The determinants of learner dropout in Kavango West region rural primary schools

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Abstract
The research aimed to explore the determinants of dropout among primary school learners in rural schools and the strategies that could be applied to retain learners in school until they complete secondary school. The study employed a qualitative research approach and data were gathered through face-to-face interviews and observations. A purposive sampling method was used to select twenty participants for the study, which included learners, parents, guardians, Life Skills teachers, and principals. The study found that family, community, school, and system factors had a huge impact on dropout rates among primary school learners in rural areas. The study further found that more male learners lacked motivation and had dropped out of school at an early age than female learners. The study discovered that there were very few senior primary schools in the circuit that implicated learners' primary education completion. This study recommended collaboration among stakeholders to address the factors contributing to primary school dropout rates among rural learners.

Keywords: *determinants, school dropout, inclusive education, rural schools, Kavango West*

Introduction

Despite significant progress in the 2000s in shrinking the percentage of children and youth out of the education system, the 2010s saw much slower progress (UNESCO, 2019). According to UNESCO (2019), global statistics report of 2018 found that 59 million children of primary school age (about 6 to 11 years old) are out of school. Research has shown that school dropouts face disadvantages in the labour market; they have lower probabilities of being employed and lower chances of getting better-paid jobs than school completers (Mendoza-Cazarez, 2019). Moreover, society loses out on human capital from the young children who leave school prematurely, having not acquired adequate knowledge to help them develop as holistic individuals as well as to develop communities. This can lead to high rates of poverty, increased criminal activity, and high taxes on society, which makes it difficult for governments to help these individuals (Mendoza-Cazarez, 2019). The Education Management Information System (2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022) reports in Namibia have shown that there is a concerning trend of non-retention of primary-phase learners through to the secondary phase both in rural and remote schools. Nationally, statistics indicate that over two-thirds of all learners in the country who were enrolled in the primary phase; just under one-third were enrolled in the secondary phase.

Thus, more children proportionally drop out or do not gain access to secondary education at all. In Namibia, a total of 17 982 learners dropped out of school in 2022, of whom 8 984 (49.9%) were females and 8 998 (50%) were males (Education Management Information System, 2022). Of the 17 982 learners who dropped out from school in 2022, 1850 learners dropped out from schools in Kavango West region. Furthermore, only one-quarter of learners registered for primary school in the Kavango West region proceeded to secondary school (Education Management Information System, 2022). In their study, Nekongo-Nielsen et al. (2018) recommended that research-based methods should be developed to reduce the dropout rate, especially in high-poverty and remote, rural schools. Although studies have been carried out to identify factors contributing to school dropout among learners nationally and around the globe, most of these studies focused on learners in the secondary phase and on the interaction of teacher-related factors and school-related factors. The researchers of the current study believe that there is a concerning problem at the primary level, which prevents learners from reaching up to secondary school level. The dropout incidences at primary school are concerning especially that these are young children mainly under the age of thirteen. Namibia has implemented the Universal Primary Education (UPE) funding to remove the burden of school

fees from parents. Yet, the number of learners who drop out of school remains high. A high learner dropout rate further reflects that the Sector Policy on Inclusive Education has not succeeded in retaining in school learners in remote and rural areas. Moreover, Namibia devotes a significant share of its budget to the education of its children, with an annual average spending of 20.7% of the total budget and 7.8% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (United Nations Children Fund, 2023). This huge investment in education needs enablers to transform education, help recover pandemic-related learning losses and revitalise efforts to achieve Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) which is quality education and related national strategic objectives.

According to Wong (2023) the high dropout rate among learners, leads to higher healthcare costs by the government, a rise in crime rates and decreased tax revenue as school dropout learners tend to earn less. Hence, focusing on retaining learners within the education system is crucial to realising the potential benefits of primary schooling. Equally, there is a need to investigate factors that enabled learners who dropped out to re-enter schools and what their experiences were once they returned to school. Such information is crucial for inclusive education and will shed light on school and community cultures that are likely to promote the retention of learners in school. The present study was intended to bring new insights to the problem under investigation by exploring the determinants of school dropout among primary school learners in rural areas, with a specific focus on those who once dropped out of school and returned.

Research objectives
In relation to the problem described above, the main objectives of the study were as follows:

1. To explore determinants of school dropout among rural primary school learners in the Kavango West region of Namibia from the perspective of learners.
2. To identify strategies that might help retain rural primary school learners in the Kavango West region of Namibia.

