School dropout among female learners in rural Mpumalanga, South Africa

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South Africa, like many countries, has high numbers of learners who do not complete secondary schooling. This reduces these young people's chances of finding work or of earning a better salary. It is thus important to understand the factors that contribute to high school dropout. In the study reported on here we investigated the factors that caused a number of female learners to drop out and return to high school in a rural community in Mpumalanga. The learners provided 3 reasons for dropping out of school: pregnancy, illness and immigration. The analysis of these factors suggests 3 underlying themes that influence the ability of children to remain in school, viz. health, policies and structures, and poverty. The implications of these and recommendations to address them are discussed. The authors argue that greater interdepartmental efforts are required to support vulnerable girls to remain in school.

Keywords: discrimination; illness; immigration; pregnancy; school dropout; South Africa

Introduction

The phenomenon of school dropout can be considered a key challenge worldwide (McWhirter, McWhirter, McWhirter & McWhirter, 2017). Learners who leave school are referred to using various terms; we have elected to use the term "early school leavers." School dropout happens when a learner stops attending school before completing their grade or phase of schooling. Each year, many young people across the world leave school (Lamb & Markussen, 2011). South Africa is facing the same challenge where up to 60% of learners drop out before completing secondary school (Weybright, Caldwell, Xie, Wegner & Smith, 2017). While there is a significant body of literature on the reasons for school dropout, there is still much that is not fully understood about the complex causal pathways leading to dropout (Branson, Hofmeyr & Lam, 2014). With this study we aimed to contribute to the subject.

School dropout comes with multiple challenges and exposes young people to various health and social concerns (Weybright et al., 2017). Idling at home exposes early school leavers to various risky behaviours, including sexual risk and its concomitant Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) infection (Stoner, Pettifor, Edwards, Aiello, Halpern, Julien, Selin, Twine, Hughes, Wang, Agyei, Gomez-Olive, Wagner, MacPhail & Kahn, 2017), pregnancy (Rosenberg, Pettifor, Miller, Thirumurthy, Emch, Afolabi, Kahn, Collinson & Tollman, 2015), substance abuse, and crime (Maynard, Salas-Wright & Vaughn, 2015). Early school leavers are also excluded from the mainstream economy. South African data suggest that completing secondary school significantly increases one's chances of employment, while completing a tertiary qualification makes one three times more likely to be employed than not completing secondary school (Sheppard, 2009).

The challenges of school dropout are well known. Dropout in the Global South, and particularly Southern Africa, is however highly complex, given the wide diversity of social and structural factors impacting negatively on the youth (Inoue, Di Gropello, Taylor & Gresham, 2015). More research is required to investigate these factors. This is particularly important for female learners (Shahidul & Zehadul Karim, 2015) who are more likely than males to drop out of school (Inoue et al., 2015). However, evidence suggests that this gender trend is true in South Africa only among lower and median poverty levels (Boyes, Berg & Cluver, 2017), while other studies indicate males as more likely than females to drop out (Weybright et al., 2017). Research is also particularly important for girls living in rural communities where dropout rates tend to be even higher (Oruko, Nyothach, Zielinski-Gutierrez, Mason, Alexander, Vulule, Laserson & Phillips-Howard, 2015).

In this article, therefore, we describe the factors that lead to school dropout among a sample of rural, female learners in the Mpumalanga province of South Africa. We draw on data from a study of learners who, after dropping out, subsequently returned to school. All the participants thus had experience of dropping out and returning to school. Based on the findings, recommendations are offered to reduce the risk of school dropouts. We start with an overview of the factors that increase school dropout as shown in existing literature. The methodology used to collect data is set out. Findings from the study are presented according to the three main themes of pregnancy, illness and immigration. Following a discussion of findings, recommendations to reduce school dropout are presented.

