

School Drop-out and Success in the Trades: A Paradox or a Reality of South African Youths?

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ABSTRACT This article reports on the success of the drop-out youths in the trades who, during their school days were classified as being incapable of engaging successfully with academic school work. This paper interrogates how these youths, who have been labelled as “slow learners”, offer services to the labour market when they grow older. Therefore, this paper, which is a qualitative case study of ten youths who dropped out of school system in the rural areas of the North West province, examines the theory of multiple intelligences (MI) and unique characteristics of these learners. It also examines the route and/or process that these formal school education failures take to finally end up as drop-outs, and what they do thereafter. Through participants’ stories in this paper, drop-outs’ lives have narratives with themes of their formal school experiences and their out-of-school experiences. The findings bring out the success stories of these drop-outs.

INTRODUCTION

School drop-out is a global phenomenon and has been a topic of international concern for some decades (Zimmerman 2003; Admasie 2003; Liu 2004; Ersado 2005; Dunne and Leach 2005; Bruneforth 2006). UNESCO Institute of Statistics (2009) defines drop-out rate as the proportion of learners from a cohort enrolled in a given grade at a given school year who are no longer enrolled in the following school year. Research by Strassburg et al. (2010) and Fleisch et al. (2010) has found that dropping out of school is not a single event but is usually the result of a combination of inter-related factors that lead up to a child eventually dropping out of school. These include grade repetition, low achievement, over-age enrollers and children who have regular absences or previous temporary withdrawals from school (Hunt 2008; Lewin 2008; Ampiah and Adu-Yeboah 2009). Strassburg et al. (2010: 40-41) highlighted in-school factors such as lack of stimulation and support as resulting in youth disengaging from their education and eventually dropping out of school. In a study by Bridgeland and di Iulio (2006), it was found that the major reason for America’s high school youth dropping out of school was that they felt their classes were uninteresting and irrelevant. PROBE report (1999: 27) sees a gradual discouragement from attending, as a result of the beatings and humiliation from teachers and that drop-out is

not uncommon after being beaten. This phenomenon goes against the spirit of Bill of Rights in the South African Constitution which clearly stipulates that “everyone has the right to a basic education, including adult basic education; and further education, which the State, through reasonable measures, must make progressively available and accessible” (RSA 1996a).

It is a conventional practice of formal education institutions to sift learners, who by assessments constructed and conducted by teachers, cannot cope with curriculum content of a formal school programme. These learners are described as slow learners. However, the same learners, through training, can use their hands to make and repair a range of items. Some of the services that these learners offer to the labour market, without either school/apprenticeship certificates are services such as bush mechanics and professional gardeners. An internal combustion engine repair requires meticulous attention to detail. How these bush mechanics who have been declared as slow learners or “learners with below average academic achievement” are able to repair such a complicated piece of work is one of the challenges responded to in this paper.

In engaging with the issues central to this study, the researcher will refer to the psychologist Howard Gardner’s eight types of intelligence. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten dropped out youths who were purposely sampled. These youths were assessed as being

incapable of attending to the demands of the school curriculum, resulting in them giving up on schooling. Presently, South Africa's mainstream schools have their curriculum compartmentalised into groups of learning areas which are supposed to match the intelligence capacity of learners who take them on. However, Slattery (2006) argued that curriculum materials are critical exercises because they contain predetermined answers, narrow methodologies and/or political agendas designed to assimilate students into hegemonic socio-cultural worldview. Slattery's critic about the curriculum materials makes one to be aware of the challenges in the curriculum development of formal education. What are the benefits and rewards of doing well in school? Progressing from one grade to the next is probably the response that comes ready from learners at any grade. Seldom do learners have any thought or reflection on why they have to learn the contents of their prescribed curriculum except that they must learn so much so that they should get a pass mark in their allocated learning areas to get to the next grade. The cognitive awareness of a school-attending child/adolescent/teenager about the acquired ability to read (what?), to write (what?) and to count (what?) because of learning what is taught at school is seldom reflected upon as an afterthought. While this may be so in a casual set of schooling situations, when a learner fails to pass, especially the academic section of school syllabus, both the teachers and the other learners who have passed have a descriptive word or phrase for such a learner: not clever, dull, dim, fool or plain outright stupid.

