



Amiri ndi alate awa

LUSAKA DISTRICT HIGHLIGHTS

DROPPING OUT? A PARTICIPATORY EXPLORATION OF ADOLESCENT SCHOOL JOURNEYS IN ZAMBIA

Research Approach

Commissioned by UNICEF Zambia, a primarily qualitative study was conducted to **understand how decisions are made on whether or not adolescents (aged 10–19) complete their schooling in Zambia**. In order to answer this, the research examined key actors and factors in journeys of school retention and dropout in Zambia. Round Robins, three-day activities with adolescents, provided an innovative and participatory means of gathering information and making adolescents actors in the research; case studies with adolescents and parents, and focus group discussions with parents and teachers, along with stakeholder key informant interviews and a small quantitative exercise in Lusaka, were also used. See *Dropping Out? A Participatory Exploration of Adolescent School Journeys in Zambia – Final Report* for further methodological info. This report consolidates key findings from Lusaka. These are based on qualitative fieldwork conducted in two locations and a short representative quantitative survey executed in 10 locations. As such these are informative rather than comprehensive.



	Urban	Urban	Total
Round Robins	1	1	2
Case Studies	3	3	6
Parent FGDs	2	2	4
Teacher FGDs	1	1	2
KIIs	6		6
Quant. Survey	-		503

Situating Lusaka

Poverty has been a driving force for most of our problems. – Community leader

Lusaka stood out in this research; while many of the underlying factors contributing to dropout reflected broader trends, the urban, connected experiences of Lusaka adolescents differed from other locations, as do some of the challenges they stated facing.

Economic challenges reportedly defined many aspects of life in Kanyama and Mutendere, where qualitative research was conducted. The very low incomes of up to half the population of Lusaka,¹ (estimated at nearly 400,000 in 2017)² and lack of jobs were the main problems for most parents and adolescents alike. Income generating activities tended to be informal businesses of various kinds.

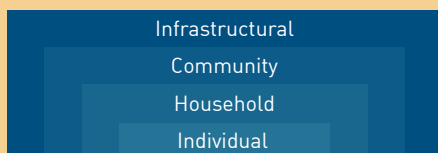
Most young people don't go to school because parents are not able to support them, and when

their friends no longer go to school, they also stop. – Adolescent

According to adolescents, both areas were “dirty” compared to most other areas in Lusaka; the recent cholera outbreak that began in Kanyama early in 2018 was still discussed. Kanyama’s low supply of piped water, lack of a sewer system, and reliance on pit latrines were identified as increasing the risk of disease and reinforced the impression of dirtiness.³

Adolescents noted crime and violence as common in both areas; repeatedly mentioning “thieves”, “thugs”, “junks”, and gangs. Many adults and some adolescents said drug and alcohol abuse amongst young people is common in Kanyama, Mutendere, and Lusaka in general.

Key District Findings



Infrastructural: Poverty; limited job opportunities; over-enrolment at schools

Community: Lack of extended family; availability of alcohol

Household: Lack of value of school; limited parental guidance; death of parent; burden of school fees

Individual: Risky behaviours; teenage pregnancies; low motivation; poor academic performance

1. Adolescents in Lusaka reported believing in the value of education, with 97% thinking that school was important for the future of young people. Approximately 71% of dropouts interviewed in the quantitative survey listed completing school as their top goal for the next 5 years.
2. Adolescents underlined parental death as leading to dropout noting that single-parent households were common.
3. Surprisingly, respondents rarely or never mentioned social-cultural practices, religion, early marriages, and, to some degree, even teenage pregnancy, as important factors in schooling. Social media, whilst an important influencer, generally, played only a limited role in schooling-related decisions.
4. Decision-making was closely centred at the nuclear family with parents; while peers influence adolescents outside the home.

Factors in dropping out



Pervasive poverty and lack of employment opportunities.

Overall, general poverty was cited as a major problem by adults and adolescents alike.

