Conceptualization of the Premature School Exit Phenomenon in Mashonaland Region of Zimbabwe: The Voice of Early School Leavers

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Abstract

School dropout is a major cause of attrition in schools globally, and its implications could be far-reaching. Evidence from previous studies has shown that the voice of those who have lived experiences of the phenomenon is missing. The present study investigated early school leavers' (EScLs) conceptualisation of school dropout from a Zimbabwean perspective. Twenty-two EScLs from three sites in Zimbabwe participated in the study. The data collection strategies included focus group discussions, interviews, and life-story narratives. The findings indicated the need for an expanded definition of school dropout that goes beyond physical withdrawal from school. School dropout was understood as a traumatic personal experience, with psychological implications. It entailed deprivation of a meaningful future, retrieval of painful memories of school life and a reflection of unresolved inequity in the education system. School policies and practices in the Zimbabwean education system should, thus, be sensitive to equity needs and provide professional counselling support to those affected and their families. Furthermore, skilled and emotionally stable personnel should be responsible for the country's education system and economy.

Keywords: academic achievement, experience, school dropout, deprivation, inequity

There is compelling evidence that premature school exit is a global challenge (Ajaja, 2012; Patrick, 2008). An important observation is that since the 20th century, school completion rates have shown a general improvement and risen to 89.9% (Bowers, Sprott, & Taff, 2013). However, with such high levels of school completion rates, premature school exit is still a problem for most education systems. In the United States of America (USA) premature school exit is a crisis (Iachini, Buettner, Anderson-Butcher, & Reno, 2013) and "up to 50% of learners who enroll in Grade 9 in some schools and communities in the US / California fail to graduate" (Rumberger & Lim, 2008, p. 1). Reasons vary from disability and poverty to race-related issues (Rumberger & Lim, 2008). Australia observed that schooling has not been addressing the needs of learners, particularly the non-university bound ones (Ramsay, 2008). As a result, 30% of learners in Australia drop out before completing Grade 12 (Ramsay, 2008; Rumberger, 2004). In sub-Saharan Africa, and South and West Asia almost one in three children enrolling in primary education leave school before completion and few learners, especially girls, make it to tertiary education (United States Agency for International Development [USAID], 2011). A cross-sectional survey carried out in Uganda revealed premature school exit rates are as high as nearly 50% of enrollments in the primary school sector and girls are the majority (Muwagga, Itaaga, & Wafula, 2013). The Kenyan government enunciated a policy of subsidised day secondary education for its learners since 2008. However, learners, particularly from disadvantaged communities, still face equity challenges leading to premature school exit because of low household income (Muwagga et al., 2013; Ndolo & Simatwa, 2016). Similarly, in South Africa, Brown (2010) reported that the number of youths who failed to complete high school was alarming, with 67% of them leaving school before Grade 12. Given these statistics, we observe that while many countries across the globe have made great strides in boosting enrolments in

schools, high premature school exit rates seem to be eroding these efforts, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa (Karabo & Natal, 2013). Unfortunately, a lasting solution has not yet been found (Ziomek-Daigle, 2010).

The Case of Zimbabwe

Successful completion of secondary school in Zimbabwe results in the learner attaining a General Certificate of Education Ordinary Level, commonly known as Form 4. This certificate is a four-year study starting at Form 1 through to Form 4. Outstanding Ordinary Level achievers can proceed to attain a General Certificate of Education Advanced Level, commonly known as Form 6, on successful completion of two advanced classes (Lower 6 and Upper 6; Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency, 2014). Zimbabwe inherited a British education system and so, like most European countries, it uses educational qualifications framework to rate eligibility for formal employment. In this case, Form 4 is the basic/minimum qualification for entry into either the formal job market or tertiary education besides university education. It is thus considered the door that unlocks many opportunities in life.

Zimbabwe has not been spared from the premature school exit challenge. Since its independence in 1980, the government and some organisations such as the church and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have partnered in improving education through infrastructural development, teacher training, and the provision of material resources (Shizha & Kariwo, 2011; Zengeya, 2011). Despite these initiatives, premature school exit remains a challenge facing Zimbabwe's education system. There is consistent evidence showing that both primary and secondary school learners in Zimbabwe are leaving school before completing a course. Furthermore, there is a clear pattern of a rise in percentages of early school leavers across the country (Zengeya, 2011). It started at 14% in the early 1980s. The lowest was 8% recorded in

1985, which then increased to 25% in 2004. The average dropout rate for the period 1980 to 2004 was 24%. Unusual rates were observed between Ordinary Level (Form 4) and Advanced Level (Upper 6). Ordinary Level learners who did not proceed to "A" level constituted 89% (Zengeya, 2011). In concurrence, the Zimbabwe Ministry of Education, Sport, Arts and Culture (MOESAC, 2012) reported that premature school exit in Zimbabwe was highest at secondary school level and the most affected classes were Forms 2, 3 and 4. All these levels had greater than 5% recorded early school leavers (EScLs) in the 2012 census data for education (MOESAC, 2012, 2013). In 2014, 22% of all children who entered primary school dropped out before they reached Grade 7, which is the primary school exit point in Zimbabwe. The major reasons were poverty and hunger among most Zimbabwean families (Zimbabwe Human Development Report, 2017).

Recent statistics on premature school exit rates and reasons in Zimbabwe are as follows: 46.1% school fees; 0.5% expulsion; 1.3% illness, 24.8% absconded, 12.4 % marriage, 8.3% pregnancy and 6.6% other reasons (MOESAC, 2012; Zimbabwe Human Development Report, 2017). The World Bank National Education Profile 2014 Update reports further noted that nearly 45% and 37% of female and male youth, respectively, of secondary school age, were out of school. The reason for school fees contributing the highest rate (46.1%) in the recent statistics is basically the high level of impoverishment that characterises most families in Zimbabwe (Zimbabwe Human Development Report, 2017). Due to the unstable economic situation, many parents are losing jobs. The loss of employment has had ripple effects on the Zimbabwean society, resulting in absconding from the family (24.8%), marriage (12.4%) and pregnancies (8.3%) as shown earlier. More females fall out of school and get married or fall pregnant as a

way to escape poverty (Mawere, 2012), while males may become children living on the streets or seeking menial jobs such as car washing.

