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DROPPING OUT FROM SCHOOL

While initial access to education is increasing in many countries, drop out rates continue to be high. This seriously affects MDG and EFA goals around educational access. This briefing paper looks at the issue of dropping out from school. It is based on the CREATE Pathways to Access Research Monograph, *Dropping out from school: a cross country review of literature (Hunt, 2008).*

Introduction

This policy brief is concerned with drop outs, that is, children who start but do not complete a cycle of basic education. In many countries the largest number of out-of-school children, are drop outs. Gross and net enrolment rates can conceal high levels of attrition and true completion rates can be difficult to measure. There are risks that high levels of enrolment growth as a result of improvements in initial access may be achieved at the cost of high levels of drop out.

The main focus of this policy brief is on the reasons for dropping out of school and insights into the process of how this takes place. An overview of literature on drop out is provided as well as indications of precursors to drop out. It focuses on CREATE zones of exclusion 2 and 5 (dropping out from primary / secondary school) and identifies policy options, practical responses and gaps in research.

Numbers of drop outs

Indications of the scale of dropouts are evident from the data presented in the GMR (UNESCO, 2008) on drop outs from primary schooling in Africa and South Asia.

In Africa country patterns show large percentage dropouts from grade 1 (which includes overage learners and repeaters), e.g. in Malawi 22% and in Uganda 32% of the grade 1 cohort in 2005 dropped out. Percentage numbers tend to reduce in grades 2 to 4, then rise in some countries as primary completion and secondary entry approach.
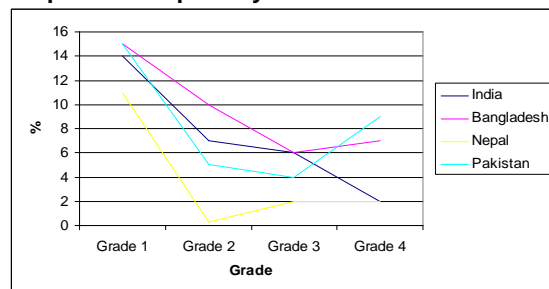
Drop out rates in primary school in Africa (%)
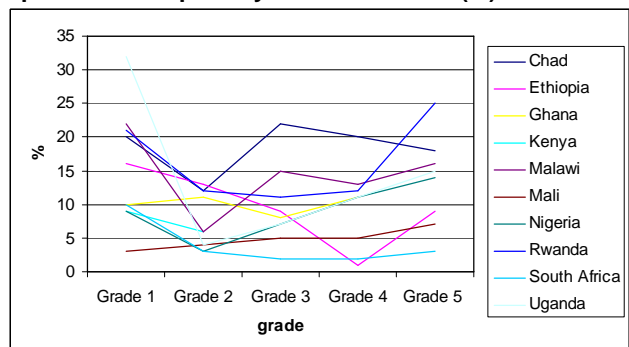
(* Ghana numbers from UNESCO, 2007).

In South Asia there are similar patterns of access. Countries have large drop outs for grade 1 (14.6% for Bangladesh; 14.0% for India). These reduce in the following grades, with some increases in drop out in grade 4 (though not India).

Drop out rates primary education in South Asia (%)

The GMR (UNESCO, 2008) also gives survival rates to grade 5 in schools. This data shows substantial drop out rates with non-completion of primary being the

norm in a number of countries.

GERS in Primary Education, Drop Out and Survival Rates %

Country	GER in primary education 2006 %	NER in primary education 2006 %	Survival to grade 5 % (2005)
Chad	76	-	33
Ghana	98	72	-
Kenya	106	75	-
Malawi	119	91	44
Mali	80	61	81
Nigeria	96	63	73
Rwanda	140	79	46
South Africa	106	88	82
Uganda	117	-	49
Tanzania	112	98	87
Bangladesh	103	89	65
India	112	89	73

Factors Influencing Drop Out and Retention

Research suggests that a range of interrelated demand and supply factors interact to influence how and why children drop out from school.

Household Income / Financial Circumstances: Studies highlight the link between poverty and dropping out from school. Poverty is seen by many as the most common reason for students to be out of school. Children from better off households are more likely to remain in school, whilst those who are poorer are more likely never to have attended, or to drop out once they have enrolled. Household income is often correlated with when children start school, how often they attend, whether they temporarily withdraw and when and if they drop out. For children from poorer backgrounds the pressure on them to withdraw from school increases as they get older. In many instances it is the girls from poor households who are withdrawn earlier than the boys.

Direct and indirect costs of schooling: The cost of schooling (both direct and indirect) is a central reason for dropping out. Costs include school fees, uniforms, travel, equipment and the opportunity costs of sending a child to school.

Income Shocks: How households deal with income shocks is an important factor in maintaining schooling access. Vulnerable households can withdraw children from school as part of their coping strategy, often in order to work, save on costs or to free other household members up to work. Households often draw on a number of other coping strategies, but where these possibilities are not present, children may drop out. Access to some form of credit during times of income shock may reduce the chances of drop out.

