Dropout and Learning Difficulties in 1st Grade Government Primary Schools in Ethiopia

Jana Zehle

Learning difficulties manifest themselves in low achievements, grade repetition and dropout. Dropout is a widespread phenomenon in primary government schools in Ethiopia. Still the problem of dropout lack of sufficient attention in the educational policy as well as in literature. Particularly in the connection between academic difficulties and dropout there is not investigated hardly any research yet. Therefore the objective of the research project is to show and to prove the connection between a high dropout rate in grade one primary governmental schools in selected parts of Ethiopia, and latent learning difficulties.

Overview of the development of the educational system in Ethiopia

The responsibility for the development of the educational system in Ethiopia laid for nearly 1500 years with the Orthodox Church and the Koranic Schools. Religious instructions follow authorial Educational styles, “…church education…is characterized by the students’ obedience, humility and respect…” Poluha (2004:99) “…the Koran teacher is usually a strong authority figure who expects subservience and respect from children…” Poluha (2004:100). The milestone for the modern Educational System was laid by Minlik II. Under his government the responsibility for the Educational Policy is assigned to the Government’s area of responsibility. Shortly after the foundation of the “Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia” a “New Education and Training Policy” was implemented, with several reforms e.g. concerning the language policy or the gender disparity. Yet, the country’s Educational System faces serious problems e.g. the high dropout rates and the neglecting of students with special needs.

Dropout

Definition

Dropout is a serious existing problem. It describes the unexcused absence from lessons. The problem cannot be reflected upon and reviewed by a restricted perspective focusing only on school and lessons. Dropout as it is defined for this research implies the breaking off from schooling for the rest of the term – without a final certification, death and changing school excluded. Taken word-for-word dropout characterizes those people who fall outside the usual parameters given by society. They no longer belong to those acting inside the usual parameters. On the one hand dropout indicates an action, the falling outside, on the other hand it also indicates the persons, who fall outside the usual parameters. They become outsiders of the system with the consequence that they become outsiders of other systems, too.

1 PhD candidate, University Leipzig, janazehle@yahoo.de
Dropout in Primary School

Dropout is not a considerable problem in primary school in the so-called developed countries. Despite of compulsory education a highly differentiated and selective system functions as a vehicle to prevent dropout. The following data proves that dropout in primary school is definitely a problem in Ethiopia as well as in many other sub-Saharan African countries. Already in 1976 Najman pointed to the problem of dropout which he attributes to the “selective system as a colonial heritage”. Although Ethiopia never has been a colony its educational system has always been deeply influenced by donor countries. Official data gathered and published by UNESCO proves that from a selection of sub-Saharan countries with a high dropout- and repetition rate Chad, Mozambique, Mauritania und Benin show a higher dropout rate, according to both sexes than Ethiopia.

Despite effort on several levels the problem of dropout in Primary school in Ethiopia stays serious. “The progress made to reduce dropout during the past two years has shown no improvement. The dropout rate in grade 1 which was 27.9% in 1999/2000 has increased to 28.7% in 2001/02. This is not an encouraging result...the dropout rate at primary stage was 17.7% in 1999/2000 and still persists around 17.2%/ in 2001/02...” Melesse (2003:4). National and international data do not differentiate too much: “…% of Primary Entrants reaching grade 5: Administrative Data 1995-99 = 64%, Survey Data = 65%...“ UNICEF (2004:11). Conspicuous high is the dropout rate at the beginning of schooling. This phenomenon is also being noticed in other sub-Saharan countries as well: “…much dropping out of schools occurs between the first and second grades. In the less developed regions taken together nearly half of all dropouts occur before pupils reach grade 2...“ UNESCO (1998:14). Especially critical to assess are the high dropout rates at the beginning of schooling in as much as “…the pattern of sustainable dropout occurring at the beginning of the primary school cycle is particularly distressing because pupils with only a year or two of schooling leave in a state near illiteracy...” UNESCO (1998:15). For the Ethiopian primary school Ayalew Shibeshi detects “…the highest dropout occurs in the initial years of schooling...“ Ayalew (1997:495). In the South the dropout rates are higher than in many other parts of the country, “…grade 1 dropout in the region was a very disturbing 35% in 1996 E.C. [2003 G.C.] recording statistics...“ MOE (2004:14).