Understanding Premature School Exit

Premature school exit has been defined as the ultimate withdrawal from school or an action in which a person becomes detached from a group or system, voluntarily or involuntarily (Ajaja, 2012; Brown, 2010). Le Compte and Dworkin (1991) explain it as any pupil of any age who leaves school for any reason other than death, before graduation or completion of a programme of studies and without transferring to another elementary school or simply leaving school earlier than at the expected exit point. In addition, Hess (2000) describes dropping out as a sustained period of disengagement from school and while in concurrence, several authorities elaborate that dropping out of school is not sudden. It is the result of challenging learner experiences over a long time (Doll, Eslami & Walters, 2013; Jugović, & Doolan, 2013). We sought an expanded understanding of the construct. We argue that perhaps the persistence of premature school exit on the one hand, and the endeavour to curb it, on the other hand, are influenced by how people conceptualise the construct. While most previous studies (DeVos, Strydom, Fouche, & Delport, 2011; Huberman & Miles, 2002) investigated secondary sources such as school administrators, teachers, at-risk learners, and/or families, in this study, we targeted the voices of those who had experienced the school dropout phenomenon. The population (EScLs) whom we believe could be rich in information about the way the premature school leavers appreciate their situation has not been reached. Their perspectives are, in effect ignored or missing. Existing literature is scant on perspectives of secondary school early school leavers concerning the phenomenon, particularly from an experiential point of view (Brown, 2010; Rumberger & Lim, 2008), a gap which this study aimed to fill. Research approaches used so far for the investigation of the

premature school exit problem in Zimbabwe have consisted predominantly of surveys, which seem to categorise the problem as an event (Machingambi, 2012; Mawere, 2012; Shadreck, 2013; Zengeya, 2011). There is agreement on the existence of a knowledge gap on the subject of premature school exit and on the need to minimise or stop the behaviour given its unpleasant consequences on the lives of individual victims, their families and societies (Rumberger, 2004).

Policies and Implications

Premature exit from school impacts negatively on the lives of those affected, often resulting in the disruption of important aspects of their development. Some problems related to premature school exit at secondary school level have implications for policy. Bridgeland, Dilulio, and Morison, (2006) argue, for example, that different schools have different types of learners. The principle of one size fits all does not work for diverse learners. Issues of equity and equality become critical. As a solution to premature school exit, Bridgeland et al. (2006) posit that it is important to develop options for learners that suit their environment, cultural and psychological needs, and job opportunities. They proceed to say that there is a need to set up early warning systems at schools and education offices to identify and trace absenteeism and institute strong remedial programmes.

Brower and Keller (2006) argue against threats and punishment in schools or homes as they are detrimental to personality-building. It is recommended to avoid coaxing, nagging, and cajoling because children feel threatened and incompetent. Ramsay (2008) opines that a new definition and conceptual framing that better reflects the changing complexities of a learner's needs and how schools, schooling systems, and accreditation institutions should respond to these, are urgently needed.

Learners' Psychological Wellbeing

Previous researchers concur that education is a powerful tool that unlocks opportunities for social mobility, thus building positive self-concept (Boakye-Boaten, 2010; Huang, 2011). It has always been considered as a way out of poverty. Secondary school learning is generally viewed as a source of social strength in the lives of learners, and the social opportunities one gets at this level of education cannot be duplicated elsewhere (Boakye-Boaten, 2010). Successful completion of school is, therefore, critical for socioemotional development (Adelman & Taylor, 2012). Furthermore, secondary school learners are going through adolescence, which ushers in identity formation critical for personality development (Erikson, 1968; Schultz & Schultz, 2013). As such, social networks provided by schools would help nurture learners into maturity, providing a smoother means of resolving role confusion crisis (Erikson, 1968). Leaving school prematurely at this stage would, therefore, mean disturbance of a niche of personality development and psychological wellbeing. Chugh (2011) and Mhizha and Muromo (2013) observed that while completing high school may not guarantee getting well-paying jobs, it facilitates opportunities for the development of high order thinking and problem-solving skills for operating optimally at personal and societal levels.

We note, however, that to date not much has either been documented or empirically researched regarding the relationship between premature school exit and the psychological wellbeing of learners. Brown (2010) points out that research has yet to establish whether there is a clear relationship between premature school exit and the psychological wellbeing of learners. However, research has established that people faced with challenges in life usually display a severed self-concept, low self-esteem, and reduced self-efficacy (Margolis & Mccabe, 2006).

They tend to give up on tasks quickly, believing they cannot do them, and ultimately succumb to self-fulfilling prophecies of failure (Margolis & Mccabe, 2006).

Theoretical Framework

We viewed premature school exit as a complex phenomenon resulting from cognitive, social, and environmental factors (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Tudge, 2008). In this regard, Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological theory (2005) became useful in our understanding of the phenomenon. It further guided the explanation of the relationship between the experiences of participating EScLs and the network of systems in which the learners were situated. We referred to the Systems Model, and the Process Person Context Time (PPCT) Model (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). In this theory, Bronfenbrenner (2005) suggests that children grow up in a system of social networks. The Micro-, Exo-, Meso- and Macrosystems represent contexts of development that have either a positive or a negative impact on a human's attitudes and behaviour depending on opportunities for development and challenges presented by a particular context. Bronfenbrenner (2005) argues that human development involves continual and reciprocal interaction between an individual and the environment in which he/she is situated (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994). In a symbiotic relationship like this, the two 'actors' (humans and their environment) influence each other and environmental and time changes characterise the interaction/relationship. By implication, if viewed from a genetic/bioecological/environmental perspective, the person one ultimately becomes is the result of genetic and environmental factors.

In the PPCT model, Process refers to activities that normally constitute the day-to-day life of an individual and what happens in these institutional environments, with which the individual interacts every day. It means that one's engagement in these activities shapes the

understanding of the world one lives in. The term "Person" refers to the biological and genetic aspects that make up an individual (Bronfenbrenner, 2009).

In this sense, the individual possesses emotional and mental characteristics or dispositions that make them react in certain ways to what their immediate environment may present. Context, according to Bronfenbrenner and Evans (2000) could be either a situated/physical environment (home, school, community) or non-situated such as a parent's job, social status or physical condition of a parent, which form part of the Exo system. It means that the nature and level of interaction between individuals (Person) and institutions, close (micro-) or far (Exo-, Macro-) have a bearing on how someone behaves. Lastly, Time (Chrono) in the PPCT model refers to specific historical events in a person's life, thus relating human development to the passage of time. Bronfenbrenner (2005) argues that activities/events in the different systems all happen in the context of time.

Furthermore, the effects of external issues, positive or negative (Macrosystem), such as those related to a country's economy, politics and legislature at various levels, filter through to the child who is at the receiving end (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). A case in point is Zimbabwe. The country's economy, which is currently unstable, leads to many breadwinners losing or having lost their jobs (Shizha & Kariwo, 2011), thus exposing their families to a situation/context in which resources, particularly fiscal ones, are meagre. Consequently, the parents may not be able to provide adequately for the day-to-day needs of their children. Informed by these theoretical perspectives, we believed that the EScLs' contexts could be one of the lenses we could use in the examination of the issues constituting EScLs' understanding of premature school exit and the impact of the experiences the early school leavers go through.

Bronfenbrenner's (2005) theory further describes time (Chrono system) as referring to specific historical events in a person's life, thus, relating human development to the passage of time. Activities/events in the different systems all happen in the context of time (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Tudge, 2008). We, therefore, understood from Bronfenbrenner (2005) that time regulates life. It implies that all human beings, at different points in their lives, go through some changes which re/shape their lives. These changes are sometimes unstable, unpleasant and unpredictable, for example, illness, death or relocation. In such cases, the effectiveness of proximal processes is compromised (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). The loss of a parent, for example, may leave an emotional and/or material gap in the life of the child.

