

GIVING CONTEXT TO THE STUDY

1.1 BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

In 2001, the Department of Education, through its Education Management Information System (EMIS), reported that there was an indication of a possible high drop-out rate of learners between Grades 1 and 11 in South African schools (Department of Education, June 2003:16). This observation is supported by Kraak's study, which suggested that of the estimated 826 000 learners who register in schools each year, about 551 000 of them do not finish their schooling (Kraak, 2003:13). School drop-outs are not only a challenge for the General and/or Further Education and Training phase of the school system, but also for Higher Education. Letseka and Maile suggest that in the year 2000, around 30% (36 000) of the students registered in higher education did not complete their studies, translating to an estimated R4.5 billion loss (Letseka & Maile, 2008:5).

Schooling is the key to a person's development, not only socially within a community or society, or economically in terms of the labour market and business, but also as it prepares individuals for higher education (Arends & Perry, 2003). When a person succeeds in schooling at a particular stage of an education system, he/she is equipped to pursue further studies at a higher stage in the system.

Schooling by its very nature contributes not only to the attainment of knowledge, But directly and indirectly develops the skills needed for the world of work. Letseka and Maile (2008:xi) suggest that 'education leads to accelerated human development, poverty reduction and sustainable economic growth'.

Education is the suggested means of developing the skills and knowledge necessary in the world of work, personal richness and social value. According to the Economic

Commission for Africa (2005:173), the education levels of the youth in Africa remain one of the ‘significant factors in the longer unemployment spells they face’.

Entry into the world of work is largely associated with academic achievement. While people with lower levels of education are also likely to be employed, their chances are limited in comparison with those of their educated counterparts. The earning potential of the two groups (those with higher levels of education and those with lower) is generally different. Those with higher levels of education tend to earn more or have the potential to earn more than those who have not stayed at school.

Investing in education on the part of government has economic benefits for the country. A study done by KPMG (2009), looking *inter alia* at the funding of higher education in Australia, suggests that investment in education benefits the country’s GDP. The report suggests that while governments invest in education in the present, the benefit they experience is the long-term effect of the return on investment when the students start working. For countries that invest very little in education, the rate of return in the investment is very low. There is also a low return on their investment for countries that have high numbers of students who drop out of school. In short, dropping out is a cost to government and not an investment. While this is an Australian study, it has potential merit in other countries.

Kolev and Saget (2005:161) suggest that a lack of access to the world of work affects a person economically, socially and emotionally. They suggest that ‘a troubled entry into the world of work has serious welfare repercussions for youth, including a higher risk of income poverty and deterioration of their human and social capital’.

The level and quality of schooling are among the main factors that determine a person’s future participation in the labour market, and education is deemed to be a main determinant of the ability to earn (Chamberlain & van de Berg, 2002). The completion of schooling is thus critical for youth development and their adjustment to life in society.

In 1996 South Africa ruled that every South African child should undergo at least nine years of schooling. These nine years are designated as a period of basic education and training, which according to the Dakar Framework on Education (UNESCO, 2005) is a critical period of education for the youth. According to Chapter 2 Section 1 of the South African Schools Act of 1996

...every parent must cause every learner for whom he or she is responsible to attend a school from the first school day of the year in which such learner reaches the age of seven years until the last school day of the year in which such learner reaches the age of fifteen years or the ninth grade, whichever occurs first (SASA, 1996: Chapter 2, section 1).

The Act further mandates the Head of Department (HOD) to take action should a learner - within the specified age group - fail to attend school. Specifically, the Act stipulates that the HOD must

...investigate the circumstances of the learner's absence from school; take appropriate measures to remedy the situation; and failing such a remedy, issue a written notice to the parent of the learner requiring compliance with the subsection (SASA, 1996: Chapter 2, section 1).

Despite the provision and intent of the SASA policy, post-apartheid South Africa has seen an increase in learner drop-outs (DoE, 2001). Researchers have argued that the increase in the magnitude of the phenomenon of learner drop-outs can be ascribed to a variety of reasons which differ within different contexts, but that in general the numbers are greater in rural communities and among the Black population sub-group.

Dropping out is not only a challenge for the education system in terms of cost and the underdevelopment of a person's capability, but it is a challenge to the youth labour market as well (Crouch, 2005; Kraak, 2003). By 2007, the subsidy per learner in schooling was estimated at an average of R6000 for ordinary public schools. While the estimates are not conclusive, for every youth dropping out of school, the government loses direct and indirect benefits, while the learner becomes a statistic in lost opportunity.