Dropout in Primary School and in 1st grade in Ethiopia, according to the selected regions

Dropout rate grade 1 by region

![Dropout rate grade 1 by region](image-url)
Despite the “compulsory education policy” and the repeal of school fees in government schools the dropout rate remains high. Apparently there is no control over the keeping of the compulsory school attendance. “There is no defined and legalized law about it, compulsory education is written as a recommendation in some papers of MOE. How it is controlled and how it is applied in concrete way is a subject matter… Compulsory Education is a wish!” (Interview with an Expert MOE, Addis Ababa, June 2006).

The collected data show in detail (sources: MOE 2003:65-71; MOE 2003:5; MOE 2004:5; MOE 2004:2)

1. The dropout rate in primary school lies in the SNNPR around 24% that means it is obviously above the national average of nearly 17%. The dropout rate in Addis Ababa lies around 1.3%. In no other region of Ethiopia does the dropout rate in primary school lie under 8%. With regard to first grade the dropout rate for SNNPR lies around 35% again above the national average of 24%.

2. The contrast between urban and rural areas, with reference to the dropout rate in first grade, is situated at 12% according to actually enrolled children.2

3. The gender gap, with reference to dropout in these asserted regions, seems not to be too serious. Regarding the rates for the whole primary school the numbers are slightly higher for females. The reasons might refer to early marriage, pregnancy or employment as a maid. Regarding the rates for the first grade the numbers are slightly higher for males.

Learning difficulties as a possible cause for dropout –

Reason for choosing the expression learning difficulties

There are many reasons mentioned for the high dropout rate in primary school entrance particularly economic and social-familial reasons. Learning disability or learning difficulties are hardly mentioned. In a questionnaire among 160 primary school teachers in Addis Ababa and SNNPR only 4 answered “learning problems” as an assumed main reason for dropout, 3 answered “inferior learning interest” whereas “economic problems” and “family reason” were given 24 times and 26 times, together 50 times as an answer. Therefore, the intention of the research work lies in the proof of a relationship between dropout and learning difficulties in the entrance of governmental primary schools in Ethiopia. In particular:

– extent and the reason for dropout in the entrance of primary school,
– incidence and the sort of learning difficulties of school beginners should be examined and
– possibilities should be shown and discussed how to improve the situation of students with learning difficulties so that circumstances leading to dropout can be reduced.

2 Analyzing and interpreting the data it should be kept in mind that the dropout rates to the students actually enrolled. In Ethiopia there is neither a Net-Enrollment-Rate (NER) nor a Gross-Enrollment-Rate (GER) of 100%.
Why is the researcher using the expression “learning difficulties” and not “learning disabilities” or “learning handicaps”? 

In the international literature there is a variety of expressions used describing learning difficulties and familiar phenomena. Some authors assume that the expressions “learning disability” or “learning handicap” are legal and administrative expressions and that learning disabilities are established through the attitudes of the controlling and assessing persons or through the controlling environment.

WHO has already changed in 1997 their classification from “impairment – disability – handicap” to “impairment – activity – participation”.

International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (WHO 2001)

In a further questionnaire 160 primary school teachers were asked how they define learning disability. The majority related the expression poverty (15.2%) followed by learning disability as a mental problem – the inability to organize things in your mind (12%). Among 106 students at AAU and different TTCs all over the country (Addis Ababa, SNNPR, Oromo Region) again learning disability is related to economic problems (18.6%) or to a neurological disorder (14.3%).
Learning handicap is defined in the same questionnaires by teachers as an injury, parts of the body are lost therefore the person is unable to learn (17%) or related to poverty (14%). The students define learning handicap as a physical defect (31.4%) or the inability to learn (17.6%).

Finally learning difficulties are explained by the teachers as an economic problem (21%), followed by the explanation through bad quality of education (19.7%) and thirdly – and this explanation was very convincing according to the researcher – as all problems that hinder students from their learning activities (18.3%). The majority of students define learning difficulties through poverty (59.6%), followed by a definition through brain injury (10.6%) and thirdly – again most fitting – as any problem that hinders learning (9.6%).
Learning difficulties manifest themselves in different areas of thinking, behaving, learning and acting. They might have organic, cognitive and non-cognitive causes. They comprise a wide range of conscious assumptions. From the point of view of cognitive psychology, learning difficulties are marked by a deficit of cognitive strategies. According to the researchers opinion “learning difficulties” the least stigmatizing term regarding the cause and the type of impairment.

