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Drop-out in township secondary schools: educators' perspectives

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The drop-out rate at township secondary schools is increasing with no sign of abating. Elevated drop-out levels cause a high rate of functional illiteracy, limited occupational and economic prospects, and an increase in the already high rate of unemployment in the country. This article examines the determinants of learner drop-out on the basis of a literature study, along with a survey of the perceptions of educators about the reasons why students drop out of school. The data from educators were obtained by means of a questionnaire. The study has uncovered factors that culminate in learners' decision to drop out of school, a problem which must be addressed.

Opvoeders se persepsies van faktore wat bydra tot die uitsakking van leerders in sekondêre township-skole

Sekondêre skole in die townships vind dat al hoe meer van hul leerders uitsak en dat daar geen teken van 'n afname daarvan is nie. 'n Noodwendige gevolg van hierdie uiters negatiewe neiging is dat funksionele ongeletterdheid ook toeneem, dit wil sê al hoe meer mense staar beperkte werks- en ekonomiese vooruitsigte in die gesig. Hierdie artikel ondersoek die faktore wat leerderuitsakking veroorsaak deur middel van 'n literatuurstudie en 'n opname van die persepsies van opvoeders verbonde aan sekondêre skole in die township, wat 'n vraelys ingevul het. Die studie het faktore blootgelê wat lei tot leerders se besluit om uit te sak. Hierdie faktore moet aangespreek en sover moontlik uitgeskakel word.

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The phenomenon of premature school-leaving occurs in all countries with a formal system of education, even where school attendance is compulsory. Roderick (1993) is quoted as stating that in many countries this drop-out problem is so serious that less than 50% of learners complete their education (Lagana 2004: 212). This phenomenon creates problems not only for the education system and education stakeholders, but also for society at large, which comprises economists, sociologists, employers and government, because education determines not only the learner's usefulness after leaving school, but also the future success of the nation.

"Drop-outs" may be defined as learners or learners who leave school or a higher education institution without completing programmes. Thus, there are drop-outs at both schools and higher education institutions, which implies that not all drop-outs are illiterate. Section 29 of the Bill of Rights stipulates that every child has the right to basic education (Bray 2000: 78). In the South African context this refers to education starting at grade one and ending at grade nine, which implies that learners who leave school before completing grade nine would be regarded as drop-outs. It may be assumed that learners who have completed grade nine are literate. However, the new arrangement is not yet in place because grade nine is not yet an exit point, where a learner receives a school-leaving certificate. Prior to the introduction of the new Constitution with the Bill of Rights, the term "drop-out" referred to a learner who left school before completing grade twelve. This will remain the case until grade nine becomes an exit point. In this article, therefore, the term "drop-out" refers to a learner who leaves school before completing grade twelve.

Many factors contribute to school drop-out rates, such as family breakdown, lack of parental control, an ineffective education system, dysfunctional schools, inadequate qualification among educators, lack of access to schools, peer pressure, repeated school failure, educator-learner ratios, poverty, and the need for the learner to work (Lategan 1990: 3, Keen 1992: 103). Marin (1995: 1) contends that the characteristics that place learners at risk of dropping out of school are varied and often complement one another. An example is a poorly-achieving learner, who comes from an impoverished single-parent home, and cites the need to work as a major reason for dropping out of school. All too often, these factors lead to poor academic performance, which culminates in

learners dropping out of school. In brief, a considerable number of drop-outs are learners who live in circumstances that place them at a greater risk of school failure.

A consequence of a high drop-out rate is a high rate of functional illiteracy and the plight of people facing limited occupational and economic prospects. Murray (1998) is quoted as stating that drop-outs have more difficulty in gaining employment in the labour market than young people who have completed their education (Fischbein & Folkander 2000: 265). Access to special educational resources does not seem to increase employment opportunities (Fischbein & Folkander 2000: 265). There is consensus among education stakeholders that the drop-out problem needs to be addressed because no nation can afford to have large numbers of its citizens uneducated or under-educated and incapable of gainful employment (Reed & Johnson 1992: 225). This article explores the effect of contributory factors rooted in the home environment, the education system, and society, as well as peer influence and gender-related issues.

1. Problem statement and aim of research

School drop-out is a multifaceted and complicated problem experienced the world over. It is the result of variables such as factors prevailing in the family, in the education system, and in society, as well as peer influence and gender-related factors. As yet, there is no empirical identification of the variables that are the root cause of school drop-out in every situation. A consequence of the drop-out rate is the high number of people who are functionally illiterate and who cannot be gainfully employed. High rates of unemployment usually lead to high rates of crime. While drop-outs sometimes experience a sense of relief once they drop out, they typically report apprehension about their preparation for economic, academic and social independence beyond school (Scanlon & Mellard 2002: 2). The African National Congress (1995) is quoted as estimating that 33% of the South African population is illiterate, which may partly account for the high rate of unemployment in the country (Bergh 1996: 96). Cassel (2003: 641) states that in the USA half of the prison population comprises high school drop-outs who have turned to crime mainly because they could not obtain lucrative employment. Drop-outs have a higher likelihood of alcohol abuse and dependence (Lagana 2004: 212), and this exercebates inequalities between high-

income and low-income children since poorly educated workers are trapped in poverty and unemployment (Mayer 2002: 153). Teenage pregnancy, which accounts for most drop-outs among girls, has a significantly adverse impact on the baby, the mother and society. Studies have shown that such adverse effects are due largely to poor socio-economic conditions rather than the age of the mother, more so if the antenatal care is inadequate (Ukil & Esen 2002: 1).

