

## Contributing Factors to Learner Drop Out in a Public School in Ngaka Modiri-Molema District

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**Abstract:** The South African government expects all children to attend school daily and receive the best education. Learner drop-out is a threat to this aim in all South African schools. The purpose of this study was to examine factors that contributes to learner dropout in one secondary school in the Nkaka Modiri-Molema district of the North West Province. The theory that underpinned this study was Tinto's model of retention. This study was conducted using the mixed methods approach, supported by the pragmatic philosophical assumption and the concurrent research design there by collecting data with the use of questionnaires and interviews. Questionnaires were administered amongst 180 grade 10-12 learners and 3 teachers were interviewed. Both statistical techniques and content analysis were used to analyse quantitative and qualitative data respectively. The main findings revealed that more learner's dropout occur as they move up in grades, increasing dropout rates due to substance use, early pregnancy, poverty and lack of parental involvement. The study recommends that educators and parents show more interests in learner's educational pursuits. Learners must also be constantly reminded of the benefits of what can achieved by staying in school.

**Key words:** Learner dropout, parental involvement, secondary school, North West, South African

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### INTRODUCTION

Learner drop out refers to those learners that leave school without the school's permission (Chinyoka, 2014). The government expects all children to attend school daily and receive the best education as education prepares the child for life and if the child drops out they struggle to succeed in life. However, there are real social reasons that might make it difficult for some learners to succeed which invariably lead them to drop out of school (Maarman, 2009). Research indicates that family issues and parental factors could be a real causative factor (Dube and Nkomo, 2014) but this study focus attention on all contributing factors to learner dropout.

The number of children dropping out of school is alarming and it is becoming a cause for concern worldwide. To this claim, dropping out of school before graduating is one of the most extended educational and social problems worldwide (Masitsa, 2006). Reflecting on the existence of the international school dropout rates, for example, in the United States of America, dropout rates in the population are 10.3% (U.S. Department of Education, National Centre for Education Statistics). In Australia, 23% of adolescents do not complete their schooling. In Germany, 9% of learners drop out before completing

school and 6% in Korea. The dropout rate for Norwegian learners in which schooling is compulsory is only 3% for junior high school and 10.8% among those who enter the voluntary high school (Masitsa, 2006). In South Africa, dropout rates are high with 60% of children who enrol in grade 1 dropping out before reaching Grade 12 (Department of Education, 2010).

This data reflect a variation of dropout rates in worldwide and confirms that there is indeed a serious problem in educational systems that needs urgent attention. In addition, high-school dropout is a phenomenon that occurs in several countries within formal educational systems. The East and Southern African region provides a statistical overview of the status of school dropouts from member countries of the East and Southern African region, including Ethiopia, Kenya, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, Rwanda, Seychelles, South Africa, Swaziland, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe. All of these country reports, produced by ESAR found that poverty was the major over-riding factor in dropouts, serving as an umbrella for related factors such as illness, distance from school, family problems, lack of parental support, pregnancies and even truancy and delinquency (Chinyoka, 2014). Learner dropout is a significant problem within the South African context. Not only is learner dropout a

