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Secondary school students who drop out of school in rural Pakistan: The perspectives of fathers

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ABSTRACT

Background: The problem of students dropping out of school is one of the barriers to improving educational outcomes in poor and developing countries.

Purpose: This small scale, in-depth study sought to explore the phenomenon of students who drop out from secondary education, through the perspectives of fathers of such students in a rural district of Pakistan.

Method: Primary data were collected through detailed, individual interviews with 14 fathers whose sons had dropped out from secondary education. The study adopted a framework involving push and pull factors to analyse qualitatively the processes and examine the reasons for dropping out that prevailed inside and outside school.

Findings: The analysis suggested that, from the perspectives of the fathers, family poverty, poor academic performance and issues relating to teachers' engagement with teaching at school were main factors involved in a student dropping out of school.

Conclusions: The findings from this small scale, detailed analysis of data draw attention to the issues arising from a tension in mainstream teachers' educational roles in and beyond the school. It further highlights the need for greater investment in secondary education, in order to help to reduce rates of student drop out in the remote rural areas of Pakistan.

Introduction

The non-attendance of children and young people in school is a global problem. UNESCO data indicate that approximately 258 million children and young people were out of school in 2018 (UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) 2018). On 25 September 2015, the UN General Assembly adopted an agenda for 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) with 169 associated targets, aiming to achieve them by 2030 (United Nations, 2015). One of the targets of the fourth SDG is to ensure 'that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education' (United Nations, 2015, p. 17). However, three years later, it was reported that there had been 'no progress in reducing the global number of out-of-school children, adolescents and youth' (UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) 2018, 1). It is clear from a range of reports (e.g. UIS 2014; UIS 2015) that

the issue of students entering and then dropping out of school, as well as the issue of students never attending school, contributes to the out-of-school problem.

Pakistan is a lower middle-income South Asian country with a population of over 207 million, of whom approximately two-thirds live in rural areas (see further National Institute of Population Studies (NIPS), 2018). In 2018, the overall gross primary school enrolment ratio was 94.33 percent in Pakistan.[1] However, the problem of students dropping out of school is exacerbating the number of out-of-school children in the country. According to Pakistan Education Statistics 2016–17, survival or retention rate to grade five is 67 percent at national level (AEPAM 2018, 28). Thus, around a third of children drop out of school before they complete primary education. The state is a major education provider at all levels in rural Pakistan; it is further evident from data that the problem of out-of-school children is more acute in rural areas. Overall, a little under 30 percent of children aged 6–16 are out of school in rural Pakistan. The data distinguish between those students who never enrolled in school and those students who dropped out. Whilst 15.8 percent of children aged 6–16 living in villages never entered a classroom, among those who did enrol, 11.9 percent dropped out (ASER, 2018, p.96).

Defining and describing student dropout

The literature on out-of-school children and young people reflects the complexity of this area of research. This is not least due to the different situations and conditions that are subsumed under the general notion of 'out of school' student status (e.g. the range of scenarios that may be represented by terms such as 'early school leaving' (Dekkers and Claassen 2001; Smyth and Hattam 2002), 'disengagement' (Rumberger 1987) and 'exclusion' (Lee and Breen 2007; UNICEF 2013). Research in this field is characterised by a range of varied definitions and descriptions for the concepts involved. The notion of 'student drop out' is usually conceptualised as a sub-type of 'out of school' status. Whilst Morrow (1986) used a range of terms to further sub-divide types of drop out (e.g. 'stop outs' are students who drop out but return to school within the same academic period), the term student dropout is generally used to describe students who enrol in school but do not complete the compulsory level of schooling before their legal school age expires.

Similarly, defining and describing the exact process of a student dropping out is also complicated and problematic. Some researchers have suggested classifying the process by stipulating certain conditions and criteria that determine student dropout. For example, Ananga (2011) maintained that if a pupil's attendance is less than 40 percent and they are no longer attending school, or have been absent for a whole term without telling the school, they are considered to be a dropout. Elsewhere, Akyeampong et al. (2007) define the process of student dropout as a child who had enrolled in a school but is absent, with the possibility of later returning to education. According to Ireland (2006), a governmental definition of student dropout in the USA described dropout status as 'a student who leaves school for any reason, except death, before completing school with a regular diploma and does not transfer to another school' but further makes it clear that 'a student who leaves during the year but returns during the reporting period (including summer program) is not a dropout' (Ireland, 2006, p.7). Still further, Dedze et al. (2007) limit the absence period for six months for the definition of student dropouts in Latvia, whereas

Hamilton (1986) defines student dropouts as those who are capable of doing the work required for graduation but choose to leave school.