Relating Bronfenbrenner's theory (2005) to our study, a breakdown in the micro-system (family, school) exposes the learner to multiple problems, premature school exit being one of them. Apart from the implication that micro-systemic breakdowns have effects across the systems, Bronfenbrenner's (2005) assertions provided a platform from which we could probe participants' views on their conceptualisation of the premature school exit phenomenon from an experiential position.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the present study was to understand how EScLs in Zimbabwe conceptualized premature school exit. Central to this study was the argument that the existing literature provides theoretical definitions of the concept (Brown, 2010). Most of the studies (Machingambi, 2012; Mawere, 2012; Shadreck, 2013; Zengeya, 2011) conducted on premature school exit have targeted secondary sources of data, which according to Huberman and Miles (2002) usually leave trails of unanswered questions and that experiencing a problem is different from imagining it. The voice of the people directly affected is glaringly missing. We believed

that those affected possess vivid memories of what they have and may still be going through, thus, giving more realistic, credible and reliable views about the phenomenon under study (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). We also assumed that more practical solutions to the school dropout problem lie with individuals experiencing the phenomenon. The conceptualisation of premature school exit seems to be viewed, largely, from an administrative point of view and its impact on the general running of schools and national budgets. The emphasis has been on understanding premature school exit as wastage of resources. Research approaches used so far for the investigation of the premature school exit problem in Zimbabwe seemed to categorise the problem as an event by simply focusing on prevalence (Zengeya, 2011). This view is worrisome because numerous global studies agree that premature school exit cannot be an event (Bridgeland et al., 2006; Burrus & Roberts, 2012; Hunt, 2008). Consequently, what has been established is that not much research has attempted to explain the intricacies of premature school exit, particularly from a qualitative perspective. Such studies are scant (Rumberger, 2004). Instead, according to Hunt (2008), existing research on premature school exit across the globe has generally focused more on the quantification of premature school exit rates. These gaps are wider in the Zimbabwean situation, hence this study.

In this study, getting the views of EScLs on the responsiveness and capacity of the systems around them, particularly with regard to the things they needed to stay at school, was critical. Gray and Hackling (2009) assert that there is a need to construct an understanding of school cultures, systems, and curricula, which promotes the wellbeing and retention of learners at school. In this regard, we hoped that this study would attempt to fill this gap by finding out from EScLs what their experiences of school culture were and how that would generate new insights on the effect that school culture had on the learners' wellbeing and sense of belonging. In the

context of this study, we hoped that participating EScLs might, thus, define school dropout in the context of experiences within the school environment as one of their "situated" contexts. Informed by these observations, we asked the following questions: What are the needs of the EScLs? What is it that the EScLs in the study believe requires redefining and new conceptual framing? What alternative arrangements in schools and the education system do they think could be considered to support positive outcomes and successful completion of secondary education by all learners?

Method

Participants

There were 22 EScLs from Zimbabwe who participated in the study. There were more females (n = 13; 59. 1%) than males (n = 9; 40.9%). The participants' ages ranged from 15 to 22 years (M = 18.59; SD = 2.06). Pertaining to dropout points of the EScLs, the majority (68. 2%) dropped out at Form 2 (Grade 9), while five (22.7%) dropped out at Form 3 (Grade 10) level, and two (9.7%) dropped out at Form 4, which is the final year of the junior secondary school level in Zimbabwe. The EScLs who participated in the study came from generally low-income families- of whom 16 (72%) were vendors. From the remainder, five (23%) were peasant farmers while one (5%) was a truck driver. The participants had attended poorly resourced schools and had dropped out of school at more or less the same grade level (Form 2).

Research Methods

Qualitative research methods were used and facilitated an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (Best, 2012; Yin, 2014). The methods included focus group discussions, semi-structured interviews, and life story writing. It entailed an in-depth exploration

and interpretation of the phenomenon from multiple and diverse perspectives of EScLs (Simons, 2009; Yin, 2014).

Interview and Life Story Protocols

The FGD protocol had ten open-ended questions that guided and generated discussion among participants. We deliberately used open-ended questions to facilitate debates, questioning, probing, and reflection among the group members (Barbour, 2007). The aim was also to allow participants to "respond to and comment on one another's contributions" (Willig, 2001, p. 29). On the other hand, the interview protocol comprised twenty questions that guided the interaction. It was, therefore, semi-structured with open-ended questions (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). This type of interview enabled the interviewer to react to and/or follow up on emerging or unfolding ideas and events. The FGD protocol and semi-structured interview questions were developed to align with the research questions in a way that elicited proper conversations. The questions were vetted and approved by the research team, proposal approval committee, and institutional ethics committee. Lastly, one volunteer participant from each site (two males and one female) wrote a story in his/her own time and pace. They submitted the stories to us in the last week of the initial fieldwork. The purpose of the life stories in this study was a means of understanding the psychology of the teller; hence, whatever was told was critical to the study (Huberman & Miles, 2002; Silverman, 2014).

Procedure

The study was carried out in Zimbabwe at three sites purposefully sampled based on homogeneity (Creswell, 2012). The distance from one site to the other, on average, is sixty kilometres. All sites share the same language (ChiShona), which is predominantly indigenous. In the three sites, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) engaged early school leavers in different

projects. We checked the National Association for Non-Governmental Organisation (NANGO) Directory to find NGOs working with early school leavers. For ethical considerations, we specifically chose organisations that were established and registered with the government and whose operations were clearly defined. Sites A, B, and C were, accordingly, chosen in terms of the context. The three sites represented urban (A), peri-urban (B) and rural (C) areas. The key criteria that guided the selection were that the participant had to have dropped out of school between Form 2 and Form 4 within the last five years from the time of the study and that they had to be interested in participating in the study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). We anticipated that a mixed sample of boys and girls would allow us to ascertain the impact of premature school exit on both groups. Individual EScLs' experiences of the school dropout phenomenon formed the unit of analysis for the study.

Targeting three sites were sufficient for saturation of opinions on the phenomenon under study (Bogdan & Biklen, 2010). It also facilitated a broader, detailed and critical examination of issues related to school dropout, as articulated by the youths growing up in Zimbabwe as a context of child development, during data analysis (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

We collected and analysed data ethically. Institutional clearance to conduct the study was granted by the ethics committee. Approvals were also granted by the Zimbabwean Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education–Research Board, and the three NGOs. We explained the purpose of the study to participants who had consented to take part. We also shared with them our endeavour to safeguard participants' rights, such as the freedom to withdraw at any point of the study. To ensure anonymity and confidentiality, each participant had a pseudonym and a code for referencing purposes.

The data were collected over six months. As shown in Table 1, there were three focus group discussions, which everyone participated in per site. Two participants from each site were selected for further participation in the semi-structured interviews and one participant per site to write his or her life story. Participation in the semi-structured interviews and life stories depended largely on active engagement during the group discussions and willingness to further share. The focus group discussions and interviews were run by two female members of the research team who spoke the participants' languages.

