School Dropouts in Fiji

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Young people who drop out of high school are unlikely to have the minimum skills and credentials necessary to function in today’s increasingly complex society and technological workplace. The completion of high school is required for assessing post secondary education and is a minimum requirement for most jobs. High school dropouts are more likely than those who complete high school to be unemployed.

While Fiji is on par with Millennium Development Goal (Number 2), to achieve universal primary education, a lot number of children still drop out of schools at various stages of their education.

In order to increase understanding of what needs to be done to reduce school dropout, this paper reviews:
- Notion of what School dropout is
- The need to graduate
- The role of education in the context of National Development
- School Dropout rate in Fiji
- Factors influencing dropping out
- Consequences of dropping out
- Recommendations

INTRODUCTION

Students dropping out of high school before completion has been a challenge for educators, parents, and employers for at least 30 years (Haycock & Huang, 2001). As minimum skill expectations have increased at every educational and employment entry point, so has the importance of attaining a good education at a tertiary institute in Fiji. Despite this trend and the increased severity of the negative consequences of dropping out (McCaul, Donaldson, Coladarci, & Davis, 1992), for many school students—particularly male students from low-income or ethnic minority families—graduating from tertiary school has remained problematic, even as the nation’s general educational level has increased (Dillow, 2003). Lacking a good qualification, these individuals will be far more likely to spend their lives periodically unemployed, on government assistance, or cycling in and out of the prison system.

THE NEED TO GRADUATE

Everyone benefits from increased graduation rates. The graduates themselves, on average, will earn higher wages and enjoy more comfortable and secure lifestyles. At the same time, the nation benefits from their increased purchasing power, collects higher tax receipts, and sees higher levels of worker productivity.

Obviously, dropouts are a drain on the economies of any nation. Lower national tax revenues are perhaps the most obvious consequences of higher dropout rates; even when dropouts are employed, they earn significantly lower wages than graduates. State and local economies suffer further when they have
less-educated populaces, as they find it more difficult to attract new business investment. Simultaneously, these entities must spend more on social programs when their populations have lower educational levels.

Dropouts represent a tremendous waste of human potential and productivity, and reduce the nation’s ability to compete in an increasingly global economy.

High school graduates, on the other hand, provide both economic and social benefits to society. In addition to earning higher wages, which results in attendant benefits to the national economic conditions, high school graduates live longer (Muennig, 2005), are less likely to be teen parents (Haveman et al., 2001), and are more likely to raise healthier, better-educated children. In fact, children of parents who graduate from high school are themselves far more likely to graduate from high school than are children of parents without a high school degree (Wolfe & Haveman, 2002). High school graduates are also less likely to commit crimes (Raphael, 2004), rely on government health care (Muennig, 2005), or use other public services such as food stamps or housing assistance (Garfinkel et al., 2005). Additionally, high school graduates engage in civic activity, including voting and volunteering in their communities, at higher levels (Junn, 2005).

THE ROLE OF EDUCATION IN THE CONTEXT OF NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Fiji is on target with MDG 2 to achieve universal primary education. Fiji has attained near universal primary education, with primary school net enrolment rates increasing from 95.98% in 2005 to 96.01% in 2006. However there is concern about the growing number of drop-outs from primary school. A slight increase is noted in the percentage of pupils starting Class 1 who reach Class 5 increasing from 91% in 1996 to 96% in 2006. This improvement in retention rates indicate that government’s efforts to retain students in schools have been effective; however, such efforts need to be sustained. A major factor to school dropout maybe attributed to educational costs especially for parents in the rural areas. A well educated society is able to better contribute towards a wealthy nation. Education remains a major spending priority for Government. Total primary school enrolment has increased from 144,284 in 1999 to 152,426 in 2004. During this period, access to secondary education has also been increasing. Pre-school enrolment increased from 6508 in 2000 to 9197 in 2003, an increase of 41.3%. However, enrolments are still low, with only 16% of the relevant age group in pre-school.

SCHOOL DROPOUT RATE IN FIJI

Statistics on dropout rate in Fiji reveal that:
- Of those who started Class One in 1999, only 85.8% reached Class 8 in 2006.
- Of those who started Class One in 2000, only 86.1% reached year eight in 2007.
- An Average of 15% of our kids don't survive primary school.

Survival Rate in Secondary Education in Fiji
- Of those who enrolled in Form Three in 2003, only 78.5% reached Form Six.
- Of those who started Form Three in 2004, only 74.9% reached Form Six in 2007.
- On average about 25 % of those who start secondary education in Fiji do not get to Form Six and a greater percentage dropout after form six.

DROPOUT RATES

The dropout rate is the proportion of students who leave the system without completing a given grade in a given school year. It shows the extent to students drop out from school. High dropout rates imply high input-output ratios and hence lead to low internal efficiency.
Figure 1 below shows the dropout rates in Fiji by gender.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Primary</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>5.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Fig 1: Primary and Secondary Dropout rates by gender**

**Survival Rate for Fiji**, 1994(Class1) - 2006(Form 7)
Survival rate by grade is the proportion of a cohort of pupils who reached each successive grade expressed as a percentage of pupils enrolled in the first grade of a given cycle in a given school year. This indicator is used to show the extent to which the school system can retain pupils, with or without repetition, and indicates the dropout rate. It is also used to measure the impact of repetition and dropout on internal efficiency.

Figure 2 shows that only 61% of the cohort of students that started Class 1 reached Form 6 with 67% of them girls and 56% boys.

