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Uganda has one of the highest rates of early school leavers (ESLs) in Sub-Saharan Africa, and the highest in East Africa, despite impressive school enrolment rates. While studies have been conducted on the possible causes of this phenomenon, little is known about the experiences and social world of these ESLs. This study aimed to explore the lived realities of ESLs by listening to their stories and experiences. The study draws from 16 in-depth interviews conducted with ESLs aged between 16 and 24. A narrative-based, qualitative method was used to analyse the data according to four broad themes: ESLs' experiences at school and eventual leaving, their feelings about leaving school, their life and work in the community and their future aspirations. Most participants in the study interpreted early school leaving (ESLg) as a bad and traumatising experience that undermined their sense of self-worth, limited their life opportunities and exposed them to social exclusion. Accordingly, interventions to address ESLg should not only seek to address the 'risk factors' for and causes of ESLg but also to rebuild the self-image of ESLs and to equip them with the relevant practical skills to help them overcome vulnerability, marginalisation and social exclusion.

Keywords: early school leavers; school dropout; marginalisation; exclusion; narratives; experiences

Introduction

So the first thing, I hated myself … I stopped in senior [secondary] 4 … I lacked money for filling the forms, so I never sat for senior 4 exams. So the first thing, I hated myself. I thought of my time that I wasted [in school] and not do other things, because I was seeing other people who had finished primary seven with me … for them they did their things [didn't continue with education but went into petty trade or farming] and developed. I again looked at the time I wasted in school. Yes, I tried to obtain knowledge but I realised that others were living [had a livelihood]. I did not continue with studies and so I was coming back to look like them [those that never went to school] and become too much of a villager. I really hated myself. I hated my parents and all my relatives; I hated them so much because I was realising that things were there [assets that could be sold to help him complete school] but no relative was willing to help. I felt hurt and I hated myself … now it is not easy to get jobs … (Seti)

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Seti's story, in some ways, summarises the feelings, opinions and lived realities of most early school leavers (ESLs) who participated in this study. The term ESLs is used in this paper to refer to young people who have either 'dropped out' of school before completing the primary and secondary cycles of education or may have completed these levels, but never went ahead to acquire further training in a technical/vocational school or any other tertiary institution. This expanded definition of ESLs is important in the Ugandan context because, due to the nature of the education system in the country (which is very theoretical, academic and lacking adequate infrastructure), many young people who complete primary or secondary school leave without the sufficient skills for life and for the labour market. Accordingly, as seen from Seti's story, even those who leave after secondary school feel as though they wasted their time in school. If they want to get a job, they may have to obtain some additional training. Furthermore, Seti's story illustrates the frustration, disenchantment and complex realities that ESLs go through. Apart from a few lucky individuals, like the individuals Seti refers to as those who 'did their things and developed', most ESLs tell stories of exclusion and marginalisation. This also reflects society's view of ESLs which made Openjuru (2010, 20) lament that 'in most cases ESLs are seen as losers and they are stigmatised by society rather than assisted'. Notwithstanding the sometimes-elusive debate in Uganda regarding the benefits of education amidst high levels of youth unemployment among graduates and whether or not some of the richest people in the country are ESLs, the world of ESLs seems to be one of a number of struggles. This paper explores the experiences and lived realities of 16 ESLs, aged 16–24, living in Mbarara, a rural district in south-western Uganda.

Uganda's mainstream system of education proceeds through a 7-4-2-(3-5) year structure from primary to tertiary education. Formal primary education comprises seven years (official age range 6–12, but there are also late enrollers), ordinary level secondary education takes four years and advanced secondary two years (age range 13–18). Tertiary education consists of universities, business and technical colleges, teachers' colleges, etc., and runs for 3–5 years depending on the profession or course of study. Alongside this mainstream academic education are diverse levels of technical and vocational education serving some primary and secondary school leavers and non-completers. However, because of the poor image of the technical and vocational education in the country (Jjuuko 2012; Openjuru 2010) and the perception of education as something that should lead to 'prestigious' degrees and certificates that will eventually lead to 'better' white-collar jobs, everyone strives to go up the ladder in the mainstream academic education and technical and vocational education tends to be the backwater of the academic system. The structure of the system and society's perception of education make the Ugandan education system rather theoretical, examination-oriented and elitist which affects the development of the necessary skills and competences for life and for the labour market. Whereas those who succeed in academic education may have improved opportunities to join the labour market, ESLs, with the exception of a few often find themselves trapped in various forms of social exclusion and marginalisation due to inadequate education and skills. To improve their plight some ESLs enrol in vocational training programmes to acquire specific skills or work as apprentices in the informal sector to learn a specific trade.