Objective of the Study

Although considerable literature has been made on school drop-out, more research is required to address school drop-out and success in their trades. The essence of this paper, however, is to explore the presence of intelligence in learners who are taken as individuals out of place in mainstream public schools: (1) because they have intellectual deficiency; (2) because they are not "smart" enough to use this intelligence they have in any strand of curriculum in formal education environments; (3) because teachers fail to work with them to use what intelligence they have to progress from one class to the next. What this paper examines is the route and/or process that these formal school education failures take to finally end up out of the school

gates, and what they do thereafter. As indicated earlier, the researcher will refer to the psychologist Howard Gardner's eight types of intelligence to engage with issues central to this paper. There are limited numbers of in-depth narrative accounts (qualitative research) of youth dropping out of school based on life stories of drop-outs and a little if not nothing is known about stories that surround them that finally drive them out of school. Awareness of various stakeholders will provide insights into realities into South African classrooms which could guide the Department of Education about the strategies to help curb drop-out rates of youth in South Africa. This study will contribute to national or international debates on lack of multiple intelligence knowledge and drop-out rate in schools. Also, it will contribute to developing theories on school multiple intelligence knowledge by strengthening methodologies of studying in schools. It is different from most of the studies conducted in this area as it uses a range of the drop-out youths in garnering information on issues of school drop-out and success in the trades. Hence the question that this paper debates will take the semblance of the following: Is a learner's poor performance in academic subjects a reflection of deficient intellectual functioning? This question led to the conceptual framework on Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences has broadened our view of intelligence.

Conceptual Framework

This paper is conceptualised on the orientation inferred in psychology and it acknowledges that some people are more intelligent than others. The psychologist Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences has broadened our view of intelligence (Gardner 1983, 1993a, 1999). He has introduced his theory in *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences* and identified the following distinct types of intelligence (Gardner 1983: 8): linguistic, musical, logical-mathematical, spatial, body-kinesthetic, intrapersonal and interpersonal and naturalistic.

This is where Gardner (1983: 8) defines multiple intelligences as the capacity to respond successfully to new situations to tackle a task demanded by life. Gardner (1999: 33-34) defines intelligence as the combination of psychological and biological characteristics that enable individuals to solve problems or create products that are valued in one or more cultures (Gardner 1999). In the same vein, Armstrong (2001) finds

multiple intelligences extremely integral to the teaching-learning process in any environment and he maintains that whatever we teach and learn can be connected to the different intelligences.

In schools and other learning environments, this idea of being intelligent or unintelligent (which is euphemism for being dim or outright stupid) is fiercely engaged with to the extent of, sometimes, life and death. The MI (Multiple Intelligence) theory challenges the theory of the intelligence quotient (IQ) in at least three significant ways: (1) several intelligences are at work, not just one; (2) intelligence is expressed in a person's performance, products and not by a test score; and (3) how intelligence is expressed is culturally defined (Baum et al. 2005). Young learners and sometimes students at tertiary institutions have committed suicide because they have failed in one school/academic year or the other. In these formal education places, when one fails, the common conclusion (right or wrong) is that one is not intelligent enough. In this case, Gardner (1993c) recommends designs in instruction in learner-centredness to consider not only the learner-centred environment but also the assessment process which addresses the wider range of intellect present in the classroom. According to the study by Osmon and Jackson (2002) and Mindy (2005), multiple intelligences theory highlights that 1) every person has all eight intelligences; 2) the majority of the population can develop intelligences to fully competent levels; 3) people with more intelligence usually operate in more complicated ways and 4) each intelligence can be expressed through a variety of ways. If daily plans and classroom activities are arranged by considering Gardner's eight types of intelligence, many problems about learning (inattentiveness, unwanted behaviours, alienation from a lesson, thinking of being unsuccessful) may disappear (Selcuk et al. 2002). This paper therefore used Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences focused on the school drop-outs and their success stories in their trades in South Africa.

RESEARCH DESIGN

To address the research problem, an inquiry used a qualitative research to ascertain the opinions and experiences of students who dropped out of school. This study employed qualitative

research approach because it is assumed to be an effective method in studying and understanding human action in its natural settings (Babbie and Mouton 2001: 278). Creswell (2007: 15) says the research design process in qualitative research begins with philosophical assumptions that the inquirers make in deciding to undertake a qualitative study. Philosophical assumptions that guide school teachers or any other person, tasked by the relevant department in government to diagnose any learner to have deficient intellectual functioning, are challenged in this paper. Creswell (2007) argues further that the ontological issue relates to the nature of reality and its characteristics. When researchers conduct qualitative research, they are embracing the idea of multiple realities. Different researchers embrace different realities, as do also the individuals being studied and the readers of a qualitative study. When studying individuals, qualitative researchers conduct a study with the intent of reporting these multiple realities. Of Vonnie Lee, a mentally-challenged adult assigned to him and resident at the Opportunity House, Creswell (2007: 260) concludes thus:

Far from operating on the assumption that he is a product of his past (even if only in reaction to it), Vonnie Lee sees his life as beginning only when he makes a definitive break with that past. For Vonnie Lee, the past is not even prologue; it is, for all intents and purposes, irrelevant as a predictor of his future.

