Early School Leavers' Perspectives on the School Dropout Phenomenon in Zimbabwe

by

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Declaration of Originality

I, Roswitta Gatsi, declare that the thesis, which I hereby submit for the degree Philosophiae Doctor in Educational Psychology, Faculty of Education at the University of Pretoria, is my own work and has not previously been submitted by me for a degree at this or any other tertiary institution.

Signature ....   Date: ..12./.07/.18........

i

Dedication

To my grandchildren Tatenda Elroi, Tinomudaishe Ivan and others to come

May you grow in the love of the Lord and desire to serve the less privileged around you now and always.

Acknowledgements

To God the Almighty, I give you glory and honour.

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- University of Pretoria for financing my study through the faculty bursary
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Ethical Clearance Certificate

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This Ethics Clearance Certificate should be read in conjunction with the Integrated Declaration Form (D08) which specifies details regarding:
- Compliance with approved research protocol,
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Abstract

The purpose of the study was to understand school dropout in Zimbabwe from the perspectives of those with lived experiences of the phenomenon. As confirmed by literature, school dropout militates against efforts by schools and governments to increase graduation rates for individual and societal benefit. However, the major gap in literature which motivated this study was the glaringly missing voice of early school leavers (EScLs) themselves on the meaning they give to the school dropout phenomenon. Answers to the problem so far have largely come from secondary sources of data. The research was a qualitative case study, influenced by the interpretive philosophy. Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Theory of Human Development and Ajzen's Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) formed the theoretical framework for the study. Twenty-two purposively sampled EScLs participated in focus group discussions, face-to-face interview and documented life stories. Research ethics were observed to ensure EScLs' informed decision to participate in the study. The study established that school dropout could be best understood as a personal experience, having a greater impact at individual than societal levels. Findings revealed that both the process of dropping out and ultimately being an EScL are unpleasant and traumatic conditions, best understood as more of a psychological than an administrative problem. This results in a severed self-concept affecting an individual throughout life. It emerged from the study that loss, particularly through the death of biological parents, was the major underlying cause of school dropout, thus, pull factors take the toll over push and fall out factors. As solutions to the problem, the findings suggested a redefinition of vulnerability in response to the diverse and complex circumstances affecting learners. Findings also suggested the training of guidance and counselling teachers for effective intervention in learners' problems. Education reforms and policy reviews that address inequity were recommended. Future studies could focus on in-depth analysis of pull factors in relation to school dropout.

Keywords School dropout, early school leaver, experience, loss, decision-making, environment, self- concept.

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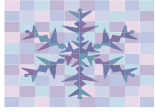
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To whom it may concern

This is to certify that I proofread and edited the PhD thesis, "Early School Leavers' Perspectives on the School Dropout Phenomenon in Zimbabwe", prepared by Roswitta Gatsi in lieu of her submitting it to the University of Pretoria, for examination purposes.

I corrected punctuation, spelling, sentence construction, number and concord and minor language errors. I also pointed out ambiguities in meaning and, where applicable, suggested adjustments to the sequence and/or construction of sentences and paragraphs which negatively affected the flow of the argument and/or undermined the cohesion and coherence of the same. To the extent possible, I either removed or rephrased unnecessary repetitions of ideas phrased in exactly the same words. I also checked the correspondence between in-text references and the reference list, indicating omissions, inaccuracies and/or non-correlation between these.

I wish the candidate every success with her final submission and trust that the recommendations she made regarding the urgency for education authorities to address the dilemma confronting vulnerable school children in Zimbabwe, resulting in their early exit from school will be heeded.

Beverley M. Malan (Dr)

Table of Contents

List of Tables

List of Figures

List of Appendices

Abbreviations and Acronyms

BEAM	Basic Education Assistance Module
DDQ	Demographic Data Questionnaire
EFA	Education for All
EScL(s)	Early School Leaver(s)
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
FN	Field Notes
GCE 'O' Level	General Certificate of Education- Ordinary Level
GCE 'A' Level	General Certificate of Education – Advanced Level
In	Interview
LS	Life Story
MOESAC	Ministry of Education Sport, Arts and Culture
MPSE	Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NANGO	National Association of Non-Governmental Organisation
PPCT	Process Person Context Time
SDC	School Development Committee
SDG(s)	Sustainable Development Goal (s)
TPB	Theory of Planned Behaviour
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
UNICEF	United Nation International Children's Education Fund
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
ZIMSEC	Zimbabwe Schools Examinations Council
ZIMASET	Zimbabwe Agenda for Socio-Economic Transformation

Chapter 1

Focus and Scope of the Study

1.1 Introduction

Researchers (Ajaja, 2012; Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morison, 2006; Burrus & Roberts, 2012; Patrick, 2008) concur that school dropout is a challenge facing many education systems globally. While many countries have made great strides in boosting enrolments in schools, Mhele and Ayiga (2013) observe that high school dropout rates seem to be eroding efforts to increase access to education, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa. Zimbabwe has not been spared by the challenge of school dropout (Chinyoka, 2014; Dakwa, Chiome, & Chabaya, 2014; Shadreck, 2013). This study investigates the secondary school dropout phenomenon in Zimbabwe. Research participants are the dropout learners; however, the term, 'dropout' as referring to these persons is avoided in this study as it sounds derogative. They are, instead, referred to as early school leavers (EScLs). I also declare that the study is undertaken within the framework of Bronfenbrenner's Bio-ecological theory, a theory which emphasises the concept of human beings and their environments (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). In this context, the EScLs are studied within their physical and social environments. Bronfenbrenner's theory is complemented by Ajzen's (2012) Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB), which explains how humans make decisions regarding the performance of certain behaviours - school dropout being the target behaviour in the context of my study.

The present study was triggered by my experiences of working with schools and communities in two different capacities for many years. My exposure to schools and communities provided the impetus and motivation for this study. I also observed that youths of school-going age in Zimbabwe have become a common sight at odd places and times in both urban and rural settings. They roam public places, such as streets, street corners, villages and business centres during school hours, some of them engaging in activities such as street corner car wash, accompanying a beggar, usually a blind parent and other trading ventures. Both boys and girls engage in these activities. Since the school dropout phenomenon has permeated geographical boundaries, (Mafa &Tarusikirwa, 2013), this study includes research participants form urban, farm and rural settings – what Bronfenbrenner (2005) calls "situated environments"

As a child advocate, I have always wondered why such significant numbers of youths have fallen out of school prematurely. My contention is that concern about the problem should go beyond mere observation of the situation because, if learners continue to leave school prematurely, as is currently happening, the nation could be heading for more complex problems. I fear for the future of many young learners in this predicament. The problem might

cause degeneration into problems that could be difficult to contain. I argue, therefore, that the situation is not healthy for either the individual youths or the nation, hence the need to investigate the perspectives of participating EScLs regarding possible solutions to the problem.

Chapter 1 proceeds with a clarification of the terms 'school dropout' and 'experience' as used in the context of this study. The clarification of these terms is important since early school leavers' (EScLs) experiences constitute the primary source of information for my study. Following the clarification is a brief description of the education system, including a background chronicling of some of the major transformations in Zimbabwe's education system since the attainment of independence in 1980. This description serves as an explanation of the circumstances surrounding the problem under investigation, thus putting the study in perspective for the benefit of the reader. Next, in this order, is the statement of the problem, the rationale for and purpose of the study, the research questions which guided the study, the conceptual framework, and a brief outline of the two theoretical frameworks chosen for the study. Finally, I present an outline of the chapters comprising my research report, and a summary of the first chapter.

1.2 What is School Dropout?

The central construct in this study is school dropout. In much of the literature, the term, 'dropout', is used both as a verb and as a noun. Brown (2010) defines school dropout as "an action in which a person becomes detached from a group or system" (p.54). According to Brown (ibid), the action is "a selective process of detachment which could either be voluntary or involuntary". It could also be defined as leaving school earlier than at the expected exit point. In this study, school dropout refers to children leaving secondary school before completing Form 4, roughly equivalent to Grade 11 (eleven) in other countries such as Australia, South Africa, Botswana and Kenya (Bettman, Kilgore, Jeremiah, & Parry, 2013; Brown, 2010; Ramsay, 2008). Synonyms of the concept, 'school dropout' are, for example, 'premature school leaving', 'early school leaving' and 'early departure' (Doll, Eslam & Walters, 2013; Dyson & Squires, 2016; Frostad, Pijl, & Majaavatn, 2015; Jugovic; & Doolan, 2013). In this study, the term 'school dropout' (action) is used interchangeably with the terms, 'premature school exit' and 'early school exit'.

Hess (2000) describes dropping out as a sustained period of disengagement from school. What is critical in Hess's (2000) description is the suggestion that leaving school prematurely or earlier than the expected exit point does not happen suddenly. It is the result of challenging learner experiences over a long time (Doll, et al., 2013; Jugovic; & Doolan, 2013). Failure to resolve the challenges ultimately either pushes or pulls him/her out of school.

School dropout or EScL therefore implies that a learner enrolled for school with the purpose of exiting at a specific point – for example, Grade Seven (primary school exit point), Ordinary Level (Form 4) or Advanced Level (Form 6), in the case of Zimbabwe (Shizha & Kariwo, 2011) - for some reason, fails to reach that point. According to Le Compte and Dworkin (1991), the term, 'dropout' is used to refer to "any pupil of any age who leaves school for any reason other than death, before graduation or completion of a programme of studies and without transferring to another elementary school" (p. 79). In the present study, the term, 'EScLs' refers to youths who failed to complete secondary education, particularly Ordinary Level since, in Zimbabwe, it is regarded as the minimum qualification into the job market.

1.3 The Concepts 'Experience' and 'Premature School Exit'

My study focuses on understanding school dropout from the perspective of individuals who have experienced the phenomenon. Throop (2003) observes that the definition of experience remains elusive because the construct is characterised by subjectivity. Throop (2003) argues that experience entails how the world around us appears to our consciousness during social interactions. Because we perceive situations differently, Throop opines that experience can be best defined at individual level. Brown (2010), thus, defines experience as "conscience of an event or action" (p. 55). It is an encounter with the surrounding world which is either exciting or disturbing. In describing an experience, Brown (2010) posits that it makes one "bring out a complete picture of the state of the mind, including one's beliefs, feelings attached, attitudes developed, reflections, lessons learnt and decisions" made by an individual (p. 55). In the context of my study, dropping out of school constitutes a genuine, negative/unpleasant experience.

An experience can be conscious, unconscious or even sub conscious (Brown, 2010, p.55). By implication, people either directly or indirectly interact with and/or learn from the world around them. Direct contact is when a person is part and parcel of the happening/experience, feeling the consequences, whether positive or negative, hence it is a 'lived' experience. According to Brown (2010), a lived experience is affected by the "particular concepts, ideas, thoughts, images… someone harbours" (p. 57). Indirect contact, conversely, is when learning takes place through secondary means, such as observing, hearing or talking about how others went through an experience. This is what Bandura (2000) calls vicarious learning. In the context of my study, vicarious learning would apply to learners still at school who may be aware of the consequences of leaving school prematurely and of what it is like to be an early school leaver without their actually dropping out of school. While vicarious learning can arguably facilitate understanding of issues in early school leaving, Throop (2003) opines that there are limitations to relying on the indirect experience of a phenomenon. Information

derived from secondary sources may not always be credible as chances of misinterpretation are high. My study therefore focused on the "conscious and direct experiences" of early school leavers – excluding any vicarious experience (Brown, 2010, p.55).

Concurring with Throop (2003), Brown (2010) views experience as subjective, referring to the way in which the individual views his/her own world, and/or to his/her state of mind at a particular point in time in a particular environment. Experience therefore includes the way someone feels about his/her status, safety, freedom, interrelatedness with the world around him/her at any particular moment, including the way in which he/she describes his/her own feelings about a situation. In an encounter, for example, decisions are usually immediate, abrupt, with emotional attachment (Tsai, Levenson & McCay, 2006). An experience thus has the power to influence someone's immediate thinking and behaviour. Depending on the nature of the experience, according to Brown (2010), the thinking can be rational or irrational, the latter sometimes leading to regrets, anger and loss of focus on the desired outcomes. Brown's (2010) observation was critical to my study since my focus was on the analysis of EScLs' responses, with specific reference to the reasons for their pre-mature school exit. It was important not only to analyse the nature of thinking that drove the decision but also for me to understand that experiences are powerful in directing or influencing future behaviour, thus some EScLs could have been lured or deterred from behaving in a specific manner based on their past encounters.

1.4 The Education System in Zimbabwe

In Zimbabwe, as is the case in other countries, the education system comprises primary school, secondary school and tertiary education. My study focused specifically on secondary school education. Ordinary Level ('O' Level), usually referred to as Form 4, is part of basic education, with learners expected to go through an academic course of four years (Form 1 to Form 4) after Grade 7 (the primary school exit point). A Form 4 ('O' Level) certificate is the minimum qualification for entry into the job market in Zimbabwe. Those who do extremely well at Form 4 are expected to proceed to a higher, two-year, secondary school course known as the Advanced Level ('A' Level). While all other tertiary level courses would require the Form 4 certificate (Education Secretary's Circular Number 14 of 2004; Shizha & Kariwo, 2011), it is usually the 'A Level academic qualification which serves as the entry requirement for university education.

Progression through secondary school in Zimbabwe is automatic. At the end of the fourth year, learners sit for the public General Certificate of Education (GCE) 'O' Level examinations. Secondary education in Zimbabwe is offered at either day or boarding schools (Policy Circular No. 73 of 15 October, 1991 p. 3; Education Secretary's Circular No. 5 of 1997;

Education Amendment Act (2006, No. 2). Besides the academic areas, learners at secondary school also participate in co-curricular activities such as sports, clubs and excursions. What is critical to mention at this point is that education is not free in Zimbabwe. Parents bear the full responsibility of paying school fees and levies. In a few cases, however, the government, through the Ministry of Social Welfare and well-wishers, including the NGO community, help to an extent. Without their contribution, the Government subsidy might fall short with regard to the securing of necessary materials as well as the fiscal, infrastructural and human resources needed to ensure that all children complete full secondary education.

Given the Zimbabwean scenario, I make an observation that basic education might imply free and compulsory education in other countries (UNESCO,2007). In Zimbabwe, however, the construct simply refers to the first two levels of education, namely primary and secondary (Education Amendment Act, 2006, No. 2). Basic, in the Zimbabwean sense implies the importance of the foundation levels of education for life-long learning. Since secondary school learners in Zimbabwe, who were the target group for my study, are required to pay fees and levies in order to be successfully enrolled, the scenario pauses challenges as it seems to contradict the essence of basic education. It means that secondary education may not be wholly considered to be part of basic education since the payment of fees already creates a barrier to accessing education as a right for children (United Nations, 1989; Unesco.2011).

1.5 Zimbabwe's Efforts to Keep Learners in School

Prior to independence in 1980, Zimbabwe's education system was characterised by racial discrimination. Education for the black community was a privilege, not a right (Mhizha & Muromo, 2013). It was the preserve of the small white community, thus access to education was a struggle and levels of literacy were low among the black majority. The post - independence period, however, ushered in improved access to education for the black majority (UNESCO, 2011). The expansion and democratisation of the education system was comprehensive, ensuring that every Zimbabwean would have access to that which was once denied to some during the colonial period. Shizha and Kariwo (2011) report that at some point Zimbabwe achieved one of the highest adult literacy rates - pegged at 92% - in Africa. Zimbabwe's education system could then be trusted to prepare children for a secure and bright academic future and, ultimately, paved the way to a meaningful life for all. This was a highly commendable achievement compared to education standards in Africa. However, the problem of pre-mature school exit, as observed today, seems to be militating against progress towards adequate education for the younger generations, hence this study.

To date, numerous education policies have been enacted in an effort to address inequalities experienced in the pre-independence era. It is clear from these policies that

education has always been seen as the solution to problems related to the socio- economic status of the country. Education is, moreover, also understood to be a basic human right. In principle, therefore, Zimbabwe has taken the requisite steps, by means of policy enunciation, to respond to the challenge of premature school exit (Zengeya, 2011). These steps include, amongst others, universal access to primary education, allocating education the biggest vote since 1980, automatic promotion, and policy on automatic progression from Grade seven to Form 1. In addition to policy interventions, there is also ample evidence that Zimbabwe, like Kenya, has worked hard to improve school enrolments. At its attainment of independence in 1980, for example, the government of Zimbabwe introduced free primary education which unfortunately, did not last due to economic challenges which still exist today. Church missionaries have made concerted efforts to facilitate access to education by building schools and training teachers on a very large scale (UNESCO, 2002). Some Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) stepped in to further consolidate government efforts related to the provision of education. From 2003, several NGOs started providing stationery and furniture, paying school fees for some disadvantaged children and, in some cases, building and/or rebuilding schools especially in rural communities (UNESCO, 2011). In urban as well as rural settings, for example, schools are generally reachable in terms of distance, hence the majority of learners can walk to school without strain. The efforts are strong indicators of a commitment by all to the achievement of Education for All (EFA), with access to education having, to a large extent, been achieved.

A close analysis of the Zimbabwe education scenario indicates that the mid-1990s saw Zimbabwe having achieved near to universal primary education for all (Government of Zimbabwe, 2001; Mafa & Tarusikira, 2013). For example, "the net enrolment in 1994 was 81.9%. Literacy levels for 15 to 24-year olds rose from 95% to 98% between 1992 and 1999" (Zengeya, 2011). During the same period, however, primary school completion dropped from 82, 6% to 76.1% by 1995 and further to 75.1% by 2000" (Government of Zimbabwe, 2001, p. 23), suggesting that initial enrolment rates do not necessarily guarantee school completion rates. This scenario strengthens my argument for the present study, namely that the school dropout problem needs to be approached in a different way if lasting solutions are to be found. Efforts so far do not seem to have had much impact on the problem: instead, the situation seems to be deteriorating further, and is, therefore, a cause for concern. Policy initiatives that were meant to protect and keep children in school are not working as expected.

Given the afore-mentioned positive developments, I was concerned to find out why school dropout occurred, especially since it rose significantly, as illustrated in the percentages indicated in Figure 3. To find out what the possible causes could be, I asked myself the following critical questions: Why is Zimbabwe experiencing significant school dropout rates?

Why are there so many children of school-going age on the streets during school hours? What has gone wrong? Who is responsible for whatever could have gone wrong? Where are the support systems responsible for the care, protection, learning and development of the youth? Finally, what is it that could be done in order to curb the dropout situation? These questions assisted me to continuously reflect on the focus of my research, the questions which directed my study and, subsequently, the tools I needed to collect data.

According to Bronfenbrenner (2005), it is when the network of systems breaks down that children are exposed. On the surface, the Zimbabwean systemic education network seems sound. Zimbabwean government policy, in principle, sounds clear on issues related to school attendance and payment of school levies. The Education Secretary's Circular No. 5 of 1997, and the Education Amendment Act of 2006, No. 2 protect learners from being denied attendance at school for failure to pay levies. However, the implementation of these policies seems not strictly monitored. As a result, learners continue to be sent beck home for failure to pay fees. In essence, it defeats the purpose of basic education. A related observation is that almost a 100% of Zimbabwe's school teachers and administrators are qualified, suggesting that the standard of school education is at least up to par with that of other countries. School dropout, though, remains a challenge, both at rural and urban schools. This is a matter of concern since the policy position is that no child should be sent back home or denied school attendance, especially not for non-payment of levies (Zengeya, 2011). Informing policies in this regard is, I believe, the will of government to remove barriers to the accessing of education, especially for children raised in impoverished families and communities. While more children have since the promulgation of these policies had the opportunity to enrol at schools, there is little evidence of a significant increase in the number of learners completing school. Premature school exit is still prevalent, many years after the enunciation of these policies, challenging the envisioned scenario (Chinyoka, 2014; Machingambi, 2012; Shadreck, 2013). It is to determine the reason for this that I embarked on this study. More specifically, I wanted to establish what had gone wrong, what it was that pushed, pulled, or otherwise caused learners to drop out of school. Put differently, I wanted to determine what 'triggered' school dropout. In doing so, I assumed, I would have to keep at the back of my mind the possibility that equality and equity issues might play a role in this regard.

Based on the developments in Zimbabwe's education chronicled in the section above, as well as on the government's seeming commitment to open the door to education for all, it would be reasonable to infer that learners would do everything in their power to stay at school. Also, because secondary school education is believed to open the doors to a more meaningful and stable future (Chugh, 2011; Lewin, 2009), one would assume that the completion of secondary school education would be the goal of all Zimbabwe's children. Instead, the current

7

situation presents the inverse: while Zimbabwe has worked hard to improve its education standards, school dropout seems to be negating these efforts (Muchenje, 2012). This is evidenced by a desk review which clearly indicated a rise in school dropout percentages across the country (Zengeya, 2011). At secondary school level, dropout in the early 80s was documented at 14%, with the lowest dropout rate, recorded in 1985, being 8%. Thereafter, it escalated: the average dropout rate for the period 1980 to 2004 stood at 24%, rising to 25% in 2004. Dropout rates between Ordinary Level (Form 4) and Advanced Level (Form 6) are particularly alarming, with 89% of learners who had completed the Ordinary (O) Level not proceeding to the Advanced (A) Level (Zengeya, 2011). Annual statistics released by the office of the Zimbabwe Ministry of Education Sport, Arts and Culture (MOESAC) in 2012, while confirming that school dropout was most prevalent at secondary school level, (higher than 5%) indicated that, the highest fallout occurred somewhere between Forms Two and Five, that is even before learners had completed their O Levels (MOESAC, 2012). These findings were confirmed in 2013 in the Annual Statistical Report of the Zimbabwe Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (MOPSE) (2013) (see Figure 1.1 for statistics on school dropout rates extracted from the 2012 and 2013 Annual Statistical Reports).

	Absconded	Death	Expulsion	Illness	Marriage	Moved	Other	Pregnancy	School Fees
2012	0	1	0.3	1.2	8.2	28.03	14.1	6.2	40.6
2013	15.16	8.28	5.12	7.76	20.04	0	13.75	14.41	38.52
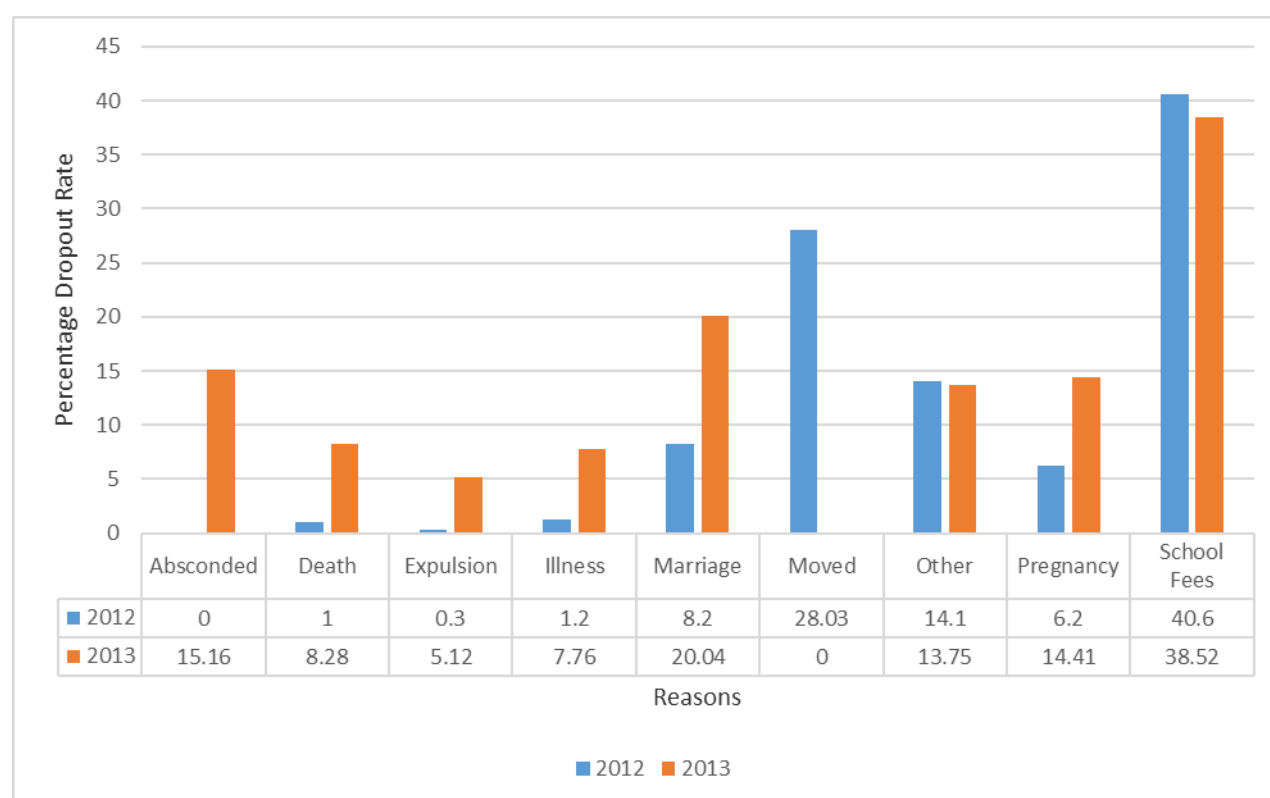
Figure 1.1: Secondary school dropout rates for 2012 and 2013

Sources: MOESAC Annual Statistical Report 2012; MOPSE Annual Statistical Report 2013

8

As indicated in Figure 1.1 learners prematurely dropped out of school for a whole range of reasons - marriage, pregnancy, expulsion, death, illness, et cetera - during the period 2012 to 2013. What is evident from this illustration is that the factors seemingly most responsible for school dropout in 2012 are not exactly the same as those in 2013. Learners who absconded were not captured in 2012 but in 2013 they constituted 15.16%. The statistics for those who moved were not captured in 2013 while the recorded percentage in 2012 was 28.03%. Distribution by gender is not clearly given. The percentage of learners who dropped out due to the non-payment of school fees seemed to have dropped in 2013 but percentages for all the other reasons had increased. Percentages for uncategorised, 'other', reasons remained high, though. It is on determining what these 'others' are that I wanted to focus in my study since, so I believed, an awareness of these reasons could, on the one hand, contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the school dropout problem and, on the other, identify existing gaps on the phenomenon n literature.

While I believe that every secondary school learner has the potential to complete school, I am not oblivious to the fact that the ground may not be level for all, hence the focus of this study which sought to understand why learners continue to leave school prematurely. Following Bronfenbrenner's (2005) argument that children grow up in a network of systems which have a bearing on their well-being, I assume that the nature of activities and events that take place in the social and physical environments surrounding the child influences how he/she proceeds in life. Furthermore, I acknowledge the reasons for school dropouts which are presented in the Annual Statistical Report (2012) and MOPSE Annual Statistical Report (2013) highlighted earlier, but as secondary sources. The targeted EScLs participating in my study constitute my primary source. Informing this decision is my contention that those who have dropped out from secondary school have rich personal experiences to share (Brown, 2010; DeVos, Strydom, Fouche, & Delport, 2011; Huberman & Miles, 2002). It was also my belief that focusing on EScLs' direct experiences would help me to unpack the ambiguous 'other' category of reasons in Figure. 1.1. Investigating the school dropout phenomenon from the perspectives of the EcSLs) was, thus, critical to the collection of primary source data for my study. It follows that the phenomenon which is the focus of this study is, therefore, presented from the perspective of participating EScLs.

1.6 Defining the Problem

School dropout is a challenge facing the education system in Zimbabwe, particularly at secondary school level. My major concern, that which motivated this study, is that secondary school learners are leaving school before completion of this crucial education level. Without the General Certificate of Education (Ordinary Level), their future may be bleak as

they are leaving school without adequate knowledge and skills for self-sustenance and meaningful contribution to national development (Burrus & Roberts, 2012). Zimbabwe is currently experiencing various economic challenges which would require skilled human resources – those with high level scientific and technological skills - to fill existing knowledge gaps. Through premature school exit, families and the country lose human resources that could make a difference to their own personal lives, families and the society at large (Boakye-Boaten, 2009).

To buttress the argument for the problem under investigation, I noticed that school dropout is an under-researched phenomenon in Zimbabwe. The few studies done so far have generally focused on collecting statistical data on premature school exit. Zengeya's (2011) desk review of school dropouts in Zimbabwe, targeting the period between 1980 and 2004, focused on the identification and analysis of statistical data on enrolments within schools and colleges, using government publications and websites as primary data sources. Other known studies focused on capturing possible reasons for school dropout, using a range of stakeholders in education - school teachers, parents and organisations working with EScLs - as primary data sources (Chinyoka, 2014; Machingambi, 2012; Mawere, 2012; Shadreck, 2013) although they are, in fact, secondary sources, not being school early school leavers themselves.

Indications from documented literature are that researchers have, so far, used secondary sources as if they were primary source. The population concerned (EScLs), whom I believe could be rich in information about the way they appreciate their situation, have not been reached, thus their perspectives are in effect ignored/missing. Existing literature is scant on perspectives of secondary school early school leavers concerning the phenomenon, particularly from an experiential point of view (Brown, 2010; Rumberger & Lim, 2008). Furthermore, I argue from Brown's (2010) perspective that research is yet to establish the nature of the psychological impact that having to leave school prematurely has on those who do so.

Lastly, research approaches used so far for the investigation of the school dropout problem in Zimbabwe have consisted predominantly of surveys which seem to categorise the problem as an event. Included in these types of research are studies by Machingambi, (2012); Mawere (2012); Shadreck (2013) and Zengeya (2011). This is worrying because numerous global studies agree that dropping out cannot be an event (Burrus & Roberts, 2012; Hunt, 2008). Consequently, what has been established is that not much research has attempted to explain the process of dropping out (Bridgeland et al, 2008; Cross, 2010; Rumberger, 2004). Instead, according to Hunt (2008), existing research on school dropout across the globe, has

generally focused on the quantification of dropout rates. Consequently, the statistics provided highlight the problem, without shedding any light on either the causes or the process of dropping out. These gaps are wider in the Zimbabwean situation, hence the present study.

I would argue that it is due to these issues, coupled with the exclusion of EScLs perspectives on the phenomenon, that comprehension of the dropout phenomenon is incomplete. In this sense I concur with Byrne's (2001) opinion that the truth about and understanding of life emerge from people's lived experiences. Direct experience of a phenomenon and mere telling of it may, thus, never be the same. The need to bridge this knowledge gap, is therefore, a key justification for my study.

1.7 Rationale for the Study

There is growing evidence from literature (Bettmann, Kilgore, Jeremiah, & Parry 2013; Huisman & Smits, 2009; Reeve, 2013) that keeping children in school until graduation has many benefits. The benefits are at personal, family and societal levels. Bettmann, et al. (2013) and Brown (2010) concur that education is a powerful tool in life which enhances one's opportunities for better and more satisfying employment. Wedgwood (2005) and Muwagga, Itaaga and Wafula (2013) specify that healthy lifestyles, stable careers, higher income, better coping skills and strong social networks are positive outcomes usually linked with the completion of school education. Education is also viewed as a tool for upward social mobility, a symbol of power and security (Huisman & Smits, 2009). Completing school education is also critical, moreso, in this era when all countries are working towards the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), particularly, Goal No. 4 whch seeks to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and provide life-long learning opportunities for all (The Sustainable Development Goals Report, 2017).

Secondary school learning is a source of social strength in the lives of youths (Lewin, 2009). It is a vital part of late childhood development and the social opportunities one gets at secondary school cannot be duplicated elsewhere in life (Boakye-Boaten, 2009; Lewin, 2009). Successful completion of school, thus, helps youths to mature and to understand their world. To buttress this argument, Brown (2010) adds that education is a human right, implying that denying anyone the opportunity to go to school would be equal to denying someone the right to live. Based on these arguments, it was important, through the present study, to understand why learners continued to drop out when they were, in fact, expected to complete the course towards the achievement of meaningful education and life outcomes.

Furthermore, Lewin (2009) posits that it is at school that identities of learners are shaped to suit the needs of various disciplines such as academia, sport and arts. UNESCO

(2011) categorically states that education equips people with the necessary knowledge and skills to break the cycle of poverty and to shape their future life outcomes. Education, across nations, has always been regarded as a key element of sustainable development and living (Mahapatra, 2009; UNESCO, 2005) since it is assumed to drive national development goals (Ely, 2004). Sleep (2010) points out that there is no doubt that the level of development in a country is directly proportional to its literacy level (p. 64). Education, therefore, is a forerunner to development. Implied in this assumption is the belief that if learners stay in school and gain knowledge and skills relevant to sustain life, issues of vandalism, robbery and murder may be reduced, because one of the purposes of education is to facilitate rational and logical thinking. If learners leave school prematurely, it means that these gains may not be realised. Learners should, therefore, complete school. In short, according to Burrus and Roberts (2012) life outcomes could be compromised without meaningful and competitive educational qualifications.

Education has also been seen as a way out of poverty (USAID, 2011). Now if a child leaves school prematurely, with no meaningful academic qualification, parents' expectations, the child's dreams and the nation's goals are jeopardised. According to Sleep (2010) societies with generations of learners who do not realise meaningful educational goals are at risk of recycling poverty. Many studies agree that secondary/ high school learners who drop out are likely to live in poverty as they have fewer chances of being gainfully employed. Fuller and Coll (2010) add that leaving school prematurely perpetuates and deepens the cycle of poverty, and thus in the creation and recycling of communities which cannot sustain themselves or the nation. Investment from primary through secondary school which does not yield the expected fruits because a child has dropped out before completion of a course, is a waste (Burrus & Roberts, 2012; Zengeya, 2011). EScLs are also likely to lack competent problem-solving and literacy skills necessary for operation in day-to-day life (Bridgeland et al, 2006; Burrus & Roberts, 2012). Tied to the power of education, it is important to note that the education system in Zimbabwe was once the best in Africa and rated very high, in terms of standards, in the Southern Africa region (Shizha & Kariwo, 2011). However, immense challenges, such as the rising school dropout rates, speak to a situation requiring attention. It means something has gone wrong.

It is unarguable that school dropout is an economic factor. By dropping out, a resource (human) is wasted (Burrus & Roberts, 2012; Watkins, 2000). There is evidence from literature that secondary school provides knowledge and skills needed by any country to compete favourably with the ever-growing and changing demands of the global world (State of Education in Africa Report, 2015, p.8). Dropping out, therefore, is likely to have negative implications for the economy of a country (Boakye-Boaten, 2009). It diminishes the pool of

qualified persons expected to influence a wide array of professional fields, religion and politics, all of which are essential for sound and progressive public policy decisions (Sang, Koros, & Bosire, 2013). The wastage created by dropping out at secondary school level, I believe, is an issue that should be of concern to families and the government, hence efforts should be made to address the situation. To this end, Boakye-Boaten (2009) argues that today's youth are the custodians of tomorrow's world, implying that the future of a society lies in the quality of its offspring, and education is believed to be a key ingredient in their personalities.

Considering the cited threats to individual and collective life outcomes, this study could be relevant not only to the Zimbabwean situation but also to some of the school dropout issues at global level. It was my hope that studying school dropout behaviour at secondary school level may help to unearth its possible root causes and to formulate propositions towards the assurance of a smooth trajectory from children's educational endeavours to life outcomes Education would also empower learners to solve their own problems (Sarker & Davey, 2009). Informed by this line of thinking, I focused my study on understanding why learners are leaving school prematurely as this seems to compromise the expected gains. This question is fundamental to my study and is constantly referred to throughout the chapter.

Targeting individuals who have experienced the phenomenon was important because according to Montecel, Cortez and Cortez (2004), since the late 19th century, researchers, educators and political leaders have tried without success to end the dropout crisis, something which puzzles me. Furthermore, Freeney and O'Connell (2009), Gray and Hackling (2009), and Montecel et al. (2004) concur that the challenge of school dropout has remained, despite decades of research on the issue. Their contention is echoed by Huberman and Miles (2002), who argue that even with the significant body of literature exploring triggers of school dropout, studies done so far have failed to articulate the lived experiences of the EScLs, issues of life which cannot be adequately studied in a laboratory.

The preceding discussion indicates a gap in literature in the area of school dropout globally and, more critically, for this study, on school dropout in Zimbabwe. In fact, research done so far suggests that field studies which can provide first-hand information to inform the education system in Zimbabwe on the school dropout phenomenon are lacking. It thus became imperative for me to understand how the EScLs in the study conceptualise school dropout and how they describe the process and its impact from an experiential point of view. Finally, it was important, through this study, to establish what EScLs believe could be done to solve the school dropout crisis in Zimbabwe. The sum total of the arguments for this study is that the voice of EScLs expressing their views on an issue which has affected them is silent. School dropout is, thus, a real problem for Zimbabwe, warranting an investigation. The

arguments forming the statement of the problem provide an antecedent for the purpose of the study

1.8 Purpose of the study

The purpose of the study was to gain an in-depth understanding of the school dropout phenomenon in Zimbabwe from the perspectives of those who had experienced it. My study shifted from a focus on investigating secondary sources such as school administrators, teachers, at risk learners and/or families as contained in most previous studies to targeting the voices of those who have experienced the phenomenon. The argument was that what the education system, schools and families might regard as the problem may not necessarily be viewed in the same manner by individuals who have experienced the phenomenon. Thus, I believed that EScLs had stories to tell in this regard.

Furthermore, the purpose of the study was to establish patterns, perceptions, conceptualisations and perceived solutions from those who had experienced the phenomenon. I investigated what EScLs thought had gone wrong in the education system to create the early school leaver population. More specifically, I investigated their conceptualisation of school dropout, what they defined as the fall-out, push and/or pull factors, and what impact the phenomenon had on their lives. In the final analysis, I made the effort to find out what the EScLs believed could be done to ensure that learners remained at school until completion of the secondary school course. My intention was to go beyond the theorising of school dropout to an understanding of the phenomenon as experienced by the EScLs (DeVos, et al, 2011). Informing my intention was the assumption that the findings of the study would provide first-hand information on the reasons for school dropout, reasons which could result in views on the school dropout problem which differed from the findings of previous studies and thus in the consideration of alternative ways of reducing it. The research questions which guided the study are provided below.

1.9 Research Questions

My research questions comprise a single primary question and five secondary questions.

1.9.1 Primary question. How can the school dropout phenomenon in Zimbabwe be understood from the perspectives of early school leavers?

1.9.2 Secondary questions.

1.9.2.1 How do early school leavers in Zimbabwe conceptualise school dropout?

1.9.2.2 From the perspectives of early school leavers, what are the triggers of school dropout in Zimbabwe?

1.6.2.3 How does dropping out of school happen according to early school leavers?

1.9.2.4 How do early school leavers in Zimbabwe describe the impact of school dropout on their lives?

1.9.2.5 What do early school leavers believe could solve the school dropout problem in Zimbabwe?

Question 5 paved way for the development of a framework (presented in Chapter 6) which I deemed important and useful in an effort to curb secondary school dropout in Zimbabwe.

1.10 Conceptual Framework

As I embarked on this study and sought to operationalise the problem under investigation, I had my own mental picture of what I thought could be happening with the early school leaver in the post-dropout phase. My thoughts in this regard, guided by Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory of human development and Ajzen's theory of planned behaviour, are illustrated in Figure 1.2. The concepts highlighted in the illustrated framework were meant to assist me to make sense of generated data later in the study.
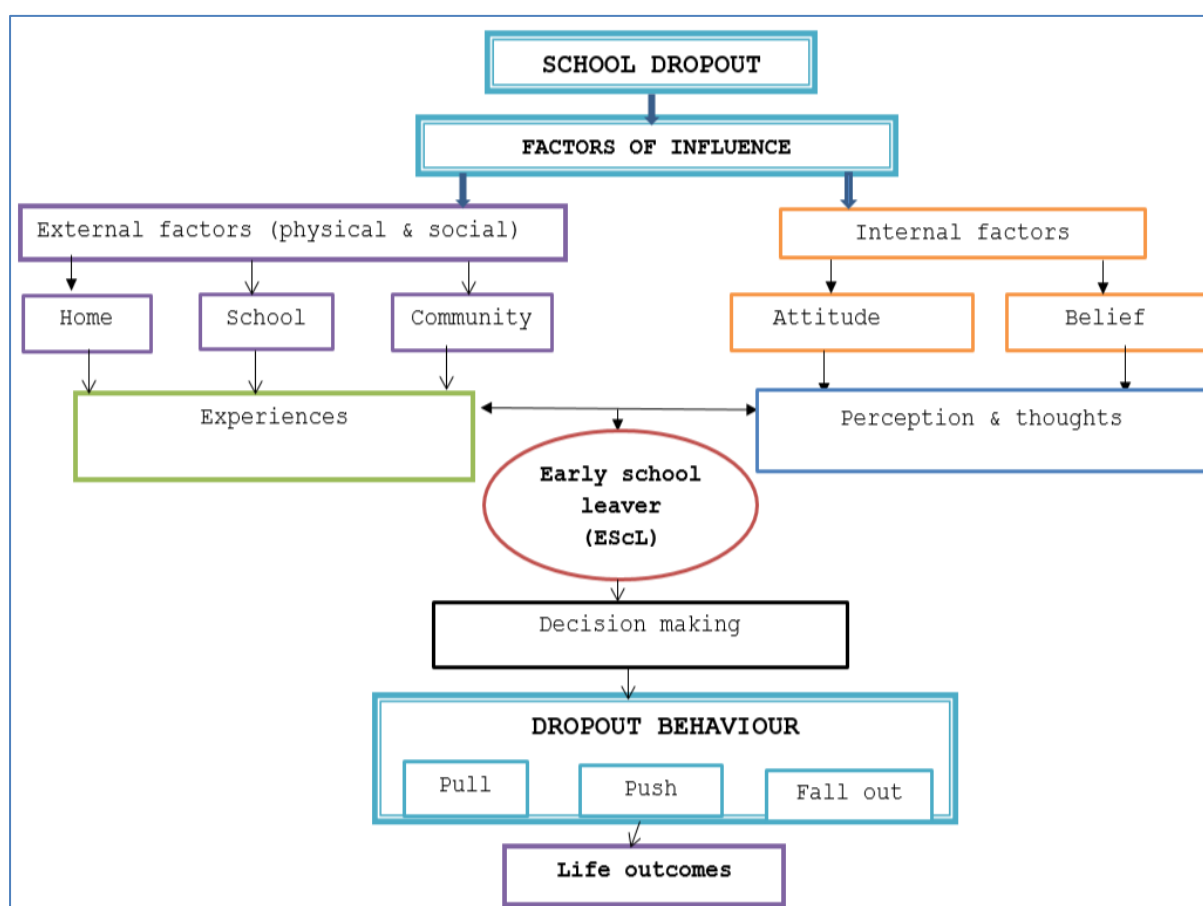
Figure 1.2: Conceptual framework

As indicated earlier, I viewed school dropout as a behaviour resulting from learners' situations (Bridgeland, et al, 2006; Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Doll et al, 2013). Key concepts that

guided my thinking were context/ nurturing environments, experience, attitude and belief as well as push, pull, fall-out factors and life outcomes. In the illustrated framework (Figure 1.2), the secondary school learner is situated in three broad contexts namely, home, school and community. The contexts encompass situated and non-situated physical and social environments (Bronfenbrenner & Bronfenbrenner, 2009; Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000). Day-to-day activities and specific events which take place during the learner's interactions in these three contexts shape his/her experiences with the world around him/her (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). These experiences could be either positive or negative (Brown, 2010), depending on the nature of the interaction between the human being(learner) and his/her environment (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). The responsiveness of various physical and social contexts/environments to the learner's needs have a bearing on his/her overall wellbeing (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). In the case of the learners participating in this study, the response is negative. Learners' direct and indirect (associative) experiences typically translate into thoughts, attitudes, beliefs and perceptions which I refer to as internal pressures influencing their understanding of their world/s (Bronfenbrenner & Bronfenbrenner, 2009). According to Ajzen (2012), internal pressures have the power to influence an individual's (learner's) rational decision/s to behave in a certain way. In the case of the present study, the decision/behaviour is to drop out of school.

The attributes resulting from the internal pressures usually influence a learner's decision to either stay on or drop out of school. Ajzen (2012) argues that the confidence one has to manage the behaviour outcome determines his/ her intention and, finally, the decision on how to act. In this study, I viewed the EScL as having been uncomfortable with what he/she was going through, the situation being so unbearable that it did not allow him/her to continue enjoying school. I considered activities and events contributing to this situation as constituting external pressures on the life of the learner. In my view, the learner would try to focus on school but the ground was not level since his/her experiences tended to be increasingly negative and overwhelming. The learner was, thus, faced with the pressure to meet the demands/standards of the three contexts. Failure to meet school demands would push the learner out.

Conversely, what happens outside the school such as job opportunities, illness or the death of significant people in the learner's life would pull him/her out of school. In some cases, the learner might fail to cope with school, for example, in cases where work appears difficult. The learner then falls out. In this regard, Bronfenbrenner (2005) opines that the effects of the external pressures, positive or negative, filter to the child who is at the centre of the network of systems. In the case of my study, the effects of the activities and events around the learners'

world seemed to be negative, further influencing their attitudes, beliefs and perceptions about themselves and school.

Attitudes and beliefs are not formed overnight; thus I, in line with Burrus and Roberts' (2012) views on these, perceived school dropout as a process. In the case of an EScL, I would argue that, without meaningful support from education systems/contexts, with pressure mounting every day, and with efforts yielding no positive results, the learner gradually begins to lose hope. The decision to drop out is therefore likely to be the result of a culmination of unpleasant events and circumstances over a period of time leading to the learner's disengagement from school. Bronfenbrenner (2005) posits that negative events that take place in a person's (learner's) life over time (Chrono system) compromise the effectiveness of his/her development processes. In the case of the EScL, the situation deteriorates daily, with the learner progressively losing his/her focus on schooling.

Embarking on my study, I believed the impact of the process of dropping out was not felt at the end only but began from the time the learner started thinking about leaving school and continued into his/her post-dropout life. The learner may have persevered for a while but was ultimately pushed, pulled or fell out grudgingly, in response to sustained internal and/ or external pressures. The process might thus well result in negative life outcomes for the EScL in Zimbabwe.

Finally, I assumed that school dropout behaviour is predictable and can be traced and understood through explanations. I believed, therefore, that as EScLs present their cases through focus group discussions, interviews and story-writing, issues at stake would be put to the fore. I would then interpret the dropout behaviour as I analysed the explanations by the EScLs. Based on this assumption, I envisaged a situation where participants would construct meaningful and effective ideas that could assist today's young generation to acquire the knowledge, skills and values necessary to the realization of sustainable personal and national goals. In that respect, more lasting mechanisms to curb school dropout ought to be proffered.

1.11 Theoretical Framework

The construct, 'school dropout', can be explored from a variety of perspectives, such as philosophical, psychological or sociological. My study was embedded in the field of Educational Psychology. From a psychological perspective, I viewed school dropout as a complex phenomenon resulting from cognitive, social and environmental factors (Sigei & Tikoko, 2014). Since aspects of different theories can be employed to conceptualise the school dropout phenomenon in Zimbabwe, I chose Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological theory,

particularly his Process Person Context Time (PPCT) model, and Ajzen's Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB).

Several reasons influenced my decision to use aspects of these two theories, the key reason being that I regarded the two theories (Bio-ecological theory and Theory of Planned Behaviour) as being complementary. I chose Bronfenbrenner's theory to explain the relationship between the experiences of participating EScLs and the network of systems in which they were situated (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). The TPB model, on the other hand, would elucidate the decision-making process which EScLs went through in the dropout behaviour (Ajzen, 2012; Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010).

Another reason which influenced my choice of the TPB was the assumption that premature school exit could be the result of a rational choice, one made under the volitional control of the individual concerned (Sheeran, 2002). Also, according to Battin-Pearson., Newcomb, Abbott, Hill., Catalano, and Hawkins. (2002, p.11), ascertaining that "the contexts in which learners exist have a bearing on their attitudes, behaviour …" would help me to illustrate the relevance of the Bio-ecological theory and the TPB to my study. In view of the strengths of both these theories, I was confident that they were equally relevant to my study. Both are relevant to research which involves behaviour in education (school dropout) because of their ability to predict and illustrate behaviour and behavioural intention (Fichten, Nguyen, Amsel, Jorgensen, Budd, Jorgensen, et al, 2014). However, while both theories could contribute to my explanation of the school dropout phenomenon, I viewed elements in each one as having the potential to make a specific contribution to my study, thus ensuring useful research outcomes. An elaboration of the two theories appears in Chapter 2.

1.12 Key Concepts

To ensure a common understanding of the key terms used in my study, the meanings attached to them in this context are briefly clarified below.

1.12.1 School dropout. Ajaja (2012, p. 145) defines school dropout as "ultimate withdrawal from school", while Brown (2010) views it as "an action in which a person… becomes detached from, a group or system" (p. 54). Brown (2010) further explains the action as "a selective process of detachment which could either be voluntary or involuntary". It could also be explained as leaving school earlier than at the expected exit point. In this study, school dropout refers to learners leaving secondary school before completing Form 4 by Zimbabwean standards.

1.12.2 Early School Leaver (EScL). In general terms, early school leaver is a learner who "quits school before the official exit grade level" (Brown, 2010, p.54), that is, "any pupil of

any age who leaves school for any reason other than death, before graduation or completion of a programme of studies … without transferring to another elementary school" (Le Compte and Dworkin, 1991, p.79). In this study, the term, 'early school leaver' refers to a learner who enrolled for secondary education but, for whatever reason including lack of school fees, left school prematurely, thus, failing to complete either the Ordinary Level ('O' Level) or Form 4, which is the initial expected exit point for secondary school education in Zimbabwe. I use the term, 'early school leaver', deliberately to avoid 'school dropout' given its derogatory connotations if viewed from a psychological perspective.

1.12.3 Experience. Brown (2010) defines experience as the conscience of an event or action. He further explains that it is an encounter with the world around which is either exciting or disturbing. Speaking about an experience brings out a complete picture of "the state of the mind, feelings attached, attitudes developed, reflections, lessons learnt and decisions made" by an individual (Brown, 2010, p.54). In the context of my study, dropping out of school is an experience – not an event -entailing the interaction of EScLs with their physical and social environments. Such experiences could include both exciting and nasty encounters.

1.12.4 Loss. Meerwijk and Weiss (2011) view loss as a kind of a feeling associated with psychological pain. It can be loss of a person, a thing or failure to achieve an intended goal. The experience is usually lasting, unpleasant resulting in the affected person harbouring a sense of deficiency. In this study, loss refers to what EScLs describe as failures in various ways which bring about a sense of regret in their lives.

1.12.5 Decision-making. Eisenfuhr (2011, p.23) defines decision as "a conclusion reached after consideration when one option is selected to the exclusion of others". According to Lunenburg (2010), decision-making entails what happens between thought and action, thus acting as indicators of behaviour. It can also be understood simply as an act of reducing the gap between an existing undesirable situation and a desired situation (Nura & Osman, 2012). In the present study decision-making by EScLs is understood as related to their ability to judge their situations and decide to drop out after considering and trying other alternatives.

1.12.6 Environment. Lippman (2010) describes the environment as including the surroundings and everything else that affects the life of an organism, while Bronfenbrenner (2005) views it as a set of complex layers formed by a system of relationships, with each layer affecting the development of the child either positively or negatively. In this study, the term, 'environment', is used to describe both the physical and social elements of the environment that impact on the learner during his/her lifetime.

1.12.7 Self- concept. Baumeister (2005) and Huang (2011) similarly view self-concept as an individual's knowledge about him/herself. Baumeister further explains that self concept includes an understanding about one's beliefs and other personal attributes such as self-esteem and identity (p. 248). In the present study, self-concept is understood as how EScLs think about themselves, their feelings, beliefs and attitudes.

1.13 Summary

In Chapter 1 elaborated on the rationale for the study, outlining the background to the study, its purpose, the statement of the problem and the envisaged contribution that my study could make to the existing body of knowledge on school dropout. I also briefly explained the interpretive philosophy underpinning my study, the theoretical framework in which the study is located, and the qualitative inquiry methods and research procedures used in the collection, analysis and interpretation of data. In Chapter 2 I present a discursive summary of the literature I reviewed to help me identify and/or confirm the existence of information gaps regarding the phenomenon investigated in my study.

1.14 Outline of the Chapters

The section concluding this chapter outlines the focus of subsequent chapters in my research report.

I used Chapter 1 to describe the scope and purpose of the study, namely an investigation of the perspectives of early school leavers on the school dropout phenomenon in Zimbabwe. I explained that the study was important since it sought to close a gap in existing literature on this phenomenon by giving a voice to a population which seems to have been overlooked in terms of contributing towards issues which affect them.

In Chapter 2, I review literature as a means of positioning my study, seeking to establish what is already known and indicating the gaps and silences in literature with regard to the conceptualisation, triggers, process and impact of school dropout. All of these are critical to my attempt to generate new knowledge about these by means of my study. I also describe a range of theoretical frameworks which help inform experiences, attitudes, beliefs or systems around the learner which might have an influence on dropout behaviour.

Chapter 3 is essentially a discussion of the multiple case study I did and the methodology I employed to generate case study data. I also explain the interpretive philosophy underpinning the research, data collection and analysis procedures and process, quality criteria and research ethics.

Chapters 4 and 5 contain the results of the study, synthesised as themes. In Chapter 4, I present the results under Themes 1 and 2, focusing respectively on conceptualisation and factors triggering school dropout. In Chapter 5, which is a continuation of the presentation of results, I focus on Themes 3, 4 and 5, that is, on the process, impact and suggested solutions to the problem. In both chapters, I present the results in the form of direct quotations of EScLs' responses, excerpts from my field notes and written stories, focusing on similarities, differences/contradictions and silences in the results when compared to findings reported in reviewed literature.

Finally, in Chapter 6, I present my major findings as consolidated answers to my original research questions. I also discuss the significance of the study and the contribution it could make to the field of school dropout and educational psychology respectively. I conclude the chapter and thesis with an indication of the limitations of the study and recommendations for further research on the school dropout phenomenon.

Chapter 2

Understanding the School Dropout Phenomenon

2.1 Introduction

Chapter 2 consists of two sections. First is a review of literature on premature school exit at secondary school level. It begins with a discussion of the benefits of education at individual and systemic levels. This is followed by a declaration of what is known about the school dropout phenomenon from a global perspective. In this section, the focus is on issues tied to the research questions guiding the study. These include the conceptualisation, triggers, process and impact of as well as possible solutions to the school dropout problem. Next is a discussion of Zimbabwe, which is the context for my study. A description of the education system in Zimbabwe and how it has developed in the post-independence era forms part of this discussion as does a review of studies done on school dropout to date. The first section of the chapter ends with a summary of what is already known about the school dropout phenomenon, key insights in this regard, identified knowledge gaps in existing literature, and an indication of what I intend to do to fill these by means of my study.

The second section of the chapter discusses in detail two theories I deemed relevant to an explanation and analysis of the school dropout phenomenon in Zimbabwe. These are Bronfenbrenner's Bio-ecological theory, with particular reference to his Process, Person, Context, Time (PPCT) model, and Ajzen's Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB).

2.2 What are the Benefits of Education?

The central argument on which my study is premised is that learners in Zimbabwe are leaving secondary school prematurely in spite of efforts to increase access to education for all children, particularly in the post-independence era. Knowledge about the benefits of education was important to the present study since it helped me to analyse not only the EScLs' conceptualisation of school dropout but also their reasons for prematurely exiting school given its benefits.

There is general agreement amongst theorists that completing school has personal and societal benefits (see Section 1.7). Regarding benefits at a personal level, literature indicates that when children stay in school until graduation of a course, their assumption of adult responsibilities is naturally delayed, thus either preventing or minimising problems later on (Kehily, 2004; Sarker & Davey, 2009). Sleep (2010) opines that, since the introduction of schools in the 17th and 18th century, they have been viewed as haven for children. Generally, they are perceived as providing children with the ideal context in which their personalities can

be nurtured and in which they could be moulded into active citizens who are willing and able to contribute meaningfully to national goals (see Section 1.7, par. 2).

Chugh (2011) and Mhizha and Muromo (2013) observe that while completing high school may not guarantee that school leavers would get well-paying jobs, it does provide them with more and better opportunities in life. In this regard, Hess (2000) concludes that, by dropping out, learners may lose the chance of acquiring a better social and economic status in the future. Informing this argument is the assumption that once somebody attains a certificate, especially at a higher level such as the end of secondary school, his/her social status is automatically enhanced. If schooling offers all these benefits, one wonders why learners decide to leave it earlier than necessary, thus missing out on opportunities to improve their status and their quality of life. It was my intent with this study to find answers to this question by finding out what the views of EScLs were on the matter and how they conceptualised school dropout in relation to the value they give to school based on their experiences.

At a systemic level, research indicates that there is no single government, the world over, which does not attach great importance to the education and prosperity of its citizens (see Section 1.7, paragraphs 3 & 4). In this regard, the need to complete secondary education cannot be overemphasised. If learners, in any society, fail to acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to meaningful and independent survival, the peace, order and tranquillity of the society of which they form part may not be guaranteed. Since school dropout could potentially rob a nation of confident and well-groomed future leaders, an investigation of the school dropout phenomenon was deemed important, hence this study. It was also deemed important based on the assumption that the habit of dropping out might result in cultural degeneration and a relapse into illiteracy (Muchenje, 2012).

Education facilitates the mastery of knowledge and skills necessary for the young generation to become fully functioning members of their own societies, able to contribute meaningfully to their families, culture and the global world (Boakye-Boaten, 2009, p.1). Implied in this claim by Boakye-Boaten (2009) is the notion that premature school exit could pose a serious threat to the lives of the youth, particularly those growing up in sub-Saharan Africa (UNESCO, 2007). Informed by this claim, I deemed it particularly important to investigate the problem in the Zimbabwe context. I asked myself what would happen to a parent's expectations, a child's dreams, and the nation's goals if a child left school prematurely, with no meaningful academic qualification. According to Sleep (2010) societies with generations of learners who do not realise meaningful educational goals run the risk of recycling poverty. Bridgeland, Dilulio, and Morison (2006), as well as Ajaja (2012), echo this sentiment,

emphasizing the complexity and dangers associated with dropping out of school. According to Ajaja (2012, p.146), dropping out could result in those concerned facing insurmountable challenges in terms of the imperative for them to be able to function optimally, especially since current technologically-driven industries the world over need a workforce that possessed the advanced skills needed for industry to compete in an increasingly globalized world.

Related to the aforegoing arguments, the successful completion of Ordinary Level in Zimbabwe is usually considered as the opening of a door to further opportunities in life and a prerequisite for eligibility to meaningful employment. Since secondary school education is believed to offer so many benefits, it was important, through the present study, to gain an understanding of the reasons for the continuous dropout of school learners who are theoretically given the opportunity to complete school and, subsequently, to realize/achieve meaningful life goals.

2.3 Conceptualisation of School Dropout

My review of literature on the school dropout phenomenon presents secondary school dropout as a problem plaguing today's young people and the education system in many countries across the globe (Legault, Green-demers & Pelletier, 2006, p.579). There is growing evidence that the school dropout problem has persisted regardless of transformations that include social movements, efforts to improve graduation rates, other education reforms and even civil rights (Doll, Eslami & Walters, 2013, pp.2-13; Patrick, 2008). USAID (2011) reports that "the global state of education is poor as evidenced by dropout rates which have remained high, and very few learners, especially girls, make it to tertiary education" (p. 4). Carr-Hill (2012), in a review of studies on out-of-school children observed that at the time of the 2000 Dakar Education for All (EFA) conference, 125 million children were out of school. In 2008, approximately 115 million children were out of school worldwide. The definition and understanding of school dropout given so far seems to be tied to its prevalence as evidenced by available statistics and information on the impact this has on the lives of young people and the education system.

In the US, school dropout has been declared a crisis (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morison, 2006; Iachini, Buettner, Anderson-Butcher, & Reno, 2013). Statistical reports show that around 50%of learners who enrol in Grade 9 fail to make it to Grade 12 (Rumberger & Lim, 2008), with approximately 7,000 learners dropping out every day (Iachini et al.., 2013). Schools where less than 60% of learners fail to complete the course, have been coined "dropout factories" (American Psychological Association, 2012, p.1). Additional statistical evidence in the US example strengthens the inference that existing literature presents a biased view of school dropout as a problem which is based on its prevalence. While these

statistics are quite useful in understanding that even developed countries are not spared from the school dropout challenge, I argue that secondary data leave trails of unanswered questions. Figures alone may not be sufficient to understand why learners continue to leave school prematurely, more so when it has been established that it is dangerous to the individual and the system. I therefore, decided to look at this 'problem' through a different lens in this study, so as to gain a fuller understanding of the problem as such.

Premature school exit is quite pronounced in sub-Saharan Africa. Bettmann, Kilgore, Jeremiah, and Parry (2013) observe that the state of education is lamentable in many African countries, with 47% of children not attending school globally being in sub-Saharan Africa (see Figure 2.1).
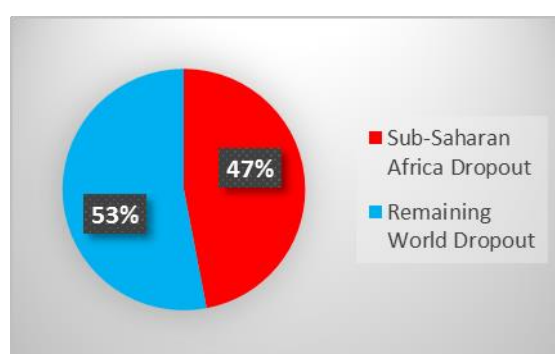
Figure 2.1: School dropout rate in sub-Saharan Africa

Source: Adapted from Bettmann, Kilgore, Jeremiah & Parry (2013)

Evidence of school dropout studies in Africa and, subsequently, in sub-Saharan Africa is significant. According to Bowers, Sprott and Taff (2013), school completion rates have since the 20th century improved from single digits to 89.9% recently. Bowers, Sprott and Taff (2013) further observe that, while countries have worked hard to institute education reforms and other social and cultural changes, premature school exit is still a problem in most education systems and seems to have persisted even where school completion rates have risen considerably. Bray (2003) also observe that, while developing countries have made great strides in expanding opportunities for the majority of school-going populations to access education, school performance as measured by school dropout and progression rates is quite discouraging. Other researchers add that "no African country is nearing universal secondary education despite concerted efforts and heavy investments channelled" in this respect (Sang, Koros & Bosire, 2013, p.248). The major reason for this is school dropout, a phenomenon which is militating against the efforts. Zionek-Daigle (2010) and Bowers et al., (2013) agree that a solution, if there is one, has not yet been found while, according to Mahapatra (2009),

the premature school exit crisis is worsening by the day, its extent and impact being beyond one's imagination.

In Uganda, for example, Muwagga, Itaaga, and Wafula (2013) report on a plethora of challenges related to achieving goals set in education. They cite school dropout rates, which they claim are "as high as nearly 50 per cent of enrolments in the primary school sector, the bigger number being girls" (p. 371). Muwagga, et al. 's (2013) study used a cross sectional survey design which targeted secondary sources of information such as District Education Officers, Schools Inspectors and parents. Methodology was predominantly quantitative. While the findings of Muwagga, et al. (2013) are useful in supporting the argument for my study in that school dropout is a challenge warranting research, the methodology falls short of capturing lived experiences of those who have dropped out of school, hence, the present study. In South Africa, according to Brown (2010), the number of youths who fail to complete secondary school is alarming, with 67% of them dropping out before Grade 12. Brown (2010) further explains that "those who drop out are usually thrice the number that fails Grade 12 every year" (p. 53).

A desk review by Zengeya (2011) in Zimbabwe between 1980 and 2004 provided a springboard for my intended study. The objective of Zengeya's study was to identify and analyse statistical data on enrolments within schools and colleges, using government publications and websites, with the aim of suggesting provisions for early school leavers at tertiary level. The results of Zengeya's (2011) study clearly indicate a progressive rise in the dropout percentages over the years. For example, the "dropout rate at grade seven in 1981 was at 41%. Dropout percentages then fluctuated between 1982 and 2004, the lowest being 23% in 1984 and the highest 60% in 2004. The average dropout rate in the reviewed period was 34%" (Zengeya, 2011, p.7). A similar pattern was recorded for Forms 1 to 4 within the same period (1980 – 2004). Zengeya further indicates that the dropout rate started at 14%, the lowest (8%) recorded in 1985, escalating to 25% in 2004. The average dropout rate for the period 1980 to 2004 was 24%. (See Figure 2.3 for an illustration of major milestones in secondary school dropout between 1980 and 2004.
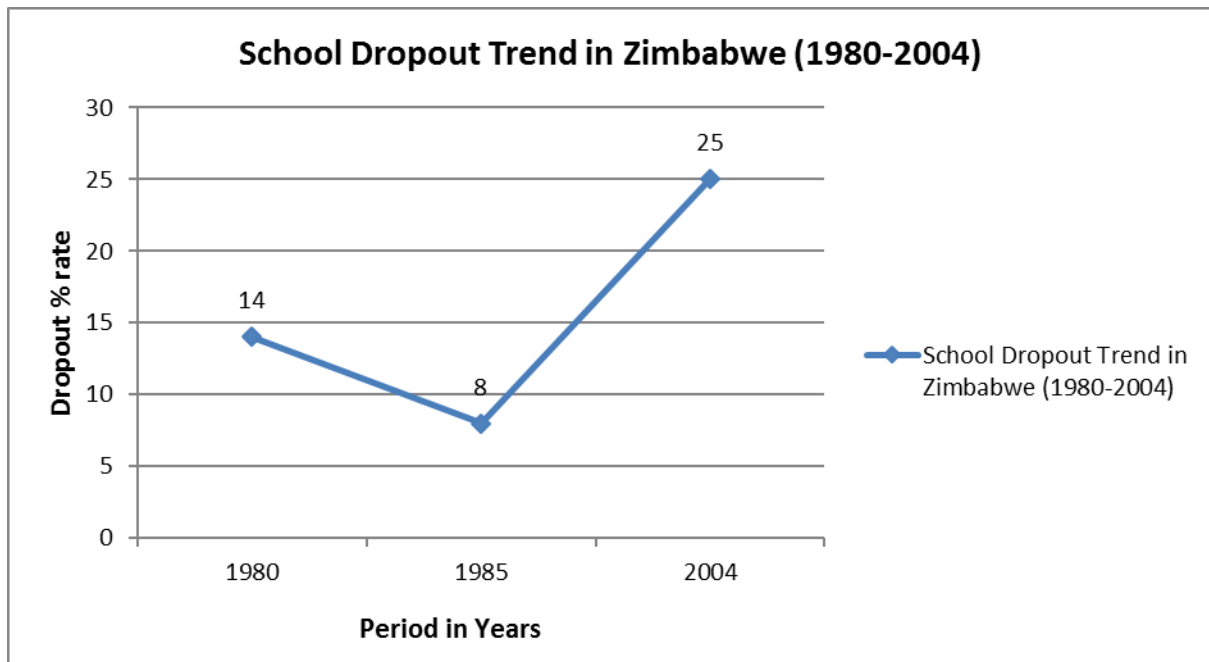
Figure 2.2: School dropout trend in Zimbabwe: 1980-2004

Source: Adapted from Zengeya (2011)

Zengeya's (2011) desk review paints a picture of the prevalence of the problem, indicating how it has developed over the years but, as is the case in the other field studies reviewed, did not investigate the process of dropping out, its impact on the individual lives of the EScLs, or their views on how the problem could be solved. This is what the present study entails. It is an in-depth study aimed at understanding not only the causes or prevalence of the problem but also the process, an aspect which I believed was more critical to the determination of solutions. The narrow focus of the field studies and the desk review alike was evidence of the fact that the area of pre-mature school exit in Zimbabwe was still under-researched, hence, the present study.

The facts presented here make it increasingly important to conduct research on school dropout, as the indicated prevalence suggests trouble. However, the understanding of the dropout problem seems to be coming from sources which exclude the people who have experienced the phenomenon, i.e. the EScLs. My contention is that the magnitude of the problem probably calls for a different perspective to define and interrogate its nature. Its persistence suggests that something is probably missing, hence the present study in which the focus is on the perspectives of EScLs. More specifically, hearing their voices was the focus of this study. Supporting my chosen focus is Rumberger's (2004) observation that there is great agreement in literature on the existence of a knowledge gap on the subject of school dropout and on the need to minimise or stop the behaviour, given its unpleasant consequences on the lives of individual victims, their families and societies. Rumberger (2004)

pertinently adds that researchers admit that serious problems in this area are yet to be examined and addressed.

2.4 Triggers of School Dropout: Pull, Push, Fall-out Factors

Many studies carried out across the globe indicate a wide array of reasons for learners dropping out of secondary school. These have been classified under three broad categories, namely push, pull and fall-out factors (Ananga, 2010: Brown, 2010; Doll et al. 2013; Lewin, 2009; Rumberger, 2011; Sigei & Tikoko, 2014). To illustrate the three factors, Knoff (2012, p.57), in a study in California on discipline, classroom management and learner self-management, established conditions at school, in the home environment, personal traits and economic contexts as some of the factors which lead to school dropout at secondary level. The results of Knoff's study were useful to the present study because, coincidentally, these issues are contained in the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) which I used as one of the theoretical frameworks for my study. The intention to dropout as illustrated by the TPB, is a product of attitude, subjective norms (expectations by significant people in the child's life) and perceived behavioural control (consequences of schooling). The TPB framework as well as Knoff's findings helped me to assess confirmations, contradictions and silences in the results generated by my study regarding reasons for school dropout. The TPB is fully discussed in the last section of this chapter**.**

Tied to the reasons for school dropout is the issue of agency. Doll et al., (2013) established that school dropout behaviour is linked to agency, a key element distinguishing the three factors from one another. Agency refers to either an individual or an institution being directly responsible for what could be happening in the immediate environment and the affected person (Doll et al., 2013). As to push factors, the school is usually labelled the agent that pushes the learner out, mostly due to the fact that the climate of the institution may not be favourable to the well-being of the learner (Doll et al, 2013; Rumberger, 2011). In the case of pull factors, the learner is usually viewed as the agent: he/she entertains certain attractions or distractions which eventually lure him/her out of school (Rumberger, 2004). Lastly, the agent of fall-out factors is believed to be neither the school nor the learner (Rumberger & Lim, 2008; Sigei & Tikoko, 2014). Doll et al. (2013) suggest that these factors are circumstantial: circumstances weaken the learner's bond with the school, leading to what is referred to as disengagement. The disengagement process is gradual, resulting in the learner eventually quitting schools. The push, pull and fall-out triggers are briefly discussed in the upcoming section.

2.4.1 Push factors. Brown (2010) defines push factors as dropout reasons usually generated by negative situations in a school which consequentially force a learner to

prematurely leave school. Situations like these include poor teaching methods, insensitive teachers, regular tests (which make learners feel unsafe or bad about poor grades), which constitute non-supportive physical and social learning environments because the school probably failed to provide an impetus for engagement in such activities. Other related issues include a lack of motivation from the side of the learner, which could lead to frustration, discontent and a lack of interest. According to Legault et al., (2006), a "lack of interest may arise if tasks given are too difficult, boring, tedious, routine and/ or irrelevant" (p. 369). Other situations include school hours which are too long, long walking distances to school, and harsh discipline policies, including hard corporal punishment, school rules that are too rigid, and threats of expulsion (Brown, 2010). Machingambi (2012) did a case study of two rural secondary schools in Masvingo district in Zimbabwe investigating school related factors that influenced school dropout. The study was designed as a survey because its focus was on the breath, not the depth, of the issues at stake. Findings highlighted poor relationships between teachers and learners, with teachers not seeming to be very concerned about learners' class progress. The major recommendation of the study was "the need to create positive learning climates and institute special programmes such as counselling" that would assist learners to receive emotional support on social concerns (Machingambi, 2012, p.62). My study identified and analyzed additional push factors presented by EScLs in terms of their particular school experiences.

