



## A review of enabling factors in support intervention programmes for early school leavers: What are the implications for Sub-Saharan Africa?



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### ABSTRACT

One of the major problems facing education systems in Sub-Saharan Africa is the phenomenon of young people who leave school before completion. Research has shown that this phenomenon disadvantages young people and exposes them to various forms of social exclusion. Accordingly, there have been increasing calls for the scaling up of support intervention programmes for young people who leave school early. This paper analyses literature on support intervention programmes for early school leavers (ESLs) to identify enabling factors that can be promoted in future or in current less effective interventions. The review revealed that programmes that address the multiple disadvantages and needs of young people through flexible, holistic and intensive support approaches tend to be more attractive and beneficial to the participants. The findings from this review are crucial to policy makers and teachers working in support intervention programmes for ESLs.

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### 1. Introduction

In the last decade, countries in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) have made significant progress in providing access to education at both the primary and the secondary school levels, but these countries are far from achieving access to education for all children (Majgaard & Mingat, 2012; Mingat, Ledoux, & Rakotomalala, 2010). Indicators in many countries in this region, however, have shown remarkable improvements in enrolment rates (see Majgaard and Mingat (2012); The World Bank (2013); UNESCO (2014); UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2011)), which is, in large part, due to the introduction of universal primary education in many of the countries and the implementation of programmes such as Education for All (EFA) and Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (UNESCO, 2011, 2012). Despite this encouraging trend, there are still many children out of school, the majority of whom are school dropouts or early school leavers (ESLs) (Lewin & Little, 2011, p. 333). Globally 57 million children are out of school, of which 30 million are in SSA (UNESCO, 2013). SSA, South and West Asia have the highest rates of early school leaving (ESLg) to the extent that one out of three children entering primary school will not complete the complete primary cycle (UNESCO, 2013). In its 2011 EFA Global Monitoring Report, UNESCO (2011, p. 47) estimated that 10 million children drop out of primary school every year in SSA. Education systems in SSA are very diverse, but the recurring challenges in the region are related to war-affected areas, poor infrastructure, post-colonial legacies, economic

challenges, diversity of cultures and languages within nations, and exclusion of the poor and the rural (Majgaard & Mingat, 2012; UNESCO, 2013; Zeelen, van der Linden, Nampota, & Ngabirano, 2010).

There are concerns that the aims of education enshrined in the EFA and MDGs agenda may not be realised if the problem of ESLg is not addressed (UNESCO, 2012). The large number of ESLs in SSA threatens development objectives, as these youth leave school without acquiring the skills necessary for life and for future employment. This lack of skills then increases individuals' vulnerability to poverty and social immobility and denies them a chance to enjoy the wider benefits of education. Furthermore, a large number of illiterate and poorly educated youth can be a major burden to the economies of SSA, as it can be considered a wastage of public resources, leads to an absence of skilled labour, low earning power and unemployment (Openjuru, 2010; Woolman, 2002). Accordingly, this situation calls for support intervention programmes to provide alternative sources in education for ESLs to fill the skills gap, thus reducing the vulnerability and social exclusion of ESLs, improving their opportunities to gain employment and making them active citizens in their countries.

Against this background, governments in SSA and international organisations are calling for an investment in second chance education or support interventions for ESLs in addition to retention attempts (Africa Progress Report, 2012). It is imperative that support intervention programmes be established and that existing programmes be enhanced for those who already left school. As most countries in SSA have hitherto not ventured much into support intervention programmes for ESLs (Africa Progress Report, 2012), there is need to learn from other countries on how best such interventions can be designed and implemented.

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Accordingly, this paper analyses available literature on support intervention programmes for ESLs to identify enabling factors that can be implemented in future interventions or current less effective interventions for these youth in SSA. By enabling factors, we are referring to those practices that should be included in support intervention programmes, making such programmes more protective and beneficial to the participants in terms of preparing them for life, for the labour market and for community/national development. This review seeks to answer the following question: What enabling factors, found in the literature, should be considered when developing and implementing effective support intervention programmes for ESLs in SSA? Effectiveness in this case, means achieving the programmes' objectives of combating social exclusion and preparing the youth to become active citizens.

## 2. The ESLg problem: an overview

Before delving into support intervention programmes for ESLs, it is important that we first gain insight into the problem of ESLg and its consequences. While consensus exists on the challenges of ESLg, the conceptualisation of the phenomenon has been widely discussed and variably understood (Zeelen, van der Linden, et al., 2010). The concept of 'early school leaving' or 'school dropout' is a very complex one, especially in regard to its definition. Not only is this concept defined differently by different people, but different countries use different stages or years of schooling to determine at what level one is considered to be an ESL. While 'early school leaver' and 'school dropout' are often used interchangeably, Lally (2009) argues that using the term 'dropout' is inaccurate because some young people leave school after making a conscious decision to pursue other employment or training goals, such as apprenticeships. It is also argued that using the term 'dropout' places blame on the young people who leave school prematurely, yet there are always other contributing factors that may not be of their own making (Cassidy & Bates, 2005; Conen & Rutten, 2003). Therefore, we prefer to use the term 'early school leaving', using Cullen's (2000, p.10) definition which summarises various positions in literature: 'early school leaving can be understood as young people leaving school before the legal school leaving age and/or leaving school with limited or no formal qualifications'. In the context of SSA, this category of young people includes those who have not completed the seven or eight years (depending on the country's education system) of basic education, those who have stopped school to enter a trade or vocation (Ananga, 2011), and those who have not made the transition from primary or secondary school to higher institutions that offer formal qualifications for work. In many SSA countries, even those who have completed the primary or secondary school cycles may also be considered ESLs because many of these young people leave school without the skills and competences, that is, attitudes, knowledge, and practical know-how that are required for social and labour market integration (UNESCO, 2011). Since retention in the global North is commonly followed up through the legal system up to a certain age, the phenomenon and definition of ESLg in SSA include a group of learners without basic learning skills because such a legal framework does not exist in many SSA countries and where it exists, it is often poorly enforced.