Baine & Mwamwenda (1994: 119) contend that, traditionally, many black children in South Africa have not stayed in school long enough to achieve basic literacy and numeracy. For instance, at least 300 000 young black people annually join the ranks of those who are not functionally literate or numerate. They contend that on average 15% of black learners entering primary school drop out after the first year and a further 10% after the second year. Only 30% of those entering primary school will complete four years, while less than 10% will reach secondary school. They conclude that black people have the highest drop-out and failure rates in South Africa, and that only 11% of learners who enter primary school complete grade twelve. In support of this, the National Education Co-ordinating Committee (1992) is quoted as asserting that 25% of black learners are likely to leave school before completing grade five (Bergh 1996: 96) and Taylor (1989) is quoted as estimating that 25% of black children grow up illiterate (Le Roux 1993: 124). One could argue that the statistics discussed reflect the situation in South Africa before 1994. However, there appears to be no unequivocal statistical evidence suggesting that the post-1994 situation has improved significantly.

According to *The Citizen* (2005: 6), the South African Minister of National Education has ordered an investigation into the reasons why huge numbers of learners drop out of school before they reach grade twelve. The investigation was prompted, *inter alia*, by the fact that in the Free State 15 000 learners drop out of school before they reach grade twelve, while only half of the 80 000 learners who start grade one in the Western Cape reach grade twelve. In addition, the national education statistics indicate that 22 376 (4.5%) of the 493 447 learners who enrolled for grade twelve in 2004 dropped out of school. It is incomprehensible that so many learners drop out of school a few months before writing such an important examination. In the light of the foregoing, the aim of this study is to investigate the causes of school drop-out

by means of a literature study, and to obtain the educators' perceptions of the reasons why learners drop out of school by means of an empirical survey.

To provide answers to these questions, an empirical investigation was conducted on the basis of educators' perceptions of the causes of drop-out in township secondary schools and a literature study was undertaken on the causes of school drop-out.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research sample

This study was conducted in all five education districts of the Free State province, from each of which seven secondary schools were selected by means of stratified random sampling based on an address list obtained from the Department of Education. The principals of the selected schools were requested to ask three management team members and seven educators, who were randomly selected to form the sample for this study, to complete a questionnaire. All questionnaires were posted to the principals. Of the 350 questionnaires distributed, 347 were returned, of which 339 were suitable for processing.

2.2 Research instrument

The research for this article was based on a literature study and two questionnaires. The first questionnaire was used as a pilot study to gain a picture of what principals perceive to be the causes of drop-out in township secondary schools. It explored selected principals' perceptions of the factors contributing to learner drop-out, and was open-ended to enable the respondents to provide their responses in an unrestricted manner. The questionnaire was mailed to the principals of three secondary schools in each education district. All the questionnaires were returned. Their responses were analysed and yielded twenty-nine causes of school drop-out. On the basis of this information, a second questionnaire was designed to gather data from a sample of 339 selected from 35 secondary schools. An empirical investigation was conducted to establish the secondary school educators' perceptions of the causes of learner drop-out.

The use of questionnaires was appropriate as the participants were distributed over a wide area. The respondents were given a week to com-

plete the questionnaires, which were then posted to the researcher. The use of questionnaires was compatible with the aim and purpose of the research. The respondents were asked to indicate how factors referred to in the questionnaire influence drop-out at their schools by choosing from the following possible answers, using a Likert scale where 1: never; 2: seldom; 3: half the time; 4: frequently; 5: always. Data from the questionnaires was computer-analysed to obtain the frequencies and means of each question.

2.3 Reliability and validity

The questionnaire was structured in such a way that the questions posed were clearly articulated, and clearly directed. It was pre-tested on five secondary school teachers who were not part of the sample, and thereafter amendments were made to ensure simplicity and clarity of some questions, thus making it understandable to the respondents. However, the self-report approach incorporated in the questionnaire does present certain problems which may limit its validity, namely that respondents must co-operate in completing the questionnaire and they must relate the facts, rather than what they think the researcher would like to read. To address this problem, the author indicated to the respondents, via their principals, the importance of providing accurate information. The questionnaire also explained the rationale of the study and gave clear instructions for completion. The principals were requested to have the questionnaires completed at the end of their staff meetings and to collect them immediately after completion. In addition, questionnaires were completed anonymously to ensure a true reflection of the respondents' views and to meet the ethical criterion of confidentiality, thus ensuring content validity and reliability.