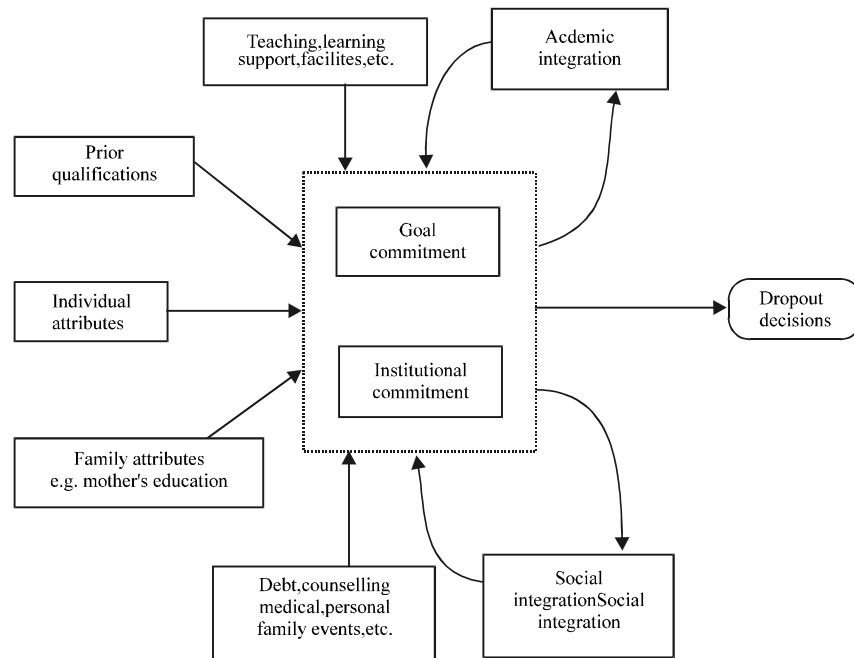


Fig. 1: Tinto model

problem but it is linked to many other issues that negatively affect society with issues like crime and high rate of unemployment. This study examines only factors contributing to learner drop out in a high school around Montshioa area in Mahikeng, located in the North-West Province of South Africa.

The school selected for this study is situated in the centre of Montshioa Township in the North-West province and it was chosen because the researcher observed a high learner dropout rate at this school. From the school where the study was conducted, drop out has been a major problem in the past few years. Learners disappear for a week or more without a valid reason and in some cases they do not return to school. This is supported by the class registers of the school and the admission files. The drop out problem has persisted, causing a lot of challenges related to non-completion of academic programme. The population of learners in that school was 1244 in 2015 whereas in 2014, there were 1357 registered learners. This results to a 25% dropout rate in this school within one year. As a researcher, from an observational perspective, the school offers boarding facilities. The township where the school is situated is identified as a high risk community due to high levels of gang activities, high liquor consumption, in an informal settlement, shebeen around the township, poverty and drug abuse. These pose a danger to learners because the township has a high population which results in

overcrowded houses, lot of schools and also unemployment. Gangsters in the township tend to give drugs to learners to sell at schools because there are a lot of secondary schools in the area. Some learners, after taking drugs, misbehave and forget to do school work. If they cannot do well at school, they fail and have to repeat. Assumptions are that substance use and abuse greatly contribute to learner's lack of interest at school, absenteeism and aggressive oppositional behaviour which may result in them dropping out of school.

Learners at risk of dropping out display some certain identifiable characteristics some of which are demographic and some of which are related to their performance in school (Dube and Nkomo, 2014). The questions this study sought to answer in order to achieve the aim of this study are: which learners are likely to drop out of school? what causes learners to leave school? and what are the responsibilities of parents in dealing with learner drop out?

**Theoretical and conceptual framework:** Tinto's theory of retention was examined to help explain why students stay or dropout of school. This study also briefly examines other theories as a form of predictors of learner dropout. These theories are the academic mediation theory, general deviance theory, poor family socialisation theory and the structural strain theory. This pluralistic theoretical approach in this study helped in the avoidance of being

consumed with one theory so that educators becomes capable of developing interventions from multiple theoretical approach to a problem (Maag, 2004). This literature also examined the causes or contributing factors to learner dropout.

### **Theoretical framework**

**Tinto's model of retention:** Tinto's model was first offered in literature in 1975 (Draper, 2005). Figure 1 which describes Tinto's model. Adapted from Tinto (1975). The central idea of this theory is in its integration. This theory simply states that whether a learner drops out or persists is strongly dependent or predicted by their degree of academic and social integration. As time passes, these integrate and could result in dropouts depending on the kind of decisions made (Draper, 2005). The academic integrations that could affect learners are:

- Grade or performance results
- Personal development which may be two ways student's perception of their development and that from the official or teacher's judgement
- Academic self-esteem which measures a personal level of satisfaction from the learners themselves
- Identification of one's role as a student
- Identification and acceptance of academic norms and values
- Subject selection and satisfaction. This measures whether or not the subjects are enjoyable

The social integration conceptualisations that directly relate to the academic integration are:

- How many friends does a learner have? At a school, a learner may belong to a group of friends/gang while some are always lonely
- Are learners in personal contact with their teachers? Sometimes, it is important to have some level of influence on teachers in the school environment which can either be positive or negative

This study explores these integrations through theoretical and empirical implications on the contributing factors to learner dropouts. Tinto in his model tries to explain reasons for learner's progress/dropout which offers distinct categories: those thrown out and those who leave voluntarily. Arguably, Tinto's theory may not give all reasons to these two distinct categories therefore, this study briefly examined other theoretical predictors to learner dropout. According to Brown (2004) there are five theories that also help in explaining learner's dropout in

schools. They can arguably also be regarded as predictors of learner dropout. They are briefly explained:

**Academic mediation theory:** Standardised achievement test is used to measure academic performance of learners in school through test and discussions. This has consistently over time been the strongest predictor of learner dropout especially when poor performance in associated with anti-social gathering, family socialisation, personal deviance and structural strains. Low academic performance can ultimately cause learner dropout in schools.

**General deviance theory:** Deviant behaviour such as teenage substance use is a direct predictor of learner dropout (Branson *et al.*, 2014). Others are teenage pregnancy, family background and early sexual activity. They all show direct relationship with dropout (Dekeza, 2012). It is found in research that learners with low performance history and poor academic aspirations are more likely to start having sex during their teenage years than those faring better in school (Dekeza, 2012).

**Family socialisation theory:** The family provides the early experiences of their children in life. Early influences such as divorce, family stress, parental behavioural control and parent's educational levels are all predictors of learner dropout. Therefore, low parent expectations and education would have direct effects on school drop out over and above the mediating influence of low academic achievement (Dekeza, 2012).

**Structural strain theory:** According to Rumberger and Lim (2008) studies in the past focusing on demographics indicate that boys are more likely to drop out of schools as compared to girls especially those from poor socio-economic status. Arguably, the over-arching hypothesis is that structural strain factors such as gender, ethnicity and socio-economic status have a direct influence on learner dropout. In this regard, an empirical tool would be very a predictive tool in measuring these structural strains against learner dropout (Janosz, Boulerice and Tremblay in Dekeza, 2012). Preventive strategies for learner dropout should be devised by school manager to help tackle these learner differential personalities.

### **Conceptual framework**

**Causes of learner dropout in schools:** The causes of a learner dropout may be seen as an antecedent of the

learner dropout simply because the causes are pivotal events which eventually lead to dropout (Doll *et al.*, 2013). Historically, studies in dropouts started since the 1920's with the research of Fuller in 1927 titled 'school leaving which was a mere monograph. Later on, more studies were conducted with power in content and empirical research explaining the causes of learner dropouts (Dorn, 1993; Rumberger and Lim, 2008; Short and Fitzsimmons, 2007). The causes of learner dropout are now briefly discussed.

**Peer pressure:** According to Inglis and Lewis (2013) peer pressure influence how children dress, how they think and even which schools they to go to. Peer pressure can be extremely strong and seductive (Inglis and Lewis, 2013). Learners do what their friends say they should do just because they want to be liked by their friends and want to be recognised being from certain groups (Qakisa, 2005). Adolescents sometimes drop out of school to join a group of gangsters in order to become accepted amongst their peers (Masitsa, 2006). The need for belonging and fitting into the peer group usually causes stress for the learner which affects participation in class and even school attendance (Masitsa, 2006). This agrees with Tinto's model of social integration. Students who are rejected by their peers disengage themselves from school, do not socialise and do not get involved with school based activities. Tinto's model reveals that isolation from their peers and poor relationship with other learners can cause learners to drop out of school due to this lack of social integration (Tinto, 1975; Drapper, 2006). High school is an important period of time in an adolescent's life and also the period a parent's authority is being challenged due to peer pressure (Holz and Lessing, 2002).

**Financial problems:** A study by Ramlagan *et al.* (2010) established that teenagers may drop out of school in order to help parents with the poor finances. In some cases, the financial strain can be due to an unplanned pregnancy and/or parental disabilities (Ramlagan *et al.*, 2010). This agrees with the structural strain factor of financial problems directly influencing learner drop out.

