
COVID-19 Exacerbated Socio-Structural and Behavioural Realities of Girl-Child Development and Education in Selected Rural Eastern Cape Communities

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Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic significantly intensified pre-existing socio-structural and behavioural challenges faced by girl children in rural Eastern Cape, South Africa, leading to a marked increase in school dropout rates. This study explores the extent and pathways through which the pandemic exacerbated vulnerabilities among girls, employing a mixed-methods participatory action research approach. Quantitative data from 2018 to 2021 in the OR Tambo District revealed a statistically significant rise in girl-child dropout during the pandemic, especially among Grades 8–12. Complementary to this, qualitative data from principals, teachers, school governing bodies, and education officials underscored numerous causes including early pregnancy, substance abuse, poverty and parental fear of COVID-19 transmission. Drawing from Vygotsky’s socio-cultural and Crenshaw’s intersectionality theories, the study shows how overlapping oppressions such as gender, poverty and rurality interacted to disrupt education. Also, stakeholders reported that remote learning was specifically ineffective due to lack of digital access and that rotation of attendance further disengaged learners. Thus, the findings highlight the urgent need for multi-sectoral, context-sensitive interventions such as school integration programmes, gender-responsive support services, and community-led strategies to address compounded effects of socio-economic disadvantage and crises disruptions. Therefore, the findings show how global crises disproportionately affect marginalised populations and advocates for resilient, education systems that prioritise the needs of rural girls.

Keywords: COVID-19; girl-child; rural education; pandemic; Eastern Cape

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the already dire realities faced by Black girl children in the rural Eastern Cape, South Africa, thus intensifying school dropout rate among an already vulnerable group.

Girls from disadvantaged backgrounds, marked poverty, inequality, and poor infrastructure (Levinsohn et al. 2013), were disproportionately affected as lockdowns disrupted education, access to school meals, and care structures. South Africa, the most unequal nation globally (Bank, 2022), saw a 50% increase in child hunger, with one in six households reporting children had gone without food (May et al., 2020). These compounding factors heightened dropout risks, especially in rural areas with high multidimensional deprivation (Statistics South Africa, 2020; Şengönül, 2021; United Nations, 2021). Globally, the pandemic affected many sectors and services while millions of people succumbed to the coronavirus disease, and many school-going children also felt the impact. There is no doubt that those who live below the poverty datum line have been hit harder than others as many learners have failed to return to schools after their reopening with many factors being at play. As the COVID-19 pandemic temporarily forced an estimated 743 million girls out of school in 185 countries, the rising drop-out rates disproportionately affect adolescent girls since disease outbreaks affect girls and boys differently (Albrechtsen & Giannini, 2020).

The education sector was affected by the 2019 coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic that emerged in Wuhan, China in November 2019 (World Health Organization, 2020). South Africa was not spared from this pandemic. South Africa reported the first two cases on 2 March 2020 and there were 1,823,319 cases of COVID-19 reported from 2 March 2020 through 19 June 2021, nationally (National Institute for Communicable Diseases (NICD), 2021). To date, there have been three periods of increased transmission (waves). According to the NICD (2021) a wave is defined as the period representing a weekly incidence from ≥ 30 cases per 100,000 persons to a weekly incidence < 30 cases per 100,000 persons. The Eastern Cape reported 50,572, 72,763 and 6,197 new COVID-19 cases during waves 1, 2 and 3, respectively (NICD, 2021). Figure 1 plots the number of new cases and waves over time by province. Eastern Cape's new COVID-19 cases over time are shown with the light blue line. Figure 1 shows that wave 1 of the pandemic occurred from week 20–34 in the Eastern Cape (NICD, 2021).

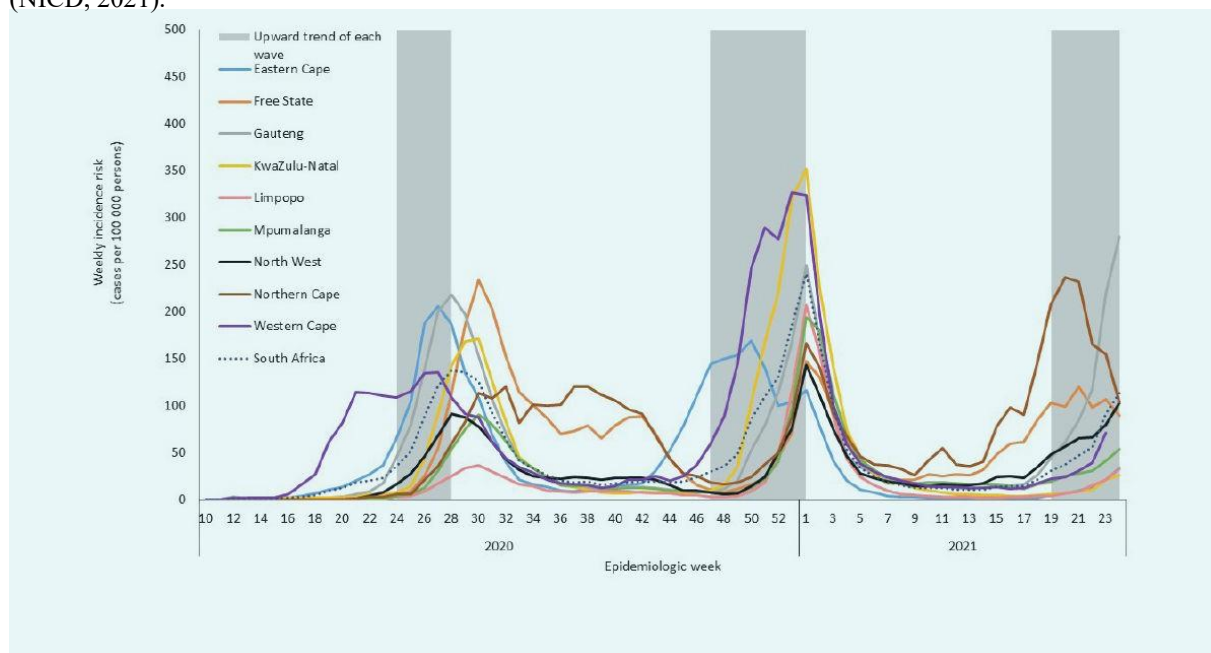


Figure 1. Weekly new cases of confirmed COVID-19 cases by province, March 2020- June, 2021 **Source:** NICD, 2021

The pandemic disrupted curriculum delivery in school education globally. With social distancing and lockdowns, it was difficult for the teachers to deliver the curriculum. According to UNICEF (2021), approximately 250,000 school-going children drop out every year, and during the COVID-19 pandemic, this figure tripled to 750,000. The pandemic also led to a rise in extreme poverty in a generation, as an additional 119–124 million people were pushed back into extreme poverty in 2020 (United Nations, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic brought education systems across the world to a halt, leading to large learning losses with school closures affecting more than 1.6 billion learners (World Bank, UNESCO & UNICEF, 2021). Regardless of the remote learning opportunities offered by nearly every country, inevitably, the quality and accessibility of such initiatives varied significantly. In numerous countries, the younger and more marginalised children were the most affected (Fatima et al., 2021).