Perspectives on student dropout

Research suggests that there can be a tendency for teachers and school staff to blame poor parents for appearing to be uncaring, uninterested, and uncommitted towards their child's education and ignorant to the benefits of a good education (Boyle et al. 2002; Bridgeland, DiIulio, and Balfanz 2009; Mughal and Aldridge 2017; Patterson, Hale, and Stessman 2007; Seidu and Adzahlie-Mensah 2010; Smyth and Hattam 2002). However, research also indicates that this belief does not necessarily accord with the perceptions of poor parents. For example, in their comparative study, Boyle et al. (2002) noted that poor parents, although they had no experience of schooling themselves, perceived their child's education as a tool to escape poverty. Furthermore, they could judge the quality of education services being rendered to their children at local schools through certain key characteristics of teachers. Bridgeland (2010) also indicated that, regardless of income, race, ethnicity or the school that their child attends, parents recognise the importance of education.

Some studies have captured parents' perspectives on the relationship between the school, the families and the development and importance of teacher–student relationships (Connor 2001; Krane and Klevan 2018). For example, Krane and Klevan (2018) held focus group interviews with 14 parents, in order to examine their experiences of the importance of teacher–student relationships and parental involvement in upper secondary school in Norway. These studies reported on some positive impacts of good relationships between teachers and parents on students' performance. Further, Liu (2004) conducted interviews with 30 families of students who dropped out (15 boys' families and 15 girls' families) at junior secondary level in the Weichang county of rural China. They sought to understand the reasons for the students' dropping out through the students' and their parents' perceptions. The students and their parents provided various reasons for the students' dropping out. These included being tired of schooling, financial constraints, and expected future education at university, having few job prospects after graduation, a tough school life, a boring school environment, having dropped-out friends, admiring youngsters who made money by working in the city, and the demands and persuasion of parents to quit schooling (Liu 2004). This interesting study notwithstanding, there is insufficient literature on the perspectives of the parents on the reasons why their children drop out of schooling. The limited amount of documented research evidence is particularly of note in the case of developing countries like Pakistan.

In general, the available literature on student dropout in Pakistan is rather scarce. The existing studies on this issue are mostly conducted by foreign researchers, who widely used quantitative household survey data to draw conclusions about school access, household characteristics and school dropout (See Alderman, Orazem, and Paterno 2001; Behrman et al. 1997; Behrman, Ross, and Sabot 2008; Bilquees and Saqib 2004; Burney and Irfan 1991; Hazarika and Bedi 2003; Holmes 2003; Kermal and Ahmed 2002; F. Khan 2007; S. R. Khan, Siddiqui, and Hussain 1987; Sathar and Lloyd 1994; Sawada 1997; Sawada and Lokshin 2001, 2009). The in-depth, qualitative examination of the problem, particularly at secondary school level, is extremely limited, although some work has been

conducted on the perspectives of teachers and students. In particular, Mughal and Aldridge (2017) reported, through the perspectives of male and female head teachers of secondary schools, that (other than some socioeconomic and individual factors) some major causes of children dropping out from school in rural Punjab, Pakistan, were identified as follows: different exam patterns at primary, elementary, and secondary levels; easy promotion policy in early classes; an English medium syllabus; the substandard educational background of students; a high failure rate in class 9 (age 14–15); and top-down pressures on teachers to perform non-academic duties. In addition, in a study by Mughal, Jo and Monaghan (2019), 18 secondary school boys who dropped out were interviewed, in order to explore the reasons for their having dropped out. They reported that the main reasons for dropping out in rural Punjab were as follows: poor educational background, poor health and malnutrition, ineffective school and national education policies, failure in class 9, an unconducive learning environment at home, family size and structure, pressure of domestic responsibilities and household poverty. However, although these studies provide some insights into the perspectives of teachers and students, the perspectives of parents have not yet been accounted for: the current study is a contribution to addressing this important gap in the literature.