It is within this context that this study employed narrative inquiry as a research approach to gain a richer and deeper understanding of views through narratives (Bathmaker and Harnett 2010). The informants were from the three municipal areas in the Mafikeng region of the North West province of South Africa. Purposive sampling was used to select teachers who taught the drop-outs under study. The same approach was used to identify and sample bush mechanics and gardeners. The therefore used narratives because they help me understand patterns in the stories of the learners who dropped out of school because of the labeling and who eventually made it in life irrespective of "the conditions" they were in during their formal schooling years. In this paper, the point of departure is the narratives of these drop-outs' teachers. Because of the above statements, stories of the participants in this paper, drop-outs' lives have themes, narratives with themes of their formal school experiences and their out-of-school experiences.

Data Collection and Analysis

Life history semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten drop-out learners (Franzak 2002; Clandinin and Collely 2000). However, this paper focuses only on the narratives of the two drop-outs and their teachers. The interviews were conducted at places where they do their trade. The questions in the interviews were framed using everyday language that the drop-outs would understand. The data analysis involved three main stages (Miles and Huberman 1994). The first stage is data reduction which involved transcribing and summarising the data from all sources. The second stage involved organising the reduced data, generating major themes and sub-themes from oral and written texts. The third stage covered the interpretations and drawing of conclusions from the analysed data. Data generated from interviews covered the drop-outs' formal school and post-schooling experiences. The interviews were then transcribed in detail. Fictitious names were used in this study to protect the identities of these ex-students who dropped out of school.

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

The findings resulting from the conversations with the drop-outs' former teachers and the drop-outs themselves showed their views and their experiences regarding their journeys before, and after they drop out of school, and their successes in their trades (after they drop out of school). This paper has identified three themes from the stories of the drop-outs and their former teachers: *Each intelligence can be expressed through a variety of ways; Every person has all eight intelligences and people with more intelligence usually operate in more complicated ways.* To make the drop-out students' stories understandable, the transcribed interviews were then re-written as summarised and logical stories. The drop-outs' narratives were then organised thematically before they were analysed in a two-phase process, namely their formal school and post-school experiences.

Theme 1: Each Intelligence can be Expressed through a Variety of Ways

According to Howell (2004) and Chen (2007) the students should be respected as individuals and their fortes valued, and instructors should provide appropriate learning experiences and

stimulate the growth of multiple intelligences. In an interview with Xemba's teacher, she described how Xemba was different from other learners. She remembers how a common poem: 'Twinkle, twinkle little star', was used in the classroom to engage learners on their environmental awareness:

They were able to talk about other celestial bodies like the sun and the moon, the four cardinal points, time nights and day and many others, and it was enjoyable. Outstandingly, when they were to copy the poem, Xemba drew the night sky. Looking at it one may deny that the work was done by a grade two learner. I never draw things for the learners to copy.

The above assertion is in line with Rockwood (2003) who highlighted critical thinking, passion and enthusiasm for the surrounding, courage to try new things, creativity and skills, generosity and tolerance, and keen observation as some of the components of multiple intelligence teaching. If the above strategies could be imbedded into teaching and learning activities, it could improve learning effectiveness. In an interview with one of the drop-out youths, Thando described how teachers pushed him into taking a decision to leave school. Thando said the following regarding his formal school experience:

I could not concentrate at school, my mind kept scattering off in different directions. I couldn't get anything done. I felt I was falling behind at all times, always at the bottom of my class. I ended up bored and began to daydream or make drawings of teachers and get into trouble all the time. In most cases, I was sent outside because I was a nuisance to all my teachers. At times I would be called to the staffroom and got tongue lashing and insults from a group of teachers and I became a laughing stock. I was later named 'slow learner' or 'donkey' by my teachers. I could not stand such bullying, prescriptive and limiting labels any longer; I then decided to quit school.