Shadreck (2013), again in Zimbabwe, replicated Machingambi's focus in a study aimed at establishing school related factors that lead to school dropout behaviour, again in a rural district. While his methodology and results were similar to Machingambi's, Shadreck added geographical factors such as distance from school as school dropout causes. The focus of both studies was narrow, lacking in-depth analysis of the process of dropping out and perspectives of the early school leavers themselves, which was the focus of my study. Both also fail to suggest underlying causes of factors such as poor relationships and insensitivity of teachers. However, they were useful to me in that they provided me with baseline information about the causes of dropout behaviour notwithstanding the narrowness of these, thus further justifying my investigation.

Chugh (2011), who studied dropout rates at secondary school level in Delhi, found that schools did not respond positively to learners' special educational needs. Indicators included a lack of guidance and counselling, expectations that were too demanding, routine schooling, unclear career goals, social hostility - bullying, prejudices, exclusion, low levels of academic engagement, identity crises, a poor sense of belonging, insensitivity to learners' well-being and lack of recognition. Similar results were generated in a 2002 survey of 17-year old

Canadians conducted by Anisef, Brown, Phythian, Sweet, and Walters (2010). The survey indicated that 45% of those who had dropped out of high school attributed their premature school exit to school environments - sustained periods of disinterest in classes, difficulties with schoolwork, expulsion-related issues, low reading proficiency and persistent low achievement grades (high failure rate). Gtazek and Saraon (2007) argue, moreover, that the secondary school curriculum was not responsive to the needs of the majority of learners, especially those who were not academically oriented or university- bound. These findings were confirmed by Ramsay (2008, p.40), who also found that a lack of "motivation, interest and engagement" with existing curricula triggered attrition. While these studies, both of which were surveys, were conducted in different countries (India and Canada respectively), the issues reported in the results were similar. Also, both tended to generalise issues. My study is neither a survey nor an attempt to generate data which can be generalized. Rather, it is aimed at establishing the underlying causes of school dropout in a specific context – Zimbabwe - by allowing EScLs to share their experiences by telling me their individual 'dropout' stories. By means of their stories, I hoped to gain insights into their perspectives on the problem under investigation.

There is also evidence in literature that countries such as Kenya have worked hard to improve their school enrolment situation (Sigei & Tikoko, 2014; Chege & Sifuna, 2006). The Kenyan government, for example, enunciated a policy on free primary education in 2003, and has been subsidizing secondary school education since 2008 ((Bettmann et al., 2013). However, unforeseen problems arose from these initiatives: classes which were too large; limited/insufficient resources, and inadequate furniture, for example. "Cultural practices, gender disparity, sexual abuse and harassment, stereotyping, attitudes by teachers and parents" also contributed significantly to the problem (Bettmann et al., 2013, p. 67). Without any tuition demanded for primary day school attendance learners, especially girls, are still leaving school prematurely (Kibugi, Cheserek, Murgor, & Mutwol, 2013). According to Kibugi et al. (2013), studies found that learners either transferred to private schools or simply chose not to go back to school the next day. While transfers would not constitute school dropout in the context of my study, the issue suggests problems in the former school. Such problems probably add to the numerous ways in which school dropout has been triggered throughout the years in developing countries. One of the aims of my study is to compare the perspectives of participating EScLs with the Kenyan findings on school dropout triggers.

Observations by authorities suggest that school climate is a crucial/elemental push factor. According to Knoff (2012, p.57), it is the way learners "think, feel about their school, teachers, classroom interaction, social status within their peer group… and expectations for the future, short and long term" that shapes their school behaviour and success. Relatedly, Cohen, McCabe, Michelli, and Pickeral (2009) and Osman (2012) summarise the

characteristics of school climate as elements of the quality and character of school life, that is, the norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practice, organisational structure and psychological make-up of a particular school which distinguishes it from other schools. By implication, the responsiveness of both the social and physical environments to individual learners' needs and interests in a school is critical, as it can either attract or push out learners (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). To buttress the argument on the influence of school climate on learners' decision to stay or quit school prematurely, Brower and Keller (2006, p.104) argue that:

> *The teacher is a decisive element in the classroom. It is my personal approach that creates the climate. It is my daily mood that creates the weather. As a teacher, I possess that tremendous power to make a child's life miserable or joyous. I can be a tool of torture or an instrument of inspiration.*

From what literature established, it was critical, in my study, to investigate EScLs' views from their lived experiences of the climate that prevailed at their former schools. It was important to find out whether or not the school climate in any way influenced their decision to drop out. It was also pertinent to establish the relationship between the expectations of learners who ultimately drop out and the expectations of adults at the school (Knoff, 2012).

The issue of equity could also be categorised as a push out factor leading to school dropout. Wyness (2016) observes that many issues still need to be resolved concerning schooling and social class. Wyness (2016) notes with concern that while many countries have prioritised a rise in individual and economic well-being, material differences between groups of people in the same society have continued to widen. As a result, the situation of children, particularly in developing countries, has deteriorated significantly, and I note with concern that Zimbabwe has not been spared in this regard. Wyness (2016) argues, therefore, that policies meant to resolve inequalities in society, for example, seem to be failing as the gap between the rich and the poor gets wider and deeper. This observation, too, was critical to the present study as issues such as unemployment in Zimbabwe are on the rise, inflation has eroded the small incomes of the poor, the economy, generally, is failing, and corruption is taking its toll as schools charge exorbitant fees, far beyond the means of those coming from disadvantaged family backgrounds (Hadebe, 2013).

Great strides in providing education are noticeable across nations including Zimbabwe but, be that as it may, reducing the gap between the rich and the poor is still a challenge, making it difficult for learners from disadvantaged and / or low-income family backgrounds failing to complete school (Harkness, Gregg, & McMillan, 2012). Lastly, Wyness (2016)

believes that social class differences among learners are reinforced through the education system. It means that certain school demands, practices and policies may favour some learners at the peril of the others. EScLs' perspectives in the present study were expected to entail the extent to which issues of equity, as reflected in school policies and practices, contribute to school dropout in Zimbabwe. Their personal experiences, mostly targeted in this study, were important in that they describe real equity issues related to the school dropout problem.

2.4.2 Pull factors. Doll et al. (2013) describe pull factors as preoccupations in the learners' minds that divert them from completing school. Circumstances in the family or personal life of the learner may demand his/her participation and, as a result, pull him/her out of school to take up a specific responsibility. Examples of these include; a girl falling pregnant, financial problems, job-seeking, changes in the family - usually caused by illness or death (Ananga, 2010: Doll et al., 2013, p.2). Bronfenbrenner and Bronfenbrenner (2009) describe such cases as the negative influence of the micro-system on the life of an individual. In a US study, Rumberger and Lim (2008) found, for example, that seeking jobs, early parenthood, caring for ailing family members, disability and poverty typically resulted in premature school exit. Other studies (Bowers et al., 2013; Dahl, 2010) have shown that the societal and economic costs of high dropout rates in the US are quite huge, with young people concerned being likely to be prone to a reduced income and/or a scarcity of job opportunities thus, according to American Psychological Association (2012, p.6), they would require government assistance to sustain life.

Gray and Hackling (2009) too, found that learners may decide to drop out of school early after weighing the benefits of completing school against work and employment opportunities. In other words, if they feel that there is no likelihood of fulfilling their aspirations they might decide to leave school prematurely and pursue other avenues. Pulling out could also result from the combined influence of the micro-system (unfulfilling and negative school experiences) and exo-system (severe home and welfare problems ignited by the loss of income in the family). For example, Inglis (2013) found that learners at risk of dropping out of school in Western Cape schools in South Africa came from single- parent families, unstable and unemotionally available/ unsupportive families. In such cases, the learner is/feels exposed and drops out. In this regard, Gray and Hackling (2009) observe that the learners most affected by this are those who are already struggling to deal with disadvantage.

In a bid to understand the Zimbabwe situation, I included such factors as fulfilment of aspirations, gender, and socio-economic status (SES) for analysis in my study so as to establish how participating EScLs experienced the phenomenon and what their perspectives

were on what they define as pull factors. In a study with more or less the same purpose as mine, Makwinja-Morara (2009) conducted a case study with twenty-four female early school leavers in Botswana, targeting their experiences of and perceptions on the premature school exit phenomenon. Focusing on conditions which contributed to these learners dropping out, the value they ascribed to education, and the ways in which they viewed their homes, school life, communities in relation to early school exit, this study uncovered a range of causal factors: pregnancy, illness, death of a breadwinner (resulting in the inability to pay school fees), and lack of parental guidance (Makwinja-Morara, 2009). Also indicated in the study were that learners often dropped out because of clashes in their (youth) and adult (parents' and teachers') cultures. Lastly, the study found that the research participants attributed their decision to prematurely leave school to their fear of an uncertain future since opportunities for secondary school graduates in the job market seemed scarce.

One major similarity between Makwinja-Morara's study and mine was the methodological approach - a qualitative case study – we chose to use. Our studies were different, though, in that the research participants in Makwinja-Morara's (2009) study were teachers, school administrators, and learners still at school (i.e. they had not dropped out), while I targeted only EScls as research participants. This was a deliberate decision, based on my belief that, while everybody else's views on the phenomenon had been recorded, those of learners who had dropped out – the EScLs – had been ignored. I wanted to hear their voices which, I believed, would hold a clue to possible solutions to the dropout problem in Zimbabwe.

Also, having studied the school dropout phenomenon in general, Lewin (2009) adds as causal factors a list of out-of-school attractions: immediate life/money-earning opportunities, such as going to the diaspora, gold-panning, farming, family responsibilities, marriage opportunities, quick cash spinning and short cuts to life opportunities (grabbing, corruption, and abuse, for example). Admiration for the lifestyles of peers already out of school could also be an external attraction, as could reasons put forward by family members as to why one should rather quit school (Rumberger, 2004; Sigei, & Tikoko, 2014). Since all of these have the power to pull learners out of school, I supposed that they might relate to my study in one way or the other since determining what EScLs experienced as attractions, formed part of my study and was, in my view, important in the uncovering of new knowledge.

In Zimbabwe, Chinyoka (2014) examined the causes of school dropout with a view to suggesting measures and solutions that would promote the retention of learners until graduation. Participants were Form 4 learners and teachers from a farm resettlement area in Zimbabwe. Results identified factors such as poverty, child labour, broken families, drug abuse, early marriages and low self-motivation. Its major recommendation was that the

government should be persuaded to introduce poverty alleviation strategies. The weakness with Chinyoka's study is that it focused on secondary sources, eliminating the voices of those directly affected (EScLs). The focus of the study was also on causes only. My study, on the other hand, is broad in scope, thus facilitating a comprehensive view of the school dropout phenomenon.

From another perspective, studies have shown that poverty correlates with school dropout, particularly in developing nations (Ramsay, 2008; Sarker & Davey, 2009; Zionek-Diogle, 2010). Nandori (2011) argues that a person is poor when his/her income falls below the average wealth level of a given society. Learners situated in disadvantaged communities and/or in families with a low socio-economic status (SES) tend to leave school prematurely because they lack the requisite provisions for school completion. Concurring with Nandori (ibid), Ramsay (2008, p.40) cites economic incapacitation and the need to get immediate employment as primary reasons for attrition in high school. Dakwa, Chiome and Chabaya (2014) studied the poverty-related causes of school dropout among girl child learners in the Bikita district in Zimbabwe. Qualitative analysis was used and respondents were teachers and school heads. Factors included academic failure, gender-biased official and hidden curricula, long walking distances, unfair secondary school authority and power, cultural preferences for the boy child to be educated, household responsibilities and poverty. Recommendations included suggestions that gender-sensitive curricula and the promotion of equitable gender regimes should be considered. Shortcomings similar to Chinyoka's (2014) study are applicable to the Dakwa et al. (2014) study. Over and above this, it was gender-biased as it focused on the girl child only.

Two other studies in Zimbabwe, by Mawere (2012) and Mhizha and Muromo (2013), targeting girl- child school dropout prevalence yielded results very similar to those of Chinyoka, and Dakwa et al. The focus of all six these field studies (cited in the foregoing paragragh) was therefore relatively narrow. The worldview of those directly affected (EScLs) was not captured, lending credit to the present study, which focuses on the depth as opposed to the breadth of premature school exit issues from the perspectives of the EScLs themselves. The research designs used in the cited studies were predominantly descriptive surveys, using, by and large, quantitative methods of data collection. My study was different in that it was an in-depth inquiry, employing a qualitative research approach to data generation with a view to understand the school dropout phenomenon from those who have lived experiences of it.

Zimbabwe, as a nation, is characterised by poor families in all settings (rural, farm and urban). It is important to note, however, that poverty is a multiple-problem releaser, "an overarching motif for related factors such as …child pregnancies, hunger, and illness" (Brown,

2010, p.55). Implied in Brown's claim is the notion of poverty as a broad social construct. Specific issues related to poverty, which constituted the direct and conscious experiences of the EScLs participating in the present study, were a matter of concern and, therefore, needed exploring. In this study, although I treated poverty as a presenting case, it was not a focus of my investigation: I analysed the underlying causes of poverty merely to find out whether they were in any way, according to EScLs' perspectives, related to their reasons for dropping out of school in Zimbabwe.

Associated with the issue of poverty is the need to understand the 'pull out role' played by families. Mhele and Ayiga (2013) view the role of the family as fundamental in child-rearing issues. Relationships amongst family members, as well as between individual children and adults in the family, may impact significantly on children's behaviour. Disruptions in relationships, such as family ties, also tend to destabilise learners, with teenagers being particularly sensitive to sudden or abrupt changes in relationships (Ream & Ramberger, 2008). According to Coleman and Hagell (2007), there seems to be a great deal of disruption in young people's lives in today's world - loss of significant people in young people's through death, divorce or separation. Ream (2005) agrees, adding that changes to family structure are aggravated by stressful events such as death and illness as such situations can be devastating, increasing the vulnerability of the children who are affected by them. Moreover, the mobility of adults around children potentially increases the odds of the latter dropping out of school. Disruptions in families may also result in shattered networks of security and love (Coleman & Hagell, 2007; Ream, 2005), making young people feel insecure and exposed. Without proper guidance, they are likely to make abrupt, unguided and, therefore, regrettable decisions, like prematurely dropping out of school in pursuit of external attractions like jobs and marriage.

More evidence on pull out factors is found in Doll et al.'s (2013) study which analysed seven national studies in the US on responses by dropouts in terms of the push, pull, and fall-out frameworks. The purpose of the study was "to determine the most prominent reasons for the prevalence and implications of dropout scholarship in the past, present and future" (p. 131). The findings of these seven studies provided me with insights that were important to my study; hence I could check my findings against theirs in the final analysis. What Doll et al. (2013) found, was that it was pull factors which were mostly responsible for school dropout from 1955 to the 80s, with jobs and family historically constituting the most significant pull factor. Since then, according to Doll et al. (2013), citing a 2002 longitudinal study, push factors seem to have increased, having risen to at least 48.7% at the time of the study. Issues related

to relationships in school environments also featured more regularly than in the past, including learners finding it difficult to get along with their peers and/or teachers (Doll et al., 2013, p.13).

The statistical data contained in the quantitative desk review carried out by Doll et al. is impressive, clearly indicating the seriousness and scope of the problem. It is my contention, however, that statistics do not paint the full picture. An in-depth, holistic understanding of the problem, according to me, can only be gained through qualitative research because it allows researchers to listen to life stories, to probe deeper and deeper until they uncover the whole picture. Also, the data cited in the review are old - the longitudinal study was conducted in 2002 – and, since life is dynamic, need reviewing. Hence my decision to embark on a qualitative study of the factors influencing/causing premature school dropout as experienced by the EScLs themselves.

The analysis that I make of Doll, et al.'s (2013) survey is that the results are silent on possible underlying causes. I therefore support Ajaja's (2012, p.147) view that much of the research on this problem has focused too much on surface issues (reasons, effects and remedies) rather than on the roots of the problem. My study goes beyond these surface issues in that I derive my data from primary data sources – EScLs themselves – in order to uncover the roots of their reasons for prematurely dropping out of school. Informing my choice of EScLs as the only data source was the assumption that the real reasons they dropped out – i.e. the root causes of the problem – would be embedded in their direct experience of the phenomenon.

I also noted that the surveys carried out by Bridgeland et al., (ibid) and Doll, et al. (ibid) lacked in-depth analysis of issues, primarily because of the nature of their research designs. It was to start the process of closing this gap that I decided to use specific qualitative methods; ones that would help me capture the perspectives of EScLs on what they thought the causes of school dropout in Zimbabwe were. Another reason was that, although I planned to use the results of the Doll, et al. (ibid) survey for comparative purposes, I did not, as they did, target different categories of participants. Whereas their research subjects were teachers and administrators, my research participants were past learners who had prematurely dropped out of school, mostly because their views/'voices' were absent from the Doll et al. study.

The point of departure for my study was therefore to focus on the people who had directly lived the experience of dropping out of school. Moreover, I wanted to know, not what other researchers thought the solution to the school dropout problem could be but what, based on their collective and individual direct experiences of the problem, the EScLs thought the solutions might be.

2.4.3 Fall-out factors. Doll, et al. (2013) also identified fall-out factors, referring to instances in which the learner is not forced or lured out by anything outside school, but drops out because he/she fails to cope or fit into the culture of the school due to his/her particular individual characteristics. In such cases, the learner continues to gradually disengage from school activities, dissociating him/herself and ultimately falls out. Disengagement is usually marked by high absenteeism, the skipping of classes, late-coming and/or late attendance of classes, talking negatively about school, avoiding participation in school activities or finding it hard to adjust to school routine (Rumberger, 2011). Fall-out factors could, thus, be viewed as either a lack of 'personal educational support' or the side effects of push-out and/or pull-out factors (Doll, et al., 2013, p. 293). Constituting factors like these, according to Green and Winters (2005), are typically either personality traits - short-sightedness/lack of vision – and/or personal principles which impact negatively the learner's school achievements and life outcomes. Sigei and Tikoko (2014) add that the learner ultimately gives up hope of completing school mainly because they lack intrinsic motivation and/or because they do not see significant progress in their schoolwork. In sharing their lived experiences of school dropout with me during the course of my study, EScLs would be providing me with data which would either confirm or reject the claims made by the afore-mentioned researchers.

Bridgeland, et al. (2006) carried out a survey to establish the causes of school dropout among 15 to 16-year old early school leavers in twenty-five different locations throughout the USA. In the sense that the study was aimed at getting a more in-depth picture of the characteristics of those who had dropped out, to determine why they had left school prematurely and to ascertain what could have been done to keep them in school until graduation, this study was very similar to mine. The research findings of this study indicate that predictors of school dropout which ranked high on the list of dropout causes/reasons included "uninteresting classes, (47%): having missed many days therefore unable to catch up (43%); spending time with people not interested in school (42%)' too much freedom, and not many rules in life (38%), and failing at school (35%)" (Bridgeland, et al, 2006, pp.3-9). While this study focused on EScLs, data collected was statistical thus, according to my earlier reasoning, lacked depth as regards the analysis of dropout causes, a gap that I attempt to address by means of my study, To this purpose, I opted to do qualitative case study research - the case being a group of EScLS in Zimbabwe – using qualitative data collection methods (interviews and life story writing) to gain an in-depth understanding of their school dropout experiences.

Ramsay (2008, p.37) observes that Australian governments have, for a quarter of a century, been trying to find the means to minimize premature school exit "so that more young

people are retained" and successfully finish secondary education. One of the reasons established by research in Australia was that secondary schools had not been addressing the needs of learners, particularly those who were non-university bound (Ramsay, 2008). Consequently, 30% of learners in Australia would drop out before completing Grade 12 (Ramsay, 2008; Rumberger, 2004). Other contributing factors were similar to those in the US: gender, low socio-economic status, cultural status (being non-English, for example), and poor school achievement grades.

Similarly, Gray and Hackling (2009), in a study of metropolitan schools in Western Australia, established premises on which to base their measurement of learners' wellbeing at secondary school and to determine how these premises relate to the general retention of learners in school. The study enabled them to identify three key factors that influence learners' decision to leave school prematurely. The first of these was that learners' perception of the school culture plays a critical role. Based on this finding, Gray and Hackling (2009) argue that learners are concerned about the extent to which school culture meets their academic, social, emotional and aspirational needs. Satisfaction with the way in which their needs are met thus becomes a key indicator of their well-being, hence affecting their decision whether or not to remain in school. The second finding of this study was that learners' engagement in school activities, both in and outside the classroom, reflects the extent of their sense of belonging to the school. Their level of engagement therefore influences the value they place on schooling and, by implication, whether this value warrants staying on. The third, and last, finding was the "the definition that learners give to a supportive school culture … in turn, facilitates the level of engagement, (which) shows the level of the sense of belonging that learners carry" (Gray & Hackling, 2009, p.122).

I viewed the efforts and measures taken in Australia as evidence of the prevalence and complexity of the school dropout problem. Examples of studies conducted in other/different countries justify the investigation of school dropout as a real problem, thus making my study not only relevant but also important in terms of the contribution it could make to the field of educational research. Global research provided evidence that school dropout is not an issue in Zimbabwe alone but definitely a cause of concern across the globe. What I needed to establish in my study, however, was whether or not the findings of these study, i.e. the facts established regarding the reasons for premature school exit, were applicable to the Zimbabwean situation. To this purpose, the focus of my study was the investigation of the process, nature of impact, and solutions to school dropout from participating victims' points of view.

Given the focus and purpose of my study, the significance of the three factors established by Gray and Hackling lies in the fact that I analysed the school, with its features, as part of a micro-system which interacts with the learner (Bronfebrenner, 2005). Aspects such as school culture, level of engagement and responsiveness are of interest in my analysis of EScLs' responses to determine whether or not they contribute to school dropout in Zimbabwe. Capturing EScLs' school experiences in my study was, thus, important to the generation of first-hand information/data. Gray and Hackling (2009, p. 121) observe that, despite evidence that the prevalence of the school dropout is a global problem, including developed countries, "there is little research targeting the youths that drop out of school to explain possible causes and solutions from their point of view". Instead, there is a growing body of research focusing on school retention, mainly focusing on institutional and socio-economic factors that have a bearing on high school completion (Gray & Hackling, 2009).

Furthermore, USAID (2011) posits that "the global state of education is poor as evidenced by dropout rates which have remained high and very few learners especially girls make it to tertiary education" (p. 4). UNESCO, however, has repeatedly called for reduction of "school wastage by addressing inequity and creating transition strategies from one level of education to another" (UNESCO, 2014, pp. 34-35). By so doing, various forms of attrition are addressed, of which school dropout is one. From a global point of view, as indicated earlier, the reasons for school dropout are wide-ranging, covering socio-economic, cultural and religious wrangles. These reasons sound complex and needed unpacking. Thus, I decided to limit my investigation to Zimbabwe; more specifically, to conduct an in-depth qualitative analysis of the perspectives of ESLs' in Zimbabwe on prevailing school dropout behaviour.

Overall, determining the perspectives of EScLs on school dropout factors (push, pull and fall-out) in my study is essential if I am to understand not only what it is that constitutes the school dropout phenomenon in Zimbabwe but also how it happens. It is not possible, however, to exhaust the literature on reasons for school dropout. Having looked at triggers of school dropout, I regard it as important at this point to note that, while researchers have to date identified many reasons for dropping out, the underlying causes are glaringly absent: they have not been documented anywhere, and neither have they been registered as constituting a critical knowledge gap on the problem in literature (Rumberger & Lim, 2008). It, therefore, implies that current literature has partially addressed my second research question which sought to establish what EScLs in Zimbabwe describe as triggers of school dropout. One of the reasons for this state of affairs, according to Rumberger and Linn, is that the underlying causes of school dropout may not be easy to identify because of the range of contexts/ sources involved: peer group, family, school and community. Relationships issues,

as well as the physical conditions of the different contexts in which the learner is situated must be understood first since they may affect learners' decision to stay on or drop out of school. These issues point to the observation by Bridgeland et al. (2006) and Doll et al. (2013) that school dropout is a complex phenomenon, with ripple effects occurring at various levels of life and on different groups of people.

In this study, I therefore sought to interrogate the school dropout phenomenon from the perspectives of EScLs. In doing so, I hoped to provide those interested in the problem with the perspectives of individuals affected by the phenomenon rather than with perspectives gained from the use of secondary sources. Justifying my decision are research findings from across the globe that it is important to target primary sources - EScLs in this case - because their views have seldom, if ever, been investigated although what they have to say might be very different from those held by schools, families, or even, learners at risk (Makwinja-Morara, 2009**).**

2.5 Dropping Out: Process or event?

The discussion under triggers of early school leaving suggests that learners are either pulled or pushed out or, in certain cases, simply fall out. Be that as it may, dropping out of school, according to Finn (2005), Bridgeland et al. (2006), is never sudden, nor can it be viewed as an event. According to Finn (2005) and Bridgeland, et al (2006), there seems to be a pattern (or a pathway) to dropping out of school, one characterised by erratic school attendance patterns and other types of behaviour which are early signs/signals of disengagement (Rudduck & Fielding, 2006). Specific observations by Bridgeland et al. (2006, pp. 8-9) include refusing to wake up in the morning, extending lunchtime, missing classes and truancy. While research studies prior to those by Finn (2005) and Rumberger and Lim (2008) did not clearly explain the the process of premature school exit, they do include observations which provided me with useful directions towards first establishing, and then closing the knowledge gap related to the premature dropping out of school process.

Finn (2005) points out that continuous failure in class, for instance, is an antecedent to withdrawal/dropout. Initially causing low self-esteem, it ultimately manifests in problem behaviours. Non-participation in school activities is another signal of potential withdrawal/dropout, gradually leading to less and less identification with the institution, a process which affects the learner emotionally and behaviourally because he/she longs for, but has no company. Finn's observations were particularly critical to my study since I endeavoured to establish the process of dropping out. During data generation, I asked direct and explicit questions seeking about this process: when the EScL started thinking about dropping out; how it all started, and what could possibly have triggered the idea. Based on Finn's (2005)

observations, the purpose of my study was to understand, from the EScLs' perceptions, features of school which they believe directly influence learners' participation and identification with their schools, failing which they tend to fall out.

Similarly, Ramberger and Lim (2008) in the US reviewed 203 published studies which analysed data collected at local, state and national levels. The aim was to identify statistically significant predictors of school dropout and graduation. One of the key findings was that experiences in the elementary school may affect attitudes, behaviours and performance later in secondary school. Ramberger and Lim (2008) also observe that an individual's characteristics, especially during early adolescence, mark the beginning of a downward trend which may result in academic failure, which inevitably lead to the learner leaving school prematurely. Adolescent learners are also believed to be prone to test/examination anxiety, resulting in school grades declining and interest and intrinsic motivation diminishing.

Based on their study, Ramberger and Lim (2008) conclude that school dropout is the culmination of experiences over a long time, suggesting, once again, that it is a process rather than an event. The study does not, however, include any evidence supporting this claim. It means while there has been some effort in attempting to answer my third research question on what entails the process of dropping out of school, the specific experiences and steps followed are not explicit. This further justifies the importance of my study as it sought to establish how the EScLs in the study went through the process as they would narrate personal experiences. Rumberger (2011), too, argues that dropping out is the final stage of a process which starts at some point in the learner's school life. In my study EScLs were required to describe their experiences, including activities and specific events to enable me to test not only these claims but also Bronfenbrenner's (2005) contention that behaviour is always influenced by experiences. By implication, school dropout behaviour, the focus of my study, should also be influenced by learner experience. More specifically, my argument was that negative interactions between the learner and the institutions (micro-system) surrounding the youths are likely to form part of the process of dropping out of school. It was to test these claims, and the validity of my argument, that I decided to collect data on the behaviour of the EScLs participating in my study.

Important to my study was the collection of data on participating EScLs views regarding the mechanisms typically used to groom youths – including the parenting styles to which they were exposed – since I believed that such data would enhance my understanding of the dropout phenomenon in Zimbabwe. My research was, thus, a well-placed attempt to fill existing gaps in knowledge about the process of dropping out, based on the perspectives of EScLs. This was one of the key objectives of my study.

41

2.6 Consequences of Dropping out

Early school leaving seems to have far-reaching consequences, both at individual and systemic levels, according to previous studies (Bridgeland et al., 2006; Gray & Hackling, 2009). The specific impact it had at each of these levels is discussed in the sub-sections constituting this section.

2.6.1 Consequences at individual level. Levin (2005) posits that the adverse effects of dropping out at the individual level seem to permeate every aspect of the life of the person concerned. Elaborating on Levin's (ibid) observation, Bridgeland et al. (2006) claim that premature school exit also tends to impede the person's potential to advance educationally and, consequentially, to utilise available job opportunities. The arguments put forward by Levin (2005) and Bridgeland et al. (2006) are supported by Gray and Hackling (2009) who, in a study conducted in Australia, focused on attempts to measure the impact that learners' social connectedness had on their success in school completion. What they found was that learners who were unable to secure a secondary school certificate usually experience challenges in securing well-paying and/or stable jobs, thus not only having to cope with prolonged periods of unemployment but also being unable to contribute meaningfully to their communities (Gray & Hackling, 2009). In the present study, I needed to understand the overall impact of dropping out by determining what the EScLs in my research sample regarded as the post-school consequences of their school 'dropout status'.

2.6.2 School dropout and the psychological well-being of youth. Not much has to date been either documented or empirically researched regarding the relationship between premature school dropout and the psychological well-being of learners. Brown (2010) points out that research is yet to establish whether there is a clear relationship between school dropout and the psychological development of learners. Margolis and McCabe (2006), while not directly addressing the issue of school dropout, contend that struggling learners who might end up dropping out of school usually display minimal/low self- efficacy: they tend to quickly give up on tasks they think they cannot do and ultimately succumb to self-fulfilling prophecies of failure. I used Margolis' and McCabe's observation as point of departure in my attempt to gain an in-depth understanding of the relationship between participating EScLS post-dropout experiences and their self-efficacy as well as their self-concept and self-esteem, the latter two being critical to personality development and school performance. According to Maslow (1968), a human being is a wanting being, whose self-actualizing tendencies which drive, or spur him on, to satisfy certain needs, the satisfaction of which contributes to his/her self-actualization. Carl Rogers, concurring with this claim, adds that hmans have a unique self-concept; they need to have a positive view of themselves if they were to achieve the goals they set for themselves (Rogers, 1983).

While Rogers did not refer directly to school dropout, his argument that "psychological discomfort, anxiety and mental disorder can result when the feelings that people experience or express are incongruent with their true feelings," makes sense in the context of the present study (Bernstein, 2011, p.443). Informing this study is my assumption that participating EScLs prematurely dropped out of school due to a sense that the life they were living was at odds with the way in which they wanted and/or expected to live. Using Roget's argument about the congruence and incongruence of experience and emotion/feeling was important to my attempt to determine the impact that dropping out of school had on learners' lives as individuals.

2.6.3 Consequences at systemic level. Communities have not been spared by the effects of early school leaving. Bridgeland et al. (2006) and Nelson (2006) agree with one another that if learners continued to leave school prematurely, society would be left without educational and professional role models for future generations of young people. Such a situation has the potential to create dangerous communities typified, according to Nelson (2006), by high levels of crime, idleness and a dependency syndrome. Moreover, it is likely that peer pressure, as a pull factor, could draw even more teenagers out of school. The likelihood of this happening is supported by arguments that the academic school curriculum, examinations and compulsory schooling culture do not usually connect with many children's everyday lives. As a result, they respond to the immediate influence exerted from the street and community where alternative role models are found, hence they leave school prematurely (Evans, 2004; Wyness, 2016). The end result is the 'recycling' of poor communities, due to what Nelson (2006) calls the intergenerational effect on families and communities, that is, the children of early school leavers also prematurely dropping out of school due to the absence/non-existence of alternate role models in their immediate environments. In the present study, I, therefore, also had to determine how EScLs believed the dropout phenomenon had affected families and the wider community in Zimbabwe and what they thought could be done to break these cycles.

Dahl (2010) who researched issues related to early/ teen marriages in the USA found strong correlations between early marriages, school dropout, child labour and future poverty. He established that the majority of victims of early and unplanned marriages and/or teen mothers were early school leavers who might end up in child labour and perpetual poverty because of their limited access to resources. The situation becomes a vicious circle as more and more of them drop out and join the queue. Dahl's (2010) observations clearly illustrate the ripple effect of premature school exit. In seeking to establish the impact of school dropout at systemic level in Zimbabwe as viewed by the EScLs participating in my study, I, therefore, analysed their experiences against Dahl's (2010) findings.

Sang, Koros and Bosire (2013), focusing on education in Kenya, found that its education system is faced with challenges related to internal efficiency. More specifically, they found that the extent to which Kenyan education yields the kind of results expected to benefit individuals and their societies was questionable with wastage being prevalent at all levels of the system but particularly at secondary education level. Their study, aimed at analysing dropout levels at public secondary schools found that the level most affected by this phenomenon was Form 2, which constitutes the 'peak' level / stage of education" for most adolescents (Sang et al., 2013, p. 251). They ascribe departure at this point of learners' education to 'adolescence' which, according to them is typified by "premarital pregnancies, peer influence, indiscipline and early marriages" (ibid:251). They also found that dropout rates in Kenyan secondary education, in 2003, for instance, were as high as 17.8% for girls and 6.1% for boys (Sang, et al., 2013), creating wastage, straining/eroding the education budget, and, thus, complicating enrolment forecasts and teacher supply plans. My study, also conducted in an African country (Zimbabwe), was therefore also aimed at determining whether or not the EScLs in my research sample would describe the impact of the school dropout problem there in a similar fashion.

Having noted the emphasis on resources, curricular type and teaching styles as factors contributing to school dropout in Kenya, Bettmann, et al. (2013) point to the seemingly absence of peer-reviewed literature on the Kenyan situation. Informed by their observation and the findings of other studies on education in Kenya, aspects related to the Kenyan situation form part of the concerns pursued in my study. Not only did a consideration of these assist my checking of the extent to which these aspects feature in the responses of my EScLs participants, it also helped me to establish whether or not there was anything unique about the school dropout phenomenon in Zimbabwe, particularly as responses reflected the direct experiences of participating EScLs. At this point, I, therefore, reflected on two questions: How do early school leavers in Zimbabwe conceptualise school dropout?
What do EScLs in Zimbabwe articulate as triggers of school dropout? These questions would assist me to compare and contrast initiatives and challenges faced by Kenya with those of Zimbabwe. In asking these questions, I assumed, I could stimulate a discussion on issues such as free or subsidised education amongst participating EScLs.

2.7 Mitigating the School Dropout Problem

The numerous consequences of school dropout discussed require attention. Several studies have proffered strategies to mitigate the school dropout challenge. The discussion that follows analyses some of the inquiry-based factors namely; supportive school experiences, the value of recognition, threats versus discipline and policy pathways.

2.7.1 The role of supportive, quality, purposeful experiences. Gray and Hackling (2009), having asked themselves why learners should continue to go to school if their lives are not changing for the better, contend that a key issue in this regard is learners' lack of identification with school. This issue, according to them, should therefore be a key feature of attempts to stem school dropout. Several other theorists agree with them that the extent to which learners identify with school and/or feel that they 'belong' there, determines the value they attach to school, schooling and related outcomes. Affecting these attitudes to school and schooling are trust relationships within the school, that is, learners' relationship with teachers, peers and school managers (Fisher & Khine, 2006; Gray & Hackling, 2009). In the context of my study, I hoped that participating EScLs might proffer suggestions related to their school environment as one of their 'situated' contexts (Bronfenbrenner, 2005).

Bridgeland et al. (2006), in a US study on strategies aimed at curbing school dropout, collected numerous responses from learner participants in this regard. Eighty-one per cent (81%) of the respondents argued for improved teaching, and curricula that were engaging and relevant to everyday life. According to Bridgeland et al. (ibid), it was clear from the results that unless learners saw a connection between having gone to school and getting a satisfying job/ employment, going to school became purposeless. Bettmann et al. (2013) add that school needs to provide more opportunities for real world learning. Issues of culture and relevance also came into play, informed by the argument that too much foreign material might not be useful as some learners would never use the information derived from it in their future lives (Bridgeland et al., 2006; Sweeten, 2006). The present study, thus, needed to check whether or not issues of curriculum were of concern to the EScL participants.

Another observation by the researchers was that, in many cases, "parental involvement came in too late when the learner had already lost opportunities or was in trouble" (Bridgeland et al., 2006, p.9). In rating the level of consultation with significant people before dropping out, Bridgeland et al. (2006) found that "47% respondents did not tell their parents when they either dropped or intended to drop out of school. The respondents also never contacted their school when they were absent" (pp. 11-13). These findings were important for my study as they helped me to analyse EScLs' responses and establish whether issues related to communication with adults in their lives surface as part of their suggested solutions. The Bridgeland et al. findings also coincide with the issue of decision-making in dropping out, where I used the subjective norm principle in Ajzen's theory of planned behaviour. It was important to my study to establish whether or not EScLs had consulted the significant people in their lives (Ajzen, 2012) on their decision to drop out and, if so, to what extent they did so.

According to Reeve (2013), learner engagement is critical in determining one's decision to drop out of school or stay on. Reeve advances three dimensions of learner engagement in school - behavioural, emotional and cognitive - as important to keep learners focused and ultimately working towards completing school to achieve school outcomes. Behavioural engagement entails the learner's effort to physically attend classes, attention and persistence. Emotional engagement relates to the kind of emotions and ability needed to manage the emotions the learner shows during interactions with people around him/her. Cognitive engagement refers to the use of different learning strategies employed by the learner in the learning process (Reeve, 2013). I notice from Reeve's (2013) study that engagement is a distinct, relatively new, educational construct. In this model, positive learning outcomes are deemed to be the result of unfolding reciprocal processes between the teacher and the learner, that is, what learners do to transform what teachers do, and vice versa. Reeve's observation tallies with/clarifies Bronfenbrenner's (2005) argument that there is a symbiotic relationship between human being and his/her environment, that the environment affects the individual while, in turn, the individual influences what happens in the environment. The relationship is, thus, reciprocal (Bronfenbrenner & Bronfenbrenner, 2009). My awareness of the foregoing statements informed and enhanced my analysis of the causes of school dropout and of the views of the EScLs on what should be done to solve the dropout situation based on their former school experiences.

2.7.2 A sense of belonging. Gray and Hacking (2009) contend that there has not been research to date on the specific features of secondary school culture that speak about learners' perceptions of what they regard as positive, purposeful and productive school experiences. Gray and Hacking (2009) therefore believe that there is an imperative to construct an understanding of school cultures, systems and curricula which promotes the well-being and retention of learners at school. In this regard, I hoped that my study would help to fill this gap that finding out from EScLs what their experiences of school culture were would generate new insights on the effect that school culture had on the learners' well-being and sense of belonging. Put differently, it was important to my study to find out what EScLs in the sample regarded as positive and purposeful experiences in secondary school life which might reduce school dropout.

Indications from American-based experiences reported by Barile, Donohue, Anthohy, Baker, Weaver, and Henrich (2012, pp.257-258**)** are that "school policies that allow learners to evaluate their teachers' performance have been proven to have the capacity to improve teacher-learner relationship and learner engagement in school". This confirmed what Cook-Sather (2007) had found earlier. Barile et al. (2012) further observe that positive learner-

teacher relationships help develop in learners a sense of belonging, thereby fostering engagement and ultimately achievement and graduation. Related to this, Viero, Perkins, Smith, and Santinello (2005) found, in a study in Italy, that learners involved in school activities such as making school rules and organising school events felt more connected to school as they felt a sense of ownership. Implied in this finding is that the more learners have a voice in matters that affect them, the more they engage in school (Barile, et al., 2012). In addition, Barile et al. (2012, p.264) argue that "learners with warm, caring and supportive teachers regard this as compensating for the difficult academic school experience", this being especially true in the case of struggling learners. They also found that giving learners an opportunity to evaluate their teachers helps the learners to believe that their teachers value what they think, thus improving their relationships and reinforcing a sense of belonging. The findings here were to be compared with what EScLs believed could be done to effectively address the dropout phenomenon in relation to what Barile et al. (2012) and Viero, Perkins, Smith, & Santinello (2005) found in their studies on the phenomenon.

2.7.3 Recognition and the value of consultation with learners. According to Ramsay (2008), recognition involves care and commitment. Ramsay (2008) argues that learners may decide to drop out of school due to a lack of recognition, hence the need to consider it as a means of minimizing dropout behaviour. Ramsay (2008) posits that dropout behaviour may be triggered by the fact that "learners' views are not necessarily consistent with schools'/adults' views" which is the reason the current study targeted learners who have lived experiences of the phenomenon (p. 44). The absence of the learners' voices in matters relating to their welfare and learning is an issue of concern in the present study. It means learners, especially those at secondary school level, need to be consulted on issues relating to their educational and social needs (Cook-Sather, 2007).

Related to the issue of recognition are the views of Coleman and Hagell (2007), Shoda, Cervone, and Downey (2007), who argue that issues of respect for and acceptance of learners' feelings are critical to reducing school dropout rates. Shoda et al. (2007) argue that sometimes defiance among learners could be a sign of deep problems with school authorities. To them, explicit communication, which included an open-door policy on issues related to learners' welfare and general schooling, is imperative. These issues were critical to my study. They were to be examined from the EScLs' point of view on the role that the recognition of learners at their former schools played and whether they thought it could help to address the dropout situation in Zimbabwe.

Coleman and Hagell (2007) observed, moreover, that if secondary school learners are always reminded about their failures, it makes them focus more on their weaknesses and/or

disregard their strengths. Closely related to the issue of adult attitude towards a learner's ability, Coleman (2011) posits that, because adolescence is characterised by psycho-social challenges, the way adults respond to the teenagers' needs at this age becomes critical. Again, Whitty and Wisby (2007) observe that during adolescence learner involvement in school decision-making where learner voices are not merely incorporated but given power, yields positive results. They argue that learners, in such cases, tend to express positive ideas because they are treated with courtesy and respect. If they are directly involved in the organisation of their learning they are "more engaged, hence, see reasons for staying on" (Whitty & Wisby, 2007, p. 685). By implication, classroom climate and the nature of learner-teacher relationships have a bearing on issues of trust and commitment (Pearson, 2012). These issues were important to my study as I used them to determine whether or not similar ideas were expressed in EScLs' views on potential solutions to the dropout problem.

Similarly, Thompson (2009) carried out a study in the East Midlands of England, whose aim was to explore the importance of secondary school teachers consulting with learners on the curriculum in order to fight school dropout. Issues at stake included the level of participation, engagement and ownership of learning. The target age group was eleven to eighteen-year old learners and their teachers. As part of the methodology, learners were allowed to evaluate their own learning. Results indicated that learners' voice was important to meaningful engagement in school. Mutual respect and trust between teachers and learners enhanced retention as learner's felt they belonged (Thompson, 2009, pp. 677- 678). Teachers thus become gatekeepers of children's voices; the quality of teachers' mediation determining the form in which the voices may or can be expressed. The central issue in Thompson's study, namely recognition of the learner's voice, is also critical to my study in the sense that, by analysing EScLs responses, I could see how much they valued the issue of recognition as a solution to the dropout problem in Zimbabwe.

2.7.4 Threats and punishment versus discipline. Brower and Keller (2006, p.18) advance claims related to the use of threats and punishment versus discipline, defining threat as "an act of power over another person" and punishment as "an action carried out against another person". They believe threats and punishment should never be used in schools or homes as they are detrimental to personality-building. Coaxing, nagging, cajoling result in children feeling threatened and incompetent, thus should be avoided. Discipline should be preferred, because it allows a child to understand and be able to distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable behaviour through reflection, which is a critical mental skill.

Contrary to threats and punishment, discipline is characterized by healthy, positive, clean, logical, rational and consistent action (Brower & Keller, 2006, p.19). These were

important elements to pursue in my study because corporal punishment was common at schools in Zimbabwe in the past decades, until a policy was enacted to protect learners (Secretary's Circular, No. p 35). The influence of corporal punishment on school dropout was, therefore, also to be analyzed in my study. Brower and Keller (2006) conclude that it should be appreciated that punishment is counterproductive to teacher-learner relationships and can prompt negative feelings leading to school dropout.

2.7.5 Policy pathways. Some problems related to school dropout at secondary school level have implications for policy. Bridgeland et al. (2006) argue, for example, that different schools have different types of learners, therefore the principle of 'one size fits all does not work'. As a solution to school dropout, Bridgeland et al. (2006) posit that it is important to develop options for learners that suit their environment, culture and job opportunities. They proceed to say that there is a need to set up early warning systems at schools and education offices in order to identify and trace absenteeism and institute strong remedial programmes. Programmes for special needs learners are also important so that all categories of learners are adequately catered for (Bridgeland et al., 2006). The EScLs' responses to research question number 5 in the present study were later compared with suggestions by Bridgeland et al.

Ramsay (2008) posits that policy and practice issues could help to address early school leaving challenges. He advocates for constant reforms of educational policies to ensure that they seriously consider dropout rates and the major causes of these to avoid the risk of making misguided and expensive decisions. Ramsay (2008) further advocates for intra-school factors affecting dropout rates to be considered in the implementation and evaluation of public policies for secondary school education. He opines that a new definition, and conceptual framing which better reflects the changing complexities of learner needs and ways in which schools, schooling systems and accreditation institutions should respond to these, are urgently needed. According to Ramsay (2008), changes are required to adapt schools and schooling systems to the reality of life, particularly for children from disadvantaged families. It means research and policy have to identify arrangements in schools which can support positive outcomes and the successful completion of secondary education (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007; Ramsay, 2008).

Ramsay's observations constitute the climax of my study. Informed by these observations, I asked myself the following questions: What are the needs of the EScLs? What is it that the EScLs in the study believe requires redefining and new conceptual framing? What alternative arrangements in schools and the education system do they think could be considered to support positive outcomes and successful completion of secondary education

by all learners? It was my hope that the responses of the EScLs to the last research question contained answers to these fundamental questions.

Having established the status of school dropout globally, the discussion which follows focuses on a review of literature on Zimbabwe specifically.

Finally, while school dropout is a global challenge, Zimbabwe's situation is unique. The country is faced with economic challenges which require citizens endowed with high levels of creative and critical thinking skills. It needs people with well-developed skills in Science and Technology, areas with which the nation is still grappling, yet essential drivers for the nation's economy (Sibanda & Maposa, 2013). Such skills are best developed systematically, in a stable learning environment. USAID (2011, p.2) categorically states that "successful learning is a powerful tool in facilitating rational and objective thinking, providing cognitive skills" necessary for youths to prosper in the job market and life in general. If young people continue to leave school prematurely, these essential skills will not be fully developed and, as a result, hopes for the nation's economy may be shattered.

2.8 Declaration of the Known: Highlights from Literature

Literature reviewed in this chapter shows that there has been extensive wide research on the school dropout phenomenon across the globe. A few studies have also been done in Zimbabwe. The following are some of the major issues/findings on school dropout at secondary school level so far.

School dropout is a global problem and its prevalence cuts across geographical boundaries such as urban, farm and rural areas. It prevails amid some education reforms and economic transformations. Factors leading to dropout are quite similar and have been universally categorised as push, pull and fall-out factors. The precursors to school dropout are also commonly explained at personal, school, family, and community levels; however, the degree of their influence varies across the globe. There is growing evidence in literature that the impact is greater in developing countries, with sub-Saharan Africa, where poverty is a major cause of school dropout, seemingly most affected. Literature also shows general agreement among researchers that school dropout is a challenge militating against most countries' efforts to increase enrolment and graduation rates.

My review of literature has also shown that secondary sources, such as schools, families, and governments, have globally been used as data sources. Most of the research on school dropout so far has, moreover, employed quantitative methodologies/ approaches. In Zimbabwe, quantitative studies have thus far focused predominantly on rural settings, targeting mostly the girl child. From the present body of knowledge, push factors, particularly

the school, seem to be the major causes of school dropout. To this end, the current literature partially answers my second research question which sought EScLs' perspectives on triggers of school dropout in Zimbabwe. In the present study I, however, intended to go beyond establishing the triggers and establish the underlying causes. The review of literature was particularly useful in that it provided me with information that helped me identify gaps which my research study could attempt to fill.

A review of existing literature on a phenomenon to be studied is deemed important because, according to Webster and Watson (2002, p. 13), it helps to "expose knowledge gaps from the known and create a foundation for advancing new knowledge". Informed by claims put forward by Williams and Colomb (2003), I identified empirical evidence in existing literature to strengthen my argument by means of explicit, research-based findings. Attempts to target populations with lived experiences in other parts of the world prior to my study guided me in my choice of methodologies, focus and research process. More specifically, it forced me to reflect on the methodologies I planned to use in my study and gave me the confidence to venture out into areas not yet researched.

My conviction that school dropout is a process rather than an event is derived from the evidence I have found in the existing literature. Since I was not sure whether or not it would be possible to establish a particular pattern of dropout behaviour in my analysis of participating EScLs' dropout experiences, I had to determine what had already been established in this regard prior to embarking on my own research. My review of existing literature helped me accomplish this. It also facilitated my understanding of the phenomenon from my research participants' points of view and enabled me to assess whether or not their views could be either confirmed or negated.

2.9 Insights, Gaps and Focus of Study

The insights described in this section relate to the school dropout phenomenon in general, with specific reference to the Zimbabwean situation, the context in which the phenomenon was investigated. Indicators in the literature reviewed suggest that school dropout is not just a once-off problem: it is similar to an epidemic, with ripple effects on the global community as a whole. Except in very few studies, research reported in existing literature has not targeted the people who have directly experienced the dropout phenomenon notwithstanding the fact that the results of several studies indicated the need for a more comprehensive and deeper understanding of school dropout as a phenomenon. The reasons given for school dropout, for example, are complex and need unpacking. It is partly to this purpose that I decided in this study to isolate Zimbabwe and do an in-depth qualitative analysis of EScLs' perspectives on prevailing school dropout behaviour. Informing my quest is my

conviction that there are voices which still need to be heard in order to find answers to the global challenge in education. The existence of the gap in literature in this regard strengthens my argument for an in-depth analysis of issues surrounding school dropout in Zimbabwe as viewed through the eyes of participating EScLs. Hence, I regard my study as well positioned.

A major problem in most of the studies which were reviewed in this chapter, which the present study attempts to address is their predominant use of either surveys targeting learners at risk, or desk reviews, with data in all of them derived from secondary data source (Anisef et al., 2010; Bridgeland et al., 2006: Chugh, 2011; Gray & Hackling, 2009; Ramberger & Lim, 2008). While targeting those at risk sounds logical for purposes of early intervention, I believed that the collection of data from primary resources, those who have themselves dropped out of school might be a better point at which to start 'digging' for the root causes of school dropout, hence this study. Starting there would, I believe, facilitate a shift in focus from the monitoring of increased access to school to a focus on the underlying, often hidden, causes of school dropout behaviour (Rumberger & Lim, 2008). From the examples in literature, I noticed that early school leaving is influenced by different factors at macro-, meso- and micro- systemic levels in the countries which served as research contexts (Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000; Tudge, 2008). Based on this observation, I was curious to find out what - based on their particular experience of the phenomenon- EScLs thought the factors were that influenced school dropout and how their views compared to the findings of global research on this matter. My contention was that if the effects of school dropout were significant in developed countries, its effect on a developing country like Zimbabwe might be worse, threatening an already weak economy. I thought the voices of affected learners were critical to the articulation of the real reasons why learners exit school prematurely because they themselves had at some or other time taken that route. I believed, moreover, that in the recall of their school dropout memories, they would be able to suggest what could be done to effectively address the problem.

At global level, the reasons for school dropout are numerous, including socio-economic, cultural and school climate factors. Investigating the school dropout phenomenon in Zimbabwe, particularly from the perspectives of those who have lived through the experience, I believe, could generate important data not only on the phenomenon specifically but also on broader education-related issues in sub Saharan Africa. Having established from literature an upward trend in secondary school dropout in developed countries and, more critically in sub-Saharan Africa, where Zimbabwe is located, I regard my study as important and unique for two reasons: first, data was collected exclusively from primary sources and second, I used qualitative methods to do so. It is also an important response to calls/recommendations in existing literature for learner participation in decision-making processes and/or policy-related activities. I believe that, by targeting EScLs in the present

study, I might be able to uncover the missing link regarding ways of dealing with the problem. Major gaps, therefore, as revealed by the literature review in this chapter, gave me the impetus to develop my study focus, which is outlined next.

The perspectives of those who have experienced the school dropout phenomenon is, to a large extent, absent in school dropout literature, particularly with regard to the situation in Zimbabwe. Most studies so far have used secondary sources. Where learners were included as sources they had not yet dropped out, although they were at risk of doing so. They, too, are regarded as secondary sources. The most significant inquiry so far in Zimbabwe, one which focused on girl learners at risk of dropping out, was the desk review conducted by Zengeya (2011). My study is thus unique, not only because it uses learners as data sources but also because it targets EScLs of both sexes and assumes that these learners, not the researcher, are best positioned to suggest possible solutions to the problem given their own dropout experiences. No known study in Zimbabwe has to date attempted to understand the conceptualisation and possible solutions to the problem of school dropout from the perspectives of those with lived experiences of the phenomenon. Researchers across the globe acknowledge that the process of dropping out has not been sufficiently interrogated and that, in Zimbabwe, no known research has attempted to determine what the EScLs have gone through and how they finally landed outside the school premises. My point of departure from the known, therefore, was to target a primary data source - EScLs - in my search for an authentic understanding of the school dropout phenomenon in Zimbabwe.

To consolidate what I said before: there has not been much in-depth qualitative analysis of the school dropout phenomenon. As indicated earlier on, scientific studies on the topic done so far in Zimbabwe have used quantitative methodologies. No study has deliberately engaged early school leavers themselves in an in-depth inquiry of the problem, my research, which was a multiple case study targeting urban, peri-urban and rural settings being the first of its kind. Lived experiences are embedded in my study, forming the basis on which data generation hinges. I hoped that by investigating the school dropout phenomenon in Zimbabwe from the perspectives of those who have themselves lived through the experience, my study would contribute significantly to the addressing of education-related issues in sub-Saharan Africa.

Having identified gaps in the current literature, Section 2 of this chapter discusses the theoretical framework that helped me in my inquiry and analysis of the issues I attempted to address in the study. Specific aspects of Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological theory and Ajzen's Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) helped me to understand the issues at stake, the perspectives of the EScLs remaining central in terms of the extent to which these provided

information on critical issues and helped to close the gap in existing literature by adding new knowledge to the current body of knowledge on the subject of school dropout.

2.10 Theoretical Framework for Understanding School Dropout Behaviour

My study was largely guided by Bronfenbrenner's Bio-ecological Theory of Human Development and Ajzen's Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB). Bronfenbrenner's theory was useful in explaining the conditions and relationships in the different contexts in which secondary school learners are situated. It gave me the confidence to answer my research questions regarding the reasons for and the impact of dropping out. The weakness of Bronfenbrenner's theory, though, was its failure to consider the individual's contribution to the outcome: it does not explicitly articulate issues related to the individual's attitudes, perception and beliefs which may contribute significantly to decision making and the ultimate shaping of the individual's behaviour. Thus, although the Bio-ecological theory helped me to explain the contexts nurturing the EScL, issues related to decision-making, deemed critical to my study, were not sufficiently addressed by Bronfenbrenner's theory alone. In restricting myself to the use of this theory alone, I therefore ran the risk of undermining/weakening my argument that dropping out is a behaviour which might at some point involve personal commitment to and/or personally contributing to the decision to remain or quit school regardless of other pressures or influential factors. To prevent this from happening, I decided to use the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) to complement Bronfenbrenner's Bio-ecological Theory. Together, the two theories seemed more able to explain the phenomenon I was investigating.

2.10.1 Bio-ecological theory of human development. Bronfenbrenner's Bio-ecological Theory of Human Development was particularly useful in my analysis of generated data on the school dropout phenomenon. The two models forming part of this theory – the Systems Model, and the Process Person Context Time (PPCT) Model (Bronfenbrenner, 2005) - which I regarded as relevant to my study are integrated in the description which follows regarding the ways in which they assisted me in my study.

In terms of the two models mentioned above, human development involves continual and reciprocal interaction between an individual and the environment in which he/she is situated (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994). In a symbiotic relationship like this, the two 'actors' (humans and their environment) influence each other. According to both Bronfenbrenner (2005) and Tudge (2008), the key elements characterizing the interaction are environmental and time changes. By implication, if viewed from a genetic/bio ecological/environmental perspective the person one ultimately becomes is the result of genetic and environmental factors (see Figure 2.3 for a graphic illustration of the symbiotic relationship between an individual and his/her immediate environment).

Figure 2.3: Symbiotic relationship between an individual and his/her environment

(Source: Adapted from Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994)

The darker part where the two circles overlap in Figure 2.3 represents the experiences resulting from the symbiotic interaction between the individual and the environment. I viewed the youths in my study as active and dynamic social beings who were situated in multiple social systems (family, school, community). Their daily, simultaneous interaction with the systems occurs concurrently with the interaction amongst the systems themselves at the meso-systemic level (Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000). Together, these interactions determine the nature of the experience (positive and negative) and, in the case of the youth, have an impact on their subsequent life decisions (Tudge, 2008). The value of this illustration to me was that it helped me to further sharpen the focus of my study, namely to understand the issues at stake in premature school exit and thus, to explain the triggers and the process of dropping out of school. Informed by the systems model, I analysed the ways in which certain activities and relationships in the EScLs environment influenced learners' dropout behaviour. Conversely, I considered the ways in which individuals' dispositions (what and how they think, feel, view the world around) influenced their decision to prematurely leave school.
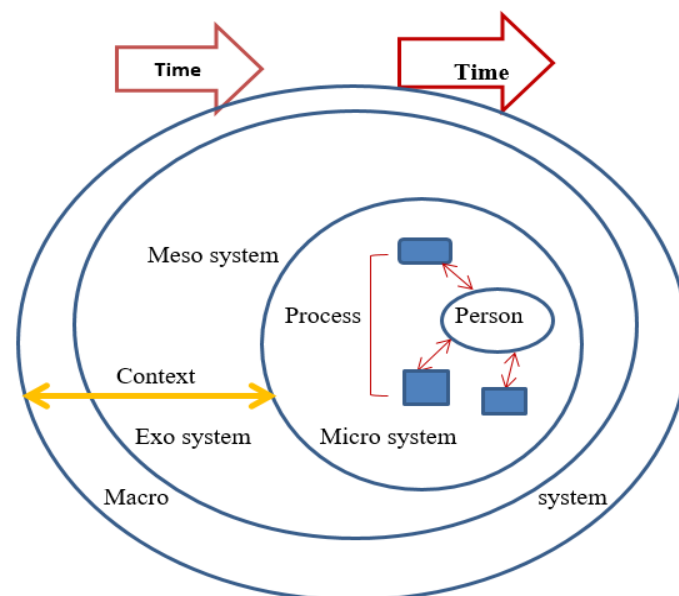
Figure 2.4: The PPCT model and school dropout behaviour: Bronfenbrenner (2005)

(Source: Adapted from Tudge, 2008)

55

Figure 2.4 illustrates the Process Person Context Time (PPCT) model forming part of the Bio-ecological Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 2005, p.17). Process here refers to activities that normally constitute the day-to-day life of an individual. The three dark boxes in the Figure represent micro-systems. These could be home, school and/or community. What happens in these institutional environments – with which the individual interacts every day - constitutes process. According to Bronfenbrenner and Bronfenbrenner (2009), it is one's engagement in these activities which shapes one's understanding of the world one lives in and one's place in it.

In line with Bronfenbrenner's thinking, the conceptual framework I presented in Chapter 1 shows that the EScL in my study was situated in the micro-system (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). The strength and relevance of this system to my research lay in the fact that the learner does not exist in a vacuum, rather, he/she interacts with other people (peers and adults) in all three contexts every day. The type of relationships the learner forms in the micro-system has a bearing on his/her attitude towards school, him/herself, and life in general (Ajzen, 2012; Woolfolk, 2012). Understanding the micro-system, thus, help me to describe the EScLs' experiences in the three contexts in terms of where things went wrong, resulting in the learners' dropping out of school. A statement by Bronfernbrenner and Ceci (1994) which I could not overlook, points to the fact that a breakdown in or of the micro-system exposes the child to multiple problems, school dropout being one, hence, this study. Apart from the implication that micro-systemic breakdowns have a ripple effect, Bronfernbrenner's statement provided me with a platform from which I could probe participants' views on what could/should be done to unearth possible underlying reasons for the premature school exit of Zimbabwean learners in general.

Using this framework, I could 'dig' for possible answers to the fourth research question, which directed my attempts to understand the impact that dropping out of school had on participating EScLs. What the framework helped me realize was that learners might make decisions and behave in a certain way (TPB) based on their everyday experiences. If, as Bronfenbrenner (2005) claims, engagement should be reciprocal (illustrated by the double arrows between the person and each institution in Figure 2.2), learners interact with their peers and adults in all three institutions/systems, and the relationships formed during such interaction are usually sustained over long periods of time.

Reciprocity could also refer to exchanges of adult and youth cultures, resulting in the forming of active and wide-ranging relationships (Koch, Mamiseishvili, & Huggins, 2014). However, from my research perspective, any breakdown in the interaction between the learner and either the physical and/or the social environment may trigger dropout behaviour. The

Process Principle was thus relevant to my study, enabling me to determine the existence and/or nature of relationships formed between secondary school learners and their immediate environments (home, school, and community).

The term, 'person', basically refers to the biological and genetic aspects that make up an individual (Bronfenbrenner & Bronfenbrenner, 2009). This individual "has the power to influence the proximal process" (Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000, p.119) as illustrated in Figure 2.4 (P denoting Person in the smallest circle, and P for process as explained earlier). In this regard, Tudge (2008, p.90) advances that individuals possess "emotional and mental characteristics (dispositions) which make them react in certain ways to what their immediate environment may present". However, since disposition is not observable it can only be determined by exhibited behaviour(s) -temperament, motivation, endurance, and resilience, for example (Tudge, 2008).

When I considered the reasons for learners dropping out of school, I realized that the issue of disposition was quite relevant to my study because learners' mental and emotional characteristics could affect their ability to realize their life goals. In my view, a learner who is poorly motivated and possesses low self-esteem, easily gives up. Therefore, he/she is more likely to be at risk of dropping out and, by implication, might never realize the goals he/she would like to, not at school and not in life. This was one of the reasons why I decided to use the Person aspect of the PPCT model to determine EScLs dispositions and the extent to which these might have contributed to their dropout behaviour. Another reason for my decision to use the 'Person' element of this (PPCT) model was that it relates with elements of the other theoretical framework (Theory of Planned Behaviour) I planned to use in my study, and which is discussed later in this chapter. Central to this theory is the influence of an individual's attitudes and beliefs in decision making.

Bronfenbrenner (2005) further explains 'Person' as also referring to the demand characteristics of an individual. According to him, demand characteristics represent the observable characteristics of an individual. When a person interacts with others, his/her demand characteristics evoke an immediate response from the environment. Informed by these definitions, I regarded demand characteristics as having the power to either lure or inhibit interaction with the social world. According to Cook-Sather (2007), a person's demand characteristics are typically used to describe him/her since, showing how much someone appeals to the social world influence the response he/she can elicit from that environment. The way in which he/she treats another person could, for example, be based on skin colour, gender, or stature. In my research, I, therefore, wanted to analyse EScLs' demand

characteristics as reflected in their attitudes towards peers and adults who could have influenced their decisions to drop out of school.

A 'situated' context, according to Bronfenbrenner and Evans (2000) could be either a physical environment (home, school, community), as discussed earlier, or a social one (the people with whom an individual interacts). While situated contexts do have an impact on a person's development and/or life, they are not the only contexts to do so. According to Bronfenbrenner (2005) non-situated contexts - a parent's job, social status or physical condition - of a parent, which form part of the Exo system, could do the same because these are every-day places where interaction takes place. I would, therefore, argue that the nature and level of interaction between individuals (Person) and institutions, close (micro-) or far (Exo, Macro-) have a bearing on the way in which someone behaves (TPB). As indicated by the double gold arrow in Figure 2.5, context includes all the systems mentioned in Bronfenbrenner's theory. An individual may, thus, judge what is happening around him/her as either worthy or not based on his/her own perception and life goals, and respond accordingly. Related to the learners targeted in my study, it could mean that their decision to drop out of school may have been influenced by their particular (situated or non-situated) contexts.

Bronfenbrenner (2005) argues that the effects of external issues, positive or negative - such as those related to a country's economy, politics and legislature at various levels - filter through to the child, who is at the receiving end. A case in point is Zimbabwe. The country's economy, which is currently unstable, leads to many breadwinners losing or having lost their jobs (Shizha & Kariwo, 2011), thus exposing their families to a situation/context in which resources, particularly fiscal ones, are meagre. Consequently, the parents may not be able to adequately provide in the day-to-day needs of their children. Informed by these theoretical perspectives, I believed that the context represented by C in the PPCT model could be one of the lenses I could use in my analysis of the reasons and consequences of someone dropping out of school.

Finally, T-time (Chrono) in the PPCT model refers to specific historical events in a person's life, thus relating human development to the passage of time. The thick red arrows above the circles in Figure 2.4 show that time is an independent variable. Activities/ events in the different systems all happen in the context of time. Time, thus, regulates life. Put differently, all human beings, at different points in their lives, go through some sort of change (Tudge (2008) which re/shapes him/her. These changes, according to Levin (2005), are sometimes unstable, unpleasant and unpredictable, for example, illness, death or relocation. In such cases, the effectiveness of proximal processes is compromised (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). The loss of a parent, for example, may leave an emotional and/or material gap in the life of the

child (Person). In the present study, I viewed the EScLs as, at some point, having gone through unexpected/unplanned memorable experiences or happenings which were negative to their personal development.

Guessing that the unpredictable and unpleasant event/s might therefore have triggered their premature school exit, I decided to use 'Time', as conceptualised in Bronfenbrenner's (2005) PPCT model, as basis for my analysis of participating EScLs' reasons for school dropout, targeting specific events which took place at specific times and that might have influenced their dropout behaviour (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). The Chrono system (Time) would, so I believed, also help me to better understand and assess the extent/degree of the impact that their dropping out of school had on the individual learners. This kind of thinking coincides with Matshalaga's (2004) critical observation that some unpleasant events in life can be devastating, particularly when the event culminates in a problem that persists over a long period of time. I would argue that such events also leave conspicuous dents in a person's life, dents which may take time to mend. I therefore concur with Bronfenbrenner's (2005) conclusion that systems should operate as smoothly in order to ensure, as far as this is possible, the protection and welfare of children. In my study, getting the views of EScLs on the responsiveness and capacity of the systems around them, particularly with regard to the things they needed to stay at school, was critical.

2.10.2 Theory of planned behaviour (TPB). The Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) is widely used in the field of Psychology to measure the ways in which human actions are guided (Ajzen, 2012; Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010). In this study, school dropout was understood as a human action. According to Cook (2004), the model suggests that a person's behaviour reflects his/her mental processes. This statement supports my view that school dropout is not an event but a conscious, individual process – a potential answer to my third, secondary research question (see Chapter 1). Informing my belief are existing research findings that the best predictors of academic persistence and school dropout are the three TPB scales of attitude, subjective norm and perceived behavioral control (Koch et al., 2014). According to Ajzen (2012**),** the more favorable the attitude and subjective norm, and the greater the perceived behavioral control, the stronger the individual's intention to pursue the intended behaviour.
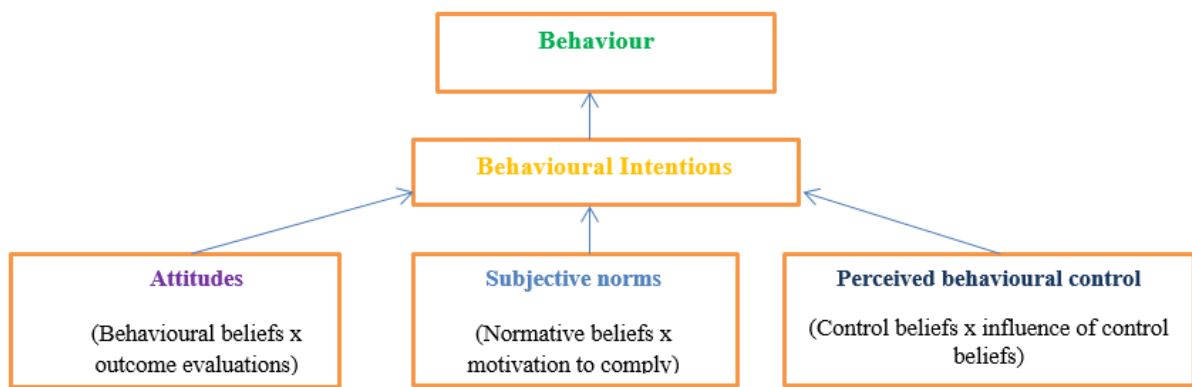
Figure 2.5: Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) Model

(*Source:* Adapted from Ajzen, 2012)

2.10.2.1 The premise on which the theory rests. According to Ajzen (2012), the rational decisions individuals (EScLs in the case of my study) make to engage in certain behaviors are based on their own beliefs about the specific behaviors and its desired outcome(s). I believed no-one would simply/unintentionally drop out of school without thinking through the consequences. According to the TPB, intention is the key around which the decision-making process unfolds (Davis, Ajzen, Saunders & Williams, 2002). Intention is thus a mental representation of the readiness one has to perform an action. Intentions are, thus, viewed as, "indications of how hard people are willing to try, of how much of an effort they are planning to exert, in order to perform the behaviour" (Davis, et al., 2002, p.113). Matshalaga's (2004) adds to this view by arguing that intentions are precursors of behaviour, thus behaviour constitutes an output of intention. Dropping out of school could therefore be viewed as beginning as an intention developing into action. It becomes an intentional process. As illustrated in Figure 2.5, intention is the immediate antecedent of behaviour (Ajzen, 2012; Davis et al., 2002; Koch et al., 2014), thus I believed that the EScLs in my study considered dropping out after weighing certain options. As indicated in my third research question, this study seeks to understand the process of dropping out. The TPB model would allow me to probe participants' memories of their school dropout experience to gain a sense, or an understanding, of the specific intentions which informed their decision to drop out of school as well as the way in which these intentions were generated.

To reiterate, the intention to behave in a particular manner is the product of three elements namely; attitude, subjective norm and perceived behavioural control (Ajzen, 2012; Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010). How do these elements apply to my study? According to Koch et al. (2014), 'attitude' refers to an individual's positive or negative feelings regarding a specific behaviour (such as dropping out of school). This attitude represents the individual's "disposition', that is, whether to respond "either favourably or unfavourably to an object,

60

person, institution or event" (Ajzen 2012, p.4). In the case of my study, dropping out of school could denote the harbouring in the learner of certain attitudes towards school or conditions surrounding going to school - how favourable or hostile these are, in other words. In this regard Davis et al. (2002) and Koch et al. (2014) are in agreement with one another that one's attitude represents/reflects one's overall evaluation of the behaviour in question. As to school dropout, the beliefs and/or feelings of the individuals concerned might have influenced their intention to leave school prematurely (see Figure 2.5). The arrow pointing from attitude to intention in Figure 1.5 suggests that intention is partly a product of one's attitudes. With reference to my study, the influence that secondary school learners' dispositions had on their response to the push, pull and fall-out factors of school dropout could be explained around attitude. In order to do this, I intended to first establish the EScLs' attitudes towards school and school dropout (Research Question 1). Having done so, I would attempt to establish what triggered these attitudes and how the attitudes were formed (Research Questions 2 and 3). In order to explain their experience of and within the systems by which they were surrounded (micro, exo, and macro) I used the PPCT model since I believed that it could help me explain how these attitudes were formed/generated.

Ajzen (2012) and Davis et al. (2002) agree that subjective norms are beliefs regarding the influence of the favourable or unfavourable views of significant people (in the case of my study these are parents, friends & teachers) on an individual's intentions. Fichten et al. (2014) concur, positing that the individual's expectations regarding the views of significant/important people in his/her life on the potential behaviour – that is, whether these persons would think the individual should or should not behave in a particular way - ultimately determine whether or not to act.