Purpose of study

In order for poor and developing countries like Pakistan to work successfully towards the targets of the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030, there is a need for boys and girls to stay at school and complete equitable and quality primary and secondary education. Therefore, we argue that the policy focus at national and international levels should be on identifying strategies to prevent student drop out. There is, therefore, a requirement for the local analysis of problems and assessments of potential strategies at the point of service delivery, in order to better understand what the issues and challenges are. To this end, so that the research evidence can inform policy, we believe that it is crucial that the perspectives of teachers, heads of schools, community members of school councils, parents and the students who have dropped out are collected and analysed.

Accordingly, this study sought to contribute to this by conducting an in-depth analysis of the experiences and perceptions of fathers whose sons did not complete their secondary school education in a remote rural locality in Punjab, Pakistan. These children either dropped out during secondary classes and never returned to school or failed the annual board exams and did not retake them within the given time period.

Methodology

Definition and framework

As discussed above, there are many different definitions and descriptions of what constitutes student drop out. As part of the study design, it was necessary to describe clearly how the process of student drop out would be defined. Pakistan has declared its constitutional responsibility to provide free and compulsory education to all children aged five to sixteen (Government of Pakistan 2012). In Pakistan, the official school entry age is five years and free compulsory schooling lasts for 10 years (primary to secondary,

age 5 to 16) (ASER, 2017a). Thus, this study defined a dropout as a student who enrolled to formal schooling but failed to complete a secondary school certificate by the age of 16 regardless of their attendance or for how long and how frequently they left and returned to school during an academic year.

Many studies conceptualise student dropout as a process (See Finn, 1989; Hunt 2008; Rumberger 1987). For example, Rumberger (1987) suggests that dropout is a process of disengagement from school due to social or economic reasons. Hunt ascertains dropping out should be 'not presented as a distinct event, but rather a process where a range of supply-demand factors interact to influence schooling access' (Hunt 2008, p. v). Sometimes, the pressure of such factors is so strong that it makes a student unable to continue schooling. Similarly, Finn (1989) argues that dropout is a long-term disengagement process which does not happen in a single day or a school year; the reasons for this disengagement develop over a long period of time. Elsewhere, Stearns and Gellinie contend that 'the concept of a dropout process is inaccurate, as students of different gender and ethnic groups are affected by different push and pull factors at various ages and to varying extents' (Stearns & Glennie, 2006, pp. 54–55).

This study has conceptualised student dropout as a process, following the positions of Hunt (2008) and Finn (1989). We have considered that the decision of dropping out of school is not influenced by a single big event but, rather, it is an outcome of a continuing process that develops gradually over a long period of time. Moreover, we see the decision of dropping out as the final outcome of several interacting factors rather than just one. Accordingly, the notions of *push out* and *pull out* underpin the framework for this study. As suggested by the literature, it can be helpful to differentiate between push and pull factors. In this context, various out-of-school factors (e.g. individual and family characteristics, and ongoing household financial pressures) can pull students out of school. At the same time, out-of-school factors (e.g. the quality of learning and teaching, various school policies and practices) can push children out of school. We will use this framework as a lens through which to view the processes and examine the reasons for dropping out that prevail inside and outside school.

Ethical considerations

Full ethical clearance was granted to the study via Loughborough University's Ethical Committee and also from the head teachers at all the schools included in the study. All ethical considerations prescribed by the Loughborough University Ethical Committee such as confidentiality, anonymity, consent and storage of data were strictly followed during the fieldwork. An Information Sheet and Informed Consent Form were given to all respondents. Although these papers were developed in English, they were translated into Urdu to ensure that all participants were provided with written information about the project. These forms were clearly read aloud in the participants' own language so that they could understand the meaning. In addition, they were briefed about the nature of the research and usage of data. Before the interviews, the informed consent forms were obtained from the participants and translated into their own language, so that they knew what they were signing. In line with the ethical protocol of the study, in order to protect and respect the privacy of the participants, the real names of the respondents have been changed (pseudonyms are used) to uphold anonymity.

