

The Role of Educational Stakeholders in Mitigating Socio-Economic Shocks Causing Students to Drop Out of School in East Shewa, Ethiopia

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Abstract

This study analyses the role that key education stakeholders play in mitigating socio-economic shocks causing students to drop out of school. The study investigated the role of teachers, parents, support providers, and administrators in four districts of East Shewa zone in Oromia Region, Ethiopia, with respect to their understanding of the severity of school drop-out, collaborative actions to combat it, and context-based handling of shocks. A cross-sectional descriptive survey design was employed. Pertinent data were collected from second-cycle primary schools in the areas of Adea, Dugda, Gimbichu, and Fentalle, which were selected based on cluster sampling. Semi-structured interviews and focus-group discussions were utilised for the purposively selected participants and a binary-mode questionnaire for the randomly selected groups of teachers in the targeted schools. Data were collected and analysed systematically by means of percentage points and thematic analysis. The findings show that though causes of school drop-out were diverse from place to place in accordance with the socio-economic conditions of the respective communities, the actions taken to combat school drop-out were not cognisant of the communities' socio-economic conditions as they did not consider the varied nature of shocks. While school drop-out was understood to be a misfortune among supportive groups, teachers, and supervisors, it was not equally understood so by parents, who appeared as representatives of the community. Strategies that different education stakeholders used to combat factors leading to school drop-out were not focused and context friendly.

Keywords: role; stakeholders; socio-economic shocks; school drop-out

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Introduction

School drop-out has nullifying effects on students' educational success since it results in a sudden end to the overall progress of educational accomplishments (Tyler and Lofstrom 2009; Zaharia 2009). Reasons that children drop out of school include causes of a push or pull nature. In this regard, Sahin, Arseven, and Kihc (2016) and Rumberger and Lim (2008), in their studies on drop-out cases in Türkiye and California, respectively, consider factors such as family instability, low income levels, parents' lack of interest in children's education, and seeking children's labour as pull factors leading to school drop-out. However, the direct cause of each case was not clearly discussed in line with intervention mechanisms.

According to Zaharia (2009), students' academic underachievement, in the forms of students' moving from one place to another, non-promotional school changes, and being held back in promotion, are considered school-based push factors. These are also widely identified personal predictors of student engagement and the social aspects of schooling such as low learning abilities, low motivation, and attention deficiency (Chirtes 2010; Tyler and Lofstrom 2009). Actions taken to tackle school drop-out need to be related and responsive to the context-specific socio-economic conditions of each situation. Since a school is a society in miniature, what the society experiences in its daily life either accelerates or decelerates the lesson-delivery system. The context-specific situation as well as how the situation and the lesson-delivery system are connected provide either positive or negative influences on children's education. As a result, all considerations to tackle school drop-out should be responsive not only to the economic but also to the socio-cultural implications of schooling and learning.

Low teacher commitment, financial problems, pregnancy, divorce, belonging to a minority group, and having a disability have been identified as the target causes of school drop-out (Yokozeki 1997). Poor parental supervision, negative peer pressure, drug abuse, malnutrition and health problems, and low self-motivation and interest have also been noted to have triggering effects on drop-out (Chinyoka 2014). In the category of determining factors, low teacher motivation, having a disability, negative peer pressure, drug abuse, low self-motivation and interest are individual based, and require individuals equipping themselves with necessary skills to overcome. On the other hand, family financial problems, divorce, poor parental supervision, and poor health are considered an institutional category at large. The intervention mechanisms to alleviate socio-economic shocks leading to school drop-out, however, are devised in a holistic and generic manner such that drop-out cases are considered and treated in a uniform manner. Such intervention mechanisms appear to be far-fetched and unrelated to the specific socio-economic conditions of the society. Hence, this research intended to investigate comparative role-assumption in combating socio-economic shocks causing children to drop out of school.

