



**Consortium for Research on
Educational Access,
Transitions and Equity**

**Dropping Out of School in Southern Ghana:
The Push-out and Pull-out Factors**

Eric Ananga

**CREATE PATHWAYS TO ACCESS
Research Monograph No. 55**

January 2011



**University of Sussex
Centre for International Education**



Consortium for Research on
Educational Access, Transitions & Equity
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List of Acronyms

| | |
|--------|---|
| CSS | Children's School Supplies |
| CREATE | Consortium for Research on Educational Access, Transitions and Equity |
| EFA | Education for All |
| GMR | Global Monitoring Report |
| GoG | Government of Ghana |
| GPRS | Ghana Poverty Reduction Strategy |
| GSS | Ghana Statistical Service |
| JHS | Junior high school |
| MOESS | Ministry of Education Science and Sports |
| PTA | Parent Teacher Association |
| SMC | School Management Committee |
| UNESCO | United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation |
| UNICEF | United Nations Children Education Fund |
| USAID | United States Agency for International Development |

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Preface

Drop out is endemic in much of Sub-Saharan Africa. The largest number of children out of school in most countries not experiencing civil unrest are drop outs who enrolled but failed to complete their primary and junior high schooling. Disproportionately those dropping out are over age. Many will have a life history of late enrolment, irregular attendance and low achievement coupled with poverty and dislocated childhoods with insecure family relationships.

Many surveys report the main causes of drop out as reported by children and teachers. These usually highlight costs and irrelevance of the curriculum, child labour amongst older children, pregnancy amongst girls, and other factors including distance to school, teacher absenteeism, disability and violence at school. This monograph goes beyond the first level attributions of drop out to delve under the surface and explore the dynamics of decision making and actions that lead to drop out, profile the forms it takes, and encourage or discourage re-entry into school. This generates a rich tapestry of insight into the life histories of different children who have dropped out. This shows how both factors on the supply and demand side are influential and may interact. It also illustrates how important action at the local level may be and how the actions of “significant others” may determine if drop out occurs and if it become permanent.

The evidence presented is enough to establish that drop out is in important part generated by characteristics of schools and teachers, and by complicity within communities about child labour. The insights presented offer sharp challenges to schools, teachers and local education officials to re-examine their culpability in premature termination of the school careers of many children from poor households. They are also a reminder that though households and parents of course have responsibilities to encourage and support the schooling of their children, where this fails to happen, the state will remain the only guarantor of the right to education and needs to live up to the realities and obligations of being the provider of last resort.

Keith Lewin
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Summary

Addressing school dropout has been one of the most controversial elements of policy since the introduction of free compulsory universal basic education (FCUBE) in Ghana. However, research that utilises qualitative biographical detail surrounding irregular attendance and the critical events in the process that lead to dropout in Ghana is limited. I argue that in order to achieve the target of universal basic education by 2015, education policy should focus more directly on addressing dropout. This paper provides an in-depth analysis of the critical events pupils experience as they cross the threshold from being enrolled to being out of school in southern Ghana. This paper provides fresh insights into drop outs' life worlds and educational needs; opportunities to re-cross the threshold back into basic education, whether into school or complementary provision. The findings presented in this paper show that conditions both external to the school environment – poverty and the opportunity cost of schooling – and within the school – the teacher factor, and school practices and processes – conspire to compromise retention and push and/or pull children out of school.

Dropping Out of School in Southern Ghana: The Push-out and Pull-out Factors

1. Introduction

This monograph presents an analysis of children's accounts of the causal factors that influence the decision to drop out of school. The paper reveals the various issues and events that influence children's patterns of attendance and attitudes towards schooling. The paper focuses on socio-economic factors outside school and conditions within the school environment that compromise attendance. I identify the factors that influence schooling behaviour from children's accounts and exemplify the analytical claims with relevant interview excerpts from the field study. Data was gathered by means of in-depth interviews with children and observation of their activities.

In the 2008 Education for All (EFA) Global Monitoring Report (GMR), the question is raised: "Education for all by 2015: will we make it?" Although it is a very simple and straightforward enquiry, the answers are highly complex. Ensuring that children enrol in school is one thing, but whether they will complete their education is another issue altogether. It has been argued that most children in Africa are enrolled in school, but that the real problem concerns children dropping out of school (Dumas et al., 2004; Lewin, 2007). The Consortium for Research on Educational Access Transitions and Equity (CREATE) identifies six zones of exclusion (see Lewin, 2007) and children who participated in this study fall within zones 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6 (Ananga, forthcoming) (see Appendix for an explanation of CREATE's zones of exclusion).

In the literature on school dropout, factors such as the cost of education and other socio-cultural issues are cited as causes. Most researchers attribute the reasons why pupils are unable to complete basic education in developing countries to structural factors at household, school and society levels (Colclough et al., 2003; Eie, 2003 cited in Wikan n.d.; Hunt, 2008).

Children's accounts of their reasons for dropping out of school are analysed in the light of such research findings. The analysis examines the causes of dropout from three points of view: first, children's accounts of their family, socio-economic and societal circumstances; second, conditions within the school; and third, accounts of dropout children who have returned to school. It thus balances structural analyses of dropout with an account emphasising children's agency in events.

The finding of the study presented in this monograph show that some supply and demand conditions act as push and or pull factors to incite children to drop out of school. The main argument in the study is that unless the nature and characteristics of the critical events in the dropout process are understood and clarified to inform policy, any policy intervention intended to prevent dropout and/or encourage drop-in is a waste of scarce resources that Ghana cannot afford to squander. This paper therefore highlights the fact that in addition to the poor socio-economic conditions of children's backgrounds that shape school attendance and retention, certain critical conditions within the school are found to interact with the poor socio-economic background of children to result in dropping out of school.

1.1 Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study is to highlight the causes of dropout from the accounts of children who experienced drop out. This monograph highlights the conditions that create the processes that led to dropout. The study relied on intensive in-depth interviews that specifically focused on exploring the experiences of dropout children to capture their views on the risk factors, trajectories and the critical point of dropping out. Major strengths of this qualitative study are its depth of coverage of the experiences of dropouts located in context for both boys and girls and the wide range of issues it covers including socio-economic background; grade of dropping out, age and related daily activities of children and how these shape children's school attendance patterns.

This study highlights the stories of dropout children on a range of within and outside school conditions that pushed and/or pulled children to drop outs in a new way. Although the problem of dropout is very prevalent, it remains an under-researched area particularly from the view of the 'victims' of drop out. Any new information that sheds light on the complexities surrounding dropout will be useful in informing policy towards the achievement of EFA and MDGs targeting access to education.

1.2 Background

In Ghana, access to primary education has grown over the years and Gross Enrolment Rates are now above 95% (MOESS, 2007). According to official statistics, 85% of children of school going age went to school (86.3% boys and 83.6% girls) in 2001 and between that period and 2006, gross enrolments is reported to have reached 90% (MOESS, 2006). Basic education (grades 1-9) is compulsory in Ghana's education system and the compulsory age for basic education is 6-15 years (UNESCO, 2005). While basic school enrolment in Ghana has improved significantly in recent years, one major challenge facing it has been high levels of drop out (MOESS, 2007). Many children enrol over age, some repeat grades and only two-thirds reach the last grade for completion (USAID, 2007). In Ghana, over 20% of school going children have either dropped out or never enrolled in school at primary level (Ampiah & Adu-Yeboah, 2009). Reports on the state of education in Ghana by Akyeampong et al., (2007) and other studies confirm the reality of school dropout in Ghana's basic school system (GSS, 2003; Hashim, 2004; MOESS, 2007; 2008). In 2006, non-completion rates stood at 15% and 35% for primary and junior high school (JHS¹) levels respectively (MOESS, 2007).

In a description of the details of dropout in Ghana's basic education system, the multi-indicator cluster survey (MICS) 2006, reports that dropout rates across all grades in Ghana are similar (4% per year) except for grade three, which is 5% (GSS, 2006). Considering gender, males have higher dropout rates than females in almost all grades. From grades 1, 3 and 6, dropout rates in rural areas stood at 3.9%, 4.6%, and 3.9% respectively compared with 3.3%, 5.5%, and 4.5% in urban areas. There are however, wide regional variations in dropout rates. The regions with the worst rates are the Upper West, Northern, and Central regions. In the Central region, where this study was located, dropout rates from Grades 1 to 6 stood at 7.3%, 8.2%, 10.7%, 8.5%, 8.6% and 6.2% respectively (GSS, 2006). To achieve universal basic education by 2015 in Ghana, policy attention needs to focus more on addressing dropout.

¹ Lower secondary education is now called junior high school in Ghana, but when research for this paper started these schools were still called junior secondary schools.

Several factors, particularly direct educational costs to households and some socio-cultural practices including child labour are alleged to be responsible for children dropping out of school. Basic education has been free since 1987, though schools continue to charge maintenance fees which many believed were responsible for children dropping out or staying entirely out of school. In 2005, the Government of Ghana (GoG) introduced a capitation grant scheme² to replace all fees charged by the school. The capitation scheme is reported to have attracted both unenrolled children and drop outs into school (MOESS, 2006). Despite this, dropout continues to occur in some basic schools in Ghana, which threatens the achievement of universal basic education by 2015 (Akyeampong et al, 2007).

1.3 Organisation of the Study

This paper is organised into six sections. Section one focuses on the background and purpose of the study. The second section highlights literature on the factors that influence dropout. The third section presents the context and methods of the study. Section four is organised into two parts around the research questions, with part one focussing on conditions outside school that pushed and/or pulled children out of school; part two on conditions within the school that led to dropout. The fifth section addresses the final research question about the motivations behind children's decision to drop back in to school or not and finally, views from children who return to school about their chances of staying and completing school. In both part one and two, excerpts from the interview data are used to support emerging themes from children's accounts of conditions that push and or pulled children to drop out of school. Based on the evidence of children's accounts I argue that conditions within the school appear to be critical in influencing children's decision to drop out of school. In a sixth section conclusions are drawn from the findings, that certain conditions within and outside the school—supply and demand related push and or pull children to drop out of school and the paper ends with policy recommendations.

² The capitation scheme pays \$3 per school child to the schools to defray the costs schools previously charged children.

2. Dropout Literature: Reasons Why Children Drop out of School

Although there is a growing body of research on the role of the individual and influence of household conditions on children's schooling in Africa, there have been relatively few empirical studies focusing on school dropout (Fuller et al., 1995; Fuller & Liang, 1999). Understanding why children drop out of school is the key to addressing this major education problem; yet, identifying the causes of dropout is extremely difficult because the phenomenon is influenced by a range of proximal and distal factors.

Research into the causes of dropout focuses on the influence of a series of interrelated demand and supply factors that interact in a complex way to incite children to drop out of school (Hunt, 2008). I draw on these perspectives in conceptualising dropout as an outcome of contextual conditions setting a process in motion that pushes and/or pulls children until they eventually drop out of school. The several causal factors of dropout are related to the family background the child; the community in which his or her school is located; and conditions within the school environment. See Hunt (2008) for a more comprehensive analysis of the factors are either demand or supply-driven.

Supply and demand factors that cause dropout to occur are contextual, since they are variously located in the family, school and community. The influence of the child's attributes – his or her values, attitude and behaviour pattern in terms of education – are dictated by contextual variables. These are, on the one hand, demand factors, which include the socio-economic conditions of the child's background; and, on the other hand, supply factors, which relate to conditions within the school setting that shape the child's decisions in terms of his or her education.

Empirical research into dropout has identified a number of supply and demand factors in the child's family background, the community in which the school is located, and the school itself that can be utilised as predictors of dropout. In a study of dropout in northern Ghana, the complexity of the causes of the phenomenon is illustrated by the variety of at-risk factors cited as reasons for withdrawal from school (Ampiah & Adu-Yeboah, 2009).

In spite of the fact that supply and demand factors that interact in a complex fashion to encourage children to drop out of school often function simultaneously, I attempt to explore them separately, although there is necessarily a degree of overlap between them. The next section discusses the demand factors. In the next two sections I review the literature on a range of push and/or pull supply and demand factors that were found to be linked and in some cases provoked school children to terminate their schooling.

2.1 Demand Factors: Socio-economic background and the Dropout

2.1.1 Household Poverty

The characteristics of the household influence whether a child will enrol in school or not, the frequency of attendance, and the likelihood of suspending schooling or dropping out permanently (Croft, 2002 cited in Hunt, 2008).

The link between poverty and school dropout is highlighted in a number of studies (e.g. Birdsall et al., 2005; Boyle et al., 2002; Brown & Park, 2002; Bruneforth, 2006; Cardoso &

Verner, 2007; Dachi & Garrett, 2003; Hunter & May, 2003; Porteus et al., 2000; Ranasinghe & Hartog, 2002; UIS & UNICEF, 2005; Vavrus, 2002).

According to Hunter and May (2003), poverty is regarded as the likely explanation of school disruption; and in describing the link between wealth and school retention, Colclough et al. (2000) found that:

... amongst those out-of-school, the mean wealth index for school drop-outs was generally higher than for those who had never enrolled ... children at school were, on average, from better-off households than those who had dropped out, who were, in turn, from richer backgrounds than school-age children who had never enrolled (Colclough et al. 2000:16).

In its analysis of poverty in Ghana, the Ghana Poverty Reduction Strategy 1 (GPRS) captures the effects of poverty in three dimensions – income or consumption poverty, lack of access to basic services, and as an impediment to human development. All three dimensions are considered to negatively affect the demand for education by people from poor households, which results in low levels of participation in education. Poverty is considered to be a major factor in the impediment of enrolment and retention in Ghanaian schools (Akyeampong et al., 2007; Canagarajah & Coloumbe, 1997; Chao & Apler, 1998; GSS, 2003).

In Ghana, most out-of-school children – both those who have never enrolled and those who have dropped out – come from economically deprived households. According to a Ghana child labour survey report, child workers claimed to be working to raise the money to go to school (GSS, 2003).