Literature Review

Education is key for one's life opportunities (Bruns, Mingat & Rakotomalala, 2003). Education helps one realise a better life and predicts a prosperous adulthood (Van Breda & Dickens, 2015). In South Africa, completing Grade 12 significantly increases one's employability and earnings (Department of Basic Education [DBE], Republic of South Africa [RSA], 2011). Among people who complete Grade 12, additional post-Grade-12

education or training provides yet further employment benefits (Branson, Leibbrandt & Zuze, 2009) and helps people realise higher earnings. It is thus unfortunate when learners do not recognise the advantages of completing or are unable to continue to Grade 12. Leaving school early may rob them of the skills necessary to compete in the new world, moving towards the fourth industrial revolution where technological skills are highly prized.

School dropout is a global challenge (Inglis, 2009). In the United States of America (USA), for example, 6.1% of 16-to-24-year-olds were not enrolled in school in 2016 (McFarland, Cui, Rathbun & Holmes, 2018). In the South African context, a very large number of learners drop out of school each year (Weybright et al., 2017). During the 2007/08 calendar year alone, 6.5% of Grade 9, 11.5% of Grade 10 and 11.8% of Grade 11 learners dropped out of school (DBE, RSA, 2011). The 2011 census found that only 40.7% of young people aged 20 had completed Grade 12 (Statistics South Africa, 2012).

The literature on school dropout shows a wide range of factors that increase young people's risk of dropping out. Several of these are briefly discussed here, viz. academic challenges, immigration, poor commitment to studies, disability, pregnancy, poverty, and drug and alcohol abuse.

Academic challenges
Some studies highlight academic challenges as the cause of dropout (Weybright et al., 2017). In one American study (Bridgeland, DiIulio & Morison, 2006), 57% of participants reported dropping out because they found their studies too difficult, discouraging them from passing from one grade to the next. A South African study found that teacher-learner relationships, struggling to cope with school, and difficulties keeping up with homework contributed to dropout (Inglis, 2009).

Immigration
Immigration – relocation to another country – contributes to dropout (Rossi, 2008). Through globalisation, people are now moving to other countries in search of safer living environments, improved income and better health care. But immigration has its own challenges, including language difficulties and experiences of xenophobia, which contribute to children's academic challenges (Perumal, 2015). When children cannot speak the language of the host country, they find it hard to cope with their studies and are at risk of dropout. Research in South Africa (Magqibelo, Londt, September & Roman, 2016) suggests that migrant children may experience hostility from other learners and teachers as well as structural barriers to accessing education.

Demotivation to study
The loss of motivation to learn can lead to dropout. This loss can result from teachers holding low expectations of learners, which is especially common regarding migrant learners (Becker & Luthar, 2002). In a study in the USA, Oseguera, Conchas and Mosqueda (2011) found that the stereotype that Latino children are lazy and don't try hard enough to be successful makes them pessimistic and leads to the loss of motivation for and commitment to their studies. When learners feel demotivated and undermined by teachers, they see little reason to attend school (McWhirter et al., 2017).

Disability
Being disabled can increase the risk of dropout (McWhirter et al., 2017). Research in Kenya shows a dropout rate of about 75% among learners with disabilities, with particular challenges for girls with disabilities (Eron & Emong, 2017). Learners with disabilities can be challenged by inaccessibility of school venues and the lack of equipment and resources to enable them to learn. Stigma, social exclusion and labelling by teachers and peers are not uncommon causes for school dropout.

Teenage pregnancy
According to many scholars, teenage pregnancy is the main challenge leading to dropout among girls (Weybright et al., 2017). South African research indicates that despite a decline in teenage pregnancies, many girls become pregnant and leave school (Rosenberg et al., 2015, Stoner, Rucinski, Edwards, Selin, Hughes, Wang, Agyei, Gomez-Olive, MacPhail, Kahn & Pettifor, 2019). Adults and peers may treat pregnant teenagers differently than before, due to stigma, leading to shame and the loss of emotional support (Sibeko, 2012). Absenteeism is common due to pregnancy-related symptoms of dizziness, vomiting, nausea and exhaustion (Rangiah, 2012) and providing childcare after birth (Stoner et al., 2019). These, in combination, can result in deteriorating academic performance and dropout.

