

# The education crisis and school dropout prevention strategies of teachers in Cameroon

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This article explores the education crisis in Cameroon, focusing on the personal experiences of teachers and the strategies they employ to reduce school dropout during the transitional phase from primary to secondary education.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Based on a teacher training programme, 31 interviews with primary and secondary school teachers were conducted. An exploratory research design with an inductive thematic approach was used to identify themes and establish code categories. This design allowed for flexibility in investigating contextual crisis factors by eliciting interpersonal stories and exploring the dynamics of each case.

**Findings** – Three types of dropout prevention strategies – either standalone or mixed – are identified, depending on network, opportunity or service factors. Network-based strategies are considered the most effective and popular, as school dropout is largely influenced by students' social backgrounds, and teachers remain key players in community life. Lies and fictional narratives, through opportunity- or service-based strategies, create dishonesty and unrealistic expectations regarding final education outcomes. Each type of strategy has significant limitations due to the highly fragmented education system in the country.

**Originality/value** – The article reveals that school dropout prevention in Cameroon is hampered significantly by education disorganisation. Teachers' individual practices are insufficient to convey the actual value of education and reverse dropout decisions made after careful consideration. A national pedagogy plan is needed to ensure continuity.

**Keywords** School dropout prevention, Primary education, Secondary education, Cameroon, Education crisis

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

The persistent education crisis in sub-Saharan Africa has been an ongoing challenge for many decades, despite some positive outcomes and increasing enrolment rates. Many children still lack access to or are effectively excluded from basic education programmes (Lewin, 2009; Lewin & Sabates, 2012; Miningou, Pierre-Louis, & Bernard, 2022). The region suffers from enormous resource shortages and overall poor education governance, which are associated with deteriorating infrastructure, low teaching quality, and overcrowded classrooms, leading to poor learning performance and low motivation among students to be promoted to the next grade. School dropout often closes the door to any future educational

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opportunities, as various social, political or cultural factors hinder the possibility of re-enrolment, especially for those in the most vulnerable situations.

The weak public education authorities in the region have limited capacity to effectively address the deteriorating quality of the learning environment for both teachers and students. Furthermore, school absenteeism is not a simple problem that can be solved by a single intervention, as it affects even the most advanced education systems in the world (Kearney & Graczyk, 2020; Keppens & Spruyt, 2020; Wilson, Tanner-Smith, Lipsey, Steinka-Fry, & Morrison, 2011). A comprehensive and long-term approach is needed to examine and tackle multiple aspects of this global crisis simultaneously, including the root causes of school difficulties, continuous support mechanisms, evidence-based observation and assessment of each strategy, and contextualised intervention plans. In particular, school dropout and early withdrawal in emerging countries with high levels of socioeconomic deprivation and chronic poverty are influenced by numerous factors that contribute to demotivation and a loss of interest in education (Momo, Cabus, De Witte, & Groot, 2019). An effective dropout prevention strategy may require a holistic and multidimensional approach involving families, communities and schools. The focus should be on raising awareness of the benefits of education by overcoming certain traditional beliefs that undermine education as a marginal aspect of personal development, leading parents to withdraw their children from school in favour of other social incentives.

The academic debate on these issues remains intense, with no clear consensus on how to effectively address and reduce the likelihood of school dropout. This article explores the phenomenon of school dropout from the perspective of teachers in the context of Cameroon. The article focuses on teachers' efforts to prevent students who have successfully completed primary education from dropping out during the critical transition to secondary education. The context of the education crisis in Cameroon is utilised to elicit perceptions on the current methods of addressing school dropout, mainly by primary and secondary school teachers. Through their initiative, goodwill and distinctive strategies of school dropout prevention (network-based, opportunity-based or service-based), teachers aim to convince children, their families and their wider communities to stay in school.

### Literature review

#### *The complexity of the school dropout problem in sub-Saharan Africa and beyond*

Sub-Saharan African nations have historically struggled with consistently low rates of primary school completion, prompting national policies aimed at improving the quality of basic primary education, at a minimum. Recurrent trends of school progression reveal the most crucial domains of intervention, and although a variety of resources may amplify the effect of educational outcomes, there is no single intervention that can fully address the intricacy and magnitude of the school dropout phenomenon in this region (Sabates, Westbrook, Akyeampong, & Hunt, 2010).