It is the learners who leave the higher education phase that ultimately constitute the youth labour force in the country. There is an obvious relationship between education level, employment prospects and income level. The more educated a prospective employee is, the better the chances of securing employment and the higher his or her remuneration (Sum, Khatiwada, McLaughlin, Tobar, Motroni, & Palma, 2007). There are also rate-of-remuneration links not only to levels of education, but also to particular fields (Moleke, 2005; Marrow *et al*, 2005). Given the strong attachment of competence to academic qualifications in South Africa, dropping out signals youth unemployability (Bhorat & Oosthuizen, 2005).

Thus, dropping out is a serious challenge for the labour market and a learner's future employability. Dropping out clearly affects not only the subjects as individuals, but also the education system and the labour market. It also has adverse effects on the development of social capital.

It should be noted, however, that apart from the youth who drop out of school and stay out of the education system, there are those who 'drop-in' or attempt to do so (CASE, 2000; Grant & Hallman, 2006). Evidence suggests that while some youth succeed in dropping back into school, staying, and completing their schooling successfully, others do not (Grant & Hallman, 2006). The unsuccessful ones face the prospect of a life without skills, formal education or academic qualifications (Kraak, 2003). The labour market, and to some extent the formal and non-formal education system, have not been able to absorb these growing numbers of young people (Kraak, 2003), leaving large numbers of the youth educationally and economically inactive.

The educational and economic inactivity of significant numbers of the youth is evident at a time when there is a high demand for skilled labour in South Africa (Kraak, 2003). An increased demand for skilled labour has plagued the country since the 70s and began to peak in the 90s as a result of the change of the economic structure from a labour-intensive economy to a skills-intensive economy.

Socio-economic development has been the thrust of South African policy since the dawn of democracy in 1994 (Everrat, 2003). The government is committed to

reducing poverty and social inequality generally. As part of the United Nation's Millennium Development Goals, the South African government is committed to halving national poverty and food shortages by 2015 (EVERRAT, 2003). Like most countries, the South African government has also prioritised education for redress in the labour market and as a measure to eradicate poverty (EVERRAT, 2003). Education and the acquisition of skills are thus seen as tools to eradicate poverty, increase employment chances and improve income levels.

Since 1994, the abandonment of old policies and the development of new ones have created change, not only in the legislature, but also in various structures and mechanisms of government (EVERRAT, 2003). Post-apartheid South Africa has been praised for its wide range of policies, especially on education and social transformation, developed since 1994 (EVERRAT, 2003). Although a lot has been achieved in youth education and development since 1994, there has been a debate on the extent to which the education and skills development policies have transformed and improved conditions for the youth and the extent to which these have helped to limit the numbers of the youth dropping out of school, experiencing life out of the school system, and re-entering, or at least attempting to re-enter the system.

1.2 PROBLEM FORMULATION

The high incidence of the youth dropping out of and dropping in to the ETD system is part of the reality in schools and society in South Africa. According to the findings of one youth study (CASE, 2000), many out-of-school youth indicated that they wanted to return to school, technical college, university or night school. Many also indicated that they have attempted to find employment (CASE, 2000). But their experiences in this regard are little understood. Furthermore, the role of education- and employment-related policies in assisting the youth to get back into the ETD system or to enter the labour market has not been clearly interrogated or documented.

1.3 PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

This study traces the pathways of out-of-school youth who dropped out of school between Grades 1 and 11, as they seek re-entrance to the ETD system, and/or entrance into the labour market.

The researcher intends to investigate the factors that determine the choices made by youth who dropped out, either in re-entering the ETD system, and/or entering the labour market i.e. their dropping-in experience. Additionally, this researcher also wishes to understand their experiences in pursuit of a successful transition to either the ETD system or the labour market, as well as the role that education- and labour-related policies play, if any, in assisting these youth get back into these systems and markets.

This study assumes that the youth who drop out of school attempted to drop back into school at the General Education and Training phase, or at the Further Education and Training phase. It also assumes that many of these out-of-school youth would like to re-enter the ETD system and subsequently enter the labour market. It is in this context that this study:

- Firstly, aims to understand the experiences of out-of-school youth as they attempt, successfully or unsuccessfully, to re-enter the ETD system.
- Secondly, the study seeks to investigate the experiences of youth who attempt to enter or re-enter the labour market.
- Thirdly, the study assumes that particular factors influence the transition of out-of-school youth between high school and the labour market. It thus investigates factors that influence the transition of the youth in this regard. The nature of these factors is of particular interest as it assumes that these factors might be multidimensional and complex.
- Fourthly, while it is possible for some young people to make a successful transition to their occupation, there might be others who do not. Thus, the study further examines the characteristics of successful career destinations for the youth.

- Finally, given the transformative role assigned to education and employment policies in South Africa and the extent to which these policies are aligned to the developmental priorities of the government, the study looks at the role of policy in assisting the youth get back into the education and training system or to enter the labour market. It further looks at lessons that can be learned during the transition from the education training and development system to the labour market.