Poverty
Poverty is a key contributor to dropout in South Africa (Dube & Nkomo, 2014; Strassburg, Meny-Gibert & Russell, 2010). British children from poor families do worse academically and are at higher risk of dropout than their better-off counterparts (Hirsch, 2007). Children facing poverty may experience less support for their education at home (Makunga, Schenck, Roman & Spolander, 2018), be unable to buy uniforms and school books (Yamba, 2005), have to leave school to seek employment to contribute to the survival of the

family (Hirsch, 2007), need to take care of ill parents (Arnab & Serumaga-Zake, 2006), or function as the head of their household (Van Breda, 2010).

Alcohol and substance abuse
Young people who use drugs or alcohol are often absent from school and are not motivated to study (DBE, RSA, 2013) resulting in decreased academic performance (Diraditsile & Mabote, 2019) and increased risk of dropout (Maynard et al., 2015).

Methodology
Research Approach
In this descriptive study we aimed to understand the factors leading to school dropout among a sample of female high school learners in Mpumalanga (De Vos, Strydom, Fouché & Delport, 2011). A qualitative approach was adopted to gather rich, descriptive data from the participants. The study was informed by the phenomenological research design (De Vos et al., 2011), which seeks to understand the life world of participants within their own frame of reference, helping them make sense of their lived experience.

Population and Sampling
In this article we draw on data collected from a larger study focused on learners who dropped out and subsequently returned to school. The population was thus defined as learners between the ages of 17 and 22 in rural areas who dropped out and returned to school to continue with their studies. The study was focused on rural areas because learners in rural areas are more prone to dropping out of school (DBE, RSA, 2011). Sampling was conducted in two stages. Firstly, one high school in a rural community of Mpumalanga was sampled using purposive sampling. Criteria for sampling were the principal's willingness to participate in the research and her/his ability to identify several returned early school leavers. Secondly, from that school, a total of 12 learners were purposively selected. The criteria for selection of learners were that the learner must have dropped out of school for at least a year, returned at least 6 months prior to data collection, and was willing to participate in the study.

We had intended to gather data from both males and females but only females met the sampling criteria. Thus, this study inadvertently became a study of female school dropout. Participants ranged from 17 to 22 years, with a mean age of 19.2; the sample was older than expected, perhaps because of the impact of having dropped out of school for a time. The participants were in Grades 9 to 12 at the time of the interview, with most (seven of the 12) in Grade 11. Nine dropped out of school for 1 year, and the other three for 2 years. They dropped out in Grades 9 to 12, with five of the 12 dropping out in Grade 11.

All but one had returned to school in the year in which data were collected, thus had fresh memories of dropping out. All learners returned to their original school.

Data Collection Method
Data were gathered through individual interviews. The first author interviewed participants in their school. For in-depth, rich data, interviews ranged from 60–90 minutes. During the interviews, probes and follow-up questions were used for clarification (De Vos et al., 2011). Open-ended questions were asked with the intention of eliciting in-depth information. The semi-structured interview schedule included questions such as: *What are the challenges you have encountered in school that made you to decide to leave/to dropout? What challenges did you encounter at home and your community that made you decide to leave school?* The first two interviews were conducted in English, as planned. However, we quickly realised that the learners struggled to articulate themselves in English, and thus conducted the remaining interviews in SiSwati, their home language.

Data Analysis
Creswell and Poth's (2018) spiral method of data analysis was used. After transcribing and organising the transcripts, the first author read and reread the transcripts in their entirety, immersing himself in the details with the intention of making sense of the interviews before breaking them down into parts. He then reflected on the larger data presented and formed initial categories. From there, he described the data in detail and developed themes through classification of the data. The themes were then classified into categories and subcategories for them to be a manageable set to record in the final narrative report. The findings were then interpreted in light of literature so that it would make sense and for the lessons learned to be highlighted. Data collected in SiSwati were analysed in SiSwati to prevent loss of meaning and nuance through translation. Only participant quotations reported here were translated into English.

