

Research Article

School Dropout: A Major Barrier in Providing Education to All

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ABSTRACT

Literacy is one of the important components of socio-economic growth of any country. It is obvious that literate individuals could have better understanding about health and hygiene, appropriate opportunities for employment, family planning, their rights, duties and other current issues related to development of a nation. Despite putting best efforts at various levels the ultimate goal of 'Education to All' could not have been achieved so far. There are several reasons for it but prominent among them is dropout in education. The dropout rate is different for different countries even though the reasons for it are different. These reasons are based upon socio-economic condition, facilities and belief system of a particular country. In India, the literacy rate has been increasing day by day but it is still lagging behind many countries. The dropout rate in education differs at various level including state, district and block. It also varies according to facilities, availability of schools, teachers and other basic amenities. However, the dropout rate is higher in backward area and disadvantageous groups. In order to control dropout rates and improve the efficiency of education system, there is an emergent need to understand the basic reasons for dropping out. This paper is an attempt to fill this gap by finding out major causes of school dropout. Furthermore, some corrective measure is also suggested to improve the educational system.

Keywords: Literacy, Dropout, Dropping out, Socio-economic conditions, Schools

INTRODUCTION

The member countries of the United Nations have identified '*achieving universal primary education*' as one of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The severity and

sensitivity of the issue has been realised globally then only they have decided to consider it as one of the MDGs. It means that education for all at primary level is still a dream for most of the countries, though we are living in 21st Century and achieved so much so far. In India, the Article 21A and 93rd Constitutional Amendments 2009 clearly states that education is a fundamental right. This article clearly spells out the responsibility of the state to the extent of providing free and compulsory education to all the children from the age of 6 to 14 years. Keeping in view of this government has initiated several schemes for both quantitative and qualitative improvement in education. It has been found that the number of enrolled students at secondary and senior secondary level is lesser in comparison to primary education. Even though, the number of students who complete their secondary and senior secondary education is least in comparison to enrolled students.

There are several reasons behind non-achieving the goal of education to all. Many students fail to enrol themselves in schools. Many enrol themselves in schools but few of them could not complete the primary education and few left the school while reaching secondary or senior secondary school. The dropout is one of the prominent reasons for not achieving this goal.

This study is an attempt to analyse the data based on case studies reports and review of related literature. The data used in the study have been taken from Census of India and other government agencies. The main purpose of this paper is to derive detailed information about the specific reasons behind high dropout rates at secondary level. It tries to analyse the role of school as well as of contextual variables in order to bring into fore the debate between supply and demand interventions aimed at reducing dropout rates and to suggest appropriate important policy implications. The paper also tries to identify the 'at risk' environment and 'at risk' students associated with dropout at secondary level. However, the study does not elaborate on the various determinants of school quality and of the differences in education opportunities available to the children living in rural areas.

Considering the significance of secondary education for all the adolescents, especially for the disadvantaged, in breaking the vicious cycle of economic and educational backwardness, it is important that some study should be directed to understand the level of dropout at secondary stage and reasons for the same, in order to make policies and strategies to reduce it. In this context, this paper tries to examine the factors that contribute to dropping out by children at the secondary level.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Over the years, an appreciation for the intricacy of the dropout phenomenon has emerged in the relevant literature. Considerable research has been undertaken to reduce the wastage

in education caused by dropout and the studies conducted on dropout can be classified into four categories: (1) Longitudinal and Cross-sectional examinations of dropping out using data from nationally representative data sources like Census of India and the NSSO. These studies have been particularly useful in identifying 'at-risk students' and developing estimates of the extent of the dropout problem; (2) Studies using multi-level statistical models that differentiate between individual effects and school effects. These studies help in identification of factors related to the child and household and those related to the institutions which they attend; (3) 'Experimental' studies examining particular aspects of dropout. These are basically micro level studies and, therefore, are not nationally representative; (4) Qualitative studies that employ interviews and focus group discussions to probe into youth's attitudes. Most of the qualitative studies assume that the behaviour and attitude of at-risk students start showing the symptoms of dropping out much before their actually dropout.

A review of these studies indicate that the final decision of the child to drop out of school comes from a variety of sources such as within students' families, schools and communities (and peers) or the child's behaviour. Meanwhile, research has consistently found that socio-economic status, most commonly measured by parental education and income, is a powerful predictor of school achievement and dropout behaviour (McNeal, 1999; Rumberger, 1995; Rumberger and Larson, 1998; Pong and Ju, 2000). High parental income makes it convenient to provide more resources to support children's education, including access to better quality schools, private tuitions and more support for learning within home. Poverty still remains as one of the significant causes of children dropping out of school (Birdsall *et al.*, 2005; Boyle *et al.*, 2002; Brown and Park, 2002; Bruneforth, 2007; Cardoso and Verner, 2007; Dachi and Garrett, 2003; Hunter and May, 2003). In addition, empirical studies have found that students, whose parents monitor and regulate their activities, provide emotional support, encourage independent decision-making and are generally more involved in their schooling, are less likely to drop out of school (Astone and McLanahan, 1991; Rumberger, 1995; Ainsworth *et al.*, 2005).