Table 1

Breakdown of Sample based on Site, Focus Group and Interview (N = 22)

	Number of participants	Focus group discussion	Individual semi-structured interview	Life story
Site A (Urban)	8	1 ($n = 8$)	2	1
Site B (Peri-urban)	7	1 ($n = 7$)	2	1
Site C (Rural)	7	1 ($n = 7$)	2	1
	21	3 ($N = 22$)	6	3
Note. Participants were numbered P01 to P22. Sites were coded A, B and C Life stories = LS; Focus group discussions = FG; Semi-structured interviews = In				

The three focus group discussions (FGDs) involving all participants at each site (seven each at two sites and eight at one site) took an average of one and half hours with information (data) saturation as the determining time factor (Kumar, 2014). We facilitated the group discussions in terms of asking questions and audio- recording the discussions. Six interviews, two participants from each site, explored several themes that emerged from FGDs. Follow-up questions included EScLs' conceptualisation of school life, achievements made at school and their level of involvement in school activities. Each interview lasted one hour on average. Life stories facilitated expression in an artistic way as two of the authors (EScLs) included drawing and picture pasting emphasising expressed feelings that went beyond words (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). We guided the FGDs, conducted the interviews, audio-recorded the sessions and later on,

did the analysis and interpretation of the results. Engaging in the process helped us to familiarise

ourselves with the data and understand, and pick issues emerging from the data sets faster.

Data Analyses

Thematic analysis afforded the opportunity to make several decisions, including the

determination of themes and sub-themes, while we planned the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The approach was abductive as it enabled interaction between the data sets and theory during the

analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). NVivo, which is a qualitative research software package, was

used to record, sort, and analyse the data from FGDs and interviews we had audio-recorded and

transcribed (Creswell, 2012; Hilal & Alabri, 2013). We used it to process data from the

commented transcripts and uploading the data into Microsoft Excel for the nesting of the themes

and sub-themes together with the data sources and references related to each theme and sub-

theme. NVivo facilitated analysis of two data sets (FGD, interview) at once because similar

themes emerged after establishing trends in the three data sets. NVivo first facilitated Excel

presentation showing the fine details of each participant's contribution and frequency in relation

to either the interview or FGD protocol. It also showed the source of each superordinate,

subordinate, and emergent theme. Using NVivo is a robust analytic process (Hilal & Alabri,

2013); hence, there was no need for double coding.

The written life stories were manually coded and interpreted by the research team. Reading

and re-reading the stories allowed us to pick up the codes that we then matched and slotted into

the pre-defined and other categories that emerged from interviews and FGDs. The process of

coding was dialectic and recursive. Quotes from the stories were also grouped with those from

the other data sources under sub-themes and themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). However, the

emerging sub-themes still matched those from the two protocols; therefore, they were presented

together with the other data sets. A Master Table of the various level themes was finally created to show the results of the analysis. During data presentation, the referencing for the excerpts included participant code, site and data sources.

Results

A mini-master table is presented in Table 2, showing the sub-themes developed from early school leavers' conceptualisation of the school dropout phenomenon with the aid of NVivo. Three themes emerged from the data sets collected. Based on data from the FGDs and interviews, the conceptualisation of premature school exit was reflected under three themes. The themes were deprivation, endured memories of school life, and reflections of unresolved issues of equity in the education system. Put together; it was clear that the results from the three study sites were similar in every respect. The nature of participants' experiences, of course, differed according to their contexts (rural, peri-urban and urban) but ultimately issues raised which forms the three themes, remained the same in every respect. Participants' age range (15-22 years) did not show any significant influence on the results. Experiences shared by all participants were similar, cutting across ages.

Table 2

NVivo Mini Master Table of Themes and Sub-Themes

Theme	Descriptive Comments	Conceptual Comments
Understanding the school dropout phenomenon in Zimbabwe from the perspectives of early school leavers		
1. **The conceptualisation of school dropout:** How do early school leavers in Zimbabwe conceptualise school dropout?		
A. Deprivation: Early School Leavers felt they were short changed on benefits below		
Certification for employment	Secondary schooling opens doors to employment so dropping out literally closes opportunities for employment	Education is a way out of poverty
Foundation for life	Secondary school viewed as a critical stage where focused life begins	Attitude: Education is life
Harbinger of maturity	Secondary school life explained as a signal for the approach of a significant stage like adulthood	Autonomy Problem–solving capacity (cognitive maturity)
Peer grouping (social benefits role of peer group)	Secondary school learners enjoy social relationships, mixing	Subjective Norm – Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB)
The identity formation stage	Begin to understand who they are	Formation of clearer self-concept/self-confidence Identity issues – Erikson's 5th stage of psychosocial development (1968)
B. Endured memories of school life		
Achievements made in secondary school life: Extracts are outlined below:		
Excelling in co-curricular activities	Strong preference for co-curricular activities	Attitude towards curriculum Selective participation based on interest/ability
Good grades	Portrayed by doing very well in school	Motivation form good school performance leading to enhanced self-esteem
Negative feelings associated with school: Extracts are outlined below.		
Feeling of being a social misfit (systemic)	Their status has changed since they no longer belong to the same category as peers in school	Damage to self-concept
Helplessness/despair, low self-esteem	Giving in to a situation or circumstance	Damaged self-concept
Reminder of orphanhood (sense of loss)	Lamenting over loss of parent (s) and sees problem as growing bigger	Bleak future, feeling of regret, helplessness and meaningless of life (Pathway model)
Theme	**Descriptive Comments**	**Conceptual Comments**
Self-fulfilling prophecy	Not putting effort and accepting defeat. Playing to the tune of failure	Giving up, acceptance of worthlessness (Low self-esteem)
Self-pity/inadequacy, hurt/pain	Accepting defeat, looking down upon self and seeing self as worthless	Damaged Self-concept

Comparison with other children	Always looking at others with envy and expressing regret about own situation	Low self-esteem/self-efficacy
Pleasure and displeasure in secondary school Extracts are outlined below.		
Pleasures: Theme for categorical management of the emergent extracts		
Co-curricular activities	Co-curricular activities were more preferred as providing pleasure with less mental strain	Boosting self-concept/self-efficacy
Diversity of subjects (systemic)	Secondary school provides a wide range of subjects which is good as there is something for everyone	Self-confidence and hope boosted
Sexual relations	At secondary school relations between opposite sex develops and there is urge to experiment	Adolescent stage showing up
Displeasures: Theme for categorical management of the emergent extracts		
Bullying and Coercion (systemic)	Use of force on other learners by older learners and/or teachers	Emotional disturbance, involuntary submission, reduced self-concept
Humiliation from non-payment of fees (systemic)	Being laughed at, ridiculed, pointed at, being asked to leave the classroom and go home to fetch fees	Destruction of self- esteem, emotionally torn
Intimidation, punishment and threats from teachers (systemic)	Harsh treatment by teachers, scolding, shouting abusive language	Emotional disturbance Destroyed Self-concept
Non-attendance of teachers (systemic)	High absenteeism of teachers	Behaviour problems
C. Equality versus Equity (systemic)		
Political, economic and social problems	Circumstances surrounding life coming from different angles	Impact of physical and social environments Bio-ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 2005)
Induced poverty	Issues related to inheritance, greedy leading to deprivation coming out	Emotional disturbance, cultural practices
Unemployment	Limited or no opportunities for jobs	Compromised self- concept

Note. Sample size = 22.

