



PREVAILING AGAINST THE ODDS OF DROPPING OUT OF SCHOOL IN GHANA

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines factors that affect school dropout at the basic level of education in Ghana. The study focuses on the experiences of students, parents, teachers and welfare workers. Weak family support, poor academic performance, poor school quality and low value for education are identified as important to children's stay in school. It is observed that some children prevail against the odds and remain in school while others drop out. Resilience is identified as an important factor that could enhance the capacity of at-risk student to stay in school despite adverse circumstances. The study recommends research on the underlying processes that foster personal resilience in school age children from disadvantaged backgrounds in Ghana

Keywords: Dropout, Family Support, School Quality, Basic Education, Ghana

1. INTRODUCTION

In recognition of the benefits of education, Ghana has initiated educational programs to promote enrolment at the basic level of education. These programs include free tuition, and more recently, the School Capitation Grant, and the School Feeding Program implemented under the Free Compulsory Universal Basic Education (FCUBE) program¹. Despite these initiatives, many children continue to drop out of school before completing their basic education. According to the Ministry of Education in its Educational Sector Performance Report (2006), out of 1000 children who enter Primary 1, only 56% progress to Primary 6. One hundred and fifty-nine (159) of this figure drop out and the rest repeat. The Consortium for Research on Educational Access, Transitions and Equity (CREATE) in its 2007 Country Analytic Report believes the dropout figure of 159 per 1000 is under reported considering the number that progress to Primary 6 (Akyeampong, Djangmah, Oduro, Seidu, & Hunt, 2007).

In addition, figures from the 2008 Ghana Living Standards Survey found that thirty-one (31) percent of adults in Ghana have never been to school and seventeen (17) percent did not complete Junior High School (Ghana Statistical Service [GSS], 2008). Thus approximately 6.4 million Ghanaian adults (almost half the adult population) have never been to school or never completed Junior High School.

Enrolment patterns in Ghana from the district to the national levels indicate that children are dropping out of school right from early Primary to the transition from Primary to

¹ FCUBE was launched in 1996 and it was basically to extend universal access to quality basic education to every school-age child in Ghana by the year 2005. The School Capitation Grant and the School Feeding Program were launched in 2004 and 2005 respectively under the FCUBE.

Junior Secondary School.² Gross enrolment ratios have been on the increase since 2000 but they have been offset by high dropout rates (Ministry of Education [MOE], 2004). The 2011 UNESCO Global Monitoring Report indicates that the number of primary age children out of school in Ghana has reduced from almost 1.2 million (1,198,000) in 1999 to just under 800,000 (792,000) in 2008. This indicates that government's efforts at enrolment has proved effective, however the population that remains out of school indicates other interventions are needed to keep children in school. Moreover many adolescents at the Junior High School level remain out of school.

Despite the expanding literature on various aspects of education in Ghana, very few studies were found to focus specifically on school dropout (see Ananga, 2011; Fobih, 1987; Ibrahim and Oduro-Ofori, 2005; Yokozeki, 1997). In many other studies, school dropout was examined while studying other aspects of education such as access and enrolment or social problems and not in its own right (see Akyeampong, 2007; Coulombe and Wodon, 2007; GSS, 2003). The importance of research focus on school dropout in addressing issues of access has been underscored by the Consortium for Research on Educational Access, Transition and Equity (CREATE) in the following quote: "To look at access without a focus on sustained and meaningful access, would show just part of the picture. A focus on drop outs and the processes of drop out is integral to our understandings of educational access" (Hunt 2008: 53).

In a country policy brief in March 2008, CREATE identified a number of research gaps which it observed as important in enhancing initiatives to improve educational access in Ghana. Among the gaps identified were:

- Identifying the causes of the rise in dropout in later primary grades and JHS, and suggesting interventions to reverse the pattern.
- Exploring in detail why a high proportion of school-age children continue to be out of school and why after several education initiatives, the proportion of out of school children has proven resistant to change (CREATE, 2008: 13).

This paper highlights findings on aspects of a study carried out on school dropout in Accra, Ghana. Research questions that the study sought to answer were: How do individual, school, family and socio-cultural conditions contribute to enhancing young people's maintenance at school or preventing them from completing the statutory years of schooling? In what ways can young people's chances of completing their statutory years of schooling in Ghana be enhanced?

2. PERSPECTIVES ON SCHOOL DROPOUT

The problem of students at-risk of dropping out of school is a worldwide concern, affecting both developed and developing countries. According to the 2011 Global Monitoring Report (GMR), globally, approximately 140 million children and adolescents are out of school (UNESCO, 2011). The Education Policy and Data Centre (EPDC) estimates that about one-quarter of children in developing countries who enter first grade do not make it to the fifth grade (Ingram et al., 2006).

