Understanding the Causes of Students' Dropouts in Urban Municipal Schools: Evidence from Surat

Hekmatullah Yousufi

Research Scholar

Faculty of Arts,

Department of Sociology,

Veer Narmad South Gujarat University, Surat

Email:- hekmatullahyousufi@gmail.com

Mo:- 9023141341

Dr. Bahadursinh A. Vasava

Assistant Professor

Department of Sociology and MSW Program

Email:- bavasava@vnsgu.ac.in

Mo:- 9879757804

Abstract:

School dropout remains a tenacious challenge within the education system of India, especially in urban municipal schools where socio-economic issues, migration, and infrastructural limitations persist.Review of the related literature at both the national and international levelsdepicted that dropout is a multi-layer issue influenced by numerous factors. Poverty, lack of interest, low scores at school, parents' status of literacy, girl child, early marriage, child abuse, no practical work at school, unemployment, accessibility, and low-quality education are the reasons students drop out of school.The study was conducted to address a significant gap in understandingthe student dropout phenomenon,particularly in the Surat Cityindustrial hub of Gujarat state. This study examines the causes of dropout in Surat Municipal Corporation (SMC) schools using a qualitative thematicmethodology and purposiveconvenient sampling method. The paper depicts evidence-basedreality from 213 teachers,including 165 females and 48 males,across 22 out of 38 schools(primary to high school) in the Nanpurazone.By highlighting dropout as socially important research, the study explains how the issue reflects wider concerns of poverty, gender inequality, and urban migration in the region. Recommendationsinclude empowering teacher training, upgrading school infrastructure, supporting parental and community engagement, and expanding support schemes. Considering the local understandings and national priorities, this paper suggests evidence-based solutions to reduce dropout in urban schools of India.

Introduction

Education is globally recognized as a powerful social and economic tool as well as a fundamental right for everyone. Still, despite the universal progress and accessto enrolment, the school dropout issue persists as one of the top challenges confronting educational systems globally. Dropout is not an individual challenge that limits the chances for one, but it's a systemic problem that affects national development goals(Mubarak et al., 2022).

In Europe, countries like Germany have developed an investment in predictive analytics to identify at-risk students early(Mubarak et al., 2022). Schneider and Salzer explainthat longitudinal data can successfully predict dropout risks by analysing attendance, performance, and behavioural indicators(Dockery, 2020). Similarly, in Mexico, socioeconomic inequalities and poor school engagement are among the top predictors of dropout (Kemper et al., 2020).Studies in Yemen during the COVID-19 pandemic depicted that inadequate digital infrastructure had expanded educational inequalities, particularly affecting vulnerable children in fragile contexts(Mubarak et al., 2022). In Romania, strong reality–based teaching

interventions have been examined to improve student engagement and decrease disengagement, offering proof of how technology can be applied to dropout prevention (Cidota & Datcu, 2020). These universal cases underscore that dropout is shaped by both contextual and systemic factors, requiring context-specific solutions.

In South Asia, the issue persists. UNICEF has recorded the dropout issue in the region, linked closely to poverty, gender inequality, migration, and digital exclusion(Unicef Degital Learning, 2024.).Girls experience disproportionate dropout risks due to early marriage, Homeresponsibilities, and safety concerns. In India, although primary educationenrollment has improved remarkably, retention continues to be a challenge. The National Education Policy explicitly recognizes dropout as a barrier to achieving universal foundational literacy and learning(National Education Policy, 2020). NEP-2020 suggests remedial programs, alternative schooling, tracking of out-of-school children, and expanded vocational pathways as key solutions for the dropout problem.

Within this widened context, Surat city provides an important case for examining dropout. As a fast-growing industrial city with a huge migrant population, municipal schools in Surat became some of the most vulnerable communities. This study contributes to the discourse by focusing on teachers' perspectives in Surat's municipal schools, suggesting locally grounded insights that support national and international literature on the dropout issue.

Statement of the Problem

India has remarkably developed in school enrolment. However, retention stays a persistent challenge, especially in urban municipal schools that support children from socio-economically disadvantaged families. Dropout is not only an individual issue that limits opportunities but also undermines national goals of equity and universal education as articulated in the National Education Policy 2020. In cities like Surat, migration, poverty, parental illiteracy, and infrastructural gaps add to the problem. Despite multiple schemes and initiatives, dropout continues to persist, and there are limited localized studies capturing teachers' perspectives on the issue. This creates a gap in both knowledge and practice that the present study seeks to address.