Children from low socio-economic households, and those that are vulnerable and prone to income shocks, commonly face some form of demand to withdraw from school if their parents cannot afford the direct cost of education (Gubert & Robilliard, 2006). The payment of school fees therefore acts as a barrier to enrolment and retention (Colclough et al., 2000; Hunter & May, 2003; Liu, 2004; Mukudi, 2004).

Household poverty may be regarded as affecting dropout through its interactive effects with other factors that trigger events that result in dropping out from school. In exploring the conditions outside school that influence dropout, this study sought to highlight how poverty shapes school attendance and dropout in the study area. The next section looks at how the costs of school —direct and indirect, affect schooling.

2.1.2 Fees and Indirect Costs of Schooling

In the literature on determinants of school participation the direct and indirect costs of schooling are found to affect enrolment and attendance especially amongst poor households (e.g. Dachi & Garrett, 2003; Fentiman, Hall and Bundy, 1999). As mentioned earlier, some studies suggest that the cost of school fees was the reason why poor households withdraw their children from school (Canagarajan and Coloumbe, 1997) and evidence exists that other indirect costs of schooling also affect demand for schooling.

Payment of school tuition fees may not be the main reason behind dropping out in those educational systems that do not charge children any fees, as is now the case in Ghana. However, it often appears to be the case that other fees apart from tuition are charged and

other direct costs – e.g. uniforms, transport, food etc remain. Research shows that poor households sometimes withdraw their children from school in order to work as part of a coping strategy to meet costs and generate resources to support the costs of schooling (see Hunt, 2008). There is therefore a relationship between poverty, structure and arrangement in the household and dropout. The next section looks at structure and arrangement in the household and dropout.

2.1.3 Structure and arrangement in the household and dropping out

The household composition, arrangement, interaction and support play crucial roles in retention and completion. Structures in the home play very key roles that encourage and promote children's participation in schooling or conspire against it. The composition and structure of the household, (gender, size, education, health, and income of members, etc.), shapes access and retention (Al Samarrai and Peasgood, 1998).

A study on education access in South Africa on participation and dropping out reported that children who live with their biological mothers are not very likely to drop out of school when compared with those pupils whose mothers were living somewhere or who were bereaved (Grant and Hallman, 2006). Also, households that are headed by females place more emphasis on the education of their children (Al Samarrai and Peasgood, 1998).

Also, the number of children that live in a household also affects retention. For example, where there are more children in the household with many of them being less than five years old, it negatively affects the regular school attendance of girls (Glick and Sahn, 2000). Nekatibeb (2002) showed that household size and compositions interact with other factors to shape access and retention to confirm this,

Ersado (2005) argues that parents' education is the most consistent determinant of a child participation in education. It has been documented that the higher the education of the parent or the household head, the greater the chances of increased access, regular attendance and lower dropout rates (Ainsworth et al., 2005; Connelly and Zhen, 2003; Duyea, 2003).

Poor health of household members affects school attendance. For instance a pupil may be asked to stay at home to take care of parents, guardians and sibling should they fall ill. Girls are most affected which results in them staying out of school for long periods taking care of relatives to the detriment of their studies (Case and Ardington, 2004; Kadzamira and Rose, 2001). Apart from this, death of parent(s) does have effects that reduce schooling for children (Chipfakacha, 1999).

2.1.4 Child Labour/Work and Dropping out

In addition to household interaction and support on dropout, poverty, location, gender and age of children often interact with seasonal factors and child labour to influence a child's access to education and dropout. Specific work-related tasks, for example, full time child care and work in peak agricultural times often clashes with schooling times. Child labour is described as the main reason behind absenteeism, repetition and drop out cases in Tanzania (Dachi & Garrett, 2003).

While poverty is often cited as creating an enabling environment that encourages child labour (Blunch & Verner, 2000; Duryea, 2003) and leads to drop out, Duryea (2003) highlights the

pull of the labour market (as opposed to the push of poverty) as a main factor in children dropping out of school in urban Brazil. Also, studies show that rural children are more likely to work than urban or peri-urban children (Blunch & Verner, 2000; Canagarajah & Coulombe, 1997; Ersado, 2005).

The PROBE Team (1999) in India sees agricultural activities as clashing with school times and because such activities take place in rural areas and are seasonal, they lead to seasonal withdrawals from school. Children who combine child labour with schooling often suffer and cannot attend regularly. Working children therefore attend school intermittently and irregular attendance predisposes pupils to dropping out (Hunt, 2008). Rural children's work is influential in drop out Ghana (see Hashim, 2005).

In relation to gender, studies show that girl children drop out of school to look after younger siblings (e.g. Brock & Cammish, 1997). Girls are found to be engaged in more duties that take them out of school than boys (Kane, 2004). In many contexts, girls take on a heavier workload within domestic/household settings, whereas boys are more likely to be involved in agricultural duties and the formal labour market though it can also be the case that girls are employed in traditional agriculture. (Canagarajah & Coulombe, 1997).

In rural areas of Cote D'Ivoire, the relatively high wages that male child labourers are able to earn has the effect of increasing the probability that boys will drop out, and decreasing the likelihood that girls will drop out (Appleton, 1991 cited in Bredie & Beeharry, 1998). In addition, Rose and Al Samarrai (2001) state that in the case of Ethiopia while boys may be the first to be enrolled in school, in times of economic crisis, if waged employment is available, they may also be the first to be withdrawn. A study of education access in Ghana between 1994 and 1996, in two circuits in the south (Ziope and Amankwa) and one in the north (Fumbisi), reveals that child labour is the main reason that older pupils drop out of school (Fentiman et al., 1999).

The influence of child labour on dropout notwithstanding, it is argued that the school has the potential to implement protective mechanisms and provide incentives that attract children, increase attendance levels and discourage pupils from dropping out (UNESCO, 2007). The next section examines the influence of the school environment itself on dropout.

2.2 Supply Factors: Conditions within the School as Factors in the Dropout Process

It is widely acknowledged that the school exerts a powerful influence on children's achievement, and its characteristics have an impact on the dropout rate. In a study in Ghana, a wide variety of school-related causes of dropout are cited. Specifically, factors such as teacher attitude; grade repetition; corporal punishment; difficulty in learning; and being overage for grade are posited as the reasons behind dropout (Ampiah & Adu-Yeboah, 2009).

Research also points to distance to school being an important determinant of educational access. For example, in cases in which there are more primary schools than junior high schools in the locality, and in which the only available secondary school is further away (Fentiman et al., 1999), the distance to the latter may be considered too far for younger children, especially girls (Juneja, 2001). This is also true in the cases of older girls and those children regarded by parents as vulnerable to sexual harassment (Colclough et al., 2000; Nekatibeb, 2002; PROBE, 1999). Parents are afraid of the safety of their children when they have to travel longer distances to school. Thus, according to Ainsworth et al. (2005), the

likelihood of children attending primary school decreases the greater the distance to the nearest secondary school. Other factors on the supply side are discussed below.

2.2.1 Quality of Education: Processes and Practices

The level of school performance; its institutional configuration; its processes and practices; and relationships within school between teachers and students all influence access. These factors within the school have been found to interact with other factors outside to cause children to drop out, although in some cases, a single positive or negative experience at school can be the main determinant of whether a child stays in school or withdraws (Akyeampong et al 2007; Hunt, 2008).

Real and perceived educational quality has been raised by many researchers as a major factor influencing schooling access (e.g. Ackers et al., 2001; Boyle et al., 2002; Brock & Cammish, 1997; PROBE, 1999). Improved access to education as a result of EFA and universal primary education (UPE) programmes has highlighted the importance of quality as a requirement for ensuring sustained access. It has been argued that quality has been compromised by rapid expansion and increased access (Boyle et al., 2002), although the meaning of exactly what constitutes quality remains unclear (PROBE, 1999; UNESCO, 2004). There are varying definitions of what quality actually means. There seems to be a dearth of empirical studies establishing the link between quality of education and dropout. Such shortcomings notwithstanding, the following section considers the influence of resources and facilities, as well as the practices and process that are linked to quality of education and dropout.

2.2.2 Education Resources

Education facilities are linked to quality in terms of human resources and in-school resources. Availability of resources such as textbooks, desks and blackboards has been found to influence dropout (Brock & Cammish, 1997; Molteno et al., 2000), as have various aspects of teaching and learning processes. Teaching practice and behaviour can particularly influence a pupil's decision to drop out. Smith (2003) found that in some schools in Zimbabwe's Southern Province teachers did not prepare lessons, had no schemes of work, and left pupils' assignments unmarked. Such classroom practices and implicit lack of in-service teacher development has serious implications for retention.

The prevalence of teacher absenteeism is noted in the works of Alcazar et al., (2006) and Banerjee and Duflo, (2006); and the global teacher absence project reports cases of public primary school teacher absence (Chaudhury et al., 2005). Although much is still unknown about how teacher absence leads to dropout, it clearly implies that pupils' education – and by extension, interest in school – suffers as a result.

From research in Peru, Alcazar et al. (2006) found that teacher absence was concentrated in poor and rural communities. Working in such localities decreases teacher motivation, and a poor community may also be unable to hold teachers accountable. Posts in remote areas that lack basic amenities such as passable roads, a reliable water supply and mains electricity, may be unattractive to teachers. As a result, pupils are more likely to drop out of school on account of the higher rates of teacher absence. To compound this situation, it has been found that certain practices and processes within the school are also linked to dropout.

Ghuman and Lloyd (2007) and Hunt (2007) describe the lack of accountability and monitoring mechanisms in some schools, arguing that once teachers are in post, it is usually difficult to dismiss them. Ghuman and Lloyd (2007) note how meaningful performance and attendance are difficult to guarantee. Hunt (2007) focuses on the lack of monitoring of policy in practice, in particular the corporal punishment ban in South Africa. The author argues that there has been little research into how these factors directly correlate with dropout rates. This is one of the key issues explored in the present study, which is based on children's views of how conditions within the school – including the behaviour of teachers towards pupils, and corporal punishment among other things – lead to dropout.

2.2.3 Conditions within the School: Practices and Processes

Research shows that teacher attitudes towards pupils are linked to dropout. From their research in Ethiopia and Guinea, Colclough et al. (2000) found that teachers were more positive about the participation, interest and intelligence of boys rather than girls. In some cases, this is because they believe that girls will drop out early, an attitude that can then become a self-fulfilling prophecy (Ames, 2004). In their study of Guinea, Glick and Sahn (2000) argue that the school environment and classroom conditions in general seem to be less conducive to effective learning of girls than boys. However, in other contexts, education practices have been found to be more likely to exclude boys (Hunter & May, 2003).

Although few researchers make the direct link, there are issues related to the preservation of an appropriate teacher–student relationship and dropout. For example, the use of corporal punishment or violence is practiced by teachers in many countries (Boyle et al., 2002; Humphreys, 2006 cited in Hunt, 2008; Hunt, 2007; Seidu and Adzahlie-Mensah, 2010). While it has been outlawed in some contexts, it is legal in others, although with varying degrees of restriction. Boyle et al. (2002) suggest that beating and intimidation “*affect children's motivation to attend school.*” As a result of the caning and accompanying humiliation pupils suffer at the hands of their teachers, the former gradually become less motivated to go to school (PROBE, 1999).

The issue of bullying from fellow pupils may also exacerbate the precarious situation of children already suffering from corporal punishment by teachers, inciting them to drop out. In some studies, gender based violence in school has also been negatively correlated with educational access, although it has not been directly linked to dropout (Dunne et al., 2010; Human Rights Watch, 2001; Leach et al, 2003).

2.2.4 Academic Performance

Poor academic results are associated with higher levels of grade repetition and dropout, and with lower progression ratios to higher levels of the education system (Colclough et al., 2000). This is reflected in the way in which the household perceives education quality in relation to its own context; which is often regarded in terms of the expectations of children, the perceived relevance of the education children are receiving, and their ability to meet parental aspirations. Household expectations of education quality affect decision-making around schooling access and retention. Based on their research in rural Ghana, Pryor and Ampiah (2003) found that parents did not consider the education available in their community to be worthwhile because the quality of the village school was not high enough to warrant the investment of time, energy and economic resources.

While pupils who perform exceptionally well academically at an early age are often given preferential treatment by teachers in order to pass exams, others who perform poorly are made aware how slim their chances are of rising very high in the education system; and pupils who feel left out very quickly become disheartened (Liu, 2004). In a study that interviewed parents about children's dropout rates in Mongolia (Batbaatar et al., 2006), responses revealed that in schools where great emphasis was placed on the maintenance of very high academic standards, children with poor academic results were 'allowed' to drop out. In effect, pupils were encouraged to leave school because it was considered that they were not able to survive for much longer in a competitive education system (Batbaatar et al., 2006).

2.2.5 Overage Enrolment, Health Status and Dropout

2.2.5.1 Overage in Grade and Dropout

The age of the pupil at the time of enrolment is an important determinant of retention and completion. Overage enrolment predisposes pupils to dropout (Ersado, 2005). In instances where children start schooling later than the official entry age, they are not very likely to complete the basic school cycle (UIS & UNICEF, 2005). Late enrolment may be attributable to the child's poor health or nutritional status; gender; household conditions; or, in certain cases, distance to school (Brock & Cammish, 1997; Pridmore, 2007).

Late enrolment creates the phenomenon of overage in grade, a situation in which pupils may find schooling unappealing owing to the pressure of feeling inferior to younger classmates. In addition, an unfriendly classroom environment is sometimes created by the teacher's attitude to overage pupils. These two conditions, together with the use of a curriculum that is not designed for teaching pupils of varying ages, can conspire to push children out of school.

With children from poor backgrounds, the older they are in school, the greater the pressure on them to engage in socio-economic activities (Ersado, 2005); and this together with an unappealing school environment pushes pupils to drop out of school. Being from a poor background, overage and unmotivated at school, pupils who gain access to a viable market for their labour are attracted (pulled) to drop out and earn a living.

An overage pupil from a low-income household often starts working to make some money to support the family income (GSS, 2003), and this results in irregular attendance. As children work, they initially interrupt their education when they withdraw temporarily and/or stay away from school on a seasonal basis. This is an indication that the pupil is losing interest in schooling and on the path to long-term dropout. Studies have shown that in Ghana, by the age of 13, children from economically poorer households have dropped out of school to migrate to areas in which there is a viable labour market, such as Accra or Kumasi (Hashim, 2005).