Chugh (2011) expressed that it is commonly known that schools exert considerable influence on the attendance, continuation and performance of the children. Some of the studies have tried to estimate the school influence after controlling the estimate of individual characteristics of students (Rauderbush and Williams, 1995). Several studies indicate that resources influence school dropout rates with pupil-teacher ratio having a positive and significant effect on high school and middle school dropout rates (McNeal, 1997; Rumberger, 1995; Rumberger and Thomas, 2000). Further, when the teachers do not prepare lessons, do not have designed scheme of work, do not check the notebooks properly and is not regular, the learning does not take place (Ghuman and Lloyd, 2007;

Smith cited in Hunt). These classroom practices have an adverse impact on the retention of children. Furthermore, research has shown that early school leaving at the secondary level is the outcome of a long process of disengagement of children with measurable indicators that exist in the early grades (Alexander *et al.*, 1997; Barrington and Hendricks, 1989; Ensminger and Slusacick, 1992; Garnier *et al.*, 1997). These studies found that early academic achievement and engagement like regular attendance, misbehaviour in elementary and middle school, predicted withdrawal from high school.

Therefore, the key ingredients of student engagement include student participation, identification with school or social bonding, academic performance, etc. (Finn, 1993; Maehr and Midgely, 1996). Boyle *et al.* (2002) suggest that beatings and intimidation 'affect children's motivation to attend school'. Some studies indicate that poor academic achievement leads to dropping out (Ekstrom *et al.*, 1986; Rumberger, 1995; Rumberger and Larson, 1998; Boyle *et al.*, 2002; Hunter and May, 2003). Absenteeism from school and student discipline problems is also strong predictors of dropping out, especially at the secondary level of education (Carbonaro, 1998; Rumberger 1995, Rumberger and Larson, 1998; the PROBE Team, 1999). These studies support the idea that dropping out is influenced by both the social and academic experiences of students.

The literature review suggests that child-related factors such as disinterest in studies and poor comprehension are one of the significant causes for dropping out which is very closely related to school quality measured in terms of infrastructural facilities, teacher preparedness and curriculum relevance. The reasons identified by the research studies were found to be holding true in the case of drop out children living in slums and in resettlement colonies of the town. However, not much research has been conducted in the Indian context. This paper is a modest attempt towards this direction.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SCHOOLS

The dropout is one of the major problems inflicting Indian education system across all levels and this condition is more acute at the elementary stage. However, with the recent initiatives to reduce dropout rates and some amount of success at elementary stage, it is feared that dropout may simply shift to secondary education in a big way. Much of the research till now is confined to elementary stage of education and the factors responsible for dropout at elementary and secondary stage are most likely to be different. Details on the particulars of schools and drop out children are as follows:

Size of Class

Overcrowded obstacles, when attempting to teach in such classes. Large class size can negatively affect or large class size in Indian context could be specified as those classes

where the pupil–teacher ratio exceeds 40:1 and teachers often face two significant and interrelated aspects of teaching practice, that is, instructional time and class room management. Large class size takes a toll on the teachers' ability to manage time, requiring more time to be devoted to task and behavioural management thus leaving less time for actual instructions.

Socio-Economic Background of Dropouts

Considering the importance of the households' decision to send the children to school or to discontinue their studies, information was collected from the families of the drop out children to look at their environmental, social and economic compulsions which may act against their continuation in school.

Physical Facilities in the Household

The children living in the slums are devoid of basic infrastructural facilities like toilet and drinking water. Inadequate and poor quality of infrastructural and physical facilities negatively influences education of the children. Due to non-availability of water in the individual household, the children are many a time given the responsibility of collecting water from the tanker or the municipal tap that consumes around 2–3 hours per day. In addition, absence of toilet facility poses a great problem especially for girls who have to answer to their biological needs at the early hours of the day. Poor housing facilities do not provide the space for children to study in peace. Either the electricity connection is not available or it has been taken illegally resulting in irregular supply. In the absence of electricity, it is not possible for the child to study at home in the evening or late night. The sample children living in the slums were also faced with the similar kind of environmental and physical hazard.