Child Work: Factors such as location (urban/rural); gender; type of work; opportunity cost; household contexts and income; length of work commitments; and age influence whether children dropout of school to work. Differences also exist in terms of whether work is

paid or unpaid. The most prevalent types of child labour are domestic and household-related duties (girls) and agricultural labour (boys). Labour of this sort does not necessarily impede educational access, although might mean more regular absences. Girl children who drop out may often be needed to look after younger siblings.

In some contexts child labour is enabling, i.e. it allows children to gain access to school. Children may earn money, or their work may free-up other household members to go to school. In other cases child labour can be disenabling, and an active factor leading to drop out. In some areas the pull of the labour market (as opposed to the push of poverty) may be a main factor in children dropping out of school. As a child grows older, the opportunity cost of their time often increases, leading to different incentives to remain in school.

Migration: Child migration can be linked to both increased and decreased educational opportunities. Parents and their children may move into urban areas to access education; but also may migrate to gain paid employment, limiting educational chances. Migration can also lead to temporary withdrawals from school, while access is gained to other schools.

Household Contexts: Who makes up the household can have an influence over educational access and retention, particularly in poorer communities. Children living in households with mothers present are generally less likely to drop out. How many children are in the household can be important (older girls may be withdrawn to look after younger siblings; more children might lessen the burden on individual children for household chores/ income generation or may increase the burden). Birth order and gender often influence who has access.

There can be both positive and negative effects of **fostering** on educational access. In many cases children are fostered to allow them greater educational opportunities. At other times the focus is on foster children providing forms of child labour in households.

Bereavement and Orphanhood: Bereavement amongst family members and in particular parents can make children more vulnerable to drop out, non-enrolment, late enrolment and slow progress. Orphanhood often exacerbates financial constraints for poorer households and increases the demands for child labour. Access to schooling after bereavement can be linked to who died, who children live with afterwards and the age of the child / their level of education. Girls often drop out to be caregivers to siblings, and girls who have lost mothers may be especially vulnerable. Some countries have targeted support to assist orphans access education.

Education of Household Members: Educational levels of household members are particularly influential in determining whether and for how long children

access school. Higher parental/ household-head levels of education are associated with increased access to schooling, higher attendance rates and lower drop out rates (particularly for mother's educational levels).

Household Perceived Benefits of Schooling: Research indicates that the importance household members place on education is an important factor in whether and for how long children gain access to schooling.

Health: Health of children influences initial access to education and cognitive development. Health problems (e.g. under-nutrition, stunting) are related to late enrolment and may also be associated with high dropout. Research indicates that children who suffer from malnutrition, hunger or who lack certain micronutrients in their diet, do not have the same potential for learning as healthy children and might be more likely to drop out. Irregular attendance is often the result of children's health problems. Also children whose parents/siblings fall ill might be expected to be caregivers for these sick relatives, at times causing them to miss or drop out of school. This is especially the case for girls.

Pregnancy: In many countries pregnancy is a major cause of dropout for teenage girls. Some studies suggest there are predictors of teenage pregnancy (and thus drop out). These include: girls with poor school performance; girls who have previously been temporarily withdrawn from school; low economic status; family migratory life styles and the consequent vulnerability of girls. Many countries allow girls who have been pregnant to return to school but there is little evidence to suggest re-entry levels are significant. There may often be less pressure on boy fathers to drop out.

Disability and special educational needs: There are few studies on children with disabilities and/or SEN and dropping out. This may be due to lack of awareness or a lack of initial access to primary education.

Gender: Gender cuts across a wide range of constraints that lead to drop out (see previous sections). Gendered cultural practices affect the opportunities of girls and boys to access and complete education. In the majority of cases it is girls who miss out on schooling, although this is improving in certain countries (e.g. Bangladesh). In some contexts boys withdraw earlier than girls (e.g. South Africa, Jamaica). This is generally where initial access is high and equal and the move out of school is influenced by labour market opportunities.

Rural/Urban: Drop out rates can be higher in rural rather than urban and peri-urban settings. Households in rural areas tend to be poorer, schools more inaccessible, household members less educated and pressures on children to work to support the household

greater. However educational access in urban slums can be problematic and drop out rates high.

Other Socially Disadvantaged Groups: Research indicates in certain circumstances some socially disadvantaged groups have less access to schooling than other children. Often there are interlocking exclusionary factors, including poverty, cultural practice and gender. A number of reasons have been put forward for high dropout rates including: economic disadvantage, poor quality of available schooling, forms of social expectation, discrimination and perceptions of returns to education. Many nomadic communities continue to be marginalised from schooling provision with implications for both initial access and drop outs.