The problem stems from the deep influence of family and community factors, with parental guidance and the overall family educational background remaining the primary determinants of educational choices at various transitional stages. In addition to offering free state primary education, effective and flexible protective measures are needed to convince the adult population of the initial and subsequent advantages of education over the indispensable income-producing activities of their children (Abuya, Oketch, & Musyoka, 2013; Ananga, 2011). Despite the availability of free education, it is rarely completely free; in most cases, there are associated costs and fees that can act as additional barriers, contributing to social exclusion among the poor and potentially leading to emotional and peer-related distress, including feelings of humiliation (Dieltiens & Meny-Gibert, 2012).

The cumulative effects of socioeconomic disadvantages are apparent in how children start primary education, but more so in how they remain in secondary education and advance through the grades. Falling behind in secondary education is strongly associated with socioeconomic status and school inequality, with higher-quality schools playing vital roles in addressing dropout issues and facilitating pathways to successful school completion (Branson, Hofmeyr, & Lam, 2014). Overcrowded classrooms and unfavourable school environments lead to inadequacy in curriculum quality and school instruction, which is often reflected in a lack of discipline and educational interest (Ngwokabuenui, 2015). Rising dropout rates in secondary education may also be caused by peer influence, especially in adolescence (Sang, Koros, & Bosire, 2013), if the value of education is not adequately emphasised. Parental influence and the perceived insignificance of education are vital determinants of school dropout rates. However, many children feel lost and alienated from the learning environment and exercise their agency in making their own school dropout decisions (Zuilkowski, Jukes, & Dubeck, 2016). Ultimately, improving secondary school attendance requires tackling social, economic and systemic issues within schools.

Different forms of school attendance complications, such as school refusal, truancy or withdrawal, afflict not only the developing world but also the most developed, wealthy countries. Interventions are becoming contingent on their own specific institutional, geographical, social and historical factors. However, a persistent challenge remains: while the causes of poor school attendance have been thoroughly assessed, there is a notable absence of an effective, empirically based implementation strategy to address this issue (Keppens & Spruyt, 2020). Given the diversity of the school dropout phenomenon in sub-Saharan Africa, interventions are resource-intensive and operate within a range of circumstances, limitations, and potentially unforeseen external factors that influence their outcomes (Sabates *et al.*, 2010). Therefore, tailored and well-resourced interventions are necessary to effectively address school attendance issues in diverse contexts.

#### *Teacher and education quality in combatting school dropout*

Teachers in severely underdeveloped educational systems struggle with unsustainable class sizes, making it impossible to offer individualised curriculum instruction and guidance. The case of free primary education in the slums of Nairobi in Kenya (Abuya *et al.*, 2013) illustrates how the exhaustion teachers experience from working in adverse, overcrowded conditions can significantly discourage students from attending school. In such environments, teachers are often completely detached from students' lives, lacking any effective communication channels. Slum schools in particular must retain quality teachers who can handle teaching in these difficult areas. Otherwise, a vicious cycle of widespread disobedience and disrespect towards school authorities may emerge among the remaining students, as seen in some Cameroonian secondary schools, creating a volatile atmosphere of mistrust, dishonesty and violence between students and teachers (Ngwokabuenui, 2015). This observation aligns with findings from a recent study on school dropout in Cameroon, which highlights how household characteristics and teacher quality affect dropout rates (Ewondo Mbebi, 2023). School teaching staff should be equipped to identify high-risk students with specific characteristics and focus their efforts on extra dropout-prevention activities for these students (Zuilkowski *et al.*, 2016). This strategy requires sufficient support and resources from high-quality schools to enable teachers to assist struggling students, thus improving and strengthening their connection with the school environment (Branson *et al.*, 2014).

High-quality teacher education – including curriculum and pedagogy skills, along with financial motivation and stability – is a crucial factor in reducing dropout rates. The perceived inadequacy of teacher education in addressing the current education crisis underscores the need for increased investment in education and the integration of teaching

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staff experiences into teacher education programmes. The latter is particularly important since school-based training is significantly influenced by locality, ethnicity and socioeconomic status (Humphreys, Dunne, Durrani, Sankey, & Kaibo, 2020). The Nigerian context offers valuable insights into how improved school infrastructure with less crowded classrooms enhances the perceptions of better outcomes for both teachers and students (Adeniran, Ishaku, & Akanni, 2020). The diversity, large size and mixed ability of classes, primarily in rural schools, impede individualised instruction and formative assessment. The scarcity of materials and the lack of playful methods hamper teachers' ability to capture and sustain attention and differentiate their instruction to accommodate the diverse abilities of their students (Adamu, Tsiga, & Zuilkowski, 2022). Consequently, rural teachers need better support and resources to manage large, diverse classrooms effectively.