3. Results

3.1 Rank ordering of the causes of drop-out in secondary schools

The rank ordering of the causes of drop-out is based on an analysis of the educators' responses to the questionnaire. The analysis was performed to obtain the mean scores and to rank the causes according to their mean scores from the highest to the lowest.

Table 1: Rank ordering of the mean scores

Causes of drop-out	Mean score	Rank order
Unemployment of parents	3.77	1
Lack of or inadequate parental support	3.69	2
Not living with parents	3.68	3
Going to school hungry	3.45	4
Divorce or separation of parents	3.32	5
Family conflict	3.30	6
Poor performance at school	3.29	7
Repeated failure	3.27	8
Lack of role models at home	3.27	8
Peer pressure	3.26	9
Single-parent family	3.22	10
Repeated absenteeism	3.19	11
Walking long distances to school	3.13	12
Learner not seeing the value of education	3.11	13
Teenage pregnancies	3.10	14
Loss of parents	3.09	15
Early marriage	3.05	16
Lack of motivation	3.03	17
Poor family education background	3.03	17
Being too old for his/her standard	2.92	18
Learner not willing to accept discipline	2.89	19
Ill-health	2.82	20
HIV/AIDS-related factors	2.77	21
Drug abuse	2.77	21
Learner forced to do odd jobs	2.71	22
Learner looking after siblings	2.70	23
Not having decent clothes	2.70	23
Attendance at an initiation school	2.55	24
Learner arrested for committing crime	2.55	24

In descending order, three factors with means ranging from 3.68 to 3.77 came close to being frequently the causes of drop-out, 16 factors with means ranging from 3.03 to 3.45 are the causes of drop-out half the time, and ten factors with means ranging from 2.55 to 2.92 are the causes of drop-out almost half the time. None of the factors investigated is frequently or always the cause of drop-out in schools.

3.2 Categories of drop-out factors

Drop-out factors can be categorised into factors that push learners out of school, which are commonly cited as the primary catalysts for dropping out, and factors that pull learners out of school (Scanlon & Mellard 2002: 240). Push factors are normally caused by or prevalent in the school or education system, whereas pull factors exist outside the school. The drop-out factors in township secondary schools are categorised in Table 2.

Three pull factors with means ranging from 3.68 to 3.77 come close to being frequently the causes of drop-out, ten pull factors (with means ranging from 3.03 to 3.45) are the causes of drop-out half the time, and eight pull factors (with means ranging from 2.55 to 2.82) are the causes of drop-out almost half the time. Six push factors (with means ranging from 3.03 to 3.29) are the causes of drop-out half the time and two push factors (with means of 2.89 and 2.92) are the causes of drop-out almost half the time.

4. Discussion

The findings from the literature study and the questionnaire indicate that a combination of push and pull factors jointly or severally influence learners' decision to drop out of school. They include factors relating to the home environment, such as poverty, poor education of parents and lack of or inadequate parental support; factors in the education system, such as poor academic performance, a poor culture of teaching and learning, and inadequate facilities and resources; peer pressure, notably peer dominance and poor peer choices; gender-related factors, notably teenage pregnancies, early marriage and girls having to look after siblings, and factors inherent in society, notably inadequate role models, exposure to poor role models, and unemployment, which is a precursor of poverty.

Table 2: Categories of drop-out factors

Push factors	Mean score
Poor performance at school	3.29
Repeated failure	3.27
Repeated absenteeism	3.19
Walking long distances to school	3.13
Learners not seeing the value of education	3.11
Lack of motivation	3.03
Being too old for standard	2.92
Learner not willing to accept discipline	2.89

Pull factors	Mean score
Unemployment of parents	3.77
Lack of or inadequate parental support	3.69
Not living with parents	3.68
Going to school hungry	3.45
Divorce or separation of parents	3.32
Family conflicts	3.30
Lack of role models at home	3.27
Peer pressure	3.26
Single-parent family	3.22
Teenage pregnancies	3.10
Loss of parents	3.09
Early marriages	3.05
Poor family education background	3.03
Ill-health	2.82
HIV/AIDS-related factors	2.77
Drug abuse	2.77
Learner forced to do odd jobs	2.71
Learner looking after siblings	2.70
Not having decent clothes	2.70
Attendance at an initiation school	2.55
Learner arrested for committing crime	2.55

4.1 Factors relating to home environment

The strongest factors perceived to be the cause of drop-out are those related to the home environment. Since the parents and the school have similar aspirations for the child, parental involvement in, and support of, the child's education are essential for the realisation of those shared aspirations. Home conditions and the relations between home and school have a great impact on the child's education, and this makes the role of the family critical to success at school.