Premature School Exit as Deprivation

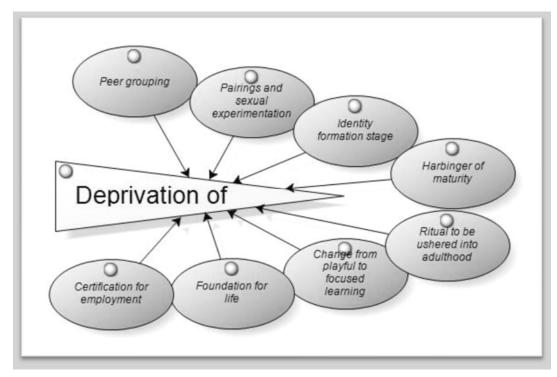The data under this theme were based on responses from twenty-two EScLs who participated in three FGDs and six EScLs who were interviewed. Early school leavers conceptualised premature school exit as deprivation of a meaningful future. Saunders, Naidoo, and Griffith (2008) described deprivation as a lack of socially perceived necessities. It encompasses life-threatening living conditions, which can be environmental, social or emotional.

According to Saunders et al. (2008), the construct had emerged as a way of identifying who has been deprived of what the community regarded as the essentials of life. Summarised in Figure 1 are the issues raised by participants, including their meaning of premature school exit as embodied in the sense of deprivation.

Figure 1

Understanding School Dropout as Deprivation

Note. The figure depicts the various aspects of deprivation identified by the early school leavers.

As depicted in Figure 1, the study results revealed that EScLs perceived premature school exit as a form of deprivation of certification for employment. Five participants out of the six interviewed, and eight members from FGDs concurred that attainment of a certificate upon completion of Form 4 was hailed as important for securing a job. The main argument presented by EScLs was that lower levels of education like Grade 7 (Zimbabwe Primary school exit class)

cannot qualify someone for employment. Leaving school prematurely, therefore, deprived them of a suitable qualification to compete on the job market as expressed by two participants during interviews and the majority of those who spoke during FGDs (three from Site B; three from Site C and five from Site A). Participants emphasised school as a key source of livelihood and failure to get a certificate at a secondary school level pointed to the loss of opportunities to climb the social ladder. Participant 02 (P02) and participant 09 (P09) said respectively:

> A person without high school certificate will never get a better job (P02/A/In>).
>
> If you complete school, you have better chances especially in this poor economy of ours which now needs educated people there are no companies taking people without education, it is not possible. It now needs you to have your papers (P09/B/In>).

Participants also indicated that they understood premature school exit as deprivation of a foundation for life. Results showed that deprivation of certification for employment created a weak foundation for adult life as was highlighted by the three volunteer story writers. All three FGDs also showed points raised about deprivation of opportunities for employment. Secondary school level was described as a period of preparation for later/adult life, the deprivation of which results in the loss of a well-prepared life. P13 said: "Secondary school hey, is a foundation for life because you will now know what you want to do in the future …" (P13/B/FG.>).

P 20 added that: "sometimes at secondary school, you may learn proper habits or moral uprightness and how to relate with others so that you live in harmony with other people" (P20/C/In>).

P20 showed that secondary school life has social benefits. It helps build societal values. Four EScLs, one from Site B and three from Site C, expressed that secondary school education was significantly higher and therefore more influential in determining one's social status than

primary school education. Succinctly, the EScLs perceived dropping out mostly at Form 2 as deprivation of a stage in their life to prepare for their future. This issue generated intense discussion in all three groups. Eighteen participants said something related to what they regretted as having missed out in life so far because of premature school exit. Two excerpts confirmed this view: "Parents will tell you that at, Form 2, you can now read, so give chance to your sibling" (P01/A/In>).

P21/C/In> implicitly confirmed this: "Some parents say that at least you have tested secondary school; you know what it is like so because of money you have to drop out. It is not like you did Grade 7 only, you can look for a simple job or buy and sell to help us" P21/C/In>.

Secondary school completion was viewed as the harbinger of maturity needed to access adulthood. The EScLs reiterated that maturity begins and is moulded in secondary school. Leaving school prematurely at such a critical stage, thus, meant severance of the identity formation processes. It is at this stage that EScLs believed a person began to realise his/her potential, including life goals. Many participants (seventeen), particularly in FGDs, had a lot to say about experiences of teenage. A few excerpts are cited:

> Uhm, secondary school is when you now know real things. Like for me, it's the time I begin to know the real person I am, I begin to mingle with others and start to know what is good and bad … (P08/A/FG>); Aah, Eeh, you begin to know the reason why you are going to school. You begin to realise your destiny, be it in sports or academic subjects, you would begin to know your potential that for example, eeh, mine is in playing the ball (P01/A/FG>); Also you can set your ambition in life, to say I want to be an engineer, scientist and a doctor; that is when it starts (P02/A/FG>).

The above statements by participants showed that understanding of life, in general, becomes clearer and the knowledge of oneself is highlighted. Consequently, premature school exit meant a disruption of a focused future for them.

Results also showed that EScLs felt that dropping out of school disturbed the formation of social relations and sexual exploration. This view is succinctly expressed by P05:

At secondary level, we start to have some feelings in our bodies and that issue of being seen as you are backward, no one wants to be associated with that because the white people say practice makes things perfect, boys and girls want to experiment. So, when you drop out, you leave all that. (P05/A/FG>)

Closely related to identity formation, pairing and sexual experimentation, participants further expressed dropping out of school as interfering with the peer grouping processes. To the EScLs, it interfered with the formation of a clear definition of peer reference groups. As expressed by one participant: "As for me, I think that there is a lot of pleasure in secondary school and when you drop out you miss all that. It is time to make friends" (P08/A/FG>).
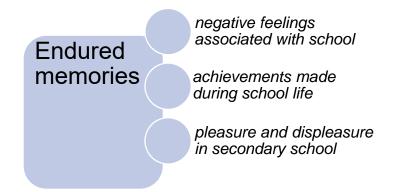
EScLs described secondary school level as a stage offering opportunities for getting out of the control of parents/adults. One participant (P20) in an interview expressed concern over peer pressure as affecting boys especially while the three stories indicated issues related to peer pressure and experimentation with life and, as a result, tendencies to misbehave. They missed such experiences by dropping out.

Premature School Exit as an Icon of Endured Memories

This theme was derived largely from interview and focus group discussions data. Eleven responses from FGDs and two from interviews were noted. EScLs defined premature school exit as an icon that reminded them of their school days. Participants remembered both positive and

negative experiences. Positive experiences were presented as achievements made in the school, including enjoyable activities. Negative experiences, on the other hand, constituted events and activities that were unpleasant/not pleasurable. Figure 2 presents the three elements as shared by participants.