Training teachers in rural schools poses additional challenges for recruiting and retaining teachers in local communities. Rural curricula prioritise practical skills over theoretical knowledge, including traditional subjects and activities, engaging in community life both during and after teacher training and participating in the learning environment as a community member rather than as a professional teacher (Nsiangengo & Diasala, 2008). However, this approach demands significant personal effort and makes it challenging to attract quality teacher candidates to unappealing conditions with inadequate remuneration.

### **Education in Cameroon**

#### *The facade of the education crisis in Cameroon*

The Cameroonian education system strives to foster unity while acknowledging the social context of diversity (Nana, 2013). The country's rich linguistic and ethnic diversity is accommodated by two distinct education subsystems – one for the Anglophone and one for the Francophone population. Both subsystems are managed and coordinated by unified ministries: the Ministry of Basic Education for primary education and the Ministry of Secondary Education for secondary education. However, the national education policies and overall structure predominantly reflect the influences of the French system of education, despite the official national vision of promoting bilingualism and interculturalism. Francophone favouritism after the reunification in the 1960s has affected the allocation of education expenditure in favour of Francophone education, with the French colonial legacy prevalent in national-level mechanisms and policies (Dupraz, 2019). Educational reforms have aimed to harmonise the structural organisation of both subsystems (Nana, 2013), resulting in the unification of the number of years of primary and secondary education across Anglophone and Francophone schools. School duration is six years for primary school and seven for secondary school in both subsystems. However, there are minor variations in secondary and high school durations for Francophones versus Anglophones, with secondary school lasting four or five years and high school lasting two or three years.

Cameroon's dual system of education has several drawbacks that affect its quality and equality. The system is characterised by inefficiencies in resource allocation, poor learning outcomes and large disparities among schools within the country (Miningou *et al.*, 2022). Cameroon's contentious colonial heritage still influences the quality and infrastructure of education, as the Francophone teaching style seems to be more effective in curriculum instruction, fostering better teaching practices and enhancing the performance of Francophone primary school students compared to their Anglophone counterparts (Bekkouche & Dupraz, 2023). However, these differences are so subtle that it is difficult to identify the factors that account for this performance gap. Teachers have formulated specific learning strategies based on their own experiences of how Anglophone and Francophone children perform (Esch, 2012). Despite the bilingual policy that mandates extensive English and French lessons in both systems, a lack of knowledge of the other official language is

prevalent (Nana, 2013), as French schools are expected to prioritise their French language objectives, often exclusively.

The educational crisis in Cameroon reveals a severe public mismanagement problem: the fragmented educational landscape, characterised by multiple disconnected ministries, hinders cohesion between the two systems, despite their shared linguistic origins (Achu, Asongu, & Dinga, 2022). Although both systems enjoy equal status in the national education pyramid, one system is frequently viewed as superior, fostering a contentious atmosphere that prevents the harmonious integration of the best practices and principles from each system into a unified knowledge base. The educational system is not prepared to deal with ongoing challenges.

To mitigate the current state of disarray, a coherent national policy direction should be swiftly adopted to address the existing disparities and chaos, with various decision-making bodies 'going every which way' with the vague notion that 'any action [is] welcome to address the crisis' (Béché, 2020). This situation has led to chronic dropout rates in Cameroon, especially among the most impoverished social groups. In particular, the current social structure does not prioritise education for girls, who are frequently subjected to violence, victimisation and patriarchal constraints that limit their future opportunities to the domestic spheres of marriage and maternity. Consequently, girls suffer from inferiority, ignorance, low self-esteem and a lack of support for possible school re-enrolment (Mutia, 2013).