In addition to late enrolment, grade repetition also produces overage pupils; and as children grow older and progress through the grades; the likelihood that they will drop out before completing the school cycle increases (UIS & UNICEF, 2005). Thus, in some cases, a hostile school environment and lack of support for pupils (PROBE, 1999) results in weak performance. As pupils perform poorly, they tend to stay away from school more frequently; weak academic performance often leads to grade repetition; repeaters and underachievers attend school intermittently; and this somewhat circular chain of events is eventually broken when pupils drop out of the education system (Hunt, 2008).

2.2.5.2 Poor Health and Dropout

Deprived circumstances and – the sometimes related – poor physical condition of children have been positively correlated with late enrolment, irregular attendance and dropout. For example, the health and nutritional status of children is one such condition, which, according to Pridmore (2007), has a marked impact on a pupils' ability to learn and/or remain in school.

Pupils who suffer from ill health and poor nutrition are inclined to attend school irregularly, are more likely to repeat grades, and eventually drop out. Poor health makes it impossible for children to maintain motivation and sufficiently high levels of concentration; and has also been found to result in poor cognitive function (Grantham-McGregor & Walker, 1988; Pollit, 1990; Roso & Marek, 1996).

Studies of children in Ghanaian schools have shown that poor health negatively affects pupils' education; and reports show that anaemia, malnutrition, stunted growth, and delayed enrolment are correlated (Fentiman, Hall & Buny, 2001; Glewwe & Jacoby, 1995; Pridmore, 2007). In some instances, irregular school attendance – which has been identified as a precursor of dropout (Hunt, 2008) – has been found to be caused by the poor health of children (Batbaatar et al., 2006; Boyle et al., 2002).

Another dimension of the connection between health and dropout is disability, which interacts with other factors to restrict access. According to Rousso (2003), disabled girls are more likely to have restricted access to school; and when disabled children are enrolled, user-unfriendly school facilities and a hostile school environment have the potential to push such children out of school.

3. Research Problem and Questions

In this study, the problem under investigation is the causes of dropout from Ghanaian basic schools. Few studies in Ghana have actually elicited the views of the children concerned, particularly in terms of why dropout occurs. In a study by Ampiah and Adu-Yeboah (2009) citing Akyeampong et al. (2007), it is argued that much research into dropout dwells only on its causes through listing critical events. It is argued by Hunt (2008) that dropout is a process and understanding the causal factors in the course of its progress has significant policy implications (Ampiah and Adu-Yeboah, 2009; Hunt, 2008).

This study therefore engaged children who had dropped out of school in order to gain an in-depth understanding of the process and causes of dropout and unmask the various critical events that pushed and/or pulled them out of school.

The findings presented in this paper specifically focussed on the following questions;

- What causal factors within and external to the school environment are responsible for pushing and/or pulling children to dropout?
- Why is it that some dropout children return to school while others do not?³
- How does the school respond to the learning needs of dropout children who have returned to school, and how do such children rate their chances of completing school?

3.1 Study Context and Methods of the study

This study is located in the Mfantseman municipality in the Central Region of Ghana. The municipality was selected for the study because of the demographic characteristics that pose challenges to schooling and its accessibility with regards to location. Mfantseman is one of the communities in Ghana where further qualitative and quantitative research for CREATE is focussed. One of the challenges facing effective attendance in the area includes the incidence of child labour/work, independent child migration and seasonal withdrawals from school.

Ghana has over 20 million people unevenly distributed over ten administrative regions. The coastal and forest regions are more densely settled than the northern savannah regions. According to the 2000 population census, the Ashanti Region has the largest share of the national population (19.1%) followed by the Greater Accra Region (15.4%), Eastern (11.1%) and Western (10.2%). The remaining six regions of which the Central Region is one have less than 10% each of Ghana's population (Ghana Statistical Service, 2002).

The Central Region is divided into 17 administrative districts of which Mfantseman municipality is one. Mfantseman municipality has 168 settlements of which 148 are rural. The total population of Mfantseman is 152,264 comprising 69,670 males and 82,594 females. The participants in this study are selected from two schools located in two educational circuits out of the eight circuits in the municipality. The selected circuits are Narkwa and Dominase. I selected these circuits in order to compare the slightly different economic activities (fishing and farming) engaged in by children in these circuits. The two circuits are located in the rural settlements. At Narkwa and Dominase circuits, Narkwa and Kyeakor townships are selected respectively. Narkwa has a population of 5,859 with 2,721 males and

³ In this monograph, a pupil who has dropped out of school but has subsequently returned to continue his or her education is sometimes referred to as a 'drop-in'.

3,138 females while Kyeakor has a total population of 2,231 with 1,023 males and 1,208 females. In these two communities, fishing (in Narkwa) and subsistence farming and trading are the main occupations. There is high migration of males and seasonal migration of children from these communities to fishing towns such as Half Assini, Axim, Fasu, la Cote d'Ivoire and other towns along the West African coast. The selected communities are typical of other communities in the municipality in terms of economic activities.

The municipality's total school age population in 2003 was 40,624, out of which 22,360 children enrolled, leaving 18,264 (45%) out of school (MOEYS/GES, 2005). For primary school age population (6-11 years old), which totalled 28,962, only 17,995 enrolled. The male – female enrolment ratio stood at 51:49 in favour of boys. The school age population (12-14 years old) of 11,662 had a total of 8,523 enrolled at the junior high school (JHS) in the ratio of 53:47 for boys and girls. The gross enrolment ratio (GER) for primary school was 87.2% and for JSS was 73.1%. The NER for primary and JSS were 60.4% and 37.4% respectively. Drop out in primary and JSS schools stood at 2.2% and 1.2% respectively per annum (MOESS, 2005). These dropout figures may reveal only a fraction of the real levels of drop out because of poor record keeping in schools.

Interviews were conducted with 18 children who dropped out of schools. Although the focus of this study is to highlight the voices of dropout children, I also interviewed some school teachers and parents for their views on dropout to highlight the ambiguity surrounding the definition of dropout.

3.2 Data collection and analysis

This paper attempts to bring out the influence of context as a factor that leads to dropout based on the experiences of individual children (aged 7—17 years). It uses the interpretive research approach focusing on real life experiences of children who dropped out of school to highlight the reasons behind school dropout.

To identify dropout children who participated in this study, I made initial contact with three school pupils who previously dropped out but had returned to school. I spent time in the town during school hours to identify children not in school. After contacting these children, I negotiated access by seeking consent from parents and children before engaging them in the study. The first contacts with the children who had returned to school and those I met loitering in town during school hours led me to identify other children who participated in the study. During the period of data collection, I conducted and recorded in-depth interviews with 18 children who had dropped out of school. I examined the previous attendance records of all the participating children. I gave all the children disposable cameras to take photographs of activities that affected their regular school attendance (see Appendix for pictures). I observed activities in the school and community that children mentioned to have incited them to drop out of school. I followed 12 of the children who seasonally migrate to understand how migration shapes attendance. The data was collected in two phases within a period of 11 months: from May to October and November to March. I analysed the data by looking for emerging themes.

The evidence presented in this report is important but caution is needed when generalising to Ghana as a whole for several reasons. The focus of this study is only on selected cases of dropout of children rural setting. I am careful in drawing conclusions about urban school dropout. In the next section the results and discussion of the study is presented.

4. Discussion of Results

This section is devoted to children's views of contextual circumstances external to the school that influence the decision to terminate schooling. It is important to note that these factors are not independent of each other; rather, they often exert their influences concurrently, and an understanding of the relative importance of such factors in affecting children's schooling decisions can only be obtained if they are studied simultaneously.

Field Notes

Mensah told me that he seldom had breakfast before going to school, and that he bought food on credit at break time because he did not have any pocket money. When he could not get anything on credit, he borrowed money from his friends. He had been skipping classes to go to the beach to earn money to pay his debts; but he eventually stopped attending school because he made enough to live on at the beach.

Field Notes

In my conversation with Ekow, he told me that his parents could not afford to get him a school uniform, so he attended school irregularly in order to work and buy one. He also told me of the transfer of his teacher without a replacement, which meant that he did not bother to turn up early when school reopened. Consequently, he had to dig up tree stumps as a punishment before being allowed to return to classes; but because he refused to carry out the task, his teachers told him not to set foot in the classroom.

These two examples illustrate the conflict and complexity surrounding children's decisions to drop out of school, which appear to encompass several contextual issues. To shed light on such issues, I explored contributory family, socio-economic and societal factors in detail.

4.1 The Socio-economic Context as a Push and/or Pull Factor in the Dropout Process

4.1.1 Household Poverty

When I asked children about the conditions outside school that prompted them to drop out, their answers appeared to encompass several factors. However, almost without exception, household poverty and the need for economic survival was cited as a major cause that pulled children out of school; and, specifically, the lack of children's school supplies (CSS)⁴, arising from the family's inability to purchase them, was a significant determinant of the desertion of school. The following complaints are typical:

You have to go to school without food, and [then] staying in school till home time becomes difficult ... you cannot go for lunch with your friends because you do not have any money; meanwhile, you are hungry.

Sometimes, there is no breakfast in the house and my parents are not able to give me any pocket money to take to school either; so, I have to skip school to work to make money to support myself.

Children who do not eat breakfast may not want to stay in class, preferring to look for opportunities to find food. Hungry children are more likely to drop out of school because they are unable to concentrate in class.

⁴ CSS includes breakfast, a school uniform, shoes, stationery and a school bag.

Lack of CSS is likely to have influenced most of children under study to drop out of school. Those who had withdrawn from primary grades three and four emphasised that they had stopped attending school because they did not have a school uniform. This leads me to suspect that the abolition of school fees is not enough to ensure retention.

Gacer⁵, a 12 year-old girl who had dropped out of class four and stayed at home for two years, told me:

I did not have a school uniform; that is why I stopped going to school.

Yet, interestingly, school authorities did not prevent children who had not got a school uniform from attending class. One teacher said:

Nobody prevents children without uniform from coming to school.

Nevertheless, it appears that pupils felt singled out from their classmates if they went to school in different clothes. Such children therefore chose to stay out of school until they were able to acquire the official uniform.

Most parents were well aware of their children's reluctance to attend school if they did not have a uniform. For example, one parent, Lawife, complained that school uniform amounted to barrier to access, because children who did not have one refused to go to school, explaining:

This school uniform thing is really affecting children's attendance ... When we were kids, we wore any old clothes to school, so nobody really worried about not having the official uniform. But now, because most children wear the same school uniform, a child without it won't want to go.

Field Notes Phase 1, 2008

I visited a school on Thursday morning. During assembly, I noticed a teacher going round among the children inspecting their shoes. After ten minutes, she had collected a pile of flip-flops from them. I was informed that these children were later punished by having to weed the school compound for wearing unofficial footwear to school.

The practice of collecting unofficial footwear from children may have forced some pupils to drop out of school. One child told me:

I don't go to school because I don't have the official shoes.

Based on this account, it is apparent that although teachers claimed that pupils were not turned away from school for wearing unofficial clothes, the practice of collecting children's flip-flops and punishing them seems to have prevented some of them from attending school regularly.

It appears that due to household poverty, many parents could not afford to provide their children with a school uniform or shoes. When the harvest was poor, children's education became a luxury that many parents could not afford, since a low yield compounded existing low socio-economic status, leading to further household privation and disruption to children's

⁵ All the names used in this paper are pseudonyms and not participants real names

schooling. Consequently, some – though not all – pupils chose to find a job in order to buy their CSS themselves.

Oodia, who had not been able to make the transition from class three to four, said:

My father could not afford to buy my school uniform to start the new academic year because the harvest was poor.

Oodia's father told me:

Last year, we did not get any good catches during the fishing season; therefore, I could not buy his school uniform so he stopped attending school.

These quotations clearly demonstrate the effects of seasonality on children's schooling, a view shared by Gubert and Robilliard (2006). Owing to the already low socio-economic conditions of the poor, households become vulnerable and suffer income shocks when the fish catch or harvest is poor. Thus, children from such households are faced with some form of demand to withdraw from school (Gubert and Robilliard, 2006).

Dropping out of school owing to lack of a school uniform was probably mentioned as extensively as it was because by the time most children in Narkwa and Kyeakor made the transition from class three to four, their parents had stopped providing them with their basic schooling needs.

One child told me:

Your parents tell you that you should try and buy the things you need to go to school yourself because they do not have money.

According to one teacher:

These children look after themselves at school because parents in this village are poor.

Therefore, in many ways, it seems that one of the major causes of school dropout in Narkwa and Kyeakor was household poverty exacerbated by demands to acquire uniforms and other school necessities. Based on children's accounts, it may be argued that there is a correlation between poor harvests and school desertion. In this regard, it is important to note that the harvest season in Narkwa and Kyeakor fell between September and late October (see Figure 1), months that coincided with the beginning of the academic year.

The evidence shows that at times of poor harvest, household poverty is exacerbated and children are obliged to drop out of school. This may be why sporadic dropout cases (see Ananga, forthcoming) occurred in the month following a poor harvest; and also why dropout children who intended to return were pushed to stay away from school for longer. Most long-term dropout cases and some overage instances are traceable to these kinds of conditions.

4.1.2 Family, Parenting Style and Dropout

Interviews with children also revealed that poor parenting/fostering practices played a critical role in terms of pushing children away from school. For example, the education of a child

whose father or mother was absent from the household was disrupted because the child had at least partly to make up for work that had hitherto been carried out by the missing parent. Hun, a 15 year-old boy who had dropped out of class 4, told me:

I was going to school until my mother passed away, and my father also travelled ... I stopped school to work for money to take care of my brothers and sisters.

I gained insight into the nature and influence of parenting on pupils' school attendance when I spoke with foster children and those who had been neglected. Joe, a 15 year-old boy, shed light on how his experience as a foster child pushed him to drop out of school:

My parents had travelled to Cote d'Ivoire and I was staying with my aunt. She was very busy and often went to Accra to buy goods. When the money for food ran out, my aunt was sometimes not around to give me more, so I had to stop schooling and earn some money.