Research approach

A qualitative methodology was used, as the intention was to collect rich data and undertake in-depth analysis in order to understand the reasons fathers gave for their children dropping out of secondary education. A naturalistic approach was adopted, as we sought to understand a phenomenon in a context-specific setting (Bryman 2016). The current study was undertaken in a natural setting and specific locality; the researcher physically visited the schools and the participants in their 'real-world'. Most of the interviews with the participants were conducted at their workplaces. The data on student dropout were for a specific time period: school years 2011–12 and 2012–13. The students who dropped out in the two years before the study took place and did not return to school or failed to pass their secondary school examinations were included in the study. The case study was both embedded and multiple, involving the phenomenon of students dropping out of school in a specific time and location. The individual experiences of the fathers of the students who dropped out present a case at a particularistic level.

Data collection

Data on rates of student dropout were collected from 33 public secondary schools (17 for girls and 16 for boys) in subdivision Pind Dadan Khan, which is a remote rural locality in the district of Jhelum. These schools reported that 741 boys (393 from class 9, age 14–15 and 348 from class 10, age 15–16) and 103 girls (68 from class 9 and 35 from class 10) dropped out of school during the academic years 2011–12 and 2012–13. Finally, 18 schools were chosen for visiting, based on their locations. The 18 secondary schools included in the final sample were located in the remote rural areas. A purposive sampling technique was employed to access the fathers of sons who had dropped out, having ascertained that the participants were relevant to the proposed research questions (Bryman 2016). The male teachers from the schools assisted in contacting them. We focused on fathers and sons because the male teachers could only contact the fathers regarding their sons at school. A mother's role in the secondary schooling of her boys was not studied in this research because of the cultural constraints in remote rural areas. Specifically, meetings between male teachers and a mother of absentees or students who have dropped out are typically not permitted. Similarly, a father who has daughters is restricted in meeting female teachers. The fathers were selected on the basis of their availability in the village and willingness to be seen and interviewed. In total, fourteen fathers of the secondary school students who had dropped out were interviewed, in order to try to gain insights into their perspective on the problem. The interviews with the fathers of the students who had dropped out of school were held in a range of different places. As some of the fathers were not able to read and write, the researcher (the author of this paper) read aloud the participants' information sheet and consent form to them in their own language.

For data collection, a semi-structured interview method was applied. For all interviews, the researcher followed the guideline suggested by Bryman (2016) – ordering and altering the questions for an easy flow of information, using language relevant to interviewees, asking general biographical information about participants to know their gender, age and experience, becoming familiar with interview settings, preparing for questions

interviewees may ask during or after the interview, discussing with the participants the most appropriate place for the interviews to take place – in a quiet location – and possessing a good quality recording device. Each interview lasted between 40 minutes to one hour and was structured with the following questions:

(1) What are the particular reasons for your child's dropping out of school?
(2) What support do you need to prevent your children from dropping out or getting re-enrolled?
(3) Reflecting on your own experience being a father of a child who dropped out of school, how can the issue of dropping out be addressed effectively at school level?

The interviews were conducted in the participants' first language. The interviewer (author of this paper) and the interviewees (participants) had the same first language. This meant that the researcher was able to retain the originality of meanings of different words and expressions of the participants when he transcribed the audio recordings of the interviews.

Data analysis

In line with the qualitative methods used, an inductive data analysis strategy was adopted, in order to focus on participants' views, interpret the meaning of seeing, hearing and understanding, and develop a holistic picture of the phenomenon under study (Creswell, 2014). A thematic analysis strategy was used to develop theoretical understanding of the data. Specifically, all data were organised according to core themes; information on the themes was illustrated in abstract form and an inductive process was employed to establish 'a comprehensive set of themes' (Creswell, 2014, p.176), guided by the theoretical framework that underpins the study. Key themes were constructed from the interview texts through thematic analysis of the views of the fathers of the students who dropped out. Central themes and subthemes were constructed by the repeated reading of the transcripts of the digitally recorded interviews. A computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software package (NVivo) was used as a tool to facilitate the process of generating codes and forming them into separate themes. The emerging themes were then mapped back to the 'pull out push out' theoretical framework and the literature. Interestingly, some other themes emerged that had not been identified in existing studies on dropout. As part of the analysis assurance process, we related the analysis back to our research questions and the objectives of the study to check that the themes were significant, relevant and had implications for the research investigation (Bryman 2016).