The economic situation is bad, there are few companies that you can work for to raise money for my children. – Parent

Adults and adolescents spoke of the challenge of finding money and the consequences of individual poverty.

Many parents are unemployed, so it is hard for them to even put food on their table... that is one of the frustrations we come across when dealing with these children. – Parent

Poverty and lack of money were by far the most discussed reasons for low school completion rates and decisions regarding schooling. Many respondents reported personal experience with these issues. From the quantitative survey, 63% of adolescents who had dropped out gave school fees as the reason for their dropping out. In addition, virtually every case study featured conversations about economic hardship.

Poverty or lack of money impacted schooling decisions and careers in a variety of ways. The most frequently mentioned by adults and adolescents included the fact that poor parents and guardians were unable to afford school fees (especially for secondary school) or other education costs, such as uniforms; therefore, children simply stopped going to school as they were 'being chased away' by the school because they had not paid.

Generally, respondents agreed that "the school fees are higher than what we parents can afford". Direct dropouts occurred "if they don't have money, they cannot afford secondary school education, hence they just drop out." Irregular attendance impacted performance because, when schools refused children entry due to "non-payments of school fees, the child drag[ged] behind in lesson". In the end, parents acknowledged that these children "may begin to lose interest and as a result will drop out of school".

Parents explained that school fees become a greater problem in secondary school, and the costs associated with education increased when children fail exams.

With grades 8, 9, and 12... if they don't have money to pay, they cannot proceed to the next level. – Parent

Household spending on food and non-food items, while below the national mean for urban areas, left little money to cover rent and school fees.⁴

Poverty also led some parents to encourage or even force their children to engage in economic activities, such as street vending. Adolescents from poor household were said to join ‘bad groups’ and as a result stopped attending school to earn money. Girls from poor households could engage in prostitution, possibly leading to pregnancy.



Adolescent motivation. Adolescents’ regard for school and their motivation to learn were discussed by all respondents, describing attitudes ranging from positive to neutral to negative. Adults reported that adolescents’ motivation or “seriousness” has decreased in recent years but that most adolescents start to understand the value of education when they transition to secondary school. Teachers recognised that some “know the benefits of getting educated, maybe they have plans when they grow up to become a teacher or a doctor, so they value school.” Some adults referred to adolescents’ desire to end ‘their family poverty and suffering’ through education.

Both girls and boys interviewed in the quantitative research thought that school is very important for the future of young people, at 97%. Excitement about school did go down with age though – 85% of aged 10-14 year old respondents were excited, compared to 70% of 15-20 year old respondents. Indeed, several adolescent respondents who currently attend school spoke positively about education.

Education is something that every citizen and every person needs in life. – Adolescent

Interest in education or motivation to learn undoubtedly played a role in schooling decisions and events: various respondents repeatedly mentioned “lack of interest”, “being lazy”, and similar issues as reasons to drop out. That being said, approximately 71% of dropouts interviewed in the quantitative survey listed completing school as their top goal for the next 5 years.

Adults said negative attitudes toward education can make adolescents opt to leave school, and some “don’t listen...every school he goes to, they chase him. So, he says he wants to stop school, it’s not even important.” But the most crucial impact of lack of interest or motivation was that adolescents were at higher risk of failing specific tests — a key event in dropout journeys.

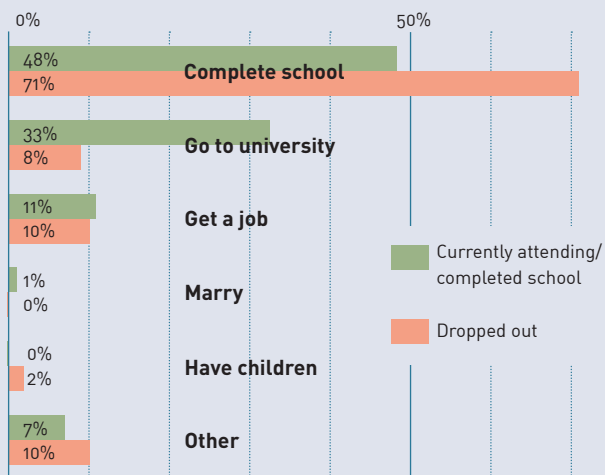
Likely schools themselves contribute to this – nearly half of all respondents to the quantitative survey noted schools as something to build in their community to make it better, suggesting that the current educational infrastructure is insufficient.