Objectives of the Study

The study is driven by the following objectives:

1. To understand teachers' perceptions of the emerging challenges, including gender-related issues.

2. To find outdropout-related challenges with the priorities of the National Education Policy 2020.

Literature Review

Many studieshave documented that school dropout is a multidimensional phenomenon that arisesfrom socioeconomic, cultural, institutional, and individual-level factors. Universalproofshighlight common initiatives while underscoring the need for local specificity.In Germany, predictive methods using early-warning factors have been effective in recognizing students at risk of dropout prematurely, depicting the importance of systemic monitoring(Kemper et al., 2020). In Mexico, research emphasizesthe role of poverty, lack of community involvement, and disengagement within schools as the main causes of dropout (Vizcaino et al., 2020). In Yemen, Al-Hemyari and Al-Mashari (2021) discovered that during the COVID-19 pandemic, digital instruments, lack of online infrastructure, and fragile socio-economic conditions increased dropout risks(Sofradzija et al., 2021). Meanwhile, Romania has examined augmented reality–based teaching models as innovative strategies to develop motivation and decrease attrition (Goel & Husain, 2018)

South Asian studiesshow overlapping factors, like poverty, migration, and gender inequality. According to UNICEF (2021), the strong socio-economic disadvantages are confronted with cultural norms that push girls out of school due to early marriage, home chores, and safety challenges. In India, the National Education Policy presents methods for tackling dropout by focusingon inclusion, tracking out-of-school children, and making comfortablelearning opportunities.At a wider level, Rumbergerclassifies dropout reasons into individual (academic challenges, lack of motivation), family (poverty, parental illiteracy), school (poor infrastructure, less teacher support), and community (migration, child labour)(Rumberger, 2014). Similarly, Patrinos and Angristclaim that mixed packages of interventions, like economic support, teacher professional development, and parental involvement, contribute to effectiveness and tend to be more effective than isolated programs(Goel & Husain, 2018).

Indian research reinforces these outcomes. Sharma, in her PHD study on secondary school dropout, insisted on the integrated role of socio-economic background, inadequate resources, and parental attitudes(Blöndal, 2014). The report School Dropout: Indicators, Trends, and Interventionsfurther identifies marginalized children as disproportionately affected, mentioning infrastructural gaps, weak curricular flexibility, and migration in urban regions like Surat as key challenges(Dockery, 2020).These studies explain that dropout is not

the outcome of a single reason, but it arises from the contribution of socio-economic, cultural, and infrastructure dynamics. The present study builds on this body of work by providing evidence from municipal school teachers in Surat, offering grounded insights that align with and extend global and national findings.

Methodology

The research is based ona qualitative thematic research design that focuses on content analysis of 11 open-ended answers. The study population included all teachers working in Surat Municipal Corporation (SMC) schools in the Nanpura zone. This area has a total of 38 municipal schools employing approximately 456 teachers. Out of the 38 schools, 22 schools were included in the study, representing 58% of the total schools in the zone. In total, 213 teachers, 165 females and 48 males participated in the study, representing nearly 47% of the total teacher population in the zone.The primary aim was to explore perceived student dropout causes and potential solutions as recognized by teachers who work directly with students at different levels.

Sampling

The researcher has used a purposive convenience sampling method for this study. Surat City has eight zones, and SMC is actively working all over the city. A representative sample was consideredfrom 38 schools inone zone of the city, "Nanpuraarea". Out of the 38 schools, 22 schools were included in the study, representing 58% of the total schools in the zone. The sample size was considered adequate as it exceeded the minimum requirement suggested by Yamane's (1967) formula for determining sample size in social research. Based on a population of 456 teachers with a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error, the required sample size would be approximately 213 respondents.

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + Ne^2}$$

Where:

n = required sample size

N = population size (456)

e = margin of error (0.05)

$$n = \frac{456}{1 + 456(0.05)^2} = 213$$

Thus, the sample used in this study is both statistically valid and contextually representative of the teacher population in the Nanpura zone.

Instrument: A structured questionnaire was developed,including11 open-ended and 58 multiple-choicequestions encompassing socio-economic reasons, institutional, community engagement, pedagogical practices, and intervention strategies. Teachers were requested to demonstrate freely, generating strong qualitative information.This paper focuses on the content analysis of 11 open-ended questions.

