



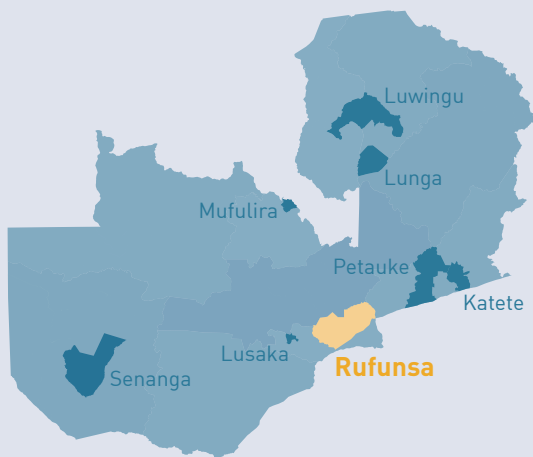
RUFUNSA DISTRICT HIGHLIGHTS

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 Rufunsa. These are based on fieldwork conducted in two locations and are **informative rather than comprehensive**.



	Town	Rural	Total
Round Robins	1	1	2
Case Studies	3	3	6
Parent FGDs	2	2	4
Teacher FGDs	1	1	2
KIIs		6	6

Situating Rufunsa

They say Rufunsa is good because they are able to get cheap village chickens and goats.
– Adolescent

A predominantly rural district, Rufunsa is located 150km east of Lusaka. Heavily reliant on small scale subsistence farming and piece work, respondents described it as quiet and even beautiful with the surrounding hills.

The good thing about this place is that there is room to farm, build and do other things. Here the soil is good, and the maize grows.
– Adolescent

In the two locations visited, everyone lamented the lack of development compared to nearby locations like Lusaka and even Nyimba and

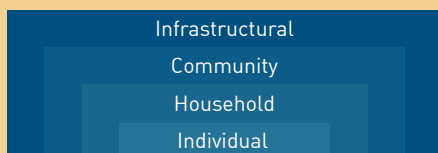
Luangwa – the town was only recently linked to the national electricity grid.

Everyone talked about how hard it is to find money and the continual struggle to cover basic needs (“we don’t get enough meals here”). The very ruralness of Rufunsa made life difficult – from the ability to make ends meet to reaching schools, especially during rainy season.

Some of these children are made to be selling vegetables, farm produce in the community, moving around covering long distances to just try and get something. – Government official

Located within the Lusaka province, Rufunsa’s approximately 50,000 residents only made up 2% of total provincial population, dwarfed by the capital city’s 79%. District-level data was broadly

Key District Findings



Infrastructural: Endemic poverty; (long) distances from school; quality of teaching

Community: Pressure for child marriage; push for gender equity in schools

Household: Lack of valuing of school; parental death; burden of school fees

Individual: Risky behaviours; teenage pregnancy; early marriage

1. Parents or guardians were the key actors who actually make decisions on adolescents schooling, but they were heavily constrained by economic factors.
2. Adolescents cited socio-cultural factors influencing schooling, such as early marriage, sexual activity, and or pregnancy — all of which primarily affected female adolescents— along with risky behaviours such as smoking, drinking, and using drugs — which were more common for males.
3. Long distances to school were made more difficult by weather conditions and poor roads. When they arrive late, teachers often scolded students, which was discouraging and reportedly affected decisions to drop out of school.
4. The quality of education was considered low, which at least partly explained why adolescents may not succeed in school.

difficult to find, and even more so in Rufunsa, which was only declared a district in 2012. While the addition of community schools ensured over 42 primary schools across the expansive district, only four secondary schools could be found.

Factors in dropping out



Pervasive poverty. The vast majority of respondents agreed that poverty was common throughout Rufunsa and that the inability to pay school fees was inevitable for many.

Poverty really impacts the adolescents in completing their education in that poverty levels are quite high in a community like this one. In some homes, parents are unable to afford to take their children to school due the lack of finances. – Government official

This poverty means many people struggled to cover basic needs such as food, water, and clothing. Some adults explained that parents

would like to send their children to school but have limited options to do so without sufficient resources to meet even their basic needs.

While the government provides primary education at no cost, school fees apply in secondary school. Adding to school fees are the cost of school uniforms and supplies, such as books; adolescents themselves often sought ways to cover these costs.