Other aspirations (mostly economic) that conflict with education influenced schooling decisions. For example, adults observed that adolescents often pursued “the quick money syndrome”,

Children will prefer to drop out of school because they see [school] taking too long in comparison to an odd job that would give them money there and then. For example, they can pick up scrap metal to sell, and the next day they pick up empty bottles and make money. – Community leader

Several adolescents confirmed that many peers aspired to earn money instead of going to school because they “think school is just wasting their time, so they just start working instead of going to school”. Adolescents were discouraged from finishing school because “some people say that even if you get educated these days, you won’t find a job”. In parallel, the “economic situation” of parents and guardians, and “high unemployment in the country” influenced their attitudes towards adolescent and their education: “They see a lot of graduates not working, so they see no reason to send their children to school”.

Quantitative survey question:
“In 5 years what is your most important goal?”



Risky behaviour. Risky or “immoral” behaviours of adolescents were discussed by all types of respondents. Adults talked about “bad

vices” amongst adolescents, such as “beer drinking, smoking, and other bad vices”. There is consensus that those who engage in “bad activities like drinking alcohol, smoking, insulting elderly people” are usually boys, and most parents agree that raising male children is often difficult because, “when they start engaging in behaviours of alcohol and smoking, they start to cause problems in the home”. Various respondents mentioned these behaviours as key reasons for dropping out of school.

According to adults, alcohol and drug abuse amongst adolescents have increased in recent years and were common in these areas. Indeed, only 40% of older (15-20 year old) respondents reported having never done any of the “risky behaviours” about which they were asked (smoking cigarettes, drinking alcohol, beating others, stealing, or doing drugs).⁵ Several adolescents concurred.

There are high levels of beer drinking amongst youths and also a number of young people have become regular smokers. If their parents ask them to go to school, they refuse; because of beer drinking and smoking, young people have become rebellious toward their parents.

– Adolescent

Alcohol and drug abuse led to dropping out because, for example, “you cannot concentrate in school and also can become disobedient to teachers”. Parents may not have been aware of what had happened:

They are caught [smoking marijuana], they fail to tell their parents why they were sent away from school. So, the following morning they wake up and put on their uniforms like they are going to school. – Adolescent



Early pregnancy. No other event was mentioned as often as pregnancy as a reason for dropping out (note that this does not mean that early pregnancy was the most common reason for dropout, simply that it was the most commonly identified “watershed” moment). Adolescents, parents, and other adults listed reasons for teenage pregnancy, including lack of parental guidance and education on sexual issues, group influence or peer pressure to be sexually active, choosing to become pregnant, and using pregnancy to cope with economic hardship.

Several adult respondents identified teenage pregnancies as watershed moments and believed girls from 13 to 19 years of age were at greatest risk because,

When they reach puberty, it becomes a very big problem, because when they fall pregnant and eventually drop out of school. – Parent

Girls said pregnancy led to dropping out because, for example, “they can’t allow her in the exam room to write while she’s pregnant”, or “she starts fearing to go to school because the other kids might laugh at her”.

In Lusaka, pregnancies were also watershed moments for some boys because of the “pressure to take care of the baby or to raise a family.”