Elaborating on this explanation, Fichten et al. (2014) claim that the final decision whether or not to behave in a certain way may, moreover, depend on the individual's motivation/desire to comply with the wishes of the (external) referent. With reference to my study, for example, the learner may be aware of his/her parents' expectations but if he/she lacks the motivation to comply with these, the subjective norm will have no bearing on the behavioural outcome (dropping out) (Davis et al, 2002; Cooke & Sheeran, 2004). Informing my study, thus, is the assumption that the value the individual learners attaches to the contribution of significant people in his/her life depends on the learner's assessment of the contribution as well as his/her motivation to acknowledge its value (Davis et al., 2002; Koch et al., 2014). The subjective norm then becomes another 'intention driver' as indicated by the arrow in Figure 2.5. which points from the subjective norm to the intention. These explanations could, I believed, facilitate my analysis of the source of learners' intentions to drop out of school.

Koch et al. (2014) added yet another dimension to the description of subjective norm when they posited that it constituted social/ peer pressure from people important in an individual's life. Should the individual believe that his/her intended behaviour would find favour with the 'significant people' in his/her life, the individual' would succumb to the pressure, whether or not the pressure at such is implicit or explicit. Should he/she believe that these people would not approve of the intended behaviour, he might not proceed with it.

Having put together all the views indicated thus far, I asked myself two questions, namely, (a) Is the dropout behaviour by secondary school learners influenced by any of the significant people around them? (b) To what extent do significant others in the learners' lives influence the dropout behaviour? The subjective norm scale, I believed, would help me to answer these two questions since it would enable me to measure the nature and extent of the influence factor on the behaviour of the EScLs participating in my study.

The third scale in Ajzen's model, perceived behavioural control, refers to the confidence an individual has in his/her ability to perform the intended behaviour. Informing the person's confidence, according to Ajzen (2012, p.132), would be his/her past experience and anticipation of potential impediments - the ease or difficulty involved in doing the action according to Koch et al. (2014). Issues related to self-efficacy, that is one's beliefs and perceived powers of control, are central to perceived behavioural control (Davis, Ajzen, Saunders, & Williams, 2002; Koch et al., 2014). By implication, one's intention is also bolstered by the confidence one has in one's own ability, as illustrated by the arrow pointing away from perceived behavioural control towards intention in Figure. 2.5. In terms of this principle, the greater the person's sense of being able to control and/or overcome obstacles, the more determined he/she is to act (Ajzen, 2012; Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010). A related view by Koch et al. (2014) is that the beliefs individuals hold about the power of situational and internal factors tend to either inhibit or facilitate their performance of the intended behaviour. In other words, perceived behavioural control serves as a proxy for actual behavioural control and so directly influences intention and actual behaviour.

Relating the aspect of perceived behavioural control to my research helped me to see how the learners dealt with institutional circumstances (Bronfenbrenner's micro-system), resulting from one's way of thinking. The individual learners' beliefs about their ability to manage the act, process and consequences of dropping out, and the confidence they had to do the action, I believed, had a bearing on their intention to drop out and, subsequently to the dropout behaviour. I planned to use the perceived behavioural control scale to measure the extent to which the confidence and ability levels of learners influenced their intention and

decision to quit school prematurely. Sources or experiences informing their confidence and ability wouldl be explored alongside.

The two theories used as theoretical frameworks for this study – the Bio-ecological Theory and the Theory of Planned Behaviour – complemented each other well. Whereas the Bio-ecological Theory largely elucidated my understanding of the influence that the network of systems in which my research participants were situated had on their behaviour (Bronfenbrenner, 2005), the TPB model effectively deconstructed the decision-making process that EScLs went through in the dropout behaviour (Ajzen, 2012; Fishbein & Ajzen 2010). One of the reasons for my inclusion of the TPB is that I assumed that premature school exit is the result of an individual's rational choice, made of his/her own volitional control (Sheeran, 2002). To confirm the relevance of the Bio-ecological theory and the TPB to my study, I would cite Battin-Pearson et al. (2002, p.11), who ascertain that "the contexts in which learners exist have a bearing on their attitudes (and) behaviour". My sense was that both theories were relevant to research focusing on 'education' behaviour (school dropout, in my research) because both predict and illustrate behaviour and behavioural intention (Fichten et al., 2014). While both theories explain the school dropout phenomenon, I viewed each one as making a unique contribution to my understanding of the phenomenon, as indicated in the discussion in the preceding section.

Overall, my literature review helped me to "expose knowledge gaps from the known and create a foundation for advancing new knowledge" (Webster and Watson, 2002, p.13) through my study. Empirical evidence cited in existing literature strengthened my argument, thus ensuring that the findings of my study would be explicit (Williams & Colomb, 2003). Realizing that the attempts made so far in targeting populations with lived experiences in other parts of the world provided me with critical information on previously used methodologies and the nature of established findings. This information helped me to reflect on the methodologies I used in the current study, thus previous, related, studies gave me the confidence to break new ground, focus on something different, thus venturing into 'unknown territory'. The notion that school dropout cannot be an event, that it is, in fact, a process, needed insights from existing literature. As I wondered whether or not there was any pattern in the behaviour I observed in my exposure to the experiences of the EScLs in the study, I needed to be clear about what had already been established in this regard. Not only would this help me to better understand the views expressed by my research participants, it would also enable me to assess what would have to be either confirmed or contradicted.

2.11 Summary

To sum up, my literature review gave me the opportunity to read about and analyse related studies on school dropout globally, in sub-Saharan Africa and in Zimbabwe. It also helped me to explain in detail the nature of and principles informing the theoretical frameworks in which I located my study. The review helped to put to the fore what is already known about the problem in question and my analysis of existing, related, literature, which revealed similarities and differences in focus between previous studies and mine, was critical to the advancement of my thesis and to ensure a broader rationale for my study. From the review, therefore, I gained several insights which acted as the antecedent to a clear outline of the gaps that my research could perhaps fill. Having laid the theoretical foundation for my study, the next chapter is devoted to a discussion of the philosophy and methodology that guided my research process as a whole.

Chapter 3

Methodology

3.1 Introduction

Chapter 3 details the qualitative methodology I adopted in the study in order to generate the data I needed to address the research questions. I begin the chapter by describing the philosophy guiding the study, the research design and the context of the study. This description is followed by a full account of the procedures adopted and the specific sources selected for the generation of data on the phenomenon being investigated. Included in the procedures are the construction of research instruments, entry into research sites, selection of participants, data generation and data analysis methods. Following Creswell (2012, p. 205), the steps constituting my qualitative data process is not linear in nature even though one step often follows another in the process described. Towards the end of the chapter, I discuss elements of the criteria I used to ensure generation of quality data (Berg, 2001; Greene, 2010; Hendricks, 2009; Lichtman, 2010). I conclude the chapter by explaining the research ethics upheld during the course of my research venture.

3.2 Qualitative Research: Interpretive Paradigm

My study was guided by interpretive philosophy, its theoretical and methodological perspectives being derived from its characteristics, principles and practices. Interpretive philosophy, as defined by Luttrell (2010, p. 68), is concerned with/ "grounded knowledge generated from the field". Using an interpretivist lens, I strove 'to generate, through discourse, rich data' about the school dropout phenomenon in Zimbabwe (Bhattacherjee, 2012; Wagner, Kawulich, & Garmer, 2012). The features of the interpretive paradigm that best suited the nature of my study included conducting research in a natural setting, using expressive language, focusing on making sense of a phenomenon rather than seeking specific answers to social problems, and using thick descriptions to explain why participants presented their stories in the manner they did (Bhattacherjee, 2012). In doing so, I implicitly supported Creswell's (2012) claim that interpretive approaches help us understand the world as others experience it. This is made possible because, in interpretive research, everything is seen through the eyes of the participants (Flick, 2014). Meaning is thus derived from the way in which the people being studied understand the phenomenon in question. Interpretive studies, according to Barbour (2007, p.2), aim to" unpack" how people view their world to make sense of their own experience in an insightful manner, an act which Luttrell (2010) describes as "bringing us in touch with the lives of strangers" (p. 71). In order to understand issues at a deeper level, the researcher has to make use of probes to 'unearth' the finer details (DeVos, Strydom, Fouche,' & Delport, 2011). This is what I did in my study; my interpretation of

Zimbabwe's dropout situation represents participants' world view. My understanding of the phenomenon therefore reflects the way in which individuals who participated in my study had experienced it and defined the school dropout phenomenon I was investigating.

Bhattacherjee (2012) observes that interpretive research is suitable for studies that seek to unearth data in complex social situations. In this study, I viewed school dropout as a complex social situation because of its high level of prevalence in both rural and urban settings of Zimbabwe. This view is shared by Mafa and Tarusikirwa (2013) who observe that the school dropout phenomenon in Zimbabwe cuts across geographical boundaries, thus, featuring in all provinces. I also found interpretive philosophy most relevant as it provided me with me with a point of departure for my inquiry, allowing me to investigate the subjectivity of reality, an option suitable to the nature of the unit of analysis under investigation (DeVos et al., 2011). To clarify this view, as I discuss the philosophical thinking underpinning my research, issues at stake basically serve as the source of knowledge (epistemology) for the construct under study and the beliefs surrounding the origins of the knowledge (the construct ontology) (DeVos et al., 2011).

Epistemological thinking in interpretive studies places the emphasis on subjectivity. In this respect, I subscribe to Willig's (2001) view that "reality is subjective and there are many realities" (2001, p. 9) involved in its investigation - 'knowledges' rather than 'knowledge', in other words. Buttressing Willig's view, Wilson (2002) claims that "knowledge is derived from people's practical experiences of the world around them" (p. 13). Huberman and Miles (2002), concurring with this view, opine that people who have experienced a phenomenon, have a story to tell and that these stories, or issues of life, are best investigated as experienced by the individuals concerned. Huberman and Miles (2002) further argue that laboratory life and mathematical explanations about life situations seem inadequate to a greater extent, thus my belief that experience is a powerful window through which people can view life. I, thus, submit to Huberman and Miles' (2002) world view that social situations are better understood from the perspective of those who have directly experienced them. In this study, knowledge about school dropout was viewed as a product of the narrated experiences of Early School Leavers (EScLs) who participated in the study. I sought to understand their "perceptions, perspectives and view of a particular situation" (school dropout) as they experienced it (DeVos et al., 2011, p.305).

Furthermore, De Vos et al. (2011, p.310) contend that "reality is socially and personally constructed" and that participants should be actively involved in the research process. Participants in this study, thus, were actively involved in its construction through their participation in Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), interview or story writing. Throughout data

generation, knowledge was constructed and co-constructed by and among the participants. I expected EScLs to share with me their lived experiences which I did not want to assume but, rather, understand from their world view. As such, I looked forward to the exposure. The meanings that EScLs attached to their collective and individual lived experiences would, therefore, guide my interpretation of the phenomenon under study.

Reflection is a critical element in qualitative research. I constantly asked myself about the purpose or value of my study. I was aware of the fact that gathering knowledge for the sake of it was not a useful activity. I subscribed to Mingers's (2003) assertion that knowledge must be purposeful. My axiological assumption, therefore, was that the findings of the study would assist to find more lasting solutions to secondary school dropout in Zimbabwe. I also envigased empowerment and transformation of lives among EScLs if positive means would be sought to apply the findings of this study to their situation (Mingers, 2003). However, in doing so, I was cognisant of what Ortlipp (2008) advises that reflective practice is critical to transparency as it helps to explain decisions made as one undertakes research. I was able to determine how my own experiences, values and feelings were likely to influence the study process. As a result, I worked in a transparent manner with the participants., which was part of my ethical considerations in the study.

Willig's (2001) and Wilson's (2002) claims in this regard underscore the importance of direct experience and the need to respect the diverse ways in which a phenomenon could be interpreted by different people. A critical observation by Brown (2010) is that, although experiences may be similar, they can never be exactly the same because of the uniqueness of individual people's thinking capacities, perceptions, temperamental dispositions, biological make-up and parenting styles. Brown's standpoint here is informed by interpretive philosophy and, in that regard, my study, for comparison purposes, endeavoured to gather individual narrations of lived experiences from different youths who pre-maturely left school. In this study, individual EScLs' personal experiences on school dropout were respected and interpreted from their individual points of view. My ontology, therefore, was strengthened by DeVos et al.'s (2011, p.309) claim that "reality … can only be constructed through the empathetic understanding of the research participant's meaning of his or her life world".

The contributions by Willig, Wilson and Brown helped me to approach the inquiry process with an open mind, continuously fighting my own, preconceived ideas prior to and during data collection (Luttrell, 2010; Silverman, 2013; Wagner, et al., 2012). I need to point out that going into the research field with the key attribute of open-mindedness was not easy, especially for me, having worked with early school leavers in a community project fifteen years ago when I was doing my first degree. While this is now many years ago, and the EScLs that

I interacted with at that time were adult women, I still have flashback memories of some of the comments that, as students, we would make about the women, for example; "they rushed into marriage," and "these could be results of mischief during school years". In this study, I, thus, needed to fight perceptions like these in order to respect the views forwarded by participants (Silverman, 2013). Steps that I took in order to minimise bias are discussed under quality criteria. The thread of interpretive philosophy was evident throughout the process of the research, thus influencing my research design, sampling procedure, data sources and data analysis procedures as contained in this chapter.

3.3 Multiple Case Study Research Design

Understanding school dropout in Zimbabwe required multiple perspectives of individuals to represent the complexity of the phenomenon (Creswell 2012, p. 207). Denzin and Lincoln (2008, p. 445) describe multiple case study approaches as research where "a number of cases are jointly studied in order to investigate a phenomenon". Simons (2009, p. 21) posits, moreover, that such a case study approach entails an "in-depth exploration from multiple perspectives of the complexity and uniqueness of a particular… system in real life". In my study, each individual EScL was a case. I, thus, had access to multiple cases (EScLs) to answer questions about school dropout in Zimbabwe. The multiple case design, unlike a single case, allowed me to develop a richer and deeper interpretation of the phenomenon in question through the collection of diverse EScLs' perspectives (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Yin, 2014). In my study, numerous sources of evidence were reached and had vast and varied experiences on the phenomenon under study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008; Baxter & Jack, 2008). The three sites from which the participants came facilitated easy access since the group of people I wanted (EScLs) are a 'hard to reach' population. Details about the sites are contained in section 3.5.1.

In-depth qualitative inquiry has the power to draw answers from those directly affected. Dropping out is a process, not the product of a single event (Hunt, 2008). It is, thus, influenced by numerous factors that need in-depth analysis to get to its root cause/s. Furthermore, I believe that school dropout behaviour is an issue of concern in real life in any society. It affects not only schools, but also touches the hearts of parents and the nation as a whole, hence the in-depth analysis of EScLs' descriptions of the phenomenon.

Evidence from the study was, thus, robust and reliable because of the multiplicity of representation of the school dropout experiences encountered (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Yin, 2014). From Best's (2012, p. 95) perspective it was "an empirical inquiry used to investigate issues of concern within real life contexts", while from Cohen, Manion and Morrison's (2011,

p. 289) perspective, the school dropout phenomenon in Zimbabwe is "a unique example of real people in real situations". The descriptive nature of the case lent itself to a multiple case study. However, as Baxter and Jack (2008) pointed out, implementing the design was time-consuming. I found the multiple case study research design aligning well with the interpretive paradigm of inquiry guiding my study because its focus was on the illumination of participants' subjective experiences and the meaning these had for individual EScLs in the study (Yzzan, 2015). The epistemological concern in interpretive paradigm of the best way to study the school dropout behaviour in Zimbabwe was thus fulfilled (Creswell, 2012; Silverman, 2014; Starman, 2013; Yin, 2014).

Case studies can be exploratory, explanatory or descriptive (Merriam, 2009). The nature of my study naturally fits into the descriptive type of case study design. A descriptive design allowed me to investigate a phenomenon (school dropout) that is occurring in a specific context (Zimbabwe) (Huberman & Miles, 2002; Yzzan, 2015). It helped me to answer a descriptive question about how I could understand the dropout situation in Zimbabwe, based on the perspectives of those who have experienced the phenomenon. It facilitated the description of certain behaviour (s) in the situation under study (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2014), thus questions such as 'Why' and 'How' learners dropped out of school were key. I strove to put pieces of information together to determine whether or not it was possible to identify a pattern of causes, processes, impact and possible solutions to school dropout behaviour. While the descriptive perspective was clearly defined for my study, I am aware that there is a significant overlap with exploratory and explanatory perspectives (Bhattacherjee, 2012; Merriam, 2009; Yzzan, 2015). Characteristics and functions of these two perspectives may, therefore, be evident in the study.

The study was descriptive in nature in that it had both the potential to enable me to extract the unique characteristics of participants and the power to generate depth and richness in the process (Bloor & Wood, 2006). That descriptive studies end themselves to this, is supported by Silverman's (2013) observation that qualitative research has the power to analyse the experiences of individuals or a group of people under study, a necessary ingredient of social science research.

While the case study design was very relevant to my study, I am aware of limitations related to the lack of generalisability of qualitative case studies, which has always been a major criticism. My confidence, however, is built on alternative views presented by Yin (2014) and Silverman (2013). Yin proposes that the results of case studies are generalisable, but to theoretical propositions rather than populations (Yin, 2014). Silverman (2013) extends Yin's view, arguing that the results of case studies are generalisable because, as in the case of my

study, they focus on whether experiences (of school dropout, in my case) expressed by the participants are "typical of the broad class of the phenomenon", not on whether the characteristics of individual participants are typical of the (dropout) population (Silverman, 2013, p. 151). Yin and Silverman's similar argument, in the context of my study, is that the critical question about the results of a qualitative case study is not how many respondents shared similar views about school dropout, but rather whether the experiences collectively relate to the broad definition of the phenomenon.

3.4 My Role as a Researcher

In doing my research, I entered the field as an 'outsider' (Creswell, 2012, p. 208). I was keen to interact with the EScLs and understand their experiences of the phenomenon under study. I had only a general idea of some of the causes of school dropout from my readings. However, descriptions of issues directly from the participants were to be established after interactions hence, in approaching participants, I had to open my mind to understand the realities of those who had experienced the problem (Creswell, 2012; De Vos et al., 2011). In this way, my position as an outsider allowed me to attentively listen to their accounts and to respect the views of the participants as key informants. Consequently, I was able to observe the elements of the study as they unfolded. The standpoint of De Vos, et al. (2011, p. 309) that "reality is subjective and can only be constructed through the empathetic understanding of the research participant's meaning of his or her life world", is critical to the outsider role that I played in this study.

I endeavoured, throughout my study, to interpret and negotiate the meaning of the phenomenon as understood in the context of participants' social world/s. How participants described school dropout and the views they held about what could be done to minimise the epidemic based on their experiences, is how I interpreted the construct. This was important because the participants were the primary sources of information in the study and my role as a qualitative researcher was merely to interpret their views as described from their lived experiences (Willig, 2001). In this study no expression was taken for granted; nor would I, as a researcher, claim to know what notions ESLs had about the phenomenon unless the participants themselves expressed it (Lichtman, 2010). Everything was understood from the perspective of the participants. It was for this reason that the study remained qualitative throughout. In order to ensure this, I did not restrict myself to the observation of events, but rather facilitated the development of the study by taking an active role throughout. This dual role ultimately enabled me to do an in-depth analysis of the phenomenon.

Furthermore, I viewed the research process as a joint product to which I, as the researcher, and the participants, as sources, contributed equally. As I strove to ensure the

progression of the work taking place, I realised that I had another role to perform. I was the owner of the initiative (the research). I was also the only one in the joint venture who stood to benefit from it, through the acquisition of a higher educational qualification. By implication, it was my responsibility to define and design the study and, even, to select the research participants. In this regard, the participants would end up being unequal stakeholders in the research process. Being aware of all this, at the point of sampling, I exercised my responsibility by explaining to participants the purpose of my study and their rights as participants. I used Ethics guidelines of the University of Pretoria's Faculty of Education to carry out the study in such a way that it would not harm the participants in any way (Bhattacherjee, 2012; Koshy, 2010; Luttrell, 2010).

Again, as a researcher in the field of psychology, I also took heed of the need to pay attention to related psychological issues, such as emotion and prejudice, as participants narrated their stories. This was critical, especially for purposes of seeking answers to the research question relating to the impact of school dropout behaviour on those experiencing it (Willig, 2001). Furthermore, the causes of school dropout, as discussed in Chapter 2, had been agreed upon by researchers who used secondary data sources and shared certain values and beliefs (Kehily, 2004). However, in this study, the focus is on understanding the concept as lived by individuals, which is their subjective state (Huberman & Miles, 2002). This stance was the basis of my conviction that understanding the phenomenon from the perspective of the person experiencing it – in terms of how it shaped the life of the individual and, ultimately, influenced his/her education and life outcomes. As participants narrated their stories, describing events, emotions and attitudes, my role was to interpret the presented accounts, both oral and written, from the participants' perspectives. Nonetheless, I was cognisant of the fact that influences from other theories could not be ignored. Important to note is the idea from symbolic interactionism that nothing possesses meaning by itself, not even people (Haralambos & Holborn, 2013). Meaning is conferred and shared. This means that the way a learner views him/herself and defines his/her own situation has an influence on significant others around him/her due to their interaction (Giddens, 2009). In this regard, probing during interviews and focus group discussion generated an extensive body of personal opinions. This posed a challenge, one I dealt with by triangulating the methods I used to generate data, a process to be discussed later in this chapter.

My role as a qualitative researcher was to understand participants' views on the phenomenon under study (school dropout) as part of their conscious experiences (Willig, 2001). The meaning they gave to their life worlds was critical to my analysis of issues around school dropout. I realised that, as a qualitative researcher, I was the main data collection instrument and, as such, I was bringing my own baggage and bias into this research (Ortlipp,

2008). It was thus critical to the trustworthiness of my findings that, although I might not be able to control my own views, assumptions and feelings, I had to give account for them during my data analysis in order to make them visible to my readers.

3.5 Bounding the Study

Bounding my study was important as it helped me during the course of the study to constantly check if I was operating within the focus of the study, thus, avoiding issues beyond the scope of my research (Creswell, 2012; Stake, 1995: Yin, 2014).

3.5.1 Setting (multiple sites). The study was carried out in Zimbabwe at three sites purposefully sampled on the basis of homogeneity (Creswell, 2012). In the three sites, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) engaged early school leavers in different projects. The projects were monitored by the NGOs concerned, hence, "approaches to activities, although not exclusively, were to some extent similar" (Creswell, 2012, p. 208). Again, the programmes/projects were the same in that they were offered to EScLs who came from low income families, poorly resourced schools, and had dropped out of school at more of less the same grade level.

My reason for using multi-sites, thus targeting early school leavers coming from seemingly different socio-economic backgrounds, was to facilitate diversity and enable a comparison of opinions on the phenomenon under study (Bogdan & Biklen, 2010). Doing so would also facilitate a broader, detailed and critical examination of issues related to school dropout, as articulated by the youths growing up in Zimbabwe as a context of child development, during data analysis (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). The three sites are referred to as A, B and C for purposes of confidentiality throughout the study. More specifically, Site A is in Harare Metropolitan Province (the capital city), Site B is in Mashonaland East Province, and Site C is in Mashonaland Central Province. Figure 3.1 illustrates the location of the study sites on a map of Zimbabwe. Following it is Table 3.1, which gives a description of the main activities in which EScLs engaged at each site.
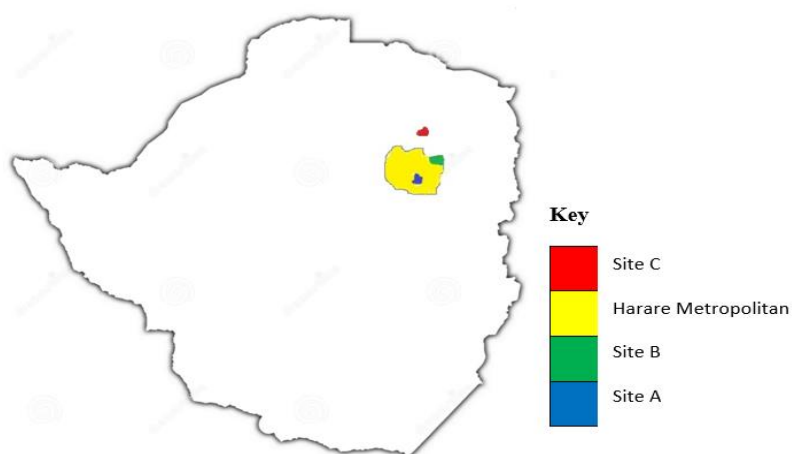
Figure 3.1: Research sites

Table 3.1: Description of study sites

Site	Location- Province	Nature of activities
A	Harare Metropolitan. The research site is situated outside one of the suburbs in the capital city.	EScLs come to the site every day if they so wish. Otherwise, Monday, Wednesday and Friday were the days with timetabled activities planned by the organisation. *Library facility for secondary school level* - EScLs interested in reading visited the library and read independently. *Gardening and poultry* - There is a flourishing garden and poultry project here and EScLs work on the 2 projects under the supervision of NGO officers at the centre *Sporting disciplines* - EScLs engage in different sports to competition levels with other youth teams outside the organisation *Bible Study* - At 1500hrs every day EScLs attend a Bible Study session at the centre before they go home. *Catch-up classes for primary school level* - EScLs at primary school level attend classes and are assisted to return to school to catch up with their peers at local schools.
B	Mashonaland East. The site is situated in a peri–urban area.	EScLs meet at the site for activities twice a week, usually on Tuesday, Thursday and Friday. *Cooking lessons* - Mainly girls are involved in the cooking project and they usually do baking and selling cakes, and other confectionary products *Dress-making* - Both boys and girls do dress-making. The big business is the making of school uniforms. *Gardening* - This is done by all. A duty roster helps to manage the youths as they work in the garden in turns. *Bible Study* - Each day the EScLs come to the site for different activities. starts with devotion.
C	Mashonaland Central. The site is situated at a primary school in a rural set-up.	The organisation offers farming-related projects. *Business Study Course* - EScLs start on a literacy and numeracy bridging course, then proceed to a business management course so as to gain rudimentary book-keeping skills and related knowledge of project implementation and assessment.

73

		Agricultural farming - EScLs are allocated pieces of land they cultivate individually or in small groups.
		Goat-rearing project - EScLs run this project as a group.
		In both projects EScLs get support by way of seed, chemicals, equipment and technical advice from the organisation.

3.5.2 Participants and sampling. Twenty-two EScLs who dropped out of school between Form 2 and Form 4 (an equivalence of Grades 10, 11 and 12 in other education systems outside Zimbabwe) were purposefully selected as "key informants" in the study (Willig, 2001, p. 53) because they were deemed to be "information rich" (Creswell, 2012, p. 206). Initially, I had targeted learners who dropped out between Forms 3 and 4 only based on my assumption that, generally, at Forms 3 and 4, learners have had a fair experience of high school life and may, therefore, be able to make a reasonable judgment of high school life. However, after my introductory visit to the NGOs, the statistics I obtained from the records showed that the majority actually dropped out between Forms 2 and 4. This pattern cut across the three sites. I therefore had to adjust and widen my initial range to include Form 2 because I needed to include persons I deemed rich in the information required to answer the research questions (Robinson, 2014; Silverman, 2014).

Robinson (2014) opines that sampling is central in qualitative research. Pertaining to sample size, therefore, I heeded Creswell's (2012, p. 207) observation that "one characteristic of qualitative research is to present multiple perspectives of individuals to represent the complexity of our world". In purposefully sampling my research participants, I used a maximal variation sampling strategy as suggested by Creswell (2012). All the participants chosen to participate in my study had dropped out of school, which was the main criteria for their inclusion, but represented different dimensions of the features of this main characteristic. For example, in terms of age, EScLs ranged between 17 and 22 years; in terms of context, they represented urban, peri- urban and rural areas, and in terms of the three sites described in Table 3.1, learners represented different dimensions of early school leaving (Creswell, 2012).

Twenty-one participants were initially selected for the study, a number which, in my opinion, warranted an in-depth study of the phenomenon. Seven participants were targeted per site, and selection was done at the individual organisations' premises. However, I ended up including eight participants from Site A because, during my selection, one of the boys requested that, although he had not picked a 'yes card' to allow him to participate, he felt he really wanted to take part. After considering that, in qualitative research, saturation is the key determining factor that should influence decisions about sample size (Creswell, 2012; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Yzzan, 2015), I allowed him to join, considering his interest and voluntary

decision to join even after selection as unique. Interest is central when working with participants in qualitative research (Silverman, 2013). Again, qualitative researchers also generally agree that the number of participants may change as the study unfolds (Creswell, 2012). Ultimately, the number of EScLs participating in my study totalled twenty-two. Tables 3.2 and 3.3 serve as summaries of the specific participant details.

Table 3.2: Site and Gender data

Research Site	Girls	Boys	Total
Site A	4	4	8
Site B	6	1	7
Site C	3	4	7
Total	13	9	22

N=22

Table 3.3: Participant identity

Pseudonym	Participant Code	Gender	Site
David	P01	M	A
Ellen	P02	F	A
Peace	P03	M	A
Mana	P04	F	A
Gibby	P05	M	A
John	P06	M	A
Natty	P07	F	A
Norma	P08	F	A
Nashe	P09	M	B
Fay	P10	F	B
Shimma	P11	F	B
Grace	P12	F	B
Sarah	P13	F	B
Tanya	P14	F	B
Purity	P15	F	B
Coolman	P16	M	C
Esther	P17	F	C
Tando	P18	M	C
Steve	P19	M	C
Brilliant	P20	M	C
Ellis	P21	F	C
Meriline	P22	F	C

Note: As indicated in Table 3.3, each participant was assigned a pseudonym and a code, which were to refer to them throughout the report of the study.

Issues related to inclusion and exclusion are critical in qualitative research (Kumar, 2014). Sampling started with the sites. I checked the National Association for Non-

Governmental Organisation (NANGO) Directory to find Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) working with early school leavers. I specifically wanted organisations that were established and registered with the government and whose operations were clearly defined. This was important in terms of ethical considerations (to be discussed later). Sites A, B and C were accordingly chosen. The next step was to define a sample pool or, as Kumar (2014) refers to it, a unit of analysis for my research study. It was from this pool that I selected participants for the study.

Key criteria which guided my selection were that participants had to have dropped out of school between Form 2 and Form 4 within the last five years from the time of my study, and that they had to show that they were interested in participating in the study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). At all the sites, I was given a compiled list with the names of youths enrolled in the respective projects. I then used the lists to identify those with the desired characteristics. At all three sites, the number of youths who indicated interest by writing 'yes' against their names was larger than the seven I had deemed adequate. Willig (2001, p. 17) points out that a qualitative researcher works with relatively small numbers of participants because "data gathering and analysis of such studies is time consuming and labour intensive". I, thus, had to employ simple random selection to involve only the required number of participants (Kumar, 2014; Silverman, 2013) because a small number also facilitates the in-depth study of a phenomenon. Silverman (2013) argues that in case studies that are qualitative, the focus is not on populations; findings therefore, were not generalized in terms of a population but in terms of theoretical propositions.

Purposive sampling was critical to this kind of study in order to obtain first-hand information on real issues affecting early school leavers as evidenced by their lived experiences. In this regard, D*eVos* et al. (2011, p. 4) emphasise that interpretive research aims to "produce explanations that are grounded in the subjective experiences of real people". In my research, the logic and power of purposive and convenient sampling derived from the emphasis that qualitative research (and researchers) place on the acquisition of an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under study (Patton, 2002), school dropout, in my case.

The distribution of participants by gender, as illustrated in Table 3.1 was determined by the numbers available for selection at each site and the willingness of EScLS at these sites to take part (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011) in the study. I anticipated that a mixed sample of boys and girls would give me an opportunity to ascertain the impact of premature school exit on both sexes. The idea of choosing participants from those interested was deliberate and important for several reasons. First, working with volunteers ensured sustainability of the study. Qualitative research demands a prolonged stay at the sites as well as the researcher

going back and forth to collect and verify data (Creswell, 2012). If participants are, therefore, not intrinsically motivated, staying on in the study could be problematic, hence the need to consider their interest in the study. Last, in terms of my research, the organisation and frequency of meetings were well managed since participants were motivated and willing to take part. I, therefore, had no problems negotiating meeting times with participants as all of them were quite flexible.

I was comfortable working with twenty-two EScLs. My concern as a qualitative researcher was to have an in-depth understanding of the construct which is school dropout (Silverman, 2013). Although I was also aware that school dropout behaviour is a national problem in Zimbabwe (Zengeya, 2011), settling for twenty-two participants helped me to "immerse (myself) in the activities of a small number of people in order to obtain an intimate familiarity with their social worlds, looking for patterns in research participants' lives, words and actions in the context of the case as a whole" (De Vos et al., 2011, p.320). It means generalisability, as highlighted earlier, would be applicable to theoretical propositions on the premature school exit phenomenon rather than on the extent to which the sample of early school leavers represented the EScL population as a whole (Silverman, 2013).

3.5.3 Unit of analysis. Individual EScLs' experiences of the school dropout phenomenon formed the unit of analysis for my study. The twenty-two EScLs selected for participation described the experiences during their secondary school life which led to their respective decisions to leave school prematurely (Baxter & Jack, 2008). As explained in 3.5.2, EScLs who dropped out between Form One and Four in Zimbabwe, and had been out of school for five years or less, were considered as potential participants. It was on the examination of the breadth and depth of this particular unit of analysis that my study was focused, limiting it to what Miles and Huberman (1994) describe as, "a phenomenon of some sort occurring in a bounded context" (p. 25).

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethical behaviour, a requirement in all research, was observed throughout the study. In my case I adhered to the ethical guidelines of the Faculty of Education at the University of Pretoria. I committed myself to a particular number of considerations. Before I even started collecting data, I applied for ethics clearance from the University of Pretoria through the Ethics Committee. This was granted in writing three months before I started on field work. Overall written permission to do the study in the field of Education in Zimbabwe was granted by the Head Office, Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education in Zimbabwe (see Appendix I). I then sought written permission from the three NGOs currently working with ESLs in the Harare, Mashonaland East and Mashonaland Central provinces to gain access to potential

research participants. For sites A and B permission was granted directly by the NGOs operating at these sites (see Appendices ii & iii). The operational basis for the project run at Site C was a primary school in a rural setting in the Mashonaland Central Province. While the project was instituted and is monitored by an NGO, the organisation does not have premises in the community where the project is running. Offices are in a nearby town, thirty-five kilometres away. The school, through the District Education Office was mandated to oversee the day-to-day running of the project, the NGO field officer periodically – usually monthly – visiting the site. Youths at this site are, therefore, supervised by the school. Because of this arrangement, permission to conduct research at Site C was sought from the Provincial Education Office as advised by the NGO (see Appendix iv).

I also had a consent form which participants aged eighteen years and older had to sign if they were willing to participate in the study (see Appendix v). If participants were not yet eighteen years of age a letter permitting them to take part in my study (see Appendix vi) had to be read and signed by their guardians or, in the case of Site A, by the organisation concerned. I explained the intent and the unfolding of the study to the participants as it is ethical for participants to be fully informed of the objectives of a study (Koshy, 2010; Robinson, 2014). To ensure that criteria regarding flexibility and freedom of participation were observed, that is, that no participant felt obliged or threatened to take part (Hendricks, 2009; Silverman, 2014), I informed them that they had the freedom to choose whether or not they wanted to take part, share information or withdraw at any point of the study without conditions or repercussions attached (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). In this respect, EScLs at the three sites were given the chance to decide to join the study, thus ensuring that my inclusion of them as participants was ethical (Kumar, 2014).

Also, even after joining, no participant was ever coerced to reveal more than they were comfortable with, either during or after a session, and throughout the entire study (Luttrell, 2010; Willig, 2001). After attending to questions from the participants, I read through the consent form, translating it into the local language as far as was possible to ensure their comprehension of issues concerned. I also read a script on the confidential and voluntary nature of the study prior to their having to sign the requisite consent documentation (Bhattacherjee, 2012; Koshy, 2010). Since their identities could not be revealed, they could not be named. To overcome this challenge, I replaced each name with a pseudonym, attaching a code to each name so that I would know which participant I was referring to in my study (see Table 3.3). I also explained to participants that there were no direct benefits from the study; but that the opportunity they were given to voice their concerns might filter into of various education stakeholder circles, creating the opportunity for them to influence those responsible for the determination of education practice and policy at various levels in the

education system. Because I had also committed myself to upholding the personality attributes or values of honesty and warmth, I conveyed, as truthfully as possible, information on the duration of the study, the length and nature of data generation sessions, and the way/s in which the generated data could or would be used. We then shared contact details with one another in order to prevent and/or address possible communication problems occurring during the course of the study.

In order to understand participants' life worlds, data was collected by using ChiShona, the language with which they were most comfortable. I made it clear to participants that they were also free to use their home language to explain, clarify and/or respond to questions (Huberman & Miles, 2002) and that, if necessary, I would translate data generated from languages used during Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and interviews into English (the language in which my thesis would be presented) after transcription. In some instances, EScLS mixed their home language (ChiShona) and English to express their thoughts. Since I am proficient in both these languages communication was not a problem.

In terms of regulations/instruments aimed at protecting the welfare of children, I adhered to general ethical rules in this regard as well as to the stipulations of Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. This article specifically relates to the Right of the child to be heard (UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989). Issues such as safety, respect and confidentiality raised in this article were adhered to during interviews and FGDs Also, the emotional safety of participants was specifically observed by making sure that discussions, especially during FGDs, did not get out of hand (Schilling, 2006).

Participants consented to the audio-recording of data during interviews and FGDs. Although the transcription of participants' verbatim accounts and concrete descriptions (Brown, 2010) was time-consuming, it contributed to the trustworthiness of my findings by effectively controlling the effect of researcher bias during the data analysis stage. The taking of photographs was allowed at Sites A and C only, enabling me to visually capture some of the projects in which the EScLs were engaged. Since "a picture paints a thousand words" (Attricher, Feldman, Posch,. & Somekh, 2008, p. 121), these photos, when accompanying the verbal data presented in my research report added another dimension to the data, one which contributed to a more in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

3.7 Data Generation Strategies

3.7.1 Steps followed. A summary of the steps I took to collect data is given in Table 3.3, providing a full description of the research site, date, activity, persons involved, and duration. Throughout the data generation period, I made sure I documented every piece of

information, including actions, observations and thoughts "accurately and in detail in order to achieve reliability" and have an audit trail of processes involved in the study (Starman, 2013, p. 36). To this purpose, I consistently kept my diary and researcher's journal updated.

Table 3.4: Data generation process summary structure

Site	Date	Activity	Participation	Duration
Site B	17/11/15	Introductory meeting with Site B admin. (Pastor in charge)	Researcher & Projects Coordinator	35mins.
Site C	20.11/15	Introductory meeting with Site C Coordinator (tele-meeting)	Researcher, Provincial manager, Field officer	40mins.
Site A	08/12/15	Meeting with Site A Director	Researcher & Site Director	37mins.
Site B	06/01/16	Choosing participants and signing contract	Researcher, 13 EScLs, Organisation rep.	1hr 15mins.
Site C	19/01/16	Choosing participants and signing contract	Researcher, 17 EScLs Field officer, School rep.	1hr 20 mins
Site A	12/01/16	Choosing participants and signing contract	Researcher, 15 EScLs, Youth leader	1hr 12 mins
Site B	16/01/16	FGD Completing Demographic Questionnaire Story writer identified and given material	7 participants 7 participants 1 participant (P13)	1hr 33mins 5sec
Site C	28/01/16	FGD Completing Demographic Questionnaire Story writer identified and given material	7 participants 7 participants 1 participant (P20)	1hr 33mins 25sec
Site A	11/02/16	FGD Completing Demographic Questionnaire Story writer identified and given material	8 participants 8 participants 1 participant (01)	1hr 06mins. 53sec.
Site A	24/02/16	Interview	P02	1hr 11mins. 41sec.
Site B	24/02/16	Interview	P13	1hr 08mins. 31sec.
Site B	24/02/16	Interview	P09	1hr 06mins. 42sec.
Site C	28/02/16	Interview	P20	1hr 03mins. 20sec.
Site C	28/02/16	Interview	P16	40mins. 41sec
Site A	03/03/16	Interview	P05	1hr 01mins. 32sec.

I collected data for my study over a period of six months, from mid-December 2015 to mid-May 2016. Data were generated by means of FGDs, interviews, written life stories, field notes, pictures and photos. FGDs and interviews were audio-recorded and supported by observations. The collection of site data happened on a rotation basis, a procedure which helped familiarise me with all three sites, enabling me to quickly pick up salient issues to be considered in the planning of subsequent site visits. This arrangement also gave me ample time to communicate and make timeous appointments with participants. I also designed a schedule to guide me in making the visits. Figure 3.4 shows the data generation schedule used. Weeks indicated in the eight-week plan did not always follow each other without breaks between them, either because dates clashed with some of the NGO activities or because I was tied up at work. I used breaks between them to make/adjust appointments, to plan and to reflect on what I had already done in terms of data collection and/or analysis.

The sites selected for my research were conveniently placed in terms of accessibility to the intended participants, procedural requirements for doing research and time management because of reasonable distances from my home (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). The relatively short distances were an advantage to me as I was able to frequently get in touch with participants and spend more time with them. The short distances, thus, facilitated more stay at the sites, albeit over many, non-consecutive days (Bhattacherjee, 2012; Bingma, 2013; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Wagner, et al., 2012). Locating/reaching selected research sites was also relatively easy since I had a fairly good idea of the geography of the sites. This was due to my prior involvement in other projects, such as the Literacy Boost Project, the location of my workplace and because I periodically visit schools in the country for purposes related to the external examination of the Diploma in Education and postgraduate student teachers. My research sites were therefore 'ideal' for my circumstances, not only because of ease of access but also because I could establish "immediate rapport with informants" (Stephens, 2009, p. 59).

During the familiarisation period, when I visited each site for introductions and subsequent planning for data generation, I made some interesting observations based on the structure of programmes offered at the three sites. First, I found that the EScLs projects at the sites were different. Site A ran gardening, poultry and sport projects, offered catch-up classes (for those interested), had a library and Bible time programme. Site B ran sewing, gardening and cookery programmes. Site C had a goat project, gave groups of EScLs pieces of land to cultivate. These projects were managed by EScLs themselves, assisted by an adult field officer from the NGO and Ministry of Education (represented by the District Education Office and the local school where the project is situated). To ensure that they would be able to utilize the skills acquired in these projects to make a living, all the participants were taken through a

basic book-keeping and business management course prior to their involvement in a particular project.

I visited the sites on days when participants came in for routine activities with the NGOs, having arranged fixed visiting times that were convenient to me and the organisations concerned while my research was still in the planning stage. At Site A, I met participants after their lunch every time I visited, since lunch marked the end of the Centre's activities for the day. At Sites B and C arrangements were more flexible.

The research activities in which I engaged EScLs at all three sites were similar (see Table 3.3 for the duration of activities and order in which they took place at each of the three sites). Specific days were devoted to specific activities, with demographic questionnaires being completed on the same day that participants took part in the FGD for their group. The writing of life stories was not, however, restricted to specific days and neither were any time limits attached to them. The three participants who wrote the stories had the whole data generation period to work on their stories but had to hand in their manuscripts some time during the last week of the period allocated for data collection/generation (see Table 3.4 for details on this). I made an appointment with each of the 'writers' to collect their manuscripts at the sites where they were situated (Site B in the case of P13, and Site A in the case of P01) and at a time convenient to them. The persons whom served as my liaison contacts at these two sites sent me text messages indicating that the story writers had finished their stories and that their manuscripts were ready for collection. As for P20 (Site C), since he was coming to town with the project coordinator on other business he called me to make arrangements on where and at what time we could meet while he was in town so that he could hand me his completed manuscript.

Table 3.5: Collection of written stories

Site	Date	Activity	Participation
Site B	08.04.16	Collecting story book	P13
Site A	12.04.16	Collecting story book	P01
Site C	26.04.16	Collecting story book	P20

3.7.2 Transcription, translation and back translation. I started with the transcription, translation and back translation process soon after my field work was completed, working with the audio-recording of each FGD and interview. The whole process took about five months, beginning late January and ending in June 2016. I played the recordings of my field work several times, transcribing these verbatim. Transcribing FGDs took longer, spending at least two weeks on each FGD since I had to identify and capture each participant's contribution. It was a mammoth task, particularly when a participant's voice was low, having

to replay each recording several times to capture all the words. After transcription and translation, I gave the recordings to a language specialist to transcribe and translate without my input so that we could later compare our transcribed and translated versions. Changes were made where necessary, particularly with regard to the interviews conducted with P09 and P16 since both spoke very softly, their voices tending to fade away gradually. Although I had throughout the recording encouraged them to speak louder, their voices remained low most of the time. The specialist and I also did a back translation together to ensure that we had not misinterpreted the original sense of what the participants had said. As to the written stories, they were typed, translated, and back translated as was the case with the FGDs and interviews. Having noticed at the point of typing that the three writers had used their real names in writing, I had to change these to the pseudonyms which I had attached to them in the FGD and Demographic Data Questionnaire (DDQ).

After the translation process, data had to be verified with participants (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Kumar, 2014). I used the month of July to organise the transcriptions and to arrange dates for verification with participants in August 2016. I fixed appointments with participants at each of the sites to ensure that the process would be systematic and without unnecessary disruptions/ delays. Table 3.5 summarises the data verification/confirmation with concerned participants in each case.

Table 3.6: Data confirmation process

Site	Date	Activity	Participation
Site C	06.08.16	Verifying interview transcription with participants Verification of story transcription	P20 & P16 P20
Site B	12.08.16 20.08.16	Verifying interview transcription with participants Verification of story transcription	P09 & P13 P13
Site A	19.08.16 26.08.16	Verifying interview transcription with participant Verification of story transcript	P02 & P05 P01

Time spent on verification depended on the pace at which the participant concerned needed to go through the transcript. I had the recording with me also, in case the participant wanted to check the transcript against what they had said during the interview. I remember P05 (Site A) commenting that he was happily surprised that he had said so much during the interview. The six interviewees being satisfied with the transcripts, no changes were made. The transcripts were now ready for the analysis. At Site C, verification of both the interviews and the story was done on the same day to limit travelling frequency to the site because of the bad road. I made sure this did not compromise the quality of the process by being on the site

early enough for me to work through the transcripts with the two participants involved without having to rush.

3.7.3 Data sources.   Data for the study was generated through qualitative methods. These included Focus Group Discussions (FGD), face-to-face interviews, documented life stories, demographic data questionnaires, field notes, reflective journals and document analysis. A summary of data generation methods I used at each site is given in Table 3.6.

Table 3.7: Summary of data generation methods used per site

Method	Site A	Site B	Site C	Total
FGD	1	1	1	3
Interview	2	2	2	6
Life stories	1	1	1	3
Demographic Questionnaire				
Field notes				
Reflective journal				
Document analysis				

The upcoming section describes the data sources and the ways in which they were used. The methods employed were closely linked and seamlessly complemented one another (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

3.7.3.1 Focus group discussion (FGD).   FGDs took place with all the participants at the three research sites. I generated an FGD protocol consisting of ten open-ended questions which were meant to guide and generate much discussion among participants (see Appendix vii). I was allowed to use the NGO premises for Sites A and B, and the school premises for site C. A convenient room was allocated in each case.

The three FGDs took an average of one and half hours each, with saturation being the determining time factor (Kumar, 2014). The FGD at Site A involved eight participants while those at Sites B and C involved seven each, slightly more than the six suggested by Willig (2001, p. 20). Even so, the group was small enough to ensure the maximum participation of all those participating in a session. Open-ended questions served as guides to discussion only: what was actually discussed, and the extent to which this was done, was as a result of debates, questioning, probing and reflection among the group members (Barbour, 2007). Since school dropout is wide-spread, FGDs enabled me to obtain a global view /opinion from the participants acting as information sources (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). FGDs served as relaxed discussion fora, especially for participants who find one-on-one encounters uncomfortable (Bloor & Wood, 2006), because they could "respond to and comment on one

another's contributions" (Willig, 2001, p. 29). My participants had the opportunity to experience how others felt, thought, and reacted to issues related to school dropout, thus, contributing to the emergence of a common understanding of the phenomenon. During the FGDs, participants were given the opportunity to construct knowledge and reflect on their thinking. I, on the other hand, acquired valuable insights from the FGDs on the ways in which the youth view adults and the world in general.

The use of FGDs was meant to boost the confidence of the participants: I assumed that, with the support of their peers and, since issues raised in the FGDs were discussed from a general perspective (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Tisdall, Davis & Gallagher, 2009), they would perhaps not be reluctant to speak up and/or stand up for what they believed in respect of issues discussed. I also decided to use FGDs because EScLs were not an organised group of people that could be reached at a particular place, such as schools or work places. Moreover, FGDs lend themselves to the comparison of contrasting ideas on school dropout. By implication, participants could respond to and comment on one another's contributions (Willig, 2001, p. 29) without fear or favour: they would not, I assumed, feel pressurized to talk, especially on sensitive issues - such as personal experiences related to family background, health and abuse-related accounts – as might be the case in one-on-one interviews. Yet another advantage was that FGDs are more naturalistic. I believed those youths who might not have been able to articulate their stories in writing and/or in individual oral narratives/ interviews, found comfort in being given the opportunity to do so in FGDs (Silverman, 2014). In addition to audio-recording the FGDs, key observations were noted and included in transcriptions, thus contributing to the emergence of a more complete record of contextual and casual relationships (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Silverman, 2014). The audio-recorded discussions also facilitated easy storage of information, thus enabling me to revisit such during the data analysis stage (Patton, 2002; Willig, 2001). The next section discusses face-to-face interviews.

3.7.3.2 Interviews. In addition to facilitating FGDs, I conducted face-to-face interviews with two participants from each of the three sites, that is, a total of six interviews. My interview protocol comprised twenty questions which were meant to guide the interaction (see Appendix viii), thus the interviews could be typified as semi-structured, and the questions as open-ended (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). Participants were given ample time and scope during the interviews to express their views with ease (Creswell, 2009; Patton, 2002). A key benefit of the semi-structured interviews was that they enabled me to react to and/or follow up on emerging or unfolding ideas and events (Robinson, 2013). Since the interviews were in-depth interviews, they helped me, as Boyce and Neale (2006) pointed out, to obtain detailed

information on participants' thoughts on and behaviors related to school dropout. I would therefore, support Merriam's (2009) claim that interviewing is a relevant means of gathering information in intensive case studies which involve a small number of carefully selected individuals.

I used purposive sampling as a means of improving my understanding of the phenomenon being studied (Silverman, 2014). I therefore targeted as information/data sources those I deemed most able to productively answer the questions (Merriam, 2009; Creswell, 2012). To facilitate this, I developed a framework of variables which I believed would help me get informants who were "richer" (in terms of information) than others (Marshall & Rossman, 2011; Silverman, 2013). Based on the results of the FGDs and the information gathered in the completed DDQs, I considered as potential interviewees those participants who had presented seemingly complex situations, who had more consistently voiced different opinions in the group discussion, and who had been out of school for a longer period (because I thought they might have more to share) and those with a family and/or school history that looked odd when compared to the histories of other participants, as potential interviewees. As I went through the variables and listened to participants' contributions during group discussions, I asked myself which of them would be most likely to provide a different opinion, or feel differently, in a different setting (outside FGD), and at a different time (Creswell, 2009; Creswell, 2012; Marshall & Rossman, 2011). I was satisfied that the interviewees on whom I eventually decided met the criteria for selection. To this end, Marshall and Rossmans' (2011) caution that since there is no perfect way to sample for qualitative interviews, the trustworthiness of the research results depends not on the selection criteria but on the researcher's acknowledgement of the influence that selected interviewees' inputs could have on the eventual research outcomes.

The inclusion of interviews as a data collection instrument/source was deemed necessary since "we cannot observe feelings and thoughts, or how people view the world and the meanings they attach to what goes on in the world" (Patton 2002, p. 341). Interviewing enabled me to unearth what is in a person's mind, thus gathering his/her story systematically in a non-threatening atmosphere (Patton, 2002; Stephens, 2009; Silverman, 2011). It also helped me to interrogate issues and make sense of the world of youths who had dropped out of school. I wanted to also explore their feelings, intentions and the way they individually interpreted their worlds. Since telling usually comes naturally, expression of deep emotions and feelings was facilitated through interviewing (Bogdan & Biklen, 2010). Finally, lengthy engagements with one person, as is the case in an interview, also facilitate the identification of other, often extremely valuable, sources of evidence (Yin, 2014).

Participants selected as interviewees in my study decided on a venue at their sites which was suitable and convenient for them. I held one interview with each of the participants, and each session lasted on average one hour (see Table 3.4 for a list of participants who were interviewed and the duration of each interview). Having audio-recorded the interviews, I transcribed, translated into English and back translated them for quality assurance purposes.

3.7.3.3 Life stories. People generally have different temperaments. Some people feel more comfortable expressing themselves through writing, painting or drawing (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). In my study, I facilitated such expression through written life stories. One volunteer participant from each of the three sites wrote a life story on his/her experiences of dropping out. I believe writing is an art and, therefore, calls for intrinsic motivation. I gave participants the opportunity to indicate whether or not they were interested in writing a life story. This was soon after the FGD. They were asked to indicate 'Yes' or 'No' on a provided card. One participant from each site - three in all – volunteered. I chose life stories as a means of data generation based on Huberman and Miles' (2002) argument that human beings are storied beings that make sense of their lives through stories because they lead storied lives. Stories have expression power; thus thoughts, imaginations, emotions and feelings can be captured. Usually, life stories are associated with ethnography, but in this study, I employed them as a data collection method. Life stories helped to complement data for the first three research questions which target participants' lived experiences. Again, life stories are suitable for studying small numbers such as is in this study. I am aware of some of the limitations of life stories such as ambiguity, subjectivity and the question of whether or not what has been written down is true. Huberman and Miles (2002) contend that in qualitative research, issues of subjectivity, personal bias and incompleteness of research are noted. However, the purpose of the life stories in this study is not to tell a true story but a value of normativity, a means of understanding the psychology of the teller, hence whatever was told was critical to my study (Huberman & Miles, 2002; Silverman, 2014). The volunteer participants wrote the stories in their own time and at their own pace and submitted them to me in the 8th and/or last week of my initial field work.

3.7.3.4 Demographic data questionnaire (DDQ). A demographic data questionnaire (DDQ) was completed by all participants prior to the FGDs, face-to-face interviews and story writing. The DDQ helped me to collect participants' biographical data, personal, family and school details (see Appendix ix). The purpose of the DDQ was to collect background information about the participants in order for me to better understand them prior to my interaction with them. I assisted participants in the completion of the questionnaire in the sense that I had to translate verbally sections that needed clarification.

As indicated above, the DDQ acted as a pre-group activity aimed at collecting background information on each participant and using this information to better understand and be able to interpret their FGD, interview or story writing responses (Kumar, 2014). Berg (2001) indicates that such special activities could be done before group discussions. The DDQ also allowed me to establish minority and/or dominant opinions ahead of the FGD and to gauge the group effect on responses during my analysis of data (Berg, 2001, pp. 124-125). During FGDs and interviews, probing was focused as I constantly referred to the DDQ for details. At this point it is important to observe that the DDQ played a critical role in enhancing the quality of data and the data generation process. The next step was to engage participants in a group discussion at each of the three sites.

3.7.3.5 Memos. Besides the DDQ, FGD and interviews, I had other complementary sources such as a researcher's diary, field notes and document analysis. It is important to mention that while these provided additional data, the field notes and reflective journal form part of the research audit trail. Keeping an audit trail was an important aspect of my data generation process (Yin, 2014), involving the keeping of records of decisions, processes and procedures to ensure that no details are overlooked.

Field notes*.* Collecting field notes enhanced my understanding of the school dropout phenomenon (Merriam; Mulhall, 2003). According to Mulhall (2003, p. 310), field notes are a rich source of data since conceptualisation of the field influences the researcher's assumptions and practices in the field. The field notes formed part of the audit trail, enabling me to systematically record activities and observations during my interaction with participants at the three sites. Interaction included informal chats with gate keepers. Each time I entered the field I recorded everything that took place, including conversations, process, activities, daily events, observations of participant interaction, behaviour and dress. In between the FGDs and interviews, I engaged in conversations with participants and personnel at the sites. These chats provided further insight and reflection on the data I was generating. I also observed their contexts in general, for example, structural features and projects in which participants were engaged. In this regard, I had the opportunity to take a few photographs, whenever and wherever it was possible and permissible. These I also analysed. My field notes, thus, took two forms – description and dialogue. Moore and Savage (2002, p. 310) opine that there are no rules as to how field notes should be presented. What may be important to write about is influenced by one's personal and professional world view. However, I took comprehensive notes so that I would be able to follow activities and decisions I made during field work (Mulhall, 2003).

Lastly, the approach I used to write the notes varied depending on the time available in the field and the nature of the activity I targeted for a particular day. Sometimes the notes were immediately written down to ensure details were not lost to memory. At other times I found it more suitable to just jot down points (personal short hand) and do the comprehensive notes later. This approach had the advantage of enabling me to reflect on events, thus enriching the notes (Tumock, & Gibson, 2001; Mulhall, 2003). The field notes, initially, were contained in small note books which I carried each time I went out to generate data. Each set of notes reflected the date, place, and activity. I later typed the notes so that they would be accessible in soft copy for commenting and coding during analysis.

Reflective journal. Keeping a reflective journal was necessary to continuous reflection, something which became increasingly critical as the study progressed. It helped me to keep track of what had already transpired and what still needed to be accomplished (Altricher, et al., 2008). Reading notes collected against research questions, revisiting data generation instruments and methods I was using became a daily exercise, helping me to focus on participants' stories/views rather than on my own views, thus reducing researcher subjectivity (Ortlipp, 2008). Keeping a reflective journal also gave me the opportunity to acknowledge some contradictions and inconsistences in the data which I would re-analyse in order to enhance the collected data (Wagner, et al., 2012).

According to Ortlipp (2008), reflective practice is critical to transparency as it helps to explain choices and decisions undertaken during the research process. The self-reflective journal also helped me to see how my own experiences values and feelings were likely to influence the data generation process. For instance, in cases where a participant narrated a story and sometimes shed tears, this would affect me and I had to seek debriefing with a colleague at work. Reading through the diary helped me as a researcher to consciously acknowledge my own feelings and not attempt to bracket them (Ortlipp, 2008). This also meant exposing bias and keeping track of them as the study unfolded so as to ensure its trustworthiness (Hendricks, 2009, p. 114-116).

Self-reflection also made me reconsider and improve my data analysis procedure. More reading after the proposal gave me insights into more qualitative data analysis procedures. Through the reflective journal I kept asking questions, such as, who would benefit from the study and how might I come to know what I needed to know. I would, thus, probe during interviews to try and see if I could answer the critical epistemological and ontological questions that kept coming to mind (Luttrell, 2010, pp. 169-162).

Moreover, keeping a reflective journal helped me to continuously improve my approach to interviews. After the first FGD, for instance, as I played the recorded session, I realised that

I needed to keep a certain degree of personal presence to guide the discussion and avoid unnecessary arguments that were not focused on the questions. In the other groups, I would provoke responses so that participants conceptualised issues and made useful connections (Ortlipp, 2008). However, during individual interviews, I tried to create a non-hierarchical relationship to allow the interviewee an opportunity to open up and express him or herself more deeply.

Overall, I came to appreciate the role that a reflective journal plays in data generation in general and in the generation of data in my study in particular. The adjustments I had to make taught me to appreciate the messiness of the research process, particularly the qualitative research process in which I was engaged. As Boden, Kenway and Epstein (2005, p. 70) put it, keeping a reflective journal helped me to avoid pretending that the results of my research emerged from a neat, seamless and linear process.

3.7.3.6 Document analysis. During my field work, I was offered some documents which I analysed. I used an open checking procedure in which, after reading, I wrote notes on the information I considered relevant to the focus of my study, particularly, the nature of activities in which participating youths were engaged at the different sites. Table 3.7 provides details of the documents I had access to and the nature of information contained therein.

Table 3.8: Documents analysed per site

Document	Nature of information	Site
Brochure	History, mandate and vision of the organisation and major activities in which early school leavers were engaged	A, C
Project records	Minutes of meetings, progress records of projects, book-keeping, attendance register, photographs of existing projects	B, C
Timetable	Specific activities the EScLs do, day and duration	A, B.C

I acquired brochures and timetables from the offices of the organizations running the projects, while project records were availed by participants' project committees. Documents were availed voluntarily in all cases. The documents were useful in the corroboration and augmentation of evidence from interviews, FGD, written stories and memos. They also helped me obtain additional valid information which enhanced my understanding of those participating in my study. Willig (2001, p. 28) confirms that documents can facilitate access to 'personal and intimate information which may not emerge in a face-to-face interview', whereas Bogdan and Biklen (2007, p.133) add that documents which participants write themselves or which are written about them - personal diaries, memos… and students' records, for example - are important sources of research data.

3.8 Data Analysis Procedure: Thematic Analysis

My analysis of data started during data generation since the study was qualitative. However, the full analysis, beginning with coding, began in September 2016 and ran through to mid- January 2017. What follows is a description of how I sorted and coded my data for analysis, the ultimate goal of my analysis being to gain a better understanding of EScLs' conceptualisation and lived experiences of the secondary school dropout phenomenon in Zimbabwe. I interpreted EScLs' perspectives particularly to establish the extent to which these departed/differed from what had already been documented on the school dropout phenomenon in Zimbabwe. How the EScLs constructed their meaning of the construct was central to my analysis. Figure 3.3 summarises the major steps I followed in analysing the data.
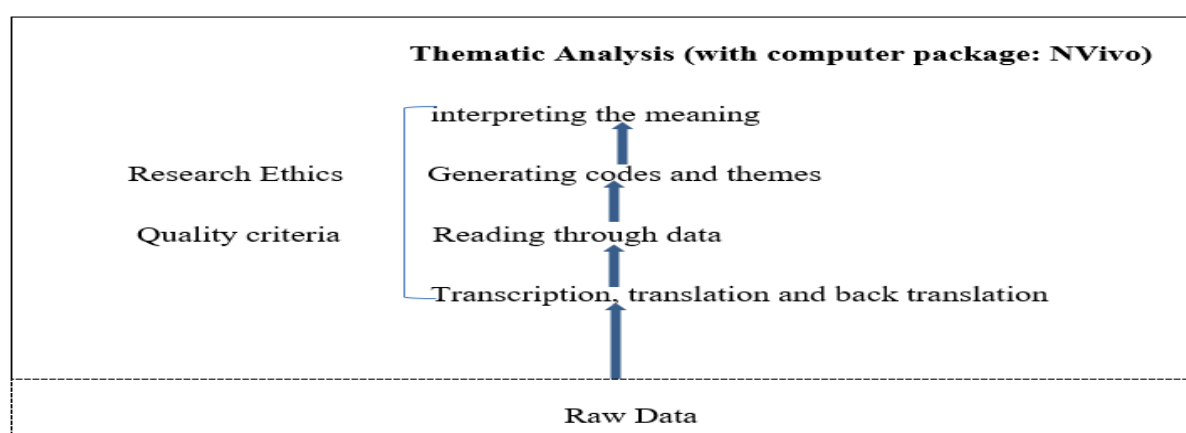
Figure 3.2: Data analysis process

(Adapted from Cresswell, 2009, p. 185)

I used thematic analysis for data processing, a decision largely influenced by its flexibility. It afforded me the opportunity to make several decisions, including the determination of sub-themes and themes, while I planned my analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). My analysis was predominantly inductive, with identified themes being strongly linked to the sets of data which I had, not to any attempts on my part to fit data into my own analytic preconceptions (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 12). I was, however, aware of the fact that, even within an inductive framework I needed to respect the influence of the theoretical framework I developed in Chapter 2. In other words, the flexibility of thematic analysis enabled me to go beyond the obvious, to examine underlying ideas and conceptualisations that probably shaped the semantic content as transmitted by participants. In this respect, I developed themes from a semantic to a latent level (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Planning for data analysis using thematic analysis was absolutely critical to my attempts to make sense of the generated chunks of information from my study. Providing me

with clear steps, the process as described in literature helped me to systematically organise the data in preparation for and during analysis in order to eventually be able to answer my research questions (Willig, 2001; Silverman, 2014). Figure 3.4 illustrates the main steps I took in my analysis of data. The finer details of the coding process are presented in Chapter 4. To code my data, I used the NVivo computer programme. Before I started with the analysis, I had to transcribe data from audio to text format. Since the bulk of data had been generated in participants' first language (ChiShona), I had to translate twelve data sets into English: three FGDs, six interviews and three life stories. My memos were already in English, thus did not need translation. A language expert was engaged to do the translation, an exercise which lasted five weeks. After this, I did back translation to make sure no information was lost during the initial translation (Creswell, 2012).

The next step involved reading and re-reading the transcriptions, sometimes going back to the audios. Braune and Clarke (2006) refer to this stage as familiarising oneself with one's own data. This was an important exercise because, as I continued to read, I was able to pick up codes and generate themes from the data, thus establishing a cornerstone for the identification of codes and themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Creswell, 2009). I carried out the coding of data myself since it was an on-going, dialectic and recursive process, not a routine task (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). At this stage NVivo helped me to create annotations which allowed me to comment on every line. These comments were subsequently developed from the descriptive to the conceptual level.

Doing the annotations by myself helped me to gain a deeper understanding of issues involved as I read and re-read the transcripts. This was also an opportunity for me to call upon my experiences with school dropout, albeit at primary school level some 20 years ago, in judging/ making sense of the data; if not, the data might be ambiguous and subject to multiple interpretations. Calling upon own experiences was part of reflexivity, a special tool I employed to monitor my own research process, considering/comparing my own biases and preferences against presented data (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). The actual coding then followed, a process in which I used both pre-defined and other categories that emerged from the totality of data sources. At this stage, according to Braun and Clarke (2006), I searched, reviewed, defined and named the emerging themes. Quotes from the data were grouped under sub-themes and themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006), and data categorised in order to identify attitudes, thoughts, feelings and motivations as displayed by participants (Huberman & Miles, 2002; Fereday, & Muir-Cochrane, 2006), the purpose being to find recurrent themes which were basically similar - thoughts, images, ideas, accounts shared by participants (Brown, 2010).

The identification of critical issues related to school dropout as given by participants through DDQ, FGDs, interviews and the memos was a major task. Coding needed time as the process was not linear but iterative (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). There was much back and forth revisiting of issues that might need clarification or more explanation and, in the process, opportunities to analyse every bit of information gathered. A lot of tabulation and editing were also involved (Kothari, 2005; Kunar, 2014). The development of codes into themes was closely checked against the research questions guiding the study. As a result, some initial categories were either discarded or modified, or new ones were developed and added according to the concerns of my study and the evidence I was looking for to answer my research questions.

3.8.1 NVivo aided process. The nature of data I had collected also determined the categories into which they were to be located. At this point, NVivo proved very useful, aiding me in the processing of data from the commented transcripts and uploading data onto Microsoft Excel for the nesting of the themes and sub-themes. The nesting of data facilitated the viewing of the data sources and references related to each theme and sub-theme. Frequencies were also shown in each case to further aid the analysis of data. Still aided by NVivo, a Master Table of themes was then generated from the Microsoft Excel presentation. The Microsoft Excel nesting and Master Table of themes are available in soft copy, making my NVivo project accessible through NVivo 10 or NVivo 11. For purposes of presentation in the thesis, I condensed the Master Table of themes into a thematic Mini-Master Table of themes, using NVivo computer software to organize the categories into superordinate, subordinate, emergent and sub-emergent themes (see Appendix x). Lastly, I used NVivo to create diagrammatic representations of my thoughts about the data sets which I presented to illustrate the various themes and sub-themes discussed in the results and findings chapters.

3.8.1.1 Why I used Nvivo. I used computer software called NVivo to go through the data coding process because it enabled me to select the aspects of data that I wanted to analyse, coded phrases that summarised the portions to be analysed, grouped codes together to form categories, and finally built themes from the categories of information (Hilal & Alabri, 2013). NVivo software is user-friendly and robust and, in the case of my study, the process of coding was systematically directed into the eventual forming of a pattern emerging from the developed themes (Rambaree & Faxelid, 2013). It thus helped me to synchronise data for in-depth analysis. In short, the NVivo programme helped me with rapid coding, thorough exploration and rigorous management and analysis (Creswell, 2012, p. 243).

Because it took less time to work out data sets, I found NVvo particularly useful to my study. It eliminated the frustration that I would probably have experienced with manual coding.

I specifically chose NVivo because, while it assisted me to do the coding systematically, I remained in control of the analysis. Its role was to help manage my thought processes and monitor how I presented my data. Put differently, it acted as an artist's desk which equipped me with the tools I needed to produce the desired outcome. I used NVivo as my sixth or extra sense as I constantly reflected on patterns that were forming as I was working through the data (Hilal & Alabri, 2013). Lastly, the interactive nature of NVivo helped me, like in a driving situation, to look out for blind spots, sharp curves and respond accordingly.

Interpreting the data was the climax of data analysis. According to Creswell (2009, p. 177), "qualitative research is interpretive research". My task was to interpret elements of the model created with NVivo in order to draw conclusions. Meaning was established against the backdrop of assumptions raised earlier in the study. This is the point at which I also compared the results of the study against the literature I had reviewed.

Engagement with data was critical throughout the analysis period to ensure in-depth levels of analysis. I therefore did a negative case analysis to gain new insights into the data (Barker, Pistrang & Elliot, 2002; Silverman, 2014). Contradictions and inconsistences were, in the process, analysed and assessed against the focus of the study (Wagner, et al, 2012). Findings were presented as thick, narrative descriptions (Hendricks, 2009; McMillan & Schumacher, 2010) which enabled me to explain why and how participants dropped out of school prematurely (Yin, 2014). In triangulating the findings that emerged from my data analysis, I focused particularly on emergent contradictions and tensions, an example of this being that, although participants complained bitterly about corporal punishment in school they did not mention this as a major reason for dropping out.

3.8.2 How I presented my findings. The perspectives of the EScLs were interpreted and organized into 5 themes which were respectively linked to the secondary research questions which guided the study. The presentation and discussion of results as well as the findings of the study revolved around these 5 themes. I extracted verbatim quotes - referred to as excerpts or exemplars (terms used interchangeably) - from the data sets which were compiled and processed with the aid of NVivo. These excerpts constituted the greater part of the results (see Table 3.4 for elements which constituted the references of the excerpts).

Table 3.9: Referencing for excerpts/ exemplars

Participant	P1, P2, P3, to P22
Site	A; B; C
Data source	FG – FGD In - Interview L/S - Life story F/N - Field notes

Each reference was represented by three elements representing (a) the participant's code, (b) the site where the participant took part, and (c) the source of the data as shown in the examples below.

Excerpt from FGD: P1/A/FG

Excerpt from interview: P 9/ B/ In

Excerpt from a life story: P20/C/LS

Excerpt from field notes: P8/A/FN

The codes for the three categories of the reference appear as indicated in Table 3.7

3.9 Quality Criteria/ Verification

Rigour in interpretive research is ensured by considering a number of elements as given by Silverman (2014), namely credibility, dependability, transferability and confirmability.

3.9.1 Credibility. In my study, the quality of data collected was ensured through variuos ways. Tiangulation of data collection methods and the use of multiple sources of data led to a fuller understanding of the phenomenon (school dropout) being studied (Patton, 2002; Bogdan & Biklen, 2010; Lichtman, 2010). It ensured robust, rich and comprehensive findings. During data collection, credibility was ensured through debriefing, accurate recording of interviews, narrations and observations (Hendricks, 2009, p. 4). These in-depth descriptions, coupled with verbatim transcriptions of interviews and FGDs increased the credibility of my research findings. Simultaneous data generation and analysis further enhanced the adequacy of data collected and further ensured its trustworthiness (Berg, 2001).

Furthermore, I involved the participants in member checking in order to validate the data collected, thus, judging the credibility of the results. According to Flick (2014), this is important to the validation of themes as representative of collected raw data (Kumar, 2014; Bogdan & Biklen, 2007) as well as to the triangulation of data sources (Gibson & Brown, 2009).