My daughter kept on crying about wanting a school bag. If I had the money to buy one for her, maybe she would still be going to school. She refused to use a plastic bag to carry her books. – Parent

After dropping out of school, my friends wrote their exams and passed, so they tell me that if I had re-written my Grade 9 exam, I would have passed eventually, but I kept telling them that it requires money to re-write. I really want to re-write but I don't have money. – Adolescent

Respondents complained that earning power was constrained by the fact that the area had no

industry and only a handful of small mines which offered seasonal work. Many said there was no work beyond farming, which was seasonal and dependent on sufficient rainfall. Adolescents often helped support their families at these times of year, which took them away from school.

Overall, adults and children alike seemed to recognise a vicious cycle of families / individuals needing to work in order to go to school, but also needing to go to school in order to find acceptable work. Some participants mentioned that children were viewed as a necessary resource in order to make ends meet for some families, needed for their help in farming, business, cattle-rearing and other home-related help. This, subsequently, could and did lead to drop-out for some adolescents. Some adolescents and adults saw education as a 'solution' to poverty.

Parents do not know the value of education in the community because they would rather have their girl children married and get cattle in exchange so they can use the cattle for farming.
– Teacher

Re-entry Policy

Some respondents mentioned the Re-entry Policy which supports females who give birth and wish to return to school, although many doubted whether the policy makes a difference (other respondents spoke of adolescent mothers returning to school, without mention of the policy).

I had a child who was coming to school, but [...] she fell pregnant. We have a re-entry policy which enabled us to bring her back, but she just stopped, so it's like one thing led to another until finally she lost interest in school.
– Community leader

The idea is good, and it is also very bad in some ways because people know there is this re-entry policy. Some do it deliberately knowing that even if they become pregnant, they will go back to school. – Teacher



Distance to school. Some students were required to walk as much as 10 to 15 kilometres. Teachers particularly emphasised that such long treks caused exhaustion, lateness, and difficulty concentrating. There were other challenges noted as well. Roads became impassable during the rainy season. Regardless of distance, seasonal absenteeism was also highlighted as common at harvest time, when parents needed their children's help, for example, to pick mangoes. Sometimes the trip to school was so difficult that adolescents needed to board at or near school, which added to the overall costs of education. Agreed by all respondents, challenging trips to school affected not only performance but also the likelihood of dropping out.



Poor performance in school.

Respondents of all ages and backgrounds overwhelming agreed that students often drop out of school due to poor performance, combined with lack of funds to re-write exams or repeat a grade.

I was in Grade 9 when I dropped out because of only passing a few courses and also not having enough money to re-enter. – Adolescent

I have a lot of children to provide for. When I couldn't pay for my daughter to go to school, she stopped for a while and she got pregnant. We are now looking after her and her young one. For the other child, it was due to failure in Grade 9. He failed twice and I have no money to make him rewrite. – Parent

Some adolescents expressed doubt that they could do well enough to benefit from school. It was not unusual for respondents to infer that students who struggle in school were less deserving of an education, which made some parents wonder if paying school fees was worthwhile. In fact, the failure rate in Rufunsa across each of the seven Grade 7 exams was 50 to 70%.¹

Despite the number of children who truly wanted to attend school in Rufunsa, teachers remarked that many sleep in class, skip school, do not complete their work, and generally behave as though they do not want to be in class. Although teachers described this as "behaving badly", it may also reflect the quality of education, the

challenges and distractions that adolescents face outside of school, hunger, or exhaustion from long walks to and from school or chores at home.

Living conditions for teachers were poor, potentially impacting their motivation.

We have qualified teachers [... but] the living conditions for teachers are bad. Because of this, teachers are not motivated, some are discouraged to offer best services. [At] any school right now you will find most teachers are not in classes and pupils are just making noise in class [...] In government schools, teachers refuse to deliver their best. So, I feel the government should improve the conditions for teachers here. – Government official

Some adolescents said teachers sometimes punished them harshly, for example beating them for making noise or requiring them to clean toilets or dig pits. Students were also punished for tardiness. Adolescents said this treatment causes frustration with school, possibly further leading to dropping out.



Early pregnancy. Respondents recognised the linkages between teen pregnancy, marriage, and dropping out of school.

In rural areas we have a number of girls dropping out because of pregnancy [...] They see that as an opportunity to be married. – Teacher

My first-born child dropped out in Grade 10 [...] She had fallen pregnant, and while she was waiting to deliver her child, she ended up in a meaningless early marriage. – Parent

A government official in Rufunsa appeared to blame teen pregnancy on vague concepts such as being “playful”, or “prey to illicit sexual behaviours”. Parents linked pregnancy directly to dropout.