School closures resulted in the upsurge of domestic violence and child labour putting the children's well-being and safety in jeopardy.

Unfortunately, this crisis also exposed the advances in gender inequality with school closures placing an estimated over 10 million girls at risk of early marriage in the next decade and at a higher risk of dropping out of school (Fatima et al., 2021). The COVID-19-induced school closures unmasked just how vulnerable education is and this global crisis undoubtedly forced education stakeholders to strategise towards providing effective and equitable education systems that will be resilient in preparation for any future disruptions (World Bank, UNESCO & UNICEF, 2021). Nationally, schools closed from the 27th of March 2020 when the initial stage 5 lockdown occurred and in-person learning stopped completely (Haffejee et al., 2024). In response to the decrease or increase in COVID-19 cases as well as the development of new strains, schools reopened on the 8th of June, closed again on the 27th of July, and finally reopened on the 24th of August for most learners (grade 12 learners-3 August and grade 7 learners-11 August (Department of Basic Education 2020; Haffejee et al., 2024). The school closures that were enforced in all schools in South Africa in March 2020 interrupted the learning activities of an estimated 17 million learners from preschool to secondary school (Statistics South Africa (Stats SA), 2020). In addition, the lockdown had a negative impact on the number of out-of-school children in 2020 since nearly one million children aged 5–18 were out of school in the country with the greatest number being within the 5–13 years age group (Statistics South Africa, 2020).

The Eastern Cape province, which is the poorest province in South Africa, recorded over 130,000 learner dropouts in all school levels during the 2020 academic year (Mavuso et al., 2023). The multifaceted challenges imposed by complex risk factors including family, school, individuals, and community that interacted during the process of disengagement and dropout are noted in this paper. We argue that the girl-child learners investigated in this study, like most children born and raised in low-income and disadvantaged backgrounds, have been faced with several challenges since childhood and their plight is exacerbated through their lived schooling experiences and currently with the COVID-19 pandemic. Their childhood deprivation experiences as the literature presents compromise their cognitive development, while schooling experiences do not better their plight with added socio-cultural, economic, and behavioural factors that impact them being dropouts. Previous studies show that reasons provided by both males and females aged 7–18 for not attending any educational institution include: illness and disability (22.7%), poor academic performance (21.2%), and lack of money for fees (19.5%). Worth noting is the 7.8% of individuals who abandoned their studies due to family commitments such as pregnancy, getting married, and minding children; such reasons are more likely to be given by females than males (Statistics South Africa, 2021).

There is a need to rethink the issues around gender and education while paying attention to situational accounts and restrictions that shape gender equality at a local level. Therefore, the one-size-fits-all approach cannot be used in implementing gender interventions within schools (Vale & Graven, 2021). If the existing constructions within and around schools are continuously overlooked, irrational expectations are made of learners and educators (Vale & Graven, 2021). The development and education of girl children in rural communities have long been a challenge, which the COVID-19 pandemic has only exacerbated. In the Eastern Cape province of South Africa, where rural communities often face limited access to resources and infrastructure, the pandemic has had a profound impact on social, economic, and educational activities (Raphela & Tjantjies, 2025). The closures of schools and restrictions on movement have disrupted the lives of millions of children, with girls being particularly affected. While the pandemic has affected people worldwide, its impact has been particularly severe in communities with limited access to resources and support systems. There is some research on the impact of COVID-19 on education in general, but there is a lack of specific studies on the impact of the pandemic on the education and development of girl children in rural communities, more especially rural communities of the Eastern Cape (Bozkurt et al., 2022; Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021).

Considering the dearth of knowledge, this paper aims to contribute to the body of knowledge by showing the extent and pathways through which COVID-19 affected girl-child dropout in the Eastern Cape. Specifically, our objectives are to show the differences in dropout for periods before and during the pandemic; to explore how COVID-19 exacerbated the underlying drivers of girl-child dropout in the Eastern Cape as well as to provide recommendations, interventions and practical solutions to mitigate the challenges and improve educational outcomes for girl children in these communities. The assumption was that identifying key themes and patterns related to the experiences and challenges of girl children dropping out from school in rural areas of the Eastern Cape, South Africa would help to gain insights from these communities. For South Africa, in the context of

COVID-19, it was important to explore the impact of how the pandemic had affected schooling, social interactions, and access to resources. The researchers assumed that socio-structural and behavioural factors (including poverty, gendered family responsibilities, and cultural barriers) contributed to schooling challenges faced by girl children in rural communities. Additionally, it was suspected that the challenges faced by the development and education of girl children were exacerbated by the pandemic and affected their schooling, social interactions, and access to resources. By contributing to the knowledge base in this area, the research will support efforts to promote the overall development of girl children in rural communities.

Theoretical framework

There are two most relevant approaches that this paper acknowledges, the socio-cultural theory on child development and the intersectionality framework on addressing multifaceted factors on human deprivation, in this case of girl-child learner deprivation. The socio-cultural theory by Vygotsky and Cole (1978), views human development as a socially mediated process in which children acquire their cultural values, beliefs, and problem-solving strategies through collaborative dialogues with more knowledgeable members of society. Vygotsky and Cole (1978) theories stress the fundamental role of social interaction in the development of cognition; with a strong belief that community plays a central role in the process of “making meaning”. Socio-cultural theory is relevant in the paper to explain the functionality of children’s social structure, the immediate other being significant in the cognitive development of oneself. On the other hand, the intersectionality framework takes such aspects of social structure and problematises them to draw our attention to how such structures combined with one’s existence can be sources of stressors and problematising them. Intersectionality is a contextual framework for examining how systems of oppression deeply intertwine and influence experiences and opportunities.