Early school leaving (ESLg) is a global problem, but it affects regions and countries differently in terms of definition, scale and consequences. In Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), the phenomenon of ESLg is of immense proportions. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO 2011, 47) reported that in SSA 'about 10 million children drop out of primary school each year', and in a study by Lewin (2009, 154),

it was stated that 'fewer than 30% of all children successfully complete secondary schooling'. This makes SSA the continent with not only the highest number of out-of-school children but also with the highest number of school 'drop outs' or ESLs. Accordingly, the recent Africa Progress Report (2012) has expressed concern about this problem and called for second-chance education to be scaled up in efforts to increase retention in formal schools and also to improve the skills, opportunities and life chances of ESLs.

Uganda is one of the SSA countries hailed for increasing access to education by implementing Universal Primary Education (UPE) in 1997 and Universal Secondary Education (USE) in 2007 (Altinyelken 2010; Ssewamala et al. 2011; The Republic of Uganda 2010). These initiatives have astronomically increased total enrolment rates in primary and secondary schools. Primary school enrolment rose from 2.7 million in 1996 to 8.7 million in 2010 and secondary school enrolment rose from 518,931 in 2000 to 1,537,000 in 2010 (UBOS 2010). However, serious questions about school quality and retention remain. As Hunt (2009, 1) noted, 'While initial access to education is increasing in many countries, dropout rates continue to be high'. Uganda has one of the highest rates of school 'drop outs' in SSA and the highest in East Africa. For example, figures from the Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES) show that of the 1,763,284 pupils registered in primary one in 2006 across the country, only 564,804 candidates registered with Uganda National Examinations Board for the 2012 primary leaving examinations. This means that 68% of the pupils who were enrolled in 2006 either 'dropped out' or repeated some classes during their primary school education (Ahimbisbwe 2012). The completion rate for secondary school is approximately 50%. The literature shows that ESLg is a complex issue influenced by 'a range of interacting factors' (Hunt 2009, 4) and is often a process rather than an event (Ampiah and Adu-Yoboah 2009; Hunt 2008; Lee and Ip 2003). In Uganda, according to recent studies, ESLg is linked to direct and indirect costs of education, parental decisions, pregnancy, early marriages, interest in petty trading, being too old for the class (for late enrollers), effects of war, child labour, poor academic progress, sickness or calamity, harassment at school, perceived lack of relevance and orphanhood (see for example, Blaak, Zeelen, and Openjuru 2013; Kanyandago 2010; MoES 2008; Amone-P'Olak 2007; UBOS 2006; Nakanyike, Kasente, and Balihuta 2002).

As studies have shown, the main problem with ESLg is that it exposes young people to social exclusion and diminishes their life chances (Africa Progress Report 2012; Sabates et al. 2010; Olmec 2007). Social exclusion, as defined by the European Union in 2003 refers to:

> … a process whereby certain individuals are pushed to the edge of society and prevented from participating fully by virtue of their poverty, or lack of basic competencies and lifelong learning opportunities, or as a result of discrimination. This distances them from job, income and education opportunities as well as social and community networks and activities. They have little access to power and decision-making bodies and thus often feeling powerless and unable to take control over the decisions that affect their day to day lives … social exclusion is multi-dimensional in that it encompasses income poverty, unemployment, access to education, information, childcare and health facilities, living conditions, as well as social participation. (Eurostat 2010, 7)

The same concept was previously described by Walker and Walker (1997, 8) as: '… the dynamic process of being shut out, fully or partially, from any of the social, economic, political or cultural systems which determine the social integration of a person in society'.

ESLs are likely to find themselves in situations of social exclusion and marginalisation as those described above. Many ESLs leave school with few of the skills necessary for the labour market and for taking advantage of the opportunities society provides for improving their livelihood. They are consistently at an 'increased likelihood of long-term unemployment, low-skilled and poorly-paid employment and social and economic marginalisation' (The National Economic and Social Forum 2002, 8).