Trustworthiness
The second author served as a peer reviewer (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), reading, testing and verifying the coding of the first author, and asking critical questions to determine the accuracy of the coding. In the selection and presentation of direct quotations under each theme, the second author again verified that the quotations provided a coherent account of the theme to which they were allocated. After the study was completed, the participants who were still in school were invited to a feedback meeting. In this meeting, the findings, interpretations, and conclusions reached in the

study were presented to them. Participants were given the opportunity to react to the findings and confirm whether they were unbiased. Participants also checked all the categories that emerged from the data. This strategy, known as member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), is an important technique to promote credibility in a study.

Ethics

The research proposal was scrutinised by the Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Johannesburg and approved on 25 August 2016. Approval to conduct the study was also requested and obtained from the Mpumalanga Department of Basic Education (DBE) on 30 January 2017. The school principal identified prospective participants, based on his knowledge of who had dropped out and returned to school. He initially approached prospective participants and linked those who were interested to participate with the researchers.

An information letter (De Vos et al., 2011) was drafted, addressing anonymity and confidentiality, dissemination of findings and the right for participants to withdraw from the investigation. Learners who were 18 years or older gave their own informed consent. For learners aged 17, parental informed consent was obtained, and the learners provided assent to participate. Pseudonyms are used to protect the confidentiality of participants. For professional referral of learners who needed further counselling after interviews, the researchers provided contact details of the nearest social workers.

Findings

Participants in this study raised three primary causes for them dropping out, viz. pregnancy, illness and immigration. These challenges are described using the participants' own words, with English translations in square brackets.

Pregnancy

More than half the participants (seven of the 12) dropped out of school because they were pregnant. Pregnancy has multiple impacts on the lives of young women and can contribute to their dropping out of school.

To avoid being a victim of discrimination from teachers in the school, Ntombi decided to leave school the moment she found out that she was pregnant. She claimed that teachers at the school were judgemental towards learners who become pregnant:

> *Maye sengibona kutsi ngalendlela bathritha ngayo labanye lebeba, labachubeka bafundza bangahlali bona ah, bebabapha ngabona kutsi bebabaphatsa kabi, maye mine bengingeke ngikhone kumelana nalesimo leso. [I've seen how bad teachers in the school treat pregnant learners. I wouldn't managed to tolerate that, so I decided to drop out.]*

When the school's principal discovered that Mpumi was pregnant, she was required to drop out. According to Mpumi, it is the school's policy that learners who become pregnant must bring a letter from the doctor stating the proposed date of birth. Furthermore, someone must be arranged to attend school with the pregnant girl to look after her, in case she went into labour while at school. However, Mpumi did not have money to consult a doctor to get that letter, nor could she find someone to look after her at school. She thus dropped out of school: "*Eish, it's because I did not have a letter to come with principal.*" Zama reported the same challenge:

> *Ahhh ngayekela cause laskolen' naw' lo, if uphreg bak'tshela kuts' ute nemuntfu latokugada se ene mine bekute muntfu latongigada so ngahlala. [I left because here in school one is required to bring a person to look after you when you're pregnant and I didn't have that person.]*

Philile reported that she did not want to leave school but was forced to by the principal because of her pregnancy. She was devastated, because she was the only family member to have reached Grade 10 and was hoping to complete her schooling. Her leaving school resulted in a suicide attempt: "*I was pregnant and I went to school early in the morning so the principal saw me around the school and he asked me to the office so* [another teacher] *call my mother to ask him about what's happening, so the principal chase me, so chase me out so I go back home and I come with Monday and he saw me again. So he tell that, he tell me that I must take my book and go back home. So when I arrived home I wrote a letter to say goodbye to all in the family. So that is very difficult, so I decide to kill myself.*" After giving birth prematurely, she endeavoured to return to school in April of that year but was turned away as the year was already in progress and she had to start again the following year.

