ABSTRACT

South Africa has made remarkable strides to increase educational access in the past three decades or so. Near-universal enrolments have been achieved in the compulsory phase, and many learners make a transition into the post-compulsory school phase. However, a major concern remains about consistently low matric completion rates, suggesting high levels of dropout in the senior phase. The release of 2016 matric results showed that half of the students who were in the national Grade 10 class three years earlier, did not make it to the matric examination hall on time or had dropped out of the system by the end of 2016. Given the unfavourable labour conditions, particularly excessive youth unemployment for the past decade or so, most youth exiting school prematurely without requisite skills, competencies and work-relevant capacities, are likely to face long-term unemployment among a host of other negative life outcomes.

This study investigates the extent, the spatial distribution and socio-demographic characteristics of older adolescent school dropouts in the country. A broad conceptual framework, that is, the model of high school performance, guided the study. The conceptual framework was constructed to identify factors predicting dropout or high school completion. Its conception of dropout as a function of interaction between individual and institutional factors was useful framework for this study's interest in potential demographic, family, school, and community factors that associate with older adolescent dropouts in the country.

The study employed a pragmatist approach to attempt answer the guiding research question. Mixed methods sequential explanatory procedures were used to analyze the large-scale Census 2011 data and to administer data collection and analysis of the qualitative multiple case study data. The procedures involved the use of descriptive statistics and thematic analysis of the qualitative data.

The results of the study show that, unlike other education outcomes, school participation or dropout is not distributed along the historical apartheid geography lines. This is contrary to the current research that tends to claim all education outcomes in the country do. The study reveals dropout distribution patterns that split the country along the east-west axis, which does not align with the apartheid geography lens. Instead, the results indicate that dropout is a much more localized experience, driven by local-level dynamics rather than macro forces at provincial level. In addition, the results show that dropout is neither urban nor rural phenomenon.

The factors that the quantitative phase of this study and the statistical research in general, single out as predictors of dropout, are important features in the narrative of dropout, but are not necessarily explaining premature exit. The qualitative data and findings show that the commonly cited factors are actually events, and often traumatic, that trigger a series of reactions including withdrawal from school by the affected adolescents. Based on these findings, the study proposes a preliminary model of dropout that considers the trigger factor in combination with debilitating context of the individual to sufficiently account for premature school exit.

Keywords