Figure 2

Summary Representation of EScLs' Endured Memories

Participants expressed that talking about premature school exit, on the one hand, made them realise how much they were missing, yet, on the other hand, brought about some kind of therapy as they flashed back on achievements made. Therapy was generated from moments of "re-living the good old days," as they narrated their stories. EScLs expressed that they felt better as they assured themselves that at least they achieved in life at some point. Although the term achievement implies positive development, the mere act of remembering the achievements made in secondary school was conceptualised as a source of aversive stimuli. From all three data sources, the participants expressed a sense of loss as they reflected on effort and capability during their days in school. Two participants explained their success in academic work;

I was someone who was good at school (all right) (P20/C/In>). P 16 also said: Uhmmm, I passed all the nine subjects I was doing at Form 2. First-term, Form Three, I wrote my exams and passed again … even though I was not able to proceed with school, uhmm (P16/C/FG>).

Outside the classroom, two other EScLs indicated several achievements related to sports, clubs and leadership as given in the following examples:

I was appointed a peer educator. We used to go and counsel others, especially the Form 1 pupils (P02/A/In>); A-ah, I was a prefect and later appointed a vice-head girl (P13/B/In>).

EScLs cited academic achievement as a major goal in school life. The short-lived achievements had done well to boost their self-efficacy, esteem and confidence which they lost due to premature school exit. They also indicated that to a great extent, strength in academic work compensated for the material deficiencies they suffered, and it gave them some confidence to push on for some time. For example, P20 said,

… even though the situation was tough, during class, I would concentrate on school regardless of the clothes that I was a person who was good at school from Grade 1 and I would pass until I dropped out at Form 2. (P20/C/In>)

EScLs, however, intimated damage of self-determination, positive regard for self and high self-esteem harboured through premature school exit. Doing well in school was expressed in detail by two story writers as a great source of motivation and hope for a better future that was short-lived and did not yield the intended goals. It also emerged that recognition and the formation of self-identity are powerful instruments for motivation in school and life. Strong

mention of issues related to the different achievements suggested that the EScLs lost recognition, high self-esteem and the confidence they had earned in school as in P05's response:

> A-ah I achieved writing poems and drama and other things like science. Now I realise this thing of dropping out is bad, I lost the good names people were giving me (P05/A/FG>).

The EScLs used a language that showed elements of very high regard for self, high self-esteem and confidence in things they had achieved in and outside class. For example, P09 said;

> No, I never got to become a prefect but there is a topic called matrices in mathematics, I was very good in that one. … yes. I was one of those who like really wanted to get it … (yes). (P09/B/FG>)

Closely related to memories about school achievement, participants described their understanding of premature school exit through reflection of what they enjoyed and disliked. Almost everyone during FGDs at the three sites had something to share. The major finding expressed was that the EScLs were leaving school prematurely meant loss of adventure and exposure to the world of youth because secondary school learners are social beings who need interaction.

EScLs associated premature school exit with memories of experiences that were pleasurable or fun during their school days. Five females spoke more of mischief, preference for practical subjects, love for reading, showing off and social life, as experiences they enjoyed. Areas of interest for the males centred on academic subjects such as science, mathematics, a diversity of subjects, high participation in class, sexual relations, bullying and sports. Bullying was mentioned by P05, P01 and P16 (all males) as pleasurable only to perpetrators/bullies, otherwise to those who were bullied, this was displeasure. The same for mischief, EScLs explained that this

was pleasurable only to those who hated certain subjects and sought behaviours that would create opportunities to leave class and experience corporal punishment. We noted, in this instance, gender difference in what seemed to have fascinated female EScLs vis-à-vis their male counterparts in terms of choice of subjects and interests pursued outside the classroom during their short-lived stint in school. Perhaps this observation could be attributed to the traditional upbringing of children in Zimbabwe where boys were generally expected to handle more challenging subjects (Science related) and also show muscular strength (resulting in bullying in the case of this study), On the contrary, girls would usually be associated with lighter subjects on the school curriculum. Otherwise, good memories of school days shared by all participants were generally similar.

EScLs also associated premature school exit with nasty experiences during their short-lived secondary school days. Results revealed that cases of corporal punishment and punishment in general, coercion, bullying, humiliation, long distances to school, and the power that prefects seemed to possess were sources of discomfort to EScLs. Results, however, showed that in all the experiences, good or bad, participants regretted being out of school as each experience would groom them towards disciplined lives that they now missed.

School Dropout a Reflection of Unresolved Issues of Equity

The last theme evident in EScLs' understanding of premature school exit involved issues of equality versus equity. Data were derived largely from three life stories and six interviews. Little information came from FGDs. Five out of the six EScLs who participated in the interview and the three who wrote life stories raised issues, mostly personal, however, similar in nature. Such issues included orphanhood and its impact, forced early marriages, inheritance, and lack of emotional attachment. P13 and P01 in their life stories, for example, clearly lamented over the

loss of their inheritances to greedy relatives landing the participants and their siblings into induced poverty.

Equality was understood as referring to equal opportunities for all children to access school. This situation meant ensuring that schools and teachers were available, allowing all children regardless of colour, race, ethnicity, and culture to access schools. These concerns, according to participants, seemed to have been fairly addressed in Zimbabwe. Equity, on the other hand, was understood in this study as the extra effort to consider individual differences and circumstances of learners so that their needs were met proportionally to achieve equality. Participants in the study defined equity as the need for fairness and justice in issues related to the education of all children. Findings were, thus, based on such understanding of the two constructs.

The major finding under equity and equality was that, while learners in Zimbabwe have equal opportunities to go to secondary school, equity remained a challenge. Gaps existed on the social ladder with the rich and the poor distinct and far apart. EScLs expressed that those from low income earning families, which may also be child-headed or characterised by numerous orphans, generally could not afford the fees, levies, and related costs in Zimbabwean secondary schools. Results showed that cushioning strategies for learners living in difficult circumstances were inadequate to enable them to enjoy education outcomes like their counterparts from well-to-do families. One story writer said, "Remember life is like a rim and each day has its own story, it has ups and downs" (P13/B/LS>).