Poor teacher quality is another major issue contributing to the high school dropout rate in Cameroon. The learning environment for teachers creates an unprecedented set of barriers to high-quality teaching, leading to ineffective pedagogical processes, a lack of individual attention to students' learning, and old-fashioned teacher-centred instruction (Wiyahnyuy, 2019). Teachers in Cameroon face a severe shortage of essential teaching resources and materials, overcrowded classrooms, poor remuneration and limited career prospects, while miscommunication and workload irregularities further aggravate their stressful working conditions (Check & Okwo, 2012). The formal training scheme for teachers neglects the educational realities and the individual problems teachers face in their workplaces. Informal learning structures, offered as an alternative supplementary qualification path, especially in rural areas, provide teachers with opportunities for collaboration and peer mentoring from seasoned colleagues. This access enables them to acquire the practical skills, behaviours and problem-solving strategies of experienced peers. Informal teacher training extends beyond the typically short duration (9 months) of training required to become a fully qualified teacher. It incorporates a traditional system where knowledge from experienced elders plays a pivotal role in learning and adaptation (Wohlfahrt, 2018). Effective collaboration among different teaching positions is essential for enhancing teaching motivation, productivity, personal interest and development. Effective collaboration requires establishing clear communication channels and promptly resolving conflicts and managing diverse expectations (Etomes & Mola, 2019).

#### *The Cameroonian education crisis in data*

The latest reports from the Ministry of Basic Education (MINEDUB) for the 2019–2020 and 2021–2022 school years reveal an alarming situation in the education system. On a positive note, the absolute number of primary schools increased by approximately 15% from 2014–2015 to 2021–2022. However, 15% of them are housed in temporary structures. The congestion in classrooms is evident from the student–teacher ratio, which is a staggering 43:1 in primary schools (114,142 registered teachers for 4,944,290 students), meaning that each teacher must instruct on average 43 students at a time. This ratio rises to 56:1 in public primary schools and 70:1 in community schools, while private, fee-based schools have a much more reasonable ratio of 25:1. According to data from the MINEDUB report for the 2019–2020

school year, there is a striking disparity in class size between rural and urban schools, with the former having an average of 35% more students per class than the latter. The most isolated regions in the north face the most severe school overcrowding, with average class sizes exceeding 100 students in the Far North Region and the North Region.

System inadequacy is further manifested in school funding and teacher remuneration, as about 34% of public primary schools with more than 100 students have fewer than three teachers employed by the government. Moreover, the enrolment rate steadily declines as students advance to higher grades in the primary cycle. As a result, only 75 out of every 100 students who enter the first grade of primary school complete the final grade of primary school. A remarkable decline in student enrolment occurs from the first to the last (sixth) year of primary education in both Francophone and Anglophone schools. Specifically, the student population drops by more than half (52%) in Francophone schools between the first and the sixth primary school year, compared to a 35% reduction in Anglophone schools. The Francophone system, however, dominates the primary education sector, with a student population four to five times larger than that of the Anglophone system.

The latest reports from the Ministry of Secondary Education (for the 2017–2018 and 2020–2021 school years) reveal the challenges students face in transitioning from primary to secondary education. The gross and net enrolment rates in secondary schools have declined steadily, from about 59% and 46%, respectively, in the 2015–2016 school year to 47% and 37%, respectively, in the 2020–2021 school year, with a current population of 1,543,373 secondary school students. The country has 3,390 secondary schools, of which 58% (1,957) are public. The public schools host most of the student population, accommodating 70% of the total number of students (1,075,455), while the private schools have only 467,918 students. The transition and dropout rates (Table 1) partially illustrate the magnitude of the education crisis that has unfolded in recent years, aggravated by multiple crises, including conflicts and the COVID-19 pandemic. Most official statistical data seem inadequate to capture the actual extent of the education crisis, particularly given the total closure of schools in 2019–2020 and data discrepancies, including dropout rates during the pandemic years (Béché, 2020).

## Methodology

### Objectives

Based on the literature review and the discussion on the education crisis in Cameroon, specific objectives were formulated for this research. This article intends to explore the following questions:

	2015-2016	2016-2017	2017-2018	2018-2019	2019-2020	2020-2021
Transition rate from primary to secondary school	76.98	61.64	59.00	61.22	63.31	57.69
Gross admission rate on the first year of secondary school	69.68	55.38	52.25	47.65	50.18	48.01
School dropout rate in secondary school	13.25	15.54	20.16	17.34	11.80	13.27
Francophone school dropout rate	12.33	23.46	12.57	13.41	15.16	14.11
Anglophone school dropout rate	12.55	17.54	38.13	29.16	0	9.30

**Table 1.** Transition and dropout rates (%) in secondary schools in Cameroon

**Source(s):** 2017-2018, 2020-2021 Statistical Yearbook, Ministry of Secondary Education, Republic of Cameroon

- (1) How do public school teachers in Cameroon act independently and attempt to prevent school dropout in the transitional stage after the completion of primary school and before admission to secondary school?
- (2) What are the perceived outcomes of these individual efforts?
- (3) How can further school dropouts be prevented through individual or collective actions?