Theoretical framework
The study was framed within the ecological systems theory of Bronfenbrenner (1979). The theory describes how the learning and development of a child are influenced by the interaction of different systems such as the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem and chronosystem (Ettekal & Mahoney, 2017). The decision of learners in rural primary schools to drop out of school can be influenced by their ecological systems such as family, peers, community, culture, financial status, and the education system. Gil et al.'s (2019) study shows that the factors that are most likely to predict school failure are related to commitment and that of both the learner himself or herself and of the agents involved in their education, the teaching staff, and the learner's family. Bronfenbrenner's theory takes child development from the home to the schools and neighbourhoods, to the community and nation, and ultimately involves all policymakers and others' roles in child development (Wahedi, 2016). This theory is relevant to this study as it allowed the researchers to understand how the environment of primary school learners in rural schools influences them to drop out of school.

Literature review
Factors contributing to school dropout among learners in rural primary schools
Several studies (Ali et al., 2021; Andrew et al., 2018; Hirakawa & Taniguchi, 2021; Krstic & Stepanovic-Ilic, 2017; Mughal et al., 2019; Nambala, 2022) investigated factors that lead to primary school learners' dropout in both rural and urban areas. These studies demonstrated that school dropout was caused by a variety of factors, such as individual, family, teacher, and school characteristics. Individual factors such as gender, grade retention, academic achievement, and age on the first day of school were all important. Ali et al. (2021) highlighted parents' educational and socioeconomic status as family factors. While teachers' factors included teacher absenteeism and their relationships with learners, school issues included low school quality and a lack of school infrastructure.

School factors
Hasan and Irhaif (2021) revealed that positive relationships between learners and teachers were major contributors to school dropouts. They further explained that teachers who exhibited empathy and provided support were well-liked and respected by their learners. On the contrary, teachers who were indifferent and made negative remarks were identified as

pushing factors for some learners to drop out of school (Andrew et al., 2018). Furthermore, the behaviour management and teaching strategies employed by certain teachers could also influence learners' decisions to leave school (Pedditzi & Fadda, 2022). Participants reported that teachers who relied on physical punishment might increase the likelihood of primary school learners' dropouts of school. According to Hirakawa and Taniguchi (2021), the longer the teachers were absent from school, the higher the likelihood of learners dropping out. Conversely, Mughal et al. (2019) clarified that the enthusiasm of teachers towards the subject they teach has a significant impact on the rate of learners dropping out.

Mughal et al. (2019) discovered that substandard teaching, particularly in rural public schools during primary education, was the main reason most learners left school. Teachers must, therefore, implement comprehensive approaches to cater for the learning needs of all learners as those who feel excluded from the lesson are prone to disruptive behaviours and absenteeism (Nabugoomu, 2019). Additionally, Mughal et al. (2019) reported that overcrowding and high learner teacher ratios, shortage of classrooms or appropriate facilities, and absence of a good-quality learning environment at public schools in rural areas had an impact on the educational performance of some learners who dropped out of school. Nabugoomu (2019) revealed that some learners were demotivated to stay in school due to hunger and long distances to school. Furthermore, leadership styles that created an unfavourable school environment for the learners usually made them drop out of school (Andrew et al., 2018).

Nambala (2022) observed that, despite the implementation of school feeding programmes in some countries, there were instances where meals were provided late in the term, which contributed to elevated rates of absenteeism and learner's dropout. On school policies, Hirakawa and Taniguchi (2021) substantiated that policies have an impact on learners' enthusiasm for learning. For example, the repetition policy in a school is a cause for learners to leave school prematurely, especially when the policy allows forced repetition of a class (Andrew et al., 2018).

Family factors

According to Kurebwa and Wilson (2015), family factors such as low income, lack of parental involvement in their children's education, large family size, high crime in the community, and lack of community support for school, influence learners negatively, and some of them tend to drop out of school. Learners from disadvantaged families are more likely to drop out of school than those from advantaged families (Hirakawa & Taniguchi, 2021). For instance, some girls have dropped out due to a lack of sanitary towels during menstruation (Nabugoomu, 2019). Furthermore, a study by Ali et al. (2021) revealed that low level education of parents; significantly contribute to dropout rates in rural schools in Pakistan. When learners struggle academically or have learning disabilities, parents decide that they should drop out of school (Osman & Özer, 2020).

Lastly, "the age and gender of the family head are also important determinants of primary school learner's dropout" (Ali et al., 2021, p. 127). The higher the age of the parents, the higher the chances of learners dropping out of school. It was also discovered that male household heads are more educated and support their children's education more as compared to a household's female heads (Ali et al., 2021). Family factors are evidently strong factors contributing to the dropout rate of learners in primary education. However, only a few studies directly involved parents as participants. Therefore, befits this study that it directly involved parents as participants to help explain the parental and family factors fuelling the dropout of learners from primary education.