Intersectionality is a lens through which one can see where power comes and collides, where it interlocks and intersects. Stating that it’s not simply that there’s a race problem here, a gender problem here, and a class or LGBTQ problem there. Many times, that framework erases what happens to people who are subject to all these things or even more than one of such things in a single individual. We then get to intentionally press towards their functional required role through a multisectoral response. Using the same explanation presented by Crenshaw (2022) on the intersectionality of different socio-cultural and educational challenges experienced at the same time by the girl learners in the study is a point of departure to suggest a multisectoral approach in addressing the plight of girl-child learner dropouts from schools in rural Eastern Cape. The extent to which girls complete their education is frequently influenced by socio-economic pressures resulting from patterns of community life. Girls who live in low socio-economic circumstances frequently exhibit poor performance, absenteeism, and dropout rates. Dagane and Aden (2021) is of the opinion that girls leave school because of family pressures related to their economic situation, which forces them to work to support their families. Their primary motivation for leaving school is to work as maids/domestic workers to alleviate their poverty. The scenario is made worse if the girl’s parents are completely obstructive of her education and uneducated.

Research methodology

This mixed methods study utilised a participatory action research (PAR) approach to investigate the impacts of COVID-19 on education, particularly for girl children in selected rural communities in the Eastern Cape, South Africa. The quantitative data comprised secondary DBE administrative data on dropout for January of 2018 to May of 2021 from the inland region of the OR Tambo district. Qualitative primary data was collected through interviews with principals and officials, as well as focus groups with parents and teachers who shared their experiences and opinions on the exacerbation of COVID-19 for girl-child dropout. The interviews and focus group discussion provided an in-depth understanding of the lives and experiences of young girls during the pandemic and helped to establish the pathways of COVID-19 exacerbation and identify new insights and understandings of socio-structural and behavioural patterns. The results were verified through triangulation of qualitative and quantitative data as well as comparison of data from interviews and focus group discussions. Doing this assisted to create a more complete understanding of the exacerbation of COVID-19 girl-child dropout. While the results of this study may not be generalisable to a larger population due to the sample size, they offer valuable insights into the experiences of the selected sample and the challenges they faced during the pandemic. Although socio-economic factors are not new to social science, this study aims to bridge the gap by examining how COVID-19 exacerbated these factors and further affected the education of young girls. Therefore, the exploratory nature of this study provides an opportunity to gain insight into the challenges faced by young

girls who dropped out of school due to the pandemic and contributes to the understanding of the broader impact of COVID-19 on education in rural communities.

For the quantitative aspect of the study, 2018 to May 2021 administrative secondary data on dropout from all schools in the inland region of OR Tambo district were included. The qualitative primary data collection for the current study was conducted in 10 selected schools in the OR Tambo district, Eastern Cape, South Africa, with approval from the Department of Basic Education (DBE). To ensure a diverse range of perspectives, 5 schools from the coastal region and 5 schools from the inland region were selected. A purposive sampling technique was used to select participants who met the prepared selection criteria. Participants included principals from each of the 10 schools, 80 School Governing Body members who formed part of focus groups, and 80 teachers of all genders. To be included in the qualitative aspect of the study, participants were required to be currently employed at one of the selected schools, from any socio-economic or ethnic group, aged between 25–65 years, and willing to answer questions about the factors that exacerbated the experiences of girl children during the COVID-19 pandemic. This selection criteria were employed to ensure that respondents had relevant knowledge and experience regarding the topic under study for a high data quality. The research did not use a saturation of data approach to indicate a halt to data collection but rather focused on collecting rich and detailed qualitative data, thus allowing the support of each theme with multiple examples.

To ensure the protection of the participants, the researchers obtained approval from the Department of Basic Education in the OR Tambo district, Eastern Cape, South Africa. The researchers provided the participants with a consent form that explained the study's purpose, research procedures and processes, risks and benefits, and confidentiality protection measures. The participants were informed of their right to decline participation or withdraw from the study at any time, without consequence. The researchers upheld the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants by not recording any identifying information, such as names, school addresses, and telephone numbers. The audio recordings were initially made on a password-protected cell phone and transferred to a computer, after which they were erased from the phone. The transcripts and audio recordings were stored on the authors' computer in a locked, password-protected file to maintain their security. The Eastern Cape DBE provided regional sex disaggregated quantitative administrative data of school dropout from 2018–2021. However, the analysis mainly compared 2019, 2020 and 2021 data as the relevance of 2019 data far outweighed 2018 data for unbiased historical analysis. To apply participatory action research, numerous workshops to collaborate with government officials from the OR Tambo Department of Basic Education (DBE) were held to collectively develop the research objectives, methods and to select the most appropriate schools, girl learners at risk of dropout, communities, and school governance bodies to gain insight into the challenges faced by these communities. The qualitative primary data collection utilised two methods which included face-to-face semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions.

The researchers also conducted face-to-face semi-structured interviews with 10 principals, which lasted approximately 60 minutes each. This approach allowed the researchers to delve into the subject matter, ask probing questions, and explore new avenues of discussion. By doing so, they could fill gaps in knowledge and gain new insights (Patton, 2002). Before the interviews began, the researchers obtained permission from the principals to record them using a cell phone for transcription purposes. They also went through the consent form with each participant, clarifying any questions and ensuring that they fully understood the content. Copies of the consent form were provided to the participants for their own records. The interviews were conducted in the principal's office to minimise noise and distractions. English was used as the language of instruction and communication throughout. The principals were asked to share their experiences, knowledge, and perceptions regarding the phenomenon being investigated. Furthermore, focus group discussions were used as another means to gather data through group discussions centred on a specific topic. These focus groups included three groups namely School Governing Body (SGB) members, teachers, and Basic Education officials. The 80 SGB members were divided into 10 groups of 8, and the researchers sampled 8 individuals from each school to form part of the focus group. Additionally, 80 teachers (male and female) were also included in the focus groups. The researchers sampled 8 individuals from each school to participate in the discussions. The use of focus groups was advantageous as it allowed the researchers to seek clarification and obtain detailed information about the respondents' personal opinions and perceptions (Mishra, 2016). The focus groups were conducted in school classrooms provided by each school, and the researchers met with 8 SGB members and 8 teachers (male and female) in each school until all the respondents had been covered, and data had been collected.

The researchers analysed the quantitative secondary data through descriptive statistics to show levels of girl-child dropout by month and year, grade and school phase. The chi-squared test for trend tested whether there was a significant linear trend of dropout across months in quarter 4 for 2019 and 2020. The chi-squared test assessed the differences of dropout across years by grade, and month of dropout levels. Specifically, this analysis tested statistical differences by year for grades R to nine separately to grades ten to twelve. This was based on the findings from Statistics South Africa, 2020 that showed the greatest number of school dropouts were among the 5–13 years age group. The p-value was set at 0.05 to determine whether differences in girl-child dropout were statistically significantly different for all the above statistical tests mentioned. The collected qualitative data was analysed thematically. Firstly, the audio recordings for each group of participants were listened to while simultaneously linking the observation notes captured. These recordings were then translated and transcribed. The aim of this process was to ensure that relevant information obtained during the interviews was recollected. The data was then read and re-read to ensure the researchers' familiarity with it. Following this, it was coded, resulting in the identification of relevant themes. To begin the qualitative analysis, the researchers reviewed the audio recordings of each participant, along with the transcripts and interview notes, multiple times. This process enabled the researchers to become well-acquainted with the qualitative data. Quotes that specifically mentioned the pandemic assisted to decipher the role of COVID-19 in girl-child school dropout. The section below details the results from the application of the methods discussed.