**Substance use:** Drug use and its abuse by learners at schools is a worldwide phenomenon and has negative consequences on school performance as well as the general well-being of a learner. The consumption of alcohol and dagga amongst learners in school have negative consequences which results in poor academic performance, high number of dropouts and social misfits (Kaiser *et al.*, 2010). Ramlagan *et al.* (2010) supports that drugs and alcohol abuse is within the top three reasons students fail to complete their high school education.

**Absenteeism:** It is a standard and expected that learners should attend school. Students who had dropped out of school had a chronic history of absenteeism. Nearly 88% of students who had dropped out had missed at least 20 days of school in a given year and an alarming three out of every four drop outs had missed >40 day in a year (Department of Education, 2003). Schools must carefully monitor attendance and notify parents immediately if their children are missing school on a regular basis. Teacher support and parent's engagement could be the key strategies to making sure students show up for school (Department of Education, 2005).

**Teenage pregnancy:** Some female learners often drop out of school once they realise that they are pregnant. They become afraid to be judged and criticised by other learners of the same age or grade (Chakacha and Dakora, 2014). In most cases they are being impregnated by boys of the same age as them so, after giving birth they usually have to work to support the baby. Pregnant learners may feel embarrassed about going to school as they will be struggling with morning sickness or fatigue and have difficulty keeping up with their classwork (Chakacha and Dakora, 2014). Pregnant student's needs extensive support to remain in school due to lack of financial and emotional support (Mostert, 2006).

**Retention:** According to Mbele (2006) retention refers to the practice of having a learner repeat a grade level because of low academic performance. Retention is one of the most common factors that puts learners at the risk of dropping out because the learner might become over-aged in that particular grade. The grade retention in South Africa is higher in the Further Education and Training (FET) phase than in the General Education and Training (GET) phase (Department of Education, 2005). Learners who are retained are 2-11 times more likely to drop out during high school than the non-retained learners (Spinath, 2012). Once learners have been retained >3 times, they end up experiencing lower self-esteem and their school attendance can even drop than other promoted learners (Mbele, 2006). In addition, during lessons, learners at times feel afraid to give answers because they are afraid to be judged by either their classmates or teachers who taught them in previous years.

**Poverty:** In terms of poverty, inability to pay school fees, the costs of uniform, shoes, transport, stationary, added to the opportunity costs of what children might be contributing to household labour are all contributing factors to learner drop out. In South Africa school fees

have been singled out for blame as a particularly burdensome cost and organizations such as the education rights project have been campaigning for its complete abolition (Spinath, 2012). Qakisa (2005) argue that fees do not feature as a primary reason for drop-out but they contend that absolute or 'abject' poverty inhibits educational access where the full range of costs associated with attendance, particularly of uniforms and transport are taken into account. The department of education has implemented a number of indigent policies in an attempt to surmount the inhibiting costs of accessing by declaring schools in the bottom two quintiles fee-free (Qakisa, 2005). Families in poverty are less involved with the education of their children and students from low-income households are more likely to quit school (Ramlagan *et al*, 2010).

**Suspension and expulsion:** According to the South African Schools Act (SASA), No. 84 of 1996, Section 9 (1) states that the governing body of a public school may on reasonable grounds after a fair hearing, suspend a learner from attending school as a correctional measure for a period not longer than 14 day. Sub-Section (2) of Section 9 further states that subject to any applicable provincial law, a learner at a public school may be expelled only by the head of department if found guilty of serious misconduct (Republic of South Africa, 1996). According to Terhoeven (2009) learners are usually expelled from school as a punishment for bad behaviour. Expulsion can be viewed as a corrective measure by the teacher but it does not help the learner. In South Africa, only the governing body has the right to suspend a learner from attending school.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study used a mixed methods approach with the concurrent research design. This is also called the triangulation design (Creswell *et al.*, 2010). This design allowed for the collection of harmonising data but on the same topic to best understand and deal with the research problem (Creswell *et al.*, 2010). This design was carried out in a single phase using the same time frame for the collection of quantitative and qualitative data with equal weight (Creswell *et al.*, 2010). The actual mixing happened at the interpretation of results.