During data presentation, citing verbatim narrations by participants from audio-recordings of interviews and FGDs enhanced the trustworthiness of the data generated (Creswell, 2012; Kumar, 2014; Yin, 2014). Contradictions and discrepancies were exposed and more critical analysis of issues sought (Patton, 2002; Wagner, et al, 2012). These techniques/ procedures assisted me to to enhance the richness of information collected, thus, gauging the accuracy of the study findings.

3.9.2 Dependability. Ensuring consistency and replicability of the findings of my study was important. I produced thick descriptions of the research processes involved in my study through detailed recording of all activities, without exception. Several processes were involved. Prolonged time – spanning close to five months - spent on research sites enabled

me to generate adequate and reliable data (Yin, 2014). Emergent new leads were explored through probing during interviews and FGDs (Yates, 2004), with adequacy of data determined by saturation. I kept an audit trail of every step I took. I also kept detailed field notes and the dates of the field work. Translation of the findings into English took place after I had had time to read and re-read the transcriptions against the audio recordings. Two translators then went through the same process for validation purposes and to check for correctness of information (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007), picking out errors, especially of either commission or omission, highlighting and correcting these. The back and forth process during transcription and translation was rigorous (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006), covering a period of two months.

3.9.3 Confirmability. In my study, it was also important to ascertain that the findings were fully supported by the data sets I had collectd. Participants needed to confirm my interpretation and explanations of the information they had given. I asked some of the participants at each site to read the transcribed FGD with me before sending these to translators (Kumar, 2014; Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). I wanted the participants to identify anything that they did not agree with and/or that they would like changed on the original transcription. I found that verifying FGD transcriptions was rather difficult as they contained different voices: participants could sometimes not remember what was said by everyone. I therefore moved to interview transcriptions after I had gone through randomly selected portions of the FGDs with them. With the interview transcriptions, I allowed each interviewee to read through and indicate in a different ink what he/she wanted adjusted/ changed/corrected. Finally, I made the necessary changes and kept both the revised and original versions. This verification exercise was important in order to avoid misrepresentations (Kumar, 2014), enabling me to give my inquiry what Bogdan and Biklen (2007) calls "ecological validity". Doing so ensured that the form in which findings, interpretations and reporting is presented is useful and credible to those being researched. Lastly, to ensure that the findings and recordings are also understood by the researched for audit purposes, data should, moreover, be in a language with which the researched are familiar and comfortable. As indicated earlier in the chapter, interviews were conducted and captured in ChiShona, a common language and mother tongue of all the participants.

3.9.4 Transferability. I provided a rich and detailed description of the context being studied for purposes of applicability of the study to other contexts (Greene, 2010). Context, in this study includes the details of participants as captured in the demographic questionnaire. Other detailed descriptions and/or explanations in my research report include a clear description of my data generation and analysis methods, processes and procedures as well as the scope and duration of the study and a description of the research sites. The detail in

these descriptions and explanation would, I hope, assist other researchers who may want to replicate the study in similar or different contexts. To further assist such ventures the processes and procedures used in my study and explained in this chapter are graphically summarized in Figure 3.3.
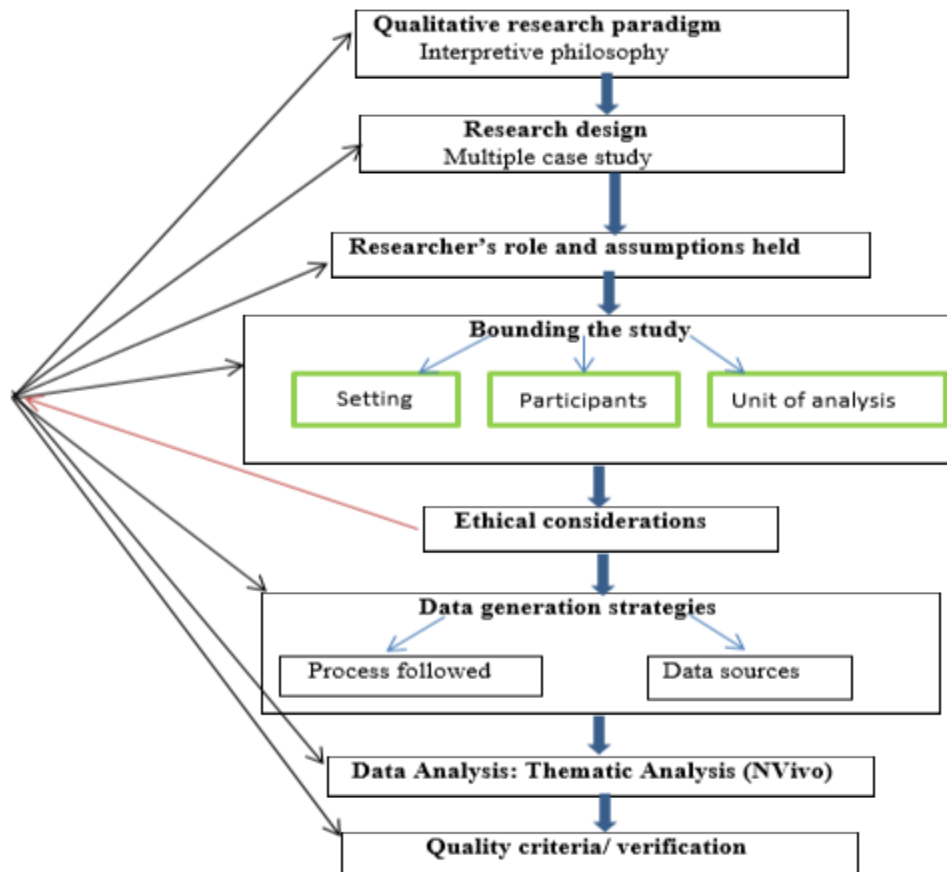
Figure 3.3: Structure of research methodology

3.10 Summary

In Chapter 3, I outlined the methodology used to carry out the research. The interpretive philosophy, the thread of which was evident throughout the study, in principle guided me in my attempt to investigate the school dropout phenomenon. The principles informing ethical research were observed throughout the study, primarily to ensure participants' safety and the trustworthiness of my findings. I employed a multiple case study design deemed suitable to the qualitative approach I adopted in the study. Qualitative data collection processes included focus group discussions, interviews and written life stories. Data generated in this way were processed as emergent themes with the aid of the NVivo computer package which resulted in easier, faster and more reliable data analysis. Lastly, specific criteria were established to ensure the trustworthiness of the study findings. The results and findings of the study which emerged from the processes and procedures described here are reported in Chapter 4.

Chapter 4

Results and Findings: Conceptualisation and Triggers of School Dropout

4.1 Introduction

The purpose of my study was to understand the school dropout phenomenon in Zimbabwe from the perspectives of early school leavers (EScL). The results of the study are presented and discussed in chapters 4 and 5 to ensure a comprehensive discussion of the findings. In Chapter 4, I present the demographic data of the 22 EScLs who participated in the study. This presentation is followed by a discussion of two themes, namely a conceptualisation of school dropout, and triggers of school dropout in Zimbabwe. Under each theme, I present EScLs' perspectives as indicated in the analysis of collected data.

Since my study is interpretive in nature, the meanings the participants attached to their experiences of the phenomenon formed the basis of my data analysis. In this regard, I presented my results in quadruple style (triangulation). Exemplars/excerpts from focus group discussions (FGDs), data generated during interviews, participants' written life stories and field notes are cited as evidence alongside the verbatim responses of participants. The reference code at the end of each excerpt represents the participant, site and source of data (FG, Interview, Life Story or Field Notes). For the details of the referencing style for data presentation, see section 3.8.2 / Chapter 3. Where deemed appropriate, I also use pictorial representations, including figures created by NVivo to enhance verbal descriptions and explanations. In the discussion, I engage in descriptive, conceptual and inferential analyses of the results, also including confirmation, contradictions and silences in the results when compared to findings reported in existing literature.

4.2 Demographic Profile of the Participants

Table 4.1 summarises the data I collected about the participants. Variables of the 22 participants were analysed to provide background information on their experiences. These include data on the age, development contexts, socio-economic status and dropout point of the EScLs as discussed in Chapter 3. The rationale informing the inclusion of demographic data was that EScLs do not exist in a vacuum: they are social beings situated in both physical and social environments, hence the reciprocity of interaction influences their behaviour (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). The demographic variables were not only derived from the data they provided but also from some components on variability and centrality of findings by other researchers as indicated by references to demographics contained in some sections of the results chapters. Demographic information was also used for NVivo classifications during my data analysis process, thus aiding me in the creation of graphical charts, comparative and cluster analysis.

Table 4.1: Demographic profile of the study participants

Variable	Variable attributes	Frequency (No. of participants)	%
Site of data collection	Site A	8	36.4
	Site B	7	31.8
	Site C	7	31.8
	Total	22	100.0
Gender	Male	9	40.9
	Female	13	59.1
	Total	22	100.0
Age range of participant	15-18years	13	59.1
	19-21years	8	36.4
	22-25years	1	4.5
	Total	22	100.0
Status of participant	Orphaned	17	77%
	With parents	5	23%
Home location	Urban high density	12	54.5
	Rural	8	36.4
	Farm	2	9.1
	Total	22	100.0
Main source of income for the family	Informal earnings	12	54.5
	Farming	8	36.4
	No income	2	9.1
	Total	22	100.0
Class/form last attended at school	Form 2	15	68.2
	Form 3	5	22.7
	Form 4	2	9.1
	Total	22	100.0
	Total	22	100.0
Post dropout time	One to 2years	6	27.3
	2 to 3 years	9	40.9
	3 to 5 years	7	31.8
	Total	22	100.0

Source: Participant's demographic questionnaire

4.2.1 Participants' gender and age range. Table 4.1 includes information pertaining to the gender and age range of the EScLs who participated in the study. I worked with the same 13 (59. 1%) females and 9 (40.9%) males throughout the study, 13 (59%) of whom were in the 15 to 18-year age range and 8 (36%) in the 19 to 21 years one. Only one (5%) was in the 22-year and beyond age range.

The study had more females (13) than males (9), confirming observations made in previous studies in Uganda and Kenya (Kibugi et al., 2013; Sang et al., 2013; US Aid, 2011),

as well as locally (Dakwa et al., 2014; Mawere, 2012; Mhizha & Muromo, 2013), that girls were more prone to school dropout than their male counterparts at secondary school level.

4.2.2 Participants' nurturing environments. The information provided in Table 4.1 illustrates the context in which the participants claimed to have spent the greater part of their lives up to the time of their participation in the study. In that regard, 12 (55%) participants grew up in an urban setting, more specifically, in a high-density suburb, 8 (36%) were reared mostly in a rural set-up, while 2 (9%) had grown up and spent most of their time on a farm.

Participants' socio-economic development contexts in general reflect the significant levels of poverty associated with Zimbabwe's economic status. No one came from an affluent family background since most family heads were not gainfully employed (Table 4.1: Main source of income). This result confirms the findings of local and international research studies that there is a strong correlation between low socio-economic family status and school dropout (Chinyoka, 2014; Dakwa, 2014; Ramsay, 2008; Rutter, 2005; Zionek-Daigle, 2010).

4.2.3 Early school leavers' dropout points. A pattern emerging from my analysis of research data pertaining to dropout points of the studied EScLs, was that the majority (68%) of them quit at Form 2 (Grade 9), junior secondary school level in Zimbabwe. From the participants' viewpoint, dropping out of school at Form 2 was common, for numerous reasons, which are discussed later in this chapter.

The results on points of dropout confirm, to a large extent, findings from previous studies. That the highest dropout rate is at Form 2 confirms the findings of a study by Sang, Koros and Bosire (2013, p. 251), which found that the main reason to challenges related to adolescence stage in Kenya were "premarital pregnancies, peer influence, poor discipline and early marriages". In addition to those who dropped out at Form 2, other EScLs in this study dropped out at different points, such as Forms 3 and 4. What I inferred from the results concerning the dropout level was that at junior secondary school level one would be generally regarded as having attained sufficient literacy and numeracy skills, and was mature enough to enable them to function in society. These inferences are confirmed by my data. (P01/A/FN>). said, for example,

> *aa, Form 2 your parents say you can now read, so give chance to your sibling".* *(*P21/C/FN>) implicitly confirmed this: "*Some parents say that at least you have gone into secondary school; you know what it is like so because of money you have to drop out. It is not like you did Grade 7only, you can look for a job or buy and sell to help us.*

Research data closely related to data on context in this study indicate that, while participants were drawn from three different geographical areas, a significant number 17 (77%), which constitutes the majority, were orphans (Table 4.1: Status of participants). The nature of orphan-hood, however, varied, with some participants having lost one parent while others had lost both. This situation had several implications on causes that led to leaving school prematurely as most responses by participants showed that orphan-hood was the most common reason for dropping out. This finding confirms those of Gray and Hacking (2009), as indicated in my literature review, namely that graduation rates were adversely affected by school dropout, with learners concerned are usually those already suffering a disadvantage such as orphan-hood.

4.2.4 Participants' distribution and their contribution in the study.

Table 4.2: Participants' contribution in the study

Pseudonym	Gender	Site	Participant Code	FGD	Interview	Life story
David	M	A	P01	✓		✓
Ellen	F	A	P02	✓	✓	
Peace	M	A	P03	✓		
Mana	F	A	P04	✓		
Gibby	M	A	P05	✓	✓	
John	M	A	P06	✓		
Natty	F	A	P07	✓		
Norma	F	A	P08	✓		
Nashe	M	B	P09	✓	✓	
Fay	F	B	P10	✓		
Shimma	F	B	P11	✓		
Grace	F	B	P12	✓		
Sarah	F	B	P13	✓	✓	✓
Tanya	F	B	P14	✓		
Purity	F	B	P15	✓		
Coolman	M	C	P16	✓	✓	
Esther	F	C	P17	✓		
Tando	M	C	P18	✓		
Steve	M	C	P19	✓		
Brilliant	M	C	P20	✓	✓	✓
Ellis	F	C	P21	✓		
Meriline	F	C	P22	✓		

Table 4.2 shows the distribution of the twenty-two participants per site and their specific contribution in the study. The names are not the participants' real names but pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality. The summary gives a complete picture of the data generated, at a glance. The 22 selected EScLs participated throughout the study; the ticks in Table 4.2 show the specific activities in which each participant took part across the three major data generation activities (FGD, interview, life story). The activities that took place at each site included an FGD, two semi-structured interviews and a written life story. Participants' contribution in these is referred to where necessary as the chapter unfolds.

4.3 Themes and Categorisation of Results

Having analysed and discussed demographic results, I focus on specific themes, identified in the analysis of generated data, and their categorisation in the rest of the discussion in this chapter. Five themes were systematically developed after establishing patterns / trends in all data sets/ data collection methods (FGD; Interview; Life Story; Field Notes), thus, they reflect triangulation of data. Details of the themes and their categorisation, including the annotations done at descriptive and conceptual levels with the assistance of NVivo computer package, are contained in the Mini Master Table of themes (see Appendix X). The NVivo Mini Master Table also contains details of the percentage contribution of each data set and specific extracts of data from each set and even individual participant to each theme. The discussion in the upcoming sections, Sections 1 and 2 proceeds as guided by the mini-master table of themes.

Section 1

4.3.1 Theme 1: Conceptualisation of school dropout. The first theme developed from the analysis of data was the EScLs' conceptualization of the school dropout construct. Three sub-themes, illustrated in Figure 4.1 in the EScLs conceptualisation of the school dropout phenomenon in Zimbabwe, were derived from this theme, namely deprivation, endured memories and equality versus equity. EScLs described school dropout as a disturbing situation which deprived them of opportunities to exploit their potential and realize their dreams. Recalling their dropout from school was a painful experience to them, triggering memories of school life which were both enjoyable and boring. They also viewed school dropout as a clear indication of inequity in the education system and society in general.

Figure 4.1: Conceptualisation of school dropout by EScLs

(*Source: Adapted from: kaieteurnewsonline.com*)

Figure 4.1 illustrates that EScLs, in conceptualizing school dropout, were more concerned with the perception that they were deprived of privileges and the retrieval of endured memories. Furthermore, a synthesis of their responses resulted in a discourse on equality versus equity in their conceptualisation of the construct.

4.3.1.1 Sub-theme 1: Deprivation. Early school leavers understood school dropout as deprivation in their lives. Saunders, Naidoo and Griffith (2008) describe deprivation as a lack of socially perceived necessities. According to Saunders et al. (ibid), the construct has emerged as a way of identifying who is missing out on what the community regards as the essentials of life. They observe, moreover, that deprivation is a broad construct encompassing life-threatening living conditions which can be environmental, social or emotional. Figure 4.2 summarises issues raised by participants which constituted their meaning of school dropout in terms of their sense of deprivation.
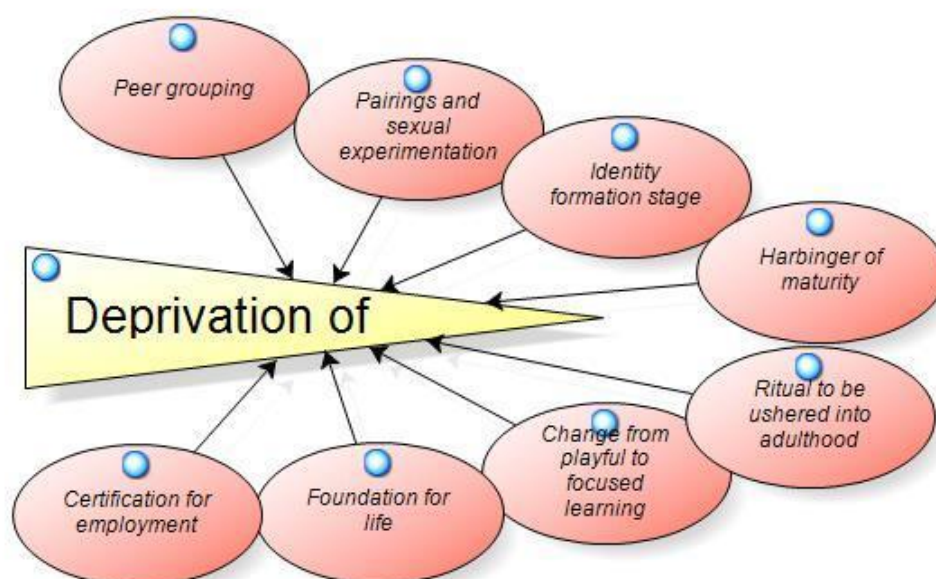
Figure 4.2: Understanding school dropout as deprivation

The eight elements constituting their perception of deprivation were expressed by participants in terms of their school dropout experience. Excerpts reflecting the views of the EScLs in the study, explaining each element, are cited in the sections below.

Deprivation of certification for employment. The results of this study indicate that EScLs perceived dropping out of school as a form of deprivation in that it deprived them of the kind of certification they needed for employment. Attainment of a certificate upon completion of Form 4 was regarded as critical to securing a job. The main argument presented by ESLs was that lower levels of education, like Grade 7, (Zimbabwe Primary school exit class) cannot qualify someone for meaningful employment. Dropping out of school, therefore, deprived them of a qualification to compete on the job market. Two EScLs, namely P16 and P18, respectively expressed the following views.

> *Secondary education to me it is like going for Form 4 and you get your certificate and wherever you go and people say they need a certificate, you will have it, you might use it to get a job and yet a person with a Grade 7 certificate cannot (get the job)* P16/C/FG>.

> *Secondary school education can help you get a job in Zimbabwe these days that we are living in. You cannot get a job with a Grade 7 certificate, you have to use the secondary school certificate* P18/C/FG>.

Both these participants (P16 and P18) emphasized the importance of certification at Form 4 for employment particularly in Zimbabwe. They viewed school as the source of

livelihood, hence failure to get a certificate at secondary school level results in a loss of opportunities to climb the social ladder. P02 and P09 further emphasised the importance of certification from secondary school for employment. They said respectively:

School is about my life and… you cannot do anything without school. School is good for everyone. Even the jobs that are being done these days, they require those with school. A person without education will never get a better job' (P02/A/In>).

If I had finished school and passed I would be able to go places; you know if you are educated you have better chances especially in this economy of ours which now needs educated people. It is now seldom for you to find a job without education, there are no companies taking people without education, it is not possible. It now needs you to have your papers and you will confidently work…(uhm) (P09/B/In>).

Deprivation of a foundation for life. Participants also understood school dropout as a deprivation of a foundation for life. My findings indicate that EScLs' perception was that the deprivation of certification for employment created a weak foundation for life. Secondary school level was described as a period of preparation for later / adult life, the deprivation of which results in the loss of a well-prepared life. Three excerpts from an FGD at Site B serve as evidence, with participants saying: '*…umm secondary school? In secondary school we would be learning other things that we will encounter in future' (*P09/B/FG>). P13 regarded secondary school as a process towards maturity when she said, '*Secondary school hey, is a foundation for life because you will now know what you want to do in the future….'* (P13/B/FG.>).

A similar perspective describing secondary school as a training ground for future life, is reflected in P14's statement that, '… y*ou learn more about life. In secondary that is where someone goes when they are now preparing for their future' (*P14/B/FG>). P 20 added that, '*… sometimes at secondary school you may learn proper habits or moral uprightness and how to relate with others so that you live in harmony with other people' (*P20/C/In>).

P20's statement reflects the perception that secondary school life shapes one's moral character and equips the youth with social skills which enable them to become acceptable members of society. The social benefits of secondary education are that it helps build societal values. The tone of the language used in this participant's response suggested that s/he regards schools as being of great value, hence dropping out deprived the person concerned of the said benefits. Thus, all in all, EScLs viewed school dropout as depriving them of the opportunity to focus on life.

Deprivation of focused/ meaningful learning. Secondary education was also associated with gaining more knowledge/ information. Results from FGDs indicate that secondary school education is significantly more advanced and, therefore, more influential in determining one's social status than primary school education is. The two excerpts below reflect views from P 20 and P 21.

> *The learning at secondary school is advanced and has greater depth. Mmm… at secondary school you know what life is and the reason why you are going to school. …In secondary school your brain would have developed and the education from many subjects here makes you … more respectable in society and you can be rich … (P20/C/FG>).*

> *The subjects that you learn at secondary and primary school are different. At primary school you learn four subjects but at secondary school you learn more subjects than you learn at primary school so you become more skilled (P21/C/FG>).*

Succinctly, the EScLs perceived dropping out as depriving them of a stage of their life in which they could have been prepared for their future. This perception is closely related to the argument presented for secondary education as a foundation for life. EScLs felt that by dropping out of school, one is deprived of more focused and purposeful learning.

Deprivation of harbinger of maturity. Referring to secondary school completion as a harbinger of maturity in the context of the study was informed by participants' views of education as the element most needed to access adulthood, which is regarded as an important stage of life. They argued that maturity begins and is moulded in secondary school and hence, having been deprived of the opportunity to proceed to secondary school, they were not exposed to some of the maturational processes critical to one's preparation for an approaching significant stage - adulthood. The excerpts below reflect similar views shared by P15 and P19 respectively in two separate FGDs.

> *At secondary school, a person will be better matured. They will now know extra more than in primary school. Once you have reached secondary school hey, you will know that you are maturing. Sooo……(uhm . …and your brain would have developed at secondary school than at primary (P15/B/FG>).*

> *At secondary school, a person will be better matured. They will now know extra, more than in primary school. I will now be learning knowing what you are doing (P19/C/FG>).*

Deprivation of identity formation stage. Dropping out of school was also conceptualised as a severance from identity formation processes. EScLs viewed secondary

school as a stage in which a person is helped to realise his/her potential. They claimed that it is at secondary school that one begins to be aware of one's strengths and weaknesses. Here is what the participants said.

*Uhm, I just want to try (yes) secondary school is when you now know real things. Like for me it's the time I begin to know the real P08, the person I am. I begin to mingle with others and start to know what is good and bad when I am at the stage (*P08/A/FG>).

*Ah, Eeh, you begin to know the reason why you are going to school. You begin to realise your destiny, be it in sports or in education, you would begin to know your position that for example, eeh, mine is in playing the ball' (*P01/A/FG>).

*Also, you can, as I said earlier that, you begin to know your destiny that I stand here, eeh, and knowing your ambition in life, to say I want to do engineering, scientist and a doctor; that is when it starts' (*P02/A/FG>).

Their arguments reflected their perception that one's understanding of life in general becomes clearer and knowledge of oneself is highlighted through secondary education. P02's statement, in particular, indicates that she believed that at secondary school there is improved understanding of the self and one's goals in life.

Deprivation of the opportunity to form pairings and experiment sexually. My findings indicate that EScLs felt that dropping out of school disturbs the formation of social relations and sexual exploration as expressed by P03 and P05 in the following excerpts.

*In secondary school, I think it is all about experimenting and influencing. When you come to school, you would think that you will be a backward person if you do not have a boyfriend. You would like to see what is in those relationships… (*P03/A/FG>).

*I would like to add that, as a person starts to mature at secondary level, we start to have some feelings in our bodies and that issue of being seen as you are backward, no one wants to be associated with that because the white people say practice makes things perfect, boys and girls want to experiment. So, when you drop out you leave all that (*P05/A/FG>).

According to EScLs, therefore, issues associated with adolescence and sexuality take their toll and indulgence into sexual relationships characterise the stage. The statement by P05 above shows that dropping out at secondary school level was conceptualised as a counter-change, which happens during a major stage in their development. It was understood

as an interference with the process of forming sexual relations and pairing with members of the opposite sex (Harwood, Miller, & Vasta, 2008; Sang, et al., 2013).

Deprivation of Peer grouping processes. Again, closely related to identity formation, pairing and sexual experimentation, EScLs expressed dropping out of school as interfering with peer grouping processes. To the EScLs, it interfered with the formation of a clear definition of peer reference groups as illustrated in the following exemplars.

> *As for me I think that there is a lot of pleasure in secondary school and when you drop out you miss all that. It is time to make friends You may forget the reason why you are going to school. …you can easily lose focus (* P08/A/FG>*).*

> *If you are easily influenced, you would realise after some days that you have been playing and abusing your own time. …haa it is not good but at that time you like it so you miss those moments now* (P06/A/FG>).

EScLs, in the two excerpts, described secondary school level as a period characterised by unmonitored freedom. According to them, the stage offers them opportunities to get off parents'/adults' hooks. They indicated missing experiences like peer pressure, experimentation with life and, as a result, tendencies to misbehave after dropping out.

To sum up, participating EScLs experienced and expressed deprivation in several ways. From the views they expressed, I established through my study that lower levels of education like Grade 7 (Zimbabwe Primary school exit class) are not regarded as qualifying someone for employment. Their comments reflected positive attitudes regarding the attainment of the Form 4 Certificate as an entry requirement to, or pre-requisite for, accessing good jobs in today's market (Huisman & Smits, 2009; Ramsay, 2008). My research findings, therefore, indicate a sense of admiration regarding the value of completing secondary school education. They confirmed it as both life and a door to life (Sleep, 2010).

My findings indicate, moreover, that the EScLs' view of education is that it enhances a person's self-esteem, since getting a job, according to the EScLs in the study, ensured satisfaction and stability in life. Pre-mature school exit was, therefore, a great loss. The study also established that the EScLs clearly understood the purpose of going to school. They emphasised that school had the capacity to lay a firm foundation for life and that one might not make it in adult life if the foundation (completion of Form 4) was weak or not secure enough (Lewin, 2009; Muwagga, Itaaga, & Wafula, 2013). By implication, according to them, finishing school has direct impact on one's life outcomes.

During interviews and FGDs responses, it emerged that just going through Form 4 with or without passing made a difference compared to someone who never experienced this level of education, hence EScLs were not concerned about passing the level. In the study, secondary education was also associated with gaining more knowledge/information. Results from FGDs showed that secondary school education is significantly higher and therefore influential in determining one's social status than primary school education. According to Maslow (1968), such expressions could be described and categorized as esteem needs and the need to belong. Education or schooling in this regard is a social ladder to greater achievements and facilitates self-actualisation (Crocker, Brook, & Niiya, 2006). It was also revealed that at secondary school one begins to reason at a higher level as argued in Piaget's theory of cognitive development (Lindon, 2010; Santrock, 2011). Succinctly, the EScLs perceived dropping out as being deprived of a crucial stage never to be missed out.

Dropping out of school was, again, understood as interference in the process of forming sexual relations and pairing with members of the opposite sex (Harwood, Miller, & Vasta, 2008). This concern, however, came predominantly from Site A, FGD. In Sites B and C similar concerns were raised but understood as provoked by adults around them. The differences in perspectives between Sites A and B & C could be explained by the fact that probably Site A youths were influenced by urbanisation, unlike those from Sites B and C who had a largely rural orientation. Secondary school level, in the exemplars, is also presented as characterised by peer pressure, experimentation with life, and inquisitiveness. It was viewed as a time during which youths begin to form relationships with opposite sex. The need to belong is strong, hence, conformity to group / peer demands such as having a boy/ girl friend at school. The issue of schools offering Guidance and Counselling (G&C) was brought in as a positive tool to redirect the behaviour of youths. They generally agreed that G&C helps learners realise the need for a focus in life (Gatsi, Bondai & Manyame, 2016; Mhizha & Muromo, 2013). It was, however, evident from the debate amongst the FGDs, particularly at Sites A and C, that this strategy helped only those willing to achieve positive learning outcomes; for others, it falls on deaf ears. The EScLs indicated that some issues discussed may be controversial particularly relationships with opposite sex. From this, it was reasoned that the EScLs would have a challenge of defining the peer reference group with which to identify. The EScLs, thus, revealed that dropping out of school at secondary school severed the identity formation processes which, ultimately, compromised one's development of a healthy self-concept (Margolis & McCabe, 2006).

The tone of language used in the responses reflects the immense value they attach to schooling. EScLs demonstrated a sense of helplessness, coupled with a strong desire to

complete school. It, thus, created the impression that without school one loses many things including knowledge, wisdom, focus in life and a meaningful future. It also implied a sense of loss - of dignity, integrity, peacefulness and healthy relationships (Marsh & Martin, 2011). Moreover, its social benefits might not be duplicated anywhere else in life (Boakye-Boaten, 2009; Lewin, 2009; Sleep, 2010). Be that as it may, there are issues causing controversy in the final analysis of the EScLs' viewpoints on deprivation. There seems to be indications of efforts to justify their failure in life, therefore, not to do much to look for alternatives after prematurely leaving school. From their perspective, EScLs seemed to have blocked out any consideration of other alternatives. There is a very clear norm in the responses to credit education as the key to everything in life (Huisman & Smits, 2009; Ramsay, 2008). This thinking seems to underestimate the ability of those who may never get an opportunity to attain secondary education. It is true that some people have managed life reasonably well without secondary school education. I also believe that the same seemingly narrow-mindedness might eventually affect the EScLs' readiness to learn new survival strategies.

4.3.1.2 Sub-theme 2: Endured memories. EScls' expressed their conceptualisation of school dropout through by recalling their memories of and reflecting on their school days' experiences. These memories comprised a mixed bag of experiences. Participants remembered positive experiences related to their achievements during that time as well as activities they enjoyed and did not enjoy. They shared the unpleasant experiences they remembered which had had resulted in negative feelings about certain aspects of schooling. Incongruences also featured in their shared memories. These four aspects, as shared by participants are illustrated in Figure 4.3 and the details of each one are is described and discussed in the rest of this section.
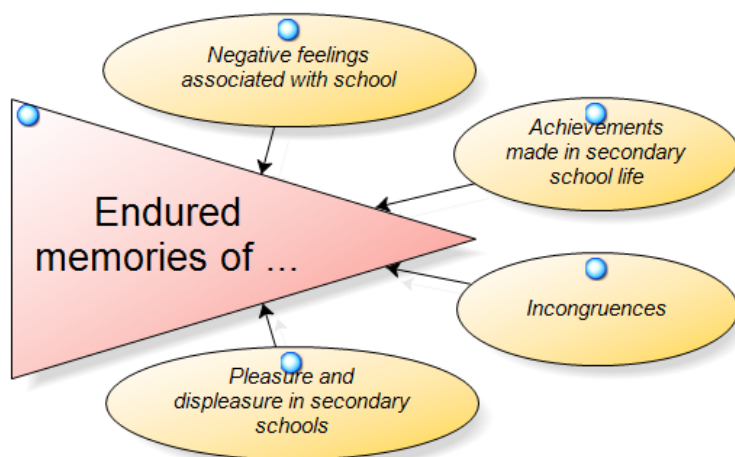
Figure 4.3: Summative representation of EScLs' endured memories

Participants indicated that, on the one hand, the reflections made them realise how much they were missing while, on the other hand it also provided them with some kind of therapy as they recalled some of their achievements and 're-lived the good old days' in their narratives.

Understanding school dropout by reflecting on secondary school achievements. *A*lthough the term, 'achievement', implies positive development, the mere act of remembering the secondary school achievements had negative effects on the participants' lives. It was evident from the results that, instead of deriving pleasure from these memories, the recalling of some of the achievements of which the memories that had remained with the EScLs' since they left school reminded them of how much they were missing in their lives due to having dropped out. They expressed a sense of loss as they reflected on their efforts and capabilities during their secondary school days. Recalling the academic aspect of their school days, participants shared the following.

> *I was someone who was good at school (alright), I thought, if I get educated and pass I might get employed so that I can take care of my parents or even my family and fulfil all the wishes that I had (*P20/C/In>)*.*

> *Uhmmm, what I can tell people is that when I was at the secondary school I passed all the nine subjects I was doing at Form Two. That is one of the things I remember when I was in Form Two during the second term. First term in Form Three, I wrote my exams and passed again…* (P16/C/In>)*.*

With regard to their experiences outside the classroom, EScLs indicated several achievements related to sports, clubs and leadership as illustrated in the following example.

A-ah, the thing that I achieved while I was in secondary school is that I was a person who, when it comes to talking to people, I was able to talk in public, I started to learn to socialize with people (P13/B/In>).

EScL participants also intimated damage to their capacity for self-determination, positive regard for self, and high self- esteem. Doing well in school was a great source of motivation, giving them hope for a better future (Huisman & Smits, 2009). They cited academic achievement as a major goal in school life. Their short-lived achievements had boosted their self-efficacy, esteem and confidence, all of which they lost when they prematurely exited from school. To a large extent, P20's strength in academic work compensated for the material deficiencies they suffered and it gave them some confidence to push on for some time. He recalled.

Even though the situation was tough, during class I would concentrate on school regardless of the clothes that I was wearing or the failure to pay the actual school fees (uhm), I didn't lose hope until I dropped out at Form 2. (P20/C/In>).

It also emerged that recognition and the formation of self-identity are powerful instruments for motivation in school and life. Issues related to the different achievements suggested that the EScLs were deprived of recognition, high self-esteem and the confidence they had earned in school as illustrated in P05's reflection on his special talent.

A-ah I achieved writing poems and drama and other things like science. I realise this thing of dropping out is bad, I lost the good names people were giving me. If I have an opportunity to go back to school, I think I will just continue with the same performance (alright) (P05/A/In>)

Pride in their achievements was reflected in the language used when they recalled that, despite challenges, they achieved some success. The language they used suggests a very high regard for self, high self- esteem and confidence in things they knew and could do in and outside class. For example, P09 recalled.

No, I never got to become a prefect but there is a topic called matrices in mathematics, I was very good in that one. …it was something that made me proud of myself …I had the passion and zeal… like the blind man who frantically looked for healing in the bible … (P09/B/In>)

EScLs perspectives on that issue of recognition and identity helped me understand that they are real adolescence issues. Unfortunately, all that remained of these successes for them were endured memories that seemed to haunt them in the form of regrets and heuristics

of 'what if…' and 'what could have…' The suffering they endured was initially a source of motivation to improve themselves, something which, unfortunately, they did not realise. Instead, their past achievements seemed to now have become a source of negative stimulus since these were incomplete and left the EScLs in a quandary.

Furthermore, EScLs' social backgrounds contributed to their views on school dropout. P02's background / experiences, for instance, seemed to have influenced her attitude towards other learners: because she had lost both parents she had great empathy with those in a similar predicament. The language she used shows how sensitive she was to the perceptions of those from stable families who look down at those in difficult circumstances. Orphan-hood in this instance is thus associated with feelings of rejection, low self-esteem, and poor regard of the self. Like that of other researchers (Ajzen, 2012; Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010), my interpretation is that experience, to a large extent, shapes people's attitudes and perceptions. Since experience has the power to influence someone's immediate thinking and behaviour, his/her thoughts and actions could be either rational or irrational depending on the nature of experience (Brown, 2010). As evident in her response to the previous question posed during my interview with her, P02 had indicated that she was not very good in class, so in my view, she took solace in activities outside academic work like the peer educator role. To her, the element of recognition and her identity formation was closely associated with this role. She made sure she was well recognised for what she was able to do.

I *was appointed a peer educator. We used to go and counsel others especially the Form Ones. As a peer educator, we just regarded other children as equal with us, we did not discriminate against any child* (P02/A/In>)

Incongruences in EScLs' conceptualization of school dropout. The discussion in the section which follows centres on emergent extracts from my analysis of experiences presented by EScLs as fun or not fun during their school life. Several incongruences were evident in their presentations, particularly in the language and tone they used.

Exaggeration of past and future potential. Instances of bias in the EScLs' presentations emerged throughout the study, in particular when they narrated their achievements. They tried to present themselves as the best, as well behaved, competent and good in leadership, as reflected in the following examples.

A-ah at school I was known as a poet. I was very good at drama and writing poems (uhm). Especially the ChiShona poems, I was very good. As for the English ones, I started them when I was in Form 3, the same level at which I dropped out of school (alright), (P05/A/In>).

*In sports; I was good such that I could qualify for further competitions that would require us to travel, raising my school's name' (*P16/C/In>)*.*

The excerpts above indicate that, while EScLs could have been good in certain areas of the school curricula, they attempted to portray a picture of themselves as better than their counterparts. Claims of associating their selves with moral uprightness, good behaviour, best leadership qualities and humanitarianism were particularly noticeable.

Ummm, I led other children at school and this required me to be good to the children so that they would not hate me. I would lead even at assembly, in class and many other things I would be asked to do. I also would respect the teachers and other children (P02/A/In>)*.*

It is possible that claims like these could have been acts of compensation and therapy for situations they could not change. Falling by the wayside, as EScLs indicated throughout, was not of their own making but due to reasons beyond their control. Thus, they tended to shift the blame for their dropping out of school onto external forces - the eroding economic situation in the country, and school or government policies as discussed under triggers of school dropout coming up in the next theme, for example. The very high levels of potential and achievements claimed could, therefore, have been deliberate exaggerations in order to either emphasise regrets or as both a coping and defence mechanisms.

In P13's case, for example, it was not my doubts about the truth of her claims but the attitude and tone used in making these that made it sound as if she was entangled in her own pride. It is possible that she eventually dropped out of school due to fear of being ridiculed by others (including the head girl) with whom she had formed warring camps, particularly after struggling to pay school fees. Some of my research findings indicate that vendettas with other school learners are an integral part of secondary school learners' experiences. This is illustrated in P13's memory, divulged during my interview with her.

I was also appointed the Vice Head girl (okay). …Apparently, I led most of the time at the assembly. I did most of the things instead of the head girl because it was like she did not have the talent to do something you will not be able to execute it properly (P13/B/In>).

While P13 sounded confident of her claim, her language and tone of voice reflected emotional disturbance and frustration. Anyone could imagine how it would feel for a person of high repute like her and others who were doing well to drop out of school.

From a positive point of view, however, statements by EScLs revealed positive self-regard and a high level of confidence, that is, a strong belief in themselves (Crocker, Brook, & Niiya., 2006). The tone in which they responded suggested that they were deliberately trying to convince themselves and/or me, as the researcher, that dropping out of school was not about their having failed at school but that they were just unfortunate victims of circumstances. Suggested in these attempts were a high level of inner drive (intrinsic motivation), passion about certain things and determination. Their claims reflected a positive attitude towards school, the need to contribute and to be recognized. Consequently, elements of success and self-actualization were explicitly stated. In addition to this, as indicated in the recalled memories of two participants, P02 and P20, they were also aware of and willing to acknowledge their weaknesses.

> *When I noticed that I was not very good in athletics, I started playing netball. I played it up to the point we were ready to go for competitions. Unfortunately, that was the time I dropped out of school (*P02/A/In>). *'*

> *When I got to secondary, in Form 1 and Form 2 that's when I had the desire to participate in athletics. I used to participate in long distance relays; I wasn't good at short distances. So, this is what I did and I was good at volleyball also* (P20/C/In>).

Data captured in the excerpts indicate that secondary school helps learners to discover and use their talents, thus emphasizing the value of secondary school and, hence, the imperative to complete the course. Dropping out, thus, disrupted the skills development endeavour in the learners which had started, but not finished, secondary school. Given the resources, many of the EScLs participating in my study could probably have pursued their dreams even outside formal school. P05, P16, P20 and P13, for example, could have exploited their potential in the different disciplines through clubs in their local communities. The question that comes to mind, however, is whether the EScLs viewed their potential particularly in the various sporting disciplines as an alternative focus worth pursuing after dropping out. This question is addressed in the upcoming section.

Blindness to alternatives. While EScLs showed potential and some level of confidence, their responses portrayed a significant level of short-sightedness. They did not consider alternatives in their conceptualization of school dropout. Responses showed a lack of divergent thinking and guidance in seeking alternatives. Sports, for example, in which many had excelled during their school days was not considered as an alternative career pursuit, something which could perhaps be ascribed to the restrictive environments they were coming from and/or to their lack of exposure to the outside world. They sounded closed up in the small and disadvantaged communities in which they exist. Vygotsky (1978) contends that children

115

are a product of their culture and that the environment has the power to shape the mind. Concepts are formed from one's culture and physical environment. If the environment is limiting, the children growing up in that environment are disadvantaged, even in terms of their thinking capacity (Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000; Bronfenbrenner & Bronfenbrenner, 2009).

My analysis of data pointed to the fact that schools treat sports as an extra-curricular activity. Sports are not examinable; hence the value placed on sport is secondary to the core curriculum, which entails academic subjects. Because of this perspective, EScLs would not view the area as valuable to pursue as a career and a means of life sustenance. As a result, the talents identified are either stifled or die, even though one could make a living / career out of the talent. Howard Gardner, for example, advocates identification and the grooming of different abilities as forms of intelligence (Gardner, 1991)**.** EScLs were, therefore, once more deprived of opportunities to realise life outcomes from a different dimension. In their conceptualization, dropping out of school was such a helpless situation that they could not see any other avenues to take in order to still realise their cherished life outcomes. Instead, they expressed desperation, being unable to envisage meaningful life beyond and outside the classroom.

The responses of EScLs in the study also indicate that, to a certain extent, secondary school learners play a part in the process of dropping out through acts of indiscipline, yet this was overlooked in their conceptualisation. An element of wrong/ negative attitudes towards school is generally portrayed in the responses. Two excerpts provide evidence:

Discipline was there at our school but there were very difficult students, you would hear them saying, 'huuuum', whilst the teacher is speaking! Students no longer greet teachers if they meet them. Only a few, especially prefects …The students are so disrespectful; you would hear them calling teachers with disrespect (P06/A/FG>).

What happens in secondary school is that we normally like to imitate other people. We would be impolite to the teachers and all that'… Some would say they are rich at home, "I am just coming here to pass time but my job is already there" (P09/B/In>).

EScLs raised many issues related to indiscipline, particularly during FGD. Data showed that disciplinary issues have pronounced impact on secondary school learner. As revealed in P09's contribution, many youths succumb to peer pressure, for example. P06 seemed to derive pleasure from recalling incidents in which he used to run away from the teachers who intended giving him school work. Attitude, according to Koch, Mamiseishvili and Huggins (2014), is a precursor of behaviour and, in terms of Erikson's Stage of Identity versus

Role Confusion, adolescence is characterized by youths being confused, caught between peer pressure and self-discipline (Erikson, 1968).

School experiences igniting pleasure and displeasure. Closely related to memories about school achievement were participants' understanding of school dropout seen through the lens of the things they remembered as enjoyable/pleasurable on the one hand, and the things they disliked/which displeased them, on the other. Their memories in this regard are presented in two categories in this sub theme: pleasant/pleasurable and unpleasant experiences/ experiences which they remembered with displeasure (illustrated in Figures 4.4 and 4.5). The major finding here was that, since secondary school learners are social beings who need interaction, dropping out of school prematurely was associated with a loss of adventure and limited exposure to the 'youth world'.

Pleasant school experiences. EScLs' sense of what they lost by prematurely exiting school was expressed in their recall of experiences which they remembered as giving them pleasure and/or which were regarded as fun during their school days. Figure 4.4 provides a summary of these experiences.
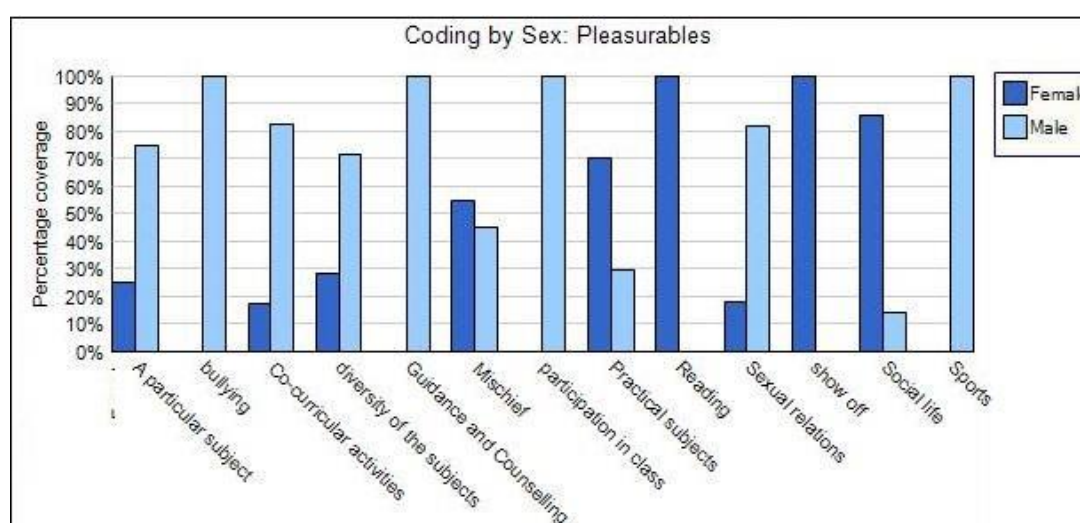
Figure 4.4: Pleasant school experiences

As illustrated in Figure 4.4, EScLs recalled numerous experiences which they remembered as giving them pleasure. Their memories of these, expressed in their own words, are best expressed in the words of Participants 16/C and 13/B.

> *Yes, there were things I liked. In the class, I was among the top ten performers. I liked sports; I was good such that I could qualify for further competitions that would require us to travel, raising my school's name. I played cricket and soccer… (P16/C/FG>).*

*I used to do debate (okay). I was part of the public speaking team (um). On the ball games I liked handball but it was not being offered at the school I last attended. (*P13/B/In>).

As illustrated in the graph, females were more inclined to recall the pleasure they derived from making mischief, their preference for practical subjects, their love for reading, showing off, and social life. Males on the other hand, mostly recalled pleasure associated with areas of interest to them: academic subjects (such as Science, Mathematics-Metrics), the diversity of subjects, high participation in class, sexual relations, bullying and sports. Bullying was mentioned as pleasurable only to perpetrators/bullies, not those who were being bullied. In the case of the latter, as indicated in Figure 4.5, this was recalled as an unpleasant experience. The same is true for mischief. EScLs explained that this was pleasurable only to those who hated certain subjects and behaved in ways that would create opportunities for them to leave class. To them, the ensuing corporal punishment was a lesser evil than to attend classes they did not enjoy, either because the teacher was incompetent or because they simply did not understand the subject. Participants' memories of these as 'pleasant' experiences confirm a claim made by Chaux (2012) and Battin-Pearson, et al (2002) that the climate of a school has the potential to breed risk-taking behaviours such as delinquency and skipping classes.

Differences emerging from the comparison of experiences regarded as pleasant/pleasurable by males and females respectively tallies well with research observations on gender difference amongst secondary school learners in general (Rumberger & Lim, 2008). The FGDs, interviews and participants' life stories all revealed that EScLs enjoyed numerous activities which they vividly remembered, and regretted that their having left school prematurely deprived them of opportunities to have excelled and achieved even more to realise self- actualization. My data analysis indicates, however, that the mention of practical subjects and co-curricular activities was particularly conspicuous, with discussions centring mostly on achievements and enjoyment in these areas. There was little mention of other academic subjects as a source of pleasure, pointing to issues which might have triggered school dropout. These are discussed under the next theme.

Guidance and counselling, sexual relationships, and social life also gave learners pleasure while they were at secondary school. Participating EScLs indicated that it was while they were at secondary school that most of them started experiencing changes in their bodies, hence, the forming of sexual relationships, characteristic of adolescence (Harwood, et al., 2008). Tied to the adolescence stage, EScLs mentioned bullying, mischief and showing off as pleasurable at secondary school level. Males, in particular, subscribed mostly to bullying that

made them feel superior to their victims, causing misery for their peers and, particularly, juniors at the receiving end of both these behaviours. Leaving school prematurely meant that they had lost the opportunity to engage in such activities, consequently having a negative impact on their self-concept (Huang, 2011).

Unpleasant Experiences. Participating EScLs also recalled nasty experiences (see Figure 4.5) during their short-lived secondary school days, some of which were cited as causes for their premature dropping out of school.
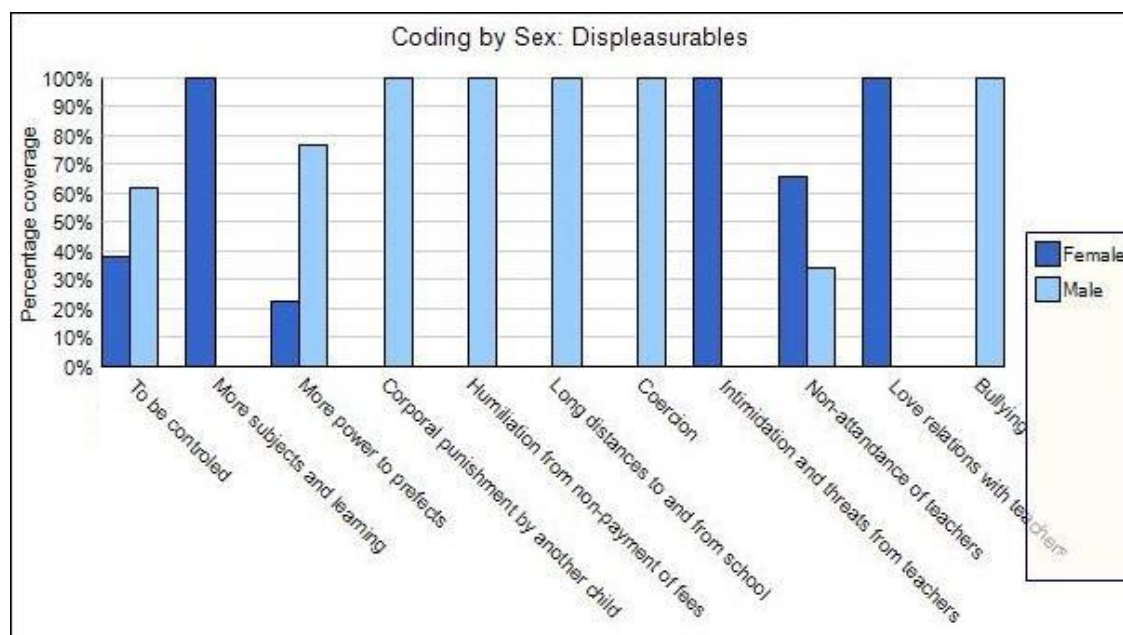
Figure 4.5: Sources of displeasure

Results revealed that cases of corporal punishment and punishment in general, coercion, bullying, humiliation, long distances to school and the power that prefects seemed to possess were sources of discomfort to EScLs. In the majority of cases during EGD and interviews, these issues mostly affected male learners, the reason being that males tended to be more resistant and vocal on issues showing unfairness in school. As a result, they become unpopular and are likely to face the wrath of the school rules, thus engaging in punishable activities.

Females, on the other hand indicated that many of their concerns centred on intimidation and harassment/ threats by teachers, proposals for love relationships by male teachers, dislike for many subjects and teachers who, in many cases, did not show up for lessons. Differences emerging from the comparison of male and female concerns are indications of masculinity and femininity characteristics typical of opposite sexes**.** From the perspectives of EScLs, such unpleasant experiences contributed, to some extent, to school

dropout behaviour. Issues such as corporal punishment are further discussed under triggers of school dropout.

Negative feelings associated with school. Negative feelings in this study were generated by memories of unpleasant school experiences, thus forming part of EScLs' conceptualisation of causes of school dropout. As shown in Figure 4.6, EScLs associated school at certain points with hardship, feelings of being social misfits, helplessness, low self-esteem and self-pity.
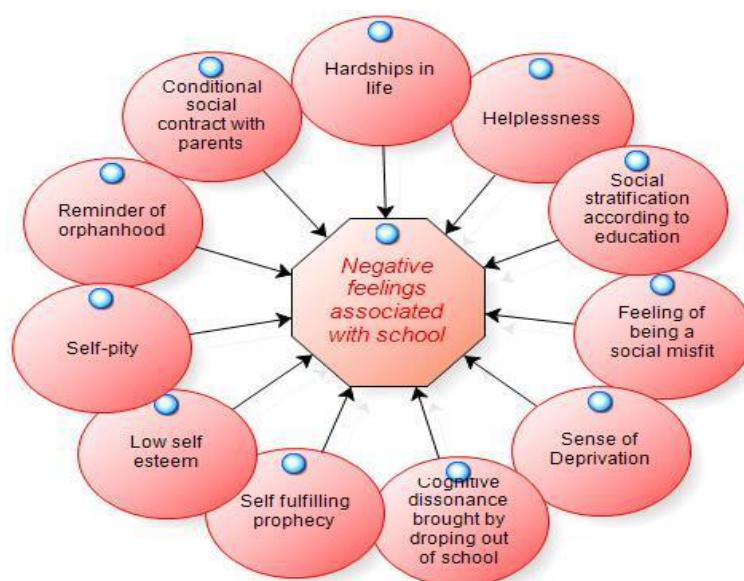
Figure 4.6: Negative feelings associated with school

Helplessness. Data showed that helplessness was a common feeling expressed among the EScLs. They conceptualised dropping out of school as a hindrance to their hopes and potential, describing it as a situation of helplessness and loss. P20, for instance, compared himself with peers who had managed to complete school by expressing admiration for them while pitying his own situation. Here is what he said.

> 'If I just hear the words school dropout, what comes to my mind is that what shall I become because like others that we see whom we learnt with, they will make it because they are continuing with school, but us who have nothing much that we are doing, you just wake up in the morning then you go and fetch water, then what… you sit down and say to yourself that but I was good at this and that subject and could be going where, to school. (P20/C/FG>

Similarly, P 16 expressed a sense of helplessness when he expressed the following.

If I could find someone who can help me to go back to school; that is what comes to my mind first. It pains me to see my peers who have parents who can afford to send them to school attending school. first; if only I could find someone to help me to go back to school (P16/C/FG>)

School dropout was associated with either idleness or routine chores at home. The tone in the expressions by the two participants denotes a sense of hopelessness as they see their peers making it in life. P19, whose perspective on dropping out was similar, described it as a helpless situation because s/he lost out on an opportunity to fulfil her/his intended goals.

Eeeh, when you go to school you usually have an objective isn't it but if you drop out of school before you finish it means that your dreams are shuttered. …it means you may not have a chance to get a job (P19/C/FG>)

EScLs experienced dropping out as loss since looking back they realised how much they had lost in terms of education and goal achievement in their lives, a situation that could have a devastating psychopathological impact on them (Bridgeland, et al.., 2006; Patrick, 2008). Some psychopathological effects - stress, self-pity, isolation, low self-esteem and poor self-concept, lack of confidence, loss of focus and direction - were evident in the EScLs' expressions. P20's response, for example, reflected the perception that school offers one opportunities to see beyond the here and now, thus helping one to plan for the future and to be to organised. P19's language emphasised that school facilitates higher quality jobs/ life and development of self-concept/ esteem needs and that education facilitates all-round life (Bridgeland, et al., 2006).

Social stratification according to education. Dropping out of school was also associated with social stratification. My research results indicate that EScLs perceive dropping out of school as widening and making visible the gap between the poor and the rich. They associated it with most parents' inability to fund the education of their offspring, basically because of unemployment or lack of meaningful funding for entrepreneurship for those who may have knowledge and/ or skills to do projects. According to the EScLs, most families cannot afford school requirements; hence children end up dropping out. The issue of social stratification was expressed by several participants.

*I want to try. I think it is about a situation in which maybe your parents would have died and you will not find anyone to pay your fees and you will have to stop going to school or maybe your own parents might be unemployed and fail to find the money for you to go to school and they will tell you to stop going to school until they find the money. That is what I think' (*P06/A/FG>).

121

'It pains me to see my peers who have parents who can afford to send them to school going to school. Yet in class I was performing quite well like others (P16/C/In>).

When someone speaks about school (yes), I would think that if I had completed my school like others then I would be among those who are regarded as educated. I would be able to look for jobs. … (P09/B/In>).

My research findings also indicate that participants viewed it as an unpleasant situation in one's life, an undesirable state of affairs and/or unfortunate life circumstance. Their responses justify my choice of a case study design as it enabled me to investigate something that was a real issue and a situation in people's lives (Best, 2012; Silverman, 2013). More specifically, participants viewed dropping out of school as a situation that widens the gap between the 'haves' and 'have nots' (Haralambos & Holborn, 2013). In this regard, they expressed a deep sense of loss for themselves and admiration of those in school. P16's regrets about the reasons for his having to leave, indicates that he had the potential but not the means thus, once more, reflecting a sense of helplessness. The tone of his response in the cited excerpt above reflects a positive attitude towards school and a desire to complete Form 4.

Indications from their responses are that watching others in uniform walking to school psychologically worsens the EScLs' situation, negatively highlighting differences between them and their school-going peers (Harwood, et al., 2008). The possibility that they were exaggerating their own potential in order to emphasise their regret at dropping out cannot, however, be ignored. They tried, in recalling their school experiences, to convince the world that their dropping out of school was not about failure in school. Some of their responses reflect a strong inner drive (Thompson, 2009), a strong belief in themselves, passion for certain things, determination, and the need for recognition (Harwood, et al., 2008). P09's statements reflect lot of introspection and peer comparison. As in the case of P16, P09 shows a positive attitude towards school and is goal-oriented in terms of his desire to finish school. Like other EScLs, P09's answer shows that he knows that there are gaps in his life which need to be closed.

Feeling of being a social misfit, low self-esteem and self-pity. EScLs' feelings about their being social misfits were perceived as being the result of their pre-mature school exit. According to P13 and P09 in a FGD,

… especially in this generation, when you did not go to school it will not be easy to live in a society with other people' (P13/B/In>); *'it's like you see other children going to school, you start feeling out of place most of the times* (P13/B/FG>).

Comparisons like these with their peers continued to feature in their responses, as did their feelings of hopelessness. Participants emphasised that they could no longer live up to their peers' standards, suggesting a low self- esteem, a reduced self-concept, stress and self-pity.

> *Yes I agree with what you said P13 because if you are not educated you are unable to go where your friends are saying ah I am not educated and they are educated. You know, it is very disheartening that you just wake up and do work at home whilst others are going to school. It is very boring, you end up being stressed. (umm). (*P09/B/FG>).

> *You start thinking of a lot of things. You end up with endless headaches asking yourself what is happening because you also want to go to school. In this generation school is needed by everyone. For example, when you are amongst your friends maybe they are now lawyers, for you to go where they are you feel uncomfortable … (*P12/B/FG>).

Data in the preceding indicate that without secondary education, one feels like a social misfit leading to low self-esteem (Brown, 2010; Dahl, 2010; Mahlomaholo, 2011)). It was clear from the results that school dropout could lead to segregation, labelling and resentment. EScLs in the study generally viewed themselves as inferior and incompetent in comparison with their peers who had successfully completed school. As is the case in social stratification, results showed that the feeling of being a social misfit makes them withdrawn and mixing with peers whom P09 calls "the educated" becomes difficult. While EScLs would try to justify themselves by pointing out that dropping out was not of their making but of circumstances beyond their control, they still felt out of place in the social world. Also implied in their responses are increased idleness, associated with and/or caused by a routine life back at home, the consequences being a degeneration into stress, feelings of inadequacy, an inferiority complex, hurt, pain, self-pity, boredom and stress. The tone in the excerpt from Site C shows serious regret, deep hurt and pain and a sense of loss which causes them to engage in wishful thinking (Cain, 2010; Field, 2008).

Conditional social contract with parents. Another finding was that school dropout, according to participating EScLs, constituted the breach of a social contract with their parents. In terms of African traditional society and thinking, children are viewed as an investment in life. Parents expect a favourable return from their offspring. Children are expected to pay back the toiling of parenthood (Chege & Sifuna, 2006). When a child then fails to contribute to family upkeep during adulthood, it would imply letting down the family and breaching an implicit social contract. EScLs in the study expressed fears in this regard. Since their hope would have been to embark on secure, meaningful careers after completing school, falling by the wayside

means serious incapacitation and continual dependency on parents. EScLs expressed these feelings as follows.

*The other reason why I need education is because I want to improve my living conditions at home especially when our parents have spent a lot to send us to school (*P09/B/In>).

*I think school dropout in Zimbabwe is raising a lot of crime and so on in Zimbabwe. Let's say I do not complete Form 4, take for example that I am a boy who had been sent to school by my parents on condition that I will repay when I finish. This is just an example guys. So, what will I do if I didn't finish school? At the end of the day I will steal, I will do prostitution because I just want to make my parents happy. (*P08/A/FG>).

P09's input suggests that school is viewed as a way out of poverty as it enhances life. Because it is an investment for families, EScLs felt under pressure to fulfil the expectation. Failure to do so resulted in stress and feelings of desperation. Although it was the parent who had failed to pay for a child's school boys, particularly, still felt they had an obligation to contribute meaningfully to the family, hence, the desperation to complete school and start a career. When this does not happen, they inevitably find themselves engaging in immoral activities in a bid to secure resources.

The issue of dependency and the breaching of a social contract with their parents also surfaced. It was clear that while EScLs placed great value on school generally. They contrarily also pointed out that even without school, one could still make it**.** This could be a result of a desperate situation. For example, realising that chances of going back to school were slim, P20 had to motivate himself and try to be positive about his situation. He says, '*We can still survive if we manage the goat-rearing project well. We only need to work hard' (*P20/C/In>). However, to explain the compensatory behaviour, he says, later in the same interview.

*But if an opportunity arises, I would still want to go back to school because these projects cannot be reliable, given the economic situation in the country, still you need to be able to read and understand the use of some chemicals so that you do not cause disaster. The only way to be safe is to have your Form 4 certificate (*P20/C/In>).

This discussion raised the incongruences mentioned earlier.

Cognitive dissonance brought about by dropping out of school. School dropout was conceptualised as causing mental confusion because of frustration. Failure to endure the pain, stress and accept the loss, resulted in EScLs getting into a state of mental confusion. On the one hand participants tried to dismiss the frustration and embarrassment of dropping out by telling themselves that everything would be alright even though they did not have a

Form 4 certificate. EScLs rationalised this by describing their situation as temporary, a state of mind that allowed them to suppress their belief about the reality that everyone needed education, particularly secondary school education, that it is a foundation to life as discussed earlier in the chapter. Indications from the data generated during the course of the study are that they live in a state of cognitive dissonance.

> *When I hear the word school my mind will engage in a debate with one side compelling me to say school is important and another pushing me to say it is not important (uhm). But finally, I resolve this conflict by concluding that school is important especially when I start to think logically, I will realise that school can improve me as I will become more knowledgeable for example in mathematics, sciences and other various subjects (uhm)'* (P05/A/In>).

In considering the cognitive dissonance brought by dropping out of school, the question that comes to mind is, how does one dismiss school but still consider it to be important? This kind of thinking is incongruous. The panic caused by their not being at school any more resulted in the EScLs, at some point, challenging the importance of school in their lives, raising several questions to which they did not have any ready answers. It was simply their way of coping with a new situation, a mechanism by means of which they could alter their understanding of school, and school dropout in particular. According to Ajzen (2012), any and all experiences have the power to influence attitudes and perception. What each EScL went through was, therefore bound to influence their perception of school and their conceptualisation of school dropout.

The response by P05, 'I will think that school is good when I begin to think logically' – typifies the tension experienced by the EScLs as they try to balance what could be termed logic with their own experiences. The state of denial thus created initially caused dissonance before gradually leading, first to acceptance of their situation and, eventually, to logical reasoning (Cain, 2010; Haugh, 2012; Stroebe & Schut, 2010). Logic then helps them to retain a positive attitude towards school, a multifaceted attitude which has the potential to ultimately help them move up the social ladder. It is in acknowledging the knowledge gained in various curriculum areas that the EScL finds the answer to their questions about the value and/or importance of schooling, as well as the reason for their perspectives on the benefits of schooling as discussed earlier in the chapter.

Hardships in life and reminiscences of orphan-hood. I understood from EScLs that school dropout was caused by a hard life. Most cases highlighted by participants indicated that the reason they left school was due to a parent or parents' illness and / or death. The absence of a parent caused by death left a gap in their lives and their support structure, one

which, in most cases, was never filled. Moreover, it resulted in children being left behind without the financial resources to afford school and related requirements. The following excerpts provide evidence.

> *Alright yea I think eeh when I hear the term school dropout to me, it is about failing to achieve your goals because no one can pay for your fees especially when parents die. .I think that is when life starts to be difficult. …* (P21/C/FG>).

> *Most people who drop out school in Zimbabwe (can you speak louder) I said the highest number of children who drop out of school in Zimbabwe is because they don't have money Sickness and death of parents being the reasons, if my parents die there is no money that we will get from the time when they fall sick because the money for fees will be used for hospital fees (*P18/C/FG>).

Since most participants were not just EScLs but orphans as well, talking about dropping out triggered memories of their orphan-hood. Indications were that they found it difficult to separate school dropout from the loss of their parents.

4.3.1.3 Sub-theme 3: Quality versus equity. The last sub-theme evident in EScLs' understanding of school dropout was that of issues related to equality and equity. In this study, equality was understood as equal opportunities for all children to access school. This would include making schools and teachers available to all, allowing all children, regardless of colour, race, ethnicity and culture, to access schools. These concerns, in Zimbabwe, seem to have been fairly addressed. Equity, on the other hand, in this study was understood as the extra effort to consider the individual differences and circumstances of children so that their needs could be met proportionally to achieve equality. It referred to the need for fairness and justice in issues related to the education of all children. Findings were, thus, based on this understanding of the two constructs.
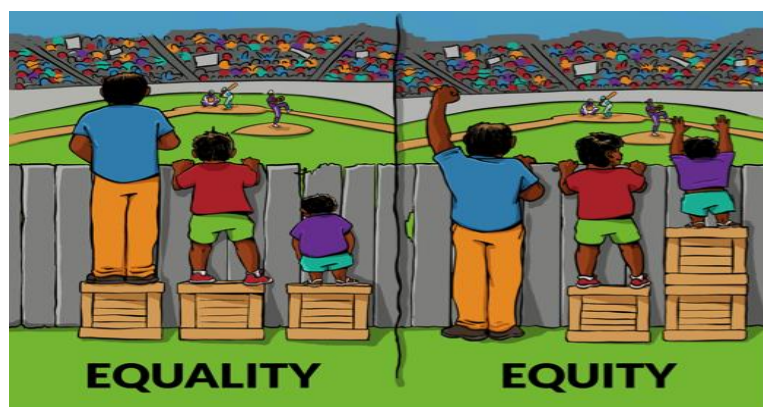
Figure 4.7: Equality versus Equity

(Source: Adapted from: Interaction Institute for Social Change/Artist: Angus Maguire)

The major finding related to the equity versus equality sub-theme was that, while learners in Zimbabwe have equal opportunities to go to secondary school, equity remains a challenge. The big gaps between the haves and have nots on the social ladder are distinct and wide. According to participating EScLs those from low income (poor) families generally cannot afford the fees, levies and costs related to Zimbabwean secondary schools. It means the implementation of statutory instruments such as the Education Amendment Actof 2006 No. 2 becomes questionable. This further reveal that the protection of the vulnerable may not be there as some schools continue to send learners away for failure to pay fees. Data suggest that there are no cushioning strategies to help those without the required resources to achieve educational outcomes as those with the requisite financial means. This was a major preoccupation amongst participants, who indicated in their reflections on issues of equality at the expense of equity, that the former (equality) was promoted at the expense of the latter (equity). According to them, the poor cannot afford even the basic requirements of school such as decent clothing (uniform), text and writing books. How then, should they be able to afford the requisite fees and levies? Chambers (2006) and Nandori (2011) concur that to be poor means falling below the average wealth level of a given society and/or the poverty 'threshold'.

While studies by Machingambi (2012), Shadreck (2013) and Chinyoka (2014) in Zimbabwe indicate that factors leading to school dropout relate to quality and equity issues they do not, however, clearly articulate these. In contrast, the EScLs in this study did, pointing out that equality issues have to some extent been addressed in policies, automatic promotion (Hadebe, 2013; Zengeya, 2011; Zvobgo, 2004), which creates the opportunity for every child to proceed to secondary education, being one. According to them, though, the aims of policies like this one are not achieved because it lacks attention to issues of equity. To them, the issue at stake was not entry but qualifying for entry in terms of one's socio-economic status (see Figure 4.7 for an illustration of the difference between equality and equity).

To clarify, the provision of equal opportunities does not necessarily facilitate the achievement of the intended goals, as portrayed in the illustration (Figure 4.7): while the opportunity to watch the game was there, the facilities/structures to utilise the opportunity were inadequate. The three spectators in Figure 4.7 all had the same opportunity – to watch the cricket game. However, the shorter ones remain disadvantaged, even after going through the gates and standing on the same size stool with their peers because the height of the fence limits their view. The advantaged, however, does not have this problem; he enjoys the fruits of his enabling height (the tallest). Put differently, one's circumstances in life may maroon one on an island of non-achievement. Other factors, of course, would play a role on ultimate individual success but the beauty of equity is that everybody is at the same level, have the same view, and can work together much more easily (see Figure 4.7).

Applied to the school dropout phenomenon, it means that learners from 'have not' families are effectively disadvantaged (Hadebe, 2013; Mann, 2014) because of their socio-economic level (the height of the fence and/or the 'box' supporting them). While the doors to school/education have been opened to every child in Zimbabwe, the vulnerable child, according to the EScLs does not have the means to get through this door because, in order to do so; they need to pay the required school fees and levies. What this implies is that the opportunity to learn is there because schools generally have space for every child but school fees becomes the barrier. While children from disadvantaged families are, on enrolment, placed in the same classes as children from affluent families, are taught by the same teachers, and are subjected to the same day-to-day operational demands of the school, they still fall behind because of their socio-economic circumstances. According to the EScLs, they then get frustrated and, because they are overwhelmed by the situation in which they find themselves, they leave school prematurely. Participating EScLs were therefore adamant that the situation needed urgent attention. While acknowledging the effort made by government - through the Basic Education Assistance Module (BEAM) – they did not think that this alone was an adequate response given the huge numbers of children living in disadvantaged circumstances (Muchenje, 2012).