Individual factors

Individual factors such as truancy, poor school attitude, peer pressure, and emotional difficulties were identified as the main factors contributing to school dropout among primary school learners in rural schools. It was discovered that poor school attendance leads to truancy and dropout problems in learners (Hirakawa, 2021). Osman and Ozer (2020) found that learners with learning difficulties developed low self-esteem as they repeated grades and became older, and most left school due to bullying. Low motivation, educational expectations, and a poor attitude towards education, preferring to be employed at a young age, are common risk factors for dropping out of school (Nabugoomu, 2019). Lastly, Andrew et al. (2018) revealed that some learners who dropped out of school

influenced others to drop out of school. Most studies focused mainly on parental and school factors, which included teachers' factors, and slightly neglected individual factors. From the related work, there is no study that addressed the learners' dropout factors comprehensively, which was the focus of this study. This study sought to explore the parental, family, school, and teachers' as well as learners' factors that influence school dropout and those that influence learners to return to school in rural primary schools.

Research methodology
The study adopted a qualitative approach. Mertens (2015) elucidated that qualitative techniques provide an in-depth description of a specific phenomenon. According to Maxwell (2012), qualitative design allows for the incorporation of participant differences as well as differences in attitudes, values, intents, and meanings, as well as social, cultural, and physical contextual elements that influence casual relationships. Lambert and Lambert (2012) stated that the purpose of qualitative investigations is to provide a detailed summary of specific events experienced by people or groups of people in everyday terms. The qualitative approach involves an inductive process, collecting specific evidence and identifying patterns to develop theories (Hong & Cross, 2020).

Research design
The study used a case study design due to the nature of the topic under investigation. A case study is a detailed description of a complex phenomenon, such as recent events, key challenges, or programmes, aimed at finding new and deeper understandings of the phenomenon (Mertens, 2015). This research design was ideal for this study since the researchers aimed to investigate the factors contributing to school dropouts by interviewing parents, teachers, and learners who dropped out and returned to school in the Ncamagoro circuit. The two schools chosen from the circuit served as the cases in this study.

Sample technique and sample size

A purposive sampling method was used to select the two schools with the highest number of dropouts and twenty participants in this study. Twenty participants from the two selected schools were purposively sampled. The sample included seven parents/guardians, of whom each parent/guardian represented a learner or two learners who also participated in the study. Eight learners, who had previously dropped out of primary school and subsequently returned, were selected to participate in the study. Additionally, a purposive sampling method was employed to choose a principal, the Life Skills teacher at each participating school, and one primary class teacher who had closely worked with the learners involved in this study.

Data collection instruments
The study used document analysis, observation and interviews to collect data. The researchers examined school, circuit, and regional records as well as Education Management Information System (EMIS) reports. The documents that were analysed were obtained both physically and electronically from the two selected schools, the Ncamagoro circuit office and Kavango West regional office. Face-to-face, semi-structured individual interviews were also used to obtain data from all participants.

Data analysis
All the interview data were analysed using the thematic analysis method. Both observational and content review data were analysed using a reflexive technique. The verbatim transcript approach was used to transcribe data from interviews.

Results
The study explored determinants of school dropout among rural primary school learners and identified strategies that might help retain rural primary school learners in the Kavango West region of Namibia. The results were organised and presented according to the emerged themes, as illustrated in Table 1. The results were presented using pseudonyms, for instance, Learner#1, Parent#1, Life Skills Teacher 1 (LST#1), Teacher 1 (Teacher#1), and School Principal 1 (SP#1).

Table 1: Study findings according to themes

Main themes	Sub-themes
1. Factors influencing school dropout out	School factors
	Learners' factors

	Family and community factors
2. Interventions/what influenced learners to return to school	Intervention by the schools Factors that motivated learners to return Interventions by parents
3. Strategies suggested to help reduce the school dropout rate at primary and retain learners in school	Strategies suggested for the school Strategies suggested for the Ministry of Education and other ministries Strategies suggested for parents

Factors that influenced dropout among learners

The results indicated that school factors, family and community factors, and learner factors influenced learners to drop out of school.

School factors
Teacher-learner relationship

All participants indicated that most learners who dropped out of school experienced emotional and mental problems but were scared to talk to their teachers about them. Following are excerpts from the interview discussions: The LST#2 said that *"establishing a good relationship with learners has to do with the teachers getting to know their learners more. Because it is much easier to convince them to return to school or not to be absent once you have a close relationship with them."* The SP#2 added that *"I have realised that learners are afraid of teachers, even though they have problems at home, they do not reach out to the teachers to seek help because that relationship is not there."*

School environment

When asked by the researcher during classroom observation, learners explained that snakes used to enter their classrooms through the holes, and that when it rained heavily, they moved to one side of the class and sometimes the teacher stopped teaching. The LST#1 indicated that the classroom conditions might also discourage learners from coming to school. This is what the teacher said *"most of our brick classrooms are old, and they are not enough, so some senior primary learners are taught in corrugated iron sheets classrooms which get really hot when it is summer and too cold during winter. We also have a serious problem with chairs. Most of our learners must put together broken parts of chairs to sit on, which is uncomfortable, especially for female learners and such conditions can discourage learners from coming to school."*