Unemployment of parents, which causes poverty, has a mean of 3.77, implying that it is regarded as almost always the cause of drop-out. It appears to be the most crucial factor contributing to school drop-out in township secondary schools. It is probably the root cause of drop-out. The variable has a ripple effect in that it gives rise to some factors causing school drop-out and influences others to a considerable degree. Thus, by addressing it, some related factors which cause school drop-out will be indirectly addressed. Le Roux (1994: 35-6) regards poverty as the most significant demographic predictor of who will drop out. He contends that education in a culture of poverty is hampered, among others, by insecurity, poor orientation towards school and clashes between the value orientation of the family and the school. This results in the child having a negative academic self-concept and experiencing discomfort in a school situation, which contributes to failure at school and, frequently, to dropping out of school. In support of this a report of the USA Department of Education, as cited in Lagana (2004: 212), states that drop-out rates are higher among the youth from low income families. By contrast, Frank (1990: 35, 44) argues that there is no significant relationship between family income and the drop-out rate. He states that the composite measures of socio-economic status used in most drop-out research do not provide adequate evidence for the assumption that poverty is an important variable in estimating the rate of drop-out. Thus, poverty cannot be isolated as a critical cause of school drop-out (Keen 1992: 100). The latter statement is explained by the fact that the causes of drop-out are often interrelated and intertwined, and some of them, such as poverty, have a ripple effect on others, since other factors which exhibit drop-out propensities are symptomatic of poverty.

Pull factors indicating the immediate outcome of poverty are going to school hungry, not having decent clothes and being forced to do

odd jobs (with means of 3.45, 2.70 and 2.71, respectively). This implies that the first mentioned is considered as the cause of drop-out half the time, whereas the rest are considered as causes of drop-out almost half the time These findings indicate that learners require basic necessities such as food, clothes and financial support from their parents. Lee & Miu-ling (2003: 107) warn that the family also has a distal effect on drop-out behaviour and its underlying influences. This is confirmed by Le Roux (1993: 124), who states that the milieu in which the black child develops is largely impoverished. Because of this the child lacks adequate nutrition and health care, which leads to poor physical condition and lower energy and vitality levels. The overall result is a child who is unable to cope with the academic demands of school. This often leads to repeated failure and early drop-out. The correlation between poverty and drop-out is emphasised by the USA Department of Education in stating that poverty can create undue stress and affect the quality of family life and the degree of family support (Lagana 2004: 218). This situation could result in children being underfed and not having proper clothing. In some cases it forces parents to leave their families in search of employment, and leave their children in the care of their daughters, who in turn are often forced to miss school while looking after siblings. Poverty is a significant factor prompting children to leave school and seek employment to support their families. Male learners, particularly those from urban communities and low-income homes, are forced to do odd jobs to provide their families with an income (Scanlon & Mellard 2002: 240). This encourages school drop-out because employment prior to completion of school education makes the child assume the responsibilities of a grown up.

Parental involvement and support for the child's education are invaluable for the child's academic performance. Therefore factors such as lack of or inadequate parental support, learners not living with parents, divorce or separation of parents, loss of parents, single-parent families and family conflicts (with means of 3.69, 3.68, 3.32, 3.09, 3.22 and 3.30, respectively), do not create a situation in which the child can freely pursue academic activities. The first two factors are almost frequent causes of drop-out, while the other four are causes of drop-out. The findings suggest that learners require supervision and moral support from their parents, and a stable home. According to Lee & Miu-ling (2003: 106), drop-outs have negative perceptions about their families

because their expectations have not been met. They feel that their parents do not support them and experience a lower degree of interdependence and adaptability within the family group. Squelsh & Lemmer (1994: 93) state that the benefits of parental involvement include improved school performance, reduced drop-out rates, a decrease in delinquency and a more positive attitude towards school. Keen (1992: 100) adds that what is significant in most cases of drop-out, is the lack of parental control and discipline. The parents of drop-outs show a lack of interest in their children's schooling and do not see it as relevant to the their children's needs.

Overman (2002: 124) found that, due to inadequate support, teenagers from single-parent families are much more likely to drop out. The same applies to children who have lost parents or whose parents have divorced or are separated. Children who do not live with their parents, or whose parents are engaged in conflict, do not receive adequate parental support and supervision in their studies. Perez (1993) is quoted as concluding that learners from single-parent homes, or in families with low-level occupations, or with low incomes, drop out of school more often than do learners with both parents, or parents in higher professional occupations (Marin 1995: 2). Therefore, parental involvement has a significant effect on the quality of learners' experience of teaching and learning in school, and also on their results (Van Deventer & Kruger 2003: 9).