1.4 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Based on the statement of purpose elaborated above, the following questions have been posed to guide the investigation:

- What are the experiences of the youth as they try (a) to re-enter the ETD system, and (b) to enter the job market?
- Which factors influence the out-of-school transition of the youth between high school and the labour market?
- What are the characteristics of successful career destinations for the youth who attempt re-entry?
- What role does policy play in assisting the youth to get back into the ETD system, and into the labour market thereafter?

1.5 CLARIFICATION OF CONCEPTS

In this section, a number of concepts relevant to this investigation are defined operationally. These are as follows:

1.5.1 Career destinations

In the study these refer to where youths end up after dropping out or continuing with schooling. They could be unemployment, self-employment, employment, or further education.

1.5.2 School-to-work transition

School-to-work transition refers to the ways in which students may successfully effect the transition into the economy through further education, paid employment in a business, or self-employment.

1.5.3 Youth labour market

In the study the youth labour market refers to employed and unemployed persons between the ages of 14 and 35 years (National Youth Commission Act of 1996). There are two main factors influencing the labour market: the demand(s) for and the supply of the labour force in the economy.

1.5.4 Drop-outs/out-of-school

In the study, these are the learners who have left school before achieving the Matric Certificate (i.e. 12 years of schooling) whether by choice or from force of circumstances. These are sometimes (in other countries) referred to as ‘push-outs’, a term suggesting that the system has pushed them out. Before the SASA of 1996, anyone who left school before completing Matric was considered a dropout. However, with the post-1996 legislation of 9 years of compulsory education and the National Qualification Framework, a learner that leaves school after Grade 9 and joins a Further Education and Training (FET) college is not considered a drop-out. The study thus concentrates on the youth cohort that drops out between Grades 1 and 11 and learners who does not finish high school. The emphasis is on the youth with a history of more than three years’ experience of dropping out.

1.5.5 Drop-in

This characterises the re-entry into the ETD system of youth who had previously dropped out of school.

1.5.6 System

This refers to education training and development and the labour market.

1.5.7 Education training and development

This refers to any educational or skills development programme. It could be between the General Education and Training phase (GET), the Further Education and Training phase (FET), or the Higher Education and Training phase (HET). It includes learnerships, skills programmes and so on.

1.5.8 Pathways, experiences and factors

- **Pathways:** The choices people make in terms of their careers. FET/schooling/dropping out/employment.
- **Experiences:** The lived experiences – how getting to their destination happens. What they encounter in their pathways. What they go through.
- **Factors:** Dynamics that shape or contribute to where the youth end up. Factors that influence their pathways.

1.6 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

A study of this nature has both theoretical and policy significance. There is a vast body of international academic literature on the school-to-work transition. Most of the literature on this subject concentrates on two broad issues. There are scholars who focus their research on explaining why learners drop out of school before they reach Grade 12 (cf. Aloise-Young & Chavez, 2002; Te Riele, 2004; Porteus et al, 2000). The research of the second group of scholars looks at the relationship between educational attainment and employment (Bhorat & Oosthuizen, 2005; Moleke, 2005; Braehmer *et al.*, 2003; Bessant, 2002; Te Riele, 2004). These scholars tend to focus on comparing the chances of matriculants and tertiary education graduates in finding work. There is one factor that unites both groups: neither of them focuses on the experiences and pathways of pre-Grade 12 out-of-school youth in their endeavours either to re-enter the ETD system or to enter the labour market. It is this major gap in the literature that this thesis addresses.

From a policy point of view, the democratic government of South Africa inherited a serious imbalance in the skills levels in the country (DoL, 2001). Blacks represent the population group that has been most challenged in this regard. Redress is one of the principles of the government, and many State policies are guided by this principle. If almost four times the number of registered youth drop out of school between Grades 1 and 11 each year, then the country will continuously be challenged with inadequate skills in the labour market. This study provides one step in strengthening the policy framework on out-of-school youth by documenting their experiences and understanding some of the factors that influence the choices youth make with regard to dropping into the ETD system or the labour market.

1.7 ORGANISATION AND OVERVIEW OF CHAPTERS

Chapter One provides the context of the study by outlining the background, the purpose of the questions and the objectives of the study.

The next two chapters (Two and Three) examine the literature on issues impacting on the youth and their attempts to enter the labour market. Chapter Two looks at the theoretical perspectives while Chapter Three examines the empirical evidence. It looks at the key challenges in this regard. Issues pertaining to the nature and characteristics of their school-to-work transitions and the challenges that they face in this process have also been addressed in Chapters Two and Three.

Chapter Four summarises the methodology used in the study. It outlines the key issues relating to sampling, data collection and analysis.

Chapter Five provides the data and a descriptive account on how the youth participating in this study experience the transition to their respective career destinations.