In Ethiopia, causes of school drop-out include parents seeking their children's labour; early marriage; traditional thought on the part of some parents to misconceive education

to be a diverter of cultural norms; unsafe environments, including abduction; extensive dependence on small businesses that force children to quit schooling; and supposed role models in the community who discourage children not to further their education (Chaudhury, Christiaensen, and Assadullah 2006). Moreover, Kebede, Demissie, and Estifanos (2015) find that issues such as shortages of educational materials, distance from school, low interest and quality of teachers, and unhealthy school climates cause students to drop out. The drop-out cases are treated in terms of teacher training, material supplies, community-based inductions, and arrangement of school feeding programmes, which were more responsive and favourable for schooling situations in pastoralist areas but not for the other economic sectors, such as agrarian and semi-pastoralist regions.

Though there are many factors affecting students' learning, some are common to certain areas whereas others are area-specific. Hence, even if possible interventions were available, it would be difficult to provide similar forms of intervention to different areas as each specific livelihood region has its own features and impacts on children's schooling. For instance, the largely agricultural areas have vast and seasonally labour-intensive harvests, which tempt families to put children into labour. Once they experience absenteeism, children themselves are then tempted to remain home. This is an economic aspect of the problem. On the cultural side, as evidenced from the researcher's survey, there are practices of early-age betrothal, termed *Nikkaa hidhuu* (literally meaning "early-age bride price"), in which families agree to marriage between children from the time of their births. From the outset, these children do not have the choice to make their own decisions, and their education is restricted by their families when desired. This is a socio-cultural determinant less considered in intervention.

Researchers (Chirtes 2010; Shahidul and Karim 2015; Zaharia 2009) indicate that possible breakthroughs to combat school drop-out must be based on identifying roles as well as causes. In this respect, Furger (2008) identifies some intervention strategies to combat drop-out which include, but are not limited to, parental engagement, in-school student-teacher collaboration, timely reaction to drop-out triggering signs, making classroom learning relevant, boosting students' learning by diversifying rigour, and rethinking scheduling. In the research context under consideration, however, there was uncertainty whether the stakeholders' roles were critically considered in the nature of the schooling environment, society's livelihoods, as well as cultural conditions. In the study area (East Shewa zone), there are instances of children dropping out of school, and various stakeholders, such as zone and district education offices, women's and children's affairs, non-government agencies, and private support-renderers, are implementing interventions in different ways to address this issue. The pertinence of such interventions to the specific livelihoods in which students grow up and learn has not been objectively studied. Thus, this research investigated strategies used to make interventions in the Fentalle (pastoralist area), Adea (agrarian), Dugda (semi-pastoralist), and Gumbichu (agrarian) districts of East Shewa Administrative Zone in Ethiopia. The study was justifiable as it focused on ensuring validity and context-

viability drop-out combating techniques used by different stakeholders in line with the existing situation of each district.

Problem Statement

School drop-out is considered the most striking factor of students' learning and overall social progress (Derribe, Endale, and Ashebir 2013). The causes of this issue are just as varied as the different sources and causes (UNICEF 2012). Some conditions can be handled directly by schools whereas others need collaborative actions (Teshome 2012). In order to take collaborative action, education stakeholders need to identify their roles clearly and perform their duties in close contact with others (Begizew 2015). There may be plans within which schools and the community work on the cases of drop-out; however, context-based interventions and role-clarity in the process are not well researched (American Psychological Association 2012). Moreover, researchers have looked at responses to drop-out that are specific to other contexts and do not apply to the study area being examined.

In relation to this issue, Smink and Reimer (2010) studied the role of rural community in combating drop-out in the context of rural schools and found that parental direct involvement in school roles was necessary when needed. However, they did not trace holistic interventions required to tackle drop-out in terms of external collaborations. In addition, Chinyoka (2014) found that to mitigate school drop-out, parents and the government should boost interventions within and out of school but did not provide the type of collaboration and context-specific handling of events.

Burrus and Roberts (2012) discuss early interventions to combat drop-out cases, however, with minimal reflection on specific situations across social contexts such as urban, rural, pastoralist, and semi-pastoralist cases. An inspiring research study was also carried out by Ajaja (2012), who found that patterns of school drop-out were diverse within the school level, such that interventions to combat them should be made in line with the diversity in the level. However, the research did not cover the necessary collaboration among key stakeholders.