A number of studies indicate that household income is essential to determining a child's access to education. It informs the decision to enrol, attendance and the decision to drop out of school (Birdsall, Levine, Ibrahim, 2005; Bruneforth, 2006; Colclough, Rose and Tembon, 2000; UNESCO, 2010; UIS and UNICEF, 2005). Income has a determining effect on schooling

² The term 'Junior Secondary School' (JSS) and 'Junior High School' (JHS) are used interchangeably in the study. This is because a year into the study, educational reforms were undertaken which replaced JSS with JHS however certain secondary data used were collected prior to the change in name. The official grade level under JSS still corresponds to that of JHS.

because education normally involves overt costs like school fees and covert costs such as school uniforms and transportation (Hunt, 2008; Ibrahim and Oduro-Ofori, 2008). Studies on Africa, Asia and America found that children from disadvantaged regions of the world, children from poor families and rural children were less likely to remain in school (Alexander, Entwisle, and Horsey, 1997; Ainsworth, Beegle and Koda, 2000; Filmer and Pritchett, 1999; Rouse and Barrow, 2006). According to Hunt (2008: 25) “poverty interacts with other points of social disadvantage.” to further increase the likelihood of vulnerable children dropping out of school.

Poverty has been found to force children into paid labour which poses a threat to their schooling as it creates pressure on their time (Heady, 2000; Hunt, 2008; Skoufias and Parker 2001). Guarcello, Lyon and Rosati (2008) found that globally, child labour is the main impediment to achieving universal primary education. The 2007 World Bank country report on child labour indicated that 1 in 5 children in developing countries were involved in child labour. Working affected schooling because children who worked did not have the time, energy or money to go to school (World Bank, 2007). In Ghana, as high as 34.58 % of children aged 6-11 and 44.26 % of those aged 12-15 who participated in a study on child labour, left school because they saw school as uninteresting and useless (GSS, 2003).

Besides household income, family structure and family size has profound influence on school dropout. In many parts of Africa, polygamous family structures were found to result in a higher incidence of marital conflict and marital distress. Such structures led to the absence of the father and economic hardships which in turn had a negative impact on the child’s schooling (Elbedour, Bart and Hektner 2000; Elbedour, Onwuegbuzie, Caridine and Abu-Saad 2002). Additionally, a large number of children in a family meant less resources allocated to each member (Eloundou-Enyegue and Williams, 2006)

School factors have also been found to affect school dropout. According to *push-out* theorists, young people drop out of school because of factors within the school (Knesting and Waldrn, 2006; Stearns and Glennie 2006; Wayman, 2002). Jordan et al. (1996: 64) define push effects as “factors located within the school that negatively impacts young people and cause them to reject the context of schooling.” Some of these push factors are weak relationship with teachers, below average academic performance (Stearns and Glennie 2006; Wayman, 2002). Fobih’s (1987) study on Ghana found that friction with teachers relating to arbitrary use of punishment, name-calling and comparing of a student’s academic performance to that of others were predisposing factors to school dropout. This paper highlights the voices of young people in Ghana as they shared factors that affect their ability to complete basic education and what could be done or should have been done to keep them in school.

3. MATERIALS AND METHOD

Fifty-five (55) participants were involved in the study over a period of ten months. These were made up of 21 children in school divided into two categories of 11 High Risk and 10 Low Risk students with the assistance of teachers, and 11 children who had dropped out of school. High Risk students were those identified as not likely to complete basic education based on attendance, interest in learning and academic performance while Low Risk students were those identified as highly likely to complete basic education based on attendance, interest in learning and academic performance. Eleven (11), teachers, 6 parents, and 6 welfare workers were also interviewed.

The study adopted a multi-dimensional ontological view of school dropout by looking at the problem of school dropout from multiple levels of the social world. The study was primarily qualitative and used social constructionism as its epistemological foundation, hence focus was more on the social processes that inform school dropout.. In-depth interviews, group

discussions, life-graph, card sorting and informal observation were employed in the collection of data.

The life-graph involved getting the children to plot on a line graph, events in their lives (both positive and negative) that they found significant. It served as a technique for soliciting background experiences of the children, and paved the way for in-depth interviews. Card sorting, similar to the life-graph facilitated individual interviews with the children and made it easier to solicit from the children what they deemed most important and least important in their lives and their reasons for such decisions.

In all, there were 45 in-depth interviews with young people who had dropped out of school, high risk and low risk students, teachers, child welfare workers and parents. There were 9 group discussions involving the three categories of young people (High Risk, Low Risk and Out of School), teachers and welfare workers. Group discussions with the participants brought to the fore common experiences.