Fragile States: Children caught up in conflict, politically fragile and emergency situations often find difficulties remaining in school and many drop out. Many children are forced to migrate, disrupting the schooling they had, with different pressures on time (and resources). Often these children have difficulties in accessing education in new areas and face problems in terms of language, discrimination, lack of documentation, etc. Access to household assets might be problematic and income restricted. Forced recruitment or voluntary enlistment of child soldiers pushes many boys, in particular, to drop out. Schools can be closed down or destroyed.

Age, Marriage and Notions of Adulthood: There are cultural notions around adulthood and age which may in some circumstances affect access to schooling. Rites of passage ceremonies, marking the move from childhood to adulthood can increase absenteeism and potential dropout. There is a link between age and drop out for girls, e.g. when girls start to menstruate / reach puberty, they might be withdrawn from school. In some cases girls are withdrawn from school at this time to marry.

School supply and quality of provision: A range of supply-side factors also influence retention levels in schools.

Supply of schools: A limited number of schools means schools are often located further away. This is particularly the case at secondary level and in rural situations. Younger children and girls are particularly at risk of dropping out where schools are located at a distance.

Schooling Quality, Processes and Practices: Education quality is a major factor influencing schooling access. Schooling systems in low–performing countries, where the institutional and management challenges are significant, often have poor quality provision. This might include: high teacher absenteeism; spending/investment unresponsive to local needs; a lack of accountability/monitoring and incentives for performance; lack of facilities and

resources; low numbers of female teachers; gender violence; corporal punishment and a lack of latrines / drinking water. Low quality provision and low learning outcomes can lead to children dropping out. Some children are more likely to receive education of poorer quality, often they are from poorer backgrounds, sometimes rural and from socially disadvantaged groups. There is a correlation between weaker quality, poverty and drop outs.

Precursors to dropping out

Often there are precursors or signs that a child might be more likely to drop out.

Repetition: Children who have repeated a grade are more likely than non repeaters to drop out from school. This may be because of low achievement and children becoming overage.

Low achievement: There is evidence that children with low achievement are more likely than those with higher achievement to drop out. Low achievement is related to other factors, e.g. absenteeism, repetition, schooling quality, household contexts, demands on time, etc.

Late enrolment: Children who begin schooling beyond the official age of entry are more likely to drop out than those who start at the official age. The late entry along with early withdrawal limits the number of years children have in school. Delaying the onset of education is likely to drastically reduce the overall period spent in school and have serious effects on completion.

Absenteeism and temporary withdrawals from school: Irregular attendance and temporary withdrawals can both be precursors to dropping out. These can be caused by a range of factors including: child ill health; ill health of family members; distance to school; labour requirements; pending school fees. Children can fall behind at school and find it difficult to readjust on returning.

Interventions to reduce dropping out

Good practice around drop outs could occur in different stages and zones of access. They could catch children both before they drop out and when drop out has occurred, helping secure some form of continued education. Points of intervention could be located: critical moments where children might stay or leave school, and where action could be taken. There are a number of ways this could take place.

School-related Factors: These include: access to pre-school; flexible schooling hours and systems; systems with automatic promotion rather than repetition; first language/local language as languages of instruction in the early years; availability of post-primary education.

Financial Support: These include: access to credit in times of income shock; conditional child support where children attend school in return for support to household; unconditional child support – households getting some support, not determined on children accessing school; scholarship programmes.

Quality Interventions: These include: monitoring and accountability mechanisms in schools; and increased community involvement:

Other Education Interventions: These might include adult education programmes for uneducated mothers; and alternative forms of education for drop outs, often run by NGOs/non-state providers.

Gaps in Research

There are a number of gaps in the literature where more research could be carried out. In particular, there is little research on the processes of drop out, with most studies focusing on who drops out and why. There are limited numbers of in-depth qualitative accounts of dropping out from school based on interviews with and life histories of drop outs.

There is little literature on: Dropping into school; Retention: why some children stay and others leave; Disability/SEN and drop outs; Dropping out from non state providers; how increased preschool provision may reduce drop outs; Motivational factors around choices to continue schooling; The role of school staff in facilitating the retention of students and/or pushing students out of schools; and the structures and patterns of responsibility that surround drop out

Conclusions

Drop out from school can rarely be put down to one event or one impact. Rather drop out is influenced by a range of interacting factors, some of which are specific to individual contexts (and agency) of each child. Drop out is a process rather than an event which is often irreversible. However, specific measures may address some of the factors facing children at risk of drop out, these include:

- Reducing direct/indirect costs of schooling for the poorest;
- Using conditional cash transfers linked to attendance for the poorest;
- Clarifying locus of responsibility for drop outs at local level;
- Encouraging child friendly, child supporting schools;
- Identifying and meeting needs for schools for excluded populations;
- Encouraging pre-school provision;
- Identifying and acting to diminish uneven patterns of drop out between different groups of children;
- Monitoring drop out and including in school performance measures.

This policy brief is based on: Hunt, F. (2008) CREATE Pathways to Access Research Monograph No 16. Available at www.create-rpc.org. It has been developed by the author.