Family Size

Family size influences children's schooling cycle greatly. In comparison to children with fewer siblings, children with more siblings tend to enrol later, repeat grades more often and drop out of school earlier. It becomes all the more difficult for those households that are having more than one school going child in the family.

Monthly Income of Households

Studies have consistently found that socio-economic status, most commonly measured by parental education and income is a powerful predictor of school achievement and dropout behaviour (Bryk and Thum, 1989; Ekstrom *et al.*, 1986; McNeal, 1999; Rumberger and Larson, 1998; Pong and Ju, 2000).

High parental income allows them to provide more resources to support their children's education, including access to better quality schools, private tuitions and more support for learning within home. During the financial crisis, schooling of the children becomes the first casualty in poor households.

The UNESCO Institute for Statistics (Global Education Digest, 2007) observes that Households in India pay for more than one quarter (28%) of the costs to send their children to primary and secondary schools. This expenditure poses a very real barrier for children of poor families. Considering the inflation and standard of living in cities, it is difficult for the families to incur expenditure on education especially if the number of school going children is more than two.

Educational Attainment of Parents

Besides household income, the education level of the parents is also expected to influence the continuation of children in school. Ersado (2005) observes that parental education is the most consistent determinant of child education. Higher parental education is associated with increased access to education, higher attendance rates and lower dropout rates (Ainsworth *et al.*, 2005). Parents, who have attained a certain educational level, might want their children to achieve at least the same level (Chugh, 2004).

PROFILE OF DROP OUT CHILDREN

The study conducted by Chugh reveals that drop out children varies widely. They belong to different regions, castes, culture and languages. About 30% of them were migrants from Uttar Pradesh and another 30% were from Bihar. About 20% belonged to West Bengal and the remaining was from Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, etc. About one-third of them were born in Delhi while about half of them have been living in Delhi for the last 15–20 years. Only about 15% of the families had come to Delhi 4–6 years back. The common factor among them was that all of them were living in adverse environmental conditions with low household income and had been attending government schools. The particulars of drop out children are presented below:

Gender-Wise dropouts

India's patriarchal society gives less importance to girls' education due to the socio-cultural and economic barriers prevailing in the society. If poor households cannot send all the children to school, then they will most likely give boys precedence over girls.

Girls are especially discouraged to attend schools from the onset of puberty and early marriage. Added to this are factors like the presence of exclusively male teachers, distance and not-so-safe road to school, and separate toilet for girls. These are considered

as potential factors for high dropout rate for girls. The field observation discloses that the factors listed above were found to be true in case of a number of girls.

Age at Which Children Dropped Out

Census 2001 data reveal that the workforce participation rate of children of 10–14 years is higher than those of 6–10 years. The NSSO data estimate of 61st round (2004–2005) disclose that workforce participation rates of children in the age group of 10–14 is around 6.6%. Though the Child Labour Prohibition Act stipulates that the children below 14 years of age should not be employed and Right to Compulsory and Free Education Act, 2009 ensures free and compulsory education to all children of 6–14 years of age group. Still a large proportion of children are engaged in work and around 18% of children are out of school (NSSO, 2004–2005). After the age of 14, the vulnerability of children entering workforce increases significantly as there is no legal compulsion. Moreover, the out-of-pocket expenditure on secondary education is substantial as the education is not free and parents are supposed to bear the educational expenditure. Poor households find it difficult to bear the cost and therefore, children neither do not enrol or dropout before completing the secondary education cycle.

Birth Order

There is evidence that in developing countries the cost of high fertility is borne by older siblings, rather than by parents. The first casualty to dropout is the eldest child for looking after the younger siblings or contributing to the household income by earning some extra money.

From the profile of drop out children it can be concluded that older children, first and second birth order are more likely to dropout. Further much of dropout is taking place in the ninth grade itself.

REASONS FOR DROPOUT AT SECONDARY LEVEL

Many studies have defined the characteristics of dropouts and have suggested to develop tools to identify children ‘at risk’ of dropping out of school. It has been repeatedly observed that low-achievers and students from low socio-economic backgrounds are at much higher risk of dropping out which could be due to several reasons such as inadequate parenting, inability to afford the educational expenditure, poor schooling infrastructure, de-motivated teachers, pressures to augment family income, accompanied by a view that schooling has limited economic returns; peers with low aspirations; poor nutrition and health; and too few role models in the community.

For policy makers to develop effective interventions, it is essential to ascertain which factors are most important for identifying school leavers as dropouts are not a

homogenous group but early warning signs can help identify those most at risk and suitable strategies could be evolved for them. However, one of the key problems is that students don't usually dropout for a single reason. There are multiple factors and no single risk factor can accurately predict who will dropout.