In the Ethiopian context, according to the Global Out of School Children Initiative (2012), key dimensions of school drop-out include social, economic, cultural, and political issues. While the initiative delineated some gaps causing children to drop out of school, it did not consider context-specific causes and interventions to be made, especially with regard to traditional thought and the existence of negative role models. Woldehanna (2012) studied children's educational completion rates and drop-out in the context of Ethiopia's national poverty reduction strategy, and found that most drop-out triggering cases were economic, whereby children shouldered family financial burdens. However, the research did not deal with drop-out cases considering the diversity in socio-economic situations and the role of diverse stakeholders in combating drop-out.

This research investigates the context-based roles of key educational stakeholders in mitigating socio-economic shocks that cause students to drop out of school by looking into their collaboration, situation-specific commitment in providing intervention, and implementing directly workable means of combating school drop-out. This research analyses stakeholders' roles (in school and in the community) in combating school drop-out by taking the role of teachers, supervisors, non-government agents, and parent-teacher association (PTA) committee members into consideration.

In East Shew, Ethiopia, a significant number of students drop out of school due to socio-economic shocks such as poverty, seasonal migration of the family in search of water and pasture, conflict, and parental labour-seeking (i.e., using children as labour or in small businesses). These shocks not only affect students' performance but also lead to a lack of motivation and engagement in their education. How the educational stakeholders, including teachers, parents, and community leaders, work together to mitigate the impact of these shocks and support students in completing their education has been partially studied so far. However, the relatedness and responsiveness of stakeholders' drop-out mitigation interventions to the context in which the problem manifests has not been studied definitively in line with stakeholders' roles. Hence, the current research focuses on unveiling stakeholders' drop-out combating roles in line with the socio-economic conditions cited in selected districts of East Shewa zone. Thus, the following research questions guided the study:

- How do key education stakeholders (parents, teachers, supervisors, and support-renderers) perceive their roles and responsibilities in addressing school drop-out in East Shew?
- What are the specific socio-economic shocks that contribute to school drop-out in East Shew?
- How do these socio-economic shocks affect students' academic performance and motivation?
- What are the current mitigation strategies and interventions used by education stakeholders in East Shew regarding the impact of socio-economic shocks on drop-out?

Methodology

Research Design

This study used a cross-sectional survey design (Bloor et al. 2001) to analyse stakeholders' roles in combating drop-out, incorporating both quantitative and qualitative aspects. Although quantitative and qualitative data were used as bases for the description of stakeholders' roles, qualitative data were used to complement the quantitative data. Cross-sectional survey design was used for its viability to enable the researcher to identify the role of stakeholders from the standpoint of their understanding

of drop-out cases, interventions they practically made, and the pertinence of each stakeholder's action to the diverse contexts (Olsen and St. George 2004).

Data for the research (primary for the issues in focus) were collected in the form of experiential self-report (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2007) from eight second-cycle primary schools in four districts of East Shewa zone which were selected based on cluster sampling. Sources of data included sixty teachers from each school, sixteen PTA members, four members of school support groups, and four supervisors from district education offices. The interview questions were prepared in English and were then translated into Afaan Oromoo (the working language of Oromia Regional State) to make participation clearer and easier. Thereafter, the interview transcripts were prepared in English during analysis of data.

Samples were identified through multistage sampling wherein the target areas (districts) of study were determined via cluster sampling, and then underlying schools were made out through purposive sampling. In reference to key stakeholders, samples from teachers and students were selected through simple random sampling, whereas members of PTAs, representatives from district supervisory offices, and supportive agencies were identified through purposive sampling. Simple random sampling was used to free the sample selection process from bias such that there could be equal chances for each staff member in-service to be sampled at random (Miller and Brewer 2003, 269; Pandey and Pandey 2015, 40). Purposive sampling was used with PTA members, supervisors, and representatives of school support groups according to their roles and experience (Dawson 2007; Ruane 2005). Different sampling techniques were used to identify samples per the nature of the population (Bhattacharjee 2019; Bryman 2016).