Furthermore, the school principal indicated that the school environment was unfavourable, as lessons frequently needed to be paused during rainfall. The SP#2 said that *"the school environment is not conducive; one would not want to sit in a classroom of this nature and be expected to listen to the teacher. Most of the time, if it is hot, you cannot even sit in these classrooms. If it is cold, then it is cold. If it is raining, you cannot even sit there, not even a teacher. We all must be standing. If there is anything that one would think the ministry can do, structural development should be one of them. I think if we can have good classrooms that can accommodate learners when it is cold or hot, that environment will be attractive to the learners. It will add value and the desire to learn may also increase."*

Corporal punishment

Three participant learners (Learner#2, Learner#5 and Learner#6) from both Schools A and B explained their fear of returning to school because of corporal punishment from the teachers. Learner#2 indicated that *"at first, after a month of being absent, I wanted to go back to school, but I was afraid of the type of punishment the teachers might give me, because I was absent for too long, so I just decided to stay at home."* In addition, Learner#5 said that *"my teacher used to beat me and get angry whenever I was absent; I was afraid that she would still beat me when I came back."* Whereas, Learner#6 said that *"we stayed in the bush because we were afraid that the teachers will give us punishment when we come back to school."*

Namibia School Feeding Programme (NSFP)

The school feeding programme also emerged as a contributing factor for learners to leave school prematurely. For example, LST#1 indicated that, without soft porridge at school, most learners in the primary phase would not go to school. School Principal#1 also confirmed that one of the challenges they had at school was hunger and said that *"currently,*

we do not have any feeding programmes at school. We find it very hard. But when we have soft porridge at school, learners attend in large numbers. Whenever there is no soft porridge, most of the learners do not come to school, and some drop out completely. Especially those ones at junior primary." Learner#8 added that *"many times, there is no food at home, and we know the soft porridge flour is finished at school, so when we are late, we just go to our friends who do not go to school."*

Distance to and from school

Three participants concurred that the distance travelled by learners to school was a significant factor contributing to learners' dropouts, which also resulted in ageism stigma. For example, School Principal #1 indicated that *"you find a learner who is 6 years old and can walk 3 to 4 kilometres. This learner will be forced to wait until a certain age to start school, and in the process, the learner will be delayed. This learner will not start in pre-primary due to age but can start in Grade 1. And it is where the ageism stigma starts, which will lead to dropouts in the end."* In addition to that, Parent#5 revealed that *"two of my children of the age 9-10 refused to go to school because apparently, they are tired of walking that long distance."*

The LST#2 noted that most overage learners had previously dropped out due to the distance between their homes and the school. This is what the teacher said *"most learners who drop out of junior primary school are stigmatised due to age. These learners who start school late have their parents' house in the inland, and they have no one to leave their children with near the school, so they wait until the child is old and then send them to school later. But some overage learners started school late because they come from Angola and Osire to this area to stay with their family members and without motivation; these learners also drop out due to ageism stigma."*

Lack of inclusive education training

One of the Life Skills teachers explained that sometimes it was difficult to give adequate attention to learners who dropped out due to academic performance because teachers were not trained properly to deal with all the learners in an inclusive setting. The LST#1 mentioned that *"sometimes it is difficult to give sufficient support to learners who drop out due to academic performance because teachers were not trained properly to deal with all the learners in an inclusive setting."* In addition, LST#2 said that *"sometimes there are just too many learners in one class, which makes it difficult for the teacher to focus on all of them and cater to their needs. Maybe if the government could employ more teachers and change the ratio to twenty-five learners per teacher in all grades, these learners would be identified and helped before they even drop out."*

Family and community factors
Poverty

Two of the parents, and all the teachers and principals highlighted that they had observed poverty as the main factor contributing to dropout in their community. According to Parent#5, girls in the community dated old men for money to sustain themselves. This is what the parent said *"girls in our community date older men for to get money to sustain themselves. I think girls get impressed when they see their friends dressing well or being taken care of by their boyfriends. At home, we do not really make enough money or food to cater to all the children's needs. We do not receive any funds from the government in our house."* Parent#5 further added that *"the small ones said they were also ashamed of being laughed at for not having a school uniform."*

One of the learners reported that he was always reminded about how his parents did not send enough money to where he lived and that they always blamed him for the poverty at home. The learner stated that it broke him every time, and he only felt better when he was at school. Learner#3 mentioned that *"every time I am reminded that my parents do not send money or food where I stay and now, I am always blamed for the poverty at home. These types of things really break me down."* Another learner stated that he felt poor when he did not have a full uniform like others and was hesitant to return to school due to that. Learner#4 indicated that *"when I do not have a uniform, I feel very bad; I feel like I am the poorest child at school."* Lastly, one of the school principals assumed that learners would opt for anything that would feed them if there was no food at home and school. SP#2 stated *"you will find that these learners coming the whole day at school will go sit at home on an empty stomach or rather go into the bush and feed themselves on wild fruits other than*

coming to school. And when they have a hobby *that is feeding them such as hunting and looking for wild fruits, they will opt for that rather than education."*