Chapter Six provides discussions and a synthesis of the study, and finally, Chapter Seven outlines the conclusion to the study.

1.8 SUMMARY

This chapter outlines the background and rationale for the study as well as the problem addressed and the purpose of the investigation. The chapter also provides a clarification of the key concepts used in the study and presents an outline of the contents of subsequent chapters. The next chapter provides a review of related literature.

**THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES ON YOUTH DROP-OUT AND DROP-IN
SCHOOL BEHAVIOURS**

2.1 INTRODUCTION

The research problem and contextual background to the study were outlined in Chapter One. This chapter describes the theoretical literature reviewed on the dropping in and dropping out experiences of youth. The chapter thus looks at the literature related to the questions posed in the study (cf. Chapter One). In the review, particular attention was given to the context and research approach used in previous research, as well as the findings that were reported. Chapter Two discusses these findings and draws relationships and similarities to this study.

The chapter commences with a critical description of the theoretical literature on the experiences in dropping out and dropping in to school or work on the part of youth, as reported in both local and international sources. The theoretical literature in South Africa and internationally is reviewed and its implications for possible out-of-school youth experiences, policies and practices and the choice of a research design for this study are discussed.

A central argument in Chapter Two is that in recent times, the ‘school-to-work’ transition has become a challenge in both developing and developed countries. Dropping out of school is one of the characteristics of the school-to-work transition. After dropping out, some of the youth attempt either to re-enter the ETD system or to enter the labour market. The overall picture is that while some of the youth reach successful destinations in terms of labour market access after dropping out, many others do not.

The chapter commences with a theoretical perspective on youth school dropping-out/dropping-in behaviours, and then proceeds to review the relevance of these perspectives in the South African context. This follows an extensive discussion on the

various causes and consequences of dropping out of or into school. These provide a meaningful framework for the present study.

Central to the study is the human capital theory, the rational decision-making theory, the social environment model, the congruent model and how these relate to the issues of drop-out/drop-in behaviours. The chapter also evaluates these theories and models and assesses how these explain the dropping-in behaviours.

2.2. THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES ON YOUTH SCHOOL DROP-OUT/DROP-IN BEHAVIOUR

Different theoretical perspectives have been put forward to explain learner drop-out or drop-in school behaviours. These perspectives can be found not just in the human capital paradigm but also in the economic rational decision-making model, which draws attention to various cost-benefit considerations (Eckstein & Wolpin, 1999). Each of these theoretical lenses is discussed in turn below.

2.2.1. Human capital theory and issues in learner drop-out/drop-in school behaviour

Schooling, according to the human capital theory, is an investment (Patron, 2008). Schooling generates higher future income for individuals and enhances economic development in a society (McMahon, 1998; Patron, 2008).

The decision to attend (or drop-into) school is often taken in anticipation of educational benefits. McMahon (1998) categorises returns to education as monetary and non-monetary, as well as private and social. Wages are the direct private and monetary returns from education, but non-monetary private returns, according to Patron (2008), include health effects, human capital produced at home, efficient household management, lifelong adaptation, continued learning at home, motivational attributes and non-monetary job satisfaction.

By contrast, Carlson (2002) identifies two monetary social benefits: effects on growth in gross domestic product, and effects on the earning of others, in terms of making them more productive. Non-monetary social benefits are linked to altruistic characteristics such as the gains from living in an educated society (lower crime rates, poverty reduction, democratic stability, and better citizenship) (Carlson, 2002).

Early primary- and secondary school drop-outs are widespread, not just in developing nations but also in developed societies (Hanuskek, Lavy, & Hitomi, 2006; Lavado & Gallegos, 2005; Thomas, Webber, & Walton, 2002; Peraita & Pastor, 2000). In terms of the human capital theory, the phenomenon of early drop-out can be explained as a consequence of the perceived absence or insignificance of the benefits to be derived from schooling, monetary or non-monetary, private or social.

However, the idea that a learner thinks in terms of these benefits upon enrolling at school has been questioned. As in Manski (1989), the learner initially enrolls without knowing how far he/she will progress inside the school system. Patron (2008) states that a learner's progress through the school system is not straightforward as it depends on several systemic factors, many of which lie outside the learner's control. Patron (2008) states that three of these factors include (a) the level of the qualification, (b) the probability of repetition, and (c) the time horizon of the decision-maker.

But some factors might also reside at the household level. Moser (1996) asserts that although education is a household investment that is often protected from external shocks (Moser, 1996; Hunter & May, 2002), the ability of a household to sustain this long-term investment may be hampered by short- and intermediate-term economic difficulties and labour demands. An adolescent's unwanted pregnancy not only endangers the long-term investment made in a daughter's education (NRC, 1993), but also creates additional financial strain that poor households may be unable to handle.