Specific equality versus equity issues. Participating ESLs pointed out issues I summarised under the seven sub- themes as illustrated in Figure 4.8. These issues, however, also emerged as triggers of school dropout. In this section, therefore, only highlights are given. These are further discussed in Section 2, under either pull or push factors.
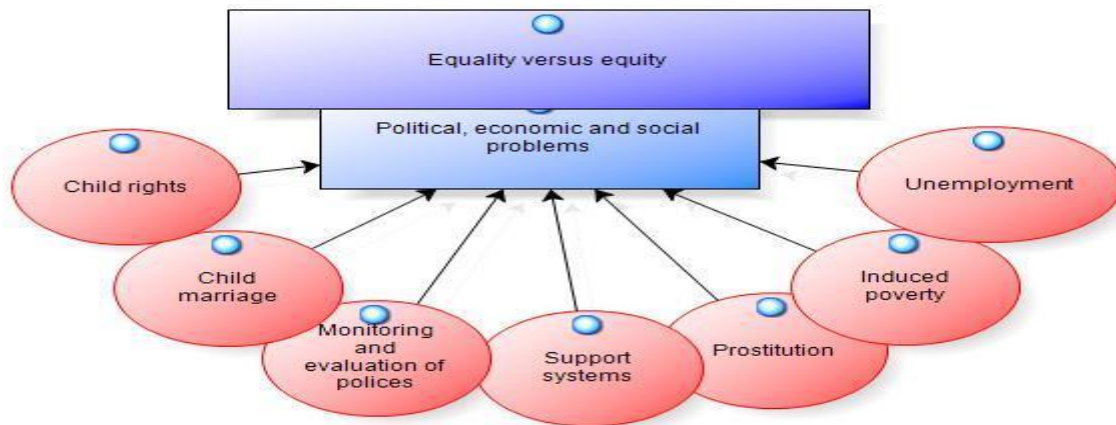
Figure 4.8: Equality versus equity issues

Relating to issues of equity and equality, EScLs shared a number of views, which are discussed hereafter under separate headings.

Political, economic and social problems. ESLs in the study associated school dropout with the political, economic and social problems in the country, the major problem being political, though they were hesitant to mention that. This emerged from an input by an FGD participant as contained in the following excerpt:

> *For me I think school dropout like in Zimbabwe I take it as an economic and social problem. The parents are failing to do their responsibilities for their children to be able to go to school. (*P03/A/FG>).

The results of my study indicate that parents were incapacitated, without jobs and money, therefore, could not fend for their children. The reality, according to the EScLs, is that the consequences of the difficult economic situation have ripple effects. Early school leavers cannot get jobs yet parents are expecting the child to "pay back" after completion of the secondary school course.

Unemployment and induced poverty. The first off-shoot of a dwindling economy mentioned by EScLs was unemployment. If the parent is jobless it means there are no resources to sustain the family. This has an impact on families' capacitation, thus negatively impacting on resources to educate children adequately. Participants pointed out that many people who were supposed to be breadwinners were unemployed. An example of participants' views is contained in an FGD excerpt, with P08 bemoaning the fact that,

> *Eeh, the issue is mostly on unemployment. Our parents are not going to work. So when the parent is not going to work, it will affect you the child because you would not be able to go to school because there would be no money* (P08/A/FG>).

However, one participant at Site A saw things differently, adding a completely different dimension to this issue. She thought people were just lazy; if they were serious they could do a lot, using local resources rather than running away to look for employment. She attributed the economic situation in Zimbabwe to attitude: according to her, people's attitudes should change if they were to be productive and able to support themselves without outside help. The same participant also attributed the situation to selfishness, arguing that people generally do not want to share even information. The tone she used reflected optimism, confidence and a positive outlook in every sense. She said;

> *For me I think that we are lazy us Zimbabweans… Yes the resources might not be there, but I do not think we do not have enough such that we will regard ourselves as nothing, I do not think we are at a critical point at which we can say we have to run away from our own things and situation* (P07/A/FG>).

Child marriage and child rights. Child marriage was also given as a cause for school dropout. My research results indicate that this was a common occurrence, mostly affecting girls of secondary school-going age. In three discussions touching on this issue EScLs blamed it on the hardships that most families are going through. In the majority of cases, the girl has no choice as her family pushes her into marriage so that, in turn, the son-in-law could look after the family. According to P01;

> *Child marriage (ok) is the other problem causing school dropout. It will happen because your parent would not have money for you to keep on going to school. The person you will get married to will be a very big man far older than you. Haa that is rampant in the community, we see it happening…. You will find out that the person who will marry her is around 30 to 40 years old yet the girl is around 15 to 16 years …is that good?* (P01/A/FG>)

Prostitution. EScLs' conceptualization of school dropout as indicated in my research results highlight their association of the phenomenon with significant levels of disintergration of families, resulting in parents, who were supposed to fend for their families, having been crippled by the ailing economy and social problems in the country. Consequently, parents and children alike have become vulnerable, with some resorting to immoral activities such as prostitution to stay alive. Prostitution has been accepted as a means of survival in some communities in Zimbabwe. The tone in the EScLs discussions on this issue during EGD portrayed the pathos and desperation of the situation regarding many families. While those who engage in such activities may be fully aware of the consequences, both health-wise and socially, EScLs, pointed out that these parents, and sometimes the children, had no other option. During FGD, one of the EScLs verbalised the situation like this:

*I realised that sometimes you should not blame, like now prostitution is permissible in the new constitution and I do not blame them because our economic situation is very difficult. So, a person would be trying to make ends meet…(*P08/A/FG>*)*.

Support systems and the monitoring and evaluation of policies. In their conceptualization of school dropout, EScLs also claimed that school administrators and teachers, as implementers of education policies, sometimes do not declare some of the statutory instruments, especially those that speak against certain practices in the school. EScLs pointed out that there were statutory instruments they only got to know and understand when they had already left school. Had they known whilst in school, steps could have been taken to seek protection to ensure that they could have remained at school. According to P12,… *even though school authorities know that it is unlawful to send children away from school, they are not acting in accordance with the policy because they are the ones who send hildren away from school (*P12/B/FG>*)*.

Other EScLs cited statutory instruments such as the Education Secretary's Circular No. 5 of 1997 and the Education Amendment Act (2006) No. 2, both of which clearly stipulate that no child shall be sent away from school on account of failure to pay fees. However, because the knowledge they have about such instruments was through 'hearsay', they also had never seen these documents, thus leaving them with no ground to challenge or counter illegal practices at schools. It means the government needs to put in place mechanisms to deal with offenders of policies.

Research results relating to the economic situation and issues of unemployment in the country concern the impact of exo- and macro-systems on the livelihood of the youth. Activities in the two systems, though remote, have a bearing on the child who is always on the receiving end, altering/compromising their pathways in life (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Rutter, 2005; Tudge, 2008). These results confirm Hongmei, Zhang, Luo, Yaojung Shi, Di Mo, Chen' s (2011) observation that a lack of resources correlates with high dropout rates, especially in developing countries (p. 556). Dropping out of school, therefore, causes multiple problems (Kibugi, Cheserek, Murgor & Mutwol, 2013), one of which is child marriages, confirmed as a common feature in sub- Saharan Africa, particularly among girls who fail to complete school (Kibugi et al, 2013; Sang, et al., 2013).

With regard to issues related to prostitution, my research findings indicate that this kind of moral degradation has adverse consequences for the individuals concerned, for their families, and for the government, in terms of managing health issues. It also has implications for the cultural values of society. According to Chitando (2011) and Phiri (2010), female sex work is abhorred on moral grounds as an unbecoming means of livelihood in Zimbabwe, as in

131

most traditionally conservative, patriarchal and Christian and/or Islam-dominated countries. EScLs' perceptions regarding this issue are therefore, contrary to existing societal and moral values.

ESLs' conceptualisation of and associations with school dropout sensitized me to a number of critical issues related to the phenomenon, one of which has to do with the triggers of school dropout, the theme discussed in the section which follows.

Section 2

4.3.2 Theme 2: Triggers of school dropout in Zimbabwe.

> *In life there are more than 10000 things which are important but there are two things which look like jewellery in our life as children, I think they are parents; without parents we are nothing.*
>
> (P01/A/LS)

The second theme based on the analysis of data was EScLs' reasons for dropping out of school. Several sub- themes were developed and they are discussed in this section under three broad subheadings namely; pull, push and fall out factors. Table 4.3 summarises triggers of school dropout as presented by EScLs in the study. The terms triggers and reasons are used interchangeably in the chapter. The detailed list of the causes of school dropout is contained in the Mini Master Table of themes (see Appendix X)

Table 4.3: Summary of triggers of school dropout

Pull factors	Push factors	Fall out factors
Home related - Loss – death, jobs, illness - Negative changes in the family - Poor family structures and/or support - Priorities in the family - Early assumption of adult roles - Induced poverty- inheritance - Lack of resources – material/financial **Geo-politically-related** - Exo and macro systems - Economy **Cultural and/or religious beliefs, practices & superstitions** - Child labour and child abuse - Teenage marriages **Step-parenting, child rights** - Child labour - Child abuse	**School Climate/ Environment** Teacher attitude & competences Poor learner- teacher relationships - Insensitive teachers, SDC - Misplaced aggression of teachers - Negative attitude by teachers **School system & policies** - Punishment- corporal - Difficult academic subjects - Poor teaching - Bullying **Constraint financial aid** - Egocentrism of well- wishers - Limited financial support - Unclear, rigid & unfair selection criteria for assistance - Non-participation in decision making	- Poor sense of belonging - Failure to cope with school work - Lack of motivation - Mischief - Lack of knowledge about relevant policies - Learned helplessness - Repeated exposure to dropout cases

4.3.2.1 Pull factors. Pull factors can be described as attractions that draw learners out of school. Included in these could be tempting situations that, for example, lure learners into marriage or into spending their time on the streets, which forms part of youth culture. In some cases, negative situations arise in the family, which are beyond the control of the learner, either because he/she does not have the power/means to resist it or because he/she has no option but to comply (Doll, Eslami, & Walters, 2013; Parijat & Bagga, 2014; Rumberger, 2004; Sigei & Tikoko, 2014). EScLs in this study described pull factors as circumstances, particularly in the family of the learner, which pull him/her out of school, albeit grudgingly. Pull factors evident in the data generated during the course of this study include a whole range of factors, respectively related to home situations/circumstances, geo-economic factors, cultural and religious beliefs and superstitions, child rights/abuse issues, and step-parenting. Each of these categories of factors is described in more detail hereafter.

Pull factors from home. Learners' home situations/circumstances emerged as a major influence in learners' decision to stay on or drop out of schools. Issues raised by EScLs with regard to this factor included negative changes in the family, poor parenting, financial burdens, child labour and religious affiliation. Illness and/or death in the family, which resulted in the loss of breadwinners was the strongest pull factor, as illustrated in excerpts drawn from the life stories that participating EScLs shared with me. A number of learners perceived their home lives as being so difficult that they could not stay on at schools.

> *It may be that your parents passed away so now you are leaving with an aunt. This aunt may be treating you badly denying you of the chance to go to school. Or she can tell you that she does not have money to take you to school, then what will you do, you just have to stop going to school. (*P10/B/FG>).

> *If one's parents die you might stop going to school and might not be able to finish school because they died and there is no money for you to get to Form 4 or 3 and sometimes even Grade 7, or Form 1 (*P18/C/FG>).

> *About my parents, my mother died first in 2004 (okay), my father also died in 2012 when I was in grade six (okay), ummm. At that time I was staying with my step-mother and my sister took me and I started to stay with her. That was the time things got hard for me (alright), ummm"* (<P02/A/In>)

The excerpts which follow illustrate the ripple effect that losing a significant person to death has on those affected by it.

In our family we are two, me and my brother (uhm). When our parents died and no one could support us, I just said for us to survive, let me start selling. I went to speak with my uncle's friend and he gave me three dollars (uhm) and I started the business of selling eggs. It was not easy (P05/A/In>).

Participants further explained that the effects of losing a significant family member left them with lifelong psychological dents. If, in addition to the loss, remaining family members are either unwilling to accept responsibility for the bereaved children or are simply not interested in sending them to school, the children concerned simply give up. P13's relatives, for example, grabbed the estate of the deceased, leaving her and her family poverty-stricken. In narrating her story, she expressed the following.

*I did not decide myself to leave school but it's only about money. When I go to my relatives they won't even, accept me (okay yet some of them have taken my father's wealth. So they will not help me even if I ask for just hundred dollars (uhmm), they will not give you (umm). They treat you like someone they do not know (umm) … By the way our father left those cattle so that they could be a source of income for us including raising school fees, but…. Its not easy (*P13/B/In>)

Another indication from data in my study was that when illness is prolonged, as is the case in terminal illness, family resources are diverted to the care of the patient and there may be nothing left for children's schooling. Should this happen in a family with already limited resources, it would usually be the older child who has to drop out of school so that the finances thus far used for schooling could be redirected towards the medication of the ailing patient. P20 said;

Sickness and death are the worst reasons …I had to leave school and help my mother to look after my sick father. These two are bad. All other reasons can come after (P20/C/FG>). Similarly, P 09 shared that, *… it can happen that your mother or father will be sick and you are a girl then they go somewhere for help, your father and mother can say what, you go to work and leave school. (uhmm)"* P09/B/FG>.

Also informing actions like these, according to my research participants, are traditional African value systems premised on the belief that failure to look after a parent, particularly during illness, has a curse attached to it. To avoid being cursed, therefore, all parties concerned have to prioritize care of the ill family member at the expense of everything else, even a child's schooling.

Data like this confirms the findings of previous studies on the influence that the circumstances in which children grow up has on their developmental trajectory (Rutter, 2005).

More specifically, the excerpts cited here confirm Rutter's (2005) contention that children do not have the capacity/power to map out their development. Instead, because they do not exist in a vacuum but in an environment, which shapes them into the people they are expected to become (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Rutter, 2005; Tudge, 2008), decisions about their lives are (implicitly or explicitly) imposed on them by the systems/ institutions surrounding them.

In the next section, I take a closer look at some of the issues that EScLs pointed out as pull-out factors emanating from their home circumstances/situations.

Negative changes in the family

> *We started to suffer when my father died and my mother had to try hard to get some food and send us to school…* (P01/C/LS>)

Events occurring in families at certain points in time seem to have triggered a number of the EScLs' pre-mature exit from school. During FGDs, interviews and the narration of their life stories, participating EScLs cited numerous issues revolving around loss which, to them, was the most disturbing experience. EScLs experienced loss through parents' death, loss of work/ job, migration, and illness as well as through practices associated with what could be regarded as controversial religious, cultural beliefs and superstitions as devastating. In terms of Bronfenbrenner's PPCT model, 'Time' (a chromo-system) has a bearing on the development of an individual. This was evident from the narration of specific unpleasant events experienced by the EScLs which shaped their personalities, ways of thinking, feelings and attitudes (Ajzen, 2012; Bronfenbrenner & Bronfenbrenner, 2009; Tudge, 2008). EScLs viewed illness and death as underlying reasons which triggered school dropout. Corr, Nabe, and Corr (2009) ascribed the devastation felt as the result of death loss as particularly devastating to children and youths since it creates voids related to safety and security, endless anxiety and secondary losses such as financial stability, faith/trust in the world surrounding the survivor. Since death usually evokes disbelief and/or anger it takes longer to process it, thus impacting on the survivor's ability to adjust to a world without his/her usual pillar of strength (Cain, 2010; Hough, 2010).
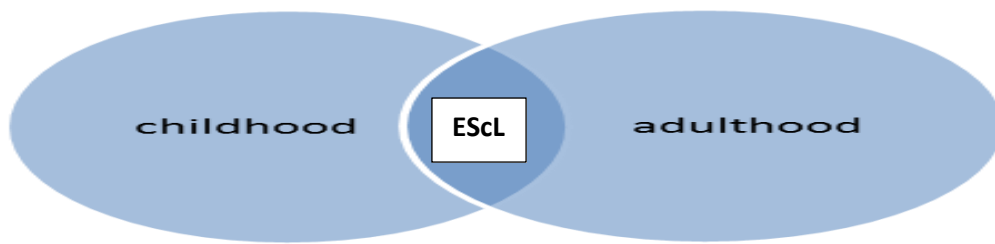
Figure 4.9: The dilemma of the EScL

Participants explained that, from a cultural perspective, older children are expected to care for an ailing parent. The expectation is higher with regard to the girl child. According to the EScLs, the eldest child, if in school, is expected to drop out in order to take care of siblings while the parent seeks medical help. Sometimes the youth has to look for a job in order to ensure the requisite resources required by the family thus, even at that tender age, having to assume adult responsibilities. I regard this as an EScL dilemma because it situates the EScL concerned in a world between childhood and adulthood. By assuming the responsibilities and roles of adulthood during childhood he/she is forced to become 'an adult' ahead of their counterparts who remain in school. Even though they are generally expected to be under the custody of adults (their parents), circumstances would have prematurely pushed them into adulthood (see Figure 4.9).

It was clear from the analysis of my data that, although the assumption of adult roles was not easy the youth had to endure it: they had no other option. Relating to the girl child and the assumption of adult roles, girls in the study pointed out that this line of thinking reflects African society's traditional perception that girl children do not need to proceed with school: their natural place is in the home. The emphasis that the girls in my study placed on this societal perception could have been an attempt from their side to rationalize their being at home rather than at school. It could, therefore, have been some kind of defence mechanism serving as a means of hiding their frustration at having to stay at home whilst their peers were at school.

The EScLs in my study also indicated that orphan-hood was the root cause of problems such as inadequate resources, child abuse and/or labour and, in some instances, migration, making it a multi-problem releaser. Their utterances in this regard reflected EScLs psychological trauma, especially in cases where both their parents were dead, an experience which they described as 'horrible' because all their hopes for the future were shattered by its occurrence. The language and tone of P13's description of the effect her parents' deaths had on her reflected her sense of hopelessness, despair, fear and uncertainty, feelings which were compounded by unsupportive relatives who, instead of assisting her, increased her vulnerability by expropriating her late parents' estate. Her deeply-felt resentment towards her

relatives, whom she blamed for the predicament in which she found herself, was evident from her narration.

Similar emotions were reflected in P01's written story as well as in the contribution of one of the discussants in an FGD. The gist of their narrations was that only the loss of parents equalled school dropout, nothing else. Rigidly ignoring the possibility that any other factors could act as school dropout triggers, P13's responses to question posed to her during interviews consistently included the clause, '*If my father was alive I would…*' (P13/B/In>), PO1 started his written life story as follows: *In life, there are more than 1000 things which are important but there are two things which look like jewelry, I think they are parents, without parents we are nothing (*P01/A/LS>)

Both these participants (PO1 and P13) obviously experienced a deep sense of loss but their comments also reflected an acknowledgement of the significant role that parents play in making their children feel safe, happy and secure, thus confirming Tudge's (2008) conclusion that the environment in which children live has an effect on their mental health (Tudge, 2008). It follows that the experience of orphan-hood would be perceived by those affected as the worst experience of their lives, especially if it forced them to drop out of school because of a lack of support (emotional and otherwise) from the surrounding systems, a lack particularly prominent from the data generated in my study.

This finding confirms the validity of one of the premises on which Rutter's Pathway Model rests, namely that children do not have the capacity to define their developmental trajectory. Instead, circumstances in their lives define their paths, a path which is never linear (Rutter, 2005). Hoyt and Larson (2010) and Gillies and Neimever (2006) agreeing that the death of a significant person, a parent, for example, constitutes an obstacle, justifies it with reference to the ripple effect it has on the young person's life. According to them, the parent's death not only undermines the youngster's self-confidence but also causes him/her to give up on his/her dreams for a better future. The situation in which youngsters like these find themselves is similar to those facing the survivors of a disaster. While the parent was alive the parent probably had a plan in place for the child's future, thus giving direction to the latter's life. With the advent of the parent's death that plan might no longer be feasible. As is the case with survivors, the disaster – the parent's death in this case –often leaves the ones who had lived through it directionless for a time, especially since their future had become uncertain.

According to Matshalaga (2004), unpleasant events in a person's life could be devastating and traumatizing, especially if the event leads to long-time problems. The effect that the deaths of their parents had on the life circumstances of affected EScLs in my study both confirm and are confirmed by Matshalaga's findings. Although the deaths of their

parent(s) had occurred more than a decade ago, their memories of the loss they felt afterwards remained vivid. This could be due to the secondary effects of their loss, details of which are discussed later in this section. What is important to note at this point is that difficult circumstances in the EScLs lives affected the entire family.

In all the 'orphan-hood' cases mentioned thus far, almost all the siblings of the affected EScLs in my study had either dropped out of school or were planning to do so. The language used during interviews and FGDs suggested that, ironically, this was a source of consolation to the affected EScLs – that is, they did not have to feel bad about dropping out of school because they were not alone in this; other family members had gone through the same experience. Put differently, although dropping out was unpleasant, it was not uncommon. While the realization that other family members had also failed to complete school was meant to comfort EScLs, it also afforded them the opportunity to shift the blame for their non-completion of school onto other people and/or circumstances. This possibility was evident in my EScLs participants' responses to a question I posed on the prevalence of school dropout during an FGD. They were quick to inform me that dropping out was a common occurrence. According to them, no one would be surprised to hear that many children are not going to school because everyone knows that. Perhaps they were rationalizing, showing their resilience in trying to sound positive regardless of the predicament in which they found themselves and the negative feelings attached to this. The tone used by most of them when they reminisced about having to leave school prematurely reflected their respective levels of loss, post-traumatic recovery and sustained competence – their resilience, in other words (Masten, 2007; Masten & Reed, 2005; Phillips, 2008),

Parenting and poor family structures and support. Another dimension of home-related pull factors was poor family structures which exposed the youths to vulnerability. EScLs shared their sentiments related to poor family ties which contributed to their predicament, indicating that they had dropped out because of inadequate or no support from their extended families when they most needed it. After the loss of their parents through death, affected learners felt exposed. As indicated earlier, in the demographic analysis, most of the participants in the study were orphans. Orphan-hood pushed them into what EScLs viewed as induced poverty. Properties of the deceased were seized by their greedy relatives, leaving them even more vulnerable, as indicated by these comments by P13 and P01:

> … *my relatives caused this, you see, they took all the properties, all the wealth that my father had left. He had a house, cattle and some savings at the bank. So-oo, so far my mother she cannot afford my school fees…* (P13/B/In>)

138

My father was a hard-working person. He left us his wealth but my grandfather and his wife took it all from us and left my mother with nothing…. There is a thing I can never forget; my mother and us were banned from going to our rural home because they wanted to take the wealth that was left by our father (P01/A/ LS>).

These findings led to my deducing that unfair cultural practices jeopardised these children's lives. Some relatives became unreachable (financially and emotionally) at the children's time of need. Although, in the case of orphans, they should initially have access to resources in the deceased's estate, in about 50% of the orphaned cases, relatives grabbed the inheritance, thus leaving the children of the deceased vulnerable. While the law is very clear about issues related to inheritance, my findings uncovered gaps in the enforcement of such laws. Issues of inheritance were not the focus of my study; however, the insights I gained in this regard indicate that that there is a strong correlation between traditional practices and school dropout in Zimbabwe. In this regard, Zionek-Diogle (2010) and Inglis (2013) concur that there are issues related to poverty and inheritance that correlate with school dropout, particularly in developing countries. In Zimbabwe, property grabbing by relatives is rampant despite stipulations of the law regarding inheritance as enshrined in the Deceased Estates Succession Act (Act No. 16 of 1873 as amended through Act No. 6 of 1997; Chap. 6:02). This Act is very clear on procedures that should be followed in the distribution of the deceased's estate. Tradition, however, seems to override some laws, thus infringing on the rights of children.

My findings indicate, moreover, that the break-down of extended family ties resulted in family members being reluctant to assist other family members – the orphans, in this case - in times of crisis. Participants' accounts as reflected in the following excerpts indicated that orphans were abandoned in times they most needed cushioning.

It's bad, A-ah I never saw my parents, I just heard that my mother died when I was three weeks old. My father also died when I was three months old but I cannot say I know him. I only know my mother from the photos (alright), …I just know my mother's younger and older sisters but they do not want to stay with us (alright) (P05/A/In>)

A-ah with this sister I am staying with, we have the same mother but different fathers (okay). That is the situation. My aunties cannot stay with me, I do not know why and my uncles (father's younger brothers) always complain that things are hard for them so they can't do anything.to help me (P02/A/In>).

While all the participants mentioned challenges regarding school fees as the reason for dropping out, my analysis showed that, even in these cases, orphan-hood was a strong

underlying factor, creating havoc in the lives of the youths under study. P01, for example, strongly regretted having had to drop out of schools, indicating that he had still not been able to get over his bereavement, even after fifteen years of loss. His life story was characterised by a deep sense of hurt (P01/A/ LS>). The tone in all the EScLs' accounts as evidenced in the preceding excerpts reflect feelings that their families had let them down and that, in turn, they felt vulnerable and exposed (Rutter, 2005), especially because the fact that they had no one to fall back on, and no other options to pursue, led them to leave school prematurely.

Geo-economic factors and school dropout. Indications from my research findings are that geographical and/or socio-political issues also trigger premature school exit. This is what participants had to say about this matter:

> *It was the retrenchment of my father that is the reason that caused me to stop going to school. He did not get his pension. My father just returned home and stayed until he met his friend who went with him to Mozambique to look for a job (P16/C/In>).*

> *Things got tougher when I was in form 4 and my sister was in form two; my father was laid off at work and we could not even finish paying for the first term. So we were always being sent back for the fees. Things got difficult and there was nothing meaningful we were going to do at school, we were just going but soon sent back for fees (P09/B/In>).*

These excerpts suggest the breakdown of systems in the affected youths' lives, with events taking place in the family changing the learner's pathway in life. Dwindling financial resources caused shortages in the family. Distances to and from school, in some cases, were challenging. The breakdown of all the systems around the youth (micro, exo, chrono and macro) reflect Bronfenbrenner's (2005) claim that events occurring in a person's life at specific times not only have a bearing on his/her development but also tend to influence subsequent decisions taken during the course of the affected person's life.

ESLs 'responses also indicated that erratic attendance, due to a lack of money and long distances between their homes and school, had caused them to lag behind other learners and to eventually drop out of school.

> *I thought about the distance from the house to the secondary school and the way I used to be late. It was 6 kilometres now. I would get to school at 10 o'clock and not get time to study because work at home was more important to my grandfather. Sometimes I never went to school doing the work (P20/C/LS>).*

> *I realised that it was not helping me because I would go one day per week like today, yet the following week there would be a test and obviously I would not be ready for it. I would be blank on what would have been taught…* (P02/A/In>).

Cultural and religious beliefs and superstitions. My research revealed the role played by culture and religion in triggering school dropout. Certain cultural practices and religious beliefs were highlighted as indicators of school dropout triggers. EScLs pointed out that while some parents accorded children time to talk, those living in difficult situations as well as some foster parents had very little or no time to engage in discussions with their children. The influence of these factors was obvious in FGD and interview data, the excerpt following being a good example.

> *The explanation is that in a family there are people who use witchcraft so that a goblin can take the brain of that thing and put it in your brain and take your brain and put it on that thing and you do what he wants and they send you and say do this to that person and that thing can do what he wants and you know you are going to school but you don't understand what the teacher says and this thing stresses you until you stay at home* (P21/C/FG>).

My research findings confirm those by Bettmann et al. (2013), namely that cultural practices, gender disparity, harassment, stereotyping and attitude contribute to the prevalence of learners dropping out of secondary school. The inputs EScLs made during FGDs showed that even when children were aware of opportunities that could help them stay at schools, their parents would simply say that there was no money for fees and, because of cultural beliefs that parents should not be challenged, the child had to accept the parents' ruling as evidenced in P09's FGD input, in which he explains that,

> *… problems at home can make you dropout. Sometimes you can see that the money is there but your father tells you there is no money, what do you do? You cannot go to police because it's your parent. So you just leave because you have no power on your own, you have no money"* (P09/B/FG>).

The scenario reflects existing/cultural inequalities in the status of parents and children as regards decision-making: children are effectively voiceless, being expected to accept whatever the parent decides because 'the parent is never wrong', even if his/her decision puts the child at risk.

Closely related to cultural traditions are religious beliefs. My findings showed that some learners, particularly girls, are forced into early marriage, thus having to leave school

prematurely, even if they do not have to or want to. P17, indicating her outrage at the unfairness of this practice, said;

> I *think it is unfair, like here in this area there are many girls who are given into marriage for exchange of food or cattle to old men. Sometimes your father knows that that man is rich and in your family you do not have resources to cultivate your piece of land so the rich man is offered the daughter so marry and he supports your family* (P22/C/FG>).

The inevitability of the child having to succumb to decisions in this regard is reflected in P19's focus group input:

> *Yes, there is also a religious cult especially in this area they can have more than 5 wives its allowed and usually they marry very young girls even 15 years. They will say it's the spirit who said I should marry you. So, the girl drops out* (P19/C/ FG>).

According to participating EScLs the marriage agreement would be arranged by the parents alone: the young person involved would not be consulted and/or informed of the reasons for the parents' decision except to be told that "*it is coming from the spirit*" (P19/C/FG>). Thus, blind adherence to traditional/cultural beliefs relating parent-child power relations and the unquestionable 'rightness' of all parental decisions, the child inevitably loses out.

Tied to cultural beliefs was the issue of superstition, another factor identified as causing school dropout. FGD results at Site C uncovered superstition related to the identification and/or labelling of family members considered to be 'evil'. The suspected persons were believed to cause misfortunes such as illness, death of parents or failure to secure a job. Some EScLs ascribed the fact that they lagged behind at schools or that they felt too ill to go to schools to such 'evil practices', hence their decision to drop out of school. While these beliefs are difficult to challenge, I had the sense that, to some extent, EScLs used superstition as both a coping and a defence mechanism because it shifted the blame for their dropout behaviour onto someone other than themselves. Doing so, I suspected, helped them to manage/get through the denial stage of their 'loss experience'.

Another culturally-related factor emerging from FGDs was reflected in girls' being scared to talk about certain things. While they felt they could talk about nearly anything with their mothers, there were certain things they felt uneasy to share. One of these was information on their relationships with boys as expressed by P03 in the following excerpt.

*Haa, it's difficult at home. It's easier when you have grandmothers and aunts of which many of us cannot reach them. Haa, I just want to say, yes, we are close to our mothers but there are certain types of information that we cannot tell our mothers. It is like when I have been proposed along the road (*P03/A/FG>*).*

This custom was, and still is, taboo in some Shona sub-cultures. Such information would, instead, be shared with aunts and grandmothers who are not readily available. Girls used their parents' emotional unavailability and lack of support of parents as a reason for engaging in sexual relationships, falling pregnant and possibly dropping out of school. Girls' FGDs inputs suggested that there might be a lack of adequate parental guidance and/or quality time spent with children, particularly during their adolescent years, a period during which the parent is most needed because of the physical, mental and emotional changes typifying the adolescent stage (Santrock, 2011). Indications from the general tone of the FGDs was that parents were perceived as being too busy with other things to have time for the counselling and guidance of their own children.

Child rights, abuse, labour, punishment and step parenting. According to the participants, child rights are sometimes not observed by parents and guardians. Moreover, African traditional child-raising practices do not acknowledge the stipulations of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Parents/ guardians could, therefore make choices/decisions which are wrong for their children without the risk of ever being challenged (as discussed in the preceding paragraph). Elements of child abuse were implicit in the responses by P20 and P02.

*I would do a lot of work in the morning before I went to school. I would see that this was too much and that I can easily drop out of school because of this. No porridge was left for me; I knew that every day I would go to school without eating anything. I would just eat in the evening …(um) (*P20/C/In>*).*

*For me I don't feel free at home. It depends on whom you stay with. I do not share the same mother with my sisters. So, the way they treat me is different. So, at home for me I am not free because they say we are not related. (*P02//A/In>*).*

In other EScLs' stories evidence of physical and emotional abuse, neglect and child labour were explicit. Abuse (physical and emotional) and neglect were also common features of step-parenting, so much that participating EScLs equated it with ill treatment and emotional abuse, both of which caused them much frustration. These findings reflect Hough's (2010) finding that the satisfaction of physiological and psychological needs is critical to a person's general well-being. While P14 had mentioned lack of financial resources as her reason for dropping out,

she pointed out (during a member checking session) that the abuse she was experiencing at home had triggered her disinterest in school. Since she could not endure the harsh conditions at home she decided to run away and seek solace at her aunt's, hence her dropping out of school.

Compounded with humiliations due to their inability to pay school fees, home circumstances like these strengthened learners' views of themselves as unworthy. The discomfort caused by these circumstances persuaded them to rather leave school behind in the hope that there were alternatives 'out there' – a job or shelter - that would change the situation they found themselves in, thus providing them with physical and/or emotional solace. Unfortunately, at the time of my study, these hopes and dreams were yet to be realized.

4.3.2.2 Push factors: School climate. According to participants in the study, school climate constituted an umbrella 'push' factor made up of various sub-factors - teacher attitudes and/or competences, the school system, policies, and financial constraints. The push factors identified by the EScLs correlated with those described by Brown (2010) as negative situations in a school, which force a learner to leave school prematurely. Included in these 'negative situations' are physical and social environments unresponsive or insensitive to the needs of learners (Legault et al., 2006). Each of these 'push' factors are discussed hereafter as sub-themes of the theme, "school climate".

Teacher attitudes and competences. The attitudes and competences of secondary school teachers were highlighted as contributing factors in learners' decision to prematurely leave school. Specific issues contributing to this factor were poor teacher-learner relationships, teachers' insensitivity to individual learners' needs, negative attitudes by teachers, immaturity, failure to observe confidentiality when counselling learners and displaced aggression. Examples of these appear in the excerpts which follow, as presented by EScLs during FGDs.

Poor teacher-learner and adult-child power relations. Data generated during FGDs and individual interviews indicated that opportunities for learners to verbally express their emotions at school were limited. In the majority of cases, teachers were not approachable even though Guidance and Counselling formed part of the curriculum. Learners, describing most teachers as 'not accommodating,' did not feel that they were free to express their emotions. EScLs participants 20 and 09, respectively recalled.

> It was *rare for someone to run with any problem to tell a teacher. Some of the teachers are not free to school children so this causes the relationship with teachers not to be too close (*P20/C/In>).

Some teachers were accessible and some of them, ha-aa, you will find out that, ha-aa, this one you can't reach him because he will keep on telling you that he is busy, come next time. He will be busy all the time (P09/B/In>).

EScLs described the relationship between teachers and learners as distant. In some cases, distance was created by cultural barriers, for instance, a male teacher could not freely talk with girls and conversely, female teachers with boys. EScLs perceived the boundaries thus created as unfair, arguing that counselling, or help, would be effective only if offered by a person whom the youth prefers and chooses independently. The following excerpt from P20's response bears evidence of this.

It would have been nice if schools allowed you as a learner to build a relationship with your teacher because at the time I went to secondary school it was difficult to be seen seated with a teacher, only the two of you. It depended with the type of teacher that you would sit down with, especially for girls if you would be seen with a male teacher haaa, others would start to be suspicious at that time. (P20/C/In>).

The general impression created by the EScLS responses to questions posed during interviews or FGDs was that teachers were distant. In some cases, distance was created by cultural barriers, for instance, a male teacher could not freely talk with girls and conversely, female teachers with boys, yet EScLs felt that the boundaries created were unfair as counselling or help can only be effective with a person whom the youth prefers and chooses independently. In reaction to their failure to get teachers' attention, according to the participants, learners often became stubborn and/or resorted to deviant behaviour. Their comments relate to school climate issues which, according to Brown (2010) and Doll et al., (2013) are critical to the maintenance of learner interest in school and thus, as found in other studies (Brown, 2010; Legault, et al., 2006; Doll et al., 2013), suggest that school climate is a central element of school push factors.

Teacher insensitivity to learner needs. Data revealed that teachers are sometimes insensitive, creating mistrust and, as a consequence, making learners feel insecure. In this regard, P16 said in an interview;

…one of the things that happen is that you consider the way you are treated at school. Let's say you came late to school, if the teacher hits you for that, you will hate that teacher such that you will not trust if s/he will hear your concerns (um). So those are some of the reasons why I did not (um) approach the teachers with my problem (P16/C/In>).

Authorities in the school, such as the school head were described by the same participant as harsh, hard and insensitive.

With the way the headmaster hit me in the staff room in the presence of the teachers, humiliating me, would I be able to go and ask for assistance?' It was very difficult for me, which was the problem I encountered (um) (P16/C/In>).

P02 and P13 also respectively indicated the following;

It's difficult to get support when you want it in school. In fact, you will not get it at the time you want it. Some teachers do not even understand that I do not have a mathematical set, they just tell you to get out of their class, and they don't care. P02/A/In.>).

Especially on science, I have already mentioned (uhm). I am a person who is not good in science. So, if a teacher gets into the class and give me notes without explaining especially science there are many concepts, what will I do with them? …What will I learn from that? It's not helpful! You need to learn according to your level and time (umm), things should be explained (yes)(P13/B/In>)/

Data generated in my study indicate that opportunities for learners to discuss social or academic issues with teachers were either not readily available or not as frequent as students wanted. EScLs gave numerous reasons for this situation. Authorities in the school such as the school development committee and school head were described as harsh, hard and insensitive. What annoyed and degraded learners most was the calling out of the names of non-payers of school fees either at assembly or in classes and to then be asked to go back home to fetch the fees. The most painful thing about this, according to the EscLs, was that it usually took place just before writing tests so that one would feel the impact. The repeated practice made victims feel inadequate, making them feel that the effort to come to school was purposeless. The school, in such instances, was regarded as an unpleasant place to be, hence the student ultimately gave up coming, confirming findings in a study which Machingambi (2012) conducted in Zimbabwe, namely that teachers seemed relatively unconcerned about learners' class progress.

Indications from my data were that learners perceived teachers as not forthcoming and/or simply disliking certain learners. "*Other teachers don't like your skin, just disliking you, just disliking someone so (uhm). So, they are just prejudiced*" (P10/B/FG>.)

The insensitive treatment of learners was described as having a detrimental effect on learners. Since it is regarded as uncultured to argue with an adult in the African tradition,

EScLs said they would comply grudgingly since they had their own dreams which they expected to fulfil. However, repeated experiences of insensitive treatment, particularly beating and corporal punishment created enmity between learners and their teachers. In one of the FGDs, P05 emotionally said that they 'marked' such teachers, organizing a gang outside the school premises to beat him up or just threaten him.

EScLs were in agreement that the support they received at school was limited. Teachers were not prepared to provide individual tutoring/counselling hence learners had to turn to their peers for support. According to the EScLs students were willing to support one another because in many cases, they had things in common - particularly home background and performance levels in class. P02 said in a FGD,

> *You help someone because you know tomorrow it will be you in that situation but teachers do not do so because they have what they want" (*P02/A/FG>).

The tone used reflected angry memories of the serious lack of emotional support they received from adults at their schools.

Their inability to pay the requisite school fees due to their belonging to a disadvantaged group had also made EScLs feel vulnerable, rejected, betrayed and helpless. They thought that teachers, who were supposed to protect them instead exposed them when students approached them, asking for help to remain in class and/or at school. My findings suggest, thus, that 'at risk' learners who had wanted to stay at school and who had asked available adults at their schools for help had seldom received any, thus their only recourse was to drop out of school.

Negative/ wrong teacher attitudes. My research findings indicate that teachers' negative attitude towards learners contributed to the learners' pre-mature school exit. This was evident from their lack of concern for learners' problems, their unwillingness and/or lack of urgency to respond to learners;' requests for help with their school work, their high rate of absenteeism from school and/or the classes they were supposed to teach. P14 remembered.

> *For some, if you approach them with a test paper and say, 'Sir I am not understanding this, especially English, I do not know what I am supposed to do", the teacher might say he is busy yet you will be seeing the person sitting, not even marking any book or doing anything! So you would not be free to approach him again (*P14/B/FG>).

Memories of discriminatory behaviour by teachers also surfaced during the course of my study. According to P12 and P09, for example, teachers engaged in a range of discriminatory practices.

*Ha-aaa I feel that at school there are no such free opportunities (please speak up) alright, some use what we call favouitism. It is like, for example, I will become friends with you Mrs Gatsi so you can assist me with this and that. It means that other learners will not get the same chance to relate with you, you see (*P12/B/FG>).

Like I mentioned earlier it is difficult for most people to give advice as they do with their own child. So sometimes you might not know where you went wrong, probably I would have annoyed the teacher in the past, now I don't know you see (P09/B/FG>),

The worst scenario, according to the participants, was when teachers did not attend classes. Such teachers had a habit of distributing notes on the lessons the were supposed to teach, using selected learners from the same class to distribute these to other learners in the class. These teachers never bothered to come and explain the notes. Some teachers did not teach the subjects they were supposed to yet expected learners to write the requisite examinations in those subjects. P13 pointed out that,

the other problem is that the teachers were lazy and they mostly wanted children to go to trips every month. Some never came to class a whole term. There was no prize giving day ceremony to motivate the children to work hard on the school work" (P13/B/LS>).

Participants indicated that practices like these frustrated learners and, as a result, there were learners who often did not turn up for the tests/ examinations. Even then the teachers did not follow up to establish possible reasons for this, thus reflecting their disinterest in teaching and supporting learners. It also showed their negative and/or carefree attitude to their professions and the efforts of the learners they were supposed to teach. Teachers' attitude towards learners whom they regarded as incapable of achieving certain learning outcomes was also a problem. According to the participants teachers made no effort to help struggling learners. The reason according to P09 was, *"sometimes they just have a low opinion about you and you feel out of place, you, therefore, cannot freely seek help"* (P09/B/FG>).

Given the absence of adult supervision of learners' work and progress and/or adults taking an interest in a learner's work, it was, according to EScLs, easy for someone to drop out irrespective of the fees issue. These findings suggest that teachers' negative attitudes towards learners contribute to the latter's premature school exit. Teachers' attitudes are reflected in their lack of interest in learners' concerns, their reluctance to help learners with their school work, their high absenteeism from duty and or the classes they were supposed to teach. In many cases, teachers claimed to be too busy to spend time listening to learners'

concerns. The unavailability of opportunities for free discussion with teachers on issues of concern were perceived as negative.

What is clear from the analysis of my data is that teachers do not seem to strictly adhere to policies, such as the institution of G&C in a school, a policy aimed at ensuring that all learners benefit from schooling. P12, for example, noted in an FGD that, "*you do not see the value of continuing going to school when you are not achieving anything, teachers ignoring you*" (P12/B/FG>).

I deduced from the EScLs' arguments/statements that, although their inability to pay fees was cited as the major reason for dropping out of school, there were numerous other, underlying issues related to their mental and emotional well-being which contributed to their decision to do so.

Teachers' displaced aggression. Another issue emerging from the data concerning the role that teachers played in learners' decision to drop out of school was that teachers seemed unable to 'separate' issues, using their encounters with learners to vent their emotions concerning problems they experience elsewhere. Learners experienced this as particularly unfair as evidenced in P16's and P13's comments on teacher attitudes.

> *When you ask a simple question, the teacher shouts at you and tell you that s/he has the same problem; s/he would also be in need of money for his/her child to be doing the same, so s/he would say s/he cannot help me (*P16/C/In>).

> *A-ah, I think they had their own problems in the offices. Maybe it was about salaries. Someone might not take it lightly and decide to sabotage. S/he will not understand that there are other children who would have paid (yes). S/he would just treat everybody the same and does not come to lessons. That is what I think (*P13/B/In>).

EScLs' FGDs revealed that teachers' willingness to help was minimal. To them, going out of their way to listen to another child did not make sense. They would also be looking for solutions to their own problems. When they were consulted, teachers were unnecessarily emotional, sometimes shouting at learners or beating them for no apparent reason. The EScLs attributed such acts of displaced aggression to the effect of exo and macro systems (Tudge, 2008). EScLs admitted that things are tough in Zimbabwe; the economy is dwindling and that even families where the breadwinner has a job cannot sufficiently fend for their own because salaries/ wages were generally below the poverty line, even for teachers.

Lack of confidentiality and teacher maturity. It was evident from focus group data that a lack of maturity and confidentiality at secondary schools contributed to school dropout. This was evidenced by the fact that wrong behaviour, such as encouraging a girl to fall in love with a teacher, were condoned. My data show that the victims of actions like these generally lose out because, in most cases, the girl would fall pregnant and leave school prematurely. Young teachers, both male and female, were believed not to have the capacity to protect the girls in love relationships, although this often occurs at secondary school due to learners being in the adolescence stage. The following excerpt gives P16 argument.

> *… for example, a girl reports her case to a teacher but he will say, why you are refusing, love him, eat his money, there is no issue, go out please. You have to go to an older madam, the young madams aah can also put you into trouble (what does she say?) the young madams say 'get into a relationship it doesn't matter isn't, he single and you are single'. But if they are older teachers like your age, Mrs Gatsi, they will understand (P16/C/FG>).*

Relatedly, P12 and P13 respectively expressed the following;

> *Like I mentioned earlier it is difficult for most young people to give advice to another youth. There are very few elderly teachers in schools, like we said before because elderly teachers really appreciate that you are their child not the young teachers. …So, it depends with the kind of teachers you have (P12/B/FG>). "The teachers at our school were not elderly teachers (okay), I can say they were big boys (uhm)" (P13/B/In>),*

Learners, particularly, girls, were exposed and vulnerable. The girls in the study revealed that sometimes they were threatened that they would be given a failing mark in a test if they refused to enter into a love relationship with a teacher. Such situations, which initially sounded insignificant, ended up creating a negative attitude towards school and, ultimately, the dropping out of the learner concerned.

EScLs pointed out that, although G&C services were available at their former schools, they existed in principle only. Learners shunned the opportunity to go for G&C because the young teachers who were supposed to offer the services did not attend to the issues with the seriousness they deserved, again suggesting the immaturity of some teachers. The issue of lack of confidentiality by some teachers also surfaced causing learners to shun counselling.

> *We are scared but the opportunity is there at school (what scares you) a child might think that if I tell the teacher I will be beaten. If you tell the teacher that this is the way*

*I am treated at home he will take the information back home. For example, if you were staying with an uncle who will be beating you and abusing you and if this information got home, you won't be safe so you would be scared (*P20/C/FG>).

Reflected in comments like these was the suggestion that learners preferred older/mature teachers to young ones when confidentiality was an issue. It was evident from participants' comments that learners at secondary schools do not have much confidence in the G&C services offered because of the poor quality of counsellors. Evidence from FGDs indicates that those who confided in the G&C teachers would later on hear their stories in the corridors. While the service was there, learners were scared to use it because they doubted that the teachers in whom they confided had the integrity to keep their secrets. Learners thus preferred closing up and suffering to sharing their problems with teachers unless these were preferred elderly counsellors. While my study did not focus on the assessment of the G&C at schools, results suggest the existence of a deficiency in the training of G&C teachers.

Inhibiting policies and practices and Compliance to school demands. The findings of my study brought to the fore issues related to school policies and practices as contributing factors to school dropout in Zimbabwean secondary schools. Numerous practices, particularly those relating to payment of school fees, were described as creating an environment that was unfriendly and unsupportive (Phillips, 2008). Learners whose families could not perform according to various school requirements were constantly sent back home and, in the process, often missed classes. School authorities, including the School Development Committee (SDC), using school assembly or visiting different classrooms, physically followed up on non-payers of school fees and the wearing or not of school uniforms. Names were called out and such learners were instructed to leave classes until they had paid up. Classroom teachers also sent learners out if they did not have the requisite equipment for learning in certain subjects - a mathematics instrument set, exercise book or pencil, for example. These requirements were real issues for a learner coming from a disadvantaged family background as reflected in the excerpts which follow.

My problem was that I could not read in the school library. They could not allow for free when other children were paid up. So it was difficult for me to go and ask if I could be assisted on that problem You would just lose out, you did not know where else to find help (uhmm) um (P16/C/In>).

But there was nowhere to report to because we did not know and were afraid, you are just told to go home and you walk out of the classroom (P20/C/In>).

Actions like these are in effect infringements of statutory regulations/instruments that govern the administration of schools. It was clear that while the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education has a policy instrument which clearly states that children should not be disadvantaged or denied access to education for non-payment of fees, school practices reflect the opposite. The EScLs explained that learners do not have direct access to the documents that spell out government policies. As a result, they find it difficult to speak confidently against some school practices. Important information which would protect them was deliberately not available to them. As a result, they had no option but to comply with particular school policies and practices which obviously put them at a disadvantage. EScLs were convinced that learners from disadvantaged backgrounds ultimately dropped out of school because they could not satisfy the demands made by the school (Chinyoka, 2014).

Implied in all these accounts are both a that lack of support systems and knowledge concerning these. Where information was available, fear of victimisation did not allow learners to report the abusive action. My findings therefore uncovered a need for advocacy by organisations/adult volunteers to protect the youth from the abuse of children and the infringement of children's rights on the one hand and the interrogation of school-based policies on the other.

Punishment and bullying. It was clear from the results of my study that punishment, particularly corporal punishment. is a common and acceptable means of disciplining secondary school learners regardless of its effect on learners. Among school-related causes, corporal punishment was described as the form of punishment most detrimental to learners' physical and psychological wellbeing. Indications from my research data were that beating was rampant in schools, to the extent that learners would wear text books inside their pants to minimise the pain caused during the administering of strokes.

*It's bad mem, you could only survive by placing at least two text books inside your pants then wear two short in preparation for the strokes. At least that way the pain would be manageable" (*P06/A/FG>).

EScLs blamed corporal punishment on school heads who, according to them, condoned the practice, thus exposing the learners and making them vulnerable.

Responding to a question on measures in schools to protect learners from corporal punishment, participants shared several views.

A-ah, that children are beaten in classrooms? A-ah as for me I think the Headmaster knows about it, I am not too sure but sometimes it would be him beating you especially

when you come late. However, I do not know much if the school head knows that the teachers are beating the children. But haa I think he knows, there is nothing that will happen at the school without his knowledge (P09/B/FG>).

A further analysis of data on the administering of punishment revealed that secondary schools used other forms of punishment, besides corporal punishment to change learners' behaviour. These punishments, according to participants, were destructive and administered in different ways as given in the excerpt below.

*On the forms of punishment, you can be told to dig a big anthill. Some are just given light punishments of just sweeping an office (okay). Someone will be just told, 'sha-a (meaning friend) water these flowers. They could send you to elderly caretakers at the school to give you the punishment. (*P18/C/FG>)

One day we were late for the woodwork lesson because the commerce teacher had asked us to finish the test first. The woodwork teacher wanted to beat us but we refused. When she insisted, and said; "get out of my class… I will not teach you." I… just went home (P09/B/FG>)

My data also revealed that bullying constituted yet another threat to learners' safety, particularly during their first year of secondary school (Form 1).

*Even bullying can make another child refuse to go to school. …Even the teachers, they are not serious about the bullying issue. If you tell some of them, they will answer you in an impolite way (*P05/A/In>).

Results revealed that secondary school, usually, had no space for learners 'voices to be heard. Obedience and respect for school rules were achieved through coercion. Corporal punishment created a tense atmosphere and friction between teachers/ administrators and learners, thus compromising their relationship. EScLs claimed that, although bullying was rife, teachers never took it seriously. It caused misery, frustration, stress and psychological damage. Based on the EScLs' statements, I inferred that bullying seems underrated in schools as a causal factor of the school dropout phenomenon, primarily because it resulted in unhealthy social interactions between and among learners. The beating and instances of humiliation which occurred quite often contributed to learners developing a negative attitude towards school, associating its attendance with unfair treatment and punishment.

Issues of child abuse and infringement of the rights of children were brought up, as punishment was randomly administered. EScLs indicated that punishment sometimes did not match the offence, creating further problems - undisciplined and/or violent behaviour. Since

the school climate was not conducive to a free flow of communication, learners became unruly and created more trouble to express or get rid of their frustration. According to Coleman and Hagell (2007), defiance by learners in secondary school signals deep problems with authority (school authority) even though, as Brower and Keller (2006) established, punishment is counterproductive to teacher-learner relationships and creates negative feelings.

My findings on the effect that punishment had on participating EScLs confirm observations by Brown (2010) and Doll et al. (2013) that policies that allow harsh discipline, such as corporal punishment, the enforcement of rigid school rules, and the use of threats, amount to social hostility and a mistrust of the environment. Brower and Keller (2006) further observe that threats and punishment should never be used at schools or homes as both constitute acts of power over others, acts resisted by adolescents. Positive disciplinary measures preferred since they are logical, healthy and encourage the child to improve his/her behaviour (Brower & Keller, 2016, p. 18-19).

EScLs, however did not completely reject punishment. To a certain extent, they thought punishment had a positive effect, particularly to correct unruly behaviour or laziness in class, provided that it was fairly administered. In such cases, EScLs viewed it as disciplinary action aimed at upholding societal values and establishing a positive social environment conducive to learning, not as a form of abused power. P09 explained it as follows:

> *It's like, when we were in Form One, we were very playful, and we used to disregard school. However, in Form Two we started to carefully consider friends who liked school. …There are situations in which you really realise that I am being punished for a reason and other situations that you are punished for no reason* (P09/B/In>).

From this perspective, EScLs explained that everyone in the school would regard the school environment with high esteem and pride. The attitude towards school experiences in such cases was positive and learners benefited from a sense of belonging and positive regard for self and peers. My sense of the claims they made in this regard was that EScLs were trying to strike a balance between the positive and negative effects of corporal punishment, showing a high level of reasoning capacity. However, in the final analysis, it was clear that, by and large, they regarded corporal punishment as harsh and unfair.

Material, financial and psychological needs as well as Physical appearance at school (Dress). The way they were able to dress as well as the food and other materials learners could afford were also classified as indicators of school dropout: those without a proper school uniform, with a poor or no lunch pack, no books and other required learning materials were already at risk of dropping out. Data generated during FGDs indicate that

154

inadequacies like these were humiliating and degrading to the learners concerned and eventually 'pushed' them out of school. Inputs made by P10 and P20 bear evidence of this.

Other children stop going to school because at school P13 has a nice uniform… Then I come with a torn one, a torn one hey and then they will laugh at me right, a-aah. Another person can even go to school without even applying any lotion on their body. So, when they get to school they are humiliated and laughed at. You then leave school (P10/B/FG>)

…also, the clothes I would wear. I would compare myself with others in my class and I would end up separating myself from others and preferred to be alone. Life was very difficult for me and I saw that it was better to sit at home where no one inspects your life. You would say to yourself if this person is like this then what's wrong with me (P20/C/In>).

EScLs mentioned that, in most cases, disadvantaged families had many children. As a result, it was difficult to get adequate supplies of school needs for all of them. Labelling these learners was, therefore, prevalent because of the inadequacies. The affected learners felt out of place, finding it difficult to mix with those coming from affluent and stable families. It was clear from the EScLs' responses that continuous exposure of their 'undesirable appearances' at their schools had affected them psychologically. This was very clear from the tone of statements P20 made in this regard. He sounded deeply affected, openly describing his negative experiences. Although he claimed that the issue of fees was the main reason he dropped out of school, his detailed description of experiences related to mental and emotional matter – psychological issue, in other words, and the emotions he experienced in recalling them, suggested otherwise, implicitly validating the claim made by Adelman and Taylor (2012) that comparing oneself with others whom one perceives as better than oneself negatively affects one's self-concept.

Financial constraints. In my study, the lack of adequate support systems to cushion disadvantaged groups in society was an issue related to non-compliance with the requirement to pay school fees. EScLs' life stories indicate again and again that their efforts to obtain financial assistance were either futile or available on a short-term basis only, a term too short to enable the learner concerned to complete school. Excerpts from some of their responses to interview questions on this issue, replicated below, illustrate the dilemmas ensuing from this situation.

Yea, there are some programmes like BEAM and by NGOs. Aren't they supposed to assist the less privileged and orphans? So, when I was in school I couldn't get a chance

to get in these programmes. It required authorities that really understand that you are less privileged for you to fit into these programme (P20/C/In>).

Ummm, at the secondary school, there was nothing but I heard something happened in primary school. Ummm, I heard it works in secondary school as well …(P02/A/In)

Responses by EScLs suggested the influence of underlying issues related to the unequal distribution of resources. The issue of equity previously discussed under conceptualisation relates to this. It was clear that there was lack of systemic adaptation to new forms of vulnerability. Responding to the question of whether or not they had information about financial aid sources, EScLs responses indicated uncertainty and a lack of adequate information. Some were guessing, as reflected in the opinions expressed in the excerpts below. My data analysis revealed that opportunities for financial aid in Zimbabwe are slim. While there are numerous organisations working with disadvantaged communities, the numbers of children in need are rapidly increasing, making the possibility to provide aid very difficult. Further indications are that financial assistance at secondary school level seems hard to get as evidenced by the high percentage of leaners that drop out due to financial constraints. Issues related to insufficient and inconsistent communication systems relate much to Bronfenbrenner's meso- system. A lack of smooth relationships and communication channels between systems puts learners at a disadvantage. Systems, situated and non- situated, should be interactive, reciprocal and protective to ensure the survival of the learner (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Phillips, 2008; Rutter, 2005).

Rigid conditions and unclear selection procedures regarding assistance eligibility. Data on the selection procedures used to determine people's eligibility for aid indicate that, in some cases, potential receivers of aid were unaware of the existence of these procedures and/or the procedures to be followed lacked transparency. According to EScLs, age, gender and educational level were used as eligibility criteria: in some of these, for example, only primary school learners or girls would be eligible as recipients. Here is what EScLs said about this issue.

I tried going to seek help at church. I tried to talk to the Fathers at church. The Fathers tried their best but their issue was that they wanted us to go back to primary level because they were assisting primary school level…. (P05/A/In>).

Aaah I don't know of the selection criteria that they use because you wouldn't have attended any meetings or know where they meet. But there were instances where you hear that Basic Eucation Assistance Module (BEAM) is taking children in difficult circumstances but when you try you are told that they are now enough. (P20/C/In>).

My findings in this regard indicate that their failed efforts to obtain aid have a negative impact on the EScL's self- esteem. Participants anticipated inclusion in the BEAM programme which is a government initiative to assist learners from impoverished families. EScLs considered the definition of vulnerability and conditions for qualification into an intervention programme as unnecessarily rigid. According to P05, beggars should be allowed to choose, particularly where issues of humanitarianism are involved. The argument presented was that children are not given much of a voice when being considered for humanitarian aid. It seems as if well-wishers are, sometimes, pursuing their own agendas instead of identifying honest beneficiaries of the aid. The EScLs participating in my study complained that, in a way, some humanitarians were more inclined to be attention seekers than helpers. Helping others, in this context, was thus conceptualised as a pretext only. The arguments put forward by these EScLs point to problems related to the selection criteria for inclusion in intervention programmes and relate to functions typical of the meso-system as conceptualized in the Bioecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 2005).

While the assessment of intervention programmes was beyond the scope of my study, it was clear to me that intended beneficiaries did not have sufficient knowledge or understanding of management and policy issues related to humanitarian aid, hence, their complains. EScLs also queried the integrity of some of the committees tasked with the selection. Some genuinely qualifying beneficiaries failed to access the fund, thus ending up dropping out of school. The EScLs reiterated that they were unable to utilize the opportunity to be selected as beneficiaries due to their ignorance of the selection procedures of and/or information on other processes related to inclusion in intervention programmes. Most of the information they had was passed on second-hand, often in bits and pieces and, to make matters worse, verbally provided, all of which had serious implications for their eligibility, eventually leading to their losing out completely. Tied to the lack of adequate information, EScLs raised the issue of lack of participation in issues related to their well-being.

Non-participation of children in assistance-related decision-making. My data analysis resulted in the identification of a missing link in terms of contact between well-wishers and intended child beneficiaries. The EScLs mentioned that those who had been given the opportunity to participate were insignificant in number and had probably learnt about it by chance. Apart from these fortunate ones, participation was basically non-existent. P20 indicated, for example, that, '*there are instances where you hear that…" or "sometimes you hear that…," or "I don't know how …. We did not get the chance to be involved in the processes, you see"* (P20/C/In>). Sharing the same view, P10 said that, "… *you see that you*

are given mealie-meal or rice or even cooking oil when you actually want school uniform or text books and fees …" (P10/B/In>).

Participants indicated that as a result, critical needs or preferences were sometimes not met. The major finding here was that affected groups generally lack information on this matter. Numerous utterances by participants reflected their ignorance of policies and strategies relating to programmes for disadvantaged groups. Information usually reached them indirectly. This finding is critical if service delivery to vulnerable groups in society is to be rethought and improved, thus confirming arguments by Cohen et al. (2009) and Osman (2012) that the responsiveness of the social environment is critical; that in its absence learners inevitably engage in risky dropout behaviour.

Push factors established in the course of my study confirmed those reported in the literature I reviewed. The Kenyan situation, as presented by Bettmann, et al. (2013), was partially replicated, in that inadequate resources and curricula were not aligned to learners' interests. My conclusion that the curriculum was insensitive to learner needs was not, however, categorically stated by participants; I inferred it from EScLs' indications of their curricular preferences.

4.3.2.3 Fall-out factors. The last set of factors leading to school dropout relate to a scenario in which a learner is neither forced out nor really attracted by anything from outside the school but by side effects of both. Doll et al. (2013, p. 293, posit, for example, that a lack of "personal and educational support" could be regarded as a fall-out factor. The school, for instance might have failed to provide the necessary impetus that would have encouraged learners to try harder; this being absent, learners lose all hope of completing school, primarily because they are not intrinsically motivated. Doll et al. (2013) categorise outcomes like these as side effects of both pull and push factors while Sigei and Tikoko (2014) describe it as a process of disengagement, characterised by gradual absenteeism, skipping or late attendance of classes, talking about negative things at school, and finding it hard to adjust to school routine: in short, failing to identify with the school concerned. According to Sigei & Tikoko (2014), behaviours like these are often the results of individual personality traits. Informed by these arguments I would categorize as fall-out factors a learner's failure to cope with school standards, mischief, learned helplessness and repeated exposure to other school drop-outs.

Failure to cope with school standards. Academic performance is a critical measurement of standards in secondary education. Lack of progress in school, therefore, was identified as a precursor of school dropout. In such a situation, the learner could be described as seeing no purpose in continuing to attend classes, having realized that he/she was lagging

behind peers or was not making progress at all. Discouraged and having lost hope of obtaining a useful certificate, she would decide to withdraw and do other things outside school. For example, her lack of progress filtered through all the issues P02 recalled – during the interview and FGD - which, according to her, led to her decision to drop out of school. The excerpts below provide evidence of instances of discouragement.

> *If you find out that others have written some notes, you will find it difficult to catch up because by the time you are writing previous notes, others would be given new ones so you would stay behind and that would disturb you (*P02/A/In>*). However, there are others who tend to discriminate those who are not good in class. How do you expect someone to improve if you keep on discriminating against them? (*P02/A/FG>*) Ummm, there were other things I was good at and other things I was not. It's like mathematics was difficult for me, I needed more help in it. Maths was difficult for me; I would score as low as 28% (*P02/A/In>*).*

Overall, the findings of the study indicate that a learner who fails to make progress at school may not see the value of completing school as he/she doubts his/her own ability to ever achieve meaningful results. Indications from excerpts of EScLs' recall of their dropout experiences are that they disengaged because they could not catch up with classes. Lack of progress in academic work was very prominent in this regard. They seemed to have felt overwhelmed by the amount of work that had to be done and, coupled with the attitude of peers, as indicated in P02's comments, this discouraged them to even try to catch up. Also, considering PO2's very low scores in Mathematics (28%), for example, disengagement was inevitable. P02 was weak in class and she knew that. While she presented financial constraints like other EScLs as the reason for dropping out, the mention of lack of progress filtered in all her responses in the study. She was worried more about her lagging behind in academic subjects. Although she did not pronounce it, from the tone of language she used, I could infer that lack of progress could have contributed significantly to her premature school exit. Teachers' attitudes could have further frustrated her and destroyed her self-concept. Whilst she expressed the wish to go back to school, her struggle with Mathematics was conspicuous as indicated in a side comment about how desperately she had needed a calculator. Her cry, "I need a lot of help" reflected inadequacies other than her inability to pay the school fees she had mentioned as the primary reason why she dropped out. She was, in fact, according to me, more concerned about her lack of academic progress than about her need for financial assistance. Although she did not pronounce it, one could pick up from her tone that this was the factor which contributed most to her premature school exit.

Reminiscences of the dropout experiences of P03, P09 and P04 were very similar to those of P02s, suggesting that challenges with school work was a common denominator in their eventual decision to drop out of school.

*I was behind with my work in class and sometimes I would never have the opportunity to have the explanations. I would end up having a lot of notes that I did not understand and there would not be any other student who would be able to explain (*P03/A/FG>).

It was difficult for me because I was not present most of the times when those things were being explained. Yes, sometimes you read at home but you would need someone to explain to you so that you can fully understand (P09/B/In>).

Aah, you would never succeed because you know that you are just going to school but you are not good in class. You would just end up staying home (P04/A/FG>).

The language used in P03's, P09's and P04's responses shows that to some extent, the impact that lagging behind in academic work had on them contributed markedly to their ultimate decision to drop out. I concluded that it was their being completely discouraged and having lost all hope of obtaining a useful certificate, that made most of these EScLs decide to leave school prematurely. It became clear to me that academic performance is a critical measurement of standards in secondary education and that certification at the end of the course is the ultimate goal. Poor grades are, therefore, as Brown (2010) posits a key fall-out factor.

Mischief. Data collected during the course of my study suggest that mischief is usually learnt from peers in the community, especially from older ones. EScLs identified the community as the source of their mischievous behaviour because, according to them no-one monitors youngsters' behaviour. At home, EScLs agreed, parents do their best, and at school teachers also are responsible, but the community is like 'no man's land'.

No-one really bothers about another person in the community, especially children's behavior. At home, your parents or guardians can beat you or chase you away from home for bad behavior so the community haa is free ground for mischief" (P021/C/FG>).

Youths are free to experiment at liberty and most boys become addicted to dangerous substances. Included in comments and views on substance abuse during an FGD were the following: *Especially others will actually smoke weed. … (um) (* P14/B/FG>).

*The other major problem is peer pressure. It is mostly among boys and sometimes girls as well. However, among the boys you will notice that we encourage each other to do bad things. …(*P03/A/FG)

Elements of mischief like smoking at school, drinking, bullying and playing music from the phone during school were cited as common secondary school behaviour. EScLs explained that such behaviours were usually learnt from peers in the community, especially older ones. Results showed that there is no strong support system (s) to groom youths in the community. Mischief, thus, degenerates into disengagement from school work as youngsters get into the habit of erratic attendance and ultimately dropping out. Dropping out of school in this context was viewed as a sanction of social expectations. Peer pressure, from the narrations of participants, seemed to exert a strong influence on youthful behaviour and decision-making. Indications were that learners sometimes only regretted their behaviour when it was too late because they would have joined the wrong click and ended up in trouble. Nelson (2006), for example, cited high levels of crime, idleness, and drug abuse as common practice at high schools. My findings confirm not only this claim of Nelson's (ibid) but also his observation that peer pressure is likely to prematurely draw teenagers out of school. The study results showed that the greatest fear by participants is recycling generations of early school leavers who would not have much to contribute to family and the nation.

Repeated exposure to dropping out and learned helplessness. Being exposed to family members and peers in the community who had dropped out of school was a common feature of EScLs' stories, suggesting that, while they regretted leaving school prematurely, they found solace in older and, in some cases, younger siblings who had not completed school. In such cases, learner suffered from learned helplessness, a situation in which one gives up after noticing that he/she is not the only one in that predicament. All the EScLs participating in my study had siblings who were not going to school, due to similar reasons than the ones provided by my participants. However, from the EScLs' point of view, repeated exposure to school dropout stigmatised the families in which this occurred since premature school exit was perceived as deepening and perpetuating the cycle of poverty in future generations of the families concerned (Fuller & Coll, 2010).

4.3.3 Comparing results in Themes 1 and 2 with existing literature. This section compares the results of this study as presented under the two themes specified at the beginning of this chapter with the existing body of knowledge as reviewed in Chapter 2. The comparison is presented as confirmations, contradictions and silences.

4.3.3.1 Confirmation of the school dropout phenomenon. Just as the value of secondary education has been confirmed by many studies, findings in this study also showed

that it is a critical stage of education which, as far as possible, should not be missed (Bettman et al, 2013; Hulsman & Smits, 2009; Ramsay, 2008; Reeve, 2013). The desire of participants in this study to have remained at and/or to go back to school confirms the claim that schools are not only a haven for children but also a means of helping them to mature. In fact, all the benefits of education established in previous studies (Bettman, et al., 2013; Brown, 2010; Mhizha & Muromo, 2013; Sleep, 2010; Wedgwood, 2005) are matched by the results of this one.

4.3.3.2 Confirmed triggers of school dropout. My research findings support the three major categories of school dropout factors, namely pull, push and fall-out identified and described in previous studies both locally and globally (Brown, 2010; Chinyoka, 2014; Doll et al., 2013; Machingambi, 2012; Muchenje, 2012; Rumberger & Lim, 2008; Sigei & Tikoko, 2014). As was established by Bronfenbrenner (2008) in his PPCT model of the Bio-ecological theory, this study also established that specific events in life such as death, illness and other losses have a bearing on one's life outcomes.

This study concurs with previous studies that there is a strong correlation between school dropout and poverty (Ramsay, 2008; Sarker & Davey, 2009; Hongmei Yi et al., 2011; Zionek-Daigle, 2010). However, in this study, poverty was further qualified as induced poverty, in most cases caused by relatives who grabbed the properties of the deceased for their own gain while inducing poverty on the deceased's descendants. Also confirmed in this study, as previously established by Doll et al. (2013), is that learners could drop out due to their inability or unwillingness to identify with a school. Several EScLs in this study admitted that they felt out of place and segregated because of several personal inadequacies, including dress code, school fees and lack of progress in class. This study showed that school climate is critical to learners; decision to either stay on or drop out of school. Previous studies have found the same (Chaux, 2012; Gray & Hackling, 2009; Osman, 2012). In this study learners were the established agent of pull factors while school was pointed out as the agent for push factors. This finding confirms similar observations by Doll et al., 2013; Sigei & Tikoko, 2014).

4.3.3.3 Contradictory school dropout conceptualisations. Previous studies define school dropout in a narrow and simplistic way, making it sound like a theoretical point of view (Brown, 2010; Chivore, 1986; Hess, 2000). In this study, the EScLs provided a tentative definition which encompasses real issues related to their everyday, lived, experience of phenomenon. This departure from prevous definitions could probably be due to the difference between studies that use secondary sources and those that use primary ones in their investigation of a particular phenomenon. Indications from this study was that participating EScLs found it difficult to separate the concept from their experiences. Becker's (2010) finding

in his study of urban schools that "it seems children do not want to go to school but adults send them" was challenged in this study. EScLs valued school and regretted having dropped out.

4.3.3.4 Contradictory school dropout factors. Doll et al. (2013) found that some learners dropped out of school in response to pull factors which illuminate or tempt them with life opportunities such as gold-panning, marriage opportunities and the admirable life styles of peers already out of school. In this study, all the pull factors were negative. Nothing was attractive or positive. Learners dropped out grudgingly because of seemingly unforeseen circumstances. Another contradiction is that, while push factors seem to be taking their toll as presented in previous studies (Rumberger, 2004; Rumberger & Lim, 2008), in this study, EScLs' experiences show that pull factors were more devastating. EScLs admitted that various factors from the school side contributed to their premature exit; however, to them school-related factors were products of underlying factors at home (pull factors). Home, particularly, issues around loss, presented challenges over which EScLs had no control, therefore, drawing them out of school.

4.3.3.5 Silences on school dropout triggers. Previous studies highlight individual characteristics or personality traits, which include physical disability and low literacy levels, as strong contributing factors to school dropout (Green & Winters, 2005; Legault et al., 2006; Reeve, 2013). Findings of this study were silent on such factors. Both local and global studies have pointed out issues such as poor toilet facilities, harassment of female learners, lack of sanitary material and pregnancy as common reasons for the premature school exit of girl learners (Branyon, 2005; Magwa & Ngara, 2015; Mawere, 2012). This study was silent on these issues, an unexpected finding considering the high number of girls in the study who could have probably raised them. It appears they had more critical issues to deal with, based on their experiences.