Nel'siwe left school due to pregnancy-related sickness. Before the pregnancy, "*I was doing well*", but after getting pregnant, her grades started dropping and her level of concentration started lapsing: "*Yah sometimes because sometimes I was not coming and I was dodging classes … Because my body was not well ... And sleep.*" The more intense the sickness, the more she felt the need to stop attending school. She finally decided to leave and stay at home until she gave birth to her baby: "*I was sick, se se I decided to stay at home.*" Maya similarly left school due to pregnancy-related complications, and then, on her mother's advice, decided to stay home for the rest of that academic year:

> *Kute bengi-pregnant se then ngagula kwangikosa kutsi ngihambe ngiyohlal' es'bhedlela inyanga yonke, ngatsi nangihleti es'bhedlela ngatsi nangibuya watsi make sekuledi kutsi ngibuyel' eskolweni ngoba sengishiyeke kakhulu. [I was pregnant and then fell very sick in a sense that I*

ended up in hospital where I gave birth to a premature baby. I was forced to stay in hospital until my baby was ready but when I came back home, my mother advised me to stay at home until the coming year with the reason that I won't be able to catch up with all the work missed.]

Gugu continued attending school during her pregnancy but dropped out afterwards as she could not arrange childcare:

April and then ngathola mntfwana ngeti January se bekute muntfu wek'sala naye ekhaya se nga decider ku dropper out skolo. [I gave birth to my child in January but couldn't find someone to look after her when I'm at school. I then decided to leave and stay at home.]

Illness
Illness (unrelated to pregnancy), reported by three participants, was the second most common factor leading to school dropout. Coping with illness in school is difficult, as it affects the learners' academic performance and concentration, as well as their general sense of well-being and self.

Bridgette was burned in the face as a child, resulting in her right ear being removed. In 2015 her ear became infected, which led her to drop out of school: *"First term bengicala nga, kay ngacala ngagula." [I started getting sick in the first term.] ... "Nangigula then lendlebe beyinkinga le-serious vele inokukhumuka yehle ikhukhumuke yehle, then nga decider kuhlala phas' plus nebafundzi bebakhuluma kabi yabo." [When I was sick, my ear gave me problems, as it was swelling and my peers in the school would badmouth me.]* Bridgette was also pregnant but was clear that she did not drop out because of her pregnancy.

Makhosazana was very ill with HIV and tuberculosis and was unable to attend school. Her siblings advised her to stay at home until she was better. Since then, she was in and out of hospital as her health was deteriorating: *"Lengakwenta kutsi ngidrope out bengigula." [What made me to leave school was that I was sick.] ... "Ngacala kugula ngala kubo March so." [I started getting sick around March [2016].] ... "Ngagula ngiphenekuhambela kubo doctor, ngihambel' emakliniki." [I was sick and was always in clinics to consult with the doctors.]*

Fikile would get epileptic fits at school and sometimes collapsed. She relied on her peers in school for assistance at these times. She felt frustrated having to depend on other people, so she decided to leave school. She was also advised by her family to take a break from school so that they could focus on helping her get better:

Beng'gula ngabona kutsi kuncono laskoleni bengingakhoni kubeketela vele mang'gula nginesiyeti mang' hamba kancan ng'yawa ngiya fainter. [I was sick and I could see that I was not coping in school as I was getting fits.] ... Mmmm beng phatfwa siyeti ngicedze lapho manghamba kancan ngi fainte phindze ngivuke njalo njalo maye ngbona kuts kute skoleni everyday mangits ngyahamba bantfu ngeke bakhone kuts everyday bapho k'vusana nami everyday ngabona kuts nghlale maseng right ngtobuyela nyalo kuze ng'buyele kuts ngitibona ngi seng right mara kuyangcala ngaskhats ngsima ngebantfu manghamba bangbambe maye ekcaleni benghamba ngiy one. [I would feel dizzy at times and collapse. I would rely on people to help me but could see that I will not cope. So, from there I decided to leave school and come back when I'm better.]

Immigration
South Africa receives many immigrant children, because the country is seen as the wealthiest and most stable nation in the region (Chiranga, 2013). Eswatini (formerly Swaziland) shares most of its border with the Mpumalanga province (the rest being with KwaZulu-Natal and Mozambique), resulting in numbers of Swazi children attending school in Mpumalanga. Two Swazi participants reported dropping out due to immigration-related challenges.