Household chores and child-headed houses
While some learners indicated that they stopped going to school to look after their siblings while their mothers went to work, other learners said that their parents asked them to remain at home to do household chores. Learner#2 stated that *"mom said I should stay with brother while she goes to work. Every day I am the only one who does everything at home, and my aunt does not do anything. I do not even get time to look at my books."* Another learner explained that sometimes they were given so much work to do that when they were done, it was already late for school. Learner#8 mentioned that *"sometimes I wake up so early to go look for goats or cattle and do other household chores with my brother. By the time we are done, it is already late for school. We just dress up and go meet our friends because if we go to school, they will laugh at us for being so late."*

Teachers and principals who participated in the study agreed that most learners are household heads of the small houses their parents build near the school, and they get tired of taking care of their siblings. As a result, some of them drop out to follow their parents who live in the inland and some look for jobs, especially boys. One of the teachers, LST#1 revealed that *"you will find out that in a house there are only three learners, and the eldest one is in Grade 5. They are living with the other siblings. You see that these learners are now facing challenges when it comes to food provision. No one provides for them food unless they have to go inland, where their parents are living, and then collect something there. Sometimes they come back without anything, so some decide to just drop out of school and follow their parents in the inland."*

Parental involvement and lack of motivation
According to the school principals, only about 40% of parents attended parent-teacher meetings. About 50% of parents invited to school regarding their children's behaviours such as absenteeism and dropout, did not show up. Participants LST#1, LST#2, and Teacher#1 also confirmed the lack of parental involvement and motivation as a contributing to school dropout mong learners in rural

primary schools. For example, LST#2 indicated that *"learners do not get encouragement from their parents to go to school. Once the child drops out, they just leave the learner to stay home. There is a negative influence from children who are not attending school. If you look at the area where we are, there are no aspirations for learners, no people that they can look up to, like, when I grow up, I want to be like this person. If you go around, you see that there are just these people who didn't go far in school."* Whereas, Teacher#1 added that *"parents have a lot of an 'I do not care attitude' and they drink too much alcohol. There is a serious alcohol abuse problem in this community by parents. Many houses they brew alcohol at home just to drink. Sometimes parents grow enough Mahangu for their family, but they trade Mahangu for alcohol. At the end, they remain without food for the children. They do not care about their children, who need to go to school."*

In addition, SP#2 explained that parents were unaware of the importance of education and schooling. Hence, they could not motivate their children to return to school when they dropped out. This is what the school principal said: *"parents who are illiterate and who do not see the importance of education also contribute to this high rate of dropping out of school. Some children are even kept at home to look after their siblings. Some are dropping out to head home when parents are somewhere else, and the whole responsibility is left in the hands of these school-going children. So, these are some of the factors that are immensely contributing to the dropping out of learners in school."*

Individual/learner factors
Peer influence
The results confirm that peer influence is central in the life of a child. One of the parents seemed to believe that some children dropped out of school due to peer pressure. The parent reported that, based on his observation, children in the community were in squads (groups) where they influenced one another with negative things. Parent#7 *"there is a bad influence in the village due to the large number of children who dropped out of school. Sometimes they don't even sleep at home. You will not see them until maybe the next day if they come home. Sometimes I force them to go to school; they dress up to go, and then you will just hear that they never reached school."*

In addition, one of the Life Skills teachers, LST#2 explained that *"learners, mostly boys, receive negative influence in the community from others who dropped out. They talk negatively about school. So, you know how kids are easily convinced, if someone says, if you go to school, there is nothing coming out of it, they just find other responsibilities at home, such as hunting and herding cattle, more interesting than coming to school."*

Emotional and behavioural problems
The results revealed that one of the learner's behaviours and emotions changed following the loss of the mother, who died at home. One of the parents reported that the child only went to school when his aunt escorted him, never stayed for the entire school day, and eventually dropped out. Parent#1 indicated that *"almost every day, he would cry and refuse to go to school. If I do not accompany him to school, he sometimes does not arrive."* Another learner, Learner#7 said that she faced emotional abuse from her parents at home, *"my mother drinks too much alcohol; many days there is no food at home, and when she comes back from the Cuca shop, she says a lot of bad things to me. She can go to the Cuca shop for the whole day and only come back at night; when she comes back, she insults me."*

Interventions/factors that influence learners to return to school
Counselling services
The collected data of this study revealed that counselling service was provided by the social worker to one of the learners who dropped out from school. The parent to the learner who received counselling from the social worker indicated that she was referred to the state hospital social worker, by an employee at Project Hope. Thereafter the social worker visited the child's house where she spoke with the child and the parents separately. The parent indicated that there had been a significant positive improvement since the social worker's visit. The learner returned to school and is motivated to continue attending school. Parent#1 said that *"last year I got to know about Project Hope when I met one of their employees here at the village. I explained my nephew's problem to her, and she referred me to a social worker at the hospital. The social worker came to our house and spoke to me and my nephew, and thereafter he started going to school and looking better. Even when I asked if*

he would manage, he said he would, and even if they laugh at him, he will not leave school until he completes."