Another girl, Etty, 16 years, also told me:

My mother had travelled to Accra and I went to live with my stepfather ... I had some problems at school, but my stepfather said that he was busy and could not help me solve the problem. All I do now is take care of my younger sibling.

These accounts of foster children reveal that they were obliged to drop out of school because they were not living with their parents. In the case of Joe, it appears that his decision to stop attending school was prompted by lack of parental control. Realising that nobody was showing interest in supporting his schooling and faced with no money to buy food at school, he decided to drop out and earn some money instead.

However, I got the impression from Etty's account that she had not made her decision unilaterally. Rather, it seems that her stepfather's unconcerned attitude, which may have been a deliberate ploy to keep her out of school so that she would take on her mother's responsibility of looking after her sibling, was what pushed her out of school.

The accounts of Joe and Etty suggest that the probable reason behind their dropping out was the unconcerned attitude of foster parents towards their schooling. It is likely that drop out associated with particular events⁶ may occur because of such indifference towards children's schooling.

However, it should be noted that living with biological parents did not guarantee that pupils would stay in school. During my fieldwork, one category of children I interviewed told me that they had dropped out because their parents neglected them. In my discussions with other interested parties, Nyaminpa, a head teacher, told me:

We all know that parents in this village are poor, but some of them use poverty as an excuse to stop taking care of their children ... and when children feel neglected by their parents, they drop out of school.

⁶ I refer to this type of dropout as 'event dropout', see Ananga, forthcoming, and next footnote.

Given the poor socio-economic conditions of the community, I was sceptical about the issue of child neglect being a cause of dropout until I heard the story of Abu, a 14 year-old boy, who explained:

My father disowned me and drove me away from the house as a punishment for supporting my mother in an argument with him.

Yet, interestingly, Abu's father could not be counted among the poor parents of Narkwa since, according to Abu:

He owns two fishing canoes and has over 16 workers. He also runs a bar with my mother.

Abu's father refused any plea for reconciliation on Abu's behalf, even from his class teacher, so the boy went to live with a friend. I regularly saw Abu at the beach rather than in school; and I suspected that he may have been finding it difficult to come to terms with his predicament, and had dropped out of school out of frustration. It thus emerged that child neglect in Narkwa and Kyeakor was sometimes overt, as in Abu's case; or it could be covert, as in instances in which parents shirked responsibility towards older children.

Child neglect manifested itself covertly in cases in which children lived with their biological parents but were left to fend for themselves when they reached the upper grades of primary school. One parent informed me that:

In this village, there are opportunities for children to work and some children are able to make more money than adults ... with the poverty that faces us, at least they can support themselves.

One probable explanation for this development is that in the past, some parents resorted to child neglect as a survival strategy in the face of difficult economic conditions, and the practice had subsequently become an acceptable way of raising children after they reached a certain stage in their lives. This is because children in the study area were perceived to be capable of earning a living by the time they reached the age of about ten. A further explanation of why children were neglected by their parents is that some of them may have believed that support required by pupils was only in terms of the provision of their schooling needs. As such, where opportunities to earn an income from child labour existed, children could be left to their own devices and expected to complete school without dropping out.

However, by the time they reach the age of ten, most pupils are making the transition from lower to upper primary school, a level at which parental support in the form of monitoring attendance is very important. Parental decisions do affect retention and children whose parents monitor and regulate their activities; provide emotional support; encourage independent decision-making; and are generally more involved in their sons and daughters' schooling, are less likely to drop out (Okumu et al., 2008).

In respect of the types of dropout⁷ (see Ananga forthcoming), it can be seen from these explanations that some cases of sporadic dropout and event dropout are manifestations of parental neglect and lack of interest in children's schooling.

4.1.3 Household Obligations: The Opportunity Cost of Schooling

The opportunity cost of schooling and the gendered identity of a child operate in complex ways to influence both his and her ability to stay in school and attitude towards attendance. According to some children, parents and teachers I spoke to, engaging in certain activities pulled children out of school.

Talking to children about their experiences revealed divisions between boys and girls. It emerged from the accounts of the girls that household duties, such as taking care of family member, affected their schooling; but boys' narratives revealed that engaging in economic activities was what pulled them out of school. Attendance was influenced by the opportunity cost of schooling because some girls did housework and some boys engaged in economic activities, both of which made regular school attendance difficult.

A teacher, Hamid, mentioned that:

In this village, children drop out of school because they have to help at home or work to earn income instead of schooling.

This statement clearly shows that school dropout results from the precedence that household chores and economic activities take over schooling.

Girls told me that it was boys who usually dropped out of school on account of the opportunity cost of schooling. A possible explanation for this is that the socio-economic activities children engaged in were gendered. Miyoc, a female teacher, told me:

Girls do not drop out of school as often as boys in this village. This is because girls are not allowed to go fishing or work for hours on the farm ... fishing and farming are for males. Normally, girls sell things when school is over ... so they are able to attend school more regularly than boys are.

Boys are affected more because, although most children look after themselves at school, boys have to support their households as well. Boys make money by fishing and farming, but they cannot combine these things with schooling because these activities start in the morning, which clashes with school hours. So, boys have to choose between

⁷ The five types of dropout include;

- Sporadic Dropout: Dropping out of school temporarily (short term) for about three months due to economic survival needs.
- Event dropout: Terminating schooling temporarily in response to one or more critical events, such as the death of a parent, sickness, conflict with school authorities, etc.
- Long-term Dropout: Deserting school for two to four years, but with the possibility of returning to school; that is, falling out of one's cohort group.
- Unsettled Dropout: Permanently dropping out of school with no prospect of any particular economic activity or apparent means of survival.
- Settled Dropout: Dropping out of school permanently but engaged in a vocation, trade or other economic activity for survival.

attending school and dropping out to work for money instead, because they cannot combine activities like girls can.

Table 1 confirms Miyoc’s view that there is a necessary correlation between gendered household chores and the economic activities children engage in, their age and irregular school attendance. In comparing boys to girls, it is notable that owing to the gendered nature of economic activities, boys were more susceptible to those activities that resulted in dropout than was the case with girls. It seems that older girls in particular were not pulled out of school as readily as boys because most of the domestic and economic activities that girls engaged in were practiced outside school hours; thus, they were able to combine them with schooling.

Table 1: Children’s Daily Activities by Age, Gender and Hour of Day

| | | Non school hours | School Hours | | | | | Non Schooling hours | | | | |
|--------|-------|------------------|--------------|---------------------------------------|--------------------------------|-------|------------------------------|---------------------|-------------|-------|-------|--|
| Gender | Age | 5:30 | 7:30 | 9:30 | 11:30 | 13:30 | 15:30 | 17:30 | 19:30 | 20:30 | 21:30 | |
| Boys | 7-11 | Fishing/ Farming | | | Hustling ⁸ /Farming | | Playing | | Play Cinema | Bed | | |
| | 12-17 | Fishing/Farming | | | Hustling /Farming/Selling | | | Play & Cinema | | | Bed | |
| Girls | 7-11 | Household Chores | | At school or Caring for family member | | | Household Chores and Selling | | Play | Bed | | |
| | 12-17 | Household Chores | | At School or Caring for family member | | | Household Chores and Selling | | | | Bed | |

Source: Field data.

In terms of the effect of the opportunity cost of schooling on girls’ education, in cases in which her mother was employed, it was a female child who was relied upon to do general housework such as cooking, washing, fetching water, and, in some cases, taking care of a siblings, or sick or elderly relatives.

It emerged that the extent to which household activities pulled a girl out of school was also dependent on other factors such as her age, the nature of the household activity, and other arrangements at the school level. With regard to the nature of domestic work, most girls seemed to be able to combine routine housework with their schooling without dropping out. It was when issues such as taking care of a relative arose that the girl’s age became a key determinant of whether she was able to combine activities or dropped out of school.

In order to gain an insight into the effect that looking after a relative had on girls’ schooling, I analysed them in two groups of younger and older children respectively. The findings imply that younger girls (7–11 years) dropped out of school due to extra domestic, non-economic work. For example, Don, a nine year-old girl who had dropped out of class two, told me:

I stopped school to take care of my younger sister so that my mother could go to the farm.

⁸ Hustling is a local jargon used in the community to describe socio-economic activities of children at the beach. In this practice, children assist adults to offload fish from the canoes during which children are given some fish as wages.

It was likely that when girls were requested to free their mothers by taking care of siblings, they would be pulled out of school because such services were often required at times when girls were supposed to be at school.

However, I noticed that some older girls were not forced to drop out when looking after younger siblings. It appears that owing to the relative maturity (11–17 years) of the girl, and the pre-school age (3–4 years) of the sibling, the former was able to combine schooling with assisting her mother without necessarily being pulled out of school. Taking a younger sibling to school seemed to be possible as long as the girl's teacher was a woman. I got the impression that a female teacher weighed the relevance of girls' schooling against a pupil's physical and mental capacity to combine both tasks before allowing her to take her young sibling to school.

A female teacher, Hamatu, told me:

Although it is a difficult arrangement, I permit some girls to come to school with their siblings if taking care of them is the reason they are dropping out of school. But I always make sure the girl is old enough to handle the situation before I allow it.

As to whether she would allow younger girls to bring their brothers or sisters to class, Hamatu said:

no, because they are too young to combine schooling with taking care of a young sibling.

This means that only older girls who were physically strong and mentally alert were allowed to combine schooling with taking care of siblings, since younger girls were not considered to be sufficiently mature to possess such qualities.

Another probable explanation for allowing an older girl to take her sibling to school is the teacher's better understanding of the social milieu in which the domestic activities of girls took place. The teacher's familiarity with the girl's family may be another factor that influenced her decision to permit such informal arrangements in her class. It is important to note that such a practice emphasises the importance of good school–community relations for retention. Such an arrangement, and the ability of older girls to effectively combine housework with schooling, could be the reason that dropout cases involving girls in Narkwa and Kyeakor seemed to be particularly affecting younger pupils between the ages of 7–11 years in the lower grades of primary school.

My interviews with some older girls also revealed that the relative age of the person they were taking care of was a significant factor in determining whether they stayed in school. For example, in the case of Etty, the girl whose foster parent made no effort to help her return to school, it is likely that another key reason she dropped out was to take care of three of her siblings. She told me:

My mother is now working in Accra so I am taking care of my brothers and sisters till she comes back.

Etty cooked breakfast for her siblings; washed up; went to the farm to fetch vegetables; and then prepared the family's evening meal. By the time she had finished all the housework and

ensured that her siblings had been fed and were ready for school, she was herself too tired and too late to go to school. Another girl, Hesta, had lost both parents, and dropped out of school because she was left alone to take care of a sick grandmother.

Interestingly, girls' schooling in the sample was not directly disrupted by their engagement in economic activities. From Table 1, it can be seen that girls did not pursue economic activities during school hours. As mentioned earlier by Miyoc the female teacher, girls' economic survival activities tended to be pursued after class and during the school holidays. These arrangements notwithstanding, it could still be argued that there is a necessary correlation between girls' dropout rates and the opportunity cost of schooling, which depends on various factors such as a girl's age and the nature of the work she is obliged to undertake.

On the other hand, it is often argued that boys' education suffers from disruptions brought about by the opportunity cost of schooling because they engage in vital economic activities at the expense of attendance; and it is clear how such economic activities coincide with school hours (see Table 1). Most boys in the study area were obliged to shoulder the responsibility of supplementing the household income in addition to working to support themselves at school. The evidence shows that the strain of attempting to meet such demands might have been so great that they ended up being pulled out of school.

In terms of age, some older boys (12 years and over) dropped out of school because they worked long hours. Mensah told me:

I work hard to make money because if I do not give money to my mother there will be no food in the house.

It seems that the pressure on boys to contribute to household income was one of the main reasons for the high rates of sporadic dropout among them in Narkwa and Kyeakor. Unlike the case with girls, owing to the gendered nature of boys' economic activities and the manner in which they clashed with the school timetable, they were unable to combine work with schooling.

When I asked why they did not combine schooling with work like the girls, Joe told me:

When I am going fishing, I leave home early in the morning – around 3:00 a.m. – and return after 1:00 p.m.

Oodia, who did farm work, said:

By 6:30 a.m. at the latest, I must be on my way to the farm to avoid being docked pay; and I return in the afternoon, around 3:00 p.m.

These accounts of children's work patterns confirm the fact that there were invariably clashes between the school timetable and boys' hours of work. It is likely that boys who engaged in economic activities might therefore have come under pressure to drop out of school in order to be able to go to work. This may explain why the number of sporadic dropout cases amongst boys increased dramatically when they entered the 12–17 years cohort groups. By this age, most of them were likely to have started working in the informal labour market in order to support themselves and their families. Second, boys may also have dropped out of school because their parents expected them to contribute to household income in times of

economic difficulty. In a context of strong cultural constraint and the discriminatory treatment of girls within a culture of prevailing machismo, boys might have been more capable than girls of making such a contribution.

From the above discussion of the opportunity cost of schooling, it may be concluded that there is a link between the work children do and the processes leading to school dropout. In respect of the gendered economic activities of children, it seems that the influence of the opportunity cost of schooling as a push or pull factor depends to a large extent on the socio-cultural context; a child's age and gender; and the available labour market opportunities for children to secure employment.

4.1.4 Child Labour and School Dropout

Local labour market opportunities appeared to prompt children to pursue income-generating activities instead of going to school. I noticed that children participated enthusiastically in economic activities in Narkwa and Kyeakor, even competing amongst themselves for work in the local and external informal labour markets.

The informal labour market structure gave children the opportunity to gain employment by taking part in fishing expeditions, 'hustling' at the beach, and working on farms; as well as to sell various items ranging from farm produce to provisions. It is thus likely that children were pulled out of school by the attraction and accessibility of such an informal labour market structure.

Younger children's school attendance might have been more regular because the distractions of the informal labour market that might influence their school attendance seemed to be minimal. However, older children might have found that they were not able to concentrate fully on their schoolwork because by the age of 12, it was becoming more difficult to postpone immediate financial reward in order to pursue temporally remote but more valuable academic goals.