Findings and discussion

In the sections below, the findings from the analysis are presented and discussed. The presentation is structured according to the 'pull out and push out' framework that underpinned the study and discussed according to the relevant literature. Where relevant, translated anonymised quotations from the transcribed interview data are included, in order to highlight or illuminate particular points of interest. Where names are used, they are pseudonyms.

Relationships between pull-out factors and the process of students dropping out of school

(1) Family Poverty

According to the fathers, family poverty was the main pull-out factor causing student drop out. Out of the 14 fathers who were interviewed, six clearly stated that they were not able to meet family needs without the help of their secondary school-age sons. The sons therefore had to drop out of school in order to contribute to the household income. The fathers who engaged in seasonal labour and relied on daily wages tended to be the ones to cite family poverty. For example, Munir, the father of a class 10 boy who had dropped out of school, said that he worked at a local kiln on daily wages and on seasonal basis. He further observed, 'My children have to work to contribute to family income. My eldest son has permanently dropped out of school and works with me at the kiln'. Three other fathers reported that their livelihood was based on a small and family-based agricultural business. They needed their sons' assistance in feeding cattle and working in the fields. For example, Bashir, the father of a class 9 student who had dropped out, commented, 'My eldest son dropped out last year from class 9 to help in our agricultural business'. The fathers' observations suggested that large family sizes and a culture of intergenerational dependency were also increasing the financial burden on them. Ultimately, the fathers needed their children of secondary school age to share financial responsibility with them. Mukhtar, a father of a class 9 student who had dropped out, had five children, wife and parents to feed. Similarly, Kabeer was also responsible for feeding two of his unmarried sisters, along with his own three children and parents.

Information from UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) (2018) resonates with evidence from this study: when 'a poor household's income suddenly drops, the family may respond by withdrawing a boy from secondary school so that he can earn money' (UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) 2018, 5). More specifically, studies based on quantitative survey data also highlight how household poverty pushes children towards child labour in rural Pakistan (Bhalotra 2007; Ray 2000). Our study adds explanatory detail, suggesting that, according to the interviewees, dropping out occurred when household income was not enough to meet the basic needs and the children's financial contributions became an absolute necessity for family survival. Additionally, none of the fathers reported that their daughters were working to contribute to family income. It is evident that in the typical patriarchal rural society represented by this study's context, boys bore the pressure of family financial stress and dropped out of school to earn money. It is clear from our analysis that the fathers thought that family hardships and financial distress made it difficult for the secondary school students to continue their schooling. Historically and more recently, it is evident from international studies that these kinds of 'pull out' factors have a substantial role to play in the decisions of students to drop out of education. For example, in the USA, Jordan, Lara, and McPartland (1996) identified family needs and financial worries as factors among Hispanic and African American students. Many other empirical studies have shown a positive relationship between parental socio-economic status, household poverty and dropping out of school (See Abuya, Oketch, and Musyoka 2013; Al-Hroub 2014; Ampiah and Adu-Yeboah 2009; Bridgeland 2010; Chugh 2011; Dakwa, Chiome, and Chabaya 2014; Huisman and Smits 2009; Hunt 2008; Moyi 2010; Munsaka 2011; Stephens 2000; Yi et al. 2012).

(2) Boys' Poor Academic Performance

In this study, fathers reported that another notable factor that caused their sons to drop out was poor academic performance at school. This finding chimes with previous studies which generally measure academic achievement through quantitative longitudinal data analysis (e.g., Hardre and Reeve 2003; Parr and Bonitz 2015; Watt and Roessingh 1994). In our interview study, it is particularly interesting to note that the fathers in our sample were divided in terms of their views about the reasons for their children's poor academic performance. Some fathers, particularly those whose sons failed in class 9, held their sons responsible and said that their boys were naturally weak in their studies. They argued that it was a waste of time and resources sending them to school, as it was clear that they were not going to pass secondary school exams. They perceived that their sons lacked the cognitive abilities necessary to pass secondary school exams. For example, Mushtaq said that he knew that his son was not good at studying and, rather than forcing him to continue, he sent him to a local barber shop to learn practical skills. Equally, other fathers blamed teachers for not taking interest in teaching at school and held teachers responsible for their sons' poor academic performance. They argued that, when teachers were not teaching their pupils adequately in class, students fell behind in their studies.