#### *Data sampling and collection*

To answer the research questions, this study employed purposive sampling to select teachers participating in a teacher training programme. During participant selection, the researchers prioritised those who demonstrated a keen interest in dropout prevention, had experience with students transitioning from primary to secondary education, and identified with the key themes of the analysis. The intensive teacher training programme was conducted as a forum of best practices against school dropout in Yaoundé, Cameroon, during June and July 2023, under the auspices of the European education programme 'Physiognomy at School', which was created by Nikolaos Toumaras in recent years. The training programme had multiple components, providing theoretical knowledge and practical insights derived from teaching experiences. It encompassed around 20 contact hours and covered topics such as student engagement techniques, early warning signs of dropout risk and intervention strategies for at-risk students, ensuring comprehensive coverage of the subject. The questions asked during the interviews included 'What strategies do you use to engage students at risk of dropping out?' and 'Can you describe a specific instance where you successfully prevented a student from dropping out?'

The main research methodology consisted of open face-to-face discussions and loosely semi-structured interviews with primary and secondary school teachers from Cameroon. A total of 31 interviews were conducted with 17 primary school teachers and 14 secondary school teachers. Because of the specific nature of the training programme, the teachers were all relatively newly hired and inexperienced, having 5 to 10 years of teaching experience in public schools. The sample included a balanced representation of male and female teachers (17 men and 14 women) and encompassed a diverse mix of rural and urban areas, with urban teachers (58%) slightly more prevalent than rural ones (42%).

#### *Data analysis*

The data collected from the interviews were transcribed and thematically analysed using NVivo qualitative data analysis software. As open discussions, the interviews mostly elicited experiences and stories related to the research questions, including personal critical reflections and speculations (Ahrens & Chapman, 2006), which vividly illustrated the complexity of the teaching environment in Cameroon. The data analysis aimed to identify common elements and successful interventions characterised by distinctive behaviours and actions.

The open discussions were framed as free communication between researchers and teachers, focusing on their actual practices and strategies for dropout prevention rather than any socially desirable perceptions. In line with other studies of teachers' perceptions in Africa (Chisango, Marongwe, Mtsi, & Matyedi, 2020; Zhao, Xu, Yu, & Liu, 2023), an exploratory research design with an inductive thematic approach was employed to derive meanings and themes from the data and to establish code categories as key themes of discussion for the specific dropout prevention strategies that were finally formulated. Although the interviews were primarily open discussions, the term 'semi-structured' is used here to reflect the guided nature of the conversations. The interviewer introduced specific themes and questions to

ensure comprehensive coverage of dropout prevention strategies, while maintaining the flexibility for teachers to share their unique experiences. This flexible design helped delineate the problem and its contextual factors, enabling a profound comprehension of the situation and the complex interpersonal dynamics involved.

## Findings

### *Types of strategies: standalone and mixed*

Each discussion with the primary school teachers (PT) and secondary school teachers (ST) illuminated various strategies to prevent school dropout and encourage students to continue or resume their secondary education after the end of primary school. During the analysis of the interviews, the teachers' interventions were categorised into three main types, based on the nature and scope of their actions. Network-based strategies involve building and maintaining strong relationships with students' families and broader communities. Opportunity-based strategies focus on creating and enhancing learning opportunities to improve students' future career prospects. Service-based strategies provide various forms of school support, mainly at the infrastructure level (Table 2).

Teacher code	Gender	School area	Type of strategy
PT1	Male	Rural	Network-mixed
PT4	Male	Urban	Network-mixed
PT6	Female	Rural	Network
PT7	Female	Urban	Network
PT8	Female	Urban	Network-mixed
PT11	Male	Urban	Network-mixed
PT15	Male	Rural	Network
PT17	Female	Rural	Network
ST2	Female	Urban	Network-mixed
ST6	Male	Rural	Network
ST8	Male	Rural	Network-mixed
ST9	Female	Rural	Network-mixed
ST10	Male	Urban	Network-mixed
PT3	Male	Urban	Opportunity-mixed
PT12	Male	Urban	Opportunity-mixed
PT14	Female	Urban	Opportunity-mixed
ST4	Male	Urban	Opportunity-mixed
ST7	Female	Rural	Opportunity-mixed
ST12	Male	Urban	Opportunity
PT2	Male	Urban	Service
PT5	Male	Urban	Service-mixed
PT9	Male	Urban	Service-mixed
PT10	Female	Rural	Service-mixed
PT13	Female	Urban	Service-mixed
PT16	Female	Rural	Service-mixed
ST1	Female	Urban	Service
ST3	Female	Urban	Service-mixed
ST5	Male	Rural	Service-mixed
ST11	Male	Urban	Service
ST13	Male	Rural	Service-mixed
ST14	Female	Rural	Service-mixed