For example, instead of attending school, some children in Narkwa, particularly older boys, joined groups of adults who left home early in the morning to go fishing, or sometimes waited at the beach for the fishing canoes to dock; while a larger number of younger children joined them later in the afternoon when school was over in order to 'hustle' at the beach. The extent to which children were motivated to seek avenues for pursuing economic activities instead of going to school is illustrated by the field notes extract below.

Field Notes

What was most interesting was that Joe [a 15 year-old boy] and Hun [a 14 year-old boy], neither of whom had completed primary school, were sitting under coconut trees on the sandy beach playing cards at around 9:00 a.m. in the morning while most of their age mates were in school learning. Apparently, they had stopped going to school and went to the beach early every day to wait for the canoes to dock, which usually took place by mid-afternoon. I suspect that they might have been waiting at the beach this early because of the opportunity to make more money if they started hustling before other children from school joined in to compete with them.

This no doubt reflects the extent to which boys in particular were attracted to seek employment in the informal local labour market instead of going to school. It seems that children from poor socio-economic backgrounds and the indifferent attitude of the

community towards schooling were the reasons why some children considered selling their labour to be attractive. Lawife, a parent, told me:

Because of the money they make from fishing activities, some of the children in this village are not willing to stay in school, and most of the adults in this community are not worried that children are not staying in school.

It appears that children's attraction to the informal labour market was supported by covert 'collective communal support' for them to sell their labour. It thus seems that the community condoned dropping out of school and approved of finding a job. It is likely that such collective communal support created an enabling environment that acted as a driving force, pulling children out of school to sell their labour in the informal labour market. It may be argued that such a collective communal support compromises children's school attendance and that this was the overt manifestation of a structural devaluation of schooling which otherwise is not visible.

For example, upon the arrival of the canoes at around 1:00 pm, all other activity in the village ground to a halt and both children and adults converged on the beach to do brisk trade. Some pupils even ran away from school so as not to miss out if the boats docked early. Apparently, adults needed child labour, a point that became clear when Hun told me:

We [children] have to be at the beach to help unload the fish, and our parents expect us to bring fish and money home.

It can be argued that children engage in economic activities because of the existence of a market for child labour. This view is corroborated by Duryea (2003), who found that a buoyant job market acted as the main force pulling children out of school in Brazil. Similarly, Okumu et al. (2008) emphasise how communities can influence dropout rates by providing employment opportunities during school hours.

Apparently, the labour market in Narkwa and Kyeakor shaped children's schooling behaviour and attendance patterns because although most children enrolled, they only attended classes until fishing and farm work were available, after which they dropped out in order to earn money. In effect, this may explain the issue of the seasonality of dropout. The attendance records of older children who dropped out of school reveal that almost all of them withdrew from school for at least a month. Moreover, it appears that children who previously attended school irregularly, especially to pursue economic activities, easily dropped out of school again. Often older children migrate independently to work while younger children are withdrawn to accompany migrating parents. Smita (2008) highlights the influence of seasonal migration on educational access in India. The next section highlights evidence of the overlap between seasonal migration and school academic calendar in the study area.

4.1.5 Seasonal Child Migration

Field Notes

It was exactly 8:15 am in Narkwa Methodist School and the children had marched from the morning assembly ground to their classrooms. The register was being marked and the children were responding to their names. For any child that was absent, the choral response “Half Assini” was shouted amid laughter from the children present; laughter because they were now aware that I was working with school dropouts. What was most interesting was that about a quarter of the children were not in school that day, having already left on the routine migration to Half Assini. At the lorry station, I met a couple of schoolchildren boarding buses with their parents who were migrating to other fishing communities in Western Region.

Seasonal migration came up in my interviews with children as one of the critical factors that pulled children out of school. The effect of seasonal migration on regular school attendance was twofold. On the one hand, parents migrated with their children even before schools broke up for the holidays; and on the other hand, some children independently migrated seasonally to work in other fishing communities (see Figure 1). Figure 1 illustrates the clash between school times and seasonal migration, which provide evidence that corroborate other studies on seasonality (see Smita, 2008; Hadley, 2010).

Some younger boys aged between 6 and 11 years dropped out of school because they migrated with their parents. A child’s education was disrupted when he or she was withdrawn from school to accompany his or her parents on the seasonal migration. I was told by Abu, the 14 year-old boy who had dropped out on account of parental neglect:

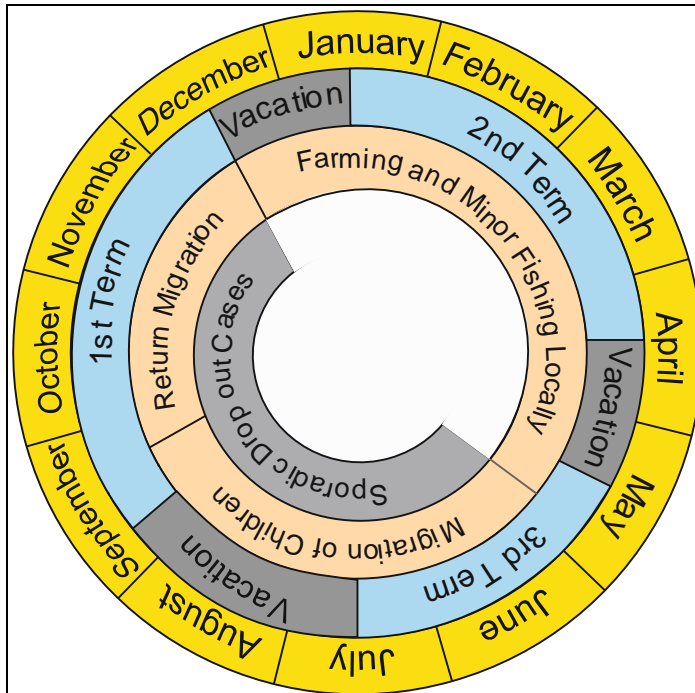
I was in class two by then and school hadn’t yet broken up, but my mother took me to accompany her to Cote d’Ivoire; and she left me there with my aunt for eight months.

Thus, taking a child out of school before the end of term obviously resulted in disruption to his or her schooling. In confirmation of this point, a teacher, Hamid, explained:

Some children drop out of school because their parents migrate with them. In some cases, the child is left behind but they later migrate to join their parents. However, when school reopens, some of these children do not report early and this disrupts their schooling.

Considering such migration, disruption of school attendance could be overcome if the schools adapted their timetables to it.

Figure 1: School Calendar, Migration and the Economic Activities of School Children



Source: Field data.

I asked teachers why the school calendar could not be adapted to accommodate this inevitable seasonal activity. One teacher told me:

All schools in Ghana follow the same timetable for reopening, writing exams and holidays ... We don't have the authority to change any aspect of the school calendar.

There was no provision to allow for adjustment to the school calendar in order to suit local variations in seasonal activities that potentially disrupted school attendance. In my informal discussion with the Parent Teacher Association (PTA) chairman and a school management committee (SMC) member, they told me that they wished they had the power to change the school times in order to avoid clashes with harvest periods. They believe that such changes may be useful in ensuring that school children remain in school.

Educators seemed to be unaware of the strong effect that the incidence of seasonal activities had on children's attendance and academic performance. Therefore, a better understanding of local seasonal variation may be useful in optimising the school calendar.

For most children in the study area, seasonal migration began in mid-June, that is, about five weeks before the end of the third term. Children who migrated often stopped attending classes at this point, a practice that could have been prevented by adapting the school calendar to the local seasonal activities that clashed with it.

Furthermore, the younger the pupil, the more likely it seemed that the child's parents would withdraw him or her from school to accompany them when they migrated. In an interview with one mother, when I inquired why she withdrew her younger child from school, she told me:

He is too young to be left behind ... my son will go back to school when we return.

I got the impression that some of these migratory parents were unaware of the effect of such a decision on their children's schooling, as they may have been under the impression that such children were too young to be engaged in any vital learning.

It appears some parents believed that children needed to reach a certain degree of maturity before they started any serious learning. Another mother told me:

When children are very young and you send them to school, they may not be able to learn anything ... Sometimes, they feel restless and cry all day at school, only to come home feeling ill.

In response to my question of when in her opinion a child should start school, one mother said:

The best age to enrol a child is when you think he or she can adjust and play with other children at school without crying and falling sick.

These opinions also indicate that some parents might have deliberately delayed the enrolment of their children or withdrawn them from school because they believed they knew the right time to enrol a child to start learning. Moreover, considering the mother's view that a child may:

cry all day at school and come home ill.

Such a belief might have been an indication of her distrust in the school's ability to take good care of her child, a reservation that could have prompted some mothers to delay enrolment.

The period of migration in the third term was the time of the school year when children sat their graduation examinations; thus, non-participation in such assessment meant grade repetition. Therefore, in addition to late enrolment, it is probable that seasonal migration partly explained the cases of overage in grade, given that grades were most frequently repeated in lower primary school.

From another angle, it appears that older children who did not accompany their parents migrated during the school holidays to join them then, but that such pupils did not return home early enough for the beginning of the new academic year. Such cases may manifest as sporadic and event dropout. It seems that boys in the upper primary grades were the most affected category of children whose schooling was disrupted by seasonal migration. Although these older boys migrated during the school holidays, they were often unable to return early enough to register at the beginning of the new academic year and thus continue their schooling. Ekow told me:

During the vacation, I travelled to Half Assini to fish, but when school re-opened I had not made enough money to go back to school ... So, I travelled further, to the Gambia, in the company of other children to fish.

Taking the duration of the third term as being from May to July, and the beginning of the first term as being in early September into consideration, it appears that seasonal migration from mid-June to early October might have been largely responsible for temporary dropout cases.

It could be argued that the clash between the school calendar and seasonal migration created recurrent cases of school dropout and drop-in during the academic year. This correlation between seasonality and disruption of schooling is corroborated by Colclough et al. (2000):

... many children, who enrol in September, at the beginning of the school year, leave ... because demands on their labour during harvest time are so great. In some cases, they re-enrol the following year ... but, again, are unable to complete the year (Colclough et al., 2000).

In the cases of children in Narkwa and Kyeakor, it seems that the influence of seasonal migration on their schooling was so strong that some pupils' education spanning two academic years might have been marked by sporadic dropout and/or event dropout, punctuated by subsequent drop-in episodes.

4.1.6 Networks, Economic Survival Strategies and Dropout

Field Notes

It was around 11:00 a.m. on a Sunday at Narkwa Beach. Some boys were playing football on the sandy beach, while others waited for a go. I was there with Teacher Becas, [not her real name] to watch the daily activities at the beach. One of the boys, Joe, who I was having a discussion with about his friends was also with us. As the other boys played football, Joe gave a running commentary, including the enrolment status of all those on the pitch. From his information, I ascertained four categories of children: a) regular school attendees, b) irregular attendees, c) school dropouts and c) those children who had never enrolled but who mixed readily with the pupils.

During interviews with children who had dropped out of school to engage in economic activities and those who independently migrated seasonally, it transpired that some of them – especially boys – had dropped out due to peer pressure. It is further probable that advice about economic survival strategies was passed among pupils through their association with those who had already dropped out, especially older children.

In Narkwa and Kyeakor, there was a strong informal network that bound children together whose influence extended to the school level. For example, boys often met socially at food stalls and video cinemas in the evenings; and during such interaction, working children bought food, sweets and cinema tickets for their friends who could not afford them because they attended school and so did not work. It appears that this display of wealth by working children might have enticed school children to seek avenues for making money as well. Indeed, some children told me that their friends kept them informed about how much money they made from their jobs.

For children from poor socio-economic backgrounds, information on economic survival strategies is often keenly sought. In recounting his experience, Hun told me:

When we meet to play, my friends sometimes show as much as five Cedis⁹ [USD 3.6] cash that they make a day from hustling at the beach ... I need money to buy food, so I borrow from them ... but the only way to pay it back is to join them in hustling at the beach.

⁹ One Ghana Cedi is equivalent to USD 0.72 (April 2009 exchange rate).

Another boy, Michel said:

Some of my friends who had dropped out came back to school with money, and they could buy anything they needed ... They told me that they got the money from working on the farms ... I needed money too, so I followed them to work on the farms.

These narratives illustrate how children's social networks in a context in which some of them attend school while others do not may be a threat to pupils' school attendance.

It appears that peer pressure pulled more boys out of school than it did girls; and it affected older boys (12–17 years) to a greater extent than it did younger boys (7–11 years). Older children might have been more susceptible to dropout in this respect because most of them were overage in grade; thus, sitting in the same class to learn with younger children might have made schooling an embarrassing and unattractive prospect.

Another reason why some of these older children dropped out of school could be due to a correlation between their relative maturity and household poverty. Their parents tended to neglect them and leave them to support themselves at school, while the informal labour market attractions of work were condoned by the 'collective communal support for child labour'. Indeed, although community members in Narkwa and Kyeakor complained about the way children dropped out of school, it is interesting to note that they did not appear to object to their children abandoning their education to engage in economic activities.

It appears that community members' unconcerned attitude towards children's irregular school attendance and dropout might be due to the value they placed on education. One parent maintained:

School is good, but only when it gives our children opportunities.

Another parent observed:

My eldest son has completed school but, like most other children from this village, he is still here, fishing and farming.

This indicates that if parents did not appreciate the benefits of education, they might have been reconsidering the whole notion of enforcing their children to attend school regularly.

The influence of socio-economic conditions on the decision to send children to school appears to encompass several interlinked – sometimes, contradictory – issues that nevertheless play a critical role in the dropout process because they are among the determinants that can disadvantage children's schooling. For example, the background of poverty and parental neglect that often incites children to pursue economic survival strategies facilitated by the informal labour market are critical issues affecting their education.

It is important to note here that owing to social network peer pressure on children in school, and collective communal support in the pursuit of economic survival strategies, the children in this study seemed to be comparing the opportunity costs of schooling with the apparent merits of education. Yet, although the children's narratives point to the fact that some conditions at home and in the wider community contributed in diverse ways to pull them out

of school, other issues raised suggest that the critical determinants that often forced children to terminate their education lay beyond the influences of the socio-economic sphere.