Informal observation was used as a supplementary method. As the researcher interacted with teachers and pupils throughout data collection, this method was used to observe pupil-teacher interaction, and also helped to 'listen' to what had not been said. Other areas of interest observed were discipline, and the general physical, psychological and emotional climate of the schools. Observation was useful in getting a feel of the general school environment, of the various dynamics, both positive and negative.

A reflective diary was maintained throughout the process. Keeping a reflective diary provided an opportunity for reflecting or pondering over the various themes that emerged from individual interviews, group discussions, life-graph, and observations. It captured all those informal interactions that could not be accessed through other data collection methods. The reflective diary served as a log for informal observations made, and provided an avenue for expressing what was seen and felt and also for expressing thoughts on daily interactions with participants. It made it easier to follow up on emerging themes by providing a link between daily interactions and experiences in the field.

The study focused on Accra which is the capital city of Ghana.³ The settings were a Primary school, a Junior High school and a non-profit organization that offered assistance to young people who had dropped out of school. These schools are located in the inner city of Accra. Data was collected along micro to macrosystem variables, therefore participants responded to questions relating to individual, family, school and socio-cultural circumstances that impact young people's stay in school. The data generated from the research was managed and analysed with the aid of a method known as 'Framework' which was developed in the 1980s by the UK National Centre for Social Research. Framework is based on thematic framework, which is used to sort and organize data according to "key themes, concepts and emergent categories" (Ritchie, Spencer and O'Connor, 2003: 220). The process involved building a thematic framework or index, indexing, creating thematic charts, doing a descriptive analysis, and building explanations.

4. FINDINGS

The findings revealed a variety of factors that affected children's capacity to continue with school. These have been summed under: (a) *Family Support*, (b) *Academic Performance*, (c) *School Quality*, and (d) *Value for Education*. It was observed that deficiencies in these four areas created conditions that overwhelmed many students and caused them to lose motivation, and ultimately give up on school. Out of the 21 participants in school, 17 of them (10 out of 11

³The 2010 Provisional Census result indicates that the population of Ghana is 24 million (<http://www.statsghana.gov.gh>). The population of the Accra Metropolitan Area is estimated at 2.5 million (<http://www.moh-ghana.org>).

high-risk and 7 out of 10 low-risk students) had a dropout history, indicating that even those considered low-risk at certain points struggled to stay in school. The study also found that despite the propensity of at-risk children to drop out of school, there were others who successfully adapted to the negative factors and managed to stay in school. These personal attributes have been discussed further below under the heading of resilience. The following sections discuss each of the overarching factors: Family Support, Academic Performance, School Quality and Valuing of Education.

The study defined family support as provision of material, social and psychological support by parents or caregivers that enhanced the educational experiences of their children. Poor academic performance related to performance that consistently fell below 40%. Variables that determined school quality were availability of teaching and learning materials for each subject and mode of teaching; teacher training and motivation; teacher-student relationships; use of corporal punishment and humiliation; and the physical environment of the schools. Finally, valuing of education referred to the recognition of education as worth pursuing due to the benefits participants believed would be gained from being educated.

4.1 FAMILY SUPPORTS

The family and socio-cultural conditions of the young people in the study, point to weak family support as a major source of the problems children face that affects their capacity to stay in school. The most cited reason under family factors was problems with care provision. The cases reviewed demonstrated that when the family structure was affected by separation or divorce, marital conflict, death or polygamy, the burden for the child's care shifted to either one parent, the extended family, a non-relation or the child. The result was financial difficulties and lapses in care provided leading to problems with schooling for the affected children.

At the time of data collection, many of the children lived with or were cared for by single parents who were mostly mothers. This is reflected in 18 mothers and 7 fathers who fully provided the needs of their children. On the other hand, 6 mothers and 16 fathers were not providing any form of care. Where a mother was absent, the child was cared for by extended family and non-relations who were mostly women. Findings indicated that the children's education was in many cases negatively impacted by the absence of a father. This was not because the mothers did not see the importance of education but because the absence of the father diminished the family income. Twelve year old Van (Out of School) narrated:

My father said he could only take care of two of us. He left my big brother and me with my mother - (Van).

Van dropped out and re-enrolled several times and was irregular at school because his basic needs were not being met. After the departure of his father, his mother also abandoned him a few months later. This resulted in permanent withdrawal from school. Due to weak family support, many children were involved in generating income instead of focusing on school which led to their eventual drop out. Another interesting case was that of Beauty. During one of the interview sessions, Beauty who dropped out of primary 5 reflected:

My school run shifts, so whenever I was on the morning shift, I sold pure water in the afternoon and sold in the mornings when I was on the afternoon shift. I knew I would stop school anyway because I had to sell - (Beauty).