Instruments of data collection included semi-structured interview and focus-group discussion (Bloor et al. 2001; Dawson 2007) for the purposively selected participants and a binary-mode questionnaire for the randomly selected groups of teachers in the targeted schools. Two focus-group discussion protocols were arranged, where collaborative committee members working with schools (parents, teachers, and society elders) were in one group, and samples from support-rendering groups and supervisors were arranged in another group. The research data were collected in such a manner that first questionnaire-based data were collected and then focus-group discussions (data) that were to be naturalistically explicative and complementary to the questionnaire-based data were held. Data collection procedures included ethical considerations. The study was initiated and held under the supervision of East Shewa Zone Education Office, where the researcher, as a concerned professional, obtained a permit to investigate the issue under study.

Data analyses also followed the same procedure with planned description and explication of the roles of stakeholders completed in steps. Techniques of data analyses followed organisation of both quantitative and qualitative data in the order of the research questions and objectives. Then, the quantitative data were analysed through

percentage values; thematic explication was also made on the qualitative data. A summary of major findings, conclusions, and recommendations were made based on the two-way analysis.

Results

Stakeholders' Perceptions of Causes of School Drop-Out

The perceptive reflections of school drop-out causes rested on responses given to questions related to tradition, unsafe mobility cases, distance from home, labour-seeking, cash indulgence, and negative role models. The results are presented in table 1.

Table 1: Reflection of stakeholders and teachers' perceptions of causes of school drop-out

No.	Options	No.	%
1.	Distance from school	7	12
2.	Early marriage	20	33
3.	Economic cases (supply and need for survival)	10	17
4.	Unsafe school environment	0	0
5.	Parents' labour-seeking	23	38
Total		60	100

From the above data, it can be asserted that parents requiring children's labour (38%) and the tradition of early marriage (33%) had the highest rates of prevalence, consecutively. Economic problems indicated by shortages of school materials and working to support oneself and the whole family was third in prevalence (17%). The fourth rate of prevalence was distance from school (12%). Hence, it can be noted from the above responses that parents seeking children's labour for assisting with household chores, practices of early marriage (typically of girls), and shortages of school supplies were the three most considerable causes of school drop-out. Home-to-school distance and an unsafe school environment were not as considerable in their effects, as indicated in the responses.

Diversity in the Manifestation of Drop-Out Triggering Conditions

In addition to identifying the rate of prevalence in conditions leading to school drop-out, the research also looked into inter-district differences in the manifestation of the socio-economic shocks leading to school drop-out. In that case, the conditions stated above were considered against the districts, and responses from teachers and reactions to the focus-group discussion guides were consecutively stated and interpreted, as shown in table 2.

Table 2: Prevalence of cases triggering school drop-out

No.	Options	Districts				No.	%
		Adea	Dugda	Fentalle	Gimbichu		
1.	Distance from school	–	2 (3%)	–	5 (9%)	7	12
2.	Early marriage	–	17 (28%)	1 (2%)	2 (3%)	20	33
3.	Economic problems	5 (9%)	3 (5%)	2 (3%)	–	10	17
4.	Unsafe school environment	–	–	–	–	–	–
5.	Parents labour-seeking	17 (28%)	2 (3%)	3 (5%)	1 (2%)	23	38
Total		22	24	6	8	60	100

As shown in table 2, the distribution and prevalence of drop-out triggering cases was disparate across the concerned districts. Distance from school was the most highly prevalent and triggering drop-out cause than any other case in Gimbichu, whereas it was not marked as a prevalent cause of drop-out in Adea and Fentalle. In Dugda, leaving the family home may cause students to drop out because parents see it as a break from their culture. Cases of drop-out related to economic problems were higher in Adea (9%), Dugda (5%), and Fentalle (3%), but the underlying conditions were different across the districts. Whereas there are small businesses in Adea, family pressure is the prevalent case in Dugda, supported by misleading role models of elders and peers, as indicated in the following comment:

As children grow in age, their families [not only parents] follow them up strictly, not to be spoiled and miss the betrothal quality set for them. As such, they are forced to quit their education, especially girls, when they grow to pubescent age. (PTA3, Dugda)

From the remark above, it is possible that children's education, along with other choices made for them, is strongly influenced by family tradition; even decisions about marriage may be made long before children understand what it means to be human. Moreover, people worry that as children grow older, they might be negatively influenced by the customs of the city and become spoiled. Such suspicion creates a gap between the traditional rites at home and the school-based requirements and rules. In spite of the traditional tier pulling children out of school, awareness-raising inductions for parents and the community at large were not given as far as the researcher surveyed. This could be the missing link on the part of the PTA and the zone education offices in general.