**Table 2.**  
School dropout  
prevention strategy by  
teacher

**Source(s):** Interview data



In most cases, it takes more than a single-parameter intervention to tackle the root causes of school dropout and convince students and their families of the benefits of education (Kearney & Graczyk, 2020; Sabates *et al.*, 2010). Therefore, teachers in Cameroon usually adopt a mixed approach, which sometimes emphasises a particular element as a starting point of action and communication (e.g. network–mixed) but eventually incorporates all parameters to elicit motivation and foster a sense of trust in the positive influence of education on children’s lives.

### *Network-based strategies*

Teachers play a crucial role in the development of communities, and they should adapt school life to reflect and possibly challenge the norms and hierarchies of the micro-environment through a combination of theoretical and practical activities (Nsiangengo & Diasala, 2008). Teachers act as network agents and disseminators of new values that must be instilled through education and community engagement. Most teachers endeavour to legitimise their work socially and influence their wider communities to create a stable trend of school participation.

Children should be our focus, and teachers should adjust courses to their actual needs. I feel that parents and the community behave as the sole judges, seeing education based on what they think or want for themselves, not for the children. (PT4)

The allocation of time for children’s education should be a priority of family decision-making processes after children have completed primary school. Furthermore, school progression should be rationalised in terms of its benefits rather than its opportunities or actual costs against children’s involvement in more practical duties. However, this is not easily understood by families with minimal levels of education (Kamga, 2010).

Finishing primary school is a great achievement, since many adults were not able to do so. After that, a blank space, ‘waste of time’, [they see] no need to move beyond some basic reading and mathematics, let alone [accommodate] the extra costs and the [travelling] distance. (ST10)

Therefore, network stimulation should target family members who are more receptive to dialogue and have more positive attitudes towards education or who have achieved practical success through education. Teachers need influential mentors who can articulate the value of devoting time to education in communities’ own terms. Failing this, teachers with sufficient local knowledge and connections may try to employ pure network-based strategies and present themselves as guarantors of children’s progress.

In a public primary school, you are unable to closely monitor the development of a child, but you develop a personal bond if you remain in the same school. Six years may create a safety zone, then secondary school is a new start. Who will guarantee this new start? (PT1)

It is evident that, after primary school, there is a lack of continuity and accountability, leaving students and their families in a state of uncertainty. This responsibility may be assumed by the old primary school teachers or the new secondary ones, but there should be collaboration in this regard. This point of collaboration between primary and secondary schools is where the networks often fail to prevent dropout and effectively convince families that there will be a smooth transition for their children.

Network influence may work to convince someone while we remain in the same school or if we guarantee that we know the secondary school. This is not entirely true, because secondary schools are not our business and there is no support to familiarise students with this environment. (PT6)

*Opportunity-based strategies*

Unlike the peripheral influence of network-based behaviours, some teachers focus nearly all their attention on their students, aiming to profoundly impact their future career prospects, as children are the ultimate beneficiaries of the education system's quality. By harnessing students' autonomous agency, teachers can help them negotiate their personal preferences and transform their final choices into uncompromised, independent goals (Zhao *et al.*, 2023).

It sounds like a fairy tale, too good to be true, but I insist on talking with children and telling them the positive stories of others. Excellent grades in final Baccalaureate exams may become the new life abroad they always dreamed of! (ST12)

Education is portrayed not only as a conventional tool to alleviate poverty but also as a pathway to migration abroad, which offers the potential for better opportunities and greater stability. Teachers also highlight the fact that their future career opportunities will deteriorate significantly, and this may have a substantial negative impact on their financial and social status. However, the low social status of teachers in Cameroon hardly inspires a vision of change for children's future, particularly since secondary schools are plagued by social favouritism and corruption (Ngwokabuenui, 2015).