In this study, 'Human Capital' refers to the properties of an individual's knowledge and skills that are derived from education, training and experience. The development of individuals as human capital has the following benefits:

- a) The contribution they can make to society by virtue of being educated;
- b) The contribution made, by their being educated and therefore employed or employable individuals, to their immediate environment (themselves and their families) ;
- c) Their contribution to the global competitiveness of their country. A country with high levels of economically active people gives individuals broader chances of employment.

There is, however, a Marxist view of human capital theory, which argues that the human capital paradigm tends to reduce people into commodities. While the argument has some basis in truth, there are arguably also the individual and governance aspects that need to be considered. While employment benefits both society and government, the association of higher education achievement and higher income benefits the individual (McMahon, 1998 & Patron, 2008).

The phenomenon of young people dropping out of school affects government, individuals, societies and the labour market. The effects of dropping out are not only financial but also social. Dropping out challenges self-sufficiency, self esteem, and the ability to make 'educated choices' (knowing what options an individual has).

The government invests in education in the country. There has to be a return on investment so that reinvestment can happen. When a young person drops out of school, employability becomes a challenge for the individual, and thus less economic participation occurs. This affects the taxes that the individual might have had to contribute to the state and ultimately represents no return on investment for the government.

Human capital is understood in two ways. One is the aspect of humans as labour (for production) and secondly seeing humans possessing capital like knowledge, skills,

competency and experience (Kwon, 2009). The premise of the study is centred on human capital as possessing skills and knowledge that assist them in attaining positive destinations, employment opportunities, improved earning power, and social participation, rather than on people as commodities.

The above reflection for learner drop-out from/drop-into school offered by the human capital theory is, however, incomplete. Looking at other models and theories provides a more holistic picture (see section 2.2.5.).

2.2.2. Rational decision-making theory and issues in learner drop-out/drop-in behaviours

An alternative explanation of the human capital proposition can be found in economics literature states that dropping out of and dropping into school are largely the result of a rational decision. Individuals consider the benefits and costs of continuing in school (i.e. continuing and completing their high school education), versus leaving school before this achievement.

In one model espoused by Oreopoulos, Page, & Stevens (2003), individuals consider dropping out or in within the context of several factors. To Eckstein and Wolpin, three of these factors are: (a) academic performance, (b) expectations about the benefits accruing from completing high school, and (c) local work opportunities. Within the context of academic performance, an individual considers, for instance, whether he/she has poor or good academic grades, but in terms of expected benefits and labour market opportunities. The decision is weighted in terms of whether the benefits and/or work-related opportunities are low or high (Raymond, 2008). Eckstein and Wolpin contend that the ultimate weighting of each of these issues leads to a rational decision about whether to stay in school or quit (Eckstein & Wolpin, 2003).

Oreopoulos *et al* (2003) developed a rational decision-making model that included factors other than those put forward by Eckstein and Wolpin. According to them, the

decision to drop out of or drop into school is based on two key aspects: (a) the personal life of the individual, and (b) his/her family background. Their thesis is that a young person from a family with certain socioeconomic and demographic characteristics such as (a) a single-parent household, (b) a low-income family, and (c) parents without high school education, has a much greater likelihood of dropping out of school than one from an affluent family structure without these characteristics.

There are criticisms of the rational decision-making model. Raymond (2008) asserts that the rational decision-making models make two implicit assumptions: that there is (a) perfect information and (b) perfect credit markets. But neither of these is necessarily the case. A lack of information leads to erroneous evaluation of the decision of the net benefits of graduating, or not graduating, from high school. Raymond maintains that as individuals acquire new information about the benefits and costs of schooling, they have the option to reconsider their decision either to remain out of or to return to school.

But access to information can be problematic. Over the last two decades, the findings of a considerable number of studies add support to the proposition that, while controlling for a wide range of socioeconomic factors, access to information is strongly associated with an individual's level of education (Bair, 2004; US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2002). In their study of inter-district mobility, Greenberg and McCall (in Brown, 2008) reported that the more educated an individual is, the higher his/her probability of finding information about job prospects or education prospects in other schools. Levels of education mediate access to information.

Clark (1992) arrived at a conclusion similar to that of Greenberg and McCall above but projects a more general stance. He notes, '...the higher the level of education of an individual or household, the greater the likelihood of access to information about a place (or school) to which to migrate. This is true in the United States... true of Western Europe and may hold for lesser-developed countries as well'. Similarly, Greenwood (1998) posits that both employment information and job opportunities increase with increased education. Each of these factors in turn tends to increase the likelihood that an individual will return to school.