Eisner (2004) suggests that educators must acknowledge differences in the way students learn to develop their unique capabilities. Since teachers are expected to observe their *locoparentis* status, and to work towards the realization of the learners' right to basic education, the above assertion indicates that teachers are doing the opposite. The teachers' professionalism in this instance is questionable.

Lee (2006) argues that teaching of multiple intelligences gives students more tolerance to-

ward learning and more adaptability toward rules and instructions in school.

When I was at school I was not coping, the teachers were not coping. My mother was advised to take me to a psychologist because my teacher suspected that I had a condition. The psychologist used a language very awkward, that sounded borrowed or rather foreign to describe my condition and none of the jargon made sense to me or my mother because we could not link it to my incompetence at reading and writing. I was then labeled 'a boy with a condition' by my teachers. I felt humiliated and frustrated and then I dropped out of school.

It is also clear from the respondents in this assertion that lack of knowledge of multiple intelligences in schools has serious and negative consequences for learners dropping out of school. Learners who have dropped out of school have poor motivation, low self-esteem and substandard academic performance (Lan and Lanthier 2003). As noted by Boyd-Struthers (2008), the use of multiple intelligences can help students achieve better effectiveness in creative thinking.

Theme 2: Every Person Has All Eight Intelligences

Chen et al. (1998: 2) advise that when learners discover the learning techniques that suit them best, learning will automatically become far easier and seem more natural. In the same vein, Gardner (1993: 39) does not deny the existence of general intelligence; he questions its explanatory importance outside the relatively narrow environment of formal schooling. This occurs because sample evidence rests almost entirely on test pertaining to linguistic or logical mathematical intelligence. Gardner (1993, 1999) shifts the focus from the more traditional emphasis on linguistic and mathematical intelligences, and encourages teachers and students to nurture and develop each of the eight intelligences. In commenting on the challenges of South African formal education system, Xemba's teacher indicated that:

Children like Xemba, do not have the room to be developed in our schools. This learner had difficulty in reading and writing at the level of his fellow colleagues. At times he was castigated, ridiculed, insulted and punished for his 'inability'. We tend to lose a variety of artists because of the curriculum that we follow

and everyone seems to be powerless in ensuring that such learners are developed.

Carl (2009) supports Rogers' humanistic theory, which is about developing the aspects of the whole child, the cognitive, social, affective, physical, creative and spiritual. Thando's teacher made the following comments:

I cannot forget a certain learner, Thando, I taught in Grade 6, who always failed tests and other written tasks but was able to make an outstanding model of the breathing process, using rubber bands, a cut out of plastic bottle and balloons for a lung and diaphragm. The model showed that when a diaphragm is stretched down, the lungs expand and draws air in (inhalation), and when it stretched up, the lungs contract and the air is pushed out (exhalation). The learner started getting positive remarks as I showed the model to the whole staff, and then his work improved because at least there was something that he was able to do and which he did outstandingly. But his moment of glory was short-lived.

Gardner's (1983) theory of multiple intelligences is critical of the deficiencies of the old-fashioned traditional view of intelligences that are framed mainly in verbal linguistic and logical mathematical abilities. In commenting on the challenges of formal education, Thando's teacher indicated that:

There is no room for such activities as we (teachers) always rush to have written tasks to submit at the end of the week.

Barrington (2004) maintains that encouraging students to use their multiple intelligences helps create personal meaning and enhances learning and achievement. One of the strengths of MI theory is its capacity to serve as a framework, allowing educators to explore their teaching styles and assisting them in making decisions about ways to structure teaching and learning experiences for a variety of students (Özdemir et al. 2006: 74). As educators, we "work and train" the brain, but don't really understand its complexity. If we were trained to understand the brain better, we would have the upper hand in the manner in which we "educate, teach, develop and nurture the brain" (Pienaar 2008: 4).

Theme 3: People with More Intelligence Usually Operate in More Complicated Ways

According to Gardner (1983), intelligence has more to do with the ability to solve problems to

enable one to cope with issues in life, to create objects or offer a certain duty or service that is important and valuable in any given cultural context (Armstrong 2000: 1; Pienaar 2008: 31). Related to this assertion, a change has been demonstrated not only on emotional well-being but also for personal growth and development of a learner. Thando said the following regarding his formal school experience:

When I left school, I became a gardener. Gardening to me used to be a hobby. I learned more about green weeds that grow in these lawns, about the type of fertilisers for what type of lawns. Later I bought my own lawn-mower machine which I use in my employers' yards and repair it myself. After a few months, three of my friends who (were banished out of school because we were 'slow learners') and who were also doing gardening individually, came together to form small corporation that render gardening services in our townships. Today we are serious business men, we are making money.

