



SENANGA

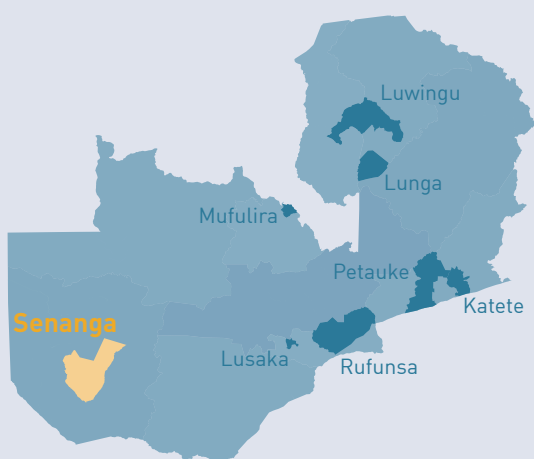
DISTRICT HIGHLIGHTS

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 Senanga. These are based on fieldwork conducted in three locations and are informative rather than comprehensive.**



	Town	Rural	Rural	Total
Round Robins	1	1	1	3
Case Studies	3	3	3	9
Parent FGDs	2	2	2	6
Teacher FGDs	1	1	1	3
KIIs	8 (combined)			8

Situating Senanga

This place makes me happy because there is a river where we get our fish. We sometimes go swimming in the river and its fun. – Adolescent

The poverty levels around this place are high because most of the people here depend on farming. Due to the poor road network, people face a lot of challenges in transporting their produce to other towns or were they can find market for their goods. Most of them trade in rice and some just do fish selling. – Adolescent

Senanga is located in Western province, where 73% of the population lives in extreme poverty, the highest rate in Zambia.¹ Household are largely dependent on agriculture, with respondents describing relying on farming, particularly rice, and fishing through a method called *kuyeza mashashab*

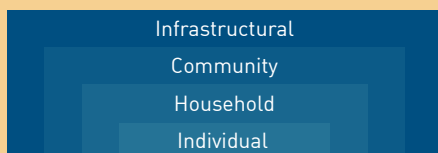
where traps are set in the river. Food availability is highly seasonal;² hunger and its effects were common point of discussion:

The other thing is some households do not have enough food you find that after a child has slept with hunger, he or she becomes weak even participation at school goes down. – Adolescent

Nevertheless, respondents talked about how, in the past decade, there has been positive changes – among others, a new road from Senanga to Sesheke, electricity and boreholes at many schools, improvements in teacher housing, and more parents valuing education.

The parents now have interest in their children going to school, the only problem is poverty. – Community leader

Key District Findings



Infrastructural: Endemic poverty; hunger; distance to school; quality of teaching

Community: Pressure for child marriage; initiation rites; traditional dance

Household: Lack of value of school; death of parent; burden of school fees

Individual: Risky behaviours; teenage pregnancy; early marriage

1. The household economic situation was the primary driver regarding adolescent school retention or dropout, from ability to pay school fees to needing children to work.
2. Hunger remains a key factor in Senenga as a whole.
3. Traditional initiation activities played a role in taking adolescents out of school, but are also linked to early pregnancy and marriage, as adolescents sought to become adults.
3. Peers played a major role in the adolescent schooling journeys. While many respondents enjoyed meeting their friends at school which gave them positive motivation to attend class, those who joined groups that are out of school tended to follow their path and engaged in risky behaviour.

Factors in dropping out



Poverty and seasonal food availability. The impact of poverty in Senenga was wide-ranging

and manifested itself in the lack of basic social services such as medical facilities and good roads to facilitate trade and economic opportunities. Farming was labour-intensive but unprofitable because of poor soil and the lack of inputs:

Farming is very hard for us as we use hoes. We lack animals. – Adolescent

Respondents discussed how the struggle to earn a living — or to find paying work at all — caused many to grapple with agonizing decisions about how to provide for their families. Indeed, household poverty was identified as the leading cause of dropouts. A female adolescent explained,

There is too much poverty in this community. Most parents cannot afford to pay their children's school fees...that is why most adolescents drop out of school. – Adolescent

An obvious consequence of poverty for adolescents was hunger, and even starvation, along with the inability to pay for transportation to school and the need to find ways to earn money. All of these were highlighted as affecting school performance and attendance:

I had friends whose parents were poor and failed to take him to school. She used to do piecework to raise some money to go back to school. – Adolescent

There is too much hunger and when a child is hungry, they fail to concentrate in class. That can result in poor performance. – Adolescent



Initiation rites and moving into adulthood.