Research supports the view that children learn more by example than by anything else. Consequently, pull factors such as the lack of role models at home and poor family education background (with means of 3.27 and 3.03) do not augur well for the child's education. These factors are considered as causes of drop-out half the time. The findings stress the particular importance of good role models and motivation for learners. Poor families are generally those who received little or no education. That is why Hodgkison (1991: 12) argues that, more than anything else, increased levels of education reduce the chance of poverty. There is ample research evidence to suggest that people's perception of education appears to be related to the amount of education they themselves have received (Keen 1992: 102; Lategan 1990: 3). For instance, Frank (1990: 44) suggests that parent education, specifically whether or not parents have graduated from high school, is likely to be the most important factor determining their desire to educate their children. He

argues that the children of high school drop-outs are more likely to become high school drop-outs themselves.

4.2 Factors inherent in the education system

The education system is fundamentally intended to ensure that the child receives education from qualified educators. This makes the child the focal point in it. Unfortunately, numerous factors and conditions hinder the smooth running of the education system, thereby impinging on the learner's right to receive a proper education. Some of these factors and conditions are so uncongenial to the learner that they force him/her to drop out of school. This study has found that push factors such as poor performance at school, repeated failure, repeated absenteeism and being too old for the standard (with the means of 3.29, 3.27, 3.19 and 2.92, respectively) are rife in schools. The first three factors are regarded as causes of drop-out half the time, and the last one almost half the time. The findings stress the particular importance of good academic performance and regular school attendance.

The single best predictor of whether or not a learner will drop out of school is his/her level of academic achievement. Lee & Miu-ling (2003: 106) postulate that if learners constantly face setbacks that contribute to academic and interpersonal failures, negative perceptions of the school will be generated. This greatly reduces their motivation to study while gradually eroding their confidence. Ultimately, their commitment to their schooling fades and they use truancy or dropping out of school as an option to express their dissatisfaction. Schwartz (1995) makes it clear that factors that push learners out of school are repeating grades, low academic achievement and insufficient evidence that school personnel care for learners (Scanlon & Mellard 2002: 240). Learners who repeat grades become too old for their grades, and are uncomfortable in class, which makes them drop out of school. Legotlo *et al* (2002: 115) state that repeated poor performance and failure in grade twelve force numerous township learners to drop out of school.

In order to be regarded as useful the school should prepare the children for social usefulness after completion of their studies. In this study drop-out is further perceived to be the result of push factors such as learners not seeing the value of education, not being willing to accept discipline, and having to walk long distances to school (with means of

3.11, 2.89 and 3.13, respectively). The first and third factors are considered as causes of drop-out half the time, and the second almost half the time. It is usually learners who live in squatter settlements who have to walk long distances to schools. The findings stress the importance of having schools close to learners' homes, and the need to make education meaningful to them.

Thompson (1993: 1) argues that learners with expectations passed down from their parents expect schooling to lead to good jobs and decent living standards. Instead, they encounter push factors such as boredom due to meaningless curriculum, uninspiring teaching and poorly resourced schools. At the end lies unemployment, even for graduates. Fischbein & Folkander (2000: 264) point out that from the perspective of drop-outs, the school is unable to adjust to their needs and is thus not for them. This results in learners having low motivation and self-esteem and feeling powerless with no possibility of influencing their school situation. Keen (1992: 102) confirms the preceding views by stating that learners sometimes drop out because they regard what they are being taught at school as irrelevant to their needs and their future or as not guaranteeing them employment after leaving school. More often, learners who regard school as irrelevant cannot get along with educators because they do not do their work, or follow educators' instructions and are sometimes not willing to accept discipline. Drop-out is further aggravated by circumstances surrounding learners who live far away from school and who are often prevented from attending school regularly due to lack of transport or bad weather. These learners may fall behind with their work and fail repeatedly — to the extent that they feel that it is not worthwhile to go to school.

Poor educators and ineffective teaching techniques, which result mainly from insufficient educator training, and a school climate that is not conducive to teaching and learning contribute significantly to the drop-out rate. According to a bulletin of the Department of Education (2001: 2), there were 343 480 educators in the department in 2000, and of these 76 839 (23.2 %) were either unqualified or under-qualified. The physical environment of the school and the availability of facilities, equipment and resources (which are in short supply in township schools) also contribute to educators teaching ineffectively (Van Deventer & Kruger 2003: 7). Wilson & Kelling (1982) are quoted as concluding

that schools which are in a state of neglect and disrepair or structurally run down lead to a dysfunctional environment as well as dysfunctional behaviour (Branham 2004: 1123-4). These provide an environment where learners are less likely to attend school and more likely to drop out.

4.3 Peer pressure

Peers are the most significant influence on adolescents. Peer influence is most profound in secondary schools because the learners in these institutions are adolescents. In view of the confidence adolescents have in their peers, when they have problems or difficulties or decisions to make, they listen to and value their peers' opinion most. These peers are extremely important during adolescence and teenagers spend their days in schools interacting with them (Lagana 2004: 213). In this study peer pressure has a mean of 3.26, implying that it is regarded as the cause of drop-out half the time.