Fieldwork: Development of an assessment of Learner’s starting point in selected primary government schools in Ethiopia (Addis Ababa and SNNPR)

The researcher’s fieldwork covered four years. Having taken first observation, interviews and questionnaires after the extensive literature of national and international publication the research was focused on the first year of primary school.

The school’s starting point implies for many children – more than in other societies – the collision of two barely compatible worlds. On the one hand most of the students start school without any preparation. Only 2% to 5% of the children attend a private kindergarten. The kindergartens are mostly located in towns. So the children able to attend a kindergarten belong to the privileged class. Children do not get too much stimuli in their parents home (for more detailed information about parent-child interactions refer to Klein and Tirussew). Often their parents did not attend school and regard school as a “useless luxury” Mayrhofer (2001:144). Childhood in Ethiopia includes child labour; children work in the household or contribute to daily labour work for the family’s income. At school teachers wait for them, having the expectation that the students know already the alphabet and the numbers, teachers who had a minimal training of nine months at the TTI or TTC in all subjects but hardly gained any knowledge about learning, and the necessary conditions for learning. Not to mention the bad condition and equipment in the over crowded classrooms.

Having identified schools’ starting point as a collision of two barely compatible worlds, the researcher developed a screening assessment of learner’s starting point – an assessment that did not exist yet in Ethiopia. The development of the screening assessment was guided by the following starting considerations:
1. Teachers in government primary schools have detected that they have students in the classroom who have difficulties to develop the basic abilities of reading, writing and counting. These difficulties might be attributed to learning difficulties.

2. Early childhood diagnosis or prevention and medical examination are not given or are given only to a few children so far.

3. The dropout rate at the school’s starting point is considerably high.

While developing the assessment already established screening assessment were consulted. The developing of the screening assessment was guided by the following starting considerations:

1. It should be an integral assessment considering different aspect of the child’s development

2. The assessment should not be an imported one. Therefore all the tools were produced in the country, either from cost-free materials (e.g. bamboo sticks, stones, seeds) or easy available materials (e.g. pearls, wood, string, rope, small rings). The tools were self made, therefore they can be easily reproduced in the schools. The amount of paper is limited so the costs for copies are not too high. All pictures and texts originate from Ethiopian context.

3. The cooperation with teachers, social workers and professors from AAU while developing the assessment and evaluating the material has been very productive. The individual components of the screening assessment have been tested several times in a pilot test and in a pre-test before they were applied in six government primary schools in Addis Ababa and three government primary schools in SNNPR, around Arba Minch.

4. The first screening to assess the Learner’s Starting Point was carried out at the beginning of the term immediately after the students’ enrollment. At the beginning of the second term a parallel screening was carried out with the same population to measure their increased learning. Between the first and second assessments the researcher was sitting in class, observing the students, interviewing the teachers about the children’s development. Additionally the classroom teacher filled out an observation file. The observation tasks focus on abilities which are also measured through the assessment (process orientated procedure). For better understanding the

5. coherence between assessment – observation – parallel assessment had to be explained to the teachers.

**Prospects and Recommendations**

Which practical consequences are taken out of the research work or already have been taken?

1. Organization of workshops in cooperation with UNESCO, MoE, AAU and other bilateral donor organizations and NGOs for teachers, school deans, stakeholders at AAU, MoE, TTCs, TTIs.

2. Reinforcing SNE topics as for example SNE is now worthy on a chapter on its own in the ESDP III.

3. Making the results and assessment public through offering a DVD, containing an explanation of the assessment including the necessary background knowledge about the child’s learning development, and the assessment tools.
References


Najman, Dragolub: Bildung in Afrika. Vorschläge zur Überwindung der Krise, Wuppertal 1976

Poluha, Eva: The Power Of Continuity – Ethiopia through the eyes of its children, Uppsala 2004

Tirussew Teferra: Preventing learning difficulties and early school dropout - Out of School MISC Intervention Program, In: Klein, Pnina: Seeds of hope, Oslo 2001:115-128


Abbreviations

AAU Addis Ababa University
ESDP Education Sector Development Plan
MOE Ministry of Education
NGO Non governmental organization
TTC Teacher Training College
TTI Teacher Training Institute
UNESCO United Nations Education Science and Cultural Organization
UNICEF United Nations Children’s Fund