Educating children about the importance of education
One of the parents mentioned that he tried to teach his children and grandchildren the value of education. Parent#5 mentioned that *"I have tried to talk to my children about the value of education. The older girl realised what was going on and returned to school. The younger children are still at home; they refused to go to school. They complained about their hunger and the distance."* Another parent, Parent#7 added that *"I encouraged the children to return to school, but only one did. The other stated that he was going to look for work. However, the one who returned to school has been going most days, even though he still sleeps away from home often."* One parent, Parent#6 explained that she escorted the children to school, to ensure that they have reached school. *"When I learned that they do not use to reach school and that they stayed in the bush when send to school, we have decided to escort them to school. The mother is usually the one who used to escort them."*

Self and social motivation
Some learners explained that they were motivated to return to school after considering their home situation and their goals in life. For example, Learner#3 explained that *"I simply examined the situation at home. Some of my classmates are still in school. If I do not finish school, I will be forced to work jobs with little pay, such as collecting water for people, where I will not be able to cover my expenses. If I stay at home, our family's poverty will not improve; rather, it will worsen."* And another, Learner#4 added that *"seeing other people speaking English and successful people with expensive cars motivated me to return to school. I want to be different and to change the situation at home."*

School interventions
School and parent collaboration
One of the participants stated that he went to the homes of dropout learners' parents to investigate the problem at home. He added that this method helped them create profound connections with parents and the community, as well as to bring children back to school. SP#2 reported that *"I have noticed that when*

these parents see you, they get really excited. These home visits have also shown me that some of the learners lie. Parents are also unaware of what is going on. But now, because of this relationship between the school and the community, we are in a situation where parents know what is required of them. A few learners have now returned to school." In addition, LST#1 explained that they constantly encouraged parents of learners who have dropped out to come to school and address the issues that the learners were facing. This is what the teacher said *"what we do is, invite the parents of learners who dropped out to come to school together with the child and discuss the challenges that the learner face. Not all parents come, but a few numbers of learners whose parents come return to school, although the majority do not."*

Strategies that may reduce the dropout rate
All participants were asked to offer solutions that could help the school, the Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture and parents to reduce primary school dropout rates. The strategies were presented below based on the emerged themes and categories.

Strategies suggested for the schools
Collaboration
One of the parents advised that the school held meetings with parents and invite social workers to educate them on the value of education and how to urge children to attend school. She also stated that social workers visited homes where children had dropped out of school to advice and counsel them in the hopes of getting them back to school and possibly reducing criminal activity in the community. Specifically, Parent#1 advised that *"teachers and social workers should collaborate to visit homes and educate parents and children about the importance of education and going to school rather than staying at home; this may also help the community's life situation and reduce criminal activity."* Some of the parents proposed that there should be collaboration between schools and parents. Parent #3 also advised that teachers worked together with parents to identify children who dropped out of school and talk to them to find out what led them to drop out. Parent#3 mentioned that *"because there has to be a reason why the child dropped out."* One of the learners, Learner#8 suggested that *"the teachers should work together with*

parents and arrange a meeting to talk about the problems those learners who drop out of school face." While LST#1 indicated that *"now the school must try to call the parents of learners who live in child headed households and advise them that parents of those learners (who live in child headed households) should decide to make turns of staying with the learners in the house. For example, one parent comes and stays with the learners for a week or month and then the following week another parent from a different household comes and stay with the kids. Just to avoid learners staying alone in the house because it is negatively affecting their learning and education."*

Motivation of learners and enforcement of discipline among learners
The results also suggested a need for motivation of learners and enforcement of discipline among learners. One of the parents proposed that teachers prevented learners from engaging in undesirable behaviours such as drug and alcohol abuse, which was currently prevalent in their area and was thought to be a cause of dropout. Parent#4 stated that *"some children in our community who become interested in drugs may miss three days of school and eventually drop out."* Similarly, another participant believed that encouraging learners to stay in school and take their education seriously could help alleviate poverty and develop the community.