**Methodology:** The study population were all the learners from grade 10-12 (N = 450) while that of teachers were all teachers teaching these grades (N = 12). Sampling was drawn differently for the quantitative and qualitative approaches. For the quantitative, learners were sampled

using the stratified random sampling. The researcher identified classroom of grade 10-12 as strata which were 15 in number. The researcher sampled by identifying 12 learners from each strata using stratified random sampling thus, making a total of N = 180 learners which served as respondents for the quantitative instrument. These learners are characterised by learners of good school attendance and relatively poor attendance as identified by the deputy principal in charge of teaching and learning. For the qualitative, teachers were sampled using the purposive sampling technique by selecting only N = 3 of the N = 12 particularly those who are responsible for the school attendance registers. It was thought that such teachers are more informed on the subject of this study. Each of these three teachers were from different grades. Questionnaire and one-on-one interviews served as measuring instruments. The Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) and content analysis was used for the analysis of data.

On ethical procedures, approval to approach subjects in the school was obtained from the Area office manager in Department of Education, Mafikeng. Confidentiality, anonymity and right to withdrawal was guaranteed to the participants of this study.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study draws the findings from both approaches which is then correlated with past literature. The findings is reported and discussed per research question.

**Learners likely to drop out:** The discussion focuses on the research question. Which learners are likely to drop out of school? From the quantitative results, it showed that a majority of learner drop out is likely to happen in grade 10 with a failure rate of 85%. According to statistical report, it seem learners experience more difficulty socially and academically especially as they move up in grades. Although, more than an average responses of learners indicated that despite failure in grades, they will eventually graduate from high school. Interviews, however, reported learners that are likely to drop out of school are: female learners more than male learners due to female pregnancy, learners with low academic performance and motivation. According to teachers, the social causative factors that contributes to dropout apply to both gender. This aligns with Chakacha and Dokara (2014) who establishes that female learners often drop out of school once they realise that they are pregnant and they become more afraid to be judged and criticised by other learners of the same age or grade. Pregnant learners

usually feel embarrassed going to school as they struggle with morning sickness or fatigue, thereby have difficulty keeping up with their classwork (Chakacha and Dakora 2014). Mostert (2006) presents a solution by recommending that pregnant students need extensive support to remain in school due to lack of financial and emotional support. The structural strain theory in contrast believes that male learners are more likely to drop out of school whereas the general deviance theory agrees that teenagers are likely to have sex especially when they perform poorly in their studies (Dekeza, 2012).

**Causes of learner drop out:** The aim here was to extract factors that causes learners to drop out of school with a follow-up discussion. Quantitative data reports that a considerable number of learners are involved with the use of drugs in school with 48.6%. Teachers from the interview session explains that a majority of the learners consume drugs especially during long-breaks. They signified that learners now add drugs in cakes and bring to school so that no teacher or even the school management is capable of seizing such snack from them. To support, Kaiser *et al.* (2010) noted that the consumption of alcohol and marijuana amongst learners in school have negative consequences which usually results in poor school performance, high number of dropouts and social misfits. This shows a good relationship from other results obtained from learners. Referring to the ‘high dropout’ pointed by Kaiser *et al.* (2010) 23.1% of learners are characterised with attendance issues. In addition, Kaiser *et al.* (2010) contends that substance abuse impairs memory, poor school motivation and poor school results which ultimately lead to school dropout. Suspension is also reported as a cause of eventual dropout in the quantitative result. Terhoeven (2009) supports that learners are usually suspended and expelled from school as a punishment for bad behaviour which can be said to be an asset to the teacher but it does not help the learner. Interview data shows that some learner stop coming to school eventually even after the suspension has expired.