Procedure: Questionnaires were distributed to the teachers through school administrations, and teachers returned responses voluntarily after 3 – 5 days. The open-ended questions allowed participants to write authentically about their classroom experiences and community observations.

Data Analysis: Collected responses were cleaned and coded using a thematic dictionary method on an Excel file. Thematic responses such as economic issues, parental illiteracy, migration, infrastructure, teaching quality, early marriage, gender norms, child labour, extracurricular activities, and government schemes were identified. Frequencies of themes were computed overall and by prompt, and representative quotations were taken to show major findings.

Figure 1 – Representing the Mentioned Themes by the Respondents

Top Themes Mentioned Across Open-ended Responses
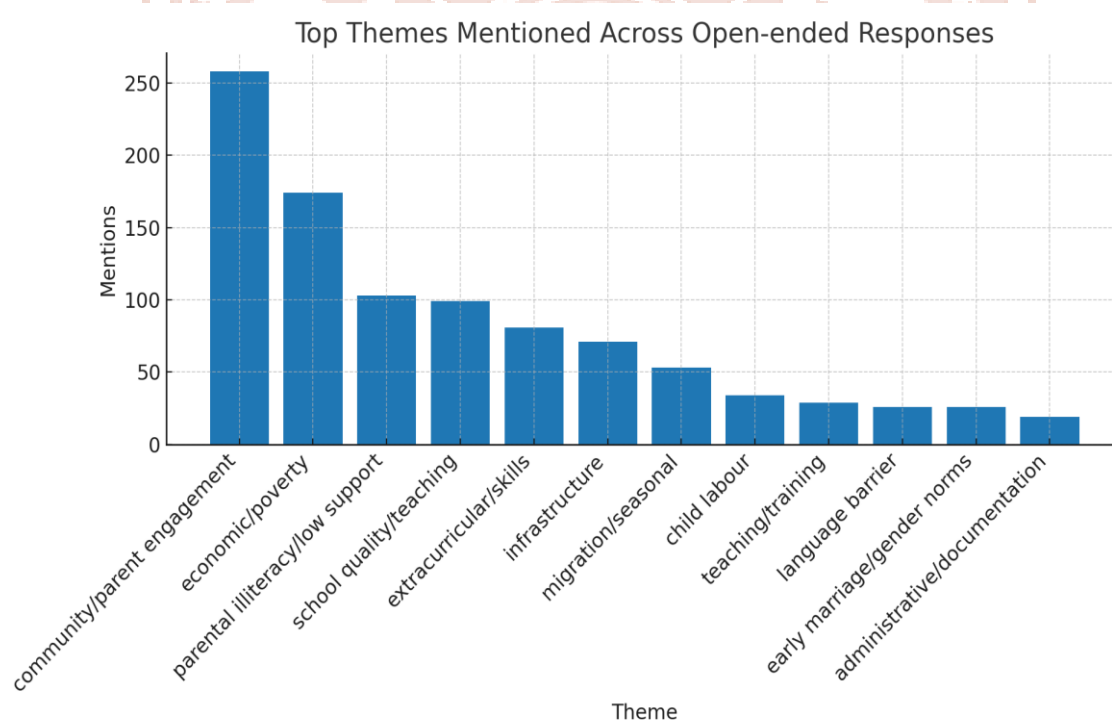
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The thematic analysis of open-ended responses depicted that the primary challenges contributing to dropout were integrated with community and parental involvement, followed by poverty and lack of parental literacy and support. However, problems at the school level,

like the quality of teaching and the state of the infrastructure, were also highlighted; they were not as strong as family and socio-economic factors. Child labour, language barriers, early marriage, and problems with documentation and administration were some of the other important issues that occurred less often. These results show that Surat City requires intervention strategies that combine family empowerment, reducing poverty, and school improvement measures to effectively tackle dropouts.

Table 1 – Gender of the Respondents

Gender	Frequency	Percentage
Male	48	22.5
Female	165	77.5
Total	213	100

As shown in the table,the gender of the respondents shows that a significant majority were female teachers, comprising 77.5% (n=165) of the sample. In contrast, only 22.5% (n=48) of the participants were male teachers. This shows that female teachers are strongly represented in the study population, reflecting a higher female participation in the teaching profession at the school level. The predominance of female teachers in the sample also provides valuable insights into dropout issues from a perspective that is closely aligned with the realities of classroom instruction and student engagement.