In light of existing evidence showing that children from similar socio-economic backgrounds to the study area tend to remain in school, the findings of the present study suggest that socio-economic influence notwithstanding, the critical determinant of who drops out is the school itself. I therefore argue that although the socio-economic context may be a contributory factor to the generation of a process that ultimately leads to the premature termination of a child's education, it seems to be only one element of the several causal factors that push pupils out of school. In the next section, evidence based on children's accounts that supports this argument is analysed.

4.2 School Context as a Push and Pull Factor in the Dropout Process

Interviews with many of the children who had dropped out showed that conditions at the school level had a critical influence on their decision to terminate schooling. Most of the pupils in the sampled schools experienced difficulties on account of the poor socio-economic background they came from, which challenged regular school attendance; but the school still retained the potential to act as protective mechanism to prevent dropout from occurring (UNESCO, 2007).

In terms of the majority of dropout cases in Narkwa and Kyeakor, it emerged that children abandoned their education at the point when the school system and conditions within it failed them. In my interviews with children and school observations, I gathered that some issues at the school level had critical implications that resulted in dropout. These are what I term the 'teacher factor', 'school-related child labour', and school policy on 'repetition, readmission and discipline'.

4.2.1 The Influence of Teachers on Dropout

Teachers play a critical role in the lives of schoolchildren; and it appears that in schools in Narkwa and Kyeakor, the lack of teachers, teacher absenteeism, and teachers' attitudes to those pupils who may have been at risk of dropping out of school all conspired to incite the termination of pupil attendance. In this study, I refer to such teacher issues that push children out of school as the 'teacher factor'. In addition to insufficient teacher numbers, teachers who were supposed to be at post were often not, sometimes for no apparent reason. From interviews with children, it seems that there is a strong correlation between dropout and the teacher factor.

4.2.1.1 Teacher Unavailability or Absenteeism and Dropout

In the case of some older children who had dropped out of school, it appears that they withdrew because there was no regular teacher for their classes. Gacer, the 13 year-old girl who had dropped out of class four because she did not have a school uniform, told me:

There was no teacher for our class, so teachers from other classes came to teach us; but there were times when we went to school and for three days, no teacher came to our class to teach – sometimes other teachers came to cane us for making a noise ... It is just a waste of time and it is better to stay at home and do something else.

Another child noted that:

Our teacher does not live in this village so sometimes she is not in school for a whole week ... we only go to school to play.

These accounts show insufficient staff and teacher absenteeism may affect children. In the study area, it seems that when no class teacher was available, children attempted to transfer to another school in the neighbourhood, or stopped going to school altogether. One child told me:

The teacher did not come to school regularly and that is why I got a transfer; but at this school too, I got to class four and there was no teacher, so I stopped for some time.

It is likely that the lack of teachers and teacher absenteeism provided the critical impetus to push children already at risk of dropping out.

In cases in which either due to insufficient staff or absenteeism, there was no class teacher available, children were sometimes engaged to take the class. The two field extracts below exemplify this phenomenon.

Field Notes

I arrived at one of the schools around 7:00 a.m. to witness the daily routine of morning assembly. Pupils were busy sweeping rubbish from the classrooms and school compound; but at exactly 8:00 a.m., the bell rang for morning assembly and they ran from wherever they happened to be to assemble in the open yard where the assembly was held. Three out of the nine teaching staff of the school were present at the assembly. By 8:30 a.m., when the children had settled in their classrooms, only four teachers had arrived and were beginning their lessons. As of 10:50 a.m. a total of five teachers, including the head, were in school.

In classes in which there was no teacher, the children were present after morning assembly, but an hour later (at 9:30), most of the children had left and the classrooms were almost empty. After the first break, the remaining children from the classes for which there were no teachers spent a little longer playing in the field until the head teacher drove them to their classes; although some children left school and went home.

Later in the afternoon, I strolled down to the beach and found some of the boys playing football. Apparently, since their teachers were not in school, these boys preferred to find something more interesting to do.

I returned to the school, which was about 200 meters from the beach, and found that one of the teachers had moved from class five to occupy a classroom in which children had been idle since the morning. Then, the class five children moved to other classes that did not have teachers. I noticed that one of the older boys from class five was calling the class three attendance register. In the other lower primary class, another two pupils (a boy and a girl) from class five were busy teaching a Ghanaian language lesson.

Field Notes

I arrived at the school around 9:00 am but since there was no teacher present, the pupils were playing in the compound. I questioned some of them and they said that their teachers were engaged in the national identification registration exercise. I called the head teacher on his mobile phone and he told me that the other teachers who were supposed to be at school had to attend an in-service training course. Sensing that the situation might be the same at the other school, I visited that community too, only to confirm that the case was no different there. Most of the pupils were playing in the school compound with not a single teacher in sight. The situation at both schools remained this way for two weeks, some of the children reporting briefly and then going home. Throughout the whole registration exercise, which lasted for about eight weeks, the schools were scenes of children playing for the entire school day. I noticed that some dropouts who had returned to school and other children who combined work with schooling were taking advantage of the opportunity to pursue their work-related activities full time.

The engagement of staff in nationwide exercises that took them away from the classroom seemed to exacerbate a precarious situation in which there were hardly sufficient teachers in the first place. It appears that both the secondment of teachers for other official duties and teacher absenteeism – even for a day – may have led to a loss of teaching time that significantly diminished children’s achievements; damaged the reputation of the school; and induced pupil absenteeism. One parent told me:

The teachers sometimes don’t come to school, and the children learn from their example, so they also attend school when they like ... can the teachers say they are punishing these children for being absent from school when they are guilty themselves?

During discussions with teachers about staff absenteeism and children spending the whole day at school without a teacher, one teacher, Miyoc, told me:

The bright children among the class teach when teachers are absent.

Commenting on the lack of teachers, a school head said:

When other teachers are done with their classes, they move to those classes without teachers to teach the children.

Such an arrangement had attendant problems because it meant leaving a set of children unattended in one class to teach another. When this occurred, children from the upper classes move to unattended lower classes to teach them. It is likely that the school authorities did not object to pupils teaching their peers because it was better to encourage this practice than to allow children to make noise and play all day. Additionally, when their teachers abandoned the class to go and teach another class, some children left their classrooms during school hours to go and play while others went to work.

Children withdraw from school when there are no teachers. They may then weigh up the pros and cons of completing their education and earning a living. It appears that the attractions of the informal local labour market coupled with the problems of teacher absenteeism prompt some children to opt to pursue economic activities instead of remaining idle in school when there is no one to teach them.

It may be argued that lack of teachers and teacher absenteeism is one of the major contributions to dropout. All primary school level classes in Ghana are assigned a class

teacher, so if that teacher is no longer available, this is likely to push children to drop out of school.

In Narkwa and Kyeakor, lack of teachers and, in some instances, frequent teacher absenteeism at the primary level could explain why most of the dropout cases identified in this study occurred when children were at primary school rather than JSS. Another reason might have been that because most primary schoolchildren were overage in grade, their services were needed in support of the household; thus, instead of sitting in the classroom without a teacher, termination of schooling might have been the more attractive choice.

4.2.1.2 Teacher Attitude towards Pupils and Dropout

Another teacher-related issue that incited pupils to drop out of school was the attitude of teachers towards children at risk¹⁰ of withdrawal. It appears that children who underachieved, repeated grades, or attended school irregularly were pushed to drop out because of the unsupportive attitude of teachers towards them.

For example, Fiifi was at risk of dropping out because he had repeated class six, was performing poorly, and attended school irregularly. He told me how the teachers referred to him as *woabon*¹¹. One girl, Esi, also told me:

The teacher always insisted that I write at school but I am no good at writing. I enjoyed games and needlework but they called me names; that was why I stopped going to school.

This evidence shows that some children find some aspects of the curriculum difficult, and in cases in which teachers place emphasis only on such subject areas, affected pupils may find school uninteresting and therefore drop out.

Another child who was attending school irregularly mentioned that he had withdrawn because the teachers encouraged his classmates to call him *kobolo*.¹² It appears that children who were called names were likely to receive hostile treatment from teachers whenever they reported being taunted. One at-risk child, Ebo, who expressed his frustrations prior to dropping out of school told me:

When I go to school, children call me names like ‘kobolo’ ... I even overheard some teachers referring to me as ‘kobolo’. Whenever I hit a child for calling me names, the teachers punish me ... I think they are encouraging children to tease me.

In another example, Oodia mentioned that:

The teacher refused to call on me to ask or answer questions in class. Even when I raised my hand, the teacher always made me feel that I didn’t belong to the class; so I felt that I was just wasting my time in school.

¹⁰ According to CREATE’s conceptual model of ‘zones of exclusion’, at-risk children are defined as those pupils who attend school irregularly, perform low academically, repeat grades, or are overage in grade (Lewin, 2007).

¹¹ Literally, ‘rotten’. In this context, it implies ‘good for nothing’.

¹² An irregular school attendee or someone who is known for frequently dropping out of school.

I got the impression that whilst teachers were aware of the problems of at-risk children, instead of supporting them, they adopted an attitude of indifference, sometimes even reacting in a way that further isolated such pupils. The field notes extract below illustrates my firsthand experience of a case in point.

Field Notes

This was the third day of my second month in the school. I arrived at around 10:45 am, immediately after the mid-morning break, and all the pupils had returned to their classrooms. I had spent the previous two weeks tracking the attendance records of pupils at the school. Tired and bored of going through the dusty worn out class registers, I decided to observe one of the classes. A female teacher was taking science with class five and I stood at the window at the back of the classroom, and observed.

In the middle of the lesson, there was a scuffle between a boy and two girls. The teacher called the boy over and asked what the problem was, and he responded that the girls were teasing him. The teacher asked him to sit down and that ended the quarrel.

After about 20 minutes, the teacher assigned some class work, but this boy did not participate. He sat there unconcerned, staring at the blackboard and sometimes at the ceiling. I got curious and inquired of the teacher why he was not working as everybody else in the class was doing. According to the teacher, the boy, had been behaving that way since he dropped-in after staying away from school for eight weeks. The teacher thought that the best solution was to ignore him.

When I spoke with this boy later, he told me how the teacher and the head of the school had informed him that he would have to repeat the same grade even if he performed well academically. Thus, as far as he was concerned, there was no point in participating in a lesson that he was going to have to repeat the following year.

It appears that children who performed poorly and attended school irregularly might have been dropping out on account of name-calling by peers and teachers. Some teachers and parents I spoke with felt that it was an agreeable practice, but that it was a means of discouraging children from becoming lazy or attending school irregularly. One school head perhaps denied the tolerance of name-calling altogether in claiming that:

children who do so are punished as soon as we get to know about it.

Nevertheless, Razak, who doubled as a subject teacher at the local JHS and a class teacher for class five, admitted that name-calling did go on:

You see, children can become lazy, stubborn and play truant, but with the fear of being teased or called names, discipline is instilled in them.

Commenting on the practice, one parent said:

Sometimes name-calling discourages children from misbehaving; it is all right to use it ... After all, we all experienced it when we were at school.

Such views suggest that name-calling occurred in the classroom on a daily basis, although the school head may have been unaware of the extent of it. However, given the general acceptance of the practice as a means of discouraging children from misbehaving, it appears that name-calling and labelling was at least semi-officially adopted as a punitive measure for managing children's unruly behaviour.

Based on the accounts of children who had been victimised and had dropped out of school, this practice might have achieved some short-term results but in many ways, it was not an effective long-term strategy for the management of pupils already at risk of dropping out. This was because in reacting to being called names, the victims – children already at risk of dropping out – were pushed into terminating their schooling.

Moreover, teachers' attitudes in ignoring children at risk of dropping out might have been due to the large class sizes that they found difficult to manage. For example Miyoc, who had been teaching classes five and six for the past five years, said;

Sometimes, it is difficult teaching all these children together; and if you tried to cater for every child's special needs, you'd never finish the syllabus.

Teachers might have ignored the cries for help from children at risk, considering such outbursts to be petty, since, aside from the large classes the former were already obliged to teach, they were also burdened with concomitant piles of homework assignments and tests to mark; as well as all the continuous assessment reports they were required to complete. It appears that some teachers had also developed their own opinions and prejudices about at-risk children, given that most of them seemed to be overage in grade and tended to perform poorly academically. As a result of all these demands, teachers might have ignored such children entirely in class; thus, deliberately but politely pushing them out of school.

It is important to note that this 'teacher factor' has several dimensions, which together constitute one of the key factors at school level – combining with other causal factors external to the school environment – that incite children to eventually drop out. First, the unavailability of teachers and teacher absenteeism may cause children to attend school intermittently. Second, children who perform poorly academically and attend school irregularly may be labelled as such in a humiliating manner. Third, these children may receive little or no attention from teachers while in class, which ultimately pushes them out of school.

4.2.1.3 School Practices and Processes, and Dropout: Repetition and Readmission

School administrative policy on repetition and readmission appears to be one of the most decisive factors at this level that incited children to drop out. During interviews with children, I noticed how repeating the same grade three times or more could push a child out of school. One boy told me that he had dropped out of school because:

the headmaster said that even if I passed my exams, I could not graduate because I had not attended school regularly in the term.

Ama, a 17 year-old girl who had dropped out of school, told me:

I did not report early when the school term began, and the headmaster asked me to stay at home and come back next year; but I got pregnant, so I could not go again.

It seems that insisting that children should repeat a grade or asking them to wait until the following academic year, actually pushed children to stay away from school for a longer period, which might have made their chances of returning to school slimmer.

Adopting measures to discourage irregular attendance and reporting late for the reopening of school could save both teachers and children a lot of time that is otherwise lost on repeating grades, but such measures should be designed to help children stay in school rather than push them to drop out, which, as the above examples demonstrate, was the case.

It appears that children who disliked certain things about school found the education process uninteresting and consequently attended irregularly, which resulted in eventual dropout. Such children might have been interested in subjects the school did not consider to be of great importance. For example, Mustaf told me;

I like sports and athletics, but at school, these things are only organised once a term. But I always join in during sports and athletics periods.