We enjoy traditional ceremonies such as masquerades known as makishi, and initiation ceremonies. – Adolescent

One socio-cultural factor noted was traditional initiations to mark the transition from youth to adulthood. These could last several months. As


a result of their introduction to the customs of maturity, young initiates expressed the desire — or are encouraged by their parents — to engage in early marriage, become pregnant, and go to work. Key informants, and in particular adolescents across locations, emphasised these, whilst parents did not. This opened up some possible awareness raising on which to focus, assuming parents may not be making the same linkages between initiation rites and dropping out. The rites themselves could take children out of school for a period of time, although some adolescents noted enjoying these ceremonies.

These traditional practices have become a problem here in Western province, for instance for the boys when they come back from the mukanda initiation ritual, they think it's time to start their own life. When girls come out of initiation [after three months], they want to practice, hence become pregnant, which results in early marriages. – Teacher

I was almost forced into some traditional initiations, but my grandmother refused [...] so I should first finish my secondary education.
– Adolescent

Respondents also mentioned age as a factor that can affect schooling decisions, in part because it was linked to a range of watershed moments. These included puberty, the onset of sexual feelings, and beginning relationships with members of the opposite sex. The experience of puberty for girls included the start of menstruation.

Traditional initiation ceremonies for girls marked their readiness for marriage. Respondents noted that as they grow older, adolescents also may become more independent (including arguing with or defying their elders or taking on greater responsibility) — and greater independence may be reflected in a desire to make decisions without consulting parents or guardians. All these age-related events affected decisions about dropping out or continuing in school.

 **Risky behaviour.** The lack of financial resources was reflected in behaviours that kept many adolescents out of school. Behaviours seen amongst adolescents in Senanga, as in many of the other districts visited in this research, included drinking alcohol, smoking cigarettes or marijuana, using drugs, clubbing, and stealing. These sometimes lead to arrest. Males were more likely to engage in these activities, whilst prostitution was mentioned as a risky behaviour among girls. Smoking and drug and alcohol abuse tended to be group activities that were subject to peer pressure. Adolescents saw these problems in their daily lives:

A lot of young people stop school [or] start drinking alcohol, and it is not easy for them to have enough food to eat during the day.
– Adolescent

Some adolescents started drinking or smoking because they do not have money to go to school. Those who do attend sometimes skip classes, drop out, or are expelled for bad behaviour. Respondents noted other effects such as health problems and deteriorating relationships with parents. Adults saw a link between drinking and negative consequences which adolescents also acknowledge.

Caterpillar season and child labour

Parents and guardians in Senanga understood that education prepared their children for a better life. Most parents expressed a belief that education was worth the cost, although they remained sceptical about the actual economic opportunities it could provide.

One parent explained, “school fees are not much if one completes school, the only problem nowadays people do not find jobs, so in that way school might be expensive”.

While adult respondents generally said they were willing to send their children to school, none mentioned situations in which parents prioritised marriage or work above education. Teachers and other respondents said this was actually a common practice, noting they may force their children to leave school and marry or help with farming tasks, if only for a limited period. “In rural areas, parents prefer children to... help with the harvest”, said a teacher.

In this area people drink illicit beer, kachasu; they start in the morning, which makes them become less productive. – Parent

I had friends who started smoking and when the parents found out, they stopped paying for school. Each time my friends went to the school the teacher chased them because of them going to school drunk. – Adolescent



Early pregnancy and marriage. Western province has the highest rate of teenage pregnancy in Zambia at 41%.³ A teacher pointed out, “for the last 10 years we have been experiencing a lot of these cases. I have seen that the number has increased”. Teen pregnancy ranks among the three leading reasons why adolescents, especially girls, dropped out of school. However, not all pregnant girls or adolescent mothers drop out.