Another point of concern was that though both boys and girls are under the burden of traditional marriage practices, girls are more affected than boys. Parents tend to restrict girls from leaving home for schooling for fear that they (the girls) could easily be won over by peer pressure as they are away from parental control. In Fentalle, the case of children's school drop-out is related to seasonal movement/migration (*godaansa*). Regarding *godaansa*, the critical part of the movement was asserted to be insufficiency, and even non-existence of nourishment and water for children to remain home during parents' migration in search of pasture and water. Parents are doing their best to ensure children stay in school; however, the children often find themselves torn between their parents' expectations and the demands of school. In some cases, they may even be discouraged from learning.

The main issue lies in parents devaluing education as a non-economic investment. Parents expected their children to come up with total changes every time they completed a grade level. However, the condition was far from being real since children learned under different contexts which exposed them to heavy burdens at home and at school. One of the participants had this to say:

The government has built schools. Yet, water pipes are either non-functional or totally absent. To the Karrayyu [people], camels, goats, and cattle are means of livelihood. You cannot live any longer without keeping your herd safe. Besides that there are no possibilities for us to keep our children and go on pasturing because of food scarcity and lack of water. (PTA2, Fentalle)

Looking into the case in Fentalle, it can be seen that migration could be related to physical needs such as water, food, and the like. However, the case in Dugda was more psychological than physical. Migration was another factor causing children to drop out of school. The mitigation strategies used by parents and schools focused on calling back children to school after a long absence. However, on discovering their inability to cope with their lessons, the children tended to boycott lessons without informing their parents. Other stakeholders such as non-government agencies and relief associations gave more emphasis to material supplies and training for teachers while the problem was in traditional pressure among the society.

Other issues mentioned as causes of school drop-out were related to children's lack of interest in attending school, which could be linked to a lack of positive role models. This is supported by research in existing literature (e.g., Tyler and Lofstrom 2009). Possible hostility with teachers on disciplinary issues, lack of parental control, infections, seasonal migration (peculiarly in pastoralist areas), and parents' lower capacity to secure rent rooms for their children as they go to higher levels of learning are also among the pulling factors. In spite of the diverse existence of socio-economic shocks leading to drop-out, the educational stakeholders' mitigation strategies were not efficient to meet the demand in view.

Status of Collaboration among Stakeholders

Collaborative action to tackle school drop-out was also a point of discussion in the research. The first issue in the collaboration process was raised as the very consideration by the community of drop-out as a threat to both the students and the families. The issues underlying collaborative breakthroughs to address the impact of school drop-out are presented in table 3.

Table 3: Existence of co-planning intervention strategies

No.	Response	No.	%
1.	Existent	42	70
2.	Non-existent	14	23
3.	Occasional	4	7
Total		60	100

The above data show that parents and schools frequently collaborated on co-planning. Every school year, children were asked to notify their expected achievements every semester with the knowledge of the parents. Parents were even made to sign the planned achievement expectancy. However, in reality, plans did not surpass the figures and promises as the respondents indicated. Schools highlighted the issue of strict parenting, while community agents attributed problems to shared expectations, emphasising barriers for both schools and parents. One participants gave the following account:

Some parents do not consider students' absence and drop-out as threats. They even take that to be [a] signal for productivity, since they largely take a negative account of schooling, by considering it wastage. Others even send their children to school only because they are urged. The moment you ask them to send their children to school, they say: "I have given two to the school, and the remaining must work to live." (PTA3, Fentalle)

From the above statement, parents' considering schooling as a waste of time was the major issue confronting swift action to reduce school drop-out. Since the community members in some contexts consider being absent from school or dropping out as a business opportunity, drop-out mitigation on the part of the community lags behind expectation.