Round Robin: Discussing gender

A discussion between adolescents (all names changed) during a Round Robin highlights some of the gendered debates around schooling in Lusaka:

Elizabeth: *Even our discussion about the family that takes the boy to school and leaves the girl behind, it surprised me a lot.*

David: *No, that’s a good thing, it’s just a girl.*

Rose: *No, it’s not fair.*

Ronald: *No, they know why they had to take the boy to school.*

Heaven: *And what’s the reason?*

Ronald: *Because, if he stays home, he can turn bad.*

David: *He can even join the Fluffy gang.*

Elizabeth: *And the girl can’t turn bad?*

Jonathan: *A girl doesn’t get spoilt easily.*

Elizabeth: *But imagine that you marry a girl that didn’t go to school. Some people bring papers home for her to sign and she signs, not knowing those are house papers. They want to snatch the house from you. And she signs.*

David: *Doesn’t she know how to ask? You call and take a photo of the papers and send them.*

Ronald: *The family knows why they are doing it like that. When the boy completes school ...*

Rose: *... he starts taking care of his sister.*

Ronald: *Yes, he starts taking care of his sister.*

Isaiah: *The final word is that, when you educate the girl child ... there are very few women that are educated, but if they had a chance, Zambia wouldn’t be like this.*

Shaping the journey

Parents and guardians. Parents and guardians were arguably the most important people in the lives of adolescents in Lusaka; teachers said they are, in most cases, essential guides for the attitudes, behaviours, and decisions of both girls and boys.

The best school is home, the words that parents say to their children can either build them or destroy them. – Teachers

Most adolescents named parents (or other family members who care for them) as “persons who have ever made an important decision for [me]”. Parents and guardians said they are largely responsible for

Parental guidance and support

Adults, including community leaders and teachers, repeatedly mentioned lack of parental guidance as a potentially crucial factor in schooling decisions, as many parents are unwilling or unable to provide guidance and oversight to their children.

Parents go to their businesses very early in the morning and they assume their children are going to school, when they are not actually attending. – Community leader

Lack of parental guidance was a particular issue for single parents or when there was no communication between parents and teachers.

There is a lack of monitoring of our children between parents and teachers. If a child does not report for school, we don't find out. – Parent

Community leaders reported that many parents and guardians in these locations had never completed school:

They don't inculcate the importance of school in these children'. As a result, their children 'don't see the value of school. – Community leader

This results in “school dropouts and teenage pregnancies”. However, the value placed on education seems higher in Lusaka than other districts.

most schooling decisions and conceded that their financial status was the ultimate decision-maker in these.

Several adolescents, parents, and guardians stated that one or both parents were directly responsible for dropout decisions. In most such cases, parents (mostly fathers) simply stopped paying education expenses due to financial constraints.

I stopped [attending school after passing the grade 8 exam] because he didn't have the money to pay for my school fees. – Adolescent

Many adolescents usually noted going to a parent for advice on issues such as relationships and difficulties at school. Regarding school, parents generally offered advice, encouragement, or discouragement, or even tried to intervene. One adolescent commented that his mother “used to advise me to work hard so I decided to listen to her”. Adolescents and adults agreed that some parents (primarily poor ones) discouraged attendance at school or assigned tasks conflicting with school. A teacher noted a student who skipped school as saying,

My mother told me, 'don't go to school [but] look after the children', as she was going to the market to sell vegetables. She told me even, 'when you go to school what are you going to do? I, your mother, didn't go to school.' – Teacher

Peers. Friends and classmates were stated to be important influencers, second only to parents and probably more important than other family members. Several adults also confirmed that peers are amongst those who have the greatest influence on adolescents' attitudes and behaviours, whether positive or negative.

Friends with bad behaviour can influence me to start doing bad things....They were never there for me when I needed them. After I had friends with good behaviour, I felt nice because they are there for me and they encouraged me to do good. – Adolescent

The major influence of peers can be categorised as either peer pressure or group influence. Several young respondents called both amongst the worst things about adolescence. Peer pressure or group influence that leads children to “join bad groups” was major concern for many parents.

These influences encouraged dropouts in various ways. For example, adolescents could lose interest in school on joining certain groups or socialising with friends who are out of school. In particular for boys, peer pressure or group influence could encourage behaviours such as drinking and drug abuse; girls cited peer pressure or group influence repeatedly as a key reason for pregnancies.