Table 2 – The Distribution of Respondents Across Different School Types

School Type	Frequency	Percentage
Boys' School	84	39.4
Girls' School	25	11.7
Co-education	104	48.8
Total	213	100.00

The distribution of respondents across different school types shows that the majority of teachers, 48.8% (n=104), were from co-educational schools where both boys and girls study together. This was followed by 39.4% (n=84) of teachers working in boys' schools, while only 11.7% (n=25) of teachers were from girls' schools. The data highlights that co-educational institutions form the largest segment in the sample, whereas girls' schools represent the smallest share. This distribution provides important context for analyzing dropout-related factors, as perspectives may vary depending on the type of school environment in which the teachers work.

Limitations

Like any qualitative research, this study has certain limitations as well. First, the findings are drawn on the basis of teachers' perceptions, which may not fully present the voices of students or parents who also play a significant role in dropout decisions. Second, the study was narrowed to the Nanpura zone of Surat, which may limit the generalizability of results to other zones or regions. Despite the present constraints, the study provides valuable insights by highlighting teachers' direct experiences and professional reflections on the dropout phenomenon.

Results and Findings

Analysis of the 213 teacher responses depicted a multi-layered understanding of dropout causes. While causes of dropout varied across contexts, specific recurring themes emerged as follows:

1. **Poverty and Financial Barriers**

   Teachers consistently insistedthat poverty is the most significant factorin dropout. Many students were forced to leave school to contribute to household income through informal work or to care for siblings while parents worked. Being unable to afford uniforms, books, or transport led to absenteeism.

2. **Parental Illiteracy and Lack of Support**

   Participants highlighted how parental illiteracy limited educational support at home. Parents often did not give importance to schooling, prioritizing short-term earnings over long-term education. Some parents were not informed of government schemes designed to help students continue their education.

3. **Migration and Seasonal Employment**

   Surat, as an industrial city, attracts seasonal migrants. Families working in different sectors, such as construction, textiles, and others, often relocate, disrupting children's education. Teachers experienced frequent mid-year dropouts linked to migration.

4. **Gender-Specific Challenges**

   Early marriage, household responsibilities, and safety issues disproportionately affected girls. Teachers highlighted cases where adolescent girls dropped out to manage domestic duties or were married off before completing secondary education.

5. **Infrastructure and School Quality**

Teachers reported inadequate infrastructure, such as toilets, drinking water, classrooms,and classroom facilities, as retention factors. Lack of extracurricular and vocational opportunities also weakened students' involvement.

6. Lack of Interest

Beyond structural barriers, teachers mentioned the issue of students' declining interest in studies.

7. Community and Parental Engagement

The respondents believed dropout number could be reduced with stronger community involvement and frequent parent–teacher communication. Home visits, counselling, and awareness points were mentioned as useful practices;however, it's not uniformly applied.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that student dropout is not the result of a single factor in urban municipal schools, but rather a multi-layer phenomenon including socio-economic, cultural, and institutional drivers. The superiority of poverty and parental illiteracy aligns with local surveys, highlighting firm socio-economic obstaclesin education. Migration, a specific challenge for an industrial city like Surat, needs flexible education policies to make room for mobile populations.

Teachers' insights further emphasize the gendered dimensions of dropout. Girls are more vulnerable to early withdrawal from school due to societal expectations of home or early marriage. This finding depicts a larger literature on gender inequality in education, where safety issues and social norms prevent female participation beyond primary levels.Infrastructure deficits, especially sanitation facilities, which directly affect attendance, particularly among young girls, are equally important.To sum up, the evidence suggests that, for avoiding dropout, we need multi-level interventions at the economic, institutional, pedagogical, and social sectors.

Recommendations:

➢ Economic support: Ensure timely and effective implementation of scholarships, midday meal schemes, and transport assistance.

➢ Infrastructure: Improve school facilities, particularly sanitation, classrooms, and access to digital learning resources.

➢ Teacher development: Expand workshops and seminars focused on remedial education, activity-based learning, and involvement strategies.

➢ Parent and Community Involvement: Incorporate parent-teacher conferences, home visits, and counseling sessions to increase awareness and accountability.

➢ Extracurricular Opportunities: Introduce athletic, art, and skill-based programs to motivate students and link education to practical skills.

➢ Need forSchool Social Workers: Hiring school social workers to find out the students' concerns, conduct parents-teacher meetings, conduct development workshops for teachers and school staff, and visit the students'homesoccasionally to prevent dropout.

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