A large number of studies suggest that poor academic achievement may contribute to school dropout (Fortin et al. 2013; Hardre and Reeve 2003; Lan and Lanthier 2003; Parr and Bonitz 2015). Watt and Roessingh (1994) call it the 'falling out' factor of dropping out. It occurs when a student is not showing adequate progress in studies and is uncertain about completion of the intended level of schooling. All in all, there are indications that low expectations from parents and teachers, and students' own lack of self-determination can contribute to students dropping out. For example, Hardre and Reeve (2003) tested a motivational model on 483 public high school students in four different Iowa school districts in the US, to investigate student drop out. They identified that, apart from school performance, perceived self-determination, and perceived competence also acted as strong predictors of dropping out. Further, Lan and Lanthier (2003) suggested that the students who experienced poor academic achievement in previous grades also had low perception of their academic abilities in upper grades. If such students did not have extra study support, they dropped out of school. In addition, it should be borne in mind that household social and economic factors greatly impact on children's academic success (Siddiqui and Gorard 2017).

Relationships between push-out factors and the process of students dropping out of school

Teaching issues
Out of the 14 fathers who were interviewed in this study, eight reported that, in their view, some teachers did not take sufficient interest in teaching the students in school. They argued that this was because some teachers ran their own private tuition centres out of school hours, thus teaching less at school and encouraging their own pupils to attend these tuition centres. The fathers also commented that some teachers had second jobs, such as running their own shops and doing agricultural work. According to the fathers, some teachers carried out their business activities during school time, therefore

neglecting the teaching duties. Receiving private tuition in academic subjects is a common trend globally (Bray 1999; Bray et al. 2014; Dang 2007; Jayachandran 2014; Nath 2008). This issue of private tuition is also widespread in Pakistan. During the field-work, many advertisements attracting secondary school students for private tuition in English, mathematics, and science were observed, even in remote rural areas. For example, Aslam (2012) suggested that 16 percent of enrolled pupils aged 3 to 16 took private tuition in rural Pakistan: the demand for private tuition was greater in urban areas. Aslam (2012) also noted that the incidence of attending private tuition was slightly higher in secondary school students compared with the other age groups.

The fathers of some boys who dropped out directly blamed the school and teachers for not teaching their children well. Bilal, a father of a class 10 boy who had dropped out said, 'My son never failed to turn up to class 8. It was the duty of teachers to teach him well in secondary classes. My job was to send him to school every day and I did it'. Among other factors, parental financial inability to pay for private tuition was noted as another reason for the students dropping out. For example, a father of a boy who had dropped out added, 'We cannot afford the costly private tuition of the same teachers who are responsible to teach our children at school'. He further questioned, 'Why they are getting salaries from the government if we have to pay them to teach our children privately?'. Muzaffar, a father of a secondary school student who had dropped out, maintained the same story and commented 'I sent my son to school for ten years. It was teachers' job to help him study and makes him successful'. Some of the other fathers who were inter-viewed were similarly of the view that in sending their boys to school for ten years they had carried out their parental role: their responsibility, as fathers, was to ensure that their children went to school. It seemed that the fathers' other involvement with the school was very limited. For example, it was understood from their educational level that they were not able to help with homework. Further, they confirmed that they had never been part of school-based involvement regarding their children's schooling and that they had never been contacted by teachers to discuss their children's academic performance. Furthermore, when they were asked about school councils, they were totally unaware of their existence and functioning at schools. More generally, it is evident that parents' level of education, family circumstances, socio-economic status, class and ethnicity, and their beliefs about school and teachers can serve as substantial barriers to parental involvement in school management (Hornby and Lafaele 2011). The fathers in this study had low socioeconomic status; none of them was employed in a technical profes-sion. They all lived locally, working at kilns, with masons, driving local vans or running their own small-scale agricultural businesses.