In terms of schooling, individuals acquire new information and use it to update their evaluation of the net benefits from schooling (Raymond, 2008). 'New information may pertain to the earnings a high school drop-out gives up to attend school (the opportunity cost), the earnings advantage a high school graduate has (the benefits), the relative instability of employment for a drop-out versus a graduate (the expected benefits), or preferences about a school to attend (the benefits)' (Raymond, 2008:13). But whether or not school drop-outs (or drop-ins) have access to the kind of information that would allow them to make rational decisions remains an open question.

It may be necessary to question the notion of rationality itself. Both the human capital and rational decision-making models have indicated that there are benefits to acquiring an education. In terms of drop-outs, then, a pertinent question is: are drop-outs or early school-leavers from the education system irrational, ill-informed, or poorly advised? There are two debates around this question, which occur from different perspectives.

One of these debates answers the question in the affirmative. The argument is that the decision to drop out of school reflects irrationality, and must have been made by an ill-informed and poorly advised individual. Those who hold this view say that the monetary and non-monetary as well as the private and social benefits should be sufficient motivation for the individual to pursue education (McMahon, 1998). The contrary argument is that systemic inefficiencies - which create underperformance in the education sector as reflected in high repetition rates and the poor quality of education - make the decision to drop out early, perfectly rational (Patron, 2008). This debate makes quality and efficacy in the provision of the service crucial to an individual's decisions.

What the latter argument does is to draw attention to the environment or context in which education is provided. It implies that rationality does not have to be based on the perceived benefits from education but might be based also on the perceived chances of succeeding in the system. This last consideration draws attention to

another factor: the nature of the learner cohort entering the school system. To Sautu (1999), consideration of the nature of the learner group is essential as it shapes system efficacy aspects: repetition rates, pass rates and so on. All of this suggests that evaluating the drop-out/drop-in decision is not straightforward, and that the rational explanation itself is incomplete.

2.2.3. Social environment model and issues in learner drop-out/drop-in behaviours

In contrast to the rational decision-making model, the social environment model uses the social environment theory to explain the relationship between the drop-out behaviour of a learner and the social ecology of the classroom (Darkenwald & Gavin, 1987). According to this perspective, discrepancies between the learners' expectations of the school or classroom environment and their actual experiences in that environment promote dissatisfaction (Darkenwald & Gavin, 1987). When a learner drops out of school, it merely reflects this discrepancy: expectation and actual experience are different.

The social environment model provides an alternative explanation to the drop-out phenomenon as it draws attention to both the school or systemic aspect and the learner aspect. Both the school and the learner have expectations of each other, and the early exit from the school system may reflect a breakdown in expectations on either or both sides.

Studies using this perspective measure expectations and actual classroom experiences using several surveys which analyse discrepancy scores, using t-tests and multiple regression (Darkenwald & Gavin, 1987). In one study in North America, Darkenwald and Gavin (1987) found that drop-outs expect a classroom environment characterised by less social involvement with other learners. Witte (1996) found in a European sample that three forces prompt school attendance among learners: (a) the social relations provided in the school environment, (b) interest in academic work, and (c) the prospect of gaining a qualification.

2.2.4. The congruence model and issues in learner drop-out/drop-in behaviours

The congruence model is based on self-theory. A key proponent of this model is Boshier (1973), who states that the congruence model rejects single variables as explanations for learner participation in school or their early drop-out from the school system. Multiple explanations are more plausible as dropping out is a complex social phenomenon.

The congruence model says that participation is a function of the dialectic between oneself and the learning environment of an institution. Similarly, dropping out is a function of the dialectic between the intra-self and the self-versus-others perspective. Any incongruence between these aspects, whether it is the self-institution incongruence, or the intra-self and self-versus-others incongruence, can lead to dropping out or non-participation. These therefore suggest that social, psychological and institutional variables typically studied in drop-out research merely mediate the congruence versus drop-out relationship (Boshier, 1973).

One could argue that the congruence model is an attempt to bring together the previous models discussed above. Patron's (2008) theorisation, which explains learner drop-out or return to school in terms of learner factors and systemic factors, fits well within the congruence model. According to Patron (2008), the drop-out causal factors which emanate from learners are subjective. These causal factors can be categorised into two groups: (a) information/valuation problems, and (b) short-termism.

Information/valuation problems are reflected where a learner is ill-informed about the value of remaining in school, or where he/she has low expectations about the value of education itself (Patron, 2008). By contrast, an illustration of short-termism is where a learner develops low education aspirations and an interest in immediate rewards: the individual is too anxious or too short-sighted, and so perceives that the

time horizon for staying in school is long (Patron, 2008; Brown, 2008b). Where either or both of these situations manifests, there is sufficient internal motivation within the individual to drop out of school.