Education is valued as an important aspect for the majority, but it is understood as a missed opportunity if that is the sole focus. Finding help from the right people who will help you emigrate is essential to be successful, not just education. (PT14)

The dream of a new life through education, either in Cameroon or abroad, seems quite unattainable for most children when school dropout is caused by poor outcomes and performance. In this case, the decision to drop out has deeper origins that must be addressed.

A student struggling with poor performance often feels lonely and skips courses. If there is no time and resources to give them attention in class, to adapt teaching to the student's style, we can't improve their motivation. We try to at least offer inspiration for the future. (ST4)

A lack of motivation and disinterest are typical consequences of the infrastructure failure that creates chaotic learning environments in overcrowded classrooms (Adamu *et al.*, 2022). Even in the most optimistic scenario, where a student believes that good learning outcomes can lead to future opportunities, a feasible support system is needed to help the student perform well. However, such a system cannot realistically be provided at present.

*Service-based strategies*

Schools in Cameroon face resource constraints, yet they serve as vital community hubs and education centres that offer various services unavailable elsewhere in the local area. This may encourage students to pursue secondary education, which goes beyond basic literacy with the goal of fostering practical and professional skills. Despite the inadequate school infrastructure, incremental advances in some critical domains, such as information technology access and interconnectedness, could spark students' curiosity and help them acquire essential modern skills (Chisango *et al.*, 2020).

The classes are without many necessary materials, but school remains the only area where so many books are gathered in one place in the community. There is a low adoption of new technologies, but there are still some PCs for demonstration. These resources are not enough for everyone, but they remain unique. (ST13)

In addition, service-based interventions promote the role of secondary education in the socialisation process of the young generation (Nana, 2013). Secondary school dropout may be perceived as a sign of social detachment and problematic antisocial behaviour. Apart from

the power of knowledge, the desire for socialisation and communication may motivate students to explore the opportunities that secondary education can offer.

If there is a basic football pitch, it should be somewhere near the school. The best internet service area is probably around the school. If some popular athlete ever decides to visit our region, the school will be one of the first places they will visit to greet and interact with the students. (PT9)

Through a trial-and-error method, parents and students may also evaluate the school environment for linguistic, cultural or technological learning, or even as a venue for recreation and play. However, this approach may entail unrealistic expectations and imaginary narratives, leading to quick disillusionment and dropout after a few school years.

There is pressure from our school authorities to promote services. Everything in words seems easy-peasy, but families soon learn that there are very few services (there are partial services for some students), and they are not always fairly distributed. (ST14)

Finally, it should be noted that with this approach, teachers cooperate and act collectively with local authorities to autonomously evaluate the specific needs of individual students and their communities (Achu *et al.*, 2022) and determine whether they can provide any kind of improvement based on the current possibilities and constraints. An effective pattern of collaboration incorporates different communication strategies regarding school dropout, reducing conflicts between interpersonal goals and objectives.

It is important for dropout awareness programmes to be taken up together as one team. Each one of us has separate contacts, ideas and stories to share, but I can't reach many families alone. If we demonstrate that we put in effort and care about our teaching, someone may look back and care. (PT13)

## Discussion

### *Potential effectiveness*

School dropout decisions are deliberate actions undertaken in light of broader family considerations that are influenced by a complex array of factors (Momo *et al.*, 2019). The perspectives of teachers in Cameroon highlight this by revealing their voluntary and spontaneous strategies to prevent dropout, which are informed by previous experiences, individual cases and the local context of each intervention. Acting as individual social participants in their communities, isolated and neglected by the official authorities and the institutional decision-making centres, teachers aim to identify and prevent school dropout largely through their own determination.

Therefore, network-based prevention strategies are regarded as the most effective and remain the most prevalent initiatives. The impact of school attendance in higher levels of secondary education on students' future lives should be properly communicated using persuasive argumentation techniques. These techniques should challenge restrictive social or traditional norms that favour out-of-school personal development to implement immediate remediation practices (Kearney & Graczyk, 2020). Although fostering personal connections as mentors and safety providers can significantly enhance children's educational progress, interpersonal interactions often encounter insurmountable barriers that prevent further advancement. Students' transitions to the secondary education system, often involving new teachers and unfamiliar areas, should be supported by comprehensive social adaptation initiatives and robust collaboration efforts to help them integrate into their new school environments. The institutional fragmentation in Cameroon considerably reduces the scope of such interventions and amplifies traditional voices calling for school dropout after primary school. Different educational ministries handle the disorganised systems of primary and

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secondary schools. Therefore, promoting extensive multi-network involvement is essential to convince families in need of a strong safety net and financial assistance to keep their children in school.