The researcher was unable to reach some of the fathers of students who had dropped out because they were either working on daily jobs or busy in their fields in remote areas. It was apparent that there was a trade-off between their manual labour and being able to have access to the teachers at school which was a difficult one for them. When fathers fear that they will lose wages if they attend meetings with teachers, they do not attend. The researcher approached some fathers working in fields that were far from the main villages. It was also observed that when a father's workplace is away from a school, time and travelling costs negatively affect meetings with teachers. In this way, teachers' cultural constraint of only being able to contact parents of the same sex and fathers' unafford-ability to trade-off between work and meeting with teachers widens the communication

gap between parents and schools. Our analysis suggested that, according to the fathers' descriptions of the home–school relationship, lack of communication between school and parents gave sole authority to teachers to decide about the students who were at risk of underperforming.

According to Hornby and Lafaele (2011), when parents think that their role is limited to sending children to school, they are less involved in their children's education. However, this study also suggests that they are less involved when they are not academically able to help their children. Furthermore, when parents cannot afford supplementary private tuition for their children at risk of dropping out, they rely totally on school teaching. They want schools to make an extra effort to improve the study performance of their children. Providing for-profit tutoring by teachers to their own formal pupils is a norm at schools in developing countries (Bray 1999). Elsewhere, it has been found that 'some schools intentionally encouraged students at risk not to sit the board exams and instead to apply as a private candidate' in order to keep their failure rate low (Mughal and Aldridge 2017, 372). In the study reported here, eight of the interviewed fathers expressed their concerns over the trend of private tutoring in the area. They said that the teachers who taught science and mathematics at local schools also offer paid tuition at their homes in the evening. They were of the view that some teachers intentionally did not take interest in teaching at school and urged children, either directly or indirectly, to seek private tuition from them. They further said that wealthy families paid them to provide one-to-one tuition for the children.

The fathers' views expressed in this study resonate with the existing literature. For example, Jayachandran (2014) indicated that Nepalese teachers taught less at school to create a demand for their private and paid tutoring to their own pupils. The pupils who could not afford private tutoring were left behind in studies and ultimately failed their exams and dropped out of school. Jayachandran (2014) highlighted that 'student perfor-mance on the national secondary exam appears to fall when the school offers tutoring, concentrated among the students from poorer families who are less likely to take up tutoring' (Jayachandran 2014, 202). It is clear that private tutoring widens the educational gap For instance, Nath (2008) observed that primary school pupils in Bangladesh who received supplementary tuition learnt more than those who did not get such support. He further noted that the demand for supplementary tutoring was higher among the children of educated parents and wealthy families. Bray et al. (2014) showed similar results in their study based on a questionnaire survey of 16 secondary schools in Hong Kong in the 2011/12 academic year. They found that 'students from wealthier families are [more] likely to receive private tutoring [...] than students from low income families' (Bray et al. 2014, 35). The affluent pupils received supplementary tutoring from their mainstream teachers at school or from private tutors. Students and parents desire better exam grades, which compels parents to invest more in their children's education. Thus, the demand for private tutoring is created (Bray et al. 2014). There are many reasons for the provision of private tuition, including low salaries paid to teachers in state schools, which produces the need for supplementary income, and insufficient official teaching hours at school to cover the syllabus Bray (1999).

The trend for private tuition is apparent in the district of Jhelum. The ASER report (2017) shows that 19 percent of the children in government schools and 47 percent in private school attend paid tuition in this district. This tendency is greater for secondary classes. In government schools, research suggests that 32.6 percent of pupils in class 9

and 24 percent in class 10 receive paid supplementary tuition, whereas this rate for the pupils in private schools is 50 percent and 87.5 percent for class 9 and class 10 in Jhelum (ASER-Pakistan, 2017b). The growing trend for private tuition in the remote rural areas of Jhelum is noteworthy in relation to the fathers' claim that some teachers took more interest in providing private tuition outside school then in teaching at school. However, the fathers ignored the other factors that created a demand for supplementary tuition, such as their children's poor schooling in early classes, a shortage of qualified staff and the requirements of teachers to carry out nonteaching duties (Mughal and Aldridge 2017). None of the fathers reported that their son was ever penalised by teachers in class tests or in other activities at school for not having private tuition from them. They argued that they did not have the money to get supplementary tuition for their children and insisted teachers should make extra efforts to help their children to pass secondary school exams. Thus, it is important to note that this is an economic and policy-related issue.