Futhi came to South Africa to study and improve her life. She had no challenge in the Foundation Phase, as she was accepted without any problem: *"Bang' bang'tsatsa e-primary." [I was accepted in primary school.] ... "e-primary bekusete lemitsetfwo kutsi bantfwana bangeti eskolweni. Batfwana bangabatsatsi etikolweni." [Back then, every child was accepted into school without any conditions.]* But as she progressed through school, she began encountering challenges, as she was constantly reminded by her teachers that she needed to get her documents in order. She was told that without proper documentation, she would not be allowed to write her Grade 12 examinations: *"Ka-grade 9 ngafundza nasengifika ka-grade 10 ngila sacala sahlangabetana khona netinkinga cause besekudzinga sigcwalise ma-form wekutsi se, sesisetulu sigcwalisele lo-grade 11 and kwatholaka kwekutsi nasite basibita basikhulumise basitshele kutsi siyashusha laskolweni." [The problem started when I was in Grade 10; I was summoned by the teachers with other learners with the same problem and we were told to make means of sorting out our problem as every learner from that level is expected to fill in forms for registration.]* Because Futhi's father was unemployed and could not afford to pay for a study permit, she had to leave school:

Ekhaya kwaba khona ngoba kwatholakala kuthi babe kumele asentele i-study permit sathola kutsi siyadura singu three ... And akasebenti, so mine bengifuna kuzama kutsi kube khona lakangisitako kutsi ngithole le-study permit ... Ngiko lekungente ngayekela. [My father was expected to pay for my study permit, but the challenge was that he didn't have the money as he was not working.]

Thulisile also did not have a study permit for her to progress with her studies. She decided to leave

school and work to obtain the necessary documents for her to return and complete her studies:

> *I lengahlangana nako kutsi nje ngiyekel' eskolweni kutsi bengite i-ID ... Sengitsi maybe ngitawuzama kutsi ngiyithole ngiphindze ngibuye ngitofundza. [What made me decide to leave school was that I didn't have an ID. I then dropped out to have it fixed.]*

Limitations

The key limitation of this study (other than the small sample size, focus on females only and using only one school) is that all participants had returned to school after having dropped out. It is possible that the reasons that lead to their dropout were of a nature that permitted them to return to school, while other learners who did not return to school may have left for other reasons, e.g., family poverty that required them to leave and generate an income; disability that made it impossible for them to continue their studies; or a lack of academic aptitude. Consequently, the findings of this study cannot be used to provide definitive, universal reasons for school dropout among rural female learners.

Discussion and Recommendations

With this study we sought to determine the reasons why female learners at a rural school in the Mpumalanga province in South Africa dropped out of school. According to their own report, there were three primary reasons (in order of frequency): pregnancy, illness (unrelated to pregnancy) and immigration. The first and third of these were already identified and discussed in the review of literature, while illness could be regarded as a more general category, which is known to increase school dropout.

A careful consideration of the participants' lived-experience narratives about the reasons for dropout suggests three underlying and cross-cutting dynamics influencing the decision to drop out. Firstly, issues of health play an important role in causing some learners to leave school, although illness was found not to be significant in other South African studies (Branson et al., 2014). Because illness (as opposed to disability) is likely to be time-limited (with treatment, most illnesses can be cured), this might explain why this reason emerged prominently among the participants who had returned to school after dropping out for health reasons. Five learners dropped out for health reasons – two related to their pregnancy and three related to other health concerns.

Health concerns can, at times, be so severe that learners are unable to continue with their studies, such as when they require medium- to long-term hospitalisation, are infectious, suffer severe pain or their immune systems are severely compromised. In such cases, temporary dropout is inevitable, and such learners should later be able to return to school. However, a closer relationship between the schools and health services could reduce the need to drop out or reduce the duration of dropout. Health services are, typically, thinly spread in rural communities, which may result in learners in rural areas being more vulnerable to health-related dropout. Given that returning to school after a period of absence is challenging, more should be done to provide community-based health care to such learners to keep them in school for as long as possible.