The paper categorises three sets of factors vis-à-vis household, school and child related that primarily contribute to the phenomenon of drop out. At the same time it may be remembered that these reasons do not influence dropout independently but intertwined with each other producing a net effect of dropout.

HOUSEHOLD FACTORS

Socio-economic and cultural background of the families is the most significant contributor to the continuation or discontinuation of the child in school. Poverty of the parents still remains one of the significant causes for the low participation of children in schooling.

Financial Constraint

Educational expenditure has two sources namely, public and private. The expenditure incurred by the state in providing infrastructural arrangements for education, like creating facilities in the form of building and maintenance of schools, provision of teachers, payment of teacher salary and other planned and non-planned grants are a part of the public expenditure. Private expenditure on education refers to the expenditure incurred by the parents and households. This is mainly contributed to the payment of fees, private tuition, stationery, uniform and transport. A number of studies highlight the linkage between poverty and dropping out from the school (Birdsall *et al.*, 2005; Boyle *et al.*, 2002; Dachi and Garrett, 2003). A few research studies indicate that the cost of schooling, including fees, is one of the main reasons for dropping out (Brown and Park, 2002; Colclough *et al.*, 2000; Chugh, 2004).

A large number of girls in India drop out of the education system around puberty. One can only imagine the situation in other towns and rural areas with girls facing serious danger in their attempt to avail educational facilities. Insecurity in reaching school is not only a deterrent factor but the insecurity within the school is also a matter of concern for girls.

A study of Mumbai Municipal Schools (2002) conducted by Vacha Kishori Project Team notes:

We tried to raise the issue of unnecessary touching and attention by male teachers. The girls resented the behavior of male teachers and expressed their discomfiture to us. The principal of the school did not believe the girls, despite the fact that two municipal school teachers had been arrested for confinement and molestation of girl

students while school was on. In one school, a teacher wrote graffiti on the walls of the girls' toilet; the girls did not want the research team to intervene as the teacher might penalize them. (Times of India, 30 April 2005, D.P. Malhotra)

Peer Group

Social composition of students in a school is a strong predictor of dropout rates. Students living in slum areas are more likely to have friends as dropouts which may also influence the decision of others to discontinue school. This is also as one of the significant factors for dropping out as they did not like to attend school without their friends.

Disputes within Family

Very often family environment of households living in slums turns violent for a variety of reasons. Financial limitations, joblessness and unemployment, addiction to alcohol and drugs can lead to frequent disruptions in the family. This can be unbearable for several children; they lose interest and attend school mechanically leading to low academic performance that may ultimately result in dropout. As discussed earlier, the monthly income in most of the households is either equivalent or less than the monthly expenditure on the essential items. In addition, as most of the parents of the dropped out children were working in private and unorganised sector, their incomes are irregular and insufficient.

Moreover, in many of the households one third to one fourth of income is spent on liquor. Some of the children reported that the habit of consuming liquor most often results in fights and making it difficult for them to concentrate on studies. One important area that requires further investigation is the interaction between family environment and the performance of children of vulnerable groups.

SCHOOL FACTORS

It is widely acknowledged that infrastructural facilities, school environment and teachers' attitude exert powerful influences on student's interest or disinterest in studies including dropout rates. In this context, the PROBE team (1999) and Balgopalan and Subramanian (2003) described discrimination against socially disadvantaged groups as terrible and exclusionary. They revealed that children from the upper classes are joining private schools and the poor are basically attending government schools with some belonging to the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe groups and teachers belong to the so-called upper caste. Consequently, the attitude of the teachers, disinterest in teaching to these disadvantaged children and poor infrastructural facilities like unavailability of functional toilets, improper seating arrangements etc. were found to be some of the significant reasons for pushing out the children from school.

Attitude of the Teachers

Studies demonstrate that when teachers hold low academic expectations of particular students, they tend to treat those students in a negative way. Some studies have reported discriminatory practices of the teachers such as verbal abuse; children given cleaning tasks in school; corporal punishment meted out to them. There have been studies showing the rude behaviour of teachers towards the students. The teachers would 'pick on' or 'single out' them and take disciplinary action against them often with no fault of their own.

INDIVIDUAL CHILD FACTORS

The child-related factors are closely associated with the family and school-related factors. Financial constraints and inappropriate school environment tend to de-motivate the children, making them lose interest in their studies and thus leading to their eventual dropout. Further household circumstances and academic failure increased students' alienation from school, leading to absenteeism, which also influenced their dropping out of school.

