Abstract

Rapid changes are happening in the field of education. From recent data, it can be observed that enrolment has improved substantially, but dropping out is an issue of concern. At least three out of ten children joining school drop out in the early years of the compulsory schooling period, without acquiring even basic literacy and numeracy skills. They do not complete 8 years of mandatory elementary education (Govinda, 2007). A large proportion of children, even while attending and completing the school cycle, remain silently excluded, as very little or no learning takes place for them (ASER, 2005 & 2006). Hence, focus is required not only on the enrolment rate but also on the completion rate, as well as on the literacy skills acquired out of schooling. Another key area of concern is that while attending school, children face social and cultural barriers and discriminatory practices in admission and evaluation. When such practices are compounded with adverse teaching and learning conditions in the school, the very purpose of universal education is defeated (Govinda, 2007).

It has been established by various studies that the academic proficiency gained out of schooling is different for various sections of the society. Children from lower castes tend to gain less academic proficiency from schooling (IHDS, 2015). Discrimination against SC, ST and Muslim groups is actualised through institutional practices (PRIA, 2015). In order to understand the causes of poor interest in schooling and of dropping out, it is essential to look at the kind of learning experience and social relatedness enjoyed by the children of all social groups at school. This study focuses on the schooling experience of children who dropped out and their sense of social relatedness at school among peers and teachers. Further, the study also attempts to understand the effects of belonging to a lower caste group on receiving support from peers and teachers.

Keeping in mind the purpose of the study, an exploratory design was adopted. Due to the non-availability of a definite universe, and also considering the nature of the study, a non-
probability sampling method with purposive sampling was found suitable. The process of identifying the samples was done systematically by collecting dropout details from every village of the selected blocks. With this database, the respondents who fit into the inclusion criteria of the study and who were willing to participate were included as participants of the study. As the research area concentrated on the socio-behavioural aspects, the researcher used mixed methods to collect the data. Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected using appropriate tools.

Villupuram and Thiruvannamalai districts were selected to conduct the study. A total of 446 respondents, aged between 12-19 years, were interviewed. Of these 446 respondents, 277 were male and 169 were female. Pearson Chi-square test was used to find out the association between variables, and factor analysis was used to find the inter-link between the variables.

From the statistical analysis, factors which emerged as key reasons for dropout were parental support, gender, academic competence, felt supportiveness of teachers and peers, and discrimination experienced at the school. In order to find out the inter-link between the identified significant variables as well as the key influential variable, factor analysis was administered.

In the factor analysis of key variables related to gender education, lack of parental support (.718) got the highest value, followed by time spent for school work (.626). In the second factor, the variables which emerged as significant were time spent for household chores, fulfilment of school amenities and parents’ migration. So, it can be inferred that in the families where parents had to migrate, the children are burdened with household chores and also find it difficult to fulfil the required school amenities on a day to day basis.

In the factor analysis of key variables related to felt comfort to go to school, teachers’ felt academic support variables emerged as the important components in the felt comfort level of respondents. As the next important factors, unsupportive teachers, punishing attitude, and
ridicule faced in class have shown significant values. This means that the unsupportiveness of the teacher is linked with an abusive attitude, which manifests as punishing and ridiculing of the students.

In the factor analysis of key variables related to social relatedness, three factors emerged with significant eigen value. The first factor gave a crucial understanding of the variables which played a central role in the sense of school membership. Interestingly, academic competence and peer friendliness were not significant factors whereas the discrimination experienced and the person involved in the discrimination (.936) emerged as key variables of sense of relatedness. This means that the discriminatory experience was not related to the academic competence of the respondents. Hence, it can be said that discriminatory experiences at school have greater influence on the felt sense of school membership of the respondents.

Economic constraint is only a minor factor; the dropout of girls is mostly a reflection of the social constructs. Societal constructs play a great role in the level of education attained by girl children. Therefore, to improve education of girl children, it is imperative to address the social constructs which sanction and incentivise parents to restrict the girl child. Next to parents, the school plays the most significant role in the retention of students. The very purpose of the education is to create an inclusive society to ensure equal social and economical growth across all sections of the society. A school should always be a place which promotes equality. It should neither indulge in nor encourage discriminative practices based on caste, sex, religion, academic efficiency etc. If any child is discriminated on any grounds, it not only affects the education attainment of the child, but also the overall self image.

**Key Words – Social Relatedness, Teacher support, Peer support, Academic engagement, Identity, Discrimination**