Another account considered that the community had knowledge about the value of schooling, but due to certain circumstances, they let children quit schooling. Reliance on day-to-day labour-selling, uncertainty about how schooling relates to youth unemployment, concerns about students becoming too rigid or inflexible as they progress through school, and the very weak return of education to family expenses were considered triggering factors which instigated negligence of collaborating to reduce school drop-out rates. Research (e.g., Amadi 2013) maintains that the economic return of education has remarkable effects on the likely continuation of children's school

attendance. However, considering the importance of the economic return, taking failure of some individuals as an indicator of total failure is the wrong attribution attached to schooling. With this in view, while some of the responses denote school drop-out as a threat, others take it as a benefit in terms of the possibility of children being employed in labour. One participant shared as follows:

Parents do know that dropping out of school is a threat. Yet, they never attempt to tackle the problem because they consider it normal. We, in the support chain, give them training several times. We go down to the locales and provide seasonal inductions. But, the parents hear in one and leave out in the other. Actually, not only ignorance but also life demand by itself is a big pressure. For instance, girls travel a long distance to fetch water [for] the family. If they are to attend school, there should be some means of filling the labour gap. (SGM1, Dugda)

In the above assertion, it was noted that though parents know the negative impact of children's school drop-out, the demand for labour in instances such as fetching water from faraway places was a common practice causing students to drop-out. Parents should have a clear mindset that their children's education is a way for future life and progress in society. Hence, they should find a way to have children help with work during their free time or when they are not in school.

That strong belief alone was not enough for parents to effectively address school drop-out. Parents considered school drop-out to be a threat but demanded their children's labour. In comparison, the situation in Dugda was more demand-based than that in Fentalle. While understanding was the first point in making collaborative breakthroughs to tackle drop-out, the second point concerned co-planning, which referred to joint strategy that was almost non-existent. The participants shared their experiences, saying that they began by following policy guidelines; this meant that instead of addressing grassroots issues first, they followed a top-down approach. In cases where co-planning did not turn out well, respondents explained the reasons as follows: The very policy to combat drop-out should make clear that education is for the future of children in the clearest way that the community members can understand (productive aspect). Policies should also clarify where students can apply their education in response to societal needs, and what society should contribute to children's education (distributive roles and values). Since schools work with the guiding frame of regulations, the regulatory policy designed to guide schools should match the reality of the community in which children live and learn (regulatory aspect). Most importantly, considering the diversity among places and people's socio-economic conditions requires special attention as it marks the unseen aspect of societal and children's life demands and problems (the miscellaneous aspect). Unfortunately, that comprehensive breakthrough in policy has not been included so far.

Reasons for Lack of Collaboration among Stakeholders

It is evident from the data in table 4 that although responses in table 3 ascertained the existence of co-planning, the situation was more about top-down “propaganda” than about genuine, internal efforts to address the issue. The main reason for inattentive efforts, as stated in the response index, was the schools not having accessible and responsive ties to the community.

Table 4: Barriers to collaborative interventions

No.	Response option	No.	%
1.	Lack of strong and workable ties	17	28
2.	Taking drop-out follow-up as the sole duty of the school	13	22
3.	Weak coordinating capacity on the part of schools	19	32
4.	Taking drop-out as a private issue	11	18
Total		60	100

The other pivotal concern was strength and workability of the connections within the community. Distorted attribution of drop-out either to the school or the individual learners was also the weakest area on the part of stakeholders. Overall, the data showed there was a general plan to address drop-out rates, but it was hard to make it practical. This was mainly because of poor communication between schools and stakeholders and the belief that school responsibilities belonged only to the schools (Namukwaya and Kibirige 2014). To substantiate, the different sites experienced different cases causing children to drop out. Yet, the mitigation strategies did not consider that difference and the subsequent effects.