As Lee & Miu-ling (2003: 105) point out, peers fulfil expectations that are not satisfied by other social systems like home, school or church. Their view is that when drop-outs are with peers they have a sense of belonging, freedom and power that makes them feel happy, understood and supported while having fun and sharing. Keen (1992: 102) concurs that a peer group exerts greater pressure on drop-outs than do parents, educators or social workers. Drop-outs enjoy peer relationships based on friendship, respect and understanding, and suggestions and recommendations from peers play an important role in their decision-making processes. Lee & Miu-ling (2003: 107) confirm these views by stating that most learners drop out of school because their peers have suggested this. Thus, peers exert an immediate effect on the drop-out behaviour of children, and will try to convince the would-be drop-outs not to take any advice contrary to theirs, even if such advice comes from parents or people in authority. An old adage stating that birds of a feather flock together is applicable to the peer group. The greatest problem facing adolescents when they have to make decisions is that their decisions may not conform to those of their peers. As a result of this, they stand to lose friends and playmates, and will be looked upon as weaklings or as behaving like children or as being out of line with their kind. Consequently, a poor choice of peers or having friends who have dropped out of school can lead a child to drop out of school.

By contrast, Kortering *et al* (1998) are quoted as stating that research also indicates that socialising with school-loving peers is one of the most important factors in motivating young people to stay in school (Lagana 2004: 213). Le Roux (1994: 219) contends that studies have revealed that children who do not live at home are more likely to be susceptible to peer pressure to engage in antisocial activities. However, he states that there are also findings which indicate that children with authoritative parents seem to develop the capacity to resist peer pressure, even when they spend a fair amount of time in situations where peer pressure is strong. This will most probably apply to children who have internalised values of obedience to authority and honesty, or who have already identified positive role models in society. Research has revealed that a poor self-concept, lower educational expectations and aspirations, delinquent behaviour, inadequate adult support and lower intelligence also contribute to dropping out of school (Lagana 2004: 218; Chavez *et al* 1994: 54). The learners' educational aspirations are influenced by their academic performance and the degree to which they perceive their parents to expect them to attain higher educational qualifications (Ramos & Sanchez 1995: 4).

Overman (2002: 117) found that the peer group effect implies that children in poor neighbourhoods come under greater pressure from peers to drop out of school than those in well-off neighbourhoods. The most probable reason for this is that learners from poor families see themselves as needy when they compare themselves with learners from well-off families. This makes them depend too heavily on their peers. These findings stress the particular importance of learners pursuing healthy peer associations and the need for parents to assist their children in their choice of peers.

4.4 Gender-related factors

Teenage pregnancy is the single greatest cause of school drop-out for female learners. Although Peraita & Pastor (2000: 166) claim that the influence of gender on the drop-out rate is negligible, Le Roux & Smit (1992: 90) regard this problem as an increasingly serious one and of great concern in South Africa. Schlesinger (1988: 63) found that 80% of learners who become pregnant drop out of school, but only 9% of female learners who are not pregnant drop out of school. This is not

a recent study, but it provides a significant indication that pregnancy has been the greatest cause for drop-out among females. According to Overman (2002: 124), male learners are 8% more likely to drop out of school than females. Reed & Johnson (1992: 225), found that 16% of males between 18 and 19 drop out of school compared to 12% of females in the same age group. The drop-out rate at these ages is not necessarily high, and this is probably because it is the period during which learners complete secondary school education and either begin their career or further their studies at higher education institutions. Britain has the highest incidence of teenage pregnancy in the European Union, with about 1% of these occurring in the under-16 age group, and teenage pregnancy leading to a 40% drop-out rate (Ukil & Esen 2002: 270).

This study has found that pull factors such as teenage pregnancy, early marriage and looking after siblings have means of 3.10, 4 and 2.70, implying that they are considered as causes of drop-out half the time, frequently and almost half the time. Goldman & Bradley (1996: 188) assert that pregnancy is one reason why female learners drop out of school, and is also an inhibiting factor discouraging their re-entry because they must rear their children or carry out their maternal responsibilities. The demands of child-rearing strongly deter a mother from completing her schooling, especially if there is a lack of child-care facilities or if her parents cannot afford to take her child to such facilities. Yampolskaya *et al* (2002: 5) add that after dropping out due to pregnancy, the drop-outs are over three times more likely to become pregnant again than girls who continued their schooling. This, together with the fact that they regard themselves and are regarded by other adolescents as grown ups, makes returning to school most unlikely. In addition, drop-outs enter into early marriages. Apart from not being ready to raise a child, the teenager will be concerned about having to drop out of school prematurely (Overman 2002: 124). Thus, parenting teenagers are likely to achieve less, educationally. They represent the majority of welfare recipients, their babies are at risk of various health problems and are more likely to live in less stimulating environments and to be neglected and abused (Sawhill 2000 as cited in Yampolskaya *et al* 2002: 1, 2). These conditions may cause them to become drop-outs too. These findings point to the importance of attending school regularly and curbing teenage pregnancy.