The cases of Van, Beauty, and the others demonstrate the reality of many children. The influence of the extended family in the education of children has decreased significantly due to

worsening financial constraints. Findings indicate that informal fostering saved many of the children in the study from being homeless. Despite the care from foster parents, the children's schooling was nevertheless doomed due to financial difficulties. Informal fostering by extended family or non-relations was prevalent because their biological families had fallen apart and could no longer provide the children with basic needs. Schooling in most cases was not the first consideration for fostering due to the additional economic burden. The accounts of 14 year-old Jessica (High-Risk) and 16 year-old Princess (out of school) illustrate this phenomenon:

My parents travelled, so I stayed with her (aunt) ...for 3 years... She said she didn't have money to take care of me, so I had to stop school – (Jessica).

The woman (non-relation) said she couldn't take care of my school needs any longer; she could not give me money for school any longer, so she advised me to stop. Her children however continued school while I did the house chores – (Princess).

Family support does not only relate to financial support but to psychological and emotional support as well. A breakdown in the relationships within the child's microsystem incapacitates the child's ability to explore and relate effectively with the other parts of his or her environment.

The conclusion drawn from the findings is that many children drop out of school because of the little or no care they receive from their parents or guardians. As children work to support themselves, they have less time to focus on school, there is increased absenteeism and their academic performance is compromised. Participants who had dropped out of school came from homes affected by divorce and separation (8 out of 10), and many had lost one or both parents through death (7 out of 10) or abandonment (4 out of 10). Moreover, they all reported abuse, mainly physical abuse, abandonment and neglect. These circumstances contributed to the shifting of their focus away from school. With such weak family support, school became less appealing and the young people experienced humiliation and poor relationships with teachers due to low academic performance.

4.2 ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

In addition to family support, the study found poor academic performance to be an important factor in school dropout. Students who were academically strong had good relationships with their teachers. As teachers expressed more interest in academically capable students and showered praise on them these young people were motivated to stay in school despite problems at home. On the other hand, children who had academic difficulties felt humiliated as they were publicly reprimanded for non-performance and ridiculed by their peers. The negative language and perceived humiliation by teachers instilled a sense of dread of coming to school each day. Fourteen year old Aminu (High-Risk) stated:

When the teachers disgrace us in class...we don't feel like coming to school for fear of being ridiculed by friends, we would rather prefer to truant – (Aminu).

Students with academic problems were lumped together with academically good students and examined using the same criteria. The inability of such students to perform well was often misconstrued as a behaviour problem, and rather than being encouraged they were punished. In effect, the under-performing students bore the burden of teachers' frustrations for poor performance. This made school less attractive to academically weak students and therefore

more susceptible to being lured by peers and outside influences to drop out of school. When 14 year old Ali (Out of School) was asked why he dropped out of school, he stated:

...it was a friend who said because of how the teachers were beating us we should drop out and go to the lorry station to cart goods to make some money – (Ali).

There was no process for identifying students with learning difficulties and other disabilities as teachers were not trained to understand and handle such cases. Moreover, students had difficulties with the mode of teaching due to inadequate teaching and learning materials and were publicly humiliated for failing to answer questions correctly. Jessica (High-Risk) expressed her frustrations:

My main problem is that when I study I don't understand, it does not stick in my memory. I want to understand what I study so I can continue with my schooling – (Jessica).

4.3 SCHOOL QUALITY

The research data further revealed that low school quality interacts with academic difficulties to alienate children from school leading to school dropout. Basic facilities and materials needed for teaching and learning were absent in the schools. Teachers in the schools found it difficult to teach effectively without enough desks for students to write on and without learning aids. Overcrowding was a common problem in many of the classrooms. One classroom had 68 students with up to three to four students sharing a desk. During days of peak attendance some students sat on the floor to write due to inadequate furniture. Teachers were obviously frustrated over not being able to teach effectively due to lack of teaching and learning materials. Mode of teaching was therefore basically 'talk and chalk', which further added to the negative attitudes in the schools. A female teacher at one of the schools expressed her exasperation:

When we teach a topic it is so abstract to the child, because the student has never seen what we're trying to describe. The children don't even know what a test tube is, we talk about it; we are told there is no money to pay for learning aids... When they compare life at school to home, home is better, because at least they watch movies, so they prefer staying at home ...even to us teachers teaching is sometimes boring when it is so abstract – (Female Teacher).