Most teachers I spoke with confirmed that some children tended to be more interested in subjects such as sports and athletics whose assessment did not form part of the graduation process.

Moreover, it seems that children did not report early for the reopening of school because they realised that teaching and learning did not really get underway until the third or even fourth week of term. When I asked why they did not start lessons as soon as term began, the teachers said that it was a school custom to spend about two weeks preparing the school compound before beginning formal activities.

As a Ghanaian teacher, I am aware of the delay in teaching and learning in rural schools at the beginning of term in order to prepare the school compound. Often, school authorities also use such periods to assist community members who have requested the use of pupils' labour. Accordingly, at this time, schoolchildren work on local farms, and collect sand and stones, which the teachers sell to generate income for the school.

4.2.1.4 The use of Child Labour at School

Field notes

I was on my way back to the school in the afternoon after finishing an interview with a child, when I met several pupils carrying bowls of sand and stones on their heads. This scene reminded me of my own primary school days in the late 1970s, when we had to take sand and stones to school every week. However, I thought that with the introduction of the capitation grant scheme, there was now no need for schools to look for alternative means of raising money. As an indigenous teacher, I am also aware of the position the Ghana Education Service (GES) has taken against the use of child labour by the school. The children told me they were taking the sand and stones to somebody's building site.

The reality is that the use of child labour is common in most rural schools. Sometimes, it occurs throughout the term, although not on a daily basis. In my discussions with children, some of them made it clear that they had dropped out of school on account of the incessant pressure teachers put on them to work in order to earn money to run the school. Sometimes, pupils were sent to labour on local farms for the benefit of the school. During my school visits, I noted that some older children – boys in particular – avoided attendance every time pupils were engaged in income-generating activities at school.

One child voiced the general consensus of opinion amongst pupils:

It is wrong for the teachers to ask us to engage in income-generating activities for the school.

It appears that children were of the conviction that if they could stay at home, work and make money for themselves, it made no sense to go to school on days when they were expected to labour and the teachers collect the money.

One older boy told me:

I do not like it when the teachers require us to bring sand and stones to school. We don't know what they do with the money ... I also need money, so I prefer to work and make money for myself instead of making it for the teachers.

Judging from these accounts, it appears that children might have formed the impression that teachers exploited child labour for their own ends; and it seems that such children preferred to stay away from school instead.

For the eleven months of data collection, I observed that at least once a week, pupils were expected to engage in some form of income-generating activity for the school. That some children opted to avoid school at these times demonstrates that they were making a rational decision about their education and economic survival; and it appears that older boys in particular dropped out of school with the express purpose of pursuing personal economic survival as a viable alternative to working at school for their teachers.

Although the Ghana Education Service (GES) has prohibited the use of child labour for school profit, the practice is still endemic, especially in rural areas where education directives are late to take effect and officials seldom visit. One head teacher justified the use of child labour thus:

We are all aware that it is unlawful to engage schoolchildren in any form of income-generating activity but you see, the capitation grant is not released early, and sometimes we get to the third term before funds for the administration of the first term are released; meanwhile, we have to run the school. It is the earnings from children's work that we rely on to keep the school running until the capitation grant is released.

It appears that this explanation by the head teacher had convinced the parent teacher association but it is not clear how the capitation grant allocated for running the school is spent when it is finally released to the schools. If the school's argument for engaging child labour is to mobilise funds to run the school, then when the government's capitation grant allocation for the running the school is released, children may be justified in complaining that the money from their labour goes to the teachers. Children's view that when they worked, the money goes to the teachers is likely a valid conclusion children may be drawing.

The use of child labour by the school seems to have affected children's education decisions in two ways. One probable effect was that children who felt that they were not making good use of the school day if they had to spend it in income-generating activities decided to drop out of school in order to utilise their time more profitably. Second, in considering the prospects for

earning money for themselves, some children might have preferred to avoid expending their energy for the benefit of their teachers, so they dropped out of school.

For most dropout children, their real problems emerged when they declined to attend school at times when their labour was required there. Teachers invariably punished those who would not work in order to help the school; but older children tended to consider such punishment unjustified and did not comply with it. This generated conflict between pupils and the school authorities, and teachers often presented such children with an ultimatum: they could either conform to the school's penal system immediately, or they would be required to withdraw from school altogether. Accordingly, conflict between teachers and children over pupil's refusal to engage in labour at school was the cause of most cases of dropout. This finding corroborates the work of Seidu and Adzahlie-Mensah (2010)

4.2.1.5 Discipline and Corporal Punishment

The practice of corporal punishment was understandably highly unpopular with most schoolchildren. It emerged from interviews that corporal punishment led to several cases of dropout, and children believed that some teachers' approach to discipline contributed directly to withdrawal. Caning as a punitive measure to instil discipline could also have damaging psychological effects. I observed that children who came to school late were caned. As a result, some latecomers promptly ran away from school again to avoid punishment. In the case of older children, this practice generated conflict between teachers and pupils when they refused to comply, which resulted in children terminating their schooling.

For example, some children who had dropped out of school mentioned that they had done so on account of the prevalence of corporal punishment. In describing the frequency and severity with which some teachers used the cane, Yao, a boy who had dropped out of class three, told me that:

Teacher Jones [not his real name] does not mess about with the cane at all. If he uses it lightly on a child, then that child will receive about six strokes. Sometimes, you can't sit down for a whole week after those strokes. So, you stay out of school, but when you show up later, he canes you again.

This account illustrates the dilemma that some children faced, which was likely to make school an unattractive prospect to them.

It is notable that while some children like Yao refused to comply with corporal punishment and thus stopped attending school in order to avoid being caned, other children internalised the situation, often quoting the saying:

suku ye de nso aba wom (meaning: school is good, but caning is part and parcel of it).

I got the impression that younger children – and also girls in general – chose to endure corporal punishment as part of school life and did not readily drop out owing to the penal system alone.

Older children, particularly boys, most likely thought that corporal punishment was unfair, abusive and inappropriate treatment of children; since by their age, and on account of their

socio-economic responsibility,¹³ they might have viewed punishment in the presence of younger children as humiliating and embarrassing. Coupled with the available opportunities to work, older boys might have been incited to stop attending school because there were other attractions from the informal labour market to engage them.

In another example, Ekow withdrew from school because he was punished for not reporting early when school reopened. He told me:

The head teacher asked me to remove tree stumps from the field, but I am too small to do that kind of work. When I complained that I couldn't do it, I was told not set foot in the classroom until I had completed the punishment.

It seems that because Ekow was repeating Basic Five, he was already at risk of dropping out, which he demonstrated when meting out punishment under such circumstances only pushed him out of school.

Another boy, Mensah, told me that he had dropped out of school on account of the punishment he had received:

The teacher confiscated my flip-flops and caned me for wearing them to school ... but I do not have any other shoes and cannot walk to school barefoot.

Indeed, the issue of punishment emerged in some children's accounts as one of the critical events that informed their decision to terminate schooling.

¹³ Boys earned an income to support their households and sometimes, to fund the education of their younger siblings.

5. Returning to School: Conditions that Encourage Children to Drop in

One of the research questions outlined in this paper sought to discover what dropouts do when they terminate their schooling. Analysis of the data reveals that some dropout children do return to school, the frequency of drop-in being confirmed by the various means by which data was collected on the dropout phenomenon. In this section, I analyse children's accounts of their motivation to return to school. The section is in two parts: first, children's views on the conditions that make returning to school possible or impossible; and second, challenges confronting children after dropping back in.

5.1 Motivation to Return to School: Children's Views

As a method of discovering the reasons behind children's decision to return to school, I interviewed ten dropout children who had dropped back in. Data from these ten children show that their decision to return to school was motivated by certain incentives brought about by changes in the household; improvements in socio-economic status; children's hope for improvement in the situation at school that caused dropout to occur; and the influence of peer pressure.

For three of the children who had returned to school, motivation arose from changes in household arrangements. Hun, the 15 year-old boy who had stayed out of school for about three years, told me that:

I was not attending school because my father was away; but now my father has returned from his journey, I am back in school.

Another child, Hesta, who dropped out of school because she had lost both parents and did not have anybody to take care of her said:

I came back to school because my cousin now takes care of me ... I don't have to work to take care of myself and my grandmother, so I am now back in school.

For some other children, it was a parent/guardian's visit to the school or a teacher's visit to their home that encouraged drop-in. Ekow, a 15 year-old boy who was a sporadic dropout, told me:

I went back to school after my grandmother came and spoke with the headmaster on my behalf.

Another three dropout children who had returned to school did so on account of their teachers' influence on them. The high esteem in which some teachers were held, often as the result of their commendable attitude to work and personal relationships with community members, was a key influence on several children's decisions.

The case of Gacer, the 13 year-old girl, is an example. She was won over by her teacher's visits to her home and interaction with her mother, which persuaded her to return to school. She had dropped out because she did not have a uniform but there had also been no regular teacher for her class. However, after the teacher's visit, she returned to school, even though she still could not afford a new uniform. Gacer confirmed:

I started going back to school after our class teacher came to my house and talked with me and my mother.

A child may drop out of school because he or she feels disadvantaged and/or disaffected, but a good relationship between the school authorities and the child's family could help prevent dropout and motivate children to return. Ekow and Gacer were able to return to school because of the direct contact between their guardians and teachers. These examples show that collaboration between parents and teachers can prevent dropout and encourage drop-in.

According to some teachers, children dropped back in when the problem that pushed or pulled them out of school was resolved. These teachers believed that as soon as the critical events that disadvantaged the child and led to dropout had improved, he or she quickly returned to school. Yet, a critical review of this belief shows that teachers might have only been looking at the cause of dropout from the perspective of the influence of socio-economic background. The evidence of children's accounts shows that teachers themselves are commonly part of the problem, and that children will only drop back in when such teacher-related issues are resolved. In their study on teachers Seidu and Adzahlie-Mensah (2010) found the same lack of reflection on the part of teachers as affecting access.

In the case of the three dropout children who had returned to school, the decision to drop back in was motivated by peer influence. These children were sporadic dropouts who had retained contact with their classmates still in school, and it was their friends who persuaded them to return. One day during fieldwork, I observed a scene in which some pupils persuaded another child who had been missing classes to return (see field notes below).

Field Notes Phase II, 2009

It was a Monday afternoon after school and I was walking home in the company of some pupils. I noticed a boy of about nine standing by the roadside as I walked past with the other children. I heard one of them say to him, "*You have not been coming to school these days ... shame.*" The boy said nothing. Later, I learnt from the other children that he was in class two. The following week when I went to the school, I saw him in class. I asked him why he was now in school and he said, "*My friends have been teasing me, saying that I've stopped coming to school ... but I haven't.*"

From this observation, a glimpse of how peer pressure can encourage drop-in is revealed. Likewise, according to Joe, a 15 year-old boy, he returned to school because:

Friends and teachers were always asking me to go back to school ... Sometimes, I avoided my friends when I saw them coming from school because they teased me for not going.

Such influence of peers is a strong incentive that shapes attendance. However, the influence of peer pressure on drop-in depends on where it is coming from. For example, while peer pressure from other dropouts potentially influences pupils to withdraw (see section 4.1.5), the influence of children in regular attendance can also encourage some dropouts back to school.

Although the accounts of 10 out of 18 dropout children show that they dropped in again on account of improved household conditions, and encouragement from teachers and peers, I sought to learn what prevented the other eight dropout children from returning to school; and also why four of the 10 children who had dropped-in, dropped out again. Based on data from the 18 children, I found that a child's personal aspirations in terms of education, work and

economic well-being was a very important determinant of whether he or she dropped in, dropped out again, or never dropped back in.

The accounts of the 10 dropout children who had returned to school reveal that education had not lost its value for them. Yet, for the remaining eight children who had not dropped back in, the value of education had been replaced by the attraction of work and economic well-being.

The perceived value of education is a critical motivating factor of children's aspirations with regard to schooling. In the case of children who had dropped back in, Gacer, the 13 year-old girl who had dropped out of class four, told me:

I want to complete school because I am still young and nobody will employ me if I don't have a certificate ... nobody will even take me on for an apprenticeship.

Similarly, Mensah the 15 year-old boy who had also dropped out of class four, said:

These days, without completing basic school, nobody is willing to give you a job ... People insult you as illiterate because you did not complete school.

The views of these children indicate that their decision to return to school could be motivated more from a consideration of their prospects for the future – as envisioned in terms of what they do or do not achieve at school – and the social stigmatisation they may suffer for non-completion of schooling, rather than the mere influence of context. Indeed, in some Ghanaian communities, it is common to hear derogatory remarks directed at people who have not completed school.

The views of those children who had not returned to school clearly indicate that they had lost interest in schooling. A 16 year-old girl, Amina, told me:

I am not going back. After all, when you finish school, it is money you are looking for ... With my rice business, I am making enough money to keep me going so why should I go back?

A 17 year-old boy, Mustaf, said:

We go to school in the hope that when we finish, we can find some work to do ... But if you are not doing well [at school] and by chance, you find some work to do now, why waste your time?

In contrast, other children may fail to drop back in owing to feelings of rejection at the hands of the school. Etty, the 16 year-old girl, said:

I can't go back ... What school would take me now? When they refuse to put my name in the register, I feel they are telling me I should leave; so I have left.

These views show that children's loss of interest in school may be the result of any combination of poor academic performance; the school's inability to meet their learning needs; and the subtle rejection of the pupil by the school.

5.2 The School's Reaction to Children Who Drop in: Pupils' Experiences

For children who drop in but drop out again, interviews and classroom observations show that – with the exception of Ety, who was openly rejected by her school – certain conditions within the academic environment may compromise children's efforts to drop in. For example, no provision was made in the study area to cater for the particular learning needs of children who returned to school. According to Hun the 15 year-old boy who had dropped out of his cohort group but dropped back in after three years, the

teacher does not answer my questions and he won't even ask me any questions in class.