Another strategy used by teachers shifts the focus from students' backgrounds to their agency in choosing to continue their education as a crucial means of improving their future lives. Students internalise various social systems and structures, interacting with different agents as they evaluate, critique and shape their own processes. These relationships are uniquely formed and gradually consolidated over time and across different contexts (Zhao *et al.*, 2023). Positive stories and idealised role models are easily challenged by the harsh reality of the education system in Cameroon, while any remedial practices for poor learning performance or behavioural and emotional difficulties are typically overlooked amid the chaos of public education. The low status of teachers in the country undermines the feasibility of an opportunity-based strategy as an unrealistic approach to social development in a society in which meritocracy is implausible and runs counter to opportunistic realities (Ngwokabuenui, 2015).

In service-based interventions, schools are vital social structures and natural arenas for youth socialisation. Within this context, opportunities for knowledge may emerge, similar to opportunity-based reasoning. In more pragmatic terms, schools are portrayed as hubs connecting communities with the wider world. Although some students may initially be intrigued by the possibilities offered by secondary education, school attendance very quickly turns into disillusionment, leading to school absenteeism, failure, unofficial enrolment status and dropout after a few years. Schools commonly resort to promotional lies and exaggerations to conceal severe issues such as poor quality, teacher shortages, limited support and lack of socialisation through leisure activities, and inconvenient school times and locations. The relative success of this strategy is primarily reflected in certain statistical patterns, as lack of interest eventually outweighs the deception, unmet expectations and lack of tangible outcomes. For many students, after careful consideration of multiple factors, school dropout remains the only viable life option (Ewondo Mbebi, 2023; Mutia, 2013; Zuilkowski *et al.*, 2016).

### *Lies and reality*

The individual actions taken by teachers to address school dropout tend to foster direct, interpersonal interactions within their immediate networks of contacts, which deepen gradually over time. However, service-based strategies can be the first step towards uniting teachers in addressing the same challenges. To effectively tackle school dropout rates between the primary and secondary levels, collective actions beyond single education levels or school districts are necessary. However, according to the teachers' perceptions, such actions remain elusive. Three separate education ministries in Cameroon (the Ministries of Basic Education, Secondary Education and Higher Education) are responsible for implementing various actions, and the collaboration between the primary and secondary levels to implement a national pedagogy plan for ensuring continuity is seen as yet another vague response to a chronic crisis (Béché, 2020). While teachers recognise the need to adopt an effective network strategy based on local needs and specific capacities and resources (Wilson *et al.*, 2011), related practices are currently isolated, disjointed and hindered by the root causes of Cameroon's education crisis (Achuo *et al.*, 2022).

Many strategies, whether official or unofficial, collective or individual, are employed simultaneously to raise awareness of the manifold significance of education and attract local attention. However, the excessive focus on unattainable educational outcomes perpetuates a narrative of falsehoods, sustaining a perilous social and cultural misrepresentation of the true value of education (Momo *et al.*, 2019), especially for the most marginalised groups. A strategy

used by one or a group of teachers in a primary school is easily disrupted by the chaotic linkage with secondary schools, while a strategy used in a secondary school is typically inaccessible to primary school students and their families. Public education problems cannot be indefinitely concealed by using fiction-based strategies that lack long-term impacts and only yield temporary results in secondary school enrolment. Successful dropout prevention strategies should use customised local approaches with the support of teachers as community knowledge mediators, building on their existing knowledge and the indispensable, seamless collaboration with the upper levels of education (Kearney & Graczyk, 2020).

## Conclusion

The long-term implications of school instruction in highly dysfunctional environments adversely impact social perceptions of the inherent value of education. Promoting personal development through continued secondary school education must become a priority in institutional policymaking, given teachers' challenges in demonstrating the benefits of staying in school. The poor quality of education in overcrowded classrooms and the cumulative underperformance of students contribute to demotivation that cannot be reversed by isolated, fragmented dropout prevention strategies, which often fail to convince students and their communities. Teachers in Cameroon generally operate in isolation due to a lack of clear national policy guidance, relying predominantly on their community networks and promoting education with unrealistic arguments about future opportunities. A national pedagogical plan is required to harmonise the Francophone and Anglophone education systems at various levels, identify best practices and effective methods for dropout prevention and propose a realistic scheme that adapts to the current needs of each local context.

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### Further reading

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