Furthermore, the poor physical environment made school a very uncomfortable and unattractive place to be. Whenever it rained the compound got flooded and the pools of water bred mosquitoes within days. There were several food vendors on the compound, and part of the compound had been encroached by automobile repair shops and used as a thoroughfare by the neighbouring community. The absence of basic facilities within the schools encouraged students to truant in an attempt to access those facilities outside the school. The schools had no toilet facilities and students made use of a public facility located nearby. Students paid 10 Gp each time they used the facility. Bernice (Low Risk), a primary 6 pupil lamented:

...we have to pay to use the public toilet, so we usually go looking for somewhere to urinate, can disgrace yourself if you need to go and can't find a suitable place, or don't have money – (Bernice).

Those who lived close to the school went home when they needed to use the washroom. There was no water in the school. The students and teachers bought sachet water from vendors for their needs.

Levying by schools also affected attendance. Students avoided school for fear of being flogged or because they knew they would be sent home for not paying a levy. The students complained about the high non-tuition costs they had to pay. School levies which included Parent Teacher Association dues, funeral dues, and teacher motivation affected school attendance. Esther (High-Risk) and Musa (Low-Risk) both in primary 6 expressed their frustrations:

Today for instance, [teacher] said we should bring a broom...out of my pocket money of 50Gp I had to give 20Gp to him. I will also have to pay studies fee of 10Gp and because I haven't eaten since morning I'll have to buy food with the rest of the money. What will I use on water? I'll be forced to ask other people for some of their drinking water and some of them complain, some even ask if I ever come to school with money and that makes me sad – (Esther).

Every year they bring a new thing. Sometimes they say someone's relative is dead so we should contribute. First term, for instance we were made to contribute towards the construction of a tap. We paid over a period but they didn't construct it. The school fees used to be GH¢4.50, though there is now free education, we still end up paying because of the levies.... Even if you don't have money, [teacher] will tell you to go look for some because he's collecting it, and if you come and tell him that your mother says to wait until tomorrow, he will beat you – (Musa).

The widespread use of corporal punishment encouraged many high-risk children to dislike school. Caning was used indiscriminately: for being late, failure to answer questions, non-payment of levies, misbehaving, and improper dressing. As a result, many high-risk children have poor relations with their teachers and therefore were more likely to be absent from school. Having poor relations with teachers added the pressure on children which understandably affected their attendance.

From the dropout history of participants, truancy and irregular attendance often preceded school dropout as all the 11 children who were out of school went through a process of irregular attendance and/or temporary dropout before dropping out permanently.

4.4 VALUE PLACED ON EDUCATION

The research results from the study show that the value placed on education by parents, peers and the wider community has a profound influence on whether or not the child stays in school. When parents perceive education to be worthwhile they were more likely to invest in their children's education

In cases where education was seen as beneficial, the motivation of parents and guardians to ensure their children persisted in school was quite high. Parents usually made adjustments in their lives in order to send their children to school. For instance, a parent withdrew his kids from a more expensive private school to the less expensive public school in order for all his children to stay in school when faced with financial hardship. Where parental assessment of education was low, it led to withdrawal of children from school. During interviews, adult participants mentioned that the motivation to send or withdraw a child from school was affected by unemployment and poverty as well as cultural and community influences.

The low value placed on education was sometimes the result of observed high unemployment amongst those who had already completed school. A welfare worker who went on outreach within deprived communities to identify vulnerable children including those who have dropped out of school remarked during group discussions:

...if the father is a fisherman, he doesn't see the reason why his son should go to school and not get a job at the end of the day and still come back to fish, so why waste money on school when the child can start fishing now - (Welfare Worker).

Furthermore, there was some evidence within the communities where the children lived that many that dropped out of school and opted for apprenticeship were self-employed. Some parents saw this as evidence of a low return rate on education and a waste of scarce resources. Another parent remarked that Junior High School did little to prepare young people for the job market and that free compulsory education in Ghana should be extended to the Senior High School level. The existence of low value for education, coupled with weak family support, resulted in a high tendency for children to drop out of school.

5. DISCUSSION

The study found a combination of factors that tend to increase or decrease the child's capacity to stay in school. This is depicted in Model 1:

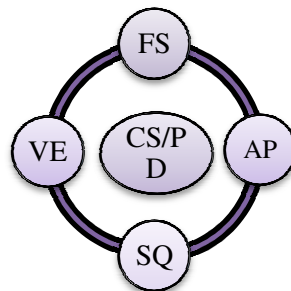


Figure 2 - Model 1: Capacity to Stay in School or Propensity to Drop out

FS = Family Support

AP = Academic Performance

SQ = School Quality

VE = Value for Education

CS = Capacity to Stay in School

PD = Propensity to Drop out of School

Model 1 posits that propensity to drop out of school (*PD*) is accelerated in the presence of weak Family Support (*FS*), poor Academic Performance (*AP*), poor School Quality (*SQ*) and a weak Value for Education (*VE*). Conversely, in the situation where any of the four key factors are present in adequate forms, the capacity to stay (*CS*) in school is strengthened. All these four factors are important and are linked. This link is symbolically represented as a *protective ring* that connects all the factors together. As a result, when a child is academically able, and values education, and the quality of his school is high but he or she has weak family support, this will make for a weakening of the protective circle as a whole.