Nature and Status of Modelling

By identifying the key factors leading to drop-out and guiding collaborative efforts by stakeholders, the research also examined the nature and status of modelling. Participants’ reactions indicated that although there were workable models supporting progressive learning, there were also discouraging situations blocking students’ learning, driving them to boycott going to school. One of the assertions was as follows:

The immediate situation reflects [the] existence of non-educated but rich people who easily attract school children to labour-selling. The plantations around lakes on the production of onion and tomato have [a] tangible blockade on learning. First, the investors attract cheap labour by paying [an] attractive lump sum, through which they capture more and more children. Second, there are conditions of educated, unemployed youth whose exemplum kindles distrust on schooling. (WS1, Dugda)

Thematically set, the above statement suggests that regular school attendance cannot meet or address the daily needs of the students. So, children tend to fill their immediate needs, and as a result, give up learning. As the experiential reflection denotes, with non-educated people getting richer and richer, spending valuable time in school served no purpose, especially since labour-selling was necessary for a secure future as students grew older. Yet, doing some demand-based work could have had little effect had it been based on model-seeking and visionary handling. The trend of child labour-selling is believed to be a hazard both to learning and life, as existing research shows (Gibbons, Huebler, and Loaiza 2005). Another assertion indicated a lack of commitment among stakeholders to work together to set grounds for effective attendance. The zone education office and the civil service officers should collaborate to control and minimise the enticing activities of business centres on education, which takes children's labour for the earning of mediocre income. A participant from Fentalle had the following to say:

No one wants to labour much, even the teacher. A teacher comes here by his bike, and turns to the town soon. When there is [a] serious shortage of water, there is no one to attend to the case and report for solutions. Deviating models are now mushrooming from the town, which show children how to chew, chat, and smoke shisha. Children quit schooling with the pretext of working on irrigation, yet spend considerable time in the town without their parents' knowledge. (PTA3, Fentalle)

From the statement above, it was noted that those who were expected to be good models could not win on environmental pressure, and that they failed to be good examples for students to attend schools. On the other hand, where good models failed, the instructive bad models in the city brought experiences which easily drew children away from schools. Existing literature also indicates that there is a need for more positive models for students to be visionary in their school attendance (Fashola 1998). Positive models could help students to complete school and achieve well since their experiences are similar to those of the school children.

Some schools indicated their use of diverse means of controlling drop-out such as assessing drop-out, influencing timely return through follow-up, and rewarding those who return to school. The law of readiness contends that a particular behaviour will be carried out more quickly if someone is physically and mentally ready (Gray, Arnott-Hill, and Benson 2021). Since readiness to learn is essential to being a student, they are more likely to return to school after dropping out. It has been shown that a students' readiness to be in the learning environment is productive when it is coupled with the law of activity and the law of effect (Seifert and Sutton 2009, 125). Even where schools attempted to follow-up, there were setbacks on the part of the community in terms of these aspects.

Setbacks in School–Community Interventions

Concerted efforts to combat school drop-out cases face obstacles from parents’ lack of awareness about the negative effects of drop-out both on the individual students’ progress and society at large, as shown in table 5. When children are absent from school, parents consider it a “free situation” to use children’s labour for household chores.

Table 5: Setbacks in school–community interventions

No.	Response options	Rank
1.	Lack of awareness about the hazards of dropping out	1 (41%)
2.	Attributing in-school problems as the sole duties to be solved by the schools	2 (32%)
3.	Giving deep attention to their family issues and forgetting the school request and assignments	3 (14%)
4.	Weak attention on the part of coordinators in the education sector, or making only ceremonial, quarterly, or annual follow-up	4 (9%)
5.	Expecting schools to go to children’s houses to register/include them, which makes schools the sole proprietors of education	5 (4%)

The second challenge is the belief that in-school problems are only the responsibility of schools, while the third challenge is the burden placed on families. This also had a striking effect since parents in particular and the community at large considered the handling of students’ absenteeism from and drop-out of school to be handled by schools alone. In the real sense, however, families and schools have tremendous roles to play together to boost students’ school retention and completion. Another challenge was the lack of strict oversight from school and educational administrators, which often worsened the situation. Furthermore, the lack of home–school intervention puts too much pressure on teachers and complicates comprehensive interventions.