Results

The quantitative results of the study are shown first, followed by the qualitative findings. Between 2018 and 2021, the O.R Tambo district witnessed a significant rise in the number of girls discontinuing their education. It is evident that the challenges of girl-child dropouts have been intensified by the impact of COVID-19, exacerbating pre-existing issues. As shown in Figure 2, in the period preceding the pandemic, from 2018–2019, the data indicates that more than 5,400 female students left school prematurely. The reasons for their dropout are multifaceted, including factors such as pregnancy and substance abuse, among others, which will be elaborated on in subsequent sections.

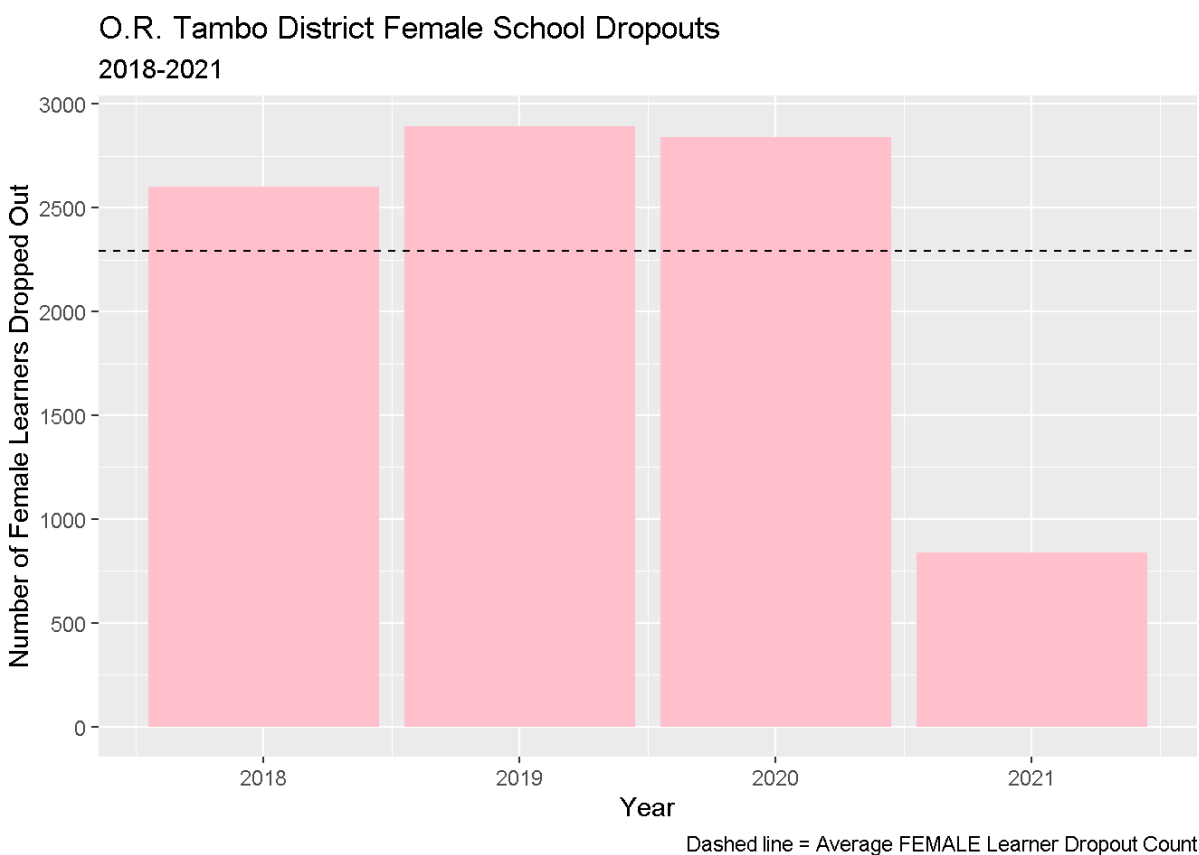


Figure 2. O.R Tambo District female school dropouts.

Figure 3 shows the prevalence of dropout by grade. According to the findings shown in the graph, the surge in female student dropouts is particularly pronounced starting from grade 8. Specifically, in grade 9, approximately 800 female learners left, while grade 10 witnessed a substantial increase with around 2,200 female learners discontinuing their education. The trend continues in grade 11, where about 2,010 female learners dropped out, and in grade 12, the number stands at approximately 1,200.

This significant exodus of female students from the educational system is indicative of broader societal issues, including but not limited to drug and alcohol abuse, the mistreatment of females, and mental health challenges such as depression. It is noteworthy that these challenges impact girls aged between 14 and 18 years and above, encompassing a sensitive phase from early adolescence to the late teenage years. During this period, they are vulnerable to various pressures, including exposure to sexual harassment.