Another silence related to the routinisation of school activities, teaching and a boring and/or irrelevant curriculum which many studies have highlighted as strong factors influencing school dropout today (Becker, 2010; Chugh, 2011; Sheng, Sheng & Anderson, 2011). Results of the current study were silent on this, too, perhaps because the EScLs in the study concentrated more on the psychosocial inadequacies which affected their everyday functioning as humans, describing related factors as they experienced the phenomenon. This could have overshadowed their reasoning about other external issues. Many studies have also highlighted tests and testing in schools as a major cause for learners disliking school (Becker, 2010). In this study, wherever the issue of tests was mentioned, it was positive. EScLs actually regretted having missed opportunities to write tests and examinations.

4.4 Summary

Study results on the conceptualization and triggers of school dropout in Zimbabwe have brought to the fore new dimensions. First, the major finding from the first research question, which focused on the conceptualization of school dropout, was that the construct was defined in a broad rather than a narrow sense, thus providing an in-depth analysis of the concept. Three elements featured to describe the construct and these were; sense of deprivation, retrieval of endured memories and concern about issues of equity. Second, from Theme 2, which focused on triggers of school dropout, the results facilitated a paradigm shift from focusing on factors of school dropout at surface level to establishing the underlying causes of school dropout behaviour. Results of this study highlighted more critical issues that lead to dropping out, factors emanating from home (pull factors), not the school. EScLs believed that circumstances at home triggered issues related to poor parenting, broken family ties and unfair cultural practices. While pull, push and fall-out factors came out clearly, EScLs in their ranking of the issues agreed that home related issues particularly loss of parents as the underlying factor, aggravated by the breakdown of family structures and lack of reliable resources, were most influential to school dropout behaviour. Problems they faced at school were primarily the result of unstable and undesirable family situations.

Chapter 5 presents and discusses results of the last three themes.

Chapter 5

Understanding School Dropout in Zimbabwe: Process, Impact and Solutions

5.1 Introduction

Chapter 5 presents the results and findings of three themes, namely the dropout process, its impact on the EScLs' lives, and EScLs' views on what could be done to solve the school dropout problem in Zimbabwe. Exemplars/ excerpts from focus group discussions (FGDs), interviews; written life stories and field notes are cited alongside as evidence of verbatim responses from the participants. Wherever necessary, pictorial representations, including figures created with NVivo are inserted to enhance the word explanations.

Section 3

5.2 Theme 3: The Process of Dropping Out of School

Theme 3 is about the process of dropping out of school. 'Process', as used in this study, refers to a collection of events and experiences which occurred at specific times in the learner's life and eventually led to his/her prematurely leaving school.

> *Remember life is like a rim and each day has its own story, it has ups and downs* (P13/B/LS>)

5.2.1 Dropping out: A process rather than an event. The early school leavers (EScLs) participating in my study did not just find themselves outside the school gates. Excerpts from EScLS' responses to interview questions, inputs during FGDS and/or written life stories indicate that home circumstances and/or events affecting the family often planted the seed for them to consider dropping out of school. It was, however, unpleasant school experiences, often policy-related, which exacerbated the situation and eventually led to the learner/s concerned actually leaving school prematurely.

> *It was about non-payment of school fees. Sometimes you got into the school and sometimes you would find that today they are asking for the receipts at the gate and you have no choice but to go back home. So I ended up saying why am I going to school? I am wasting time walking there to return at the gate. Why am I wasting my energy? I am going there for nothing, why can't I help my mother with the house work?* P06/B/In>.

Dropping out was, thus, a gradual process involving painful experiences. For most participants in the study, it began with the loss of the primary breadwinner in a family, a loss

which resulted in a subsequent lack of resources at home, the inability to meet financial school requirements, erratic school attendance and, finally, school dropout. This process, as experienced by the EScLs in my study, is graphically illustrated in Figure 5.1.
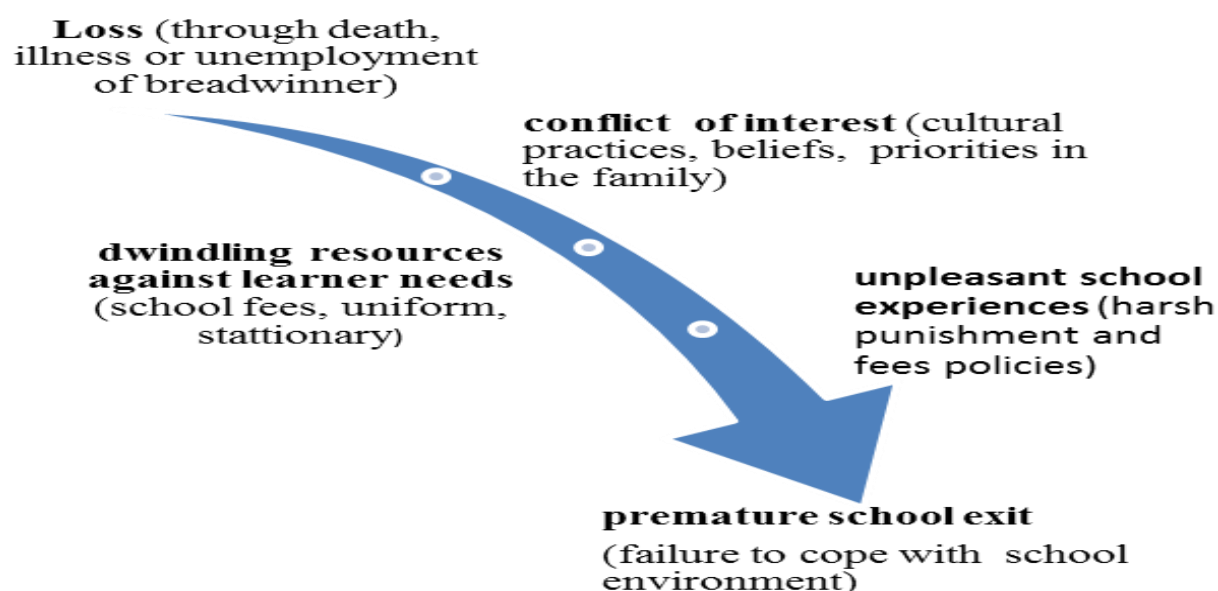
Figure 5.1: The process of dropping out of school

My research data indicate that loss, which emerged as the underlying cause of school dropout in this study, is in most cases compounded by relatives' reluctance to take on the responsibility for the youngster most affected by the loss, thus plunging him/her into a state of helplessness and hopelessness. My research participants were adamant that they did not just suddenly find themselves out of school. According to them, dropping out was a gradual, painful process. Each one had a story to tell concerning the circumstances which led to them finally dropping out. Their descriptions of the ripple effect of the loss was not only evidence of the trauma associated with the loss, but also indicated that certain experiences were stronger indicators than others that they might eventually drop out of school. The stages of the dropout process illustrated in Figure 5.1 serve as points of reference in the discussion of Theme 3 which follows.

Establishing the process of dropping out was critical to my study given that other researchers (Bridgeland et al, 2006; Finn, 2005; Rudduck & Fielding, 2006; Rumberger, 2004) who have been studying the school dropout phenomenon elsewhere over the years have already determined that school dropout is not an event, something which 'suddenly' happens; rather, it is the result of a number of events - a process, in other words - which, together, lead to learners dropping out of school. One of the inferences drawn from these findings is that knowledge about early school dropout is incomplete and/or insufficient, especially with regard to the nature of the dropout process and the factors by which it is influenced (Bridgeland et

al., 2006). Based on this inference there is general agreement amongst researchers interested in this phenomenon that a deeper, more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon is imperative if the problem of early school dropout is to be effectively addressed.

5.2.1.1 The process of dropping out.   That the EScLs in my study experienced school dropout as a process rather than an event is evident from the following two excerpts.

> *It started when I was in form two, second term. The fees were being paid in parts. When I was in Form 3, I was sent back to bring outstanding fees for Form 2 (uhm). …I was being sent back almost four days a week … when I told my mother she said, 'A-ah, my son, as for me, there is nothing I can do. That was how I stopped going to school., I did not just wake up and say ha-a I no longer want to go to school, Circumstances forced me to drop (Alright, uhmmm)* (P16/C/In>)

> *It was during the school holiday (okay) because even during the holiday my mother could not get money; she even tried to buy some Christmas clothes for her children, … So that was when I realised that it was going to be difficult for me to go to Form 3. My mother was always in debt because of my school fees. There was no money. I had seen it with the accumulating debt at school (uhm)..*(P13/B/In>).

The panic EScLs experienced when they realized that they were on the verge of dropping out is reflected in their life stories as well as in their responses to questions I posed during my face-to-face interviews with them. The excerpt which follows, extracted from one of the participants' written life story, serves as a particularly good illustration of exactly how panic-stricken they were.

> *When I was about to go to Form Three there was no money at all. I was confused …The thought of losing my education was more than death itself. I felt too much pain when I saw many students going to school. What I really knew was that it was not easy to stay at home and in this generation, you cannot do anything without education… (P13/B/LS>)*

Accompanying EScLs' panic about having to leave school were desperate attempts from their side to avoid this from happening.

> *I think I spent almost two weeks standing at the gate and returning home every day. I would spend about two days without going maybe I would get a chance to get in for about three days. So sometimes I would skip one day and go the day after but you would find them waiting again at the gate. ….* <P09/B/In>

Actions like these strongly suggest that this particular EScL desperately wanted to stay on at school but, because of circumstances beyond her control this was impossible. The learner's tone in this response suggested that, although she did not want to admit this to herself, she knew that the final outcome – dropping out – was inevitable, and that she would have to accept it. Because she could not get herself to accept this reality, she spent her time outside the gate thinking about all the things she could possibly still do to prevent it from happening, continuously weighing possible actions and their consequences against each other.

The next two excerpts, the first from an EScLs' written life story, and the second from another EScLs' response to questions I posed during a face-to-face interview, reflect a very similar state of mind. "*I knew the possibility of me to be a school dropout was real. At that moment I could not believe it, tears started running down on my chicks… P13/B/LS>*).

> *Eeh, it was in Form Two, I noticed the way others were being sent back for money and I realized that was also going to happen to me. In class I would even say as if I was playing, 'some are being sent back for fees, very soon it would be me being sent back, things were difficult (<P02/A/In).*

It is evident from these excerpts that dropping out was a traumatic experience for the EScLs. It not only frustrated them; it also generated despair and a sense of helplessness. A key contributor to feelings like these was the seeming unresponsiveness and/or lack of empathy of school authorities to the learners' efforts to stay in school at all costs. What seemed to have contributed particularly to these feelings was the act - from the side of school authorities – of 'locking them out' of school because their school fees were overdue. Driven by desperation and/or hope, EScLs did not turn around and go back home; Instead, as reflected in the next excerpt, extracted from a participant interview, they would wait at the locked gate in the hope that they would be able to get the opportunity to either negotiate with the school authorities or to sneak into the schoolgrounds without being noticed once the School Development Committee (SDC) stopped monitoring access through the school gates.

> *You would try to wait maybe up to eight o'clock and you will realize that there is nothing to wait for because the gate is still manned and so you return home. … It was painful because you would have come with your friends from home quite happy saying, a-ah today we will be doing woodwork in our practical subject; we are going to make our trays only to find that you cannot even pass through the gate*P13/B/In>

Taken together, the excerpts from information provided by participating EScLS confirm claims in existing literature that the dropout phenomenon is a complex and cumulative process of disengagement from school life (Cross, 2010; Rumberger, 2004). From the EScLs' point of view, the series of experiences constituting the dropout process took place over a long time. In fact, the actual length of the process differed in accordance with individual learners' circumstances. In some cases, the first indications that they might have to prematurely drop out of school appeared while they were still at primary school; in others, indicators appeared only when learners moved to secondary school. The common factor in both cases, if EScLs' reminiscences are correct, was their inability to pay the required school fees on time. According to them, this was the reason for their erratic school attendance: they were frequently being sent back home to fetch the outstanding fees, thus missing out on school, lagging behind in class and, eventually just giving up.

The intricacies of the dropout process emerging from my study are presented in terms of four subordinate themes, namely (a) the decision-making process; (b) the escape-avoidance process; (c) the strain and pressure of leaving school prematurely and (d) the development/use of coping and defence mechanisms (see Figure 5.2).

5.2.2 Elements of the process of dropping out.
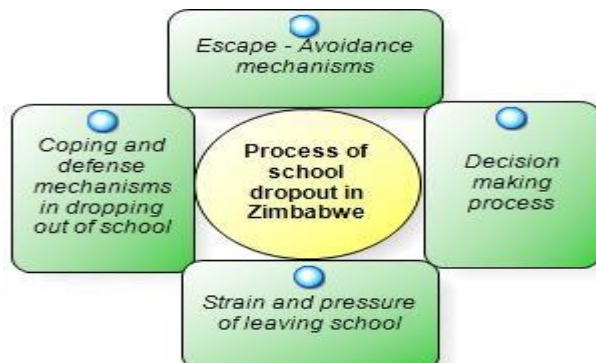
Figure 5.2: Elements of the process of dropping out

5.2.2.1 Decision making process. As indicated in the previous section, the EScLs participating in my study remembered the cognitive/mental processes leading up to the act of finally dropping out of school as difficult and traumatic. The decision-making process they recalled reflects Cook's (2004) claim that any and all behaviour is the result of mental processing of some or other kind. The EScLs in my study, reflecting on the mental processes that informed their ultimate decision to prematurely leave school, indicated that their thinking had centred on the consequences – positive and negative - of their erratic class attendance at the time.

169

I would be sent back home quite often since I would spend the whole year without even paying fees. So, in the end, I just decided to sit at home and I saw that it was better for me to do some other activities that help me to buy my own clothes (P20/C/In>).

As reflected in the cited excerpt, mental and emotional processing informing their final decision was characterised by three elements: a feeling of personal agency; the influence of consultations with significant people (parent or guardian) in their lives and laying the blame on others. Their recall of the first two elements - personal agency and consultation with significant persons in the learner's life – was so intertwined that I decided to discuss them under a single heading, thus the title of the sub-section which follows.

Feeling of personal agency with the influence of significant people. What was clear from my study was that, while participants indicated that they had consulted the people who played a significant role in their lives, most of them were adamant that they themselves, and only they, who were responsible for the final decision to drop out of school. I contend that their retrospective attribution of the decision to themselves gave them a sense of personal agency. Consequently, they believed that their decision to drop out was logical/ rational.

There were no people who came to me with suggestions but it was initially an independent decision. I just thought this was the way to go at that time seeing my situation. My uniform and school shoes were old. My school short had a lot of patches. The school shoes were heavy because there were heels stuck together. …But as someone who had parents I would not just stay at home quietly so I started by telling my mother and letting her understand my decision against the current family situation …(P20/C/In>; P20/C/LS>).

Eeh, there were people whom I spoke with I did not just want to drop out …but my sister reasoned with me so that I could understand my situation. I decided to withdraw because it was difficult for me to continue going to school when we did not have the fees. It was also embarrassing for me alone to continue being sent back home! Only me in the whole class would stand up when names of non -payers were being called out! P02/A/In>).

Ironically, even though EScLs claimed that none of the significant people in their lives offered any advice or exerted any pressure on them to decide one way or the other, the EScLs believed that these people would support their decision to drop out, thus giving them the confidence to do so. By implication, their ultimate decision was, albeit implicitly, influenced by the people whose opinions and support mattered most to them. directly or indirectly. This kind

of cognitive processing is, according to Ajzen (2012) a common human trait. According to Ajzen (2012), as well as Davis et al. (2002), a person's intention/decision on how to behave is a product of his/her belief in a particular, subjective, norm - the extent to which one's assumptions about the way in which significant people might respond to one's behaviour might influence whether or not one behaves in a certain way. In this study, the EScL's trust in the parent's or parent figure's approval of their child's decision provided him/her with the impetus and/or confidence to carry out his/her decision to drop out (Ajzen, 2012; Koch et al., 2014; Towler, 2010). Thus, because they were assured (in their hearts and minds) of the emotional support of the people who mattered to them, they were able to execute their 'dropout plan'.

Again, ironically, even a belief that the significant person/s in one's life would not care about what one did, constitutes a subjective norm, a norm which enforces the personal agency of the one concerned. This is clearly reflected in the excerpt which follows.

Haa-the decision did not come from another person, it was my own decision, I just said ha-a no, what is now here is for me to drop out of school and look for other chances in the future like that… We were many grandchildren. … (P05/A/In>)

The main difference in the nature of P05's sense of personal agency and the sense of personal agency felt by the other three EScLs' (P20, P16 & PO2), reflected in the excerpts reflecting their respective acknowledgement of personal agency (cited earlier), lies in the fact that P05 did not seem to have consulted anyone else prior to finally deciding to drop out while the other three did. In P05's case, although the 'significant person' whose opinion he would, theoretically, have cared about – his grandfather and guardian – he did not do this. Instead, he simply analysed his situation, decided to drop out, and then did just that, the reason being the lack of a strong emotional bond between him and his grandfather/guardian.

According to Ainsworth (2010), abrupt decision-making/behaviour such as displayed by PO5 is typical in cases where the emotional bond between the caregiver and the child is weak. While the child therefore accepts responsibility for his decisions and/or actions, he/she might regret the impulsiveness of both later on, as was the case with PO5. He, like the other three EScLs who accepted personal responsibility for their decision to drop out, regretted this decision later, indicating that they wished they had not dropped out, that they would have liked to have gone back to school.

Blaming others. Regardless of whether or not the decision was their own or whether they explicitly ascribed it to the influence of others, most of the EScLs were unwilling to accept the blame for what happened to them. Instead, they blamed other people, specifically relatives, who were intrinsically part of their lives. As indicated earlier, under triggers of school dropout,

issues related to secondary care-giving and inheritance were cited by EScLs as significantly contributing to their decisions to drop out of school. EScLs who stayed with secondary caregivers mentioned as contributing factors having to do hard labour and/or having to complete multiple house chores in the morning before going to school, resulting in absenteeism or late attendance. EScLs also expressed their belief that their guardians treated them differently from the way they treated their own children, something the EScLs perceived either as unfair or as rejection of them as part of their 'new' families.

In cases where relatives grabbed the estates of their deceased family members, the EScLs were even worse off. As excerpts from inputs by P13 and P01 indicate, the family members of the deceased were left in a state of induced poverty which completely incapacitated them. It was in cases like these, according to affected EScLs, that the decision to drop out was due to factors beyond their control.

> *In 2012 I was in form 2. I tried other means and went to sign the Basic Education Assistance Module (BEAM) forms but it was fruitless. The debt was accumulating at school and my maternal grandmother I now stayed with could not do anything about it. I, therefore, dropped out (P01/A/LS>).*

> *I did not decide myself to leave school but it's only about money. …I asked my aunt for money but she said she does not have (umm) of which she is the one who is staying with my birth certificate. (P13/B/In>).*

In these situations, although the decision to drop out of school was taken by the EScL him/herself - personal agency, thus - guardians were the ones who, according to the EScLs in my study, either convinced or caused them to drop out. P13, for example, was angry with her paternal relatives for not honouring her late father's wishes and plans for her future. In one of the memories she captured in her life story, she wrote, "*My father had really planned for our future before he died but because of selfish relatives everything has been destroyed*" (P13/B/LS)>).

Her feelings thus confirm Bronfernbrenner and Evans' (2000) argument that when systems such as the family break down, children are exposed and can have horrible experiences. The same piece of writing in which PO13 lays her own suffering at the door of paternal relatives' greed and non-cooperation reflects her admiration for her mother, whom she described as her 'pillar of strength'. Moreover, it indicates that some of the traditional cultural practices in Zimbabwe are contributing significantly to problems faced by OVC, school dropout being one such problem.

Differences between parent and guardian influence. In this study, the term, 'parent', is used to refer to the biological or primary caregiver while 'guardian' refers to secondary caregivers, mostly relatives, with whom the EScL stayed after the loss of their parents. Data showed a difference in the influence exerted on the EScL to drop out in the case of his/her biological parent and guardian being the caregiver. Where the significant person was a secondary caregiver - a sibling, cousin, aunt/uncle, or grandparent - the EScL was told directly to withdraw. In P02's case, for example, her sister told her that she could no longer afford the fees. P02 indicated in the interview that her sister feared incurring large bills for someone who was not her direct responsibility. She, therefore, had no choice but to comply as she still needed support for day-to-day survival.

> *It was my sister who said I should drop out (alright) because if I had continued going to school I would be considered present in the register, it would have meant accumulation of more debt for … (uuh) ummm (*P02/A/In>).

It was also evident from the data that the atmosphere at home for those who were in the care of foster parents was not emotionally supportive, as illustrated in the relationship between P20 and his grandfather, P05 and his uncle, and P01 and his paternal grandparents, as indicated earlier. Opportunities to talk/communicate freely in such families were limited, suggesting that having to keep 'someone else's child' at school was regarded as asking for too much of a secondary caregiver. In cases where biological parents were involved, the atmosphere was, however, more relaxed, with mothers being described as more available emotionally. In these situations, the atmosphere facilitated talk, and the parent kept the child hopeful by promising to pay the school fees and other requirements once funds were available, as indicated in the next two exerpts.

> *Yah, they* (meaning parents) *talked even saying, 'a-ah, we will try and if we manage to get money from the retrenchment package.' Had it been that he was given his retrenchment package, I would have written my exams (* P09/B/In>).

> *When I told my mother that I was going to drop out of school… I saw her eyes filled with tears. …My mother told me that she wished to do good things for me. My parents wished that I go to school up to 'A' level. They were expecting me to finish school and get a job so that I would look after them (*<P20/C/LS>).

My results indicate that, unlike guardians, biological parents were reluctant to allow their children to drop out of school even though they could not provide for them. They did not propose the idea of dropping out even amid a hopeless situation. Biological parents

found it hard to accept that they had failed to send their children to school, therefore, would not openly endorse the learner's decision to withdraw from school (P20/C/LS). Their preference was for their children to remain at school, even if they had to endure the embarrassment of being sent back often for non- payment of fees. They gave empty promises, thus keeping the child hopeful. EScLs explained that as a result, they were in a dilemma for a long time because on the one hand, there was hope, expressed by a parent, while, on the other hand, the learner was experiencing a hard life which did not tally with the hopes expressed. As P20 said in his interview:

> *I could easily see that there was no money in the family since we needed money for my father's hospital bills, so my mother's promises to send me back to school were out of hurt. She did not want me to withdraw" (*P20/C/In>).

In situations like these, participants indicated that the final decision to drop out came after a long period of hoping. For such learners, the process of dropping out thus took longer than for those who stayed with secondary caregivers.

These results confirm the validity of Ainsworth's (2010) Theory of Attachment. Primary caregivers usually facilitate a stronger bond of attachment which is usually painful to undo/ break. From EScLs' perspectives, allowing children to drop out constituted a breach in emotional ties, while parents feared direct heartbreak. As claimed by Keenan and Evans (2009), the weakening or loss of trust built between parent and child results in the child feeling betrayed and disowned. In the cases of P20, P13 and P09 the parents used persuasive language to maintain a positive parent-child relationship. Even so, as reflected in P16's input, the EScL concerned was still emotionally affected. P16, for example, was angry about being constantly sent back home.

On the positive side, the reminiscences of the EScLs on the dropout process reflected their endurance and /resilience in the face of difficult circumstances even though they finally dropped out. The process left them with emotional/ psychological scars - a damaged self-concept and a reduced sense of self (García-Moya., Rivera, Moreno, Lindström & Jiménez-Iglesias, 2012). The tone they used during interviews and group discussions reflected their frustration and desperation – suggesting the possibility of perpetual emotional instability which could easily result in perpetual psychological maladjustment (Bruce, Meggitt and Grenier, 2010).

5.2.2.2 Escape-avoidance process. Results showed that the process of dropping out also involved what I termed escape-avoidance mechanisms. Data on EScLs experience of the dropout process indicate that they were affected by a number of aversive stimuli, for

example, inadequate physiological needs, lack of financial resources and embarrassment, stimuli which they tried to avoid in different ways, one of which may well have been withdrawing from school.
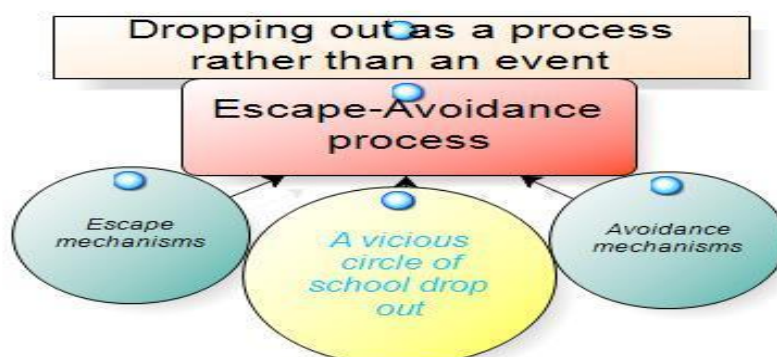
Figure 5.3: Escape-avoidance process

My data indicate that at some point during the dropout process the EScLs went through numerous discouraging experiences. Such included; being asked to leave the class or remain behind after assembly (because their school fees had not been paid or they had come to school without proper uniform) and/or sometimes having to stay at home for days while others were at school learning, triggering doubts about their future. According to the EScLs, dropping out was detrimental to their psychosocial lives. As one of them so succinctly put it, '*no one wants to be associated with school dropout, you just find yourself a victim*' (P06/A/FN>).

Put differently, the act of dropping out carried a stigma in society, hence EScLs' repeated emphasis on the conspicuous dent that dropping out had caused in their lives, hence their engagement in behaviour which would relieve them of these feelings and/or help them avoid or escape from an inevitable situation. The sub-sections which follow focus on these behaviours.

Escape mechanisms. Indications from the data generated during interviews, FGDs and life stories are that EScLs believed that they had no option but to engage in unacceptable behaviour which gave them temporary relief from nasty experiences. It would, thus, prevent or delay their premature exit from school since it was not their choice to drop out: they were being forced to do so. To this purpose they utilised a range of escape mechanisms to remain at school. These included, amongst others, taking risks to avoid school authorities and/or negotiating with a paid-up friend to use their receipts to gain access to school premises and classes as indicated in the following excerpt.

*Sometimes we had to cheat, by exchanging receipts with my friends (alright) so that we could get into classes. In our group of friends, we had one who would pay and we would exchange that receipt to pass through the school gate. If we are caught we would be told to go back home or told to bring our parents…. (*P09/B/In>).

Deceiving teachers was also common, as indicated in the next excerpt.

*Ah, what used to happen is that the teachers were rotating, let's say we have madam for History, after she goes out you would sneak and join the class. So the Geography teacher would just think that we are all paid up. …If you are unfortunate, the School Head might come in and chase you out again (*P02/A/In>).

Another of their strategies was to attend school on days when the SDC did not fuss much, on Sports Days, for example. P16, for example, categorically stated that he, '*could only go to school one day, usually on Friday especially when there were some sporting activities' (*P16/C/In>).

 EScLs, in reminiscing on the dropout process, indicated that the escape route/phase was characterized by a search for alternative ways of remaining at school. Non-payers of school fees, whose patience had not yielded the expected results therefore used any 'trick' they could think of to avoid being kicked out. Even these failed, though. The escape mechanisms they used in an attempt to beat the school system and stay at school demonstrated not only the value they placed on education but also their determination not to give up before they had completed their schooling. They would do anything they could to stay, even if it meant engaging in immoral behaviour, such as cheating (Bettmann et al., 2013; Cross, 2010; Reeve, 2013).

Avoidance mechanisms. In addition to their 'escape strategies', EScLs in this study also used a range of avoidance techniques/mechanisms. As used in this study, 'avoidance mechanisms' refers to actions intended to avoid the aversive stimuli leading to premature school exit. According to the EScLs, the dropout process caused them frustration, stress, feelings of inadequacy and, eventually, withdrawal in order to escape their increasing psychological trauma. P13, who tried to spare her mother from the stress associated with her child's schooling, described the mechanism she utilised as follows:

I went to stay with my uncle temporarily. …e-eh yes he accepted. He has no problems staying with me. I wanted to go and stay there so that I can be away from home to reduce the stress on my mother as she continues to think about my failure to go to school (okay) (P13/B/In>).

P20, on the other hand, gradually disengaged from school in order to avoid embarrassment, boredom and other psychopathological effects.

Yea, …when I got to secondary that's when I discovered that I was now bored with schooling because there were no school fees… Also, one teacher would say to me; "I learnt with your father at school, he was very dull. He did this and that" (Ummm). That pained me a lot as he was telling me this in the presence of my classmates. …So sometimes I would stay at home quietly (P20/C/In>).

These excerpts clearly indicate that some of the learners' eventual depreciation of the value of education was caused by despair, a feeling emanating from life experiences who can at best be described as 'nasty'. No matter how hard they tried they could not, however, escape the psychological impact that these experiences and their dropout behaviour had on them as individuals, an impact which could, if they were unable to restore their emotional wellbeing, have a negative impact on their post-dropout achievement of positive life outcomes (Coleman & Hagell, 2007; Shoda et al., 2007).

A vicious circle of school dropout process. The results of my study indicate that the escape-avoidance cycle became a vicious circle, with EScLs' negative school experiences creating other problems after school hours. P09, recalling some of these experiences, expressed the way they made her feel as follows:" *So it was painful and quite embarrassing because I would find out that it would be only me who would be sent back home, all my other friends would have paid and they would get inside" (*P09/B/In>).

It affected life outcomes as illustrated in the conceptual framework in Chapter 1.

Data also served as evidence that weakened systems (macro-politics, for example) contributed to the vicious circle of school dropout in which participating EScLs were trapped. When they decided that dropping out was a way of avoiding embarrassment and shame at school, they typically found themselves facing other challenges, such as trying to change their reference group. P05, recalling the frustration, anger, low self-esteem, inferiority complex and rejection he experienced in attempts to change his social network and reference group, had this to say:

However, I realised that it was even worse at home. It was difficult again for me (umm). I found out that my peers were into drugs and this and that and I could not join them. I was afraid of joining them because I knew that I would be putting my life in danger. I want good life in future… (P05/A/In>).

Reflected in this excerpt is PO5's efforts to fight peer pressure; unfortunately, they seemed to have been futile if some of the other comments he made during the course of the study are to be taken into account. These suggest that the prevalence of drug abuse in the community of which he was part (his meso-system) eventually made him succumb to peer pressure. More specifically, his subsequent accounts suggest that he was not just expressing his fear of becoming a 'junkie', but that he was speaking from experience. In all the inputs he made to the study, P05 referred to drug abuse, always talking about drugs and how he tried to avoid them. Indications from his responses to my interview questions and comments he made during the FGD suggest that he had succumbed to this lifestyle although he would not openly say so. By talking it through with the interviewer, he was trying to undo/excuse his own mistaken behaviour. Moreover, the promises and commitments he made during the interview demonstrate the psychological impact the process of dropping out had on his life.

Thank you very much for coming to talk to me about my dropping out of school… because there are many who would like to drop and others have already dropped. So I am now taking it upon myself to tell them that, no never drop out of school, (uhm) "do not drop boys (alright) do not drop girls" (alright) (P05/A/In>).

During the interviewer's probing of P05's response to questions posed, he identified a lack of resources as his reason for dropping out of school. However, other responses continued to suggest that he dropped out primarily because of peer pressure and because he had already started using drugs. It might be that the fees issue played a role in this regard but indications are that this need to 'belong' somewhere might have been the strongest driving force in this instance. Succumbing to peer pressure is usually ignited by the need to 'belong', a need particularly prevalent during adolescence, the developmental stage in which EScLs in the study were at the time they dropped out of school (Gray & Hacking, 2009)

5.2.2.3 Strain and pressure of leaving school: Adolescence stage. 'Strain' and 'pressure' as used in this study refer to the various sacrifices the EScLs had to make in order to survive during trying times, prematurely dropping out of school being one of those times. During the course of my engagement with them, EScLs expressed numerous feelings reflecting the fears besetting them as they tried - during the dropout process - to visualise themselves and their lives out of school. They recalled that their fears were related to the disruption of the adolescent peer grouping process, the likelihood that all their hopes would be unfulfilled or thwarted, and their (in)ability to survive outside the school premises without their friends and/or books. Just thinking about matters like these was, according to participating EScLs, was torturous and unbearable at that stage because events leading to their final withdrawal were continuously unfolding. The feelings EScLs identified as causing

them/contributing to the strain and pressure they felt at leaving school prematurely are graphically summarised in Figure 4.5.
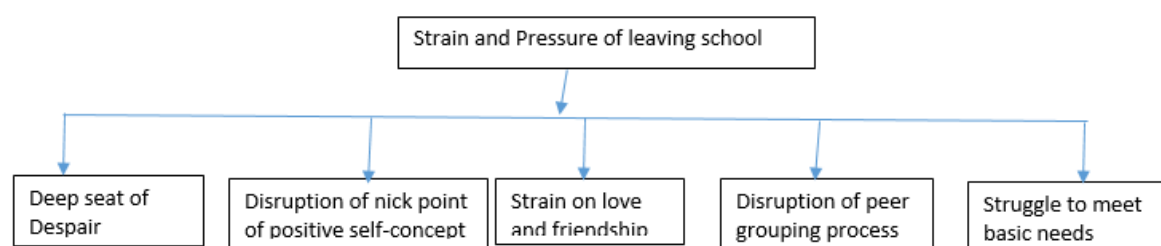
Figure 5.4: Feelings constituting the strain and the pressure of leaving school prematurely

Deep-seated despair. Data, as captured in the excerpts included in this sub-section, showed that, as EScLs' situations deteriorated, both at home and school, they experienced a deep sense of despair. From the EScLs' perspectives, 'despair' meant 'a sense of helplessness which is beyond one's control'. A deep-seated sense of despair evolved from a recurring lack of resources at home, regularly being sent back home for fees, inappropriate dress, and an insensitive school climate. Together, these brought about boredom, which then degenerated into low self- esteem, and finally culminated in a negative regard for the 'self' (Guerra & Bradshaw, 2008). The cited excerpts reveal feelings of deep seated despair.

> *Most of my time I would be wondering about the kind of person I was going to be in the future should I dropout. What kind of a father I would be? Would I be able to keep my family well or else I would do like what my parents are doing and then fail to send my children to school? So, this pained me a lot …Sometimes I would cry because I lost my dreams, I would die jobless. …* (P20/C/In>).

P20's sense of defeat was not only reflected in the words he used but also in the tone in which they were uttered. That EScLs' eventual dropping out of school was due to their having lost both their confidence and all hope of turning the situation around is starkly illustrated in the next two excerpts, the first being an input the EScL made during a focus group discussion and the latter forming part of a different EScL's written life story.

> *I discovered that I was gradually losing all my dreams as I missed classes on many occasions and could not catch up with my class mates or be in their company so this was really painful for me (* P07/A/FG>)

> *I remember my mother pushing very hard, never allowing me to face challenges…, I do not have anyone to ask for food, I am now a continuous beggar, a-ah, always*

179

intruding everywhere, I am now an intruder, I no longer know where I am supposed to be because God took the ones who belonged to my heart, my parents P01/A/LS>.

It is clear from these two excerpts that the EScLs concerned looked down upon, or had a low opinion of themselves, hence the emergence of withdrawal tendencies. Their self-concepts were weakened by the negative experiences they had had. A history of successes being critical to the development of a positive self-concept (Margolis & McCabe, 2006) it is not surprising that the series of failures that EScLs had to endure effectively eroded whatever self-concept they might have had prior to the strain and pressure that these failures had imposed on them.

Furthermore, from a psychological perspective, self-pity, regret and withdrawal tendencies signal low self-esteem, negative self-regard, and frustration. The deep-seated despair experienced by participating EScLs at the time of their withdrawal from school made them feel totally deprived in every aspect of life. Since the unfolding of a healthy sense of self in children depends on the richness of the context/s in which their development takes place (Bruce, et al., 2010), the development of self is embedded in the adequacy and systematic regulation of the child's physiological and affective needs. The contexts in which EScLs in this study developed were not like this, hence the seeming absence of a solid sense of self in any of them.

Disruption of a nick point of positive self-concept*.* It was evident in the data that, by leaving school prematurely, EScLs were disrupted at the nick point of the development of a self- concept. 'Nick point' in this study refers to a sensitive period or critical stage which marks major changes in human development – adolescence, in their case. It was clear from the results that secondary school level resonates with this stage of maturity and identity formation. Experiences during adolescence determine the development of either a positive or negative self-concept. An excerpt from P08's response bears evidence of this.

Uhm, I just want to try (yes) secondary school is when you now know real things. Like for me it's the time I begin to know the real P08 the person I am, I begin to mingle with others and start to know what is good and bad when I am in the society (P08/A/FG>).

As discussed in Chapter 4, under Conceptualization, secondary school level was viewed by EScLs as a turning point and/or important milestone in their lives. They regarded secondary school life as the stage in life where reasoning about life starts. The value of education in this regard becomes clearer, helping one to more wisely make life choices and to have greater certainty about one's likes and dislikes. An excerpt from a FGD strengthens the argument.

180

Eh change starts in Form 2, …You begin to see the practical side of why we are told to go to school to learn so that we have better lives and avoid stealing from other people. You will notice that in secondary school you will be taught things that will form the basis of your livelihood. …you will be able to know what is good and bad (P01/A/F>).

The views expressed by P08 and P01 in the excerpts above, show that the process of dropping out of school disrupted the development of identity in the lives of the youths. Their views suggest that they had reached a stage where they had confidence, zeal and the motivation to excel and achieve goals. However, suddenly, they lost everything. Guerra and Bradshaw (2010) and Rutter (2005) concur that life does not follow a linear route: it is the circumstances in an individual's life which determine the direction his/her life takes (Rutter, 2005). Keenan and Evans (2009) further observe that children have no capacity to map out their own routes: instead, these are, according to Keenan and Evans (2009) and Rutter (2005), dictated by the acts, beliefs and actions of adults around them.

It was also clearly established from data collected that secondary school life ushers in numerous beginnings; thus, as reflected in P08's view above, it should be guarded jealously. Disturbances at this stage, such as watching oneself going through a rough terrain towards dropping out, create a void which causes an insurmountable disequilibrium in one's mind. The end result would be a shift from positive to negative in the development of one's self- concept. The EScLs' desire for recognition and a sense of belonging in the school and among peers gradually faded as they realized that they had no option but to face an inevitable situation (dropping out). Results revealed that dealing with the process of dropping out of school was complex: the youths went through a lot of induced changes during the course of an existing natural change process (adolescence). According to Patterson (2008), adolescence, being typified by rapid changes in all facets of human development, is already a stage of storm and stress. Therefore, as Erikson (1968) argues, it is critical for adolescents to develop self-awareness, particularly awareness related to changes in their individual body size, shape and emotional states. At the same time, they have a growing need to belong to a group but also to have freedom/ independence and recognition (Barile et al., 2012; Gray & Hacking, 2009). Attraction to/by the opposite sex is conspicuous. Having to drop out of school at this stage only exacerbates and further complicates these typical adolescent's crises.

My results confirm Erikson's (1968) argument that failure to successfully resolve crises during the adolescent stage results in role confusion. I would argue that, with all their hopes shattered, it is natural for the youths concerned to feel depressed, demoralised and incapacitated. Such reflections are damaging to one's self-concept (Margolis & McCabe,

2006). The EScLs in the study imagined themselves as already disarmed and defeated. They gradually lost their self-confidence and, instead of engaging in exploration, mixing and mingling with peers, they started withdrawing and isolating themselves. These feelings are evidence of the fact that school dropout is a disruption of a nick point in the development of a young person's positive self-concept, further exacerbated if his/her well-being is betrayed/undermined by weak support systems (Tudge, 2008).

Disruption of peer grouping process and strain on love and friendships. Results showed that thinking about dropping out of school, particularly at secondary school level, was associated with the interference of adolescent development. My data confirm this, indicating that peer grouping and the forming of relationships, particularly with the opposite sex, are popular at this level. According to EScLs participants in my study, such interactions shape their personalities. The excerpt cited below speaks directly to this issue.

> *Unlike in the primary school, at secondary school you would start to play as groups. I realised that the people who were in Form 2 while I was in Form 1, suddenly changed when they got to Form 3. They would start to have sexual relations in that class, eh, (hoohoo), getting too close to each other such that they would start to protect each other's wrong doing especially when asked for accountability by the teacher (P02/A/In>).*

EScLs in the study pointed out that, because the need to belong at adolescence is very strong and matters most, separation from a peer group meant disorientation of personal and group principles and values. Participants argued that at this stage one would have developed an understanding of how to operate within a group, sympathising and empathising with friends. To them, adolescence was also a time in which they had a chance to experiment with different types of groupings, helping them to define themselves through the type of group with which they formed an association. (Thompson, 2009).

As the EScLs faced the inevitable reality of dropping out, they experienced frustration and anger; their self-esteem dropped, they developed inferiority complexes and felt rejected. It was because of these feelings, according to participating EScLs, that they began to experience radical changes in their social networking and reference groups: they would, for example, leave the class alone, stand at the gate while friends were inside the premises and, sometimes, see friends going to school and coming back whilst they had to stay at home for weeks because of non-payment of fees. Such experiences were traumatic to the victim, typifying a gradual loss of important ties. Their sense of belonging to a peer group was also severed as shown by feelings of regret emerging from self-comparisons with their peers who were still at school. These emotions are evident in the excerpts which follow.

So, it would pain me a lot as I would see others going to school and sometimes I would even cry …because I know some who were part of my Form 2 class and have found jobs. Others have become soldiers, others I have seen them they have joined the police force, others have started other courses, others doing driving courses. All these I can see that they are earning a living…. Uhm (P20/C/In>).

*It was difficult to see your peers going to school when you are not. Worse, they would come and tell you that, a-ah this is what we are learning yet I cannot go there unless I have paid the money (uuh), it was difficult. … I would study with them but I did not fully understood because I would be frustrated with the fact that they will be going to write tomorrow …I was not going anywhere. …it would seem as if my life had come to an end …(*P09/B/In>).

Evidence from data showed that EScLs believed that their friends who had remained at school would achieve their set goals and do better in life. They indicated that going through premature school exit was, therefore, not easy. It was a rough terrain, making one look frantically for alternative ways of remaining at school, albeit in vain. They indicated, moreover, that besides strained relationships with the extended family, the community around them was, sometimes, not forthcoming, a situation clearly reflected in an excerpt from P13's responses to my interview questions.

Ummm in a society it's hard to see others going to school while you spend the day at home. Again, people in society are different. What do some people do? They start talking gossiping about your failure to continue with school (alright) (P13/B/In>).

The tone in which he uttered these words reflected his frustration and hopelessness. This was a trait of all the EScLs in my study. They pitied themselves each time they compared themselves with peers still at school.

Another finding emerging from my data analysis was that secondary school youths develop their own culture, a culture understood only by those who belong to the group concerned. Having to leave secondary school therefore also meant that they had to disconnect from and/or lose out on this 'secondary school youth culture' and the world to which it belongs. Asked if they could not still find connecting lines outside school, EScLs in an FGD indicated that this would not happen since young people already out of school had become part of communities which did not view life in similar ways as those who were still at school. They agreed with P03 saying that, '*the exposure is very different, so is the thinking between those friends in school and those out of school You would know that once you dropout you have lost it*' (P03/A/FG>).

This result tallies with what Lewin (2009) and Boekye-Boaten (2009) posit, namely that secondary school affords children with unique developmental opportunities, and that it is a stage which cannot be duplicated elsewhere. It should, thus, not be missed.

Data also showed that final exit was sudden and unannounced. The EScLs, during interviews, FGDs and in written life stories, indicated that, due to their frustration and bitterness, they simply stayed at home. They never reported their dropping out to either the school authorities or their friends.

*At first when they (friends) did not see me coming to school, they thought that maybe I was sick or it was something temporary. With time they got to know that it was an issue to do with unpaid school fees. (*P05/A/FG>).

Probing revealed that the pain and shame of leaving school prematurely made them withdraw silently. However, they kept on hoping to go back to school if a well-wisher came their way at any time as one of the participants expressed,

*If an opportunity had risen, even now and I get someone who pays school fees up to a certain level, I have always been" (*P20/C/In>).

Ultimately, though, EScLs admitted that withdrawing quietly was more out of frustration and embarrassment than the hope of re-joining school: premature school exit, according to them, had created physical and emotional distances between them and those still at school. Consequently, they felt out of place and lost (Hough, 2010; Reeve, 2013).

Another source of strain and pressure during the process of dropping out was linked to the day to day upkeep of EScLs' families discussed in the next section.

Struggle to meet basic needs. Data showed that several precursors of dropping out were pinpointed by the EScLs. Besides failing to pay school fees, some indicated that their families, in the majority of cases, had struggled to meet basic day-to-day needs as cited in the following excerpt.

*Eeh, you would find out that even in the house, a child would end up crying because of hunger. It was difficult. So, it would not be possible for my cousin to find money for my fees when her child did not have food. As for me I am now a grown-up person, I would know that this child wants to eat. It was difficult. From her work, my cousin could not pay rentals, buy food or my school books…at first, she used to pay school fees in instalments of twenty dollars but this time she could not afford It was difficult. (*P02/A/In>).

The tone in P02's' expression of the desperate situation in her family suggested unbearable psychological trauma, with the statement, 'It was difficult', being repeated several times. The obvious presence of poor mental health and a sense of helplessness once more confirm the negative impact of a breakdown in or incapacitation of not only micro-systems (particularly the home) but also the exo-, meso-, and macro-systems. In the end, the youths, who were at the receiving end of all these breakdowns, were affected in multiple ways (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Tudge, 2008). The way in which P02 articulated related issues in the preceding excerpt reflects the marked difference between imagining and experiencing a situation (De Vos et al., 2011). The EScLs' descriptions of the dropout process were vivid because they were real, *lived*, stories. It is the focus on understanding and working with people who had experienced/lived through the phenomenon under investigation – that is, premature school exit/dropout – which is the strongest feature f my study, primarily because it enabled me to collect and analyse rich, first-hand data on all aspects / dimensions of the phenomenon in its natural setting (Silverman, 2013).

5.2.2.4 Coping and defence mechanisms. The study results further revealed that as part of the dropping-out process, EScsL also designed coping and defence mechanisms which they presented as behaviours and attitudes intended to manage their painful experiences in the face of the pending dropout situation. The discussion in this section illustrates some of the coping and defence mechanisms.

Coping mechanisms*.* Holzmann (2003) describes coping mechanisms as strategies designed to relieve the impact of risk once it has occurred. They can, therefore, be described as survival skills people develop to deal with stress, pain or difficult changes in life. In this study, coping mechanisms were understood as behaviours and attitudes EScLs displayed for some time in an effort to remain at school when they realised that dropping out was inevitable. They tried to fight the dreadful impending situation. From the results, such behaviours/ attitudes included patience with the semi-permeable school system, seeking support from family networks, friends and well-wishers and actively seeking counselling. Patience with the semi-permeable school system was evident in the accounts of P05 and P09.

> *Some friends from my school came to our house and I would ask them to give me the notes of what they would have learnt at school so that I can keep pace in case I would return and write the exams. Some would photocopy their notes for me (umm) …Unfortunately, I did not manage to continue with school (uhm)* (P05/A/In>).

> *Yes, I asked friends to bring me notes and I would copy them but would never get the explanations. I realised you will need the help of the teacher. So, it was very painful for me* (P09/B/In>).

As a coping mechanism, some of them even looked for temporary jobs in an effort to raise school fees as well as money for daily needs at home, one of them (P13) teaming up with her mother to fend for her family.

Ha-a, I had to go for some piece jobs. Relatives were not forth coming. …we used to go and fetch firewood for the preparations of the tobacco processing. However, I was not able to use that money for school fees because at home we also needed food and other needs; we could not walk around naked, so I would give that money to my mother for our everyday needs (P16/C/FG>).

Ha-aa I used to help my mother to sell at the market (uhm) then (if you can speak louder) (throat clearing) I used to help her to sell tomatoes and we used to go for piece jobs, washing clothes. However, it's no longer easy to find such jobs …(P13/B/In >).

Haa for me life has been difficult. I worked at NRZ, there is a time when coal would be offloaded (alright). So, I would be carrying that coal and would get $20 and I would buy my clothes to hide my poverty among others…. (P09/B/In>).

These excerpts clearly indicate that getting constant updates on school activities through friends, seeking coaching, and reading at home were used as alternative ways of fulfilling the EScLs' ambitions to complete school. To them, this kind of support kept them going for some time because they could psychologically still identify themselves with school and their peers. This all changed when it proved too difficult to continue: their periods of absenteeism increased until they finally dropped out.

Again, their efforts to be gainfully employed reflect the positive attitude they had towards school and demonstrated their resilience. However, because they were desperate, those who employed them took advantage of them, underpaying them to the extent that they could hardly satisfy their day to day needs, let alone pay school fees. The language used by P16, for example when he said, "We could not walk naked", emotionally emphasizes the difficult circumstances he was going through. Other EScLs' excerpts also paint a picture of the hard life and hopeless situation in which they found themselves, not only physically but also emotionally. Desperate and helpless, P13, for example, capitalised on her physical attachment to her mother in order to cope with these trials and/or to retain some sense of self-worth.

As for me, when I returned home after being sent away, I would help my mother and help her so that she would not be stressed about her lack of money. I had to comfort her and show her that I am not showing people that she does not have money to send me to school (uhm, uhm) (P13/B/In>).

186

In the cases above, the EScLs employed positive coping mechanisms. Baqutayan (2015) argues that acceptance of a problem and the act of seeking positive strategies to deal with one's stress contributes to a healthy personality and psychological well-being. Baqutayan (2015) also highlights the value of social support as a critical cushioning strategy in times of stress. Although the excerpts above provide evidence of social support rendered to the EScLs their personal endeavours to approach their situation constructively denote a gap in their psycho-social well-being. What they needed most was counselling and/or multiple opportunities to talk (Hough, 2010; Payne, 2011; Erford, 2014). Lacking these put them in jeopardy. Their high degree of resilience, determination and maintenance of positive and high self-esteem during the process of dropping out is, therefore, all the more admirable. Unfortunately, the benefits of these efforts were short-lived as they ultimately left school.

Defence mechanisms. While coping mechanisms consisted mostly of deliberate positive thinking about the self and the possibility of remaining at school, defence mechanisms tended to be destructive, even psycho-pathological in that they reflected distorted thinking. On the one hand, EScLs engaged a range of strategies to help them cope with the dropping-out process; on the other hand, they seemed to deliberately create scenarios which could relieve their embarrassment, frustration and the inevitable sense of loss related to giving up on their education and envisioned life outcomes. Included in these defence mechanisms were, amongst others, generalizations about the drop-out phenomenon, projection, making wrong choices to be in the right place, denial and tolerance of/submitting to corporal punishment.

Indications from my data are that as days, and sometimes weeks, would pass without their having gone to school, EScLs started counting or naming others who were or had failed to complete school as a means of minimizing or defending themselves against embarrassment. Typically mentioned in this regard were family members, neighbours or families with whom they were acquainted in the community. As the excerpts which follow show, EScLs found solace in generalizing the problem, thus gaining temporary relief from their fearful and despairing thoughts and emotions.

> *Yea, there are some that I know from the same stream who also dropped out at Form Two. … I can safely say a good number are failing to complete school (* P20/C/In>).

> *Yes they are those who did not complete (um). My (maternal) cousin did not complete because of lack of money. She is working as a maid (uhm) um. My sister did not even reach grade seven. My friends…They are there but I do not know their reasons because some people tend to be secretive about the reasons why they are not going to school (yes, that is it) um…* (P16/C/In>) "*Aaaah, there are and there are many among our neighbours' (uhm)" (*P05/A/In>).

The number of learners who had also failed to complete school were, moreover, used by EScLs as an opportunity to shift the blame for the problem in general onto families' lack of capacity. Implied in this blame-shifting was the EScLs conviction that having to drop out was no fault of theirs; as they could not do much about it. Highlighting the sale of a cow to pay fees was an effort to justify their claim.

> *Umm, I do have ummm, my cousin, eeh, my uncle's [father's young brother's] child. My uncle's wife ended up going to South Africa because my uncle was there but now lives in rural areas. … my brother is writing his Form 6, they had to sell a cow from our rural home for him to go to school…*(P02/A/In>)

In many African cultures, possessing a herd of cattle is a symbol of wealth. For example, in Zimbabwe, a well-to-do family keeps its herd of cattle intact and takes great pride in seeing the numbers grow. If one sells a cow to pay school fees it signifies a desperate situation. The EScL in the study was, therefore, justifying that life was difficult for many and her predicament was, thus, not a unique situation. Seeking defence by finding solace in the prevalence of the phenomenon shows that school dropout is a dreadful situation which is undesirable (Chugh, 2011; Mhizha & Muromo, 2013; Muwagga, et al., 2013).

Furthermore, data revealed that learners, as a defence mechanism, made wrong choices to be in the right place, thus disregarding and breaking school rules. Related behaviours include displaying a wrong identity card/slip to prove payment of school fees, hiding in toilets, and re-joining classes without payment. To the EScLs, it was all for a good cause - to complete school. Their argument was that education was their right, therefore, had to be achieved by whatever means. The next excerpt bears evidence to this.

> *At first, we used to say after we have been sent back we would hide in the toilet and would return to the classroom after the Head had left the classroom. Sometimes he would come back and beat us saying, "I told you to go home". So, at first it would be a lot of you but eventually you would realise that it would be you alone, all the others would have paid. It would be you alone going to hide in the toilet…* (P02/A/In>).

The risky behaviours were a clear demonstration of what they would tolerate to stay at school, even corporal punishment. However, their utterances reflect their reduced self-esteem, embarrassment, shame, frustration, regret and loneliness. The process of dropping out, therefore, negatively affected the sense of self/ self-concept (Becker, 2010; Lindon, 2010). To counter these feelings, some of the EScLs created what I refer to as 'contingent likes'. What I mean by this is illustrated in P02's discourse, which follows.

At school there are other children whom you would feel pity for, they are discriminated by others, you would see that others do not treat someone as a human being. So, I would be the one to see that she is now free and receive better treatment and avoid being ridiculed (umm). (P02/A/In>).

Data revealed that P02's attitude was influenced by her own background. She was in exactly the same predicament as those she was trying to help. Her self-esteem had been lowered through her failure to identify with peers at school because she was slow in class and also could not pay fees. Feeling for others in a similar situation showed some form of sublimation, her attempt to try and defend herself from the pressure and frustration resulting from her own shortcomings (Margolis & McCabe, 2006). In order to feel better about herself, P02 thus became a humanitarian, demonstrating empathy with someone just like her. The tone in P02's statement suggests that she, herself, is suffering psychologically. Trying to help others was a shield against her own lost confidence, an attempt to boost her own self- esteem by giving her a sense of achievement (Beckett & Taylor, 2010). In effect, it was nothing more than a form of compensatory behaviour, a way to survive the odds stacked against her in the school environment.

The results in this section so far indicate that according to the EScLs in the study, dropping out was a gradual and complex process. Experiences related to the dropping out process had a negative psychological impact on them, resulting in a reduced self-esteem, confusion, embarrassment, shame, frustration, regret and loneliness. The results indicate, moreover, that the process of dropping out was riddled with complex and overlapping decision-making strategies. Throughout the process, learners displayed high levels of endurance, patience, resilience and tolerance for challenges associated with their premature school exit. They took long before finally withdrawing, having unsuccessfully employed various coping and defence mechanisms to try and remain in school. Their accounts revealed that, ultimately, the stressful situations in their lives exhausted them to the extent that they gradually disengaged from school activities to stay at home. My findings, thus, provide further evidence of observations made by previous researchers regarding the existence of a definite, identifiable pattern/pathway, in the school dropout process (Finn, 2005; Rudduck & Fielding, 2006).

Section 4

5.3 Theme 4: Impact of dropping out on EScLs' Lives

…if life was for sale, I was going to buy my mother's life so that I can always be happy with her up to today. If life was for sale, hoo! I would buy my father's life so that I can happily stay with him (P01/A/LS)

Theme 4 focuses on the impact that dropping out had on the lives of EScLs. Impact, in this study, was understood as the effects or consequences of leaving school prematurely. Results and findings in this section point to direct experiences in the form of actions, feelings and attitudes evident in the EScLs' lives in the post-dropout world (see Figure. 5.5 for elements of the impact of school dropout as expressed by the EScls in the study). Several issues related to each sub-theme are examined in the discussion unfolding in this section.
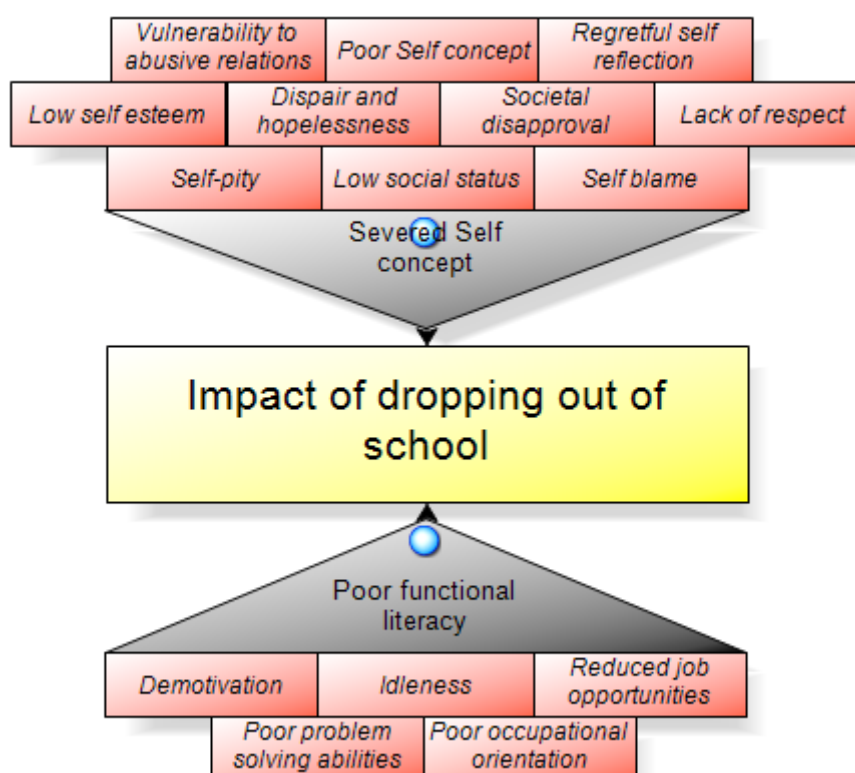
Figure 5.5: Impact of dropping out of school

Two sub-themes emerged from my data analysis, namely poor functional literacy and severed self-concept. It is to these that the discussion now turns.

5.3.1 Severed self-concept. Huang (2011) views self-concept as knowledge about self, entailing how one thinks about one's own self and the temperaments which one possesses. Marsh and Martin (2011) opine that understanding one's self-concept requires a level of self-reflection, a cognitive activity which enables an individual to be aware of his/her own strengths and weaknesses. A person could, thus, possess either a strong or a weak/severed self-concept.

The findings of this study suggest that EScLs mostly carried a severed self–concept due to a series of negative experiences in their young lives. Usually related to a severed self-

concept are a low self-esteem and weak self-efficacy, both of which were also evident in the results of my study. Huang (2011) describes self-esteem as an attitude one has towards one's own self, one's personal evaluation of one's own attitude. It follows that one's self-esteem could be either high or low. Self-efficacy, however, refers to one's belief about one's ability to perform optimally and achieve goals in a trying situation. According to Rogers (1983), in McLeod (2008), success strengthens one's self-efficacy while failure weakens it.

In this study, thus, the EScLs viewed self-concept as awareness of their own strengths and weaknesses, self-esteem as the way they valued their own self and self-efficacy as their confidence and belief in their own self's ability to cope with life situations. Together, the three concepts give an indication of a person's psychological well-being. They are therefore referred to in the subsequent discussion of a severed self-concept, characterized by painful (psychological) feelings; regretful memories, self-pity/ blame, severed determination, thwarted hopes, and wishful thinking. Participating EScLs indicated that talking about their premature school exit was emotionally draining. They recalled dropping out as a traumatic, painful experience, influenced mostly by negative home situations. Unfriendly school policies and practices aggravated their predicament. All in all, according to them, their premature school exit had left them frustrated, hurt, helpless and feeling inadequate. It destroyed their self-concept and compromised their self-esteem and self-efficacy. Their memories of the impact it had on their lives were filled with regret.

5.3.1.1 Regretful memories. The results of my investigation into EScLs memories of their school dropout experience indicate their regret at having to prematurely leave school. When asked about their post- dropout life, they narrated critical moments vividly remembered and believed to have been most damaging to their sense of self. These memories included nasty experiences and assumed achievements which they now regarded as valueless. The excerpts below present some of their experiences.

> *…. I wish I had money to pay for my school. Sometimes I was supposed to write a test and I would miss it because of that. So, it would pain me more so when I would see the teacher with the test papers coming out of the classroom from which I have been chased out. (*P02/A/FG.>*)*

> *…I remember that at one time on prize giving day I was supposed to be given a prize but I didn't get it because I was not paid up. It pained me very much. If only I had money. Was it my fault? My father's relatives had taken our property* P13/B/In>*)*.

Their 'flash back' thoughts contained elements of sustained humiliation, labelling and frustration, all of which had reduced the EScLs' self-efficacy. They remembered feeling

inadequate, angry, ashamed and desperate. They remembered suffering from a low self-esteem, characterised by a lack of confidence, a wrong/erroneous self-image, worry and pessimism (Adelman & Taylor, 2012; McLeod, 2008). I noticed some incongruities between their image of themselves and their memories of their reality/experiences, particularly when they were reflecting on their achievements. Indications of negative emotions were also visible in their frowning faces and trembling voices. The pain they sustained during the process of dropping out was still strong. They narrated their stories as if they had just happened, even though in most cases they had been out of school for at least more than a year. Even so, they still seemed emotionally disturbed and frustrated at having lost out on their education. Either the loss of their parents and/or a lack of resources preventing them from to adhering to school requirements robbed them of all they had worked for, in the process violating their previously strong conceptualization of themselves as being good, smart, respectable and bright persons. During their school days, the youths had regarded themselves as highly placed due to various achievements, and losing it all was a painful, damaging and degrading experience.

These findings confirm Frank's (2011) assertion that negative life experiences have an adverse impact on the victims' psychological well-being as well as Brown's (2010:63) observation that unfriendly experiences tend to lower a persons' self-esteem, and that prejudicial tendencies by teachers and other adults in a school setting could result in learners harbouring self-doubt, stress and a tendency to look down upon themselves as lesser human beings for the rest of their lives. Concerning EScL's attitudes towards their own selves, Fichten et al. (2014) claims that the attitude one carries around about oneself has a bearing on the thoughts one entertains about one's self as well. If a person's self-esteem and self-efficacy are low, he/she is likely to lose confidence in him/herself, a disposition constantly portrayed in the narration of the EScLs in my study. In conclusion, as Ajzen (2012) claims, one's reaction (favourably or unfavourably) to a given situation is controlled by one's attitude towards the situation.

My research findings also support the findings of Bridgeland et al., (2006), who observed that there are many surveys which indicate that early school leavers later regret their decision to do so, wishing that they had stayed in school. Their regret, according to Bridgeland et al. (2006) is probably informed by their realisation that, by and large, everything in life seems to hinge on successful school completion. Some of these conclusions are evident or implied in the two extracts which follow.

Ha-aa ever since I left school; sometimes when I am in the house and come across a paper from the book or the whole book I used to write in at school I would start to think a lot and realise that it was good for me to continue with school. I was going to achieve

what I wanted in life. Sometime I would just laugh at the same time crying …(P05/A/In>).

A-ah I wish I had not dropped out. what I am teaching other children through drama Iis; one, if you get influenced into drugs you end up like this and like that; two, If you are influenced to get into drugs by someone who does not like school you end up thinking like him and end up disliking school and eventually drop out of school and stay at home (um)… (P05/A/FG>).

Indications from his cited excerpt are that P05 was so full of regret at having left school prematurely that he wanted to educate those still in school on the disadvantages of dropping out. He mentioned that he had dropped because of some challenges but was reluctant to specify these. As indicated earlier, though, the issues he mentioned during interview and FGDs centred on peer pressure and drug abuse, neither of which, as he constantly claimed, he wanted to be associated with. He dwelt much on cautioning others to remain in school and abstain from drug abuse, the kind of thinking/behaviour which Freeney and O'Connell's (2009, p. 8) describe as "high horse power but poor steering": taking decisions that are strong/ powerful, quick yet abrupt, and usually misguided / lacking foresight. Freeney and O'Connell caution that usually such thinking is regrettable as consequences may be undesirable. However, notwithstanding my probes, P05 maintained that his reason for leaving school prematurely was a lack of financial help. Whatever his real reason was, P05's behaviour helps to explain the impact and lasting psychological effects of dropping out on the persons concerned.

What is also evident in my analysis of P05's narration is that, although school fees might have been one of the reasons why he dropped out, it was not the only reason: he admitted having succumbed to peer pressure and having been very mischievous. His constant reference to drug abuse suggest that this might well have been one of the indiscretions that contributed to his early exit from school, implicitly confirming the research findings of Saiz and Zoido (2005) who, having investigated the effect that drugs, alcohol and tobacco-marijuana had on school dropout, found that a learner's association with friends who engage in deviant behaviour increases the odds of the learner's dropping out (pp. 31-32). PO5's desire to warn those still at school against such behaviour suggests that, due to his post-dropout experience, he was now able and willing to reason rationally rather than irrationally (Brown, 2010), as was the case during his school days and, seemingly, during the early days following his premature departure from school.

5.3.1.2 Self-pity, self-blame. Feelings of self-pity and self-blame, reflected in the excerpts which follow, were evident in the post-dropout lives of the EScLs who participated in

my study. Self-pity was particularly evident in P20's written life story, as the excerpt below illustrates.

> *There is something that hurts me from time to time. When I think of this my heart bleeds and my heart beats very fast. The issue of dropping out of school; my parents and I hoped for a better life. …That is why people say it's a curse to be poor. Right now, the people I used to beat at school laugh at me because they got an opportunity to proceed with school until they got jobs because they went to school they took the opportunity away from me. I am now like a no body. I am chasing money. I have been separated from my parents because I am not working. …(P20/C/LS>).*

Self-blame and low self-esteem rather than self-pity were evident in PO5's responses to questions I posed during my face-to-face interview with him, the excerpt which follows being proof of this.

> *…I always feel bad about myself. I would constantly remind myself each and every time that I am a failure…. So, I tell the youngsters that dropping out of school for no genuine reason is bad (uhm), never ever try it because you will get into a serious trouble for yourself (uhm). You will regret yet you would have allowed it to happen on your own. …(P05/A/In>).*

In the case of P09, who compared himself with his peers, dropping out made him feel inferior to them. This feeling of inferiority is clearly illustrated in the excerpt which follows.

> *Yes, I agree with what you said P13 because if you leave school prematurely, you are unable to go where your friends are saying, ah I am not educated they are educated. …It is very boring you end up being stressed. (umm). So that is the reason why we end up having low self-esteem. You will stay worried saying 'a-ah, but why, was I not able to do that like others? (P09/B/In>).*

All of the preceding excerpts reflect EScLs' negative feelings about dropping out of school. Their failure to obtain a Form 4 Certificate seems to have stripped them of their confidence in themselves, making them feel helpless and defeated. Moreover, the results indicate that they tended to blame themselves for this even when extenuating factors/circumstances beyond their control were at play. It could therefore be inferred that all of them had been psychologically damaged, their sense of self seemingly being irreparably harmed. Low self-efficacy, according to Margolis and McCabe (2006), produces a poor self-image, something which was evident from the EScLs' belief that that they could not help themselves out of the situation in which they found themselves.

Appeals for help to go back to school, coupled with assurances that they would be more focused than they were when they were first at school, featured in all the data sets. These appeals and the promise of self-correction, reflected both in their words and in the tone of voice they used, convinced me of their urgent need for counselling. It was clear that there was no psycho-social system or procedures in place to give heed to their plight and, without counselling, as Lien, McInerney and Young (2015) point out, the ripple effect of school dropout challenges could be devastating, resulting in the EScLs living a bleak and purposeless life.

5.3.1.3 Severed determination and societal disapproval. Another aspect of their severed self-concepts was reflected in their perceptions of their position in and interaction with society. EScLs raised issues related to diminished respect for them in their communities and/or societal disapproval of their having dropped out of school. These perceptions are evident from the two excerpts which follow, both extracted from face-to-face interviews I had with the EScLs whose feelings they represent.

> *Eeh, it's important to complete school. The ways in which an educated and uneducated person speak and think are different. You would just see that, ah, this one did not go to school, or s/he went but dropped out. Okay, educated people are respectful and also respected. …It is better for you to be known as having ended at Form 4 than to end at Form 2 or Form 3. (*P02/A/In>).

> *People in society are different. …They start talking, gossiping about your failure to continue with school (alright) You will hear an adult saying to you, 'this one does not go to school, her future is doomed (*<P13/B/In).

The EScLs indicated, moreover, that society's lack of respect for them was often accompanied by disapproval, primarily because of what they felt to be their low social status. What they said, and how they said it, reflected their feelings of inadequacy, self-pity and inferiority, all of which contributed to a situation in which they felt discouraged and without hope, a situation which further damaged their already fragile self-concepts.

These findings are in line with growing evidence in literature that early school leavers are extremely vulnerable especially in terms of being subjected to societal segregation. In this regard, the EScLs in my study indicated that, in some instances, they were victims of discrimination, intimidation, stigmatization, and other social prejudices attached to poverty, attitudes also recorded in other research studies on the school dropout phenomenon (Brown 2010: 55; Dahl, 2010; Mahlomaholo, 2011). My EScLs confirmed their vulnerability to abuse, ascribing incidents in this regard to their desperation. They looked withdrawn and sounded depressed. According to Brown (2010, pp. 55-56), feelings and/or tendencies like these could

lead to "a sense of rejection, low self- esteem and low self-worth", feelings/tendencies markedly evident in participating EScLs' post-dropout lives.

In addition to the impact that dropping out of school had on EScLs' psychological state, was the impact it had on their reasoning. Education contributes to the development of language and cognitive skills; the higher the level of education, the higher the level of language and cognitive skills (Lewin, 2009). That EScLs were aware of this is evident from their regrets at having to drop out of school prior to reaching Form 4, an education level which they associated with higher levels of reasoning and language usage. The notion that education teaches and commands respect and instils in those who are educated acceptable values and norms (Bettmann et al, 2013; Banerjee, Weare & Farr, 2014; Huisman & Smits, 2009) was therefore confirmed in the responses and perspectives of the EScLs in my study.

5.3.1.4 Shattered hopes. To the EScLs in my study, dropping out of school meant shattered hopes: their expectations of what their lives would be like were thwarted. All they could look forward to was a life as bleak as the one they were currently living.

> *Haa, my life is not in a good state because of what is happening to me and what I have been planning, there is a gap between the two. (uhm). Yes, I expected to be going to work after school like what others are doing. So it's very difficult to really know what one should have done (long silence).* (P09/B/In>).

> *Yes, when I dropped out of school I had the zeal to fulfill what I wanted from the start. I wanted to be a soldier. …I would then be declared a hero and buried at the national shrine. As I grew up, I had then changed my ambition to wanting to become a pilot … I would also say to myself, "these people on that aircraft must be enjoying themselves… …its all gone (*P20/C/In> P20/C/In>).

The preceding narrations show how severely the EScLs were affected by leaving school prematurely. Ambition was equated with heroism, as reflected in P20's dream to become a pilot and having a shrine erected for him as he would have given his life for a good cause. Comparing his challenges with those faced by a pilot seems to be his way of coping with an unbearable situation – a form of therapy, thus. He had wanted to achieve something that would demonstrate victory over his own problems. After fighting life battles, he wanted a clear mark of victory, which he linked to the idea of getting a national hero's status. His entire narration seems to be a reflection of his efforts to cope with a situation he could not change hence he resorts to fantasizing.

Acknowledging that they had lost out on their dreams, EScLs felt doomed and severely disempowered. Their low self-esteem was evident in their descriptions of themselves as inferior and incompetent as well as in their admiration for those who had remained in school. They literally grieved for the loss of their dreams, which had resulted in their untenable social standing, simply because they had failed to complete school and, hence to pursue and/or realize their dreams. As established under conceptualization, to them, education/ schooling symbolised a ladder to greater heights and, by implication, self-actualisation (Huang, 2011).