Parent#7 mentioned that *"they should explain to them the value of education. They are orphans, and because I am financially strained, the only way to aid them is via education."* One of the school principals, SP#1 advised that the school implement programmes to help learners become more interested in school. Finally, SP#2 advised that teachers should study and know their learners so that they could prepare lessons that met their needs. This would help learners stay motivated in school and possibly lower dropout rates. This is what SP#2 mentioned *"they must first know their learners and identify learners with special learning needs; their lesson delivery should then be tailored to the learners' learning needs."*

Strategies suggested for the Ministry of Education, Innovation, Youth, Sports, Arts and Culture
Collaboration among stakeholders

The results suggested a need for collaboration among the educational stakeholders. One of the teachers suggested that the Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture should work with other ministries to ensure that every child begins school at the age of six and that every child in Namibia under the age of sixteen attended school as per article 20, subsection 3 of the Namibian Constitution.

Teacher#1 mentioned that *"sometimes the Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture should send someone to talk to the parents in the hopes that they will change. Because parents may grow tired of the teachers constantly talking to them."* Another parent added that the Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture should work together with the police and social workers. Parent#1 said that *"they should visit every house where learners have dropped out and threaten parents who keep learners at home to do household chores, work on the farms, or sell goods about being arrested. If the social worker goes and threatens them that they will be arrested if the children do not go to school because you are sending them to work at the farm and sell goods."*

Financial support and national documentation registration

One of the parents proposed that the government should provide national documents to parents without national documents for them to receive the social grant in order to help them sustain their children's lives. Parent#2 suggested that *"the Ministry of Education should assist parents in obtaining birth certificates for their children. Our children are unable to get the social grant because they lack birth certificates, and there is nothing I can do. We don't know where the mother is, and the father is in Angola."* Another learner pleaded with the government to issue birth certificates to children without national documents and provide orphans with a grant so that they could purchase toiletries and school clothes to encourage children to continue in school instead of dropping out due to bullying. Learner#4 said that *"the government should also register learners in order for them to receive national documents and benefit from government social handouts. The majority of the children are from Angola, and their parents do not have identification documents; thus, their children do not have documentation and are dropping out of school."*

Sensitisation of learners and parents about the importance of education and punishment for dropouts

The results suggested a need for the sensitisation of learners about the importance of education and punishment for dropouts. Parent#7 suggested that *"the government should try to organise discussions in which they visit schools and villages to talk with learners about the significance of attending school and devise repercussions for all learners who drop out."* Another teacher, SP#1 added that *"parents must be educated. There should be campaigns in which parents are informed about the value of education and the articles in the constitution that discuss children's rights to education, and with that information, they will ensure that their children attend school."* Other participants proposed that the Ministry of Education, Innovation, Youth, Sports, Arts and Culture should implement some steps to control dropout by punishing learners who drop out. SP#2 indicated that *"the ministry should come up with a punitive measure that will encourage learners who dropped out from school to return to school and to help retain learners in school."*

Deliver maize meal on time

The results strongly emphasised the importance of delivering meals to schools on time. For example, LST#1 and SP#1 explained that when there was soft porridge at school, absence and dropout rates always decreased. SP#1 said that *"at least the ministry should ensure that the meals arrive at school on the first day of teachers at school."* Furthermore, the LST#1 added that *"if the ministry tries to supply soft porridge on time, I believe the dropout problem will improve because it is one of the key contributing factors to dropout at our school in particular."*

Building hostels and increasing Universal Primary Education (UPE) grant

The results indicated that the teacher participants believed that the main cause of dropout in their schools might be remedied by constructing hostels for learners so that they did not have to struggle with hunger, travel long-distance to and from school, and mind about domestic duties. Participant LST#1 indicated that *"the community's child-headed household situation is complicated. So, hostels would be beneficial. I would like it if the*

ministry could construct a hostel to house all learners to eliminate child-headed house difficulties." Then, SP#2 added that *"upgrading our schools and building hostels will be the best strategy to this dropout out issue."*

Strategies suggested for the parents

Participants suggested that parents collaborated with the school to help learners. Learners urged parents to avoid saying demeaning statements to their children. For example, LST#1 said that *"parents must cultivate and maintain positive relationships with teachers in order to effectively assist children. They should come to us; for example, if a learner is sick, they should come to school to inform us."* One learner explained that parents influencing their biological children to abuse children who were not their biological was bad. This is what Learner#3 said *"for example, reminding the child every time that their parents do not send anything can make someone leave school. We children listen; some things are educational, but most of the things parents say are not good. Even the children of the owner of the house will copy what the parents say and say bad things to me. That is not good."*

Some teachers stressed the importance of attending teacher-parent meetings and engaging in their children's education to address the challenges faced by learners. To this, LST#2 mentioned that *"they should get more involved in the academic work of these children. And they should also reduce the workload at home. Some learners will tell you that they cannot attend extra classes because they have to do something at home. If not, they will not eat. There are few parents that normally attend to our calls when we invite them when a learner does something. Others just ignore even when we have problems where we need parents' input, only a few shows up."* Lastly, another teacher, LST#1 urged parents to use funds that learners received from the government properly. This is what the teacher said *"they need to use social grants for what it is intended for. For example, there are learners who receive social grants; this money is sufficient for a learner to dress appropriately for school. However, the way these resources are utilized does not benefit the learners. These funds are being used by parents for personal gain."*