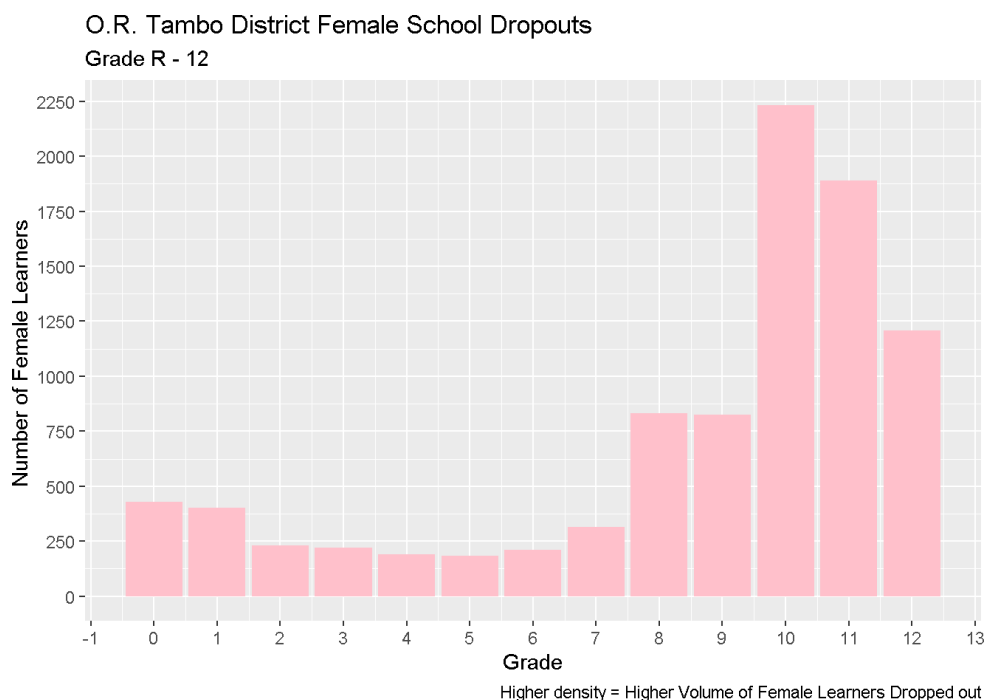


Figure 3. O.R Tambo District girl child drop out by grade.

The total levels of girl-child dropout are depicted across months in Table 1. The levels are shown in relation to the timing of the COVID-19 lockdown as well as pandemic waves and peaks. The table highlights dropout levels that increased by more than twofold compared to the same period for the previous year in red while showing slight increases in orange. The table should be interpreted bearing in mind that the South African alerts of the pandemic only started in March of 2020. Table 1 shows that dropout was higher in March of 2020 compared to 2019.

Table 1. Girl-child dropout levels across months, 2019–2021

	January	February	March	April	May	June	July	August	September	October	November	December
2019	606	210	415	201	25	275	204	46	195	67	19	632
2020	511	124	570	10	8	76	170	117	66	423	87	677
2021	61	380	250	104	43							
				LOCKDOWN								
	2021 COVID Wave 2				COVID WAVE 1 IN EC					COVID WAVE 2 in EC		
						PEAK						PEAK

Dropouts were much lower during the hard lockdown phase of April to July 2020 compared to the same period in 2019. Dropout levels were higher in August of 2020 compared to 2019, dipped slightly in September then were much higher than 2019 from October to December 2020. In January 2021 levels of dropout were again lower than in 2020 before the pandemic had started and then increased sharply in February 2021 compared to 2020 levels. All differences in girl-child dropout levels by month described above were statistically significant ($P = 0.000$). Also, a similar picture was seen in most grades, alluding to the fact that parents’ behaviour was largely the same regardless of what phase of schooling their child was currently in.

Figure 4 compares girl-child dropout for quarter 4 of 2019 and 2020. We see that in 2019 levels of dropout had a higher gradient in the final quarter with rather low levels in October, a slight decrease in November then a sharp increase in December. This was starkly different compared to 2020 levels of school dropout among girls which started off high in October and ended high in December, thus creating a statistically significant linear trend of lower gradient for 2020 ($P = 0.000$). The differences by year in quarter four were also statistically significantly different ($P = 0.000$) with 2019 having a lower dropout level (718) as opposed to 2020 (1187).

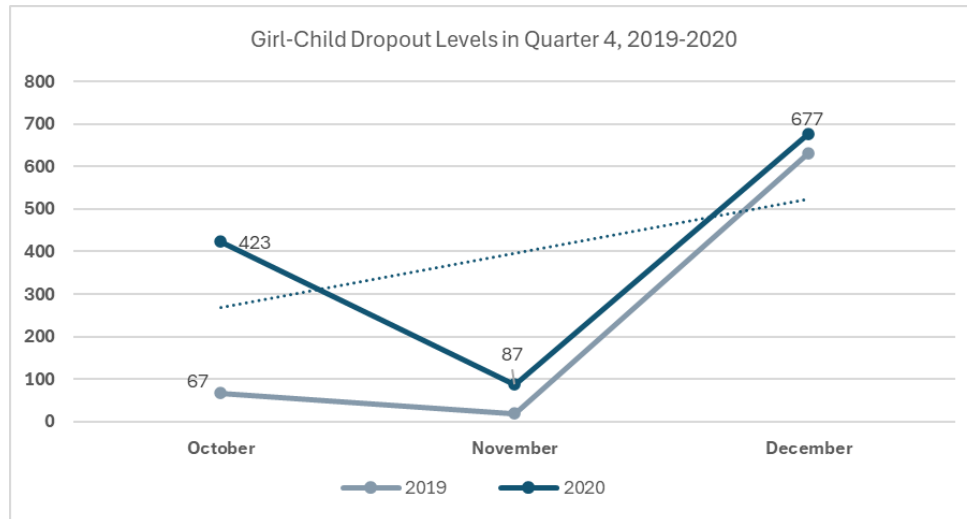


Figure 4. Girl-child total dropout levels for Quarter 4, 2019 and 2020

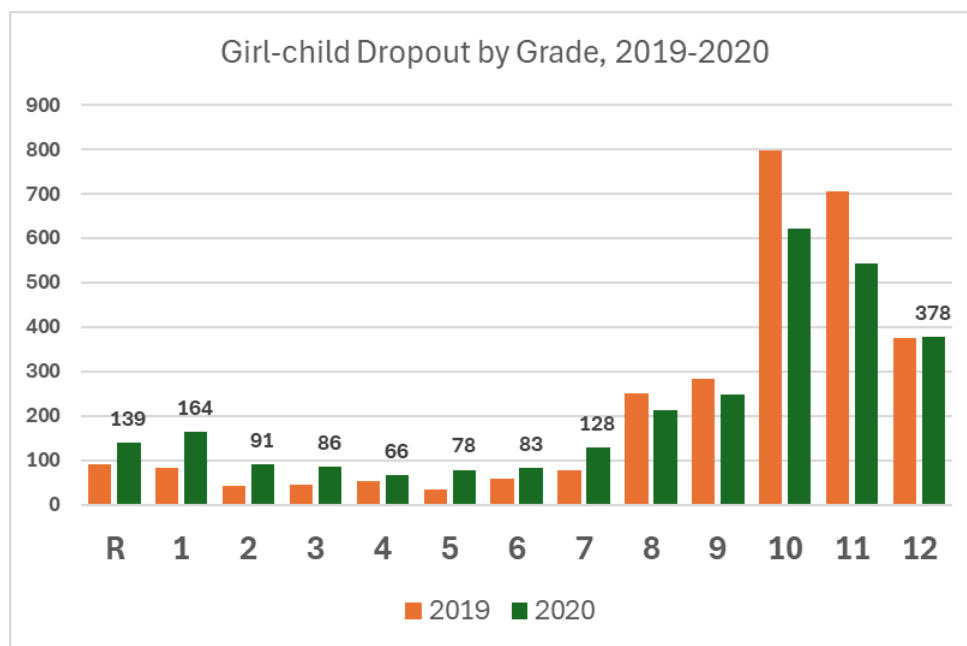


Figure 5. Girl-child Dropout frequencies by Grade, 2019–2020

The differences in girl-child dropout levels by grade and year are shown in Figure 5. Levels of dropout were higher in 2020 for grades R, one, two, three, four, five, six, seven and slightly higher in grade 12. According to the chi-squared test these differences were statistically significant ($P = 0.000$).