The other set of factors within Patron's (2008) theorisation relates to systemic factors. Systemic factors lie outside the learners' control. Examples of systemic factors commonly cited in the school drop-out literature are (a) poor quality education, (b) under-qualified teachers or a teacher shortage, (c) an undemocratic school environment, (d) violence in school, and (e) high repetition rates (Patron, 2008; Brown, 2008b). The thrust of the argument in these sources is that the prevalence of these conditions in school increases a learner's drop-out chances due to the increase in the uncertainty of the education investment.

2.2.5. A brief evaluation of the theoretical models and issues in the drop-out's decision to drop back into school

The theoretical models discussed above are not complete in their explanations of why some learners drop out of or drop into school. A combination of these models provides a more holistic picture. Implicit in the learner vs. systemic factor theorisation above is that the absence of the negative learner and systemic conditions might increase the chances of learners' persisting in school. Also these perspectives do not take into account that dropping out or dropping in behaviours are conditional: certain conditions must be in place if learners are to drop in.

In terms of the rational decision-making model, it is evident that as drop-outs acquire new information about the benefits and costs of schooling, they may reconsider their decision and decide to return to school (Raymond, 2008). The same can be said about individuals who dropped out of school to work because of borrowing constraints: the rational decision model theorises that once this individual builds up his/her credit, he/she may decide to return to school (Eckstein & Wolpin, 1999). Drop-outs are often in a position to reconsider their past decision and even reverse it (Raymond, 2008). What the rational decision-making model argues

therefore is that the individual may leave school without graduating and may later return to school as an outcome of having new information or new financial resources (Raymond, 2008). However, the approach lacks in its assumption that all learners make rational decisions regarding their education.

The social environment model positions the debate of dropping out or re-entry into the education system within the interplay of the individual and larger societal factors such as conditions in the home, or in the school, or financial considerations. The merit in this approach is that it recognises the agency that informs the decisions that individuals make in re-negotiating their way back into school or the work environment.

The human capital model suggests that education is an investment that learners should subscribe to. Whilst education is an investment, we need to ensure that learners follow learning pathways that ensure school completion and entry into streams that are in demand in the industry. This approach does not take into account that other factors influence learners' likelihood of attaining employment even if they are educated.

The theoretical models discussed above can be invoked for explanations regarding understanding not merely the causes of cases of drop-out but also the decisions to drop in, and the factors that make these decisions feasible for the learner. As stated earlier, the congruence model arguably brings together the underpinnings of the human capital theory, the rational-decision making theory and the social environment model.

2.3. APPLICATION OF THE THEORETICAL MODELS TO THE SOUTH AFRICAN SITUATION

The situation regarding school enrolment in South Africa has been documented (DoE, 2006). However, the framework leading to an understanding of the high drop-

out rate and/or return to school rate has not yet been fully developed. For instance, an official report by the CREATE study group (Motala et al, 2007) concluded that the (drop-out) decision process involves personal characteristics as well as those of students' environment. Majority of those youth who drop-out come from low-income families and those with low-education capital.

The above remarks give a sense of the learner cohort from whom the group of those who return to school comes. In the Grade R-12 school system in South Africa, the drop-out/drop-in situation has been shown to be considerable after completion of the nine years of compulsory schooling (Motala et al, 2007).

But systemic repetition is prevalent at different Grades in the system. Firstly, as Crouch (2005) indicates, there is systematic over-enrolment (due to the lack of Early Childhood Development as well as (probably) lax enforcement of age norms in the schools frequented by the poor) of the poorest groups in the early grades, resulting in a lot of repetition in Grade 1. Secondly, the tendency for a bottleneck to develop in Grade 10, due probably to enforced repetition in an attempt to control the flow to Grade 12, is common to all income groups (rich and poor) (Crouch, 2005). Even schools serving the richest segments of the population appear to be holding children back in Grade 10. As both the rational decision-making and the congruence models indicate, repetition reflects systemic failure in the school system and it provides one explanation for drop-out rates.

Patron (2008) has identified the relationship between school repetition and dropping out. The Ministerial Committee (2007) suggests that failure in schooling is an important contributory factor in the occurrence of dropping out. Repeaters are more likely to drop out than non-repeaters (Crouch, 2005; Patron, 2008; Ministerial Committee, 2007). In terms of the congruence model, this suggests that a record of failure undermines a learner's expectations. Repetition rates also severely affect other systemic indicators. Patron (2008) also found that they affect the rates of on-time completion. Crouch (2005) calculated that about 60 per cent of learners reach Grade 12 or its equivalent in Further Education and Training, which suggests that 40 per cent do not. The repeaters will not complete their level on time.

Besides this, in South Africa there is also a general perception that the quality of education in primary and secondary schools has been deteriorating. This is particularly the case in schools serving the lower and working class families, many of whom are in rural communities. Following the democratic transformation in governance, the massification of primary and secondary education – without the provision of adequate human and physical resources – has led to a deterioration in quality, and as a consequence has also led to the deterioration of performance indicators: i.e. repetition and completion rates (ESAR, 2000; Hanushek, 2003; SAHRW, 2006; Motala et al, 2007; Mgwangqa & Lawrence, 2008). The congruence model indicates that these two factors not only push the individuals out of school but also discourage re-entry.