Consequently, qualitative interviews revealed the causes of learner drop out as: bullying, teenage pregnancy, poverty, peer-pressure, drug abuse/substance, over-repetition of grades/poor academic performance, disadvantaged communities and lack of interesting education. During the interview session, an educator said “Bullying is a major cause of learner drop out and it makes the weaker learner make up excuses to their parents so, they can avoid school”. Teenage pregnancy was identified as a major cause of drop out. One of the educators said “Pregnancy is now a

common occurrence in school that even the grade 8 are guilty of it. This brings shame to them and since pregnancy at that age comes with a lot of stigma and shame, they automatically avoid school”. Teenage pregnancy has already been discussed under learners likely to drop out.

Poverty was identified as a cause. In literature, the inability to pay school fees, the costs of uniform, shoes, transport and stationary are all considered as predictors of learner dropout. To help with the problem of abject poverty, the Department of Education has implemented a number of indigent policies in an attempt to surmount the inhibiting costs of accessing schools, most notably that of declaring schools in the bottom two quintiles fee-free because most public attention has focused on the impact of school fees as a barrier which prevents poorer children from attending school (Qakisa, 2005).

Peer pressure, according to one of the educators, influences social integration, for example, learners becoming members of gangsters thereby affecting their concentration and attendance in school. Masitsa (2006) agrees with this by stating that the need for belonging and fitting in the peer group usually causes stress for the learner which affects his/her participation in class and even school attendance. In addition, Tinto’s model of social integration expresses that students who are rejected by their peer disengage themselves from school, do not socialise and do not get involved with school-based activities thereby resulting in learner drop out (Draper, 2005).

Furthermore, the use of drugs by learners affects their academic performance and level of concentration in class. To support this, the consumption of alcohol and marijuana amongst learners in school have negative consequences which results in poor school performance, high number of dropouts and social misfits (Kaiser *et al.*, 2010). This also aligns with the academic mediation theory where low academic performance can ultimately cause learner dropout in schools. Other categories identified were learners from disadvantaged communities and lack of interesting education. An educator said: “Learners from certain villages have no motivation from people in and around them to go to school. Such learners are not inspired with what education can actually do for them”. This shows that the community a learner comes from can block the possible and immense benefits of being educated.

**Parental involvement on learner drop out:** Discussing the quantitative results, almost an average of the sampled learner respondents do not have a comfortable place to learn at home and their parents do not monitor the education of their children with 41.7 and 41.1%,

respectively. This is also supported by the interview data which showed that parents are poorly involved in education of their children. Kaiser *et al.* (2010) and Dekeza (2012) emphasised that teachers and parents should be aware that motivation at home and school is an important factor to encourage learners to continue with their studies because when learners are motivated, they manage stress and are also eager to initiate learning activities and remain involved in a learning task by showing enormous commitment.

### CONCLUSION

Based on the findings, the study concludes that student's dropout occurred geometrically as they moved up in grade, especially with grade 10. About 72% of learners in grade 10 drop out in the selected school as compared to grade 11 (20%) and 12 (8%). Female learners were also found to drop out than their male counterpart due to the added cause of being pregnant. The causes of learner dropout in the selected school were summarised as the use of drugs and alcohol, teenage pregnancy, learner performance, motivation of a learner and the level of concentration absenteeism, level of poverty and the community predisposition. Finally, this study concludes that that most learner's home are not comfortable for studying and parent are not worried about the education of their children so, they practically do not have an idea of what is happening to their children at school.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommends that since failure is not the primary cause of learner dropout, educators and parents must at all-time put more interest and get involved especially by monitoring, evaluating and motivating them. Teachers who exhibit a strong sense of professional commitment usually influence their learners towards higher levels of engagement so, teachers should be more committed in-order to increase classroom study time with learners. Schools managers must carefully monitor attendance and notify parents immediately if their children are missing school on a regular basis. This is in line with the Policy on Learner Attendance, in Notice 361 of 2010 (Republic of South Africa, 1996). Lastly, the school management in partnership with the department of education should organise seminars for both learners and educators on the problems associated with learner dropout. Learners should be taught on the benefits of what they can achieve with staying in school and teachers should be trained on how to handle and manage situations that could lead to dropout.

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