If people who employ gardeners would take note, they would know that some of these gardeners come from the community backgrounds as researched and written about by Chambers (1983: 88):

Soils and land types are another domain where local knowledge is strongly based. Soil types are usually distinguished by colour and texture...soils are also discriminated into three categories by taste, as sweet, neutral and sour categories which correlate significantly with pH levels.

Since most of these gardeners come from rural communities, Chambers's point that rural people's knowledge of what is observable and its local what, where and when, fits in the central argument of this paper. It is unfortunate that in most of the sub-urban homes, these gardeners are employed mostly to take care of lawns and flowers. Xemba said the following regarding his out-of-school experience:

At Grade 8 I decided that maybe I belong to the streets not school, and then I decided to join the lay mechanics where I learnt the ropes. I work on engine blocks, cleaning cylinders, attending to pistons, mending these engine blocks, replacing/repairing petrol pumps and water pumps, cleaning and gapping spark plugs of misfiring engines. I know when the coil is not functioning or functioning well, when

the distributor cap needs cleaning. I know why and when engines overheat and how to fix them. Today I am regarded as the best lay mechanic, even those teachers who had so much to say about my condition bring their cars to me.

The lay mechanic job requires a specific level of skill, and hence requires a specific level of intellect. Xemba's assertions about his journey as a learner and his out-of-school experience, the components which are the specific focus of this paper, should provide growth of understanding on the relationship among Howard Gardner's eight types of intelligence, focusing on body-kinesthetic intelligence. Phenix (1964) further explains that understanding the disciplines, is therefore, essential to good teaching, for disciplines are the key to knowledge and methods of inquiry that have demonstrated their fruitfulness in learning. Using discipline on students is a way of learning, and a mode of inquiry in which understanding grows.

DISCUSSION

It is enlightening and humbling to note a practice that has always been happening for everybody to note, which is that people who do menial tasks may, after all, have their brand of intellectual capacity. These menial tasks obviously and conspicuously are threads of the colourful fabric that defines civil society. Ugly spots on this fabric very often are the results of the operating minds of the so-called highly intellectual people. Schirduan and Case (2004), like Armstrong (2000), argue that a mindful curriculum leadership practice should focus on ability, or on the student's predominant intelligences. The MI theory points out that learners learn best when they work with information that is presented to them in a way that suits their intellectual strengths, and when they can reflect on what they do in a variety of ways that go beyond the traditional test-taking modes of assessment (Kallenbach and Viens 2004: 23). Therefore, through their narratives, these drop-outs have the opportunity to critically reflect on their beliefs and practices to enable them to learn and grow from this experience. The motivation to do this research is an attempt to rescue learners and individuals who may not have been scientifically and/or correctly assessed and diagnosed as having "intellectual deficiency".

CONCLUSION

In this study, the researcher has attempted to explore the presence of intelligence in learners who are taken as individuals out of place in mainstream public schools. This study has shown that narratives allow a storyteller to generate educational knowledge. Based on the findings of this study, it is concluded that the gardener and the bush mechanic failed to integrate successfully with their environment and consequently suffer from arrested or restrained personal and contextual competence. Despite the valuable findings, there is a limitation to this study. This study has shown that dropping out of school can be attributed to the cumulative effects within the youths themselves, environmental factors and factors pertaining to the exchange between them and their environment. Again, this paper highlighted low achievement and humiliation from teachers and fellow learners as factors that lead learners to eventually drop out of school.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Considering the stories of the number of out-of-school youths, it is important to realize that there is a need for alternative forms of learning. In this case, teachers are expected to use varied learning and teaching strategies to create a platform for learners' creativity. These activities include making jokes or gestures while teaching, reasoning with learners, drawing pictures, hands-on activities and encouraging learners to reflect when answering questions. It is therefore reasonable to recommend that any attempt to assist these drop-out youths, should thus be implemented along the lines of learner-centred, environmental-centred and dialogue-centred interventions. Curriculum designers' applications of MI principles can help teachers to develop their teaching strategies. Such an approach respects the fact that the child functions (develops and learns) as a total being; one should be seen as a person in the context of their environment.

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