From my classroom observation of teachers' approach to dealing with children like Hun who had dropped back in alongside other children who had been attending school regularly, I noticed that classroom instruction was approached without any provision for children who may have had special needs. The account of one boy, Joe, sheds light on why a child might drop in and then drop out again:

When I went back to school, I didn't understand most of the things being taught ... I am just in the class ... the teacher teaches over you as if you are not there ... When I couldn't take it any longer, I stopped again.

In my observations of four other children who had returned to school, I noticed that they appeared to be out of place and disorientated during lessons. One of them, Ekow, said:

Sometimes, you just sit there in class and you don't understand a word being said to you.

Teachers appeared to have a developed particular attitude towards children who had returned to school after a period of withdrawal. The message they put across suggested that the school was not interested in those pupils who dropped out and then dropped in again. According to Ekow's class teacher, Miyoc:

There is nothing we can do about these children ... We can't go back and start teaching the class all over again on their account ... we can't go back to re-teach ... If you did that, there is no way we would ever finish the syllabus.

Another class teacher said:

These children are not serious. Even if you give them attention, they will still fall behind ... It may even encourage other children to drop out, knowing that if they return, they will be given extra attention.

In support of some of her class teachers' policy of ignoring drop-ins, Nyaminpa, the school head, said:

We don't even have enough teachers for all the classes ... There are over 60 pupils per class, so there is nothing special we can do for those who drop out and drop in ... If children who drop in are able to cope with the class, all well and good; but if they can't, you aren't able to do anything.

As a Ghanaian teacher, I am aware of the manner in which teachers ignore truancy and dropout cases. As a result of overwhelmingly large class sizes, teachers may be compelled to ignore children they do not consider to be conscientious pupils. Moreover, the Ghana Education Service (GES) does not implement a particular programme to support children who drop in.

From the views of teachers, it appears that retention, dropout and drop-in together constituted something of a 'survival of the fittest' contest. In particular, children who returned to school intending to complete their education were expected to manage on their own. Schools did not make any special provision for children who dropped back in. Pupils might return to school but this did not necessarily mean that they benefited from any meaningful learning. For example, Joe, in particular, dropped out again as a result of difficulty in readjusting to school and picking up from the point at which he had withdrawn.

The only strategy schools universally adopted to help dropout children when they returned was to start them afresh by making them repeat their last grade. One teacher said:

Children who stop school and come back repeat because we want them to start anew.

Yet, with classes of over 50 children on average, compulsory grade repetition might not have achieved the desired outcomes. Moreover, children's views suggest that they needed some form of one-to-one attention that addressed the individual's specific learning needs when he or she returned to school.

5.3 Returning to Complete School: The Perceptions of Drop-in Children

Owing to the general attitude of teachers towards children who dropped in, I interviewed the remaining 6 out of the 10 children who had returned to school after a period of withdrawal, and were still in school at the time of the study, in order to discover their opinions about staying on to complete their education. It is possible that such children dropped out again too. Nevertheless, findings on the likelihood of completing school show that for one set of children, continuation of schooling was achieved through the efforts of teachers who considered them to be valuable members of the school sports and athletics teams. Other children survived repeated dropout due to their determination to complete school, which was based on the perceived value of education for future prospects.

In the case of drop-in children whose continued stay in school depended on their usefulness to the school, a boy, who was a keen footballer, told me:

I will definitely complete basic school. I don't think I will drop out of school again. I will reach senior high school and play football for the school team ... In the future, I will become a professional footballer.

His teacher asserted that his performance in class was average. However, unlike other children who suffered a policy of being ignored by staff, a deliberate effort from this boy's teacher in encouraging him to stay in school on account of his talents – sports and athletics – prevented a second dropout. Two other children who had dropped in were also active members of the school football team; thus, after returning, they were constantly monitored and supported by the sports teacher and the head in order to prevent another period of dropout.

Other drop-in children who had survived repeated dropout in spite of being ignored by teachers were sustained by their determination. Hesta, the 13 year-old girl who lost both parents, said:

I think I will complete school because if you don't then you will become a useless person ... Nobody will even accept you as an apprentice if you don't have a certificate.

Her statement suggests that such children considered their chances of completing school to be high on account of the perceived prospects and benefits to be enjoyed when they obtained a leaving certificate.

6. Conclusion and Implications for Policy

The children's accounts discussed above highlight the influence of context – both within and external to the school environment – on dropout. It appears that children drop out of school when contextual factors such as socio-economic background and their situation at school disadvantage them. The data show that pupils who are disadvantaged become disaffected in terms of the educational institution. Evidence of disaffection is indicated in children's accounts of how they had to withdraw from school in order to work for economic survival, a situation exacerbated by an unsupportive school environment; and disaffected children soon drop out on a long term basis.

Yet, as school attendance and behaviour patterns show, some of these children return to school while others do not. The motivation to make the decision depends on changes occurring in the context that pushes or pulls them out of school. Children who repeatedly drop in and out again could break this cycle if the school provided adequate support for them. Moreover, effective support for dropouts can potentially prevent other children from dropping out, as well as helping dropouts who return from repeated episodes of withdrawal.

6.1 Implications for Education Policy on Access

In order to prevent dropout and encourage drop-in, education policy should focus at the outset when children first enrol on the contextual issues that disadvantage pupils and incite them to drop out of school.

With the loose family structures and parenting styles that are characteristic of children who drop out of school, policy on the locus of responsibility for pupils at risk of dropping out and those who have already dropped out is required. An effective parent teacher association (PTA) and school management committee (SMC) could address at the micro level and go a long way to remedying many of these issues. Teachers, school management committees and community members, as well as pupils themselves, could team up and work together to encourage children on the verge of dropping out to remain in school.

Although the study did not find any concrete locus of responsibility for dropout children, there appear to have been some elements of responsibility for the phenomenon diffused throughout both the community and the school. At one level, credit must be given to pupils who through peer pressure encouraged their dropout classmates to return to school. Additionally, teachers sometimes followed up cases of children who had dropped out and persuaded them to return. There were also instances in which community members articulated their concerns about instances of dropout. Therefore, policy on the locus of responsibility could revolve around what I term 'pillars of retention' at the school, community and school–community levels.

At the school level, pupils and teachers could team up to form the first pillar of retention – the 'peer and teacher-led pillar' – in order to monitor children's school attendance and support those who may be at risk of dropping out. The peer and teacher-led pillar could also encourage children who have already dropped out to return to school. Often, children who regularly attend school and those out of school interact and play together, which presents a good opportunity for teachers to encourage pupils to try and persuade their friends to return to school.

The second pillar of retention – the ‘peer and adult-led pillar’ could operate at the community level to monitor children’s attendance. This pillar would be responsible for finding out why a child was not in class during school hours; in a sense, it would police school attendance.

The third and final pillar, which would bring together pupils, the school and the community, is the ‘peer–teacher–adult-led pillar’, and would involve collaboration with the PTA and school management committee (SMC) in matters of children’s school attendance.

These pillars of retention might operate as the points of a triangle, which together could address contextual issues both within and external to the school environment that push and/or pull children to drop out; and work together to resolve them.

Policy should consider introducing multi-grade teaching and learning techniques in schools in which there are cases of overage enrolment, such as when cohort dropouts return to school.

In respect of the clash between the arrangement of the academic year and seasonal activities that pull children out of school, policy on the school calendar should be reformed to adapt it to local seasonal activities. Children who migrate temporarily at certain times would then have the opportunity to stay in school throughout the academic year without their schooling being disrupted by seasonal migration. School calendars must be flexible if the authorities are to address persistent irregular attendance and temporary withdrawal caused by the seasonality of economic and agricultural activities that encourage sporadic dropout.

Alternative school programmes may also be useful in providing lessons for children who are overage in grade, and those for whom schooling has lost its value but may yet be willing to improve their literacy and numeracy skills.

Overage children who migrate seasonally and engage in child labour could benefit from school programmes designed to suit their itinerancy, such as mobile schools and flexible timetables planned to make use of periods when they are not working.

Policy on compulsory universal basic education should be localised, thus empowering regional authorities to ensure that children are enrolled and attend school regularly. Where communities condone child labour, school authorities and others stakeholders working in the education arena to ensure that the goals of education for all are met need to work closely with community leaders in order to institute measures that will discourage parents and other community members from exploiting child labour.

Parents should be encouraged to get involved in their children’s education because this can make the difference between academic success and failure. Pupils do better when their parents show concern; when parents ensure their children go to school and are progressing well; and when parents communicate their expectations with regard to schooling. If problems arise, parents who have made the effort to keep abreast of school developments have laid a solid foundation for dealing with them.

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Appendix 1

Definition of Educational Access

CREATE views access to basic education to include admission and progression at appropriate age¹⁴ in grade, children need to attend school regularly, satisfactory levels of national curriculum achievement and equitable opportunity to progress to post-secondary educational levels and learn. Children who never enroll as well as others who gained initial access but are unable to progress due to low achievement, irregular attendance and dropout are regarded as being excluded from access. The six ‘zones of exclusion’ in the CREATE analytic model which relates with Ghana’s basic education system is described in the text box.

CREATE identifies 6 zones of exclusion. Figure 1 shows a cross sectional model by grade of participation which locates those who are being excluded and those excluded from access to conventional education systems. The model illuminates how typically enrolments decline steeply through the primary grades in low enrolment countries, and how those attending irregularly and achieving poorly fall into “at risk” zones. In the hypothetical model more than half of all children leave before completing primary school, and about half of the primary completers are selected into lower secondary school where attrition continues.

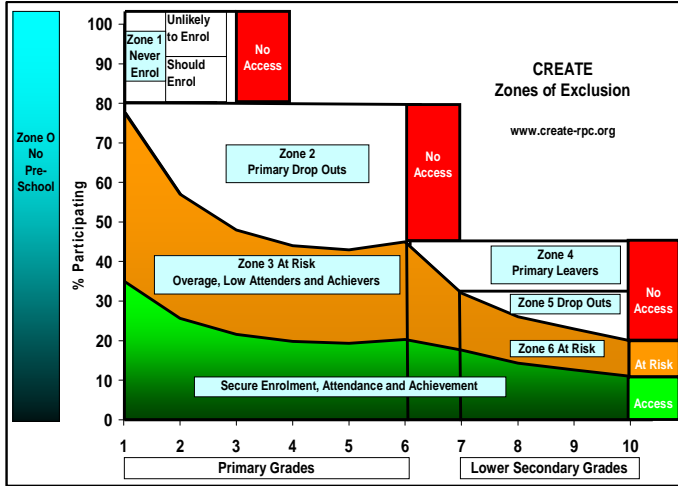
- *Zone 0*- children experience little or no pre-school access.
- *Zone 1*- children who never enroll and attend school.
- *Zone 2*- primary dropout children who after initial entry have been excluded. Depending on the age at enrolment and dropping out, the dropout status of children in Zone 2 may be temporary because of the possibility of returning to school.
- *Zone 3*- over age children, irregular attenders and low-achievers at the primary level who are ‘silently excluded’ and learn little. These children are in school but at risk of dropping out permanently.
- *Zone 4*- primary leavers who are not entering lower secondary; In the Ghanaian context, some children may enter Zone 4 because they could not make the transition from primary (grade six) to lower secondary school (grade seven).
- *Zone 5*- lower secondary dropouts, these children are also characterised by over age in grade, recurrent intermittent attendance and child labour.
- *Zone 6*- overage children, irregular attenders, low-achievers and those silently excluded at lower secondary level. These children are at risk of dropping out from lower secondary school. They are intermittent attendees and low achievers resulting in the risk of dropping out permanently.

Source: Adapted from Lewin 2007

¹⁴ 6 to 14 years is the official age for completing basic education in Ghana

The first graphic below presents a schematic illustration of the ‘zones of exclusion’. In this paper, the children who are pushed and or pulled out of school are confined to *Zones 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6* in the Ghanaian context.

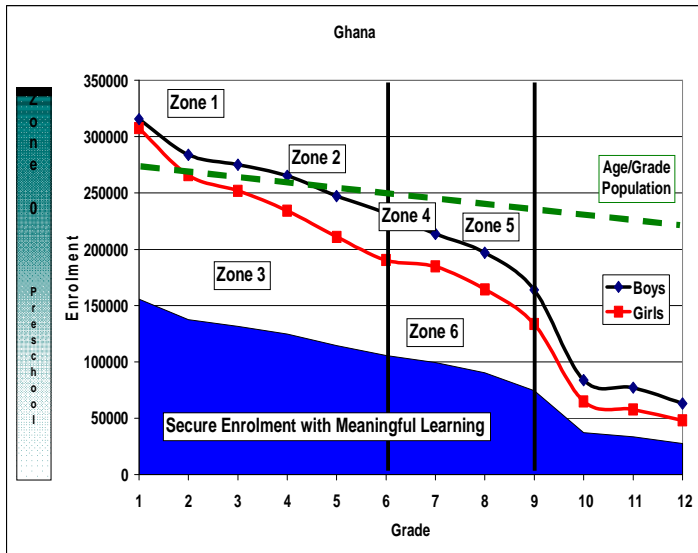
CREATE Zones of exclusion



Source: Lewin, 2009

The second graphic below illustrates the location of Ghanaian children in CREATE exclusion model.

Zones of Exclusion in Ghana



Source: Lewin, 2009



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Report summary:

Addressing school dropout has been one of the most controversial elements of policy since the introduction of free compulsory universal basic education (FCUBE) in Ghana. However, research that utilises qualitative biographical detail surrounding irregular attendance and the critical events in the process that lead to dropout in Ghana is limited. I argue that in order to achieve the target of universal basic education by 2015, education policy should focus more directly on addressing dropout. This paper provides an in-depth analysis of the critical events pupils experience as they cross the threshold from being enrolled to being out of school in southern Ghana. This paper provides fresh insights into drop outs' life worlds and educational needs; opportunities to re-cross the threshold back into basic education, whether into school or complementary provision. The findings presented in this paper show that conditions both external to the school environment – poverty and the opportunity cost of schooling – and within the school – the teacher factor, and school practices and processes – conspire to compromise retention and push and/or pull children out of school.

Author notes:

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