Table 2. Girl-child dropout for Grades 9 and lower compared to Grades 10 and higher, 2019–2020

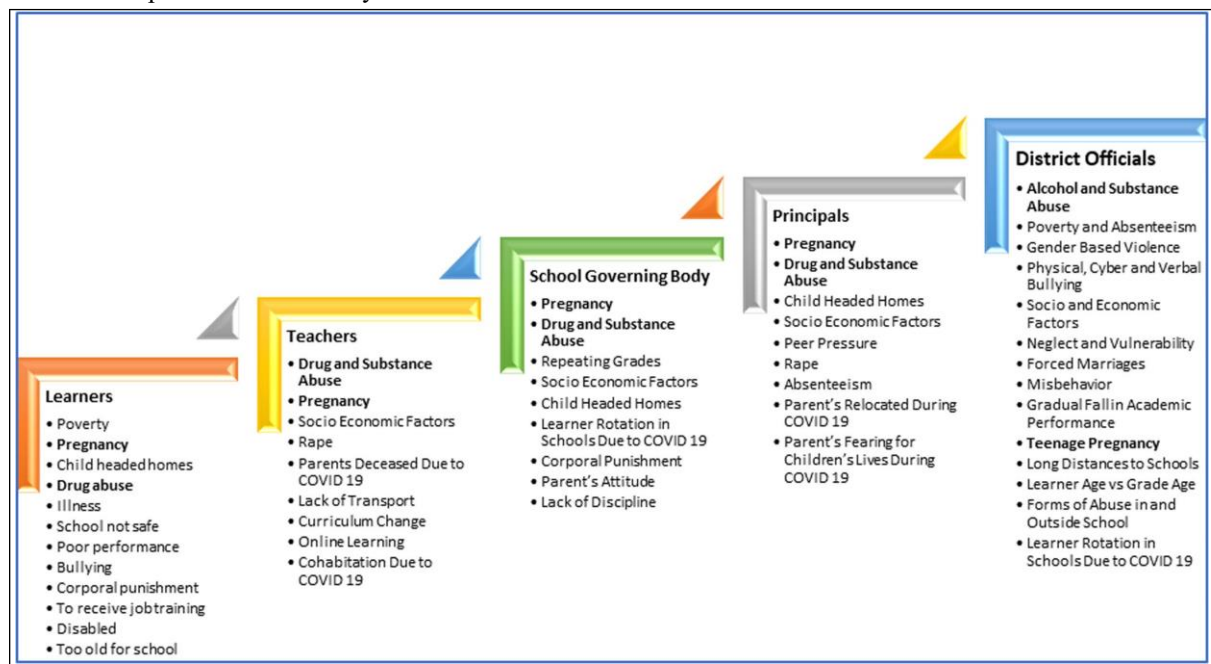
Year Left	Grade≤9	Grade≥10
2019	1016	1879
	26.44	35.23
2020	1296	1543
	33.73	28.93

Girl-child dropout levels among those attending grades 9 or lower were significantly higher (33.73%) in 2020

compared to 2019 ($p = 0.000$) as seen in Table 2. However, among girls attending grades 10 or higher dropout seemed lower, but this difference was not significant ($p = 0.090$).

Below Table 3 contains the reasons expressed by the participants for girls dropping out of school prematurely. It is worth noting that the study was conducted during the COVID-19 recovery period when schools reopened with fewer regulations to facilitate a back-to-school programme. However, the research revealed that learner dropouts were not solely a result of the pandemic; rather, it had been an existing problem that was exacerbated by COVID-19. The table showcases the cited problems, with the most mentioned reasons made bold. All the listed problems are important contributors to girls' early school dropout, necessitating comprehensive attention. The table does not prioritise issues in any order but aims to highlight all the problems and emphasise those that stakeholders stated most. This inclusive approach will aid in policy implementation by providing insights on where to initiate responsive solutions for identified problems.

Table 3. Dropout factors stated by different stakeholders



Our findings of reasons for girl-child dropout as stated by different stakeholders (learners, teachers, school governing body, principals, and district officials) are shared below. Overall, stakeholders cited pregnancy, drug abuse, alcohol, and substance abuse as the most common factors associated with dropout of girl learners. Specific pandemic-related quotes to support some of these identified factors are provided where possible.

According to learners, poverty, pregnancy, child-headed homes, drug abuse, illness, school not being safe, poor performance, culling, corporal punishment, receiving job training, being disabled, and being too old for school are the reasons behind the dropout of learners. Similarly, teachers stated that girl-child dropout was particularly due to drug and substance abuse, pregnancy, poverty, rape, parents deceased due to COVID-19, lack of transport, curriculum change, online learning and other school challenges, as well as cohabitation due to COVID-19.

Teacher 2: "Some children moved into cohabitation as a result of covid subsequently leading to pregnancy thereby dropping out."

Teacher 4: "Others drop out because they can't accept the pain that their parents died and decide to take drugs"

Teacher 3: "The issue of class and attendance rotation during the pandemic made most learners to lose interest as they could not follow the learning process."

Teacher 2: "This was also worsened by the fact that the learning methods and the online platform were things they were not used to and couldn't cope."

Teacher 1: "Covid was so stressful to learners, for them to study at home was too difficult they were not coping at all online learning becomes part of their reason for dropout".

According to the school governing bodies, reasons for female dropout included drug and substance abuse,

repeating grades, socioeconomic factors, child-headed homes, learner rotation, corporal punishment, parent's attitude, and lack of discipline were some of the listed associated factors for school dropout. Likewise, school principals mentioned pregnancy, drug and substance abuse as the main factors for females to drop out from school, besides that child-headed homes, socioeconomic factors, peer pressure, rape, absenteeism, parent relocation during COVID-19, and parents fearing for children's lives during COVID-19 were discussed as the dropout factors.

Principal 1: "Many girl children after the relaxation of the COVID-19 protocols came back pregnant and according to the school policy on pregnancy, the pregnant girl needs to go home when she is 8 months pregnant".