Besides teenage pregnancy, Baine & Mwamwenda (1994: 124) discovered that female learners in certain instances are withdrawn from school to look after younger children, especially in urban areas where both parents work and there are no child-care centres for many children under school-going age. Girls are also forced to look after siblings or even other family members who suffer from HIV/AIDS-related ailments. This sometimes takes so long that they are forced to drop out of school. This problem seems insurmountable if one takes into account that it has been estimated that more than 5.6 million South Africans are suffering from HIV/AIDS (Nthite 2005: 1).

4.5 Factors in society

Although lack of family income due to unemployment has been discussed under factors prevailing in the family it is equally applicable here. The school exists in a society that has a tremendous influence on what goes on inside and outside it. Thus, society can have a strong motivating or demotivating influence on the learners. Society determines what learners should learn, as well as their choice of vocations, because learners are educated to work in society. To be positively influenced, learners need to see a sufficient number of successfully educated people in society who can act as role models. Chronic unemployment, even among educated people in South Africa, and among educators in particular, may demotivate learners. In addition, learners view repeated salary strikes of educators as an indication that a good education does not guarantee a reasonable salary. On the contrary, in South Africa learners see politicians as good role models who, with the lowest possible educational qualifications, live affluent lives because they earn good salaries. Learners tend to overlook the value of education or to think that their education will lead to unemployment (Legotlo *et al* 2002: 116). Often, learners see very little connection between how much they learn and their future success in the labour market or the opportunity for securing employment. Learners who find themselves in such a situation will probably not feel a need for learning and may have no plans for the future. They could easily reach a stage where they do not see attending school as worthwhile (Doveton *et al* 1991: 132, Mwamwenda 1989: 224), and this could easily lead to their dropping out of school.

This study has found that pull factors such as drug abuse, ill-health, learners arrested for committing crime, HIV/AIDS and attendance at an initiation school (with the means of 2.55, 2.77, 2.82, 2.77 and 2.55) are rife among learners. These factors are considered as causes of drop-out almost half the time. Learners who drop out of school usually become delinquents, use drugs and commit crime. The levels of delinquency and crime associated with drop-outs represent a real cost to society in terms of financial loss from theft and vandalism, and personal cost to the victims of violence. They are also costly for the youth who engage in these acts. Although not all of them are arrested for their criminal behaviour, engaging in delinquency and criminal behaviour can establish a standard for behaviour that leads to problems later in life (Chavez *et al* 1994: 55).

Dropping out of school has other wide-ranging negative effects on society including unemployment, loss of national income, loss of government tax revenues, an increased demand for government services, and poorer health (Branham 2004: 1113, Kronick 2003: 531). The unemployed and those who earn meagre wages because of poor education cannot afford food and medical care, and this may result in their experiencing poor health. This situation may be compounded by the HIV/AIDS pandemic in South Africa. Thus, educational achievement is directly related to economic gain. The community benefits when more learners are retained in school and complete a curriculum that prepares them for adult roles (Scanlon & Mellard 2002: 254). The findings call for society to play a decisive role in limiting the numbers of school drop-outs and in convincing the learners of the value of education to their future.

5.   Recommendations

The school should identify learners who exhibit the characteristics of drop-outs and take immediate and decisive action in addressing the sources of their problems. The ability to identify potential drop-outs is an important prerequisite for the development of any effective prevention strategies or programmes. The rationale behind this view is that, if the problems are discovered early, the chances of addressing them will be much greater. Early identification of potential drop-outs is critical, and preventive measures by educators are imperative so that

learners at risk can receive the support needed to keep them in school (George *et al* 1992: 1). Through early identification, the behaviour of the at-risk learner is not just observed, but action is taken to understand the causes and prevent repetition (Kronick 2003: 4). Parents, assisted by the school and community stakeholders, should ensure that every learner comes to school adequately fed and clothed. Community stakeholders could provide needy learners with clothes while the Department of Education should institute feeding schemes for them.

Research has shown that parental involvement is the prime determinant in children's learning and in the successful operation of schools. Consequently, the school should encourage increased parental involvement in school affairs, and should teach and encourage parents to support and assist their children. The school should provide learners wih academic and moral support and assistance, particularly in the case of those who do not have parents. Downing & Vette (1994: 4) assert that the school personnel should try to strike a balance between effectively teaching learners in specific disciplines and showing caring behaviour that will enhance their total well-being. Their view is that caring behaviour such as listening, being patient, raising self-esteem and showing respect is helpful in keeping learners in school. The presence of caring adults has been shown to promote positive outcomes for young people in high-risk environments (Lagina 2004: 213). Studies and at-risk learner literature, as well as the high learner drop-out rate, indicate that the absence of educator concern and care are major factors mentioned by learners who leave school (Bryk *et al* 1993, Pintrich & Schunk 1996: 377). Schools should hold workshops for pre-school educators in their community to assist them in running their institutions effectively, and should encourage parents and girls who are mothers to take their pre-school children there. This will minimise the possibility of failure of school beginners, and encourage schoolgirls who have babies to pursue their studies. Schools should hold regular workshops on sex education for teenage girls and boys, discouraging girls from falling pregnant prematurely, and advising teenagers on good peer choices. Sex education remains an important tool in pregnancy prevention (Ukil & Esen 2002: 272), and schools need to develop preventative programmes that help teenagers to understand the realities of parenthood (Lagana 2004: 218).