The capacity to stay in school is negatively affected because the protective ring that provides a buffer against dropping out of school is weakened. This explains why even academically good students in the study who were categorised as Low Risk by teachers had a dropout history (7 out of 10). Moreover, valuing education on its own does not provide protection from dropping out. This was observed among students who placed high value on education, but dropped out at various points when they had difficulties with family support. The research data clearly shows that family support is a critical element. The implication of this

model is that a problem with any of the four factors (*FS, AP, SQ* and *VE*) has the potential to negatively impact a child's capacity to stay in school (*CS*).

Despite the perceived benefits from the above model when all the factors are working positively, in reality a strong protective ring is difficult to achieve. This is because there will always be differences in children's academic performance and it is not possible to ensure that family support remains permanently strong. No matter how stringent child maintenance laws are, some parents for various reasons may fail to provide for their children. Furthermore, it is not possible for educational stakeholders to ensure that education is be given the value it deserves. Moreover, due to funding constraints, school quality cannot always be maintained at the level required. One crucial element however emerges from the interview results. The data identifies resilience as a possible mediating factor that could help neutralise the negative effects of the key factors that contribute to school dropout. During several interactions with the children in the study, observations indicated that some of the children demonstrated coping skills that enhanced their capacity to stay in school despite the presence of negative factors.

5.1 RESILIENCE

It is suggested that in addition to the four key factors (*FS, AP, SQ* and *VE*) there is a fifth element that plays an important role in determining young people's capacity to stay in school (*CS*). The study suggests that this fifth element could possibly be personal resilience and recommends further research to verify this. As the findings suggested, in some cases this additional factor may have existed and further enhanced the capacity of children to stay in school despite weaknesses in the other key factors (*AP, SQ, VE, and FS*) identified in Model One.

Resilience is understood as a person's capacity to bounce back from adversity or to resist adversity (Canavan, 2008). Much could be learned from observing children who are at-risk of dropping out of school but managed to stay the course despite the odds. It is suggested that resilience enhances the capacity of children to stay in school despite weaknesses in the other key factors (*AP, SQ, VE, and FS*) identified in Model 1. Model 2 introduces resiliency into the discussion to explain why many children have been successful and what can be done to help other at risk children. Narratives collected during interviews with children who continued with school despite the odds are presented to illustrate the possible role of personal resilience in preventing permanent dropout from school.

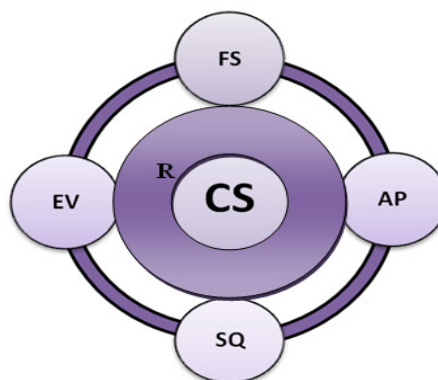


Figure 3- Model 2: Enhanced Capacity to Stay in School

FS = Family Support

AP = Academic Performance

SQ = School Quality

VE = Value for Education

CS = Capacity to Stay in School

R = Personal Resilience

In Model 2, personal resilience positively enhances and binds the other factors (*AP*, *SQ*, *EV*, and *FS*) and thereby promotes the capacity to stay in school (*CS*). Thus even when there are problems in one or more of the four key areas, the child's capacity to stay in school tends to be protected. In Model Two, resilience (*R*) forms a protective ring around the child's capacity to stay in school (*CS*). In such a situation even if there is a break in the first ring that links *AP*, *SQ*, *EV* and *FS*, the likelihood that the child would stay in school remains strong because resilience serves as an additional buffer against dropping out of school. Resilience needs to be recognised as playing a key role in enhancing capacity to stay in school, especially in deprived contexts where the key factors (*AP*, *SQ*, *EV* and *FS*) are weak.

Several of the young people interacted with faced tremendous adversity ranging from broken homes, death of one or both parents, physical and emotional abuse, neglect and abandonment, having to earn their own living, to difficulties in learning and its subsequent humiliation. Despite these extremely incapacitating experiences some of them managed to bounce back from those adversities and stayed in school. They improvised different ways to withstand, cope and adapt to these situations. Some combined schooling with various economic activities in order to stay in school, while those who could not combine school and work dropped out temporarily to work to save money in order to return to school. Many withstood debilitating situations at home and school but refused to give up. Fifteen year old Nancy (Low Risk) who was in grade 8 recalled her experiences when she was in primary school:

I sold firewood every day before going to school; sometimes I had to do 5 trips to get enough money for school. I was always late for school, and was always caned for being late, yet still I had to sell before school otherwise.... I would have to drop out of school – (Nancy).