Poor Academic Performance

As these children do not have favourable academic environmental home and even in school the teachers lack motivation to teach, as a result of which the incidence of failure is very high among them. It was also observed that those children being failed have to repeat the same grade and even after repeating they could not understand the subject matter and they start losing interest in studies.

Early Marriage

Marriage at an early age is alarming, especially among the girls. Even though statistics are elusive, estimates show that 40–50% of marriages in India involve a girl under 18 or a boy under 21, the legal ages for marriage. In fact, as per NFHS Survey 3 (2005–2006), 45% of women of 20–24 years were married before the legal age of marriage of 18 years, compared with 50%, as reported in NFHS 2 (1998–1999). Thus, early marriage is one of the important reasons for children dropping out from the school, especially in the states of Bihar, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, etc. After marriage these students do not return to school and school policy also does not encourage their return to school either. Most of the time, these students also do not possess any information regarding future educational possibilities due to which most of the girls do not attend school or any other course or training after marriage (Chugh, 2004).

CONCLUSION

It is found that the dropout is very intricately related with multiple factors. The multiple

factors which are responsible for dropping out of school includes poverty, uneducated or low educated parents, unawareness, family structure, domestic problems and other logistic problems. These factors create negative environment and affect the importance of education (Chugh, 2011). Furthermore, the unpleasant atmosphere of school, poor knowledge, absenteeism, shortage of qualified teachers, distance for school, transportation, attitude and behaviour of teacher, and repetition in the same grade are the factors which also play important role for dropouts. It was revealed that low socio-economic and educational status of the parents is correlated with the phenomenon of dropping out. Data from household survey on the reasons for dropping out of school at the secondary level reveal that economic reasons and school-related reasons are both equally important. The main finding of the study is that students do not drop out only because they are poor but also because by the time they reach secondary level of education, they have already made a strong background of school failure which puts them at greater risk of dropping out. School failure due to poor understanding, discrimination in the class, poor teaching learning process is a combined process which needs to be handled early, right from primary or elementary education to secondary education.

From the analysis in this study, a few policy implications may be drawn both in terms of broader education policies aimed at improving educational equity and for the design and implementation of economic incentives aimed at reducing the dropout rates of marginalised children. It is important that the private costs of education need to be moderated by providing scholarships and also incentives like uniform, text books and stationary. Teachers also need to be sensitised with the difficult conditions in which the children live and how they need to respond more sympathetically. Mere sensitisation of teachers without providing infrastructure that enables the students to overcome disadvantages would not be of much use. Completing secondary education does not guarantee access to high paying job; it represents a promise of greater access to further opportunities and is fast becoming a prerequisite to remain employable. Chugh has suggested that this makes a strong case in favour of investing more resources to tackle this issue of dropouts. These investments must be part of an integral approach to education policies, while maintaining very clearly that it is the role and responsibilities of schools and teachers to ensure that all students irrespective of their socio-economic background complete the secondary level of education.

SUGGESTIONS TO REDUCE DROPOUT

There are a variety of reasons for the dropout of children. Based on findings and the National Scheme for Universal Access and Quality at the Secondary Stage (SUCCESS) following steps may be taken to reduce dropouts, especially for poor children.

Socio-economic status and family structure etc. are unlikely to change but factors like access to school facilities, attendance, improvement in infrastructure, flexible curriculum and teacher's motivation may be modified to improve the retention rate of these children.

Attempts may be made to locate schools at those places where they are needed the most; to make a provision of secondary schools at the nearest possible places of the villages. As dropout is the result of financial problems; children may be given scholarships, free uniform, free text books, free stationery items. For poor children, these incentives will be useful in improving the retention rate (NUEPA Occasional Papers).

Factors of dropping out such as absenteeism, poor performance in the school examination, etc. may be taken up at the elementary school level itself. Schools may offer after school and summer enhancement programmes for the weaker students.

At secondary level of education, issues like curriculum, instructional materials, teacher preparedness and their ability to handle the teaching of modern science and mathematics need to be reviewed.

More skill-oriented courses may be introduced with the students getting the option to choose a course of their choice, as for a large number of children; secondary school is a terminal stage of education. Considering the original causes of dropouts, an integral policy adopting prevention and restoration approach needs to be formulated. For adopting the preventive measures, the teachers need to be well acquainted with the specific problems and issues of the children. For this purpose, a detailed profile of each child may be prepared from the primary stage and the tracking may be done up to the completion of school education. The advice of counsellors may be taken to identify their psychological, emotional and behavioural problems. Teachers also may have to be more active in understanding, supporting and guiding the students in their studies. For the restoration policy, it is important that dropouts are given another opportunity to acquire the necessary knowledge and skills so that they can increase their chances in the job market.

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