The moment a girl child falls pregnant the only thing on her mind is marriage and dropping out of school. – Parent

While participants did not always explain the underlying reasons behind teen pregnancy, many linked sex to poverty, exchanged for something of value; others pointed to peer pressure.



Case Study: Marcus, age 19, dropout

Marcus (name changed) enjoyed learning and school when he was younger. After doing well on his Grade 7 exams, he was motivated to continue school. Unfortunately, when it came time to his Grade 9 exams, he failed. His parents, who'd struggled to pay his fees, could not find the money to allow him to re-enter school.

I felt very good when my mother tried her best and managed to pay my school fees in Grade 8, term 1, because my friends at that time were telling me I wouldn't make it to Grade 8. But after writing my Grade 7 exams, my friends came over and told me that my name was on the list and it was showing that I had passed and scored 613 points. My mum told me she was happy that she just tried her level best to find money to pay for my school fees.

I was in school in Grade 9 when I dropped out because of only passing in a few courses and also not having enough money to re-enter school [...] There was no one who made this decision for me, after failing I just looked at my situation and I didn't have a sponsor, a uniform, books and money for school fees, so I just dropped out.

Yes, I used to talk about it but whenever I would tell my parents that I have been sent away from school because of lack of money to pay, they would say that they were going to talk to my teacher because they didn't have money or anywhere to get it. So they talked to the headmaster who gave them a period to settle the fees, that period elapsed. The problem is that if I wanted to go to a different school, I cannot do so because a statement of results is required, which I don't have because of lack of money.

What frustrates me is that I was born and raised in Rufunsa and I don't have anywhere else to go.

Shaping the journey

At this age, my parents give me plans about my life. When I get old, I will not be given the plans.
– Adolescent

While parents and guardians mentioned numerous factors, particularly around finances, which affected their agency, they were still ultimately the most powerful decision-makers for and influences on their children's lives. Many adolescents understood this.

Now they control me by telling me that this is bad, this is good, but when I grow up, I will be deciding for myself. – Adolescent

My parents just told me that I was going to school, though I remember that I used to bother them a lot and ask them to send me to school. – Adolescent

Parents and guardians also see themselves as the major decision-makers in preventing pregnancies and early marriages.

Yes, we make decisions in the sense that some children will just get pregnant and tell you [they] want to get married, but as a parent you will refuse and make a decision that the child goes back to school because we know there is

no benefit in getting married at this tender age. And they listen to what we decide. – Parent

In addition to parents, adolescents regarded some other family members as major life influencers, most often aunts, uncles, and grandparents; siblings were mentioned less frequently.

Some adolescents said such family members positively influence their schooling decisions.

My aunties and uncles told my parents to put in more effort and ensure that I go back to school.
– Adolescent

However, adolescents mentioned subjects unrelated to school more frequently, saying other family members influenced their decisions or were people they could talk with about friendships, relationships, sexuality or pregnancy, or money.

Peers were other influencers for adolescents' decisions about school and other matters, such as drugs, alcohol, and sex. Adolescents reported that some peers made them feel 'dull' in school, thereby exerting a negative influence on their attitudes toward school. Adolescents mentioned that they sometimes emulate the risky behaviours of peers, such as engaging in sexual activity, drinking, and using drugs.

Peer pressure also leads to adolescents dropping out of school. Children engage in such activities as alcoholism, drugs, prostitution and so on. Things that may not allow them to carry on with school. – Government official

Raising boys and girls in Rufunsa

There was not a wide consensus on whether there was a difference in raising boys and girls. While some participants stated that there was no difference in raising boys and girls, "nowadays boys cook and fetch water just like girls," and others note that boys were more difficult to 'control' than girls. Others stated that "girls are more troublesome than boys". In the home, girls' chores often entail cooking, washing dishes and/or sweeping whereas boys' chores may involve gathering and chopping wood. Girls noted that "it is difficult to find money" but that boys can perform labour-heavy work and girls cannot.

Adolescent agency and school

Making choices like that can be challenging, especially if you have no money. There's little you can do. – Parent

Adolescents often said they made a specific decision, but describe circumstances impacting this decision-making process which were out of their control. While some adolescents expressed a sense of agency in fairly unimportant decisions, such as whether to attend a party, they felt less in charge of 'big' life decisions such as those related to schooling, pregnancy, or money. For example, a female knew she needed to earn money, but a further decision seemed out of her control.