Seventeen year old Joe (High Risk) also in grade 8 had been abandoned by both parents while in primary school. Due to financial difficulties, he had to walk 10km to school each day and was punished each day for being late and not having books. Nevertheless he refused to give up on his schooling and managed to prevail against the odds until a philanthropist offered assistance. He acknowledged "if I don't finish school, I'm not sure I can make it in life." Fifteen year old Bernice (Low-Risk) was in Primary 6 and lived with an elderly woman as a domestic help. She narrated how she juggled work and school:

I sell ripe plantain at the Kaneshie Market... when I come for the morning shift and close at 12:00, I go to sell for a while, till about 3:00 then I come home to cook...by the time I'm done with all the house work, it will be late but I still have to learn so I learn a little and I fall asleep, I wake up again between 3a.m. and 4a.m. to continue. At 5 a.m. I go and do house work then I go to school...where I come from is far and with the 50Gp (pocket money) I pay transport fare of 20 Gp otherwise if I walk I'll be late. Then when I come to school I pay studies fee of 10 Gp leaving 20Gp so in the mornings, I don't eat because the 50Gp is for the whole day – (Bernice).

Musa (Low-Risk), a 17-year old primary 6 student from a broken home, presents another interesting case. According to his own admission, he had dropped out of school several times totalling 6 years. He had to work to enable him and his brother to return to school:

We were sacked for not having books. We didn't have money, because my grandmother had travelled, my parents had separated and she (mother) had left. We don't live with her and no one knew where she was ... I started washing dishes for

someone who sold beans close by and for that I was being given 50Gp a day and I started saving. I saved for a long time and when I gathered enough, we (my brother and I) came back to school. That whole period, we didn't know where our mother was and as for our father, we had been to his place just once – (Musa).

Fifteen year old Fred (Low Risk) got a job to wash cooking utensils and carted goods for a food vender so he could have money the next day for food and studies fees:

There were times I went to school on an empty stomach and ate only when I returned home after school. After a while I got the opportunity to help a woman, who sold yams, I carried her load from the market to her house at the end of each day. She gave me 20Gp each time I helped her. I used 10Gp to pay studies fees, and used the rest for food the following morning. When my mother could afford, she added some to my pocket money. I worked with the woman for about 3 years – (Fred).

There were others like Esther (13 years old, High Risk) and Ernest (16, years old, High Risk) who also laboured and managed to beat the odds to stay in school. With reference to Model 2, weaknesses in the outer ring (*AP, SQ, EV* and *FS*) are not minimized but are regarded as only part of what is required to build up capacity to stay in school.

The kind of resilience (being suggested) which kept the children in school was not based on Kaplan's definition which emphasises external factors to the individual such as the presence of "social, familial, and institutional safety nets" (Van Breda, 2001: 5) which help individuals to resist the stresses that life poses. Undoubtedly, social, family and institutional safety nets enhance the ability to cope with stressful situations. Indeed in Model Two, the resilience ring (*R*) should be thought of as enhanced by the strength of the outer ring (*AP, SQ, EV* and *FS*). However, much more in line with the point being made here about the findings of this study is Garmezy's definition "the skills, abilities, knowledge, and insight that accumulate over time as people struggle to surmount adversity and meet challenges.... an on-going and developing fund of energy and skill that can be used in current struggles" (Van Breda, 2001: 5).

Garmezy's definition concurs better within the Ghanaian context and agrees with the findings because what is being highlighted is that many of the children in the study did not have the protective factors being referred to by Kaplan (social, familial, and institutional safety nets) or where these existed they were weak and consequently such factors could not have guaranteed their continued stay in school. There was something else enhancing their capacity to stay in school. The question is what is it that prevents children who do not have social safety nets from dropping out of school? Fred, Musa, Esther, Joe and many others came from broken homes or were abandoned by parents yet persisted in school, some despite academic difficulties, while others who were in similar circumstances, like Princess, Akua, and Koo, dropped out. The first group's ability to remain in school could usefully be captured by the concept of personal resilience, however, to reiterate, the study recommends further research to determine this.