Early school leavers (EScLs) in the study associated premature school exit with the political, economic, and social problems in the country. Based on all data sources, the three life stories and all six interview transcripts contained issues related to hardships in all families. This was also a topical issue in the FGDs. Study results revealed that many parents and/or guardians

were incapacitated; therefore, they could not fend for their children. The reality, according to the EScLs is that consequences of the hard-economic situation had ripple effects. The first offshoot of a dwindling economy mentioned by the EScLs was unemployment. If the parent was jobless, it meant no resources to sustain the family. The situation had a bearing on families' capacitation, thus, negatively affecting resources to educate children adequately. P08 expressed such a view:

> Eeh, the issue is mostly on unemployment. Our parents are not going to work. So, when the parent is not going to work, it will affect you the child because you would not be able to go to school because there would be no money. (P08/A/FG>)

Child marriage was linked with understanding premature school exit. Results from FGDs and interviews revealed that this state was a common occurrence and mostly affected girls at secondary school-going age. Interviewed girls blamed it on the hardships that most families were going through. They indicated that in the majority of cases, the girl had no choice as her family pushed her into marriage; so, in turn, the son-in-law looked after the family. In this case, children's rights were violated. Related to the violation of children's rights emerged the issue of induced poverty. Results revealed that harsh and unfair cultural practices involving inheritance formed part of the EScLs' conceptualisation of premature school exit as expressed in the following responses:

> My father was a hard-working person. He left us his wealth, but my grandfather and his wife took it all from us and left my mother with nothing (P01 LS, p. 2>); … My relatives caused this, you see, they took all the properties, all the wealth that my father had left. He had a house, cattle and some savings at the bank (P13/B/In>).

Issues related to lack of emotional attachment; therefore, were many. In his life story, PO1, expressed:

> In life there are more than 10,000 things which are important, but there are two things which look like jewellery in our life as children, I think they are parents; without parents, we are nothing (P01/A/LS, p.4>)

> It was rare for someone to run with any problem to tell a teacher. Some of the teachers are not free to school children so this causes the relationship with teachers not to be too close (P20/C/In>).

Responses, particularly from interviews and all three life stories, showed bitterness and pain. Furthermore, EScLs expressed that premature school exit reflected the type of administration in schools. EScLs indicated that administrators and teachers, as implementers of education policies, sometimes did not declare some of the statutory instruments, especially those that spoke against certain practices in the school. EScLs pointed out that there were statutory instruments they got to know and understand when they had already left school. Had they known while in school, efforts could have been made to seek protection so that they remained in school. P 13 expressed it as such:

> … even though; school authorities know that it is unlawful to send children away from school. They are not acting in accordance with the policy because they are the ones who send children away from school (P13/B/In>).

EScLs gave examples of statutory instruments such as, Education Secretary's Circular No. 5 (Ministry of Education, 1997) and the Education Amendment Act No. 2 (Zimbabwe Ministry of Legal and Parliamentary Affairs, 2006), which clearly stipulated that no child should be sent away from school because of failure to pay fees. However, because the knowledge they had about such instruments was through "hearsay," they also had never had sight of the documents. It left them with no ground to challenge or counter the practice in schools.

Discussion

We investigated early school leavers' (EScLs) conceptualisation of school dropout from a Zimbabwean perspective. The findings suggest the need for an expanded definition of school dropout, which goes beyond physical withdrawal from school. School dropout was understood as a traumatic personal experience, with psychological implications. Understanding the premature school exit phenomenon in Zimbabwe from the perspectives of EScLs, thus, revealed several insights. Previous studies (Brown, 2010; Hess, 2000; Shizha & Kariwo, 2011) have defined premature school exit literally as withdrawal from school before the official exit grade level or failing to complete a given level of education within a school system.

The EScLs viewed premature school exit as more than the physical withdrawal from the school premises. To them, it is a personal psychological experience characterised by a deep sense of deprivation of opportunities in life, enduring memories of several losses in their lives, and a demonstration of unresolved issues of equity in society. Premature school exit, therefore, means a great loss to the affected as they carry a stigma, suffer and are likely not just to leave school prematurely but join a society in a life of socially unacceptable behaviour (Muwagga et al., 2013). Furthermore, according to EScLs, issues associated with adolescence and sexuality take their toll, and indulgence in sexual relationships characterises the stage. Quitting at secondary school level was thus conceptualised as a counter-change that happens during a major change in their development. It was understood as an interference with the process of forming sexual relations and pairing with members of the opposite sex (Harwood, Miller, & Vasta, 2008; Sang, Koros, & Bosire, 2013).

In this study, the EScLs seemed to establish a link between negative changes in life (Bronfenbrenner's [2005] Chrono system) and poor socio-emotional wellbeing. We interpreted

the EScLs' perspective, which considered premature school exit as a psychological experience rather than just a behavioural one, as a major contribution to the existing body of knowledge on premature school exit. The voices of EScLs indicated that deprivation of the opportunity to attain a secondary school certificate has been an impediment in their life. Without a Form 4 certificate, opportunities for meaningful employment are limited because secondary school education in and outside Zimbabwe is believed to open doors to the world of jobs, and mastery of problem-solving skills for day to day survival in life (Chugh, 2011; Mhizha & Muromo, 2013; Muwagga et al., 2013). Premature dropout jeopardises their future, rendering them helpless. Consequently, it implies that a youth who fails to complete secondary education starts life on a weak foundation. In this regard, participants showed a great sense of admiration for the value of completing secondary school education. This result is consistent with Ndolo and Simatwa's (2016) and Chenge, Chenge, and Maunganidze's (2017) observation that children from poor social backgrounds usually view education as a passport to a good life.

It was also evident from the study that positive memories of their school days contributed significantly to the EScLs' conceptualisation of the premature school exit construct. As they attempted to explain the construct, the EScLs, on one hand, were reminded of several achievements made both in and outside the classroom during their short-lived stint in secondary school. Leaving school prematurely, thus, meant deprivation of an opportunity to celebrate achievements made. It was evident from the EScLs' stories that instead of deriving pleasure from these memories, they had endured some memories since they left school because the achievements reminded them of how much they were missing in their lives after prematurely leaving school. They, thus, understood it as a loss as they looked back and realised there were unfulfilled ambitions. This view was evident in the EScLs' expressions, which denoted stress,

self-pity, isolation, low self-esteem and poor self-concept, lack of confidence, loss of focus, and direction (Marsh & Martin, 2011). To them, they had lost education, which, Bridgeland et al. (2006) argue, facilitates all-round life, yet they remained resilient as they made efforts to engage themselves with NGOs in various activities. To this end, Zaff, Pufall, Anderson, McClay, and Maharaj (2014) concluded from a study on premature school exit prevention that students who left school prematurely had the strength to cope in hard contexts and were much more resilient than how current researches portray them or imply.

Furthermore, hearing the words premature school exit also triggered memories of negative experiences, such as insensitive family cultural practices, harsh school policies and practices, which characterised their school life. These are characteristics of the Macro and Meso systems, though operating from a distance, negatively impacting the child's life (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). Deprivation, for example, triggered by the loss of a significant person in the EScL's life, provides a lens not only for analysing the conceptualisation of school dropout among Zimbabwean learners, but touches on debates relating to issues of Brofenbrenner's (2005) Macrosystem, such as inheritance, children's rights, and child protection, globally. Again, such deprivation created a gap in parental involvement at school and as Burrus and Roberts (2012) and Bridgeland et al. (2006) claim; learners drop out due to lack of interest in school, resulting from lack of parental supervision. The study, thus, establishes that EScLs continue to bear vivid memories of their former school life, and talk about both good and bad experiences, which trigger unpleasant feelings, such as helplessness, hopelessness, defeat, self-pity, inadequacy, hurt, low self-esteem, and feelings of being a social misfit (Adelman & Taylor, 2012; Frank, 2011; Marsh & Martin, 2011; Mcleod, 2008). The summary of all these feelings, according to the findings, is a hard life and vulnerability. It was clear from the data that missing secondary

school exposure was painful. Even though some experiences in the study seemed bad, EScLs believed such would still be more bearable than life out of school, which they currently experienced.