**FACTORS INFLUENCING DROPPING OUT**

The factors influencing dropping out of school fall under four categories. These are school related, student related, family related and community related. School related factors include threatening environment, discrimination and the fear of academic failure while the student related factors include truancy, drug and substance abuse, absenteeism and pregnancy. The family related factors are inclusive of poverty and lack of support and the community related factors include occupational aspirations and remoteness.

**CONSEQUENCES OF DROPPING OUT**

**Unemployment**

As the pool of dropouts continues to grow, employment opportunities for them are more limited, because today's economy requires increased literacy from the labor force, enhanced technological skills, and lifelong learning. Unemployment leads to children and teenagers taking to the streets.

**Poverty**

There is a general belief that a well educated society is able to better contribute towards a wealthy nation. Dropouts are more likely to live in poverty due to unemployment or employment with low wages.

**High Risk Behavior**

The rate of engagement in high-risk behaviors such as premature sexual activity, early pregnancy, delinquency, crime, violence, alcohol and drug abuse, and suicide has been found to be significantly higher among dropouts.
DROPPED OUT OR PUSHED OUT

External exams only push more students out. Almost half the number of the students who sit for external examinations at higher levels fail. The pass rates in Fiji School Leaving Certificate examination between 1997 and 1999 were less than 55 per cent. The examinations systematically push students out. Examination system in Fiji places a lot of stress on children, teachers and parents alike. These children who fail in the examinations may be far more talented and intelligent in other important areas in comparison to those who pass. A student who fails in exams may be a talented sportsman, artist, musician, a gardener, fisherman or a cook. Unfortunately, these areas are not tested in the examination so they go unnoticed, untapped and ultimately undeveloped. If these talents were tapped and developed they may have enabled the student to earn a living through them.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Government policy, legislation, or budget

The budget provided to the Ministry of Education by the Government determines to a large extent how the Ministry implements its plans on education. New initiatives are usually put on hold due to non-budgetary allocations. The lack of appropriate legislations has also limited the Ministry of Education’s powers in enforcing school attendance and retention of students in schools. A major problem in the Fiji school system is school dropouts, Students’ retention in the school system can be improved through legislation to force parents to play their role in this respect.

Economic factors

The financial status of families in Fiji is another barrier to basic education. Most families find themselves under severe financial constraints and could not afford school levies, lunches and bus fares for their children. The Ministry is trying its best to subsidize school costs, but parents still find education costs high.

Social and cultural factors

A major problem associated with Fijian parents in Fiji is their lack of understanding about the importance of education when weighed against other commitments such as social and religious commitments. A major work being undertaken by the Ministry of Education in Fiji is community awareness which targets the roles of parents and communities to education. In communities where the parents have total commitment towards their children and schools, the schools can be seen differently from other schools where the communities and parents do not have the same commitment.

Legal factors

Proper legislations need to be put in place to strengthen basic education provisions in the country. The roles of parents need to be legislated to commit themselves towards their children’s education.

Geographic factors

A major challenge to the education system in Fiji is the geographical isolation of schools. With a lot of primary schools located in the small outlying islands and remote areas of the main islands accessible only by boats and poor roads, administration problems are challenging. Students in those areas are facing problems of traveling to school daily and most stay in hostels which are not usually in good condition. Teachers are reluctant to be posted to these schools because of poor living conditions and
lack of proper infrastructure and utilities. Many times these schools are without teachers due to transportation problems.

**Language**

English is the official language of instruction in schools in Fiji. There are two other major languages which are Fijian and Hindi which under the new language policy have become compulsory in all schools. Language maybe a barrier to education as English is the second language to most students in schools. At the primary level, most teachers find it convenient to teach in the students’ mother tongue for greater understanding at the beginning stages of primary schools. Transition to the English language can come at a later stage in the primary school level. English is still a major challenge to most students at the secondary level and is a compulsory subject in all examinations within the school system in Fiji. The use of mother tongue language for teaching in secondary schools will assist students learn better.

**School factors (facilities, human resources, teaching resources)**

Most schools in Fiji are owned by the communities and other organizations such as religious organisations. The communities and school owners are expected to provide for all the facilities required for the teaching and learning process. In most schools the facilities are poor and in most instances essential equipment and textbooks are not available. This is a major contributor to poor performance and poor quality of education. The Ministry provides grants to schools to assist them in improving their facilities and also to purchase essential resources for teaching and learning. For improved performance of schools this must continue.

**CONCLUSION**

There is no one magical, quick fix solution to the dropout problem. Dropouts have dissimilar characteristics and therefore need different kinds of programs which respond to their individual circumstances and needs. Programs, to be effective, need to provide one-on-one intensive attention to at-risk students, who often must be convinced that they are competent and can be successful in school. The curriculum should be well balanced to include basic educational skills, social skills, and Arts, Music and Sports.

Children at-risk need to be identified at a young age (as early as preschool) so that early sustained intervention can be applied. Success in the elementary grades diminishes the possibility of later dropping out in high school. The key to reducing the dropout rate is helping youth to overcome their sense of disconnectedness. It is imperative not to isolate or alienate any students from the school.

Not all factors related to dropout reduction are school controllable, and solutions to the complex problem of dropouts cannot be achieved by the schools alone. It is a national problem which must be addressed by the whole society. It requires resources that go beyond the school, and solutions require a team approach--the combined efforts of students, parents, teachers, administrators, community-based organizations, and business, as well as the government of the day.

**REFERENCES**