My elder sister had a baby when she was still schooling. When the baby grew, she told my parents that she wanted to go back to school. They agreed, and she managed to complete. – Adolescent

Respondents noted that young people in Senanga marry young, both for financial security and also for traditional reasons or due to pregnancy.

When parents are poor, they marry off their daughters as a way to curb poverty. This is so that they will over charge the bride price and make a living out of it. – Adolescent

Shaping the journey

I can [not] decide about school; I am still under my parents' care and cannot pay my school fees. – Adolescent

Parents and guardians. Respondents agreed that parents and guardians were the major influencers and decision makers for teenagers on every aspect of their lives, and particularly education: “I can go to my parents because they are the ones who are responsible for my education.” Parents acknowledged their responsibility toward their offspring.



Case Study: Mufana, age 17, dropout

Mufana (name changed), aged 17, and her mother discussed a common scenario in Luwingu.

The challenge of not having school fees, books, uniforms, and generally the fact that I was suffering both at home and at school affected me so much that I even got sick. I had cerebral malaria. And this happened when we were just about 3 days before starting to write our Grade 9 exams. I was always thought I couldn't change my situation, and neither could my parents because they are unemployed and poor. I wrote all my subjects while in the hospital. My teacher used to bring exam papers for me in the hospital. I was seriously sick and used to black out sometimes due to dizziness, and obviously this distorted my answers. I failed my exams and that was the end of my schooling.

The last time I was at school was in October 2017... When I went back to school to find out if I could repeat, I was told it was not possible unless I re-wrote under General Certificate of Education (GCE) examinations. GCE exam fees are usually high and my parents failed to find the money. That's how my school journey ended.

Her mother talked about the struggles she has encounter with all her children.

I managed to take my three children who completed their grade 12 to school by farming and selling the little produce I collect to pay their school fees. Despite that, I have failed to collect their results because I owe the schools money for school fees, they cannot allow me to get them unless I clear the balances.

They are a lot of parents in our community in my situation. This is so because most of the parents are poor, they cannot afford school fees.

The most important decision I make for my children is to encourage them to work hard at school. – Parent

Naturally, decisions made by parents and guardians were not limited to education. Their involvement in either permitting or forbidding early marriages among adolescents was a prime example discussed: “When it comes to marriage when it’s the right time, I can allow them to get married”. Conflicts could occur with older adolescents who want to make their own decisions.

Extended family. While parents and guardians had the strongest influence over adolescents’ lives, other members of Zambian extended families were also somewhat influential. These included grandparents, uncles and aunts, and siblings — people whom adolescents admired because they work hard, take good care of their families, earn money, are successful, and serve as role models or sponsors. Adolescents said they turned to these family members for advice and to borrow money: they relied on them.

Teachers. Many adolescents also said they go to their teachers when they experience difficulties at school.

Parents and guardians identified teachers as having strong influence over their attitudes toward adolescents and their education. Teachers were best placed to provide advice regarding their children’ education because they spent time with them and knew them both as individuals and as students.

In terms of education I go to the teachers and especially the headmaster. – Parent

It was unclear whether teachers played an important role in the parts of adolescents’ lives that were not related to school, although they served as positive role models:

My teacher ... knows a lot of things and he is a good person and I just want to be like him when I grow up. – Adolescent

Peers. Conversely, community members and friends may exert a negative influence on adolescents’ decisions around education. Both adolescents and adults often called these people ‘bad company’: “Group influence is another vital problem to be noted here because a lot of youths encourage their friends to drink and smoke rather than going to school”. Respondents noted they may also influence or encourage early pregnancy and marriages.