Principal 1: "Parents were so fearful that their children might become sick and die due to the pandemic, learners were however provided support to vaccinate so that the virus does not spread and eventually kill them"

Principal 2: "Many learners were called back home by their parents who were concerned about the COVID situation although some returned while others did not".

Principal 1: "Since learners stay far from school, walk long hours, and walk alone after school, there have been increased rates of crime and rape during the COVID-19 pandemic."

Principal 2: "There have been many rape cases since the onset of the COVID-19",

Principal 1: "Teenagers smoke dagga, benzene, drink alcohol, and experimented a lot during COVID-19 because of the free time they had.....and rather look for work"

Principal 3: "Drugs are sold locally, and they used it more during the COVID-19 since there were alternating days of attending, it gave them all the time in the world to fall pregnant and to experiment with drugs"

Principal 1: "Surprisingly, there has been an increase in the blessing and blessed relationships during the pandemic leading to many learners dropping out as they do not see the need of continuing with school due to the benefits received from their older partners (blessers)."

Principal 1: "Covid killed a lot of pupils' parents, as a result, they had to drop out of school to take care of their siblings and their family."

Principal 4: "Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, it has been difficult for them to pass and to stay in school."

Principal 2: "The readiness to provide learning under covid regulations was a problem because there were schools without the required infrastructure to manage learning and covid at the same time and learners lost interest as there was no learning."

Finally, district officials also believed that alcohol and substance abuse, poverty and absenteeism, gender-based violence, physical, cyber, and verbal bullying, socio and economic factors, neglect and vulnerability, forced marriage, and forms of abuse in, outside school, and learner rotation in schools due to COVID-19 are the reason for school dropout.

DBE Official 1: "They were only struggling on online learning as some of them did not have enough money to buy data."

Discussion

The study found that the extent and pathways of girl-child dropout in the study interest areas were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. As Figure 2 indicates from the year 2018–2021, there have been a considerable number of girl-child dropouts in the OR Tambo district. The levels of girl-child dropout increased between 2018 and 2019 then decreased from 2019–2020 and 2021. These results need to be read in context with the results found in Table 1. Firstly, data for 2021 was collected between January and May only; therefore, levels of dropout in 2021 are not a true reflection of the occurrence of girl-child dropout in this final year. By showing the timelines of the COVID-19 lockdown waves and peaks, it becomes more evident that these factors affected the ability for parents to withdraw their children from school in the first place.

Nevertheless, it can be deduced that COVID-19 has exacerbated the problem that already existed, if we consider the prohibition of lockdowns, waves and peaks on withdrawal of children. Our results of Table 1 confirm this conclusion and showed that total dropout levels of 2020 compared to 2019 were higher and lower at different

periods. We need to remember to bear in mind that the dropout levels were affected by the repeated school closures and reopening due to DBE regulations aligning with the risk of contracting the corona virus infection (Department of Basic Education 2020). It is important to note that the pandemic complexities and resultant risk of mortality prevented parents from withdrawing their children from schools to a very large extent. Therefore, when examining and interpreting dropout levels during and before the pandemic, it is important to understand how critical it is to compare apples with apples. Similar periods of 2019 and 2020 had very different occurrences for example, the absence versus presence of a hard lockdown. This influenced levels of dropout overall to appear lower during the pandemic even though this might not have been the case if a lockdown had not been enforced. Higher dropout levels in March 2020 versus 2019 could have been due to the lockdown announcement in mid-March followed by the hard lockdown that occurred from March 27, 2020. Levels being lower in 2020 April to July was probably due to the fact that individuals could not go anywhere because of lockdown initially and then were scared to go anywhere because the first wave's peak hit in June 2020 and the wave only started decreasing after this stage (July) so parents could not withdraw their children from school as desired from April to July 2020.

The increase of girl-child dropout towards the end of 2020 hints at wave 2 of COVID-19 having started from October 2020. At this point, more parents did not want to keep their children at risk and parents were afraid for their own lives as well as their children's risk of mortality. Meanwhile, this second wave lasted longer and appeared deadlier. Differences between January and February 2021 need to be compared with the same period in 2020 before the pandemic started in South Africa, Wave 2 of COVID-19 reached its peak in December of 2020, and the Eastern Cape was the first province to reach its peak. People were dying in huge numbers the most at this point therefore free movement became restricted. When the wave was dying down in February; parents went to schools and pulled their children out again. It is all about human behaviour and assessing when it is safe or not to travel to the school to withdraw one's child from the school. Our results divulged that quarter four levels of girl-child dropout were significantly higher in 2020 than 2019. This shows that the desire for parents to pull their children out of school was markedly higher in 2020 from October already. They may have been demotivated in November slightly due to the onset of COVID's second wave severity, but as soon as the school year ended, parents took their children out of rural schools at high rates. The October to December period is the longest during 2020 that is least affected by COVID-19 complexities, though the second wave started at the beginning of October 2020. The influence of the pandemic may have been lower though due to it being the end of the year with parents needing to withdraw their children urgently at this stage, only to enrol their children in another school at the beginning of the following year. Also, the peak of this second wave only occurred on the 7th of December at which point schools would have been closing anyway if not already closed. Finally, at this point of the pandemic, nationally it was alert level 1.

Therefore, mobility would have been greater than during higher stages with parents having the ability to take a chance going to schools to withdraw their children regardless of the risk of infection. Further, determining whether levels in dropout were different by grade for 2019 and 2020 (Figure 6) showed that a difference was seen for some grades. This may partly be due to the reasoning of COVID-19 complexities preventing the ability to withdraw children from school. Additionally, Table 2 results confirm that girl-child dropout levels significantly increased during the pandemic (2020) as opposed to 2019, before COVID among girls attending grades 9 and below. This aligns with the Statistics South Africa, 2022 findings. Reasons for this may be related to parents being more worried and having higher authority and control over younger children as opposed to older children. Also, disruption of schooling through changing schools would have less of an effect in lower grades than higher grades. Additionally, it may be easier to change schools at lower grades than in higher grades. Parental fear related to the pandemic was a COVID-19 specific reason for dropout. During the COVID-19 pandemic, parents' levels of fear for their children's morbidity and mortality increased. This fear eventually led to them encouraging their children to drop out until regulations and the risk of infection eased or until the pandemic ended.