I decided for myself [to leave school] because I had no one to sponsor me. My cousin told me, 'where I'm working, you can come and be a live-in maid' [...] Maybe I won't find anyone to sponsor me, so let me just go and do it. That's how I became a maid. – Adolescent

Another adolescent appeared to believe she lacked any agency at all, instead bowed to the opinions of her mother and friends.

I wanted to start school when the child was a bit old. [My mother] said if money will be difficult to find, you'll just stop. No one told me to stop school. I stopped when I got pregnant because my friends were laughing at me at school. – Adolescent

Some adolescents seem satisfied without agency.

I enjoy having clothes, staying with parents, and chatting with my grandfather. I like following what I am told to do. If they tell me to go to the field, I go and do the work. That is what I like. I learn in the process. It's good if you do anything that they tell you. – Adolescent

Others seemed unsure how they can change their lack of agency, as evidenced by one young boy taken care of by his aunt:

When [my parents] died, I remained with my mum's sister, and she was not keeping me well. I was still young, and I started carrying 20 litre containers of water when I was seven years old. My growth became slowed. Even when I was sick, they would make me carry the containers so I was just feeling angry and I would cry most of the time, wishing my mother was around. The way her sister was treating me was different from the way my mother treated me. – Adolescent

Although parents and guardians of adolescents exhibited high levels of agency in making decisions regarding their children's schooling and other matters, their ability to act on those decisions was constrained by economic circumstances. Thus, regardless of what they decided, in actual fact parents and guardians without spending power seemed to have little agency in making decisions on schooling.

Conclusions & recommendations

Narratives around dropout journeys in Rufunsa, just like across Zambia, tended to emphasise the role of economics. What stands out in Rufunsa was the repeated mention of social pressures in decision making – including parents' valuing (or not) of education, the role of peer pressure, and the impossibility of separating adolescent agency from broader circumstances. In many cases, these social pressures are linked to key events in dropout journeys such as early pregnancy, but more often a sense of acquiescence in the face of financial struggles. As a result, recommendations for Rufunsa in particular include:

- 1. Focus on designing awareness raising programmes, targeting individuals, household and community members** to address a number of social norms and types of behaviour in Rufunsa which contribute to dropping out. For example, programmes can include messaging to reduce pro-pregnancy and pro-early marriage narratives at the community and household level, as well as programmes with adolescents in schools on how to recognise and address peer pressure. This can also include the promotion of alternative narratives of success to adolescents and their families, addressing social pressures around early pregnancy and marriage.
- 2. Reinforce long-distance means of accessing education:** Distance from school – and lack of transportation – were noted in Rufunsa as contributing to diminished school attendance and eventual dropouts. Local government can identify specific barriers on this front – for example, roads which flood frequently, or schools which have broader catchment areas – to see where specific infrastructural improvements might be made.
- 3. 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. While this recommendation is not specific to Rufunsa, it is crucial given the importance attributed to economics in dropout journeys.

1 MoGE (2016) 2016 District Profile: Rufunsa, pg 1

Community voices: Recommendations

Research participants themselves were asked to highlight what they consider top needs and approaches to reduce school dropouts in Rufunsa district.

Creation of job opportunities. That way parents will be able to find jobs to earn money for their families. Especially money to sponsor children to school. Even for us that have not been to school, we would be able to find small jobs to earn some money. Create sponsorship programs for those of us that can only go half way in sponsoring children. – Parent

Adolescents can learn various skills such as carpentry, metal work welding and so on, outside the formal learning set up. Here in Rufunsa we have some technical training schools that teach vocational studies. This is to help young ones that have dropped out of school as well as those in schools to acquire skills that can help them build their own businesses and improve their lives as they grow older. – Government official

Some pupils leave home in the morning without eating. Those are times you find that they are just quiet, not participating so it's good for a school to have a feeding program. – Adolescent

I think it is important that most of the schools should be turned into boarding schools. People in our area, in the rural set up they say a child should draw water and do other things before he comes to school, so you find that he comes to school late. Sometimes he won't come saying I was told to do some work at home. Catch up classes are necessary in this area because there are pupils who are shy to ask questions in class, so they will be presented with an opportunity to learn what they missed out in class. – Teacher

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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