5.3.1.5 Wishful thinking. Out of desperation, EScLs engaged in wishful thinking as psychological therapy. The excerpts below show the kind of wishful thinking in which the youths engaged after dropping out. One facet of this kind of thinking, as reflected in the two excerpts which follow, was to imagine themselves back at school and being more focused.

> *If I go back to school Iwill study hard…I am now different …, If I am told to write my work I have to write it because I would know the reason why I am there. Most of the children do not know that things are difficult, life is difficult (P02/A/In>).*

> *When I go back to school, I would give myself the last chance to put myself in the correct mind frame. . (P09/B/In>).*

Other facets of wishful thinking, not explicitly linked to school but related to the times they were still at school, are illustrated in the two excerpts which follow.

> *Ooh, ooh I miss you daddy. Life has got happy times and sorrow (sic) times. .How I wish my father was alive. I am struggling to find the money for my school fees…. When I eventually go to work, the first thing I will do is to start an organisation which will be helping children without school fees (P13/B/LS>).*

In his life story P01 wrote; *"If life was for sale I would buy my parents so that they can be there and I would be happy with them today; without all these problems which include not going to school, going to sleep hungry, rejection by relatives and being abused by my uncle…" Now I only see and envy others being cherished and loved by their parents. I would like to be a donor who will help the organisations with clothes, food and school fees, the same way done by Strive Masiiwa (P01/A/LS>).*

What these excerpts illustrate is that fantasizing became a way of suppressing painful emotions and managing stress. Furthermore, P20's breaking down during the interview signalled her awareness of the lack of opportunities available to her to share her concerns with someone, anyone who would listen, another example of wishful thinking. Opportunities like these could help EScLS to periodically vent their negative emotions, an act which is

necessary for a healthy well-being (Adelman & Taylor, 2012). Wishful thinking was, thus, a means/strategy EScLs used in an effort to cope with the painful consequences of dropping out.

5.3.1.6 Generalisation, acceptance and denial. Generalisations, acceptance and denial featured in the data as part of EScLs' post-dropout coping mechanisms. Reflecting the validity of Baqutayan's (2015) argument was P20's attempt to be positive about his situation (in order to be able to manage it) although the feeling of hurt was evident.

> *Yea, at the moment, yes, I left school but I didn't go home to sit. We do farming to survive. You end up being used and you begin to enjoy it …you end up being part of the system because that's the situation on the ground but deep down in the heart I would wish that I could buy a new shirt at month end when I have a fat salary, …Currently we are into goat rearing; if they increase, we can buy a car. I have to work with what is there. Problems cannot stop me from living; you cannot die just because you failed to become a soldier or that…* (P20/C/In>).

P20 mentioned projects that they were doing and tried to console himself by visualising growth and success that would enable him to make a profit and afford a car. He was looking for ways to collect himself, to break free from a heart-breaking situation, by making it sound as if things were not all that bad. In other words, he was making the effort to accept the inevitable - a situation he could not change.

EScLs also tried to find comfort in the generalization of suffering, pointing out that even those who had completed school were suffering.

> *It's not just myself but I am seeing difficult things through the lives of my sisters and my brother. Even though they have gone to school and finished, because they did not pass, they are doing nothing. Life is now very difficult; some are ending up becoming taxi touts against their own choices. Everyone is now a vendor these days and there is no one to buy from you* (P02/A/In>).

The tone used by EScLs denotes the negative psychological impact which dropping out of school had on their lives. In the case of both P20 and PO2, their utterance, if taken at face value, reflected self-encouragement as a means of boosting their self- esteem. They found solace in the prevalence of the phenomenon while remaining conscious of the unpleasant impact of their decision to drop out of school on their current situation. In P20's case, for example, having enthusiastically talked about the goat-rearing project, he reverted to wishing for something better. Indications are, therefore, that the seemingly positive

processing of the reasons for their behaviour (dropping out) was not more than a strategy to avoid embarrassment.

There is some evidence in the data that experiencing the consequences of dropping out was eroding their confidence as well as their resilience to bear the situation in which they currently found themselves (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010). Suggestions of this being so are embedded in the general appeal of participating EScLs for assistance that would enable them to go back to school, concisely captured in P20's categorical wish to return to his previous way of life: "*What I would like is for me and others to go back to school. I miss school"* (P20/C/In>).

P02's description of a tough life, the absence of jobs, insufficient resources to even be able to put food on the table depicts a helpless situation, one in which even those systems furthest from the child adversely affects him/her (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). In the case of the EScLs in my study, systems which have played havoc with their lives include the country's economy, 'international' policies imposed on the country from the outside (the IMF, for example), and a range of political decisions (local and global).

Given the failure of the 'physical' world and its systemic constructs, it is not surprising that a number of EScLs turn to other (supernatural) 'worlds' / dimensions / powers for help and/or the strength to cope with their current situation.

What I am only left with now is hope because as the bible says God said my sheep hear my voice, I know them and they follow me, God will never let me down. My God will always be there for me so I am not afraid for it says on Psalms 125 'Those who trust in the Lord are like mount Zion which can never be shaken but it abides forever' (P13/B/LS>).

…You never know how God is going to open a door for you because the bible says, 'ask and you will be given, seek and you will find; knock and the door would be opened for you.' I wanted to drink rat poison because I was being pained by being out of school. I was pained to the extent of asking God why my parents died…My God answered me and said, 'If you cry to me and say you want bread, I will never give you a stone.' So today, I now go to church with my grandmother (P01/A/LS>)

Their tone reflects the stress and negativity EScLs are experiencing due to their having dropped out of school. Reliance on God gave them relief because they 'know' that He is in control. They claimed that they felt their burden lightening when they off-loaded it onto a higher and stronger being than themselves. Be that as it may, indications from data overall are that

their feelings of relief were temporary because they constantly reverted to expressions of regret for what they decided to do (to drop out of school) and the consequences of this decision. Psychologically, though, it helped them to manage their situation with less fuss (Baqutayan, 2015; Holzmann, 2003).

5.3.2 Poor functional literacy. While EScLs had learnt to read, write and calculate at school, thus being 'functionally literate', they were not always able to solve their day-to-day problems with confidence or to participate meaningfully in society. EScLs ascribed this to their failure to complete school. As indicated in the findings reported in Chapter 4, they strongly believed that attainment of Form 4 education ('O' Level) was the door to further achievements because it would, amongst other things, have equipped them with the literacy levels adequate to the demands made on them in their attempts to solve life problems and, thus, to function meaningfully in everyday life.

> *Yea, with the current situation I think completing Form 4 is important because even with some projects, for you to be able to do them successfully you must be able to read, write and understand. …These projects require someone who knows how to keep records, there are calculations that are done when we do our businesses in order to see whether you are making profit or you are running a loss (*P20/C/In>).

The expression in the language used in the excerpt shows that those who left school prematurely had inadequate literacy skills. EScLs thought sufficient literacy skills were a prerequisite to operations in any business venture and, according to P20, all of them lacked these important skills. Consequently, according to him, they lacked the requisite confidence and/or ability to effectively function every day. Ramsay's (2008) findings confirm that failure to attain meaningful educational qualifications negatively impacts on a person's life outcomes. Moreover, as indicated in my data, deficiencies in everyday functioning meant that the individual concerned might not be able to contribute meaningfully to his/her own community. Nationally, school dropout then constitutes wastage of financial resources as well as a loss of human resources (Ramsay, 2008).

Feelings of inadequacy impacted negatively on the EScLs' self-concept, confirming the validity of claims made by Gracia-Moya, et al (2012) regarding the threats that a poor self-concept poses to a person's self-confidence and the resultant development of an inferiority complex, low morale, and disregard of the self. Elements of poor functional literacy evident in my data are discussed in the upcoming section.

5.3.2.1 Disorientation, idleness and reduced job opportunities. My research results revealed that when the youths started secondary school education, they had goals,

ambitions and wishes. During FGDs and interviews, as well as in the written life stories, EScLs mentioned the different careers they wanted to pursue. Below are excerpts describing their dreams and their disorientation when they realized that they would not be able to pursue these due to their having left school prematurely.

> *Ah I thought that if I had finished school, as in finishing Form 4, I wanted to proceed to 'A' level. When I finish I also wanted to proceed to the university. I once heard that if you want to do accountancy, I think its four years (okay). If you want to be a doctor, but it is no more….I would also like to help other children who are growing up in a situation like mine* (P13/B/In>).

> *I can see that I am disadvantaged and lost because if I had gone further with school up to completing Form 4, I could have got something to do by this moment but simply because I didn't manage to complete Form 4 I am sitting at home* (P03/A/FG>)

In addition to this, an excerpt from P20's responses during my interview with him indicate that for all of them the consequences of dropping out went beyond the level of the individual since failure to do well as an individual would translate to failure to participate meaningfully in society. He commented that, "*you may even reach that point where you die just doing peasant farming and nothing else. You may even get old without achieving anything in life (ok)*" P20/C/In>) This could be an early signal of a pending state of depression.

My findings therefore lend support to Sisulu's (2004) claim that the level of development of a country can be measured against the literacy levels of its people. The role of literacy in determining a person's success in life can thus not be ignored or negated. The EScLs obviously viewed education as a socio-economic ladder which takes people to greater heights. The absence of this 'ladder' in their lives therefore made them feel defeated and inadequate, indicating the negative psychological impact which dropping out of school had on their lives. Evidence from data that premature school exit threatened EScLs' opportunities for employment are reflected in the following excerpts.

> *Right now my life is very difficult. We are going to look for some general construction work, but there is no one willing to take someone without a certificate because the places are few* P16/C/In>

> *If you did not complete Form Four, a manager will not find any reason to employ you. At least if you have completed Form Four the manager will have confidence that at least you can do something* (P05/A/In>).

These excerpts indicate a disorientation in EScLs' lives: they had no chance of pursuing or achieving their intended goals, they had given up on their dreams and had little if any ambition left. They had, moreover, the opportunity to secure the jobs they would have preferred and to gain some or other social status. In short, they found themselves in a state of utter helplessness. On the whole, the words and tone used in their responses reflected self-pity, inadequacy, indebtedness to their parents, inferiority, and low self-esteem. According to them, even the lowest job currently requires a minimum qualification of Form 4 because it signals proficiency, especially proficiency in English, which is an international language.

In some instances, though, there were still traces of their earlier determination and resilience. P20 and P6, for example, were determined to go back to school and finish their O-levels, both being adamant that,

> *If the opportunity arises and I get someone who pays school fees up to a certain level, I am ready because I know some who were part of my Form 2 class and have found jobs. Others have become soldiers, others I have seen them they have joined the police force.*

They were therefore still looking forward, rather than back, determined to fulfil their ambition and work towards self-actualization. (Guerra & Bradshaw, 2008; Maslow, 1968; Tudge, 2008; Muwagga, et al, 2013).

Contrary to these two, were those EScLs who had simply given up and were spending their days in unproductive idleness.

> *In my opinion, staying at home is boring. Instead you would prefer to find a job to do because you will be just idle… You will be regretting…(*P09/B/In>).

> *Yea as I look at it now, I clearly see that completing secondary level is very important rather than being seated at home doing nothing like some of us are doing because most of the time you can meet some people who say; 'someone with 5 'O' Level subjects is needed to fill such a vacancy yet I haven't got those 5 'O's (*P20/C/In>).

P09 dropped out just before writing the Form 4 examination: he had not registered and had huge outstanding school fees. Elements of pain and regret, self-pity and a feeling of helplessness characterized his tone. According to him, completing Form 4 enables someone to survive; not completing thus makes a person dependent on others throughout life (Darling-Hammond, 2007; Murray & Naranjo, 2008;). He views a Form 4 Certificate as the source of a better life and social standing. To a large extent, what he said reflects previous research

findings (Boakye-Boaten, 2009; Chugh, 2011) which indicate that education unlocks doors to life achievements.

I conclude this section with the observation that the impact of premature school exit, in this study, was largely psychological, a thread that links the findings presented in Chapters 4 and 5 respectively. Together, these findings contribute to the closing of the gap which Brown (2010, p. 56) identified in current literature on the school dropout phenomenon. His claim is based on the fact that, while some studies have allowed persons who prematurely left school to describe their experiences in this regard, very little has as yet been documented on the psychological impact their experiences had on early school leavers. My study, on the other hand, has irrefutably established that leaving school prematurely had psychologically affected all the EScLs who participated in the study, its greatest impact being on their sense of self.

Section 5

5.4 Theme 5: Beliefs about What Could Solve the Dropout Problem in Zimbabwe

The fifth, and concluding, theme focuses on solutions proffered by EScLs, regarding the school dropout situation in Zimbabwe. Seven sub-themes were identified, namely, (a) beliefs about EScLs' efforts; (b) community-based approaches; (c) family intervention; (d) school intervention; (e) humanitarian aid; (f) divine intervention, and (g) redefinition of vulnerability. Emerging issues under each sub-theme included the identification of honest beneficiaries of intervention programmes; increasing programmes or NGOs to cover the targeted population; institution of free education for disadvantaged population; reducing school fees to affordable levels and allowing learners to go through their education undisturbed but withhold results until payment has been made.

Data revealed that while suggestions focused both on the individual learner and on several support systems, by and large, indications are that systems surrounding the learners are perceived as having a bigger role to play. EScLs believed that a concerted multi-systemic effort was needed to identify and implement strategies that would counter the dropout behaviour currently eroding the future of many youths in Zimbabwe. It was also clear from their suggestions that EScLs placed the primary responsibility to solve the dropout situation on central government. Their arguments centred on issues of equity (more than equality), the availability of secondary schools within reach, a constant review of education and related policies, the influence of micro- and macro-economic factors, respect for child rights approaches, and the role of the Department of Social Services (DSS) in the Ministry of Social Welfare. Fig. 5.6 summarises the beliefs proffered by participants in the study.
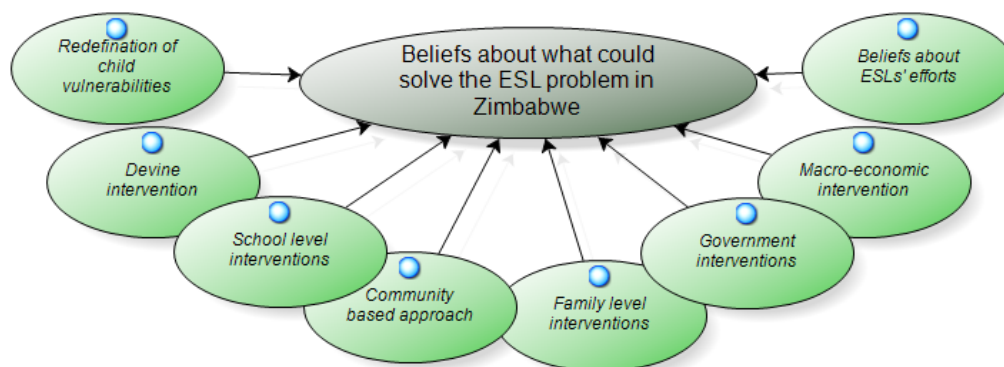
Figure 5.6: Early School Leavers' beliefs about what could solve school dropout in Zimbabwe

5.4.1 Beliefs about individual effort. Data generated during the course of my study indicate that having themselves experienced the negative consequences of dropping out of school, EScLs unanimously agreed that those who were still in school should be more serious about education and adopt positive attitudes towards their work. According to them, premature school exit was a disadvantage in every respect. Based on this premise, they argued that someone who is given the opportunity to go to school must fully utilise the available resources and complete school.

EScLs' views on the school dropout phenomenon added a new dimension to existing views on the reasons informing learners' decision to drop out of school. According to the EScLs participating in my study, learners do not necessarily drop out because of fees but because their attitude to school as a whole is negative: they lack commitment, waste their parents' resources and, as the following excerpt from P02's interview shows misuse of the opportunities by those who have been fortunate to have the means.

Some children are not serious and do not fully understand how difficult life is, like at our school there were other boys in my class, they were the first to pay their fees yet they were not serious with school. I would wish it was me, I would not miss the opportunity (P02/A/In>).

P13 clearly distinguished the dropout categories. From the tone of the language she used, it seems that she was of the view that those with genuine reasons for dropping out, as was the case with EScLs in my study, had to be identified and assisted accordingly by different authorities in society.

Umm, I think there are two types of EScLs; there are those who personally refuse to go to school and others who are forced to drop due to various reasons (um). I think that those who are forced by situations should be helped. You would like to take full

204

advantage of that chance because you may never get that chance in your life again (um). So I think there should be some sponsors who can help us to go back to school (P13/B/In>).

While agreeing with P13 in principle, P05 felt that those who could have dropped out should maintain a positive attitude towards school and continue to read books so that, should the opportunity arise, they could still catch up with their peers in school.

Aah for the children who do not have money, yes lack of money is a problem but may not completely deprive you of education. What is more important is to have the correct attitude towards school and be focused (P05/A/In>).

It was evident from the EScLs' suggestions that their own experience of dropping out had cultivated in them a positive attitude towards school, hence, their advice to those still at school. Moreover, there was ample evidence of rational and reflective thinking in their suggested solutions for action to be taken at the individual level. Instead of shifting the blame completely onto other people or circumstances, they emphasized the roles and responsibilities of the individual regarding his/her education. EScLs viewed attitude as the key factor to be considered in efforts to solve the dropout problem at individual level, thus lending support to Ajzen's (2012, p. 4) view that an individual's attitude towards a certain behaviour, i.e. his/her disposition determines whether he or she will "respond either favourably or unfavourably to an object, person, institution or event". Thus, if a learner values education, he/she should automatically be able to stay positive and hopeful as is the case with the EScLs in my study who indicated that they still wanted to go back to school should an opportunity to do so arise.

Using attitude as their point of departure, the EScLs suggested as a solution, the institution of a parallel arrangement such as night or weekend school, specifically for cases such as theirs, thus giving everybody the opportunity to attend and finish school.

What happens is that some want to send themselves to school. So they would like to find a job first. The person would like to go to night school, saying, 'a-ah, I would like to go to night school and would write my exams from work, that's another one. You would like to find a job, so the important thing is that the jobs should be available (<P09/B/In>).

But if we look at this moment, there came those people from Fit for Life we would go to school and be taught how to write, to learn how to read. Even Maths, if you learn how to calculate other things it's much better than being seated (P20/C/In>).

Implied in the night school arrangement suggested by participating EScLs was the notion that those who wanted to attend could engage in fund-raising activities during the day/week in order to generate money for their schooling needs. Another option, raised by P20, was learning from home as in what was happening at Site C, as it assisted them to run/ manage their small-scale projects.

Participating EScLs suggested that individual well-wishers and/or the government could take on the responsibility to establish parallel schooling arrangements for EScLs. These suggestions tally with Ramsay's (2008) and Tailor et al.'s (2012) sentiments that secondary school learners need flexible programmes which allow them to engage in part-time learning while they also find jobs. In this way they would not miss out on schooling due to the kind of challenges which the young people in my study had faced and still were facing. Bridgeland et al. (2006) too contends that education in the 21st century should not be confined to the classroom: since it requires increasing engagement from learners, programmes need to be flexible.

5.4.2 Community based approach. Indications from the discussion of school dropout triggers (Theme 3) are that EScLs lacked information about critical government policies related to them as children and as learners in schools. EScLs proffered several solutions to address this information gap. In the first instance, they advocated for awareness campaigns that would educate parents and children on children's rights. According to the EScLs, there is an urgent need of deliberate efforts aimed at the dissemination of information to communities on government's education policies. They pointed out that although it is common knowledge that education is every child's right, there is still a mismatch between the international law blueprint and current practice in secondary schools in Zimbabwe. Children's' right to education is, for example, seriously compromised by the schools' demand for fees and the practice of sending learners away from school if they cannot pay. Participating EScLs argued that payment of school fees was the responsibility of the parents, not the learners; therefore, sending them away was unfair and deprived them of the opportunity to access education, which was their human right.

> *I also think that we need, a-ah, some awareness campaigns in schools and sometimes like what P07 said, eeh, that the village head might invite people, calling them for youth meetings where they will be taught by some personnel about their rights and have an opportunity to do some lessons on sports and participate in various campaigns such as 'Stop Early Child Marriage' and 'Stop Drug Abuse'. I think that will help stop school dropout (* P08/A/FG>).

Besides raising awareness, EScLs also suggested that communities should be fully empowered in terms of government policies. Information should be readily available by way of brochures, pamphlets, posters and programmes on radio and television. They pointed out that every child and family must be reached, arguing that people should be able to refer to documented information for protection and guidance. They also cited the statutory instrument which stipulates that no child should be sent away from school for non-payment of fees. My research findings indicate that school administrators took advantage of the fact that parents and learners did not have the policy document in hand. Without such empowerment, parents and learners would easily lose the argument. If information is readily available, children in difficult circumstances feel empowered and confident to use the information correctly and procedurally (Ramsay, 2008).

EScLs also believed that community leaders needed to scale up their efforts to create opportunities for self-help projects. While the EScLs appreciated efforts by NGOs which were currently running small projects, they were of the view that more needed to be done given that there were many EScLs in the communities. P01 clearly pointed out in his life story that NGOs alone could not manage, thus community leaders needed to play a bigger role: after all, the youths were part of the community and needed to be empowered so as to contribute meaningfully to the development of society at large.

Concerning fund-raising projects, EScLs believed that schools should run projects that benefit children who cannot pay fees. Instead of sending such children away, the proceeds from school projects could be used to cushion vulnerable children. P07, in an FGD, argued that schools should be seen to act in loco parentis in all emergencies, and failure to pay fees should be treated as an emergency which warrants the school administration's attention. The excerpts below contain some of the ideas raised by EScLs about the need for community leaders, schools and other parties to join hands in pro-actively initiating projects like these.

> *I think like the school development committee can influence the local community may be to pay a dollar each and the committee decides what to do with the money like to buy slippers for school children in need (*P22/C/FG>*).*

> *As EScLs we need some projects to do (ok) like here we need a poultry project or we can start farming, we can rear chickens for sale. I would like the schools to introduce some projects like poultry and these would help to fund raise towards helping children who cannot pay school fees (*P03/A/FG>*).*

> *Parents should be assisted in doing income generating projects so that they can afford to pay their children's fees… (*<P15/B/FG >*).*

What emerged from the data was that the EScLs had given much thought to possibilities of getting out of their current debilitating situations, hence the proffered solutions. The idea of getting involved in projects featured in the three FGDs. EScLs' inputs reflected their attempts to encourage themselves to move forward rather than to brood on futile regrets about the past. Focusing on the generation of possible solutions rather than past mistakes seemed to boost their self-esteem: they were optimistic that, if well-wishers could be identified they would offer the necessary financial assistance. Their responses towards the end of discussions reflected greater confidence in their ability to manage the situations in which they had previously thought they were trapped. This change in attitude, according to Ajzen (2012), indicates the development of positively perceived behaviour control.

The only issue that the EScLs were unable to address satisfactorily was the feasibility of their ideas. More specifically, they were not certain whether or not the much-needed funding would be forthcoming given the current economic situation in the country, and whether securing markets for the products with which they would have to generate money would be easy or difficult. In my opinion, the EScLs' repeated call for community awareness and engagement indicated a lack of parental involvement in the day-to-day operations of secondary schools. Such involvement, according to Bridgeland et al. (2006) is a critical component of successfully run schools.

5.4.3 Family level intervention. My research findings also indicate that EScLs believed individual families had a role to play in solving the problem of premature school exit in Zimbabwe. In this study, circumstances at the EScLs' homes not only lead to their dropping out of school but, in many cases, also had a negative effect on the psychological well-being of the learner. EScLs argued that the home needed to be economically sound in order to positively influence emotional stability. They felt that at family level, income-generating projects could be an effective way of capacitating families, placing the responsibility on the government to sensitize parents to ways in which they could sustain their families instead of waiting for external assistance. Evidence from the interactions with EScLs is provided in the excerpts which follow.

> *Umm, what I think was supposed to happen for me to remain in school is that… my father or my mother was supposed to look for something like a project to do so that they can continue to pay for our school (mm). They can start a poultry project. However, for the meantime they do not have money to start the project (*P16/C/In>)*.*

EScLs felt that they lacked support during their times of need. Data from the FGDs indicated the need for education campaigns on caregiving/parenting so that families would be sensitive to both the physiological and emotional needs of their children. The EScLs also

suggested counselling sessions and continuous workshops with families of school-going children, particularly in secondary caregiving cases. They reiterated that the trauma experienced by OVC growing up in such families ruined their future, but that education and workshops currently aimed at addressing this issue seemed to target people who do not have direct contact with OVC on a day-to-day basis. They indicated that they had never heard of workshops or training programmes for families taking care of OVC, even though these are the ones at whose hands many OVC suffer. In Chapter 4, stories surfaced of participants who had been subjected to acts of child abuse, neglect and greed, hence the EScLs' contention that there was a critical need for an intervention strategy which targeted the families of OVC. Informed by the assumption that the government has many other responsibilities, and that there were not enough NGOs to care for OVC, they argued that families needed to be strengthened / empowered to meet these children's needs.

It was clear from EScLs' contributions that issues related to children in difficult circumstances need urgent consideration. My data suggest that youths need healthy relations which allow them to communicate their concerns, ambitions and ideas. The underlying fact, therefore, is that the family is the primary, and most critical support system for its offspring. Families should, therefore, proactively spearhead healthy trajectories for OVC.

It was clear from the results of my study that the various fora at which OVC issues are currently discussed have so far missed a critical target group, namely the secondary caregivers. The EScLs' observations in this regard indicate that although secondary caregivers interact with OVC every day and need education more than anybody else working with OVC, not much has been done to initiate programmes for them, not by the government and not by NGOs. In this regard, I agree with Ziiomek-Diagle (2010) that targeting families of secondary school learners for counselling could help address the devastating local and national school dropout crisis and its effect on the health and wellness of youths. It follows that psychosocial support will be neither complete nor effective until the people featuring in the everyday life of the affected children are targeted for education and counselling. Since child development, according to Thompson (2009), is an interrelated and interdependent process, the socio-emotional life of a child has a bearing on his/her overall personality development which, in turn, is a product of caregiving matrices. These matrices should therefore be sound if the positive psychological well-being of an individual is to be assured.

5.4.4 School level intervention. As regards school intervention, EScLs made several suggestions, primarily regarding school policy and practice.

5.4.4.1 Enforcement of policy: Exclusion from classes due to non-payment of fee. Data generated through my interaction with participating EScLs indicate that the EScLs

perceived some, but not all, teachers to be insensitive to their plight. Because government policies on education were not enforced and/or because their implementation was not monitored, learners living in difficult circumstances felt exposed.

> *Even though school authorities know that it is unlawful to send children away from school, they are not acting in accordance with the policy because they are the ones who send children away from school (* P12/B/FG>).

> *I suggest those who put the policies in place should go directly to the schools and make announcements to both school authorities and students so that it is clear to all because if they delegate implementation of such policies to other people there will always be a problem with how the policy is respected and implemented. So policy makers should get into schools and make public announcements that no one is to be sent home because of lack of funds (*P11/B/FG>).

Some school authorities, according to participating EScLs, who were responsible for the implementation of national education policy did not declare some of the statutory instruments that speak against their practices. According to the EScLs, delegation of policy issues to schools sometimes did not work as they were supposed to: schools simply ignored those which did not suit their objectives, often at the expense of the disadvantaged learner. EScLs suggested, therefore, that Government should make a deliberate effort to put in place mechanisms which would enable/facilitate the monitoring of policy implementation, especially those policies which deal with sensitive matters/issues. At this point, it is imperative to point out that while schools have their share of responsibility in the fees/ levies issue, Central Government needs to enunciate clear policy on the administration of BEAM, otherwise, BEAM and other relevant intervention programmes have the potential to cushion the lives of OVC to assist them to complete school. In the same vein, a redefinition of Basic education by Government is equally important so as to align related education policies accordingly.

EScLs' discussion of policy matters indicates that they were well aware of the existence of the statutory government instrument which protects children against being sent away for fees; even so, children were still dropping out because of non-payment of fees. According to the EScLs it was imperative that the implementation of policies like these should be strictly monitored to ensure that the rights of these children are protected and that adults do not continue to infringe on these rights. Bridgeland et al. (2006) posit that, since the learner population of schools is different, the principle of 'one size fits all' does not work. As a solution to school dropout, Bridgeland et al. (2006) posit that it is important to create options appropriate to learners' environments, cultures and potential job opportunities.

5.4.4.2 Withholding results. Another solution proffered to avoid sending learners back home for non- payment of fees was to allow all learners to write examinations but to withhold result until their school fees had been paid up. This view was popular, featuring at all three sites. Informing their suggestion was the argument that money could be sourced and found at any time but that time lost, especially through dropping out, may be difficult, if not impossible, to recover. They contended that dropping out and falling back into school would demand more resources than writing examinations and frantically seeking to settle outstanding bills and accessing one's results. Hence, they thought that such an arrangement would be considered fair practice and would, in addition, motivate the learner to pay up since he/she would want access to his/her results.

> *It's better for the child to write exams and then results are withheld. This encourages someone to work for the fees because they will want to see their results. But if the children are not even allowed to write exams then there is no incentive to look for the money, yet maybe that was your only opportunity (*P15/B/FG>)*.*

> *Eeh, if it was possible I also suggest that pupils be allowed to write their exams and be given a chance to look for money and pay later on terms that allow them to pay in small amounts, paying as they get it. I think it should be like that (*P09/B/In>)*.*

> P18 also said; w*hat I think I would want to see changed is (um) to enforce the policy that speaks against sending learners away for fees. Learners should be allowed to register for Form 4 make them write if they do not have money, all that money would be required upon collection of results or even before (* P18/C/FG>)*.*

To further support their argument, EScLs summised that, by the end of school, a learner would be mature and motivated enough to look for a job and, because he/she needs the certificate for job placement he/she would do any kind of work that would provide him/her with the requisite amount of money. "*You cannot go anywhere without the certificate, so you would still pay. You would also be mature to work.... yes, you can understand* (P01/A/FN>)*.*

According to participating EScLs, the use of this strategy would pave the way for government and well-wishers to assist more children whose difficult circumstances might hinder their attempts to complete school. If the payment of fees could be stalled until completion of the child's schooling, they argued, the child could go through education with minimal disturbance and much less stress than that to which they themselves were subjected. The gist of this argument is embedded in the excerpt which follows.

*Allowing me to go to school without paying and hold my results until I pay is better than being sent back for the fees while others are learning and writing tests. (uhm, so you would have to work to find the money to pay for you to be given your results- Ummm, but I would have gone to school undisturbed (uhm) (*P02/A/In>*).*

Data also revealed other, perhaps more radical, views on the issue of school fees. A significant proportion of the EScLs in my study felt that education should be free, particularly for the disadvantaged.

*If I become the next minister of education, just that I am not sure, there are companies that pay tax maybe every month or something like that, I think government should make such companies to pay tax in the form of fees for those children who cannot afford and then it is important to let Zimbabwe Schools Examinations Council (ZIMSEC) authorities know that all learners should be allowed to write examinations (*P15/B/FG>*).*

*There is something that was done by the government, they allowed tertiary students to go to school for free and pay later in the form of working(bonding), so why can that not happen at secondary school level (um) (*P08/A/FG>*).*

EScLs' suggestions support observations by Phiri (2010) that, because societies comprise mixed groups of people from different socio-economic backgrounds, issues of equity should take priority over equality. My findings also reflect an alignment with the current focus of dropout research – to determine how schools could be sensitized to focus on strategies/ policies that encourage learners to complete school rather than on strategies/policies aimed at punishing them and their families for not paying up (Montecel, Cortez, & Cortez, 2004; Ziiomek-Daigle, 2010).

Indications from my data are that affording EScLs the opportunity to suggest solutions to the school dropout problem boosted their self-esteem, resuscitated their earlier hopes and dreams, and reminded them of their own responsibility in realizing these aspirations, all of which are critical not only to their self-actualisation but also to the attainment of their educational and life goals.

5.4.4.3 Feeding scheme at school. Further indications from my research findings are that, due to the EScLs' poor family backgrounds, some children had hardly any food to take to school. As a result, they would spend the whole day on an empty stomach, hoping to get supper when they get back home. Sometimes, because of hunger, they were forced to

leave school before dismissal time. Some of the solutions that EScLs put forward to solve this problem are captured in the excerpts which follow.

> *I think it would help if schools can give children some porridge at break time (laughing). It is better (Aah its true) because some come from their homes without eating so it would be difficult for them to learn on empty stomachs (P04/A/FG>).*

> *Yes, it is right because if I come without eating I would not be able to concentrate in class because that empty stomach would not allow me to pay attention to the teacher… (P07/A/FG>).*

The EScLs proposed the institution of a feeding programme to help children from disadvantaged homes. In Zimbabwe, there is already a feeding programme but mostly for primary school children. It has not been introduced at secondary school level. EScLs' suggestion is not only noble but also harmonizes with most humanist theories. Maslow (1968), for example, argues that sensitivity to learners' needs should go beyond the usual curriculum (academic), also addressing physiological and socio-emotional needs because of the interdependence of child development facets. In terms of the arguments presented by the ESLs, the duty of schools would, therefore, be to create safe, hazard-free and sensitive learning environments (Bridgeland, Dilulio & Morison, 2006).

5.4.4.4 Leniency on school uniform and rebate of school fees. Financial demands at secondary school level were cited as inhibiting learning and being a source of school dropout. Data obtained from EScLS participating in my study indicate that individual schools had the latitude to decide on specific requirements such as uniform and levies. As a result, some charges went far beyond what families could afford. EScLs described the charges as unreachable, unrealistic and insensitive given people's economic circumstances/situations. Uniform, too, was cited as an expense which parents already struggling to pay fees, could not afford, hence they had to appeal to the Department of Social Services (DSS) in the Ministry of Social Welfare, Central Government and well-wishers to help. Some of the EScLs' views on these, as expressed during FGDs, are cited below.

> *Umm whilst my colleagues are still thinking, there are some schools that don't allow anyone to enter the school yard without school shoes (ok) so you drop out of school isn't so. … Some schools don't allow jerseys that are not school colours …I think uniform should not be a strict requirement unless government is providing. If not, then (yes) there should not be hard and fast rules about uniform so that those who cannot afford can still be allowed into school or the Department of Social Services (DSS) should supply uniform to those who don't have uniforms. …isn't it this is why DSS is there? (P20/C/FG>).*

If I were the minister of education, I would establish a policy whereby children are not sent away from school for the benefit of those who cannot pay fees. Some fees are so exorbitant that it's an indirect way of saying those who cannot afford should not go to school. That's why I suggest that secondary schools should charge fees that are affordable like a hundred and something. Both private and government schools charge exorbitant fees when a child is starting Form 1, they can charge up to US$300,00. Where does this amount come from? You cannot even borrow such an amount from anyone in this day and age. That is why we have a government to solve such issues (P14/B/FG>).

Many are dropping because I think it is mostly because of school fees which are high. So I think if these fees are reduced the children would be able to go to school (P02/A/FG>).

Over and above the issue of school fees, P06 thought the issue of insensitive teachers also needed to be considered.

 I think if the school fees are reduced, children would be able to go to school and teachers should understand children's problems… because if you (teacher) are saying to me get out of my class, you do not have this and that; if I do not have it that's it! I could not bring it because I do not have it, then the teacher should not tell me to get out of the class! They should understand us (P06/A/FG>).

Evident from their tone was EScLs' concern about the issue. Informing their concern was their belief that government needed to address the situation in a way that would enable children to enjoy the right to education. While they appreciated the need to pay fees, the EScLs felt it was not fair to use non-payment to prevent someone from completing school. Schools were reported to be hard on learners from disadvantaged families when they should be considering issues of equity related to the 'haves' and the 'have nots' (Haralambos & Holborn, 2013). By implication, disadvantaged learners should be treated differently and mechanisms which would help to close the gap between these two groups should be put in place. EScLs indicated that the Department of Social Services (DSS) needed to be more visible to assist those in difficult circumstances. The extent of their invisibility was such that EScLs in the study did not even know the location of the DSS in their communities**.**

What I inferred from participating EScLs' comments on the compulsion to wear the prescribed school uniform was that, while they viewed it as economically sensible, they wanted the rules about wearing it to be relaxed. In my view this was an irrational overreaction on their part: in my view leniency would result in learners not wearing the uniform standing out,

possibly setting themselves up for ridicule and, consequently affecting them psychologically. They would, moreover, lose the sense of belonging because such a sense is regarded as critical to the development of a positive self-concept and a healthy self-esteem (Frank, 2011). The mere fact that they did not wear a uniform might lead to them becoming withdrawn and eventually dropping out.

Lastly, regarding intervention at school level, EScLs spoke out strongly against corporal punishment, proposing that it should be completely abolished since it was destructive, unbearable, sometimes unreasonable, and compromised their self-esteem. From EScLs' point of view, teachers seemingly knew no other way of disciplining children than to beat them. The prevalence of these beatings is evident from the following excerpts.

> *There are teachers, especially at a government school… who are well known for serious beating (*P03/A/FG>*).*

> *There are some teachers who as you just enter the classroom or try and move the desk they shout at you or even beat you. Some of them ha-a will just have targeted you as a person they dislike* (P08/B/FG>*).*

> *Some of the things that were boring at school are that you are beaten for late coming. …let us say the bell has rung and you are close to the gate lets us say the gate is just by this building (um) like you will get there and there is a teacher with a rubber stick already beating, that's boring. Or the gate would be closed and you would be asked to stand outside the whole morning, right. (*P09/B/FG>*).*

> *Do you not know that it is obvious that there are teachers who come to school just to beat children? (*P11/B/FG>*)*

> *Teachers who man the gates usually if you look at it closely you find that these are the teachers who are mostly feared, the cruel ones. So i-ii as soon as the bell rings, like where I learnt, the office was facing the gate. So, if they start walking from there to the gate right, the moment they arrive at the gate beating starts with no excuse or reasoning. …(*P21/C/FG>*).*

> *Beating and punishment were by teachers and other students both sides, you can be beaten and start thinking otherwise because you will be beaten every day (*P17/C/FG>*).*

EScLs' reactions/responses to corporal punishment are consistent with Brower and Keller's (2006) observation that punishment is counterproductive to teacher-learner relationships since it generates negative feelings from those who are beaten. EScLs suggested that school and the government craft and monitor the implementation of policies that favour and protect learners from this problem. This is ironic, since Statutory Instrument No. P35, which prohibits corporal punishment has been in place for decades, forming part of a whole range of policies designed to protect learners. Given the prevalence and seeming severity of the beatings, supervisors at schools and in higher offices in the education system need to urgently address the issue.

5.4.5 Humanitarian aid. EScLs were adamant that the government had to urgently source assistance for children living in difficult circumstances. Suggestions about who should be approached and how this should be done are presented in the EScLs' own words, presented in the form of the excerpts which follow.

> *I think if it was possible there could be organisations that would be introduced or other programmes which can work with children and they should pay school fees and provide uniforms. If they would do that I think most children would be able to complete school. Even us who dropped out of school we could have completed* (P20/C/In>).

> *If a child is having challenges paying school fees, government should find funders like UNICEF who can help such a child. be able to continue with school (uhmm)* (P17/C/FG>).

> *The government should also find ways to reach more children in difficult circumstances and assist them to finish school and pay later …and that will promote education in our country (*P16/C/In>).

The equity issue was again emphasised, albeit in a different context. The sole aim of humanitarian aid, according to EScLs, was to raise the standard of disadvantaged children. Informed by this assumption, EScLs therefore suggested that the government should continuously approach organisations for financial aid, and also scale up BEAM since the number of children needing help continued to rise. Their suggestions emphasized the need to deliberately identify disadvantaged children and effectively run programmes specifically targeting such children (Hadebe, 2013).

5.4.6 Objectivity and transparency. My data indicates that School Development Committees (SDC) make life difficult for learners from disadvantaged families. The EScLs expected the SDC to protect them; instead, these committees exposed the children's

vulnerability. This was evident from the rigid follow-up procedures related to the non-payment of fees, and what EScLs called unfair practices in the selection of learners eligible for assistance. EScLs admitted that they were not aware of the selection criteria used by organisations which ran intervention programmes. All they knew was that whenever they thought they qualified for assistance, they were told they did not. They questioned the legitimacy of the selection procedures and processes, arguing that it should be the responsibility of the SDC at every school to guide organisations and well-wishers in transparent practices which would lead to the identification of genuine beneficiaries of the various programmes. Thus, the focus is once again on the achievement of equity (Hadebe, 2013). Excerpts from some of the EScLs' inputs give further clarity to their views on this issue.

Programmes like BEAM and others should help significant numbers because sometimes they come and say BEAM is taking 30 out of the 400 in need then we assess that of the 30 very few are legitimate beneficiaries. Usually, it is like with BEAM there is no transparency as to how selection of beneficiaries is done. You hear that someone takes his relatives even some who are not orphans they make sure they benefit and those who are poor are what? - left out so there should be serious vetting. If it was possible they would move around in the houses and see that here there is a school child and assess the situation and assist a large number of genuine cases (P20/C/FG>).

Haa, government must let those other charitable organisations move around the schools and help those who cannot afford the examination fees. I say so because it is so painful to fail to write when you have gone all the way and saying this year is my last… So, I would urge the charitable organisations to help genuine cases (P09/B/In>).

5.4.7 Redefining child vulnerability. Data revealed that EScLs in the study had failed to qualify for various intervention programmes. Coupled with their belief that the selection criteria were unclear, participants felt that the concept of vulnerability needed rethinking and redefining. They justified their position in this regard with reference to the increase in families struggling to survive and their perception that more education reforms cushioning the less privileged were therefore necessary. According to them, the way in which NGOs and other well-wishers addressed the plight of the less privileged left much to be desired because they could not understand how they had, so far, not been considered for any intervention. Their conclusion was simply that current intervention programmes were inadequate, a conclusion implied in all of the following excerpts.

I think there is need to introduce other things different from what is there now or other programmes with different focus because we have seen that those operating now are

217

not adequately raising the standards of some of us, … The government could also institute a programme where officers visit all schools without discrimination and find out about the real causes of dropping out…. (P20/C/In>).

*Government can also look at different issues not just one because there are many things happening in our lives which some donors may not know (*P16/C/FG>).

According to P20, partners in education needed to do more research and identify other characteristics which constitute vulnerability. Indications from my data are that many children were not qualifying because of the narrow definition of vulnerability which considered opharnhood only. P20's proposal reflects findings in related previous studies which also established that research and policies should be aimed at identifying strategies at schools which would lead to more positive outcomes and learners' successful completion of secondary education (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007; Ramsay, 2008, p. 51). In this regard, participants' proposals were calling for new thinking and/or approach to vulnerability issues. EScLS placed the responsibility on central government to initiate increased care for the less privileged. According to the EScLs, the plight of the less privileged should be treated as an emergency situation, a situation which required the proportional allocation of resources. Should this be done, equity would become a reality and discrimination would be addressed. EScLs believed that imploring government to find ways of targeting macro-issues was critical because even the Exo-, Meso-, Macro- and Chrono-systems with which children have no direct link, indirectly influence them (Bronfenbrenner, 2005).

The findings provide an important insight into the multiple challenges associated with the cultural and the socio-economic situation of the family that today's child has to overcome in order to compete school. The suggestions made by the EScLs indicate the need for comprehensive approaches and multi-delivery systems in addressing the complex situation of children growing up in difficult circumstances. By implication, support systems need to open up, broadening existing operational parameters to become practically inclusive.

5.4.8 Distance to school. My findings also indicate that, in some cases, distances which secondary school learners have to walk to and from home were prohibitive to their school attendance. Besides the fees issue, some ended up tired because of the long distances to be covered and the fact that they could not afford transport.

It's like in some areas, there are no schools there, so the parents cannot even afford a dollar for the child to board a taxi to and from school Yes. The schools are far away we used to learn with some from far away areas. P02/A/In>).

EScLs implored the government to ensure that secondary schools, in particular, are within the reach of many learners so as to reduce walking distances. This result is consistent with Pearson's (2012) observation that hunger, poor diet, and long walking distances to school could undermine a child's motivation to attend school. Since it is usually children from low SES who have to walk to school, Pearson argues that they could easily drop out as they tend to prefer the immediate gratification of physiological needs to entertaining long-term goals like schooling.

5.4.9 The need to talk it out. EScLs explained that children in difficult circumstances had to be given opportunities to speak out on issues affecting them. More specifically, they expressed the desire to actively engage with government, those responsible for other support systems, and other EScLs to hear their stories. The psychological relief afforded by the opportunity to tell their stories is reflected in participating EScLs' comments at the end of their interviews with me as well as in the life stories of the three participants who chose this option. Excerpts from some of these reflect the therapeutic effect which the opportunity to tell their stories had on them.

> *A-ah I'm feeling fantastic, terrific and great. I realised that I was thinking about a lot of things lately such that I was not able to sit down with others, I was always feeling uncomfortable and was unsure of many things in my life (um). But now I am feeling free in my mind after talking with you (okay)* (P13/B/In>).

> So*, I think what you are doing is good, taking time to ask us questions because we do not have anyone to tell that we want to do this and that or that we want to go back to school. If we go to our parents, they will tell us that see all these others they also want to go to school … they will tell you many things (* P09/B/In>).

All the participants expressed these sentiments in an informal talk with me during a tour of each site. Giving voice to a population which had been deprived of the opportunity to speak was one of the objectives of this study, hence EScLs were encouraged to freely express their thoughts, feelings and perspectives on the school dropout process and issues related to it. Table 5.1 provides more evidence of how EScLs utilised the opportunity that this study afforded them to talk things out.

Table 5.1: EScLs' informal conversations on solutions

Site A P06	Site A P01
Listen, my friend, at least we are lucky, we are here, but there are many others out there. I think secondary education must be heavily subsidised, then you pay for whatever course you want thereafter because selection will always be unfair, people have their relatives (P06/A/FN>). *Guidance and Counseling and these dramas, you know if done every day you can tell yourself that let me finish school even if things are tough at home* (P06/A/FN>)	*Then everyone would get the certificate and can start life much better* (P01/A/FN>) *Sure, students should know that so and so is the G&C teacher and does not teach Maths or what what but for G&C alone. They pay her for that I think so* (P01/A/FN>)
Site C P17	**Site C P18**
But you know, even government starting s place for counseling many children in difficult circumstances to relieve stress is better (P17/C/FN>) *Guidance and counseling is there in schools but I think there are no good teachers there to do it. They must get training and do that job only. You will change your mind when someone talks with you. Sometimes we do not know. Proper G&C must be at secondary school, a subject for everyone* *They also talk to the SDC chairman and headmaster and teachers yaah I think you are right* (P17/C/FN>)	*Good, but even other well- wishers can do that, like here they are doing catch –up lessons for primary school. I think more such places are needed so that you get counseling and catch up if you are not going to your school for that time, then you go back (P18/C/FN>)* *Not a subject, it's not for exam, you know, teachers will take it like Maths or Geo, I am saying for people with problems to go and sit there and talk. Even every day, you go and talk (P18/C/FN>)* *You know if I got chance to speak even in parliament perhaps it will make them see reality and government can come up with more effective ways to keep learners in school until graduation. We know what is happening in school, the unfair selection eh!* (P18/C/FG>)
Site B P14	**Site B P09**
Yes we can tell them for example, about relatives who grab properties of our dear dead parents (P14/B/FN>) *People are beaten in secondary school. It's not a joke, it is too much. Government must tell them to stop* (P14/B/FG>)	*I think they must be arrested and sentenced to many years in jail. It pains me, I could be somewhere now doing my own things* (P09/B/FN>) *Like us, when we knew there was hard beating tomorrow, we would take let's say two text books and put them under the pants and wear a tight short to keep the books in place then wear the uniform. When you got the strokes because sometimes they can be ten or so then you do not feel the pain much because the books protect you then can remove them. But if you were caught cheating like that, the teacher would add more strokes to make sure he deals with you.* (P09/B/FG>)

Data generated during the informal talks resulted in EScLs' making suggestions additional to those proffered during FGDs, interviews, and story-writing. In each case, the EScLs sounded relaxed and eager to volunteer more information. They reflected on what they had discussed in the FGD since tours were done a week after the FGDs with the sole purpose of connecting

the EScLs experiences with some of the activities they did at the site. Their conversations pointed to a void in their lives, their tone – particularly when talking about school G&C – indicated that, if they had found effective counselling, they might not have dropped out, in spite of the prevailing circumstances because they valued school. In this regard, Cooper (2013) observes that while G&C helps to reduce psychological distress among secondary school learners, assigning untrained and paraprofessional helpers to this important role defeats the purpose.

A statement made at Site C – "*sometimes we do not know"* (P17/C/FN>) suggests that school dropout could have been prevented had the learners received proper guidance. This comment confirms the truth of P09's claim cited earlier that they did not have anyone to talk to about their troubles and/or dire circumstances. The language and tone used in the conversations also pointed to the need to address psychological issues in the lives of the EScLs.

My findings reflect those of Ramsay (2008) on peer pressure, the importance of G&C during adolescence and the effect that equity issues have on vulnerable learners' schooling. As Suh and Suh (2007) point out, it is important to know that all aspects of human life need to be satisfied to some extent if the person is to function properly. The results of my study suggest that systems around the youths should cater for and/or attend to their physiological, affect and mental needs. In short, children, including the EScLs, need to be heard. In this regard, Bridgeland et al. (2006) suggest that access to information for youths, coupled with guidance and counselling programmes, could serve as a school dropout remedy. In support of this view, Sleep (2010) emphasizes the fact that school learners are social beings who need emotional attachment and support to realise their education and life outcomes. When faced with difficult moments in their learning, they need a secure base (a source of encouragement) to fall back on. The absence or lack of, sound adult/learner connections, an unsupportive school environment and inadequate parental and community involvement may contribute to the child's disengagement with and early exit from school (Josefowicz-Simbeni, 2008).

5.4.10 Education reforms/ policies and curriculum review. Also indicated in data generated in my study is the need for the inclusion of an additional curriculum component focusing on practical subjects such as arts and sports. In the event that someone fails to proceed to Form 4, EScLs believed that skills in practical subjects would be perfected through clubs without necessarily requiring formal tuition. As indicated in the excerpts which follow, EScLs believed that practical skills could empower someone to start a self-initiated occupation for survival.

Some learners might not be bright in academic work but good in a sporting discipline. That might benefit him or her because the sports like cricket and swimming might make a good livelihood for someone. (P13/B/In.>)

*As for me, I do projects here (Site A) and … I wish secondary schools would give learners an opportunity to do other subjects such as music …because maybe I do not want to see books; I do not want to read but if I go to music or if I go to theatre and act some drama, yah, that will make me remain in school (*P08/A/FG>).

The tone in these two excerpts suggests that some learners may be dropping out because of a frustrating curriculum. Lagging behind can be demotivating, thus, gradually leading to the learner's disengagement with schooling until he/she ultimately drops out. A thorough needs analysis and the placement of learners according to flair and ability is therefore a matter of urgency (Ramsay, 2008; UNESCO, 2011).

One of the benefits of practical subjects, according to the EScLs is that one's performance is not reflected in a certificate, as is the case in Mathematics, but in the creation of a product - a chair in Wood Technology or a garment in Clothing and Textiles. The practical skills thus acquired, according to participants had the advantage that, '*if you drop out, you can use the learned practical skills to make a living' (*P05/A/FG>).

P02, who repeatedly referred to her challenges with Mathematics during FGD and the interview, also supported the idea of a curriculum heavily skewed towards practical subjects. She expressed her thoughts like this:

*Like some of us who always scored very low, if government could put in place a separate curriculum on practical subjects, I would be happy to do counselling talking to those learners who cannot pay fees, I was good in that area" (*P02/A/FN>).

EScLs' views on the relevance of curriculum clearly show that they were aware of their limitations. While they might have failed to complete school due to fees, my findings suggest that their discomfort with the curriculum - hence, their call for a review to cater for needs and interests other than academic ones – might also have contributed to their early exit from school. My supposition in this regard is in line with claims made by Bridgeland et al. (2006) regarding the importance of developing curriculum options that accommodated/suited the environment, culture, competences and job opportunities of learners across the spectrum. My findings also confirm Ramsay's (2008) argument for constant reforms of educational policies in order to address needs of learners.

5.4.11 Divine intervention. Lastly, solutions proffered by participating EScL included suggestions about the importance to also rely on some or other supernatural powers for intervention. EScLs, in a number of cases, directed their issue to God by indicating that their faith one day, will result in their issues being resolved. The excerpts cited hereafter some extracted from interviews, other from EScLS' life stories,-reflect their faith that, with patience, their hopes would at some point somehow be fulfilled.

> *I still hold my ambitions. A-aah, I have great faith that I am going to return to school even if I have stopped for the moment. …I know that God is going to open the doors (the doors yes) and I know that God is doing great things in my life. I would like to help others since I would have been helped by other people (*P13/B/In>).

> *I am praying every day for our project… I wish that God intervenes and we will end up having National Goats Meat Producers and build our butcheries to sell goat meat. I hope that the faithful God that we pray will make my dreams come true (*P20/C/LS>).

Reflected in the tone of these utterances is EScLs determination to either go back to school or find other ways of succeeding in life. Their comments reflected their expectations of divine intervention in the provision of the required resources. There was an emotional attachment to the wishes they made, EScLS making the effort to boost their confidence and self-esteem while simultaneously suppressing worry by 'feigning' optimism. Their belief that God would intervene aligns with McLeod's (2008) perspective that, in uncertain or anxiety-arousing situations, human's thinking capacity is compromised, hence his/her search for external help, particularly from a spiritual force/world (McLeod, 2008).

5.5 Placing Findings against Existing Literature: Confirmations, Contradictions and Silences in Themes 3-5

In this section, I compare my findings, as expounded in the three themes presented in this chapter, with related local and global studies in order to highlight ways in which my study confirms, contradicts or addresses silences in these.

5.5.1 What was confirmed regarding the process of dropping out of school. The findings of this study confirm arguments in existing literature that school dropout is not an event but a process characterized by a specific pathway or pattern (Finn, 2005; Rudduck & Fiedding, 2006). My findings also confirm the results of a review of two hundred and three published studies in US, namely that multiple factors that affect the attitudes and behaviours of children at elementary school level may well inform their high school attitudes and behaviours to the extent that they prematurely exit school (Rumberger & Lim, 2008). In this study, I found that events which happened during the youths' early childhood years – the loss

of a parent to death, for example – contributed to their secondary school dropout behaviour. These findings also serve as a confirmation of Rumberger and Lim's (2008) observation that institutions surrounding the child also have a nurturing role to play, and that parenting style might influence the process of dropping out. In this study, distinct differences were established between the role played by biological parents and secondary caregivers in the process of dropping out.

5.5.1.1 What was confirmed regarding the impact of dropping out on the lives of the youths. Like studies on the effects of school dropout in the US, my study established that dropping out of school had societal and economic implications: victims were reduced to dependants, requiring assistance from government, communities and families to sustain life (Bridgeland et al., 2006; Rumberger and Lim, 2008; Iachini et al., 2013). My study indicates, however, that the situation is worse in Zimbabwe: assistance was remote because of gross challenges in the Micro-, Exo-, and Macro- systems. Moreover, my findings confirmed the notion that school dropout is an epidemic crisis because of the magnitude of ripple effects which could have serious social, psychological and economic ramifications (Bridgeland et al, 2006; Dahl, 2010; Mahlomaholo, 2011).

In addition to this, my study established, among others, that idleness, a dependency syndrome, drug abuse, poor literacy and poor problem-solving skills were consequences of school dropout. This finding is consistent with the findings of previous studies (Bridgeland et al., 2006; Dahl, 2010; Gray & Hackling, 2009; USAID, 2011). My findings also confirm previous findings that the impact of dropping out of school is felt at individual, family and community levels (Bridgeland et al., 2006; Gray & Hackling, 2009; Dahl, 2010; Levin, 2005; Nelson, 2006). Also evident from my study, and as previously established by Boekye-Boaten (2009) and Lewin (2009), dropping out of secondary school, deprived the youth of their human right to education, resulting in the loss of critical advantages associated with secondary school education - attainment of qualifications for job placement being one example. Another similarity with the findings of previous research studies was the EScLs' failure to contribute meaningfully to their own families and communities (Machingambi, 2012; Mhizha & Muromo, 2013).

5.5.1.2 What was confirmed regarding beliefs about what could solve the school dropout problem in Zimbabwe. The EScLs in my study proposed subsidised secondary education as was the case in Kenya. The desired results of this initiative in Kenya are, however, yet to be realized since statistics in this regard indicate that school dropout rates remain significant (Bettman et al., 2013; Chege & Sifuna, 2006; Kibugi et al., 2013; Sigei & Tikoko, 2014) The appeal that the EScLs in my study made to the Zimbabwean government

224

regarding the introduction of poverty alleviation strategies support recommendations in other local studies such as those by Chinyoka (2014); Dakwa et al., (2014); Mawere (2012) and Mhizha and Murombo (2013).

Suggestions related to the reviewing of school policies, particularly those on school fees and related needs, tally with findings from studies which established that learners need to identify with the school in order for them to stay on (Gray & Hackling, 2009; Fisher & Khine, 2006). Again, the call for periodic education reforms to suit the real needs of OVC confirms recommendations in global studies regarding the need for research as well as the development of policies to support learners' completion of a course (Bridgeland et al., 2006; Holcomb-McCoy, 2007; Ramsay, 2008). The reforms needed with regard to Zimbabwean youths relate, particularly, to psychosocial issues and the need for a curriculum that nurtures a hands-on inclination which could facilitate a better everyday life.

Like previous studies, which highlighted the need to recognize and consult with people in decision-making processes that will directly affect their lives (Cook-Sather, 2007), this study, too, found that participating EScLs needed such recognition. Knowing what the selection criteria and procedures for inclusion in intervention programmes were, was important to the EScLs, who queried the fairness and objectivity of some of these.

Previous studies have already found that learners' views were not necessarily consistent with those of adults, hence, the need for consultations (Ramsay, 2008). The results of my study therefore confirm findings in other studies that learners' voices need to be heard on issues related to their education and social needs (Coleman, 2011; Cook-Sather, 2007; Shoda et al., 2007). In this regard, EScLs in my study made a strong appeal to authorities to ensure schools' adherence to the Secretary's Circular No. P35 which speaks against corporal punishment and other forms of physical punishment since these were almost the order of the day in some schools. The finding confirms observations that discipline is preferred to punishment, which is counterproductive (Brower & Keller, 2006). The need for guidance and counselling as a way to help learners manage their problems and stay in school (Coleman & Hagel, 2007; Whitty & Wisby, 2007) as raised by participating EScLs is also consistent with previous studies. Lastly, the call to consider issues of equity by considering the plight of children from disadvantaged families coincides with what Chugh (2011) established from a study on school dropout in Delhi, namely that schools do not respond positively to the special educational needs of learners. Identified indicators of this problem included a lack of guidance and counselling, expectations which were too demanding, exclusion, identity crises, and a lack of recognition, all of which were also confirmed in my study.

5.5.2 Contradictions/ differences regarding the process of dropping out. While previous studies acknowledge that dropping out was a process and not an event, not much was known about the process itself (Bridgeland et al., 2006; Rumberger, 2004). I believe that my study has contributed towards closing this gap by establishing a definite pattern, one which, according to the EScLs who served as my data sources, was characterized by the following: their decision to drop out was influenced by significant people in their lives; learners used escape–avoidance, defence and coping mechanisms to try and stay at school, in the process experiencing untenable strain and pressure, which eventually made them decide to leave. This pattern differed quite significantly from the pattern described by Rumberger. According to Rumberger (2004), the dropping out process is characterized by learners' refusing to wake up, extending their lunch-times, missing classes, and truancy. In my study, the process was characterized by what EScLs described as 'nasty experiences' induced against their wishes. The motive informing learners' decision to drop out in the two studies was, therefore, quite different.

Another difference was that, while a study by Bridgeland et al. (2006) indicates that a significant number (47%) of learners neither told their parents, nor informed their school that they were dropping out or had dropped out, my study indicates that the decision was taken in consultation with a significant person/s in the life of the learner concerned. However, as in the Bridgeland's et al.'s study, they did not tell the school. They quietly slipped away, not because they planned to drop out, but because circumstances forced them to. They also kept hoping that they would bounce back at any time should they secure money.

Lastly, in the current study, the decision to drop out, which was part of the process, was largely influenced by pull factors (mainly the home situation) not,push factors (physical features, policy and practice, teacher-learner relationships, curriculum relevance and teacher competency in the school) as Sweeten (2006) and others (Berile et al, 2012; Bridgland et al, 2006; Brower & Keller, 2006; Shoda et al, 2007) found.

5.5.2.1 Contradictions/ differences regarding the impact of dropping out on EScLs' lives. Previous studies did not as clearly articulate the psychological impact of dropping out as my study did. According to Brown (2010), there is very little information in current literature which explains in depth whether or not dropping out has a psychological impact on EScLs. In the current study, issues related to self-concept, self-esteem and self-efficacy were clearly evident in the EScLs' lives. In fact, the study established that the psychological impact of dropping out of school is severe and long-lasting. The contrariness of this finding could be ascribed to my research approach, which was predominantly qualitative. In related studies (Bridgeland et al, 2006; Dahl, 2011; Gray & Hackling, 2009; Nelson, 2006),

mostly surveys, the focus was predominantly on issues related to economic costs, early marriages, crime rates, poverty, dependency, reduced job opportunities and positioning on the social ladder. Previous studies, thus, established the impact of school dropout on the outer person. My study established its impact on the inner person, something which required an in-depth study of learners who had gone through the experience and were willing to recall and reflect on it to unveil the psychological impact, particularly on the development of the EScL's personality and his/her optimal functionality as an individual member of society.

5.5.2.2 Contradictions/ differences regarding beliefs about what could solve the school dropout problem. A major difference between previous studies and mine was the belief of participants in my study in the supernatural power of God to solve the school dropout problem. They believed that, although they had already dropped out of school, waiting patiently for God's intervention might well reverse this situation.

5.5.3 Silences on the impact of school dropout at individual and systemic levels. The findings of my study reveal very little about the impact of school dropout at societal level and beyond. Besides indicating that they lacked the capacity to contribute meaningfully at family level, EScLs concentrated on its impact at personal level. While they mentioned that the fact that they had dropped out had affected systems such as their family and community, they did not elaborate on the nature of the impact. Perhaps because EScLs viewed school dropout from an experiential point of view, they tended to focus on the impact their decision to drop out had on their own lives. They acknowledged, though, that it could spill over onto their families and communities, hence their concern about its impact on systems in general. There is, however, evidence in literature that premature school exit negatively affects society, the nation and international relations/competitiveness. Bridgeland et al. (2006) as well as Nelson (2006) found that the premature exit of learners from school eventually robs societies of the critical human resource needed to propel their development, hence Sisulu's (2004) observation that the development of a nation can be measured against the literacy levels of its people.

5.5.3.1 Silences on solutions to solve the dropout problem. Gender-related issues emerged as strong recommendations in previous local studies (Chinyoka, 2014; Mawere, 2012; Mhizha & Murombo, 2013), particularly recommendations related to the need for a gender-sensitive curriculum and the promotion of equitable gender regimes. Existing literature highlights the need to review teaching approaches to make classrooms more productive, hence, the proposal for policies which allow learners to evaluate their teachers' performance. Allowing learners to evaluate their teachers was found to improve teacher – student relationships to a greater extent (Barile, et al., 2012; Cook-Sather, 2007; Viero et al., 2005).

My study was, however, generally silent on gender issues. Though critical of some teachers and the way they treat learners, EScLs in the present study did not suggest anything in relation to their involvement in the work of their teachers.

Lastly, although the setting up of early warning systems at schools and education offices, with a view to help identify and trace absentees and/or to institute effective remedial programmes, was a critical recommendation in related studies (Bridgeland et al, 2006), my study was silent on this.

5.6 Summary

My investigation into the school dropout phenomenon in Zimbabwe centred on the collection of narrative data on the school dropout experiences of young adults who had actually gone through the process. Emerging from these EScLs' narratives was the trauma associated with the dropout process and the (mostly) negative effect it had on their psyches, dreams, life and career goals.

The psychological impact was like a thread running through and linking the three themes which were presented in this chapter. Given the negative impact dropping out had on the lives of participating EScLs, they wanted and needed to talk about it but, as indicated in my study, opportunities to do so were basically non-existent. The therapeutic value of the opportunity which this study created for them to do so was evident from the fact that some of them broke down during interviews, getting rid of feelings that had been suppressed for too long a time, and from the gratitude most of them expressed about this opportunity when the study was coming to a close. All the participants indicated that they wished there were more platforms where they could speak out and express their views.

This chapter concludes with a number of suggestions – proffered by participating EScLs - on ways in which the dropout problem, its causes and its impact on learners could be addressed. Final thoughts on the study, its significance and limitations, and recommendations for action and future research on the school dropout problem, are presented in Chapter 6, which concludes the study.

Chapter 6

Consolidated Findings, Conclusions and Recommendations

6.1 Introduction

Chapter 6 attempts to answer the research questions which guided the study. It begins by restating the purpose of the study and the focus of each of the preceding chapters. This is followed by presentation of the major findings given in the form of answers to the research questions which guided the study. After this, a suggested framework for curbing school dropout is presented. The significance of the study and its contribution to the existing body of knowledge in the field of school dropout and educational psychology are then discussed. Finally, the limitations of the study, recommendations for future research and a concluding remark bring the research report to an end.

I embarked on this study in order to understand school dropout in Zimbabwe based on perspectives of those who had lived experiences of the phenomenon. In Chapter 1, I introduced the study by spelling out my research purpose, rationale, research questions which guided the study and the means I planned to use throughout the study in the observance of research ethics and issues of quality. In Chapter 2, I reviewed literature on local and global research studies on school dropout and issues related to it. This helped me to establish both what was already known about the phenomenon and to identify gaps in existing literature. The literature review not only help me put the study into perspective but also enabled me to construct a theoretical framework within which to locate the study, using relevant aspects from Bronfenbrenner's (2005) Bioecological Systems theory and Ajzen's (2012) Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB). Having thus determined a specific focus for the study, I used Chapter 3 to describe my philosophical base, namely interpretive philosophy, and my research methodology - qualitative data generation. Specific methods used for the collection of data included focus group discussions, semi-structured interviews and written participant life stories. In Chapters 4 and 5 I presented and discussed my research findings, i.e. the results of the study, highlighting confirmations, contradictions and silences based on insights I gained from my literature review.

6.2 Major Findings/ New Knowledge

6.2.1 How early school leavers in Zimbabwe conceptualise school dropout. EScLs in the study defined the phenomenon under investigation, namely school dropout, as a negative experience, one which, according to them resulted from interactions between themselves (ie. the learners) and their environments (Bronfenbrenner & Bronfenbrenner, 2009). While dropping out of school in the existing literature is generally described in the literal sense as physical withdrawal from school (Brown, 2010), the EScLs in this study viewed it as

a direct consequence of negative events during their school lives. Thus, one of the findings of this study is that the definition of the concept, 'school dropout', cannot be separated from the personal lives of the affected individuals. To the EScLs in the study, being asked to define school dropout meant the same thing as having to relate their life stories. The definition of school dropout which emerged from this study is, therefore, that it is a personal, direct experience characterised by a deep sense of deprivation (of opportunities in life), endured memories of loss in various ways, and a demonstration of unresolved equity issues in society.

The study established that deprivation of the opportunity to attain a secondary school certificate constitutes an impediment in the life of the EScL. Without a Form 4 Certificate, opportunities for meaningful employment are limited in Zimbabwe because secondary school education - in and outside the country - is assumed/expected to open doors to the world of jobs as well as mastery of problem-solving skills for day-to-day survival in life (Chugh, 2011; Mhizha & Muromo, 2013; Muwagga, et al, 2013). By implication, a learner who fails to complete secondary education, lacking the exposure offered by secondary school life, something which cannot be duplicated at any other stage in life (Lewin, 2009), embarks on adult life from a weak foundation. Moreover, identity formation associated with adolescence is undermined which, ultimately, means that the young person concerned has not had the opportunity to resolve the adolescence crisis critical to ushering him/her into adulthood (Erikson, 1968; Schultz & Schultz, 2013). Deprivation, in the context of Bronfenbrenner's theory, is caused by a breakdown in the network of systems supposed to support the learner due to circumstances which lead to negative outcomes. My research findings therefore dovetail perfectly with Bronfenbrenner's (2005) claim that the interactions between human beings and their environment in which they are situated have a bearing on their overall functioning as social beings.

It was evident from the study that vivid memories of school days, both good and bad, contributed significantly to the EScLs' conceptualisation of the school dropout construct. As they attempted to explain the construct, 'school dropout', they recalled several achievements both in and outside the classroom during their short-lived stint at secondary school. Dropping out, therefore, meant separation from such achievements, a separation which constituted a loss in their lives. Conversely, hearing the word, 'school dropout', also triggered memories of negative experiences such as insensitive family cultural practices such as unfair distribution of inheritance as well as school policies and practices, for example, punishment which characterised their school lives. The study established that EScLs continue to vividly remember their former school lives; thus, they find it unpleasant to talk about both the good and bad experiences they remember. This finding confirms Bronfenbrenners' (2005) argument

regarding the existence of a symbiotic relationship between humans and their environment. Because the learner would have developed an attachment to school routines and activities he/she carries with him/her lasting memories of former school experiences, triggering feelings of helplessness, hopelessness, defeat, self-pity, inadequacy, hurt, low- self-esteem, and being a social misfit. These feelings, according to the participants, reflect hard life and vulnerability. The study suggests that losing the opportunity to complete secondary school is a painful experience in itself because EScLs in the study sample expressed that even those experiences which seemed bad at the time would now be more bearable than their current out-of-school life experience.

Another finding was that support systems have not been able to address issues of equity to the extent that the systems do not enable learners from disadvantaged social backgrounds to enjoy opportunities which allow them to exploit their potential and self-actualise like their counterparts from stable and/or affluent social backgrounds. This 'equity gap', therefore, results in learners leaving school prematurely. From the EScLs' perspectives, while access to school/education (equality) to every child in Zimbabwe has been significantly improved, this is not sufficient because schools require payment of (sometimes exorbitant) fees, which the orphaned and vulnerable children have no means of paying. By implication, because the proportional allocation of resources to cushion the disadvantaged has not been significantly addressed, many such learners continue to leave school prematurely. Equity, which, according to the EScLs who participated in my study, is the missing link, speaks to the social and emotional needs of learners, hence the need for multiple delivery systems to address the gap.

Understanding school dropout as deprivation, retrieval of endured memories and importation of equity issues, suggests a departure in this study from previous, narrow definitions of the construct. In this study, the construct is viewed from an experiential rather than a conceptual/ abstract view. To the EScLs, school dropout is not imaginary; it is a collection of painful and traumatic *lived* experiences, hence, the breadth and depth of their definition. The EScLs' answers to the question on their conceptualisation of school dropout were given as experienced by the individual participants, never as imagined or learnt vicariously. Lastly, it can be concluded that the emphasis in Zimbabwe's education system has been on equality rather than on equity, the lack of which, according to participating EScLs, is a major cause of school dropout.

6.2.2 Perspectives of early school leavers on triggers of school dropout in Zimbabwe. The findings of this study indicate that 'pull factors', especially those emanating from home environments, constitute the major cause of secondary school dropout in

Zimbabwe. EScLs believed that circumstances at home - issues related to poor parenting, broken family ties and unfair cultural practices – triggered their decision to leave school prematurely. Arguing that problems they faced at school emanated from unstable and undesirable home situations, EScLs' ranked 'home situation' highest on the list of school dropout causal factor categories. The most critical and sensitive issues revolve around loss which, according to EScLs' perspectives, is the greatest trigger of unpleasant experiences in school life and, thus, a major impediment to completing school. Bronfenbrenner (2005) identified the home as part of a micro-system which is closest to the child, thus, directly influencing everyday experiences. Based on the bio-ecological theory, even events/developments at a parent's work place, though not directly linked to the child, ultimately affect the child's life outcomes (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Tudge, 2008). In my study, I established the influence that micro-systemic loss - the death of biological parent(s), or a lack of family resources due to job loss (exo system) as a result of the country's dwindling economy, for example – had on participants' premature departure from school. More specifically, orphan-hood, coupled with unfair cultural practices involving inheritance issues, and leading to what the EScLs referred to as induced poverty, traditional family priorities and the impact of a dwindling economy, constitute the type of loss which affects many learners at secondary school level in Zimbabwe.