We showed that there are various factors that lead to learners dropping out as pointed out by learners, teachers, principals, and district officials. These factors are not limited to poverty, drugs, lack of transport, pregnancy, and so forth. Similarly, Hughes et al. (2019) indicated that violence, poverty, malnutrition, and maternal depression are key drivers of toxic stress capable of undermining young children's physical, psycho-social, and cognitive development. Moreover, hunger and malnutrition have negative effects on a child's immediate and long-term growth, learning, development, and cognitive capabilities (Mackatiani et al., 2022). Amongst other factors, early

pregnancy and motherhood are common reasons for school dropout among adolescent girls in SA. This might rob girls of their hearts and brains, which would have a negative impact on their ability to learn (Yassin 2020). Students who become pregnant should not face unfair discrimination, according to the Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act (No. 4 of 2000) and the South African Schools Act (No. 84 of 1996). In 2007, the National Department of Education adopted regulations that stated that students might continue attending class while pregnant as long as there were no health issues.

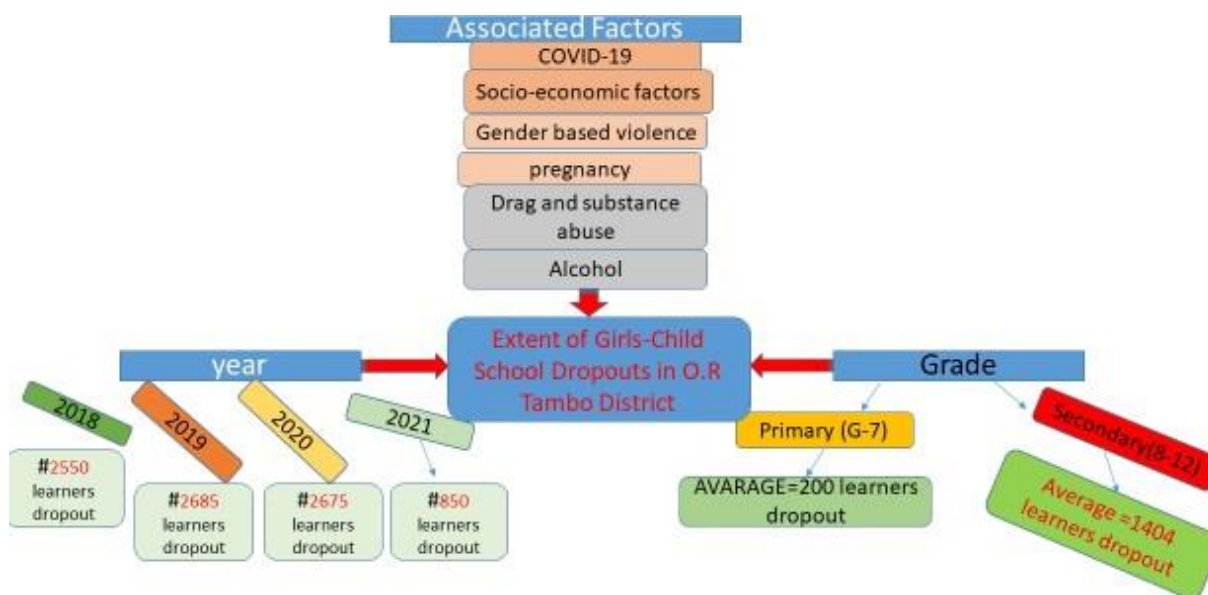


Figure 6. Extent of girls-child school dropouts in O.R Tambo District.

From this research we conclude that the extent of girl-child dropout in O.R Tambo District increased during 2019 and 2020. In the primary level about 200 learners’ dropout on average and in the secondary school an average of 1 404 learners did dropout from school. This is a huge number of students who were dropping out from school. Stakeholder perceived factors of dropout are pregnancy, drug abuse, alcohol and substance abuse are the most common listed factors associated with dropout from school. Worth noting is the 7.8% of individuals who abandoned their studies due to family commitments such as pregnancy, getting married, and minding children. Such reasons are more likely to be given by females than males (Statistics South Africa, 2021). Equally, Fatima et al. (2021) state that this crisis has exposed the advances in gender inequality with school closures placing an estimate of over 10 million girls at risk of early marriage in the next decade and at a higher risk of dropping out of school. This clearly shows that pregnancy and early marriages have an impact on school dropout. Results from Figure 3 confirmed this as higher female dropout levels started from grade 8 upwards, which may be linked to teenage pregnancy. In many African nations, early marriage is associated with both female secondary school dropouts and the lack of relevance of education to the general requirements of the populace, especially economic demands (Omoeva & Hatch, 2022; Sagalova et al., 2021). This crisis has exposed the advances in gender equality with school closures placing an estimate of over 10 million girls at risk of early marriage in the next decade and at a higher risk of dropping out of school (Fatima et al., 2021). This is in line with the Statistics South Africa (2021) findings that both males and females aged 7–18’s main reasons for not attending any educational institution include illness and disability, poor academic performance, and lack of money for fees. Looking at the socio-structural framework in relation to the schoolgirl dropout, in this study, girls have been overburdened by context-based challenges that push them out of school and a lack of interventions to address such. Furthermore, the study found that COVID-19 also contributed to the drop as confirmed by the teachers, principals, and district officials.

Conclusion and recommendations

Based on the collaborative community project conducted in partnership with the OR Tambo Department of Basic Education, selected schools, girl learners at risk of dropout, communities, and school management bodies, the researchers recommend that there has to be a properly maintained collaborative effort. It must be permanent among schools, business, department of basic education, government agencies, communities, NGOs, health social services, community organizations, faith-based organizations, and various sectors to address the complex interplay of factors contributing to girl-child dropout rates. Within this collaborative effort, these role players must develop and implement targeted interventions that specifically address the identified historical factors, such as teenage pregnancy, poverty, drug abuse, child labour, family responsibilities, social-cultural factors, and challenges arising from school-related changes during and after COVID-19 lockdowns. These interventions

should be tailored to the unique needs of the rural Eastern Cape communities and schools. The authors further recommend that *“it takes a village to raise a child”* (African proverb). Thus, not only should role players collaborate to fight the scourge of girl-child dropout but the parents, families, community leaders, and local influencers must take part as well. They must initiate community-based programmes that raise awareness and provide support for girl-child education and to thrive academically. Strong educational structural support aimed

at encouraging the academic endeavour of a child should be singled out and encouraged. These educational support structures should be initiated within schools and communities to address the specific needs of at-risk girl learners. This could involve mentorship programmes, counselling services, and initiatives that promote a positive and inclusive learning environment.

Declarations

Interdisciplinary Scope: Interdisciplinary is established by integrating insights from education, public health, and social policy to examine girl-child school dropout. It draws on sociocultural theory and intersectionality, while blending qualitative social science and quantitative enquiry. The analysis informs both educational reform and gender-responsive policy, bridging academic and practical domains.

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