Conclusions and implications

This small scale, in-depth study has analysed the phenomenon of student drop out from the perspectives of fathers whose sons had dropped out of school in a rural area of Pakistan. According to the analysis, it was evident that the fathers felt that family poverty, poor schooling background, educational performance, and issues with teachers emerged as leading factors of dropping out. The collection and analysis of these views is of value as it offers insights into the lived experiences of a hard to reach group in a remote area. It allows us to shed light on the factors that influence student drop out in this situation. It is also important to emphasise that this was a study from a specific perspective, and this has implications for the way that the phenomenon was conceptualised by the participants. It was noted during the interviews that fathers of the students who had dropped out were not particularly confident in giving detailed reasons for the students dropping out. Additionally, as they were not fully involved and engaged with local schools, they were, unsurprisingly, less able to understand and explain the dropout phenomenon comprehensively. It is also the case that the fathers' lower socioeconomic status and academic level made it difficult for them to engage with their children's home- or school-based learning. They appeared to have relatively low awareness of the problems their children went through at school. They tended to put blame on teachers, their household poverty, and children's inabilities to progress. However, they did not talk explicitly about policy-related factors that may cause students to drop out, which reflects how they did not have the knowledge of school or public policies to consider the situation from those perspectives. The National Education Policy (2009) confirms that one of the reasons why the past educational policies and plans in the country could not reach their targets is the lack of community participation in decision-making and policy implementation at local level. Among the 14 fathers of students who dropped out of school, none reported that the teachers had ever discussed about the school council with them or invited them to become a member of it. The fathers of the students who dropped out of school clearly argued that they were not told about the existence of school councils.

The pupils of poor parents suffer in many ways. As this study evidenced according to the fathers' perspectives, they attended poorly managed primary schools in remote rural areas, did not have any family support with home-based learning, and their parents could not afford private tuition for them. At school, children did not have extra study support to

improve their performance. In this regard, it is suggested that the government should improve the standards of education in the primary public schools in remote villages. Furthermore, the government should arrange extra support classes for the secondary school pupils of disadvantaged families by allocating a special budget for this purpose. Alternatively, the government should consider giving tuition vouchers to academically weak secondary school students to enable them to attend private tuition from their preferred tutor. A number of important factors need to be considered when addressing the high pupil dropout rate in secondary schools in Pakistan, and specifically in rural areas such as Punjab. Explanations for this at a national level point to structural and systemic factors such as the impact of poverty, unemployment, and a lack of adequate resources that affect so many families (including children) in Pakistan, and which are often much worse for families living in rural locations. It is highly recommended that government should provide extra supplementary classes to pupils who are underperforming and at risk of dropping out and, furthermore, should strictly ban class teachers from providing paid tuition to their own students: the issues of conflict of interest will arise if class teachers give private tuition to their formal students. If Pakistan does not introduce and implement an effective dropout prevention policy, it is less likely to achieve the targets of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in primary and secondary education by 2030.

Limitations

This study has some limitations. The dropout phenomenon under investigation is limited to secondary education (grades 9 and 10) only. The study is also limited to the formal education delivered in public secondary schools in rural Pakistan. Data on dropout rates were collected from 33 public secondary schools (17 for girls and 16 for boys) in the subdivision Pind Dadan Khan, a remote rural locality in the district of Jhelum. Furthermore, the data on pupils' dropout obtained from schools were for the academic years 2011–12 and 2012–13. The pupils in the study dropped out either from class 9 or class 10 from those schools during the given academic years. Also, those pupils whose dropping out period did not exceed two years were included in the study. The implications for these limitations are that the findings of the study are limited to secondary schooling only: they cannot be applied to primary and elementary education; the findings are limited to the remote rural areas: they do not reflect the urban secondary schools; the findings relate to one subdivision of a rural district (Jhelum) and are not generalised across rural Pakistan. Nevertheless, the findings have relevant policy and practice implications for similar rural contexts.

Note

1. http://uis.unesco.org/country/PK.

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