Schools need to work closely with learners to identify and rectify home, school, peer and community issues that impact negatively on learners' attendance and performance (Scanlon & Mellard 2002: 254). They should be motivated to see the value of education to their future, and monitored on an ongoing basis to see whether school intervention changes their behaviour. Schools should motivate learners by increasing their interest in, and commitment to schooling. To achieve this, a school should set high expectations for learners, set them attainable standards, provide adequate learner support, teach effectively, offer job-related curricula, reward learner achievements and promote school completion. These issues are fundamental and essential prerequisites for establishing a positive school culture which can promote regular attendance, improve academic performance and increase learners' interest in academic pursuits, thus minimising school drop-out.

The Department of Education should ensure that there are sufficient schools and that they have adequate facilities and resources, that educators receive assistance to upgrade their qualifications, and that they are better paid. This will increase educators' motivation and effectiveness and minimise the annual wage strikes which disrupt effective teaching. Adequate resources and facilities will facilitate effective teaching and learning, which in turn will reduce failure and minimise drop-outs. The Department of Educaion should also introduce or facilitate social upliftment programmes such as adult education and the training of parents in parenting skills, as these will enable them to assist and motivate their children to see the value of education and to recognise the need to complete their studies. The Department of Education should re-introduce a feeding scheme for needy children. In the past, a feeding scheme was the only programme used by the Department of Education to encourage school attendance and to prevent school drop-out in primary schools, but it failed due to poor management. To rectify this problem, the Department of Education should take responsibility for managing the programme as part of the school programme.

Society should provide role models by highlighting its leading citizens, as such individuals are capable of impressing the value of standards and excellence upon the minds of learners, who will then strive to attain similar standards. Society should aso apply effective strategies for dealing with the issues and negative forces that can influence learners

to drop out of school. When learners are aware that dropping out of school is unacceptable in their society they will not easily opt for this alternative. Some sectors of society could assist schools with the financial means to improve their facilities and resources, and could assist needy, hardworking learners with study bursaries, while other sectors could ensure that schools are not vandalised. Society should insist that the government address the unemployment problem seriously and unreservedly, giving it priority attention. In addressing unemployment, the government should repatriate illegal immigrants; curb crime, corruption and over- and underspending; curb unnecessary labour strikes; insist that employers should employ only South African citizens, and create a climate conducive to job creation.

The author contends that, although there could be different approaches to addressing the problem of school drop-out, the most effective strategy is the shift in focus from prreventing drop-out to promoting the completion of school education. This implies acting pro-actively rather than re-actively in addressing the problem. This point of view is confirmed by Lehr *et al* (2003: 342), who state that, given the consequences of school drop-out to society and the individual, the importance of facilitating school completion for all learners is a critical concern for researchers, policy-makers and educators. However, since the drop-out problem has spiralled almost out of control, both preventing drop-out and promoting school completion should be attempted simultaneously, but with more emphasis on the latter.

6. Conclusion

This article has attempted to identify what educators perceive as the most critical causes of school drop-out. These causes are probably not only inherent in township secondary schools, but also in schools located outside and far beyond the townships. Research evidence indicates explicitly that the school drop-out phenomenon will not disappear without intervention, and that it will have both short- and long-term consequences. School drop-out is not only the problem of the ex-learner and his/her parents, but also of the society in which s/he will have to work. The repercussions of high drop-out rates include large-scale unemployment, which is a precursor of poverty, a high crime rate and ultimately a life of hopelessness.

Since no country can afford to have large numbers of its citizens under-educated and incapable of gainful employment, every effort must be made to curb school drop-out. This study has shown that intervention strategies can be effectively applied to prevent and curb the problem before it spirals completely out of control. All education stakeholders can play prominent roles in preventing and curbing drop-out. The resolution of the problem will ensure that learners receive a good education which, in turn, can lead to improved productivity, economic growth, the reduction of unemployment, and a better life for all.

The views held by educators with regard to the causes of school drop-out are also supported by the literature study. The empirical study also confirms the theoretical assumptions regarding the impact of these factors on school drop-out. It is the learner's home background, behaviour and academic performance, in particular, that exert a crucial influence in encouraging or curbing school drop-out. Thus, by addressing these factors, other related factors which cause school drop-out will be indirectly addressed. The fact that numerous factors are perceived as causes of school drop-out indicates how complex and deep-rooted the problem has become. The findings of the empirical study support the concern of the Minister of National Education about the high rates of learner drop-out in South African schools.

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