Furthermore, the massification of primary and secondary school education also implies an increase in the diversity of the learner population in the schools. Children from Black, coloured, white and Indian ethnic groups participate in the different levels of the school system. There is a high participation rate among learners from the formerly disadvantaged groups (Grant & Hallman, 2006). At present, about one half of the learners in primary and secondary schools come from unfavourable backgrounds. Performance indicators for the disadvantaged learners are significantly worse than those for the others (Crouch, 2005; Grant & Hallman, 2006). Bucheli and Casacuberta (1999) found that the probability of dropping out is associated with a low socioeconomic background. Academic performance varies with income groups and dropping out further depresses the lower income groups. As the congruence model suggests, the above economic factors are related to learner factors, and they have implications for the chance of drop-outs from lower income groups to re-enter schools.

Crouch (2005) states that the participants in his research who have dropped out of school have signalled why they dropped out. In terms of the congruence model, many of these reasons might be classified as systemic on the one hand and personal on the other hand. Among 16- to 18-year-olds (or Grade 10s), Crouch found that the following facts stand out. Some 6% to 8% of the age group is affected by *fees*. No other factor really stands out as importantly affecting the age group as a whole, and

even this one factor (fees) is relatively small in its effect on the *whole* age group. As a factor affecting the drop-outs, a perception that education is uninteresting affects a rather large proportion of the boys (17%), and pregnancy, marriage, or family concerns affect a very large percentage of the girls (13% + 3% + 10% = 26%). The difference between male and female drop-outs finding education useless or uninteresting is notable.

As stated above, a systemic factor is related to fees. When a learner drops out of school because of fees, this points to two factors: the socioeconomic background of the individual, and that the chances of the individual's dropping back into school are few. A learner has a small chance of dropping back into school after problems with fees cause him/her to drop-out. In terms of the school-to-work transition, school fees are critical mediators (du Toit, 2005).

Even though few gender differences have been found in educational attainment (Case & Deaton, 1999; Lam, 1999; UNDFW, 2000), some South African researchers have given attention to the factors associated with female drop-outs (Fuller & Liang, 1999; Hunter & May, 2002). These studies found that there was an association between dropping out and a household's economic resources, its social structure, and its labour demands.

Both the human capital and rational decision-making models state that learners make rational decisions about continuing or re-entering school (Patron, 2008). The fact that Crouch found that a lack of interest in education triggered some learners to drop out may support this notion. It may be considered perfectly rational for a learner to exit the school system if he/she does not have the motivation to continue. The lack of interest may be related to several factors, including: (a) the poor quality of the education, (b) the probability of repetition, (c) the relevance of the education to the labour market requirements, (d) previous achievements and/or (e) the expected income differential (Patron, 2008; Sautu, 1999; Heckman & Masterov, 2004). These factors cannot be ruled out of consideration. But rationality is subjective, and what seems rational may just be an outcome of a learner's suffering from an information-valuation problem or mere short-termism.

Apart from Crouch's (2005) work, the Human Rights Watch Report (SAHRC, 2006) refers to critical socioeconomic issues leading to rural school drop-outs. Most are linked to poverty: hunger, leading to petty criminal offences; a lack of toilets, leading to illness, and even death, from cholera; and a lack of infrastructure, leading to poor learning environments and failures (Mgwangqa & Lawrence, 2008). The Nelson Mandela Foundation study (NMF, 2005) focused on the Eastern Cape, KwaZulu-Natal and Limpopo provinces. The study, which included 144 primary schools, found that rural education and its potential for development is deeply compromised by poverty. Even though, in terms of education policy provisions, learners should not be excluded because of their inability to pay fees or buy uniforms, these factors often lead to a sense of humiliation among learners and parents, and a loss of motivation to continue schooling (Mgwangqa & Lawrence, 2008).

Motivation indeed appears to be a significant factor in Mgwangqa's study. She shows how the motivation to learn, or to continue schooling, can be seriously affected not only by embarrassment caused by family poverty, but also by a number of other variables such as troubled family/teacher relationships, peer influence, and health- and curriculum-related issues (Mgwangqa & Lawrence, 2008).

Overall, the models above provide a framework in which to evaluate the drop-out and drop-in behaviours of learners. Evidently, the drop-out or drop-in situation in schools in South Africa cannot be attributed to any one factor. All in all, the congruence model provides a fairly holistic way of viewing the drop-out/drop-in phenomenon in the country.

The next section reviews the empirical evidence on the phenomenon of school drop-outs and drop-ins.