Discussion

In this study, perceived causes of school drop-out were expounded in terms of parental labour-seeking and early marriage practices. With regard to prevalence across districts, causes of school drop-out were different across the sample districts. For example, parental labour-seeking was most prevalent (20%) in the Adea district, whereas early marriage was the most striking case (20%) in the Dugda district. The reason being that the Adea district had very large crop production, which required huge numbers of labour during harvest, and that season coincided with the mid-term examination session. Once children were absent from school for days to help their parents with the harvest, they were forced to miss the examinations and then tended to remain home for the rest of the academic year. The case in Dugda district was different as it was related to the

community's culture to engage children very early. The same case was certain to be a barrier to children's school completion as stipulated in research on the effects of early marriage in East Africa (Omoeva and Hatch 2020). When school boys and girls grew up and kept progressing in their education, parents and the community suspected them of misbehaving and being disengaged.

Weak coordination on the part of schools, the lack of co-working plans of intervention among stakeholders, and the consideration of follow-up on children's school attendance to be the sole duty of schools were barriers to holistic interventions to combat drop-out. Weak coordination was evidenced in terms of the school working plan which was not open to the community members and the other supportive agents such as non-government organisations, administrators, and even PTA members. Cases were reported as shortage only when observed. As a result, proactive planning and follow-up were not well developed. This correlates with other studies held in Ethiopia that confirm families' socio-economic status, family support, teacher support, and peer support are strongly linked to school engagement (Olana and Tefera 2022; Taddese and Congman 2022).

Weak coordination and lack of attention of school drop-out were attributed to lack of awareness on the part of key stakeholders, considering school drop-out to be a duty to be solved by schools alone (41%) and stakeholders' inattention to make follow-up (32%) due, mainly, to being focused on their sectoral and personal duties (14%). Though limited in their attributive orders, the weak supervisory skills of district education offices (9%) and the expectation of schools to call children up when absent (4%) were also the other cases for weak coordination in combating school drop-out. In this regard, research conducted at different times underlines the imperative for stakeholders' collaboration to combat and minimise, if not stop, children's school drop-out (Dagnew 2017; Kibret et al. 2017). In addition to weak coordination and lack of awareness, the drop-out mitigation roles, strategies, and activities were not responsive to the diverse socio-economic contexts of the selected districts. Research shows, however, that as far as drop-out-triggering factors vary in context and cause, the mitigation strategies should also vary (Bezabih 2019; Melese 2015; Yassin 2020). Overall, the perceived causes and prevalence of school drop-out in selected districts of East Shewa Administrative Zone were diverse for which different intervention mechanisms must be used. In contrast to that reality, the intervention methods and coordination of efforts were widely discussed and inconsistent with the contextual differences across districts.

Summary of Findings

On the basis of the above findings, it can be asserted that causes of school drop-out are diverse and disparate according to the socio-economic conditions of the community in the target districts in which the study focused. As a result, the nature of communities' understanding of the effect of drop-out was also diverse. Though there were top-down attempts to reduce socio-economic shocks leading to drop-out, the potential to harness attendance by reducing the shock has fallen under the ideas of tradition and temporary

conditions such as daily labour-selling and unemployment. There were also issues related to migration for pasture but the reality did not reveal itself as migration-based as far as there were possibilities to keep children home to attend their lessons even during migratory seasons. The support provided to schools by other stakeholders is also scarce and not responsive to the local situation around schools.

Conclusion

The overall conclusion is that despite the attempts by teachers and district supervisors to reduce drop-out, the synergetic efforts to boost school attendance fall short of meeting the demand due to contextual mismatch between the socio-economic shocks leading to drop-out and solutions sought. Moreover, remedial solutions to reduce school drop-out were not directly focused on the immediate causes in the community context such as misleading family or role models, misconceptions about children's education, and the pressure of traditional practices leading to early marriage.

Recommendations

It is clear from the findings of the study that conditions triggering school drop-out vary from place to place. Hence, all educational stakeholders (non-government organisations rendering support, community members, local education officers and administrators, as well as school leaders) should make context-specific interventions rather than providing general support, which were found to be non-responsive. The district education offices need to provide awareness-raising training to parents and the community at large about the causes and effects of school drop-out in the short- and long-term. Schools should also provide consistent guidance and counselling for children with special attention given to the case of drop-out.

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