A second theme causing school dropout is policies and structures. Four learners dropped out due to school policy on pregnancy and two because of national policy on immigrant learners. In both cases, structural factors beyond the learners' control explicitly or implicitly forced them out of the school system. It seems apparent from the narratives of these participants that they would have remained in school had they not been required to leave. Most of the six learners in this situation used terminology suggesting that they felt to have been "forced out" of school. They also reported feelings of judgement and discrimination, not from other learners, but from school staff. This is tantamount to discrimination and abuse and a violation of the human right to education (Human Rights Watch, 2018; South African Human Rights Commission [SAHRC], 2018).

The South African Schools Act (RSA, 1996a) and the draft national policy on learner pregnancy (DBE, RSA, 2018) promotes the right for pregnant learners to remain in school. However, the policy (section 6.4.2) does require learners who are more than 6 months pregnant to provide a medical certificate indicating that she is fit to continue with school and that if she fails to do so "she *may* [our emphasis] be asked to take a leave of absence until medical proof is provided." On the other hand, the policy does require schools to make efforts to provide support and flexibility to pregnant learners so that they may continue with their education (section 6.4.3). Furthermore, no guideline exists that pregnant learners must be accompanied to school by a carer. It appears that school principals elect to implement the exclusionary aspects of this policy and neglect to consider the supportive and inclusive aspects.

The Department of Education's policy excludes undocumented migrant learners (DBE, RSA, 2014) – an immigrant learner "must be in possession of the relevant official documentation issued by the Department of Home Affairs" (section 4.e.i). As a result, undocumented learners are often expelled from school. However, the SAHRC (2019) has strongly challenged this and pointed out the various inconsistencies, ambiguities, and contradictions in various legislative and policy documents. Here too,

principals elect to enact the exclusionary rather than the inclusive policy provisions.

The DBE should pay more attention to ensuring the rights of children to receive an education, even when they are pregnant, mothers or undocumented migrant children. Indeed, the policy on learner pregnancy in schools (DBE, RSA, 2018) is emphatic about the right of pregnant learners to continue with education, but also introduces clauses that exclude them. Our data suggest that measures that appear to be in the learner's interests (such as obtaining a letter from a doctor and having someone to look after them while at school) in fact create structural obstacles that lead to learners dropping out. These are not in the best interests of the learner. When there are subtle contradictions in policy or legislation between inclusion and exclusion, principals should be encouraged to lean towards inclusion so that learners are able to remain in school.

The third underlying theme relating to school dropout is poverty. Poverty was addressed in the literature review as a driver of dropout, but the manifestation of poverty in our data suggests a different link between poverty and dropout. Poverty here manifests in preventing some learners (including four learners in our study) from meeting the structural requirements mentioned above, namely to pay for a doctor to provide a letter required of pregnant learners, to pay for childcare so that the learner can return to school after delivery, and to pay for documentation by migrant learners (such as an identity book (ID) or study permit). In these instances, learners whose families had a healthier cashflow would have been able to meet these policy requirements. But for the four learners, the lack of finances meant they were doubly disadvantaged; the policies themselves are arguably illegitimate and, even if they were legitimate, the families could not afford them.

Greater investment is required by the nation to protect children from the deleterious effects of poverty on education. The Department of Social Development (DSD) has an important role to play here, particularly through the delivery of social security, such as the Child Support Grant. The DBE also has an important role to play through the provision of school-based psychosocial support services to children. A good example of a programme to address these issues is the Gauteng province's *Bana Pele* (Children First) programme, which provided a package of free services to poor children aimed at keeping them in school, e.g., no school fees, free health care and uniform, and a feeding scheme.

In conclusion, we argue that our data show that many female learners drop out of school for preventable reasons, and that creating a more learner-centred school environment, based on principles of inclusivity, would assist in reducing such dropouts. This includes closer engagement between the DBE and the Department of Health to ensure easy and free access to health care for learners to reduce dropout entirely or substantially reduce the duration of time out of school; closer alignment of DBE policies and practices with the human rights values enshrined in the Bill of Rights in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996b; closer engagement between the DBE and the DSD for the provision of school-based social welfare services to alleviate poverty and remove financial barriers to children's education.

Authors' Contributions

PM collected and analysed the data and prepared a rough draft of the manuscript. AvB substantially revised and finalised the manuscript. Both authors reviewed and agreed on the final manuscript.

Notes

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