As in previous studies, the findings of my study suggest that learners who drop out of school in Zimbabwe are those already suffering some form of disadvantage. Orphans, for example, initially would have resources by way of the estate of the deceased but relatives grudgingly take away the inheritance, exposing the orphans to loss and vulnerability. This scenario relates to what Brofenbrenner (2005) describes as the influence of the chrono-system, where a particular event at a certain point in one's life may change one's life outcomes. Bronfenbrenner posits that activities and events in different systems all happen in the context of time, defining one's direction in life. The learner finds him/herself in a situation not of his/her own making but defined by circumstances and time, illustrating Bronfenbrenner (2005)'s negative network of systems surrounding the child.

It follows that loss would result in gaps/ inadequacies manifesting in physical, material and psychological forms, with psychological issues taking their toll. This is evidenced by EScLs' narrations of experiences in which inadequacies were induced either by families (micro-system), through what EScLs described as unfair cultural practices, or by malfunctioning of other support systems around them. In this regard, Bruce, Meggitt and Grenier (2010) observe that many psychologists around the world are today concerned with issues such as family breakdown, poverty and loss of 'traditional' childhood. They further

argue that children growing up in poverty are significantly likely to live in families where they worry about getting through each day with sufficient resources. The lack of basics in life can lead to high levels of stress and anxiety, reducing emotional stability (Bruce, et al, 2010). From the EScLs' perspectives, the psychological effects of unpleasant experiences created by loss during school life form part of the underlying causes of school dropout at secondary school level in Zimbabwe.

Bronfenbrenner and Bronfenbrenner (2009) emphasise the importance of maintaining the relationship (meso) between micro-, exo- and macro-systems if an individual is to develop optimally. Should this not happen, the individual (learner) gets exposed. EScLs in the study viewed school and community issues as off-shoots of their home situations. Peer pressure also emerged as a contributory pull factor but, EScLs were of the view that this kind of pressure could be easily contained through the individual's choice to focus on profitable life goals and to utilize guidance and counselling opportunities in and outside school.

According to participating EScLs, pull factors are typically compounded by predominantly school-based push factors like insensitive school policies and practices. This scenario depicts Bronfenbrenner's (2005) networking of micro systems. While specific push factors are numerous, according to the existing body of knowledge (Doll, et al, 2013; Sigei & Tikoko, 2014) on Zimbabwe, EScLs singled out as most worrying teachers' negative attitudes, coupled with their insensitivity to learners' academic and psychosocial needs, corporal punishment, embarrassment from failure to deliver on school financial requirements, and a lack of transparency in selection procedures related to intervention programmes.

Lastly, fall-out factors were also confirmed as contributing to school dropout in Zimbabwe (Bingma, 2013; Reeve, 2013; Sigei & Tikoko, 2014). However, according to the EScLs in the study, this happens to a lesser extent. The only issue which surfaced was lack of progress in class, resulting in learners becoming discouraged and gradually disengaging from schoolwork, something which EScLs attributed to teachers' insensitivity and their attitude towards learners' needs.

The findings on school dropout triggers extend and clarify my thinking expressed in the conceptual framework that as the learners interacted with the institutions around them (home, school, community), they lived through varied experiences, both good and bad. From these experiences, the learners then developed certain beliefs, perceptions and attitudes which influenced their dropout behaviour. Reasons could be push, pull or fall out. Findings, however, explicitly indicate that school dropout behaviour, based on perspectives of the participants in the study, is a response to prevalent systemic beliefs, perceptions and attitudes,

particularly in adverse home situations. As a result, learners are mostly pulled out of school. This finding came as a surprise since most literature reviewed presented push factors (school conditions such as irrelevant curriculum and related practices) as the major cause of school dropout across the world. To the Zimbabwean EScls who participated in the study, however, once the home challenges are resolved positively for personal development, the school and community factors can be easily managed.

6.2.3 The process of dropping out according to early school leavers in Zimbabwe. My study established that dropping out was the culmination of a helpless situation/ process after the learners had, to no avail, tried all means to remain at school. Previous studies indicated that not much has been documented about the process (Rumberger, 2004; Rumberger & Lim, 2008), hence the significance of this study, which suggests that dropping out of school is a complex process, not an event, comprising situations that take their toll on an individual's life at specific points in time (Bronfenbrenner & Bronfenbrenner, 2009). Data indicate that the process of leaving school prematurely is traumatic, lengthy in most cases, and emotionally draining. The nature of parenting (primary or secondary caregiver) determines the complexity and length of process. The study also suggests that the impact of dropping out is felt throughout the process, thus affecting the individual prior to, during and after dropout. Both the theory of planned behaviour (TPB) and the Process, Person, Context, Time (PPCT) model by Bronfenbrenner helped in my understanding of what participants shared in answer to the third research question, that is, the one which sought to establish whether EScLs' experiences denoted a process of premature school exit.

My research results revealed that the issue of decision-making, whether to stay on at or quit school takes centre stage as the learner goes through the process. Ajzen (2012) opines that in any behavioural undertaking, the individual makes rational decisions whether or not to engage in a certain behaviour, based on their own beliefs about the behaviour and the desired outcome. Relatedly, Bronfenbrenner and Bronfenbrenner (2009) argue that it is the individual's mental and emotional characteristics which make him/ her react in certain ways to specific stimuli. Decision-making is, thus, influenced by the reciprocal relationship between him/her and the environment in which he/she finds him/herself. In this regard, participants in my study concluded that the decision to leave school prematurely is not easy to make. In their case, they found themselves caught between two worlds. On the one hand, they suffered many inadequacies and were faced with the embarrassment of being frequently sent away from school for failure to meet material school demands. On the other hand, they were fighting to remain at school. Eventually, they grudgingly decided to finally drop out in order to avoid further embarrassment. According to Ajzen (2002), intention is key to the way in which the

decision-making process unfolds, while to Bronfenbrenner the nature of experiences determines the decision taken. Intention is, thus, a precursor of dropping out and, in turn, dropping out becomes the output of the intention (Ajzen, 2002, p. 113). The intention to leave school develops from unpleasant circumstances which form a negative attitude (feelings and beliefs) towards one's status (Ajzen, 2012): the more negative the attitude, the stronger the intention to leave school.

Ajzen argues that the individual continues to seek approval from significant people in his/her life, referred to as the subjective norm (Ajzen, 2012; Fichten 2014; Koch, 2014). Ajzen (2012) opines that the more favourable the response from the significant person, the stronger the intention to perform a behaviour. In this regard, EScLs in the study developed coping and defence mechanisms (attitudes) which helped them go through the process. Adults around them were consulted before finally dropping out. Lastly, Ajzen (2012) says that one's ability to perform a certain action and the confidence one has that one is able to manage the behaviour, influence intention. By implication, the more in control the person feels about his/her ability to overcome obstacles the more determined he/she is to act. In this regard, my research results indicate that even though the EScLs in the study did not have the needed confidence to manage the behaviour, they nevertheless, albeit reluctantly, left school because of increased pressure exerted by the systems surrounding them.

Based on my research results, therefore, I have to conclude that school dropout cannot be regarded as an event. The process as shared by my research participants involved multiple efforts by the individuals concerned to complete school. Affecting all aspects of the individuals' lives, it spurs them on to behave in unacceptable ways, cheating and doing wrong things in an effort to remain in what they regard as the right place, namely the school. At a mental level, it involves planning, with the learner taking calculated risks in their attempts to find ways of either escaping or avoiding the pain of leaving school prematurely. Coping mechanisms, such as waiting patiently at school gates to get a chance to sneak into class, hiding in unpleasant places such as toilets, and getting notes from friends after missing classes in a bid to delay premature school exit, involve both physical and mental facets of being. According to the EScLs in the study, the semi-permeable system in schools temporarily provides a leeway for those on the verge of dropping out to push on until the situation simply proves too difficult to manage. Then they finally withdraw.

Defence mechanisms, such as blame shifting, particularly in cases where secondary caregiving was involved, were evident from the data collected in the study. On the one hand, therefore, the process of dropping out, according to the EScLs, has the potential to either weaken or destroy social relationships. Instances of child abuse, child labour and neglect

prevalent in secondary caregiving, as narrated by participating EScLs, negatively affect the attachment bond between the caregiver and learners who are on the verge of dropping out. On the other hand, however, in relationships where a primary caregiver is involved, the traumatic experiences strengthen the attachment bond as the parent teams up with the child, trying to fight the inevitable situation. Even so, according to EScLs in the study, these efforts are psychologically damaging as the learner at risk frantically seeks opportunities to continue to identify with peers and the school, unfortunately without success. The process, thus, generates frustration, embarrassment, and pain, all of which bring forth feelings of helplessness, hopelessness, despair, boredom, inadequacy, shame and, ultimately, result in the creation of a withdrawn character.

What was clear from these findings was that both the TPB and Bio-ecological theory were applicable to the premature school dropout phenomenon in Zimbabwe Battin-Pearson, (2002, p. 11) argues that "the contexts in which learners exist have a bearing on their attitudes, behaviour and performance". The learner at risk of dropping out also feels defeated as he/she begins to experience a lack of progress at school, mostly because of his/her erratic class attendance. According to the EScLs in this study, this feeling is exacerbated by what they described as a cruel, unreasonable and unfriendly school social environment, one in which the plight of learners from disadvantaged social backgrounds is not understood at all. Again, the limited to non-existent opportunities for these learners to speak out amid the pressure mounting from home and school further complicate the process of premature school exit, hence EScLs mooted that going through the process of dropping out demands resilience and the strength to ensure traumatic experiences.

All in all, these findings confirm the thinking expressed in my conceptual framework, namely that school dropout is a process, moving from the point of the learner's interaction with his/her social and physical environments right through to his/her post-dropout life. In other words, as verbalised by Bronfenbrenner (2005) and Tudge (2008), all human beings are susceptible to change at certain times of their lives, thus life is regulated by time.

6.2.4 How early school leavers in Zimbabwe describe the impact of school dropout on their lives. Findings indicated that premature school exit had a negative psychological impact on the lives of participating EScLs, affecting the individual not only during the dropping out process but also in his/her post-dropout life, thus imprisoning them in a vicious circle. While existing literature emphasizes the impact of school dropout on the system - wastage of resources and a source of immorality, such as criminal acts (Bridgeland et al, 2006; Dahl, 2010; Nelson, 2006) – my study focused on its impact on the individual. As indicated in my conceptual framework (Chapter 1), EScLs participating in my study felt that

school dropout left them with psychological marks that continuously remind them of lost educational and life opportunities. One of these dents is an unstable, unpleasant and unpredictable temperament and/or disposition, one characterised by anger, irritability, shame and withdrawal (Ajzen, 2012; Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Tudge, 2008).

My research findings also indicate that the EScLs who participated in my study carried with them what Bronfenbrenner (2005) calls demand characteristics (observable characteristics), such as literacy level, problem-solving skills and social status. Such characteristics usually influence how someone appeals to the social world and subsequently determine the nature of the response/s one could elicit from that environment during interaction (Bouwer, 2005; Bronfenbrenner, 2005). EScLs in the study associated school dropout with negative demand characteristics such as poor literacy and problem-solving skills, lack of confidence and low social status. With such characteristics, society tended to look down upon them and, consequently, they became isolated and social misfits. The impact of their having dropped out becomes almost permanent, since it seemingly printed a negative label on EScLs', a label which 'branded them for life. Implied in all of this is that premature school exit constitutes failure. Consequently, the persons affected go through life feeling hopeless, desperate, and inadequate.

From the EScLs' perspectives, it is not easy to get over the negative impact of premature school exit: those who have prematurely left school cannot help comparing themselves with their counterparts who completed school and are doing well in life. My findings suggest that the EScLs in the study sample left no room for the possibility that even those who competed Form 4 might fail to do well after school. They overlooked the fact that some learners might complete school but fail to do well in life for other reasons such as poor planning, wrong choice of career or lack of discipline. Their blindness to alternative ways in which they could do well, regardless of their failure to complete Form 4, was markedly obvious in the EScLs' responses. One could infer, therefore, that they used the fact that they had not been 'allowed' to complete Form 4 as an escape–avoidance mechanism, thus absolving themselves from the responsibility of carving out an alternative, post-school life regardless of the level of their school certificate. EScLs in the study felt inferior and inadequate in comparison to their peers still in school. Consequently, their concept of self has been compromised: their self-esteem is low and their self-efficacy poor/weak.

The findings of my study indicate, moreover, that the school dropout phenomenon is destructive to the mental health and well-being of the youth. From the participating EScLs' perspectives, society has a low opinion of those who have not completed secondary school. They are regarded as social misfits. Negative psychological feelings are also triggered by their

sense of incapacitation due to reduced job opportunities. Other negative traits due to the impact of premature school dropout include idleness, low social status, a lost sense of belonging and destructive peer pressure exerted by society. The EScLs ultimately envisage a bleak future, a state of helplessness which could result in consistent wishful thinking, memories filled with regret, and endless blame-shifting. Since their efforts to remain at school by way of using the semi-permeable school system worked negatively against them, their experience of the impact of dropping out was phenomenal and traumatic. Bronfenbrenner's (2005) theory, namely that the nature and degree of the networking of systems (home and school) determines learners' experiences, goes some way in explaining the impact of the experience (school dropout) on the lives of the EScLs, suggesting the need for a system which goes beyond the usual classroom needs to also cater for psychosocial needs of learners. The urgent need for a system that does this cannot be overemphasised.

6.2.5 Early school leavers' beliefs on what could solve the school dropout problem in Zimbabwe. A number of suggestions emerged from the study regarding possible solutions to the school dropout problem in Zimbabwe. The first suggestion relates to the redefinition of vulnerability. EScLs, while acknowledging that both the government and the NGO community have made the effort to cushion the lives of Orphans and Vulnerable Children (OVC) in Zimbabwe, capacity and focus are still far from adequate. They believe, thus, that widening the scope and expanding the work of NGOs could help accommodate many children in need. The argument presented was that the challenges OVCs face in responding to the challenges of the ever-changing society and cultures are many and complex. Enhancing the status of many children, therefore, requires multi-delivery/ multi-faceted support systems, reflecting Bronfenbrenner's (2005) call for the smooth operation of systems for the protection and welfare of children. Findings in my study suggest that learners from disadvantaged backgrounds, in most cases, do not have the capacity to meet the school financial requirements. According to participating EScLs, reducing or subsidising school fees would go a long way to affording OVC the opportunity to complete school, like their counterparts from stable/ affluent families. Strong feelings expressed by them also pointed to the need for central government to consider funding the education of such children given that education is a right for every child (UNESCO, 2011).

Related to this is the EScLs call for more education reforms which address issues of equity. They believe that the allocation of resources in society should be proportional to the needs of individual learners and families because meaningful equality in education can only be achieved if equity issues are prioritised. According to the EScLs, the circumstances of learners at risk of dropping out of school should be treated as emergency cases demanding immediate attention. More specifically, they are of the view that well organised and funded/

projects for disadvantaged families would be ideal since these have the potential to empower the targeted families to raise funds for the education of their children. They argued that if home problems were addressed, school and community-related issues would be automatically managed.

The EScls also believe that the school dropout problem could be resolved at two levels: individual/personal and systemic. At the individual level, efforts by the learner to fight distractions such as peer pressure are critical to success. Notwithstanding this contention, my research findings indicate that the contribution of individuals might not be sufficient since pressure is mostly exerted from outside (systems) thus not lending itself to control by individual learners. The systems surrounding the individual child, therefore, have a greater role to play in solving the school dropout problem.

EScLs in my study also called for greater alignment between or adherence to Zimbabwe 's government laws and policies by families, the community and schools adherence to international laws. For example, EScLs think there is need for more binding laws which protect orphans against unfair and ruthless cultural practices. Families should also handle inheritance- related issues in accordance with provisions of the law. Schools, according to the EScLs in the sample, should understand, implement policies fairly and desist from corporal punishment as it is derogative. Programmes meant to cushion the lives of disadvantaged groups were viewed to be lacking close monitoring for transparency and genuineness of intention. EScLs pointed out that most intended beneficiaries of such programmes are yet to realise the benefit.

In terms of the role of the government, EScLs suggested that the monitoring of policy implementation should be more effective. The relevant government arms should be more visible in schools and communities in order to have a better appreciation of issues on the ground. To them, the current scenario presents a remote means of monitoring, thus creating gaps in accountability, auditing and authenticity of programming. EScLs' view is that government departments such as Social Services should be more visible in communities to physically check the selection criteria for various programmes. Furthermore, there was consensus amongst the EScLs that the institution of effective counselling provisions in and outside the school was urgent. In this regard, they wanted more platforms to be availed to them to enable them to voice their concerns. To this end, Ramakrishnan and Jalajakumari (2013) posit that guidance and counselling assists adolescents to understand themselves, their problems and develop social and personal competences and make rational decisions (pp. 102-103). Participation in the study, thus, provided a platform for each one of them to narrate his/her story, either in a group discussion, face-to-face interview or written account.

EScls had already stored their stories in their memory bank, thus ensuring their recall. These findings confirm Ferrer's and Fugate's (2003) contention that a child continues to develop a healthy self-concept when he/she is given the chance to express his/her. hildren need to feel free to ask questions and develop a sense of autonomy without fear of reprimand and other restrictions. According to Ainsworth (2010), successful development of the sense of self happens in a nurturing social environment. Finally, EScLs believe that awareness campaigns that educate communities, schools and learners about the negative consequences of premature school exit could significantly reduce dropout rates.

6.2.6 How can the school dropout phenomenon in Zimbabwe be understood from the perspectives of early school leavers? Overall findings which addressed the major research question suggest that school dropout in Zimbabwe is an experiential phenomenon. EScLs in the study understood school dropout in terms of their experience of its consequences (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). Their definitions of the construct were expressions of its psychological impact. Its causes, the process involved, and suggested solutions on minimizing school dropout as given in the study uncovered an array of psychological issues which impinge on the lives of learners who prematurely leave school. This finding indicates the existence of gaps in the guidance and counselling of secondary school learners at the risk of dropping out. It means that both schools and families have a role to play.

The overall results of my study also indicate that the government does not have adequate resources to cushion the lives of children in difficult circumstances (the effect of the bio-ecological systems). Results suggest a gap in the conceptualisation of the construct 'child vulnerability' amongst adults (schools, NGOs, Government) and the EScLs, hence, the need to redefine it to facilitate/ensure more comprehensive intervention programmes. The findings show that government seems to lack mechanisms that enforce and monitor laws on inheritance-related issues to protect orphaned learners. Participants were concerned that there seemed not to be any authorities who do home visits for physical checks in order to institute and implement authentic selection procedures to determine those eligible for intervention programmes related to psycho-social support.

Again, the findings show that EScLs' efforts to seek alternatives to remain in school once the process of dropping out has started are seldom, if ever, acknowledged and/or rewarded. Life dreams and hopes for a better future are shattered at a very critical stage in life (adolescence being a critical stage in the development of a person's self-concept and the determination of life choices). Consequently, life is bleak for EScLs. The absence and/or unavailability of adequate meaningful and sustainable dropout recovery programmes could therefore be seen as jeopardising any chance of a meaningful life for EScLs.

Finally, based on their conviction that the availability of platforms for vulnerable groups in society to voice their concerns was imperative. In this regard, EScLs emphasised the need for guidance and counselling opportunities in and outside school. Tied to the issue of participation, EScLs' perceived opportunities to talk, to express their needs, were remote or close to non-existent. In the study, this was evidenced by their expressions of gratitude for being given the opportunity to through this study but they wished that there were more platforms for them to be able to do so.

6.3. Proposed framework for curbing school dropout in Zimbabwe

After I put together the findings of the study, I found it imperative to suggest a framework that could assist to curb school dropout in Zimbabwe. In crafting the framework, I made several considerations. The complexity of the socio-economic status of many Zimbabweans makes life in general difficult, leaving not much space for children to enjoy education as their legitimate right. A significant number of families in Zimbabwe are struggling to make ends meet as they are not gainfully employed. Over 70% of the population live in the rural setting where a lot of fiscal support is needed for them to survive economically. The government has made attempts to empower families through Social Welfare services and implementing programmes such as BEAM for learners from disadvantaged backgrounds. However, it seems the government is overwhelmed and does not have the capacity to sustain the initiatives. For example, free primary education was introduced in the early post-independence years but intended goals were not achieved as desired because government could not sustain the programme because of a dwindling economy. NGOs in various fields have made effort to complement government efforts to improve the lives of the Zimbabwean population, however, such efforts are still insignificant, given the number of families requiring economic empowerment.

It is against this backdrop that I propose a framework which may work towards reducing school dropout at secondary school level. The framework is given in a hierarchical structure.
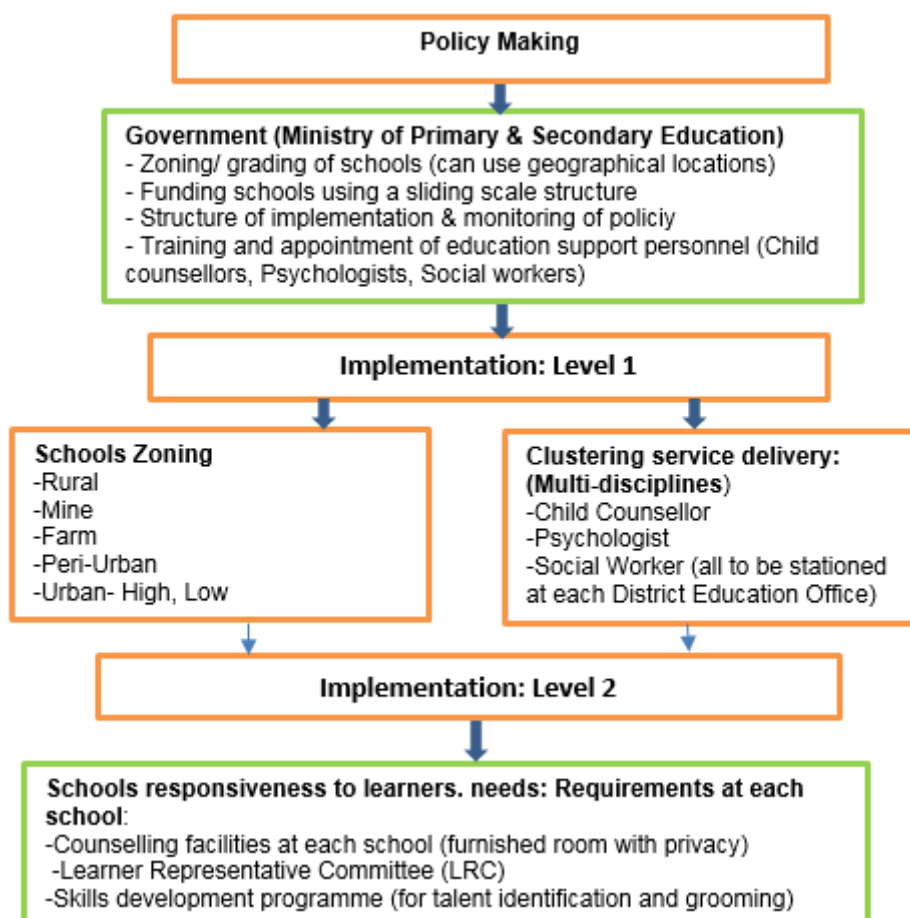
Figure 6.1: Framework for curbing secondary school dropout in Zimbabwe

6.3.1 Central Government. The central government is called to enunciate a policy that addresses issues of equity. Given the varied complexities of the socio-economic status of families, zoning or grading of schools on the basis of geographical location might work since communities in the existing geographical settings generally share common characteristics, for example, rural, farm, urban- high density and urban low density. The socio-economic status of families in a given setting is on average the similar. Fiscal support, by government, of the schools in the different zones would be given on a sliding scale, thus, addressing issues of equity. The focus on funding would then be directed to schools and not individual learners. It means learners in a particular zone / school would all benefit at the same level of intervention. No-one would be disadvantaged since the school would be resourced to suit the needs of a particular socio-economic class of learners in the given cluster/ zone. Effective implementation and monitoring mechanism/ structure should be put in place and reviews done periodically for effective delivery. Secondly, deliberate training, particularly, of child counsellors is essential so that learners can confide in and get helping services from professional people (The current scenario is that the school teachers who do not have any form of training in counselling are

appointed counsellors in schools, hence, learners may not be comfortable with such a setup as revealed by this study). Professional counsellors are required.

6.3.2 School Clustering for service delivery. Implementation is suggested at two levels. First, an interdisciplinary approach to addressing the plight of learners at the risk of dropping out would be viable. The education support personnel (child counsellor, social worker, psychologist) should design an integrated programme to reach schools and address concerns of learners in a comprehensive fashion. Currently, schools operate in clusters for activities such as sports. Government could capitalise on this existing structure to reach schools at a low cost. The education support personnel would be stationed at each district education office for easy access to schools in allocated clusters.

6.3.3 School level responsiveness. The second level of implementation would be the schools. In order to address the issue of involvement of learners in decision making on issues that affect them, platforms that offer opportunities to speak out should be facilitated at each school for maximum participation in issues that affect secondary school learners. A Learner Representative Committee (LRC) should be instituted at each school. The LRC would work with both school administration and SDC to ensure that learners' concerns are heard and addressed timeously. The secondary school curriculum should deliberately target different talents in learners and offer opportunities for grooming and excelling. In this regard, A skills development programme should be instituted at each school.

6.4 Contribution of the study

6.4.1 Contribution to theory. The study has, to my mind, generated a broader perspective of the construct 'school dropout', than that currently prevailing in that it encompasses the perspectives of those who have experienced and are affected by the phenomenon. This broader perspective of school dropout should alert educators and families to mental health issues related to school dropout. As schools and families work with learners in secondary schools, this broader view/understanding of the construct is a required mind-set if their understanding of school dropout is to go beyond its conceptualization as the literal physical withdrawal and absence from school premises. It should sensitise them to the fact that school dropout is also a psychological issue, impacting negatively on the learner who drops out. Consequences are more damaging at personal level, an aspect that most current literature is silent about. It affects self-concept, esteem and efficacy. Finding ways to curb dropout has benefits not only for governments but for the personal lives of those affected. The conceptualisation of school dropout as expressed in this study facilitates new knowledge in deed since no other known literature has given such perspectives as constituting definitions of school dropout

My study added additional dimensions to current understandings of the school dropout phenomenon. With respect to perspectives of EScLs in the study sample, the concept 'school dropout', encompasses more than the simple and theoretical definitions given in current literature since they refer only to physical withdrawal from school (Brown, 2010). The definition emerging from this study gives the concept a broader and deeper meaning. EScLs defined school dropout as a state of deprivation, retrieval of endured memories, and a demonstration of unaddressed issues of equity. This definition, therefore, goes beyond physical withdrawal to include the psychological process and impact of school dropout.

In addition to this, my study added a process element which is missing in current literature on the phenomenon. It has established that dropping out is a process characterised by painful experiences, enduring memories and high levels of resilience and perseverance. In terms of solutions, the study has pointed to the government as having the biggest role to play in addressing equity issues at schools, in society and in the NGO community. Overall, the study afforded EScLs, who constitute a 'hard to reach' group, the opportunity to share their lives with the rest of the world. This, also, was a missing link in the current literature.

My study also identified loss as an underlying cause of school dropout, a finding which current literature reflects as a gap in an overall understanding of the school dropout phenomenon (Rumberger & Lim, 2008). In their 2003 review of published studies in the US, Rumberger and Lim (2008) analysed national, state and local data on school dropout and found that existing research gives reasons for dropping out but does not highlight unique/ underlying causes. The present study was an effort to close this gap.

The biggest impact of school dropout identified in this study is associated with self-concept, self- efficacy, self- esteem, another aspect which previous studies have not emphasised. The in-depth study of individuals who had experienced the school dropout phenomenon provided me with the impetus to investigate factors beyond those already established by previous studies in order to unravel underlying causes. This approach resulted in my being able to provide a broader and more in-depth view of the school dropout phenomenon than that reflected in previous local studies, which tended to generalise and theorise issues related to the phenomenon. Finally, my study has proposed a framework that may be used to curb school dropout. It should be realised that the task requires a multi-disciplinary approach for effective implementation.

6.4.2 Contribution to policy and practice. One of the findings of my study is that pull factors, particularly loss - as in the death of parents and/or parents losing their jobs – is the major underlying cause of school dropout in Zimbabwe. The experiences attached to loss negatively affect not only the mental health and well-being of the learners but also the

development of a healthy self-concept, self-esteem and self-efficacy, what Bronfenbrener (2005) refers to as a situation in which the environment acts upon human being's life. The primary contribution of my study in this regard is that it could alert the government and organisations running intervention programmes to identify/consider ways in which families could be empowered and strengthened. Included in these could be the creation of safe zones, going beyond addressing the physiological needs of learners from disadvantaged social backgrounds, which seems to be their current practice and preoccupation, to employing approaches which focus on the mental health of the target group of learners.

My study also uncovered a gap in the implementation of guidance and counselling programmes in Zimbabwe in that there are currently no professionally trained teachers to assume the role of guidance counsellors in schools. The new knowledge about the consequences of underlying causes of school dropout highlighted in my study may persuade government and related partners in education to institute and/or scale up the monitoring of existing guidance and counselling programmes. Doing so is critical to cushion learners in schools coming from disadvantaged social backgrounds. Guidance and counselling not only assist adolescents to understand themselves and their problems but also facilitate the development of their social and personal competences, thus enabling them to make rational decisions (Ramakrishnan & Jalajakumari, 2013, pp. 102-103). Centres for professional guidance and counselling should therefore be situated in communities to facilitate access to them by affected learners. In this regard, the finding allows for a review of policy and practice measures necessary to cater for the well-being of learners at the risk of dropping out.

Findings highlight the need for central government and school policies and practices to be sensitive to the needs of all learners. For example, enforcement of such policies as BEAM is the direct responsibility of government. Schools should be resourced to enable them to go beyond the 'usual curriculum', that is, to also teach subjects and sports which would help to satisfy the physiological and affective needs of learners from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds. Related to this is the exposure of unfair and inconsistent practices at schools in my study. The EScLs participating in the study claimed that they were not given the opportunity to voice their concerns and when these were available they did not trust the adults concerned enough to share their problems with them. In fact, they feared that, in doing so, they might be victimized or hear their problems being discussed in the school corridors. Implied in these concerns were issues of confidentiality.

Embedded in participants' need for confidential counselling and/or guidance was a deep-seated desire to complete secondary school because, so they believed, it was at secondary school level that adolescents mostly leant to deal with developmental challenges

associated with adolescence. Dropping out from secondary school therefore caused a disturbance in what is commonly regarded as a particularly critical stage of human development. I would argue, therefore, that it is important for the government, through the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education to develop and run a programme which offers teachers and other adults the opportunity to acquire counselling skills. Each school needs a professional Guidance and Counselling (G&C) facility to ensure that learners receive maximal psycho-social support (Gatsi, et al. 2016; Ngari, 2008; Ramakrishnan & Jalajakamari, 2013).

The identification of loss, as a major underlying cause of school dropout in my study uncovered various unresolved issues related to equity in the education system. The roles to be played, by central and local governments alike are critical in this regard. The need to address equity issues is urgent, requiring much more attention than is currently the case in the Zimbabwean education system. It is particularly important at secondary school level in order to develop well-skilled and emotionally stable personnel to manage the country's economy. As intimated by the study participants, there is an urgent need to assess the livelihood of the majority of families. According to them, Government should conduct surveys aimed at determining the capacity levels of the majority of families in Zimbabwe and respond accordingly. There is also a need for the development and implementation of policies which explicitly address the needs of learners in difficult circumstances. Such policies should include, amongst other issues, relaxed payment plans for levies and public examination fees, relaxed policies on school uniform and staggering fee rates.

Finally, although the NGOs are doing a splendid job, there are too few of them to service the huge Zimbabwean disadvantaged population and, although government has made the effort to ensure education for all, more funders are needed to complement their efforts. The Ministry of Social Welfare should, moreover, be better resourced through the allocation of a larger share of the national budget so that it – i.e. the Ministry - could help cushion families that are struggling to send their children to school and/or to keep them there.

Indications from the findings of this study are that the Ministries of Education and Social Welfare cannot be detached. Effective collaboration between them is necessary for the achievement of education and socio-economic uplifting for all (Zimbabwe Agenda for Socio Economic Transformation (ZIMASET, 2013, the blueprint which currently underpins national objectives). Enforcement of international and national laws and policies, such as Children's Rights, Inheritance, and Child Labour should also be monitored so that children do not suffer unnecessary deprivation. People's circumstances and education are dynamic constructs, therefore requiring constant redefinition and reform/review to ensure that development efforts remain relevant and beneficial.

6.4.3 Contribution to learning support, guidance and counselling. The present study also contributes to the broad field of learning support guidance and counselling. The EScLs in the study expressed a desire for opportunities to share their concerns in and outside school. Where chance was availed, participants indicated that they did not trust adults with their problems for fear of either victimisation or hearing their problems in corridors. Issues of confidentiality were of concern. It emerged from the study that G&C teachers were hand-picked. They did not have professional training in the area, hence the ineffectiveness of the programme in schools. Findings also showed that EScLs were exposed to unfairness and inconsistences in practices in their former schools. Tied to this finding was a big outcry that secondary school level coincides with adolescence which presents developmental challenges. Dropping out at secondary school, thus, meant disturbance at the niche of a critical human development stage. Findings here imply a gap in guidance and counselling. The study, thus, contributes significantly to existing knowledge by identifying an important area seemingly missing in the learning and support of secondary school learners.

Lastly, the findings revealed rich contributions by all the twenty-two participants through the different data collection methods facilitated. It implies that participants had an opportunity to talk about issues that affect them, thus, becoming social actors. It is my sincere hope that the EScLs who participated in the study may have benefited from expressing their concerns, wishes and preferences. The study might have given them, as a 'hard to reach population', an opportunity to vent emotions and learn from others, thus, coping with their situation in better ways.

6.5 Significance/ Strengths of the study

The significance of my study lies primarily in the fact that it fills a gap in literature concerning the perspectives of EScLs on the school dropout phenomenon in Zimbabwe. The absence of in-depth studies focusing on the voices of the EScLs' constitutes a void in current understandings of the phenomenon. Following Brown (2010), who opines that experience is powerful, determining the nature of the school dropout experience from the perspective of those most affected by it – the EScLs - was central to this study. Although the results of most studies done in Zimbabwe to date were important in that they highlighted the prevalence of the problem, their use of secondary sources of information left behind trails of unanswered questions, simply because imagining a problem is very different from experiencing it (Cunningham, 2006; Kumar, 2014). Having targeted as sources, individuals who have direct experience of the school dropout phenomenon, this study adds value to existing research on school dropout in Zimbabwe. Furthermore, my study identified an underlying cause of school dropout (loss) which the current literature declares as a gap in understanding the school

dropout phenomenon (Rumberger & Lim, 2008). A review by Rumberger and Lim of 203 published studies in the US (national, state & local data) found that existing research studies give reasons for dropping out but do not point out underlying causes. This finding makes the present study significant as it contributes towards closing such a gap.

Another benefit of targeting EScLs was that it enabled the researcher to collect first-hand impressions on the phenomenon. Guided by Clark's (2010, p. 118) claim that "children grow up in their own present and know no other world", the use of primary data sources – EScLs themselves – served as recognition of adolescents as social actors who possess the ability to play an active role in the identification and resolution of issues related to their own day-to-day lives. My contention was that EScLs, being explicitly affected by school dropout experiences, possess vivid memories of what they have gone through and may still have to go through. Consequently, they would be able to paint a more realistic, credible and reliable picture of the phenomenon being studied (Bogdan & Biklen, 2010). I also assumed that possible solutions to social problems lie within individuals who are experiencing and/or have experience the phenomenon (school dropout) because reality is subjective (DeVos, Strydom, Fouch' & Delport, 2011). The findings of my study thus, reflect varied world views generated by personal experiences regarding the phenomenon itself. This finding is important as it enriches our understanding as researchers of the school dropout construct not only in Zimbabwe but across the globe. Subsequently, it enables us to distinguish between conceptualisations based on the use of primary and secondary data sources.

Lastly, my in-depth study of the phenomenon enabled me to facilitate the identification and analysis of psychological issues contained in the EScLs' views, further enhancing my understanding of the phenomenon in the process. The study was, therefore, a unique scientific undertaking targeting a "hard to reach population" (Bhattacherjee, 2012, p.70) in Zimbabwe. It gives voice to a group that seemed not to have been granted the opportunity to articulate their concerns previously, giving them the space to express their personal opinions on the school dropout phenomenon as they experienced and are still experiencing it (Lichitman, 2010). Cunningham (2006) too, observed that, for a long time, children have been facing the consequences of adults' decisions, opinions, imaginations, constructions and reconstructions of ideas about childhood crises, one of which is school dropout. Moreover, there has not been much research targeting children as social actors on issues relating to their own development and welfare (Sleep, 2010). In this regard in particular, dropout learners' participation in my study was critical as a means of empowering them to participate actively in issues relating to their school, family and community lives. Furthermore, the study findings showed that the biggest impact of school dropout is associated with self- concept, self- efficacy, self- esteem which previous studies have not emphasised. The in-depth study of individuals who had

experienced the school dropout phenomenon provided the impetus to investigate factors other than those already established by previous studies in order to unravel underlying causes.

6.6 Limitations of the Study

The first limitation of the study was in the sample size. I studied a small number of EScLs (twenty-two) situated in one region of Zimbabwe (Mashonaland). The study also involved only EScLs who were accessible through NGOs working with them in certain activities and/ or projects. While the sample size facilitated in depth study of the phenomenon, the perspectives of the participants, which were the main focus of the study, were limited to their experiences in schools and communities in the said region. The influence of the immediate surroundings in which the EScLs are situated cannot be undermined as they spend most of their lives in there. As a result, the findings of my study may not be generalised to the greater populations of EScLs in the country. However, according to Silverman (2013, p. 151), my findings can be generalised to the construct of school dropout because the critical question about the results of a qualitative case study is not about the number of respondents who shared similar views about school dropout, but rather whether the experiences collectively relate to the broad definition of the phenomenon.

Furthermore, while focusing only on those who had lived experiences of the school dropout phenomenon in this study provided first –hand information, findings also showed that the decision to dropout is largely influenced by significant people in the learner's life. As I went into the field I realised that participants had valuable information relating to the influence of the people around them such that I needed more time to get to know adequately interactions between the participants and their social world. For example, issues that related to teachers and parents were many. It would, thus, have been good to hear their views as well. However, my study focused only on perspectives of those who had pre-maturely left school.

The study focused on understanding the school dropout phenomenon based on EScLs' perspectives. I needed to listen attentively to participants as they narrated their experiences which were mostly touching. It was, therefore, certainly not easy to fight my own feelings and personal judgment concerning the participants' stories. However, in order to achieve trustworthiness of the data collected in such instances, I made sure I played the audio recordings several times and between days to make sense of the data and in the process reduce subjectivity. I also relied on triangulation of information so that I would compare the sense of similar data from different sources. Above all, debriefing helped me to regain my confidence and position as a researcher.

Lastly, there was the challenge of developing themes and sub-themes from the large chunks of data that I had collected. Sifting information which directly answered my research

questions required time to read and re-read the transcripts from the three data sets (FGD, Interview, Life story). The use of NVivo computer package for data analysis, however, assisted me to effectively manage the large forms of data I had.

6.7 Recommendations

6.7.1 Research. Future studies on school dropout could include other stakeholders in order to address participants' concerns about corporal punishment, an act which directly involves teachers' practices and professionalism. Issues related to well-wishers' capacity and selection criteria/ procedures would require the voice of NGOs and related government departments. The family could be an important source of data on issues concerning the level of support, particularly in opening avenues for discussion with their children and issues of inheritance. Similar studies could also be carried out at other levels of the education system, primary schools, for example, to find out how the impact of dropping out compares with the results of the present study. Furthermore, in the context of SDG 4, which focuses on ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and providing life-long learning opportunities for all (United Nations Report (2017), research at other levels of education is necessary since school dropout is a cyclic phenomenon which is not confined to the secondary school only. Mixed methodology could be employed to involve a larger sample and/or to include settings such as mines farms and urban-low density suburbs which were not considered in my study.

6.7.2 Families. Parents need to often communicate and involve their children in the day-to-day life of the family so that children do not rely on guesswork and are better prepared for the inevitable. In future research, parents could be interviewed on how they feel about their incapacitation and why they usually do not communicate this to their children. It was noted from the majority of cases during FGDs and interviews that parents did not actually sit down with a child to explain their position. The child had to infer by way of observing the situation at home and/or their parents' actions and general discourse. The 'silence' by most parents was expressed by EScLs as causing them – the children - psychological trauma. Lastly, as a researcher, based on the concerns of EScLs, I see opportunities for me to "give back" by becoming an advocate for the needs of the researched (Creswell, 2012, p. 211).

6.7.3 Schools. Based on the study findings, school policies and practices should be sensitive to the all learners. Schools need to be resourceful to enable them to go beyond the 'usual curriculum' that is, teaching subject and sports and help to address the physiological and affect needs of learners from disadvantaged socio- economic backgrounds. It is, thus, important for government, through the Ministry of Primary and Secondary School to set up a programme which offers teachers and any other adult counselling skills. As Cooper (2013) observes, there is need to reconsider the role of counselling in schools and consider it as a

profession requiring professional full-time counsellors. The current scenario is that teachers and other school staff are assigned G&C as an "add on" to their core business (Cooper, 2013, p. 8). Each school, thus, needs professional Guidance and Counsellors (G&C) equipped with adequate knowledge and skills so that learners get maximum psycho-social support (Ngari, 2008; Ramakrishnan & Jalajakamari, 2013). Centres for professional guidance and counselling should also be situated in communities for access by affected learners.

6.7.4 Government. The government is called upon to enforce and monitor laws and policies on inheritance- related issues, children's rights and child labour so that children do not suffer deprivation unnecessarily. Physical checks on selection procedures for eligibility and genuineness in identifications of beneficiaries of intervention programmes that are related to psychosocial support are critical. The Ministry of Social Welfare, for example, needs to be more resourced by getting bigger budget allocation from the national budget to be able to help cushion families struggling to send children to school. People's circumstances and education are dynamic constructs which need constant redefinition and reforms/ reviews so that efforts continue to be relevant and beneficial.

Identification of loss as a major underlying cause of school dropout revealed unresolved issues of equity in the education system. Both the central and local governments have critical roles to play. Issues related to equity are urgent and need more attention in the Zimbabwean education system, particularly at secondary school level in order to build strong skilled and emotionally stable personnel to manage the country's economy. The NGOs are doing a splendid job but are few to reach the huge Zimbabwean disadvantaged populations. I strongly recommend that the various support systems (home, school, community) surrounding learners in difficult circumstances should be proactive in ensuring safe zones for such learners for optimal development and achievement of positive life outcomes.

6.8 Concluding Remarks

Based on the findings of my study, I came to the conclusion that school dropout in Zimbabwe is a process characterised by unpleasant experiences which culminates more in psychological than administrative problems. Its impact, therefore, is more at the individual than the systemic level. Since it negatively affects the psycho-social lives of its victims, counselling the youth is important to ensure that, as they come out of this predicament, they do not carry with them a severed/damaged self-concept, low self-esteem and reduced self-efficacy. Hence, the range of support systems surrounding young people like these have a critical role to play in reshaping and rebuilding the confidence levels of the victims of school dropout, availability of such support systems would help them to function optimally both at individual and

community levels.   Doing this study benefited me as I now have a broader perspective of what school dropout entails.

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Appendices

Appendix I: Letter – Head office: Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education

All communications should be addressed to
"The Secretary for Primary and Secondary
Education"
Telephone: 799914 and 705153
Telegraphic address : "EDUCATION"
Fax: 791923

ZIMBABWE

Reference: C/426/3
Ministry of Primary and
Secondary Education
P.O Box CY 121
Causeway
ZIMBABWE

23 April 2015

Mrs Roswitta Gatsi
University of Zimbabwe
P. O. Box MP 167
Mt Pleasant
HARARE

MIN. OF PRY. & SECONDARY
EDUCATION
D.E.O
2 1 JAN 2016
SHAMVA DISTRICT OFFICE
P.O. BOX 130, SHAMVA
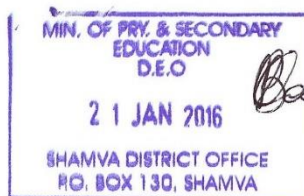
**RE: PERMISSION TO CARRY OUT RESEARCH AT THE MINISTRY OF
PRIMARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION HEAD OFFICE**

Reference is made to your application to carry out a research with the Ministry on the research title:

**"LEARNERS' PERSPECTIVES ON THE SCHOOL DROPOUT SITUATION IN
ZIMBABWE"**

Permission is hereby granted. However, you are required to liaise with the respective Directors, who are responsible for the divisions which you want to involve in your research.

You are required to provide a copy of your final report to the Secretary for Primary and Secondary Education.

P. Muzawazi
Director: Policy Planning, Research and Development
For: **SECRETARY FOR PRIMARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION**
cc: Director – PRD, Infant, Junior, Secondary and Registry

r/argatsi15mk

Appendix II: Letter - Site A

7 January 2016

Roswitta Gatsi

PhD Research Candidate

Department of Educational Psychology

University of Pretoria

Cell: 0772805316

Dear Madam,

RE: Confirmation of acceptance for conducting research

This letter serves to confirm that Chiedza Child Care Center has accepted your request to conduct a research study **"Early school leavers' perspective on the school dropout phenomenon in Zimbabwe"**

You will work with an assigned project officer who will help you to mobilize the respondents and all the necessary logistics. Kindly, note that you will be required to pay for any costs that may arise directly from conducting your research. In addition, you will be expected to follow all the research ethical procedures during the process especially the issue of confidentiality. The information generated out of the process will be solely for academic purposes and can only be shared within the context of the academic institution and Chiedza Child Care Center.

We wish you success in your studies and hopefully the research will contribute positively to the existing body of knowledge on how the development sector can sustainably support the needs of vulnerable groups.

Yours Sincerely,

S. Chakawa

Executive Director

Chiedza Childcare Centre
37 Strachan Street
Ardbennie, Harare
P.O. Box W142, Waterfalls
Cell: +263 772 437 698
email: admin@chiedza.org
website: www.chiedza.org.zw

271

Appendix III: Letter - Site B
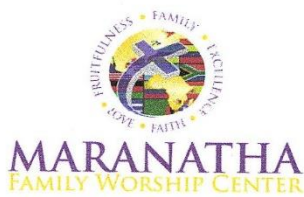
6 January, 2016

Dear Mrs Gatsi

RE: Request to carry out research with early school leavers in the organization project

We acknowledge receipt of your letter requesting permission to work with the school dropouts in the church project. You are hereby granted permission. Please make arrangements with the group through their coordinator for you to do the Focus Group Discussion and the interviews.

We hope to get a copy of the results of your study.

Yours Sincerely

Dr. Farai Katsande
Maranatha Family Worship Center

Mobile: +263 773 590828, +263 772 288 483, +263 772 274 277, +263 772 648 311
'Filling communities with the glory of God'

272

Appendix IV: Letter - Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education – Mash Central provincial education office for Site C

REF: C/440/1MC

All communications should be addressed to
"The Provincial Education Director
Mashonaland Central Province"
Telephone:0271- 6948/6996/7134/6994
Fax:0271-6997

ZIMBABWE

Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education
Mashonaland Central Province
P.O Box 340
Bindura
Zimbabwe

22 January 2016

Mrs. Roswitta Gatsi
University of Zimbabwe
PO BOX MP 167
Mount Pleasant
Harare

RE: PERMISSION TO CARRY OUT RESEARCH IN MASHOLAND CENTRAL PROVINCE

Reference is hereby made to the Secretary for Primary and Secondary Education's minute dated 23 April 2015 granting you permission to carry out a research in Mashonaland Central Province on the research title:

"LEARNERS' PERSPECTIVES ON THE SCHOOL DROPOUT SITUATION IN ZIMBABWE"

I am pleased to inform you that the Provincial Education Director has granted you permission to carry out your research at the Provincial Office. You should, however, liaise with the D.E.Os who are responsible for the districts which you want to involve in your research before you start.

Finally, you are advised to submit a copy of your findings to the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education.

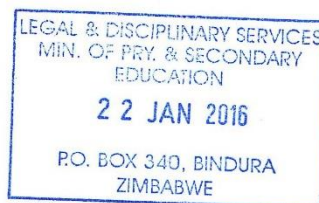C.M Mkwesha

FOR PROVINCIAL EDUCATION DIRECTOR
Mashonaland Central Province
/cc
Permission to carry out research doc

LEGAL & DISCIPLINARY SERVICES
MIN. OF PRY. & SECONDARY
EDUCATION
2 2 JAN 2016
P.O. BOX 340, BINDURA
ZIMBABWE

Appendix V: Consent letter

Re: Individual consent for participation in a research study

Title: **Early school leavers' perspectives on the school dropout phenomenon in Zimbabwe**

Invitation to participate in a study

I am inviting you **……………………………………………………………..(Please write your full names)** to take part in the research study entitled "Early school leavers' perspectives on the school dropout phenomenon in Zimbabwe". In order for you to make a decision to join the study or not, you are kindly asked to read all sections.

Your rights as a participant in the study

Your participation is voluntary. No force shall be used and you may pull out from the study at any stage. You will, therefore, not be asked to explain anything should you decide to stop taking part before the end of the study. You can just tell me that you are pulling out, that is if you want.

Explanation of the research study

The aim of the study is to get your views and experiences on the school dropout phenomenon at secondary school level in Zimbabwe. I would want to find out from you what you think is not going on well, where, how and why. I would also want you to say what you think could be done to solve the problem.

Risk and inconvenience

I do not see any risks for your participation in this study. Should anything arise, I will do everything possible to make sure that you are safe and comfortable as you take part in the study. Meeting times and venues for the meetings will be discussed with you and others who would also want to join the study so that you are still able to do your other activities as you would want.

Confidentiality

The information that I get from you during the study will be kept strictly confidential and will only be known by my supervisors and myself. No information will be shared with anyone else, except if there is a serious problem about your safety or any other person in the study. In that case, I must inform offices that have the knowledge and skills to do so but, I will talk to you about the issue first before I can take any action. Concerning privacy, your name will not appear anywhere in the final research report. No one will be able to attach any information to any names. You should, therefore, feel free to

share information as you would like. All data collected with public funding may be made available in an open repository for public and scientific use.

Benefits

I see your participation as an opportunity for you to speak out on issues that affect you. You would be able to share your thoughts, feelings and opinions with others who have gone through similar experiences. There are no monetary or material benefits.

Ethical approval to carry out this study granted?

(will indicate when I get approval)

Want to ask?

I would like you to take as long as you want to make a decision to take part in this study. If you have any questions, please feel free to get in touch with me. You can send me 'call me back', WhatsApp chat or SMS. My contact mobile numbers are +263772805316/ +263715627720. If it is not urgent, you can wait and see me the next time I come to your skills centre. Should you decide to take part, I will see you at World Vision skills centre when you come for the usual project with your group next week.

Informed Consent

After reading everything above, you can make your decision.

I hereby confirm that I have been told about what the study is all about. I have also read the above information about this study and I understand the information that has been given to me. I know that the results and information will be handled anonymously. I may, at any stage, without giving reasons, stop taking part in this study. I have enough opportunity to ask questions (out of my own free will) and I declare I may participate in this study.

If you are satisfied and would like to participate, you can write your full names and sign below.

Name: _____

Signature: _____Date: _____

If you have decided to join the study, I would also like to know if you would be comfortable to be audio recorded during interviews and to be photographed. If you agree, you can write your full name again and sign in the space provided below. Should you decide that you do not want audio recording and photographing, do not write in the spaces below. Please note that you can still be part of the study and can speak without the recorder or being photographed.

Name: _____

Signature: _____Date: _____

I, _____ herewith confirm that the above person has been informed fully about the nature, conduct and risks of the above study.

Appendix VI: Parent's letter

University of Pretoria
Faculty of Education
Groenkloof Campus
08 December 2015

Dear Parent/Guardian

I am a PhD student from the University of Pretoria. I wish to conduct research with early school leavers in Harare and Mashonaland Central provinces. The title of the research is **"Early school leavers' perspectives on the school dropout phenomenon in Zimbabwe".** I am, therefore, asking for your permission to allow your child to participate in a group discussion and may also take part in either interviews or writing a life story. I will be audio recording the interviews. The interview transcripts will be safely stored and used by my supervisors and myself. The information obtained from this study will be treated with the strictest confidentiality and will be used for this research project only. The name of the organisations and/ or any persons in the organisation will not be mentioned in the study report. Confidentiality will be ensured by using pseudonyms for all participants and the organisations. All effort will be made to ensure that no harm will happen to your child and you will be allowed to withdraw your child from participating in the study at any point/ time even without giving reasons should you wish to do so.

I would like to sincerely thank you for your cooperation with this research and I hope that the study will make a valuable contribution to an existing body of knowledge that aims to find ways of keeping learners in school until completion of a course.

Yours sincerely

_____   _____
Roswitta Gatsi (Mrs)   Dr Funke Omidire
PhD Research Candidate   Supervisor
Department of Educational Psychology   Department of Educational Psychology
University of Pretoria   University of Pretoria
 If you are willing to allow your child to participate in this study and for an audio recording of interviews and group pictures, please sign this letter as a declaration of your consent. Under no circumstances will the identity of the research participants be disclosed or published to any party/ organisation that may be involved in the research process.

Parent/Guardian's Name:_____ Name of child:_____

Parent/Guardian's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Appendix VII: Focus group discussion protocol
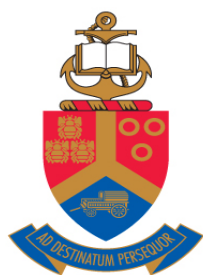
Focus Group Discussion guiding questions for early school leavers in Zimbabwe

Research title: Early school leavers' perspectives on the school dropout phenomenon in Zimbabwe

1. In your own opinion, how do you describe schooling at secondary school level in Zimbabwe?
2. What is it about secondary school life in Zimbabwe that you think is pleasurable?
3. What do you think many secondary school learners do not like about school?
4. What is your understanding of the term 'school dropout'?
5. How would you rank the reasons, in your opinion, which make learners leave school before they finish Form Four?
6. Which of the following factors do you think contribute (s) most to early school exit at secondary school level in Zimbabwe and how?
     a) Home
     b) School
     c) Community
7. What chances do you think secondary school learners get to communicate what they think and feel about their school progress, ambitions in life, career path and social life including relationships with adults?
8. In your own opinion, how does dropping out of school actually happen?
9. What are your views on whether completing 'O' Level in Zimbabwe is important or not?
10. Given an opportunity, what are some of the things that you would change about schooling in Zimbabwe and Why?

Appendix VIII: Interview protocol

Semi- structured interview schedule for early school leavers in Zimbabwe

Research title: Early school leavers' perspectives on the school dropout phenomenon in Zimbabwe

1. What comes to your mind when you hear the word 'school'?
2. Besides attending classes, what other activities in school do you remember taking part in?
3. Would you like to share with me what you enjoyed most and what you did not like about school, what was fun and was not?
4. From your experiences, can you give examples, if any, of achievements which you think you made during your time in secondary school?
5. Would you like to tell me then why you dropped out of school at form…..? (name the class)
6. What would you consider to have been your biggest challenges during your school life?
7. Would you like to share with me how easy or how difficult it was for you to leave school prematurely?
8. If you still remember, can you tell me at what point you started thinking about leaving school and when you finally withdrew?
9. Would you like to share with me your experiences from the time that you started thinking about dropping out to the day that you finally stopped going to school? What exactly was happening if you still remember?
10. Can you share with me if you still remember, whether at any point you thought of other options before you finally dropped out of school?
11. Can you tell me whether you just decided on your own to leave school or probably it was after talking to or seeing other people who had done the same?
12. Can you name people, especially relatives and friends, who also did not complete 'O' Level / Form Four?
13. From your experiences, can you comment on whether you think completing secondary school is of any benefit in life?
14. Would you like to tell me where you think, during your days in school, you did not get the support that you needed both in and outside school?
15. What kind of opportunities, if any, did you have to communicate your thoughts and feelings about social/personal and academic issues with anyone in and outside the school?
16. When you were in school, what kind of ambitions did you have?
17. Now that you are out of school, would you like to tell me if you still think the same?
18. Would you like to share with me how life has been since you left school? Give examples.
19. What do you think should have been done to keep you in school?
20. Would there be anything that you would like to add or emphasise about what you think or how you feel about the school dropout phenomenon in Zimbabwe?

Appendix IX: Demographic data questionnaire

Demographic Data Questionnaire

Research title: Early school leavers' perspectives on the school dropout phenomenon in Zimbabwe

A. PARTICULARS		
Participant code		
Name of Participant		
Date of birth		
Nationality		

GENERAL INSTRUCTION	Tick the box where necessary, or answer the question in the space provided.		

B.	**DETAILS OF PARTICIPANT**		
		Male	Female
1.	*What sex are you?*	1	2

2.	*How old were you on your last birthday?*	
15 – 18		1
19 – 21		2
22 - 25		3

3.	*Home language*	1
ChiShona		2
English		3
IsiNdebele		4

4.	Where do you live? (name of town, village, or city)	

5.	*In what kind of home location did you grow up?*	
Urban high density		1
Urban low density		2
Rural		3
Farm		4
Mine		5

6.	*With whom do you live?*			
Name	**Age**	**Gender**	**Relationship**	**Occupation**

7.	*How many rooms are there in your house?*	
One		1
Two		2
Three		3
More than three		4

8.	*To what services do you have access?*

Running water	1
Electricity	2
Health services	3
Transport	4
If yes, what type of transport:	
Any other services?	5
If yes mention the services	

9. *What is the main source of income for your family?*	
Formal salary	1
Informal earnings	2
Farming	3
No income	4
Other	5
If other, specify:	

C. **DETAILS ABOUT EXPERIENCE IN SCHOOL**	
1. *What class/ form did you last attend at school?*	
Form 2	1
Form 3	2
Form 4	3
2. *What educational certificate (s) do you have?*	
3. *What type of school (s) did you attend?*	
Government	1
City council	2
Church	3
Rural district council	4
Mine	5
Private	6
4. *What was the approximate distance from home to school?*	
Less than 1 kilometre	1
1 to 2 kilometres	2
2 to 3 kilometres	3
3 to 4 kilometres	4
4 to 5 kilometres	5
More than 5 kilometres	6
5. *What means did you usually use to go to school?*	
Walking	1
Cycling	2
Commuting	3
D. **POST DROPOUT INFORMATION**	
1. *For how long have you been out of school now?*	
Less than 1 year	1
1 to 2 years	2
2 to 3 years	3
More than 3 years	4
2. *Are you*	
Single?	1
Married?	2
Other? (Explain)	3
3. *What are you doing now?*	
Formally employed? (Nature of job)	1
Informally employed? (Nature of job)	2
Other? (Explain)	3

THANK YOU VERY MUCH FOR SHARING THIS INFORMATION WITH ME

Appendix X: NVivo Mini Master table of themes

Mini Master Table of Themes (Developed from data)		
Theme	**Descriptive comments**	**Conceptual comments**
Understanding the school dropout phenomenon in Zimbabwe from the perspectives of early school leavers- This is the super-superordinate theme that encompasses the whole study. How can the school dropout phenomenon in Zimbabwe be understood from the perspectives of early school leavers?		
1. **Conceptualisation of school dropout** A superordinate theme-How do early school leavers in Zimbabwe conceptualise school dropout?		
Deprivation: Subordinate theme: Early School Leavers felt were short changed on benefits below		
Certification for employment	Secondary schooling opens doors to employment so dropping out literally closes opportunities for employment	Education is a way out of poverty.
Foundation for life	Secondary school viewed as a critical stage where focused life begins	Attitude: Education is life
Harbinger of maturity	Secondary school life explained as a signal for the approach of a significant stage like adulthood	Autonomy Problem –solving capacity (cognitive maturity)
Peer grouping (social benefits role of peer grp)	Secondary school leaners enjoy social relationships, mixing	Maslow's hierarchy- need for belonging Subjective Norm – Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB)
The identity formation stage	Begin to understand who they are	Formation of clearer self-concept / self-confidence Identity issues – Erikson's 5th stage of psychosocial development
Endured memories: Subordinate theme		
Achievements made in secondary school life This is an emergent theme whose extracts are outlined in the sub-emergent themes below		
Excelling in co-curricular activities	Strong preference for co-curricular activities	Attitude towards curriculum Selective participation based on interest / ability
Good grades	Portrayed by doing very well in school	Motivation form good school performance leading to enhanced self esteem
Negative feelings associated with school This is an emergent theme whose extracts are outlined in the sub-emergent themes below		
Feeling of being a social misfit (systemic)	Their status has changed since they no longer belong to the same category with peers in school	Damage to Self –concept
Helplessness/ despair, low self-esteem	Giving in to a situation or circumstance	Damaged self- concept
Reminder of orphan hood (sense of loss)	Lamenting over loss of parent (s) and sees problem as growing bigger	Bleak future, feeling of regret, helplessness and meaningless of life (Pathway model)
Self-fulfilling prophecy	Not putting effort and accepting defeat. Playing to the tune of failure	Giving up, acceptance of worthlessness (Low self-esteem)
Self-pity/ inadequacy, hurt/ pain	Accepting defeat, looking down upon self and seeing self as worthless	Damaged Self- concept
Comparison with other children	Always looking at others with envy and expressing regret about own situation	Low self esteem/ self efficacy

Pleasure and displeasure in secondary school: Emergent theme whose extracts are outlined in the sub-emergent themes below		
Pleasures: Theme for categorical management of the emergent extracts		
Co-curricular activities	Co-curricular activities were more preferred as providing pleasure with less mental strain	Boosting self-concept/ self-efficacy
Diversity of subjects (systemic)	Secondary school provides a wide range of subjects which is good as there is something for everyone	Self-confidence and hope boosted
Sexual relations	At secondary school relations between opposite sex develops and there is urge to experiment	Adolescence stage showing up
Displeasures: Theme for categorical management of the emergent extracts		
Bullying and Coercion (systemic)	Use of force on other learners by older learners and / or teachers	Emotional disturbance, involuntary submission, reduced self- concept
Humiliation from non-payment of fees (systemic)	Being laughed at, ridiculed, pointed at, being asked to leave the classroom and go home to fetch fees	Destruction of self- esteem, emotionally torn
Intimidation, punishment and threats from teachers (systemic)	Harsh treatment by teachers, scolding, shouting abusive language	Emotional disturbance Destroyed Self- concept
Non-attendance of teachers (systemic)	High absenteeism of teachers	Behavior problems
Equality versus equity (systemic): Subordinate theme		
Political, economic and social problems	Circumstances surrounding life coming from different angles	Impact of physical and social environments Bioecoligical theory (Bronfenbrenner)
Induced poverty	Issues related to inheritance, greedy leading to deprivation coming out	Emotional disturbance, cultural practices
Unemployment	Limited or no opportunities for jobs	Compromised self- concept
2. Causes of school dropout in Zimbabwe A superordinate theme-From the perspectives of early school leavers, what are the causes of school dropout in Zimbabwe?		
Personal factors (Fall out factors): Subordinate theme		
Lack of knowledge	Failure to access information that could help one out of their situation eg, charity organisations	Empowerment through information publicity
Learned helplessness	Knowing other people's similar situation was discouraging and made one lose hope.	Destroyed Self- concept
Repeated exposure to dropping out	The idea of knowing several people who had dropped out made one discouraged	Negative Experience and its effects
Pull factors (systemic): Subordinate theme		
Child abuse: Theme for categorical management of emergent themes		
Compelling responsibilities at home	Because of circumstances, one has no choice but to do as assigned tasks at the expense of going to school.	Pull factor - Influence of Micro system
Desire for self-sustenance	Working on improving the situation so that one can do things for self and sustain self	Motivation to reach Self- actualization
Step parenting and child labour	Some who have been brought up by step parents faced serious problems	Negative experience_ leading to Emotional disturbance, low self-esteem
Cultural issues (systemic) Theme for categorical management of emergent themes		

Cultural inhibition and superstition	Influence of certain practices in society eg. girls asked to drop out of school to care for siblings or ailing parent.	Sense of deprivation leading to Self-concept
Parenting (systemic): Theme for categorical management of emergent themes		
Poor communication with parents and guardians	Home environment/ Cultural beliefs and practices where children are not allowed to speak	Psychological self –concept
Poor family structures and support Family Priorities	Home environment / circumstances not conducive. Parents divided on views about education	Psychological- self-concept Value of education issues
Negative changes in the family (systemic): Subordinate theme		
Death / separation of parents	The loss of a parent was devastating	Loss of parental care and support Pathway model
Loss of work	Parents losing jobs created problems	Loss of income leading to loss of care and support
Migration	Parents relocating in search for employment	Disintegration of family -Pathway model
Sickness in the family	Child had to dropout to look after an ailing parent	Loss of income, emotional disturbance, mentally demanding- Micro system
Push factors from school (systemic): Subordinate theme		
Constrains in financial aid: Theme for categorical management of emergent themes		
Limited financial support at secondary level	Felt there were very few programmes to support children in secondary school	Policy issue_ absence of well-organized humanitarian and social services
Nepotism in the selection of beneficiaries	Unfair practices in selection of beneficiaries to aid	Discrimination
Rigidity of the conditions to qualify for assistance	Practices not fair and accommodating. Most organisations look for mental capacity than need	Attitude- Children's rights disregarded
Non participation of children in decisions relating assistance	Policies and practices seem not to accommodate children in need	Attitude , cultural and policies-
Poor performance (person): Theme for categorical management of emergent themes		
Lagging behind others	One not doing well at school	Lack of support (Micro system) affecting self- concept
Low grades in class	Failing to catch up with class	Motivation,- demoralization leading to giving up- self- concept
Punishment (systemic): Theme for categorical management of emergent extracts		
Corporal punishment at school	School environment unfriendly so much beating and hard labour	Violation of children's rights, Issues of law and policy- Self- concept and compromised
School system and policies: Theme for categorical management of emergent themes		
Lack of Child protection systems	Learners would be threatened, abused in various forms	Policies and practices, children's rights, vulnerability issues rife
Adult- child power relations	Adults have an upper hand, Children may not be able to challenge an adult's view so remain docile	Lack of recognition, Child rights issues
Teacher attitudes and competences (systemic): Theme for categorical management of emergent themes		
Insensitivity and lack of confidentiality among the teachers	Teachers would not keep secrets about learners' problems.	Psychological self- concept/ child safety Professionalism
Immaturity among the teachers	Age gap between teacher and learner was a concern	Confidence levels affected , Discipline problems

Poor/ weak teacher-student relationship	Teachers not getting along with learners and teachers very removed from learners' lives	Responsiveness of school environment - Self- concept, sensitivity issues
Teachers' displaced aggression	Teachers mixing issues eg family, finance and role at school	Mental health issues-

3.   **Process of school dropout of school:** A superordinate theme: From the perspectives of early school leavers in Zimbabwe, how does school dropout happen?

Coping and defense mechanisms: Subordinate theme

Coping Theme for categorical management of emergent themes

Parallel arrangement to continue being engaged in school activities	Finding means and ways of keeping in school by reading school books from friends	Resilience
Patience with the school semi-permeable system (systemic)	Learners without fees could attend some days when policy is not strictly enforced	Resilience

Defense (person): Theme for categorical management of emergent themes

Generalization, compensation, projection, demial	One would accept the unfortunate circumstance by pointing to others who had also dropped out	Psychological therapy
Making wrong choices to be in the right place	Cheating so that one continues to belong	Resilience
Creating contingent likes, wishful thinking	Looking for other things of interest to engage self as an alternative	Resilience

Decision making process: Subordinate theme

Feeling of personal agency	Would see self as able to fight through the situation	Self-=concept Perceived behavior control (TPB)
Role of Parents' vs guardians in decision making	There was a difference between feeling for the child between biological parent and guardian	Emotional attachment issues

Escape-Avoidance process: Subordinate theme

Avoidance mechanisms	Engaging in behaviors that would not make them be associated with dropping out	Building self- confidence
Escape mechanisms	Trying to evade the inevitable which was dropping out	Resilience

Strain and pressure of leaving school: Subordinate theme

Deep seat of Despair	One would feel helpless as situation is beyond child's control	Compromised Self-concept
Disruption at nick point of positive self-concept	Wrong things are happening at a critical stage of decision making in life compromising how one sees self	Shattered hopes
Disruption of peer grouping process	Losing all ties, contacts and strings with peers	Lowered Self- esteem
Violation of societal expectations	Feels inadequate as at adolescence society has certain expectations	Compromised self- concept

4.   **Impact of dropping out of school:** A superordinate theme-

Disorientation of goals: Subordinate theme

Poor functional literacy	There is a danger of regressing mentally because there are no more resources for reading	Self- concept
Disruption of occupational orientation	What one thought would achieve as a career is now not possible	Self- actualization
Inability to contribute to family and nation (systemic)	Family expects child to look after them after completing school	Family support- education is an investment

Poor problem solving abilities	Because of challenges one loses skills to find solutions	Cognitive development
Regretful self-reflection, loneliness	Failure to achieve intended goal is discouraging	Self- concept

Severed Self concept: Subordinate theme

Despair and hopelessness	One is regretting and has given up	Self- concept
Lack of respect and shuttered hopes	Lose respect from peers and adults around for failure to achieve goals.	Self- concept
Self- blame/ self pity	They are always regretting and pointing to self as a failure	Self- concept
Societal disapproval	People in society have a low opinion of the individual	Self- concept

5. Beliefs about what could solve the ESL problem in Zimbabwe
A superordinate theme-

Community based approach (systemic): Subordinate theme

More awareness campaigns on children's rights	Deliberate effort must go into facilitate dissemination of critical information to all concerned.	Education campaigns needed for awareness
Empowerment of the community and learners on Statutory Instruments (SIs) on school practices	Information should be readily available for children in difficult circumstances for decision making	Education on policies for awareness and empowerment
School Development Committees to help engage the parents	School development committees should help to educate parents on the need for school completion	Education needed

Devine intervention: Subordinate theme

Expecting God's intervention at some point	Religion would play a part by influencing thought and the ESL rests on faith for situation to change	Beliefs and culture – (fall back on)

Family level intervention (systemic): Subordinate theme

Maintenance of good family relations	Youths need healthy relations so that they can concerns and ideas	Family as Support system
Parents to do self-help projects	Parents need to be pro-active and not wait for assistance as many children have problems and NGOs are few	Empowerment of families

Government intervention (systemic): Subordinate theme

Resolving inequity	Government to seriously consider the plight of the disadvantaged	Proportional allocation of resources
Social welfare's role	Social welfare department should be more visible to assist those in difficult circumstances	Support systems- Intervention programmes
Review of education policies and implementation	Understanding education policies by learners and communities is critical	Policies
Child-rights based approach	Observation of the rights of children	UN CRC very critical

Redefinition of child vulnerabilities (systemic): Subordinate theme

Objectivity/ transparency	Implementation of intervention programmes should be clear to people	Intervention- Fair distribution of resources
Identification of honest beneficiaries of intervention programmes	Selection of beneficiaries to be fair and done according to clear criteria	Equity

School level interventions (systemic): Subordinate theme

Withholding the results	Schools should allow everyone to write exams and finish school then can withhold results until one pays. It is better	Policy – Equity
Removal of corporal punishment	Bullying and beating were unbearable in secondary schools	Policies to favor learners