Resilience is a contested concept that is not fully understood. However, the literature on resilience indicates that there is an increasing interest in the construct to explain how people thrive against all the odds. According to Ungar (2008) resilience first of all refers to developmental outcomes that are better than expected despite being born and raised under disadvantaged circumstances, secondly it is seen as a set of competences displayed in dealing with stressful situations and thirdly, it is the ability to function well after experiencing trauma (coping strategies). Ungar gave a socio-ecological definition of resilience which he describes as much more culturally and contextually relevant than previous definitions in the resilience literature.

In the context of exposure to significant adversity, whether psychological, environmental, or both, resilience is both the capacity of individuals to navigate their way to health sustaining resources, including opportunities to experience feelings of well-being, and a condition of the individual's family, community and culture to provide these health resources and experiences in culturally meaningful ways (Ungar, 2008:225).

Luthar, Cicchetti, and Becker (2000: 543) give a concise definition of resilience as "...a dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity". The emphasis of resilience is the ability to bounce back from adversity. Ungar et al (2008: 288) see resilience as "both an outcome of interactions between individuals and their environments and the processes which contribute to these outcomes". Rutter (1999:119) stated that children are differentially vulnerable to psychological and social stress and adversity based on genetic and environmental influences and describes resilience as "relative resistance to psychosocial risk experiences". Rutter assessed that the risk young people experience (such as losing a parent as a result of a divorce or separation), is to a greater extent due to the processes that lead to the break-up (such as family conflict and problems with parenting - for instance children becoming the targets of parental frustrations) rather than the divorce or separation itself. Thus it is possible that although a number of children may come from broken homes (as in the case of the current study), their responses to such adversity may vary. Moreover, children may display resilience in certain aspects of their lives and not in others (Rutter, 1999). Thus participants in the current study who dropped out of school could be resilient in other areas but not in the area of beating the odds to graduate from Junior High School.

Rutter (1999) stressed that multiple risk and protective factors are involved in resilience. Thus the overall level of risk and the build-up of numerous risk experiences (vicious cycle of risk and adversity) is particularly more damaging to the young person than is the case when there are single risk experiences (Rutter, 1999). In addition, varying response to adversity and psychosocial stress is related to young persons' sensitivity to risk which according to Rutter is influenced by genetic and past experiences. He asserted that reducing the negative impact of adversity, increasing positive reactions and using these to neutralise negative experiences, opening up opportunities and also the way in which the mind (cognitively) processes the experience influences resilience.

Interest in resilience has extended from western to non-western contexts. Ungar and his colleagues (see Ungar et al. 2008; Ungar et al., 2007; Ungar and Liebenberg, 2009) presented several reports on research carried out on resilience across cultures within both non-western and western contexts (including Gambia, Tanzania and South Africa). Ungar et al (2007: 301) suggested that "resilience is about finding a way to 'hit your stride' and live with relative comfort despite contradictions and conflict: to continue to negotiate and navigate one's way through the challenges one is experiencing".

Clearly, Musa, Fred, Bernice, Nancy and many of the students interacted with each day negotiated and navigated their way through the challenges they confronted as they strove to complete Junior High School.

6. CONCLUSION

There are several inter-locking factors that work to increase the risk of children dropping out of school. These include: weak family support, poor school quality, low academic performance, and less-than-adequate value for education. All these factors interact in the context of weak economic and social conditions in a developing country such as Ghana. The main areas that should be targeted in efforts to prevent school dropout are: Ensuring economic safety nets for poor families, improving the academic performance of children and school quality through teacher efficiency, the provision of teaching aids and special education facilities,

teacher motivation and in-service training, and the enhancement of the physical and emotional environment of schools.

However, most of the problems that confront school children highlighted by this research cannot be solved in the immediate term. As such while long term measures are being taken to resolve these impediments, children must be given the support and opportunities to learn skills to live above the problems. In the short term, there is the need to build personal resilience skills of at-risk children. Resiliency can be facilitated by teachers, parents, peers and communities through mentoring. An example of a successful mentoring program is Big Brothers Big Sisters of America which reinforces the powerful impact of mentoring on the lives of young people and its positive impact on schooling (see Tierney, Grossman and Resch 1995).

It was observed that as the young people in the study shared their experiences in group settings during data collection, they realised they were not alone in their difficulties, and that created an opportunity for mutual learning on how to cope with their difficulties – how to recognise and build resilience. This new sense of motivation might have carried on even a year after data collection when reports from the Junior High School indicated a record high achievement by some of the participants in the final exams – an indication of the benefits of mentoring.

The implication of Model 2 is that building resilience at the various levels of interaction –from the microsystem to the macrosystem level would both provide safety nets and further strengthen the personal resilience of young people in a manner that enhances their capacity to stay in school. Teachers and key stakeholders need a better understanding of the character of resiliency in children. Further research (a longitudinal study) is needed to delve into the underlying processes that foster personal resilience in underprivileged school age children in Ghana.

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