Teachers. Several adults pointed out that teachers were amongst those with the greatest influence of the attitudes and behaviours of adolescents regarding education. However, adolescents, whether attending or out of school, repeatedly pointed to teachers' negative behaviours as potential reasons for dropping out. For example, "being beaten by teachers [...] brings fear to a learner, and some even lose interest"; "being insulted by the teacher [e.g., being called 'dull'] 'frustrates'"; and "favouritism of teachers toward pupils...[makes] others feel hated and overshadowed. Then a learner will definitely stop."

Adolescent agency and school

Adolescents could be considered the second to their parents as important decision-makers regarding dropping out or staying in school, but their agency was limited. Adolescents and adults reported few cases in which adolescents made clear schooling decisions. In one case, a mother said her son "refused alone to be in school, I tried all I could, but he refused"; another parent commented, "we want our son to be in school, but he has no interest and his grades are low".

Overall, adolescents who made their own decisions about their lives were few and far between. Male and female adolescents of all ages stated that their parents primarily take charge of decision-making and that, even if they make their own decisions, they still consulted with their parents or guardians.

Conclusions & recommendations

Dropout journeys in Katete – in both the rural and town location— resembled those of Zambian adolescents as a whole. Economics, both broadly

and at the household and individual level, played a key role, shaping the nature of the adolescents' drop out and return to school. Parents had a lead – although not unilateral – role in decision making, especially for younger children. Examining key factors contributing to dropouts underlined a stronger-than-average role of 'culture' and community level pressures around traditional practices and early marriage in particular. As a result, key recommendations for Katete include:

- 1. Promote household economic well-being** through initiatives to diversify sources of income, including TVET and skills programmes for young dropouts and the inclusion of 'practical' courses in the curriculum. School fees and opportunity cost of school attendance were noted consistently and require addressing. This should be done in tandem with **awareness-raising efforts with parents around the value of school**, to ensure that additional income contributes to school attendance, given their role as key decision maker.
- 2. Build adolescents' capacity to respond to potential negative peer pressure and social media influences.** Whilst neither was given as directly leading to dropout decisions, they were both clear contributors to risky behaviours which themselves can lead to dropout (including drinking or early sexual behaviour). Adolescents in Lusaka were excited about school which should be prioritised and built on.
- 3. Design programmes with adolescents as actors to combat school dropouts.** Channeling a more positive version of success, adolescents and young adults can promote alternative narratives, bringing in role models to the school, including from local community, for example, to speak at after-school clubs and other activities regarding various career opportunities.

1 Muna Shifa and Murray Leibbrandt (2017). Profiling Multidimensional Poverty and Inequality in Kenya and Zambia at Sub-National Levels.; MCA-Zambia (2017): Mtendere - Socio-Economic Profile.

2 Koutsouri, Aikaterini et al (n.a.). Regional Population Estimation Using Satellite Imagery.

3 UNICEF Zambia (2016). Cholera Outbreak Report.

4 MCA-Zambia (2017): Mtendere - Socio-Economic Profile

5 Note that, if anything, respondents generally underreport negative behaviours.


Community voices: Recommendations

Research participants themselves were asked to highlight what they consider top needs and approaches to support to reduce school dropouts. Respondents focused almost entirely on bringing dropouts back to school. Some argued that dropouts simply have to go back to school.

In particular, individual encouragement and financial support were flagged as needed to ensure future retention of drop-outs, noting, “they need financial support or sponsorship from donors.”

In addition, parental awareness needs to be increased so that drop-out parents actually send their children back to school – educating “caretakers on the importance of school” is crucial for boosting completion rates because parents/guardians “need to know the importance of school.”



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The findings of the study 'Dropping Out? A Participatory Exploration of Adolescent School Journeys in Zambia' are presented in the following report documents:

- Final Report
- Katete: District Highlights
- Lunga: District Highlights
- Lusaka: District Highlights
- Luwingu: District Highlights
- Mufulira: District Highlights
- Petauke: District Highlights
- Rufunsa: District Highlights
- Senanga: District Highlights