Conclusion

Based on the qualitative analysis of factors that influenced dropout at primary phase, it can be concluded that social economic and system factors, lack of motivation among learners, limited stakeholders' collaboration, and limited knowledge about the importance of education among parents and learners had a major influence on the dropout among learners in rural primary schools. The study also revealed that male learners in Ncamagoro circuit dropped out of primary school more than female learners; male learners dropped out at an early age as early as six years. More male learners dropped out of school due to family factors such as child abuse, and system factors such as overage and long distances walked to and from school. On the other hand, more female learners dropped out due to social factors such as emotional problems and child-headed household factors. Some learners returned to school because of the pressure applied by the teachers by asking them to return to school.

The study further found that more teachers in the circuit had not received inclusive education training, including the Life Skills teachers. This made it difficult for teachers to deal with emotional problems that learners faced at school and home. Learners who returned to school still experienced emotional problems with little to no support as teachers and parents were unaware of the challenges these learners faced at school and home. The study also discovered that there was a gap between primary school enrolment and secondary school enrolment. This reveals that more learners in the circuit did not enrol for secondary education. Out of 20 schools in the circuit, 11 schools were Junior Primary with some having up to Grade 2 only. Nine schools offered senior primary education which included the three Combined Schools. Although the Circuit accommodates a lot of learners, there was only one school which was a primary school with hostel in the circuit. Upgrading more schools to secondary schools and building more hostels could reduce the dropout rate in Ncamagoro circuit. This study clearly illustrated the factors that influenced dropout among primary school learners and the strategies to be employed to reduce the dropout rate in the Ncamagoro circuit. However, the study raised the question of how schools and parents supported learners who returned to school. To better understand the implications

of these results, future studies could address the support needed by learners who once dropped out and returned to school.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

Recommendations to the schools

- There should be collaboration between the school and the community, through leaders in the community such as church leaders and headmen and headwomen, to develop a relationship to encourage learners, educate them about the importance of school, and assist in monitoring learners' behaviour in the community.
- Schools should work with community members to create activities for children at school and in the community that drive learners to stay in school and help dropouts develop a love of learning.

Recommendation to learners

- Learners should communicate openly with their teachers when facing life issues that impair their learning as this will enable teachers to seek assistance from the appropriate authorities, on behalf of learners who are facing issues at home or at school which may lead them to drop out of school.
- Participating in school based social activities should help learners develop social skills and relationships with teachers. Participation of learners in school based social activities could foster trust in teachers and enable learners to open up to them when they have difficulties.

Recommendation to the parents and the community

- Parents should collaborate with teachers to develop a love of education in their children, address challenges that they encounter, and discover solutions to those problems.
- School board members should collaborate with parents, community leaders, and law enforcement officers to curb children's behaviours, such as drinking and drug abuse, which may impact school dropout.

Recommendations to the government

- The Ministry of Education, Innovation, Youth, Sports, Arts and Culture should provide in-service training for teachers on inclusive education and learning support so that they can provide appropriate support to learners who have various learning difficulties.
- The Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture, through the Namibia School Feeding Program, must ensure that schools received meals on time. More learners drop out of primary school because of hunger and absenteeism rises when there is no food at school.
- The Ministry of Education, Innovation, Youth, Sports, Arts and Culture should employ social workers or assistant social workers in each school to support and collaborate with Life Skills teachers in identifying social problems that learners at risk of dropping out face, providing counselling, and motivating them to attend school until they complete their education.
- Stakeholders collaboration must be encouraged to promote awareness about the value of education and address issues such as child abuse, alcoholism, and child-headed families.
- The study discovered that there was a big gap in the enrolments between primary school and secondary school. Additionally, out of twenty schools in the circuit, there was only three combined schools, and only one school which is a primary school had hostel in the entire Ncamagoro circuit. Hence, the government, in collaboration with the Ministry of Education, Innovation, Youth, Sports, Arts and Culture, should work with private sector organisations to transform junior primary schools into senior primary schools and senior primary schools into secondary schools. This will help to ensure that secondary education enrolment rates remain consistent. Furthermore, more hostels should be built in both primary and combined schools to solve the issue of child-headed homes as well as to shorten the long distances learners travel to go to and from school every day.
- The Ministry of Home Affairs, Immigration, Safety and Security collaborate with community leaders to make it easier for community members, particularly Namibian-born children to get national documents to qualify for government social grants.
- More research are needed to identify effective strategies for teachers to assist

learners who have previously dropped out of school and returned to school, as well as the factors that may contribute to high dropout rates among male learners, particularly in primary schools in the region.

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