From the EScLs' perspectives, we also noted that issues of recognition and identity are real in adolescence. Unfortunately, out of all these successes, what remained for the EScLs were enduring memories that seemed to haunt them in the form of regrets and heuristics of "what if …" and "what could have been." The memories that the EScLs endured were initially a source of motivation to improve themselves, which, unfortunately, they did not realise. Instead, the achievements seem to have now become a source of an aversive stimulus, because their dreams remained incomplete and left them in a quandary.

Concerning the issue of equity, the data confirmed Gray and Hackling's (2009) finding that learners who leave school prematurely are predominantly those already suffering a disadvantage. The EScLs were predominantly from impoverishment as indicated by the low-income status of their families. Ziomek-Daigle (2010) opines that issues related to poverty are correlated with school dropout, particularly in developing countries. In the Mashonaland region of Zimbabwe where the study was conducted, property grabbing by relatives emerged as prevalent despite stipulations of the law regarding inheritance as enshrined in the Deceased Estates Succession Act (Zimbabwean Government, Act No. 16 of 1973 as amended through Act No. 6 of 1997; Chap. 6:02; n. d.). While the Act is very clear on procedures on the distribution of the deceased's estate, the tradition seems to override some laws, thus, infringing on the rights of children.

It also emerged from the results that the various support systems have not been able to address issues of equity, which would enable learners from disadvantaged social backgrounds to enjoy opportunities to exploit their potentials and self-actualise like their counterparts from

stable and/or affluent social backgrounds. This gap, therefore, seems to contribute towards the creation of the school dropout phenomenon. Relatedly, inequity still needs to be addressed because some schools charge exorbitant fees, which the orphaned and vulnerable children cannot afford. It means the proportional allocation of resources to cushion the disadvantaged has not been significantly addressed; hence, many such learners continue to leave school prematurely. We interpreted that dropping out of school in this sense would imply that sometimes circumstances in learners' lives became overwhelming, and the affected would not have enough resilience to cope with their vulnerabilities. Based on the findings of this study, the most devastating cause of the vulnerability is loss of or disconnection from a significant person(s) in the life of the learner. It appears to have ripple effects leading to mental health problems and ultimately early school exit. To this end, Hadebe (2013) observes that learners from low socio-economic backgrounds are easy targets as they suffer many disadvantages.

Understanding premature school exit as deprivation, retrieval of endured memories and importation of issues of equity demonstrates a clear point of departure by this study from the previous narrow definitions of the construct. To the EScLs, premature school exit is a collection of lived painful and traumatic experiences; hence, the breadth and depth of their definition. In all the data sets, EScLs' answers to the questions on the conceptualisation of premature school exit were given as experienced by the individual participants. Their conceptualisation of the phenomenon could not be separated from their lives because from the time the process started, the EScLs have had to live with the consequences through to the post-dropout world to date. To them, being asked to define premature school exit was equal to narrating an unpleasant life story. P20 summarised it in an informal talk and said, "If anyone wants to understand what school

dropout means, you just talk to a person like me" (P20/C/FN>). Premature school exit, as a result, means loss all-round, and that EScLs carry the label/stigma everywhere they go.

In contrast to past studies, the perspectives of the EScLs themselves on the premature school exit phenomenon provided a tentative definition that encompasses real issues related to their everyday, lived, experiences of the phenomenon. This departure from previous definitions could probably be due to the difference between studies that used secondary sources and the current study that used primary data in this investigation of the premature school exit phenomenon.

Limitations of the Study

There were several limitations to the study. First, our study was limited to those EScLs who were accessible through NGOs operating in the chosen sites. The findings, therefore, may not be generalised to the greater populations of EScLs in Zimbabwe. However, our findings can be generalised to the construct of premature school exit in terms of how the EScLs' experiences collectively related to the broad definition of the phenomenon and not the representativeness of the sample in terms of size (Silverman, 2014). Another limitation was that while the sample size facilitated an in-depth study of the phenomenon, the perspectives of the participants, which were the focus of the study, were limited to their experiences in schools and communities in the said region. Lastly, throughout data collection and analysis, we listened attentively to participants as they narrated their experiences which were mostly touching. It was, therefore, certainly not easy to fight our own feelings and personal judgment concerning the participants' stories. However, to achieve trustworthiness of the data collected in such instances, we made sure we played the audio recordings several times and between days to make sense of the data and in the process reduce subjectivity. We also relied on the triangulation of information so that we would compare the sense of similar data from different sources.

Recommendations

Based on the perspectives of EScLs, we conclude that the premature school exit phenomenon at the secondary school level in Zimbabwe is a multi-dimensional problem and largely impacting the psychological wellbeing of the affected. Issues of equity, therefore, are urgent and need more attention not only in the Zimbabwean education system but globally, particularly in developing countries, to build strong skilled and emotionally stable personnel to control the country's economy. School policies and practices should be sensitive and adapt to the reality of life so that learners can complete school. Daily physiological and psychological needs should be met, particularly for children from disadvantaged families (Ramsay, 2008). It is, thus, critical for the government to set up a programme, which offers teachers and other adults counselling skills. Subsequently, there is a need to consider the role of counselling in schools and institute it as a profession requiring full-time professional counsellors. The counselling programme should equip learners with the skills to deal with difficult moments in life. It should also assist them in developing coping mechanisms in case of eventualities such as the loss of a significant person in life (Kufakurinani, Pasura, & McGregor, 2014). The programme should assist in building self-confidence in learners and nurture a positive sense of self and self- regard so that those in difficult circumstances can still be positive about life and be able to work out means to turn challenges into opportunities.

The issue of deprivation of opportunities in life is sensitive. Government-instituted and affordable parallel programmes, which offer secondary school subjects, should be established around the country so that EScLs can fall back into school and realise their dreams. Lastly, future studies could consider exploring the conceptualisation of premature school exit using the mixed

methodology to involve a larger sample and other settings such as farms, mines and low-density suburbs, which were not considered in this study.

Conclusion

Conceptualisation of premature school exit from the perspectives of EScLs in Zimbabwe entails a sense of deprivation, painful memories of loss, and unresolved inequity in the education system. From the study, we gained a broader perspective of what premature school exit entails. By targeting a "hard to reach" group (EScLs) and getting first-hand information through the expression of feelings and voicing their experiences, we believe the study has contributed significantly towards filling a glaringly missing link in the body of literature on premature school exit globally. We hope that the range of support systems surrounding learners living with disadvantage plays a critical role of reshaping and rebuilding confidence levels of such learners for them to function optimally both at individual and community levels.

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