, eliminating corporal punishment and teacher's individual attention to meet the unique needs of the students.

The dropout of students can be controlled through school improvement. Existing school can be improved by revisiting curriculum and instruction, evaluation system, professional development of teachers and ensuring physical facilities, parental participation, community involvement and accessibility for all in school. All these characteristics can be developed through adopting the inclusive education system. The proposed Inclusive Schooling Model duly endorsed by national and international experts suggested by Farooq (2010; 2013) is one of the workable solutions for school improvement and prevention of dropout at primary school level in Pakistan. It is also recommended that this study may be conducted in other districts and also on the girls drop out as well.

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