Studies have shown that ESLg is one of the biggest problems confronting education systems in many parts of the world (e.g., Bradshaw, O'Brennan, & McNeely, 2008; Lamb, Markussen, Tesse, Sandberg, & Polesel, 2011; NESSE, 2009; Smyth, 2005). In the global South, the school dropout rates are staggeringly high (Graeff-Martins et al., 2006), especially in Africa (Brown, 2010; Lewin, 2009; Lewin & Akyeampong, 2009; UNESCO, 2008, 2011, 2013; Zeelen, van der Linden, et al., 2010). The risk factors, incidence, causes and correlates of ESLg have been widely researched (e.g., Ampiah & Adu-Yeboah, 2009; Baker et al., 2001; Bradshaw et al., 2008; Hunt, 2008; Lee & Burkam, 2003; Lewin, 2009). The causes are mainly due to socio-economic and political factors. In SSA, ESLg is exacerbated by household poverty,

child labour, poor quality education, lack of interest in formal education, pregnancy, non-achievement in school, teacher attitudes, distance from school, use of corporal punishment, age of student, inequalities linked to language and ethnicity, and rural–urban differences (Ampiah & Adu-Yeboah, 2009; Ananga, 2011; Tukundane, Zeelen, Minnaert, & Kanyandago, 2014; UNESCO, 2011). In most cases, a combination of these factors leads to ESLg, which is not a one-time event; rather, ESLg is generally a process (Ampiah & Adu-Yeboah, 2009; Liskó, 2009; NESSE, 2009; Teese et al., 2000) characterised by a series of events that result in eventual leaving. The length and nature of the process largely depend on the type of ESL the student is.

Research has demonstrated that ESLg disadvantages young people and exposes them to various forms of social exclusion (e.g., Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morison, 2006; GHK, 2005; NESSE, 2009). According to Walker and Walker (1997, p. 8) social exclusion is '...the dynamic process of being shut out, fully or partially, from any of the social, economic, political or cultural systems which determine the social integration of a person in society'. As highlighted by Percy-Smith (2000), social exclusion does not only describe economic disadvantages, but also human rights, physical environment, discrimination and, psychological effects. Moreover in the context of lifelong learning, social exclusion is often associated with lack of skills sets and learning opportunities (Zeelen, 2004). The excluding effect of ESLg can not only disrupt young people's personal development, but it also has detrimental effects on their socio-economic standing in the future (Lally, 2009). Their personal life choices and opportunities as well as the development of their personal attributes and their access to services are severely curtailed. Furthermore, they miss out on the wider potential benefits of education such as a sense of self-worth, improved income and social mobility. According to Schargel and Smink (2001, p. 239), such benefits 'extend beyond the individual, the family, the local community, and transcend the state and national boundaries'. Concerned about the plight of ESLs in Africa, the UNESCO (2011, p. 47) EFA Global Monitoring Report stated the consequences of this problem thusly: 'The school dropout crisis diminishes the life chances of highly vulnerable children, closing down a potential escape route from poverty and reducing education's power to strengthen social mobility'.

The problems and consequences associated with ESLg necessitate interventions that are focussed on young people who have left school early and that offer them the necessary skills and competences that should enable them to live a fully integrated life in society. Such interventions should help in the 'acquisition of social capital and of access to career opportunities and life chances' (The National Economic and Social Forum, 2002, p. 8). However, it is important to note that the causes of ESLg are varied and complex (ACER, 2000; Bhanpuri & Reynolds, 2003; Bridgeland et al., 2006; GHK, 2005; Zeelen, van der Linden et al., 2010), as they range from individual issues to family, school and community problems. Thus, ESLs are a very heterogeneous group in which individuals and sub-groups are faced with different circumstances and challenges. Thus, addressing ESLg demands diversified solutions that take this reality into consideration.

## 3. Intervention programmes for ESLs

Retention or designing programmes that assist 'at-risk' students is thought to be more cost-effective and beneficial in achieving the objectives of education (Combat Poverty Agency, 2001; Lally, 2009; NESSE, 2009). Accordingly, most interventions targeting ESLs are preventative and mainly focus on interrupting the process that leads to ESLg. It is envisaged that strategic responses at different stages in the process will lead to a reduction in the number of young people who leave school early. While retention programmes have been emphasised since the 1980s, the literature shows that ESLg is still a problem in many countries (Lamb et al., 2011; Schargel & Smink, 2001), especially in developing parts of the world such as SSA (Lewin, 2009; UNESCO, 2011; Zeelen, van der Linden, et al., 2010). It may also not be accurate to assume

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