Media. The media, including social media, had a two-fold effect on adolescents’ lives and schooling decision based on the discussions. The media distracted adolescents from their studies or presented role models that they want to emulate. A female community leader noted,

Teens believe everything they see and read on social media. It has a big impact because they want to become what they see and read.
– Community leader

Celebrities were a source of inspiration for adolescents; girls generally admired musicians and singers while boys preferred football players. The impact of media on school attendance was unclear. Many respondents emphasized that the media can both positively and negatively affect adolescents’ feelings about education. A female headman leaned toward positive influence:



The media encourages a lot that the young ones go to school. What they listen to and what they watch can encourage the young ones to go to school, because they also want to be like that.

– Headman

But a male teacher disagreed:

The young people are affected by social media because they spend most time browsing rather than concentrating on schoolwork. – Teacher

Adolescent agency and school

At my age I don't need anyone to remind me that I have to avoid bad friends because I am old enough to know what is good and bad for me. – Adolescent

The level of agency of adolescents varied according to age, strength of personality, and external factors. Respondents agreed that the level of agency increases with age with those from 15 to 19 years old showing greater independence than those from 10 to 14 years old; this was true whether the topic is school or something else. One older adolescent stated,

I can make rules for myself for going to school every day that will make my future. – Adolescent

Young teenagers had a more agency around matters that were more unrelated to school but lower agency in general for major decisions. Some older adolescents made important individual decisions on their own if they did not rely on someone else financially. Agency related to schooling was generally linked to the ability to cover school costs.

Respondents attributed parents and guardians the highest level of agency in decision-making for their adolescents because they pay school fees. Adolescents and parents alike emphasized how money controlled their level of agency over schooling decisions: “I cannot say much about [why] my children stopped going to school. I do not have any powers over that”.

Conclusions & recommendations

Dropout journeys in Senanga resemble those of Zambian adolescents as a whole, with the household financial situation playing a key role and parents heavily involved in decision making. However, initiation rites as a factor in dropout journeys do come up more strongly here. As a result, key recommendations for Senanga in particular include:

- 1. Encourage school-friendly means of participation in traditional practices**, such as promoting cultural groups and initiation rites scheduled around school as well – for example, ensuring that any long initiation rites align with holidays.
- 2. Work with community leaders and elders to discourage school dropouts.** By working with community leaders, the tradition of initiation rites could be leveraged to promote education, either by, for example, working with schools to allow for the inclusion of initiation rite content within the structure of the school system, or, for example, building awareness of the value of education to eventually become another marker of adulthood. Awareness raising should be conducted with parents in particular as they were least likely to consider the rites an element of dropout.
- 3. Use and explain social media to adolescents.** The popularity of social media can be used for communications and awareness purposes amongst adolescents. However, adolescents also need further training in how to use and understand social media; building critical thinking abilities and helping them question what to trust on social media will reduce the risk of social-media induced school dropouts. This can also contribute to the **reduction of risky behaviour**, including of alcohol use in particular, by diminishing social-media linked appeal to such behaviour.

1 Living conditions index 2015, pg 106 Conditions Monitoring Survey, pp. 61-62

2 Pasqualino et al ‘ Food and Nutrition Security in the Barotse Floodplain System, 2014

3 Population Council, United Nations Population Fund and Government of the Republic of Zambia. ‘Child Marriage in Zambia’. Lusaka, Zambia. (2017)

Community voices: Recommendations

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

*There is too much poverty in our community, thus, the **provision of financial help to the poor** will help our parents to be able to pay our school fees. – Adolescent*


*Some people who are not serious with school, but if they realize there are some **feeding programmes at school**, they can be motivated to be going to school every day for the sake of food. – Adolescent*

*The government should **build more classes and provide more teaching and learning materials such as teachers, desks and teaching aids** so that they can improve the provision of quality education. – Parent*

***Vocational skills** such as carpentry and sawing are important because it helps to sustain them when they are out of school. – Parent*

*For those are already in school and you want to keep them in school. I think first as a well-wisher you need to identify those that have challenges of being in school... you **find out what the challenges are and see how best you could help them**. There are different reasons; some could be money, others maybe its food. – Teacher*

***Financial support** will continue to keep the adolescents in school, **school feeding program** will give the children reason not to miss classes and always go to school and for **vocational skills** this will help adolescents to make something better for their future even outside of school they can be someone in future. – 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