Studies conducted in different parts of the world show that ESLg is often a process involving a number of interacting factors (Hunt 2008; Prevatt and Kelly 2003), but its causes may differ from place to place and person to person. For example in Uganda and other SSA countries, the main causes of ESLg are especially linked to direct and indirect costs of education and processes and experiences related to individuals, families and communities whereas in Europe, the phenomenon of ESLg is more linked to 'processes and experiences highly specific to the individual' (GHK Consulting et al. 2011, 7). In terms of numbers, SSA in general and Uganda in particular has higher numbers of ESLs than most countries in Europe. However, two things are common everywhere: first is the fact that young people from poor socio-economic backgrounds as well as those with behavioural and learning problems are more likely to leave school early than others, and secondly, that ESLg is a fundamental contributor to social exclusion and marginalisation because ESLs often lack the necessary skills for their integration into the labour market and for taking advantage of other livelihood opportunities.

Given this background, it is crucial that we try to understand the experiences and lived realities of ESLs so that if there are to be second-chance interventions, as the Africa Progress Report (2012) proposes, such interventions are established and promoted from an informed position. Hunt (2008) conducted a comprehensive literature review on dropping out of school and later acknowledged the 'limited numbers of in-depth qualitative accounts of dropping out from school based on interviews with and life histories of drop outs' (Hunt 2009, 4). A similar acknowledgement was made by Tilleczek et al. (2008b, 24) who observed that, in the current literature, 'the full character of the daily lives of the youth who leave school early is less understood' and called for the exploration of everyday lives and lived experiences of these 'marginalised youth'. In Uganda, there has been renewed interest in the subject of ESLg because of the high rates of ESLg being reported by the UBOS, MoES and different media sources. As a result, several studies have been conducted to try and understand which students leave school early and why (see, for example, Zeelen et al. 2010). However, there is a lack of studies on the everyday experiences of ESLs. The current study aimed to explore the lived realities of ESLs by listening to stories told by the young people themselves. The following section explains the methods that were used to conduct the study.

Methods

This study draws on 16 in-depth interviews conducted with ESLs aged 16–24 years, all of whom had left school at least two years prior to the time of the interviews. The data used in this study are part of a larger study being conducted in the Mbarara district, southwestern Uganda, aimed at understanding the problem of ESLg and finding ways to address the problem by recommending possible interventions for ESLs. The interviews were conducted between July 2010 and March 2011, with the objective of exploring the experiences and lived realities of ESLs in relation to their feelings, reactions, meanings and interpretations of being an ESL, their life at school and reasons for leaving, their life

and work in the community and their future aspirations. The sample used in the study was drawn from the larger pool of ESLs who are taking part in the aforementioned ESLs study. They were purposively chosen from the larger group for this in-depth study based on the time they had spent out of school because we thought they had 'information-rich' (Liamputtong and Ezzy 2005, 46) experiences that would serve the purpose of our study. Because the study is exploratory in nature, we did not aim for representativeness of the sample but, instead, for the 'richness of the data' (Liamputtong and Ezzy 2005, 49) that would allow us to fully explore the lived realities of ESLs. Moreover, Kolar, Erickson, and Stewart (2012 cited Crouch and McKenzie 2006) advise that, for exploratory and analytic studies, a small number of participants are recommended. The sample included seven females and nine males. By the time of the interview, five of the participants had enrolled in different skills training programmes and the other participants were in different occupations as indicated in Table 1.

Table 1. Participants' profile.

Participant	Age	Sex	Stage left school	Current status/occupation
John	23	Male	Secondary 3	*Boda-boda*[a] rider
Esther	16	Female	Primary 5	Helping parents on the farm
Janet	19	Female	Secondary 5	At home with parents
Kelly	21	Male	Secondary 3	*Boda-boda* rider
Tom	22	Male	Primary 6	Unemployed
Joshua	24	Male	Secondary 4	On-job training in a garage
Dorah	20	Female	Secondary 3	Petty trader
Abdu	17	Male	Secondary 2	Training at a farm school
Roy	23	Male	Primary 5	Car washer
Carol	19	female	Secondary 4	Training at a commercial school
Yona	16	Male	Primary 7	Training at a farm school
Kato	20	Male	Secondary 2	Car washer
Jackie	23	Female	Primary 7	Housemaid
Seti	22	Male	Secondary 4	Unemployed
Jose	24	Female	Secondary 4	Businesswoman
Dina	19	Female	Secondary 2	Shop attendant

Note: All participant names are pseudonyms. [a]Passenger motorbike.

This was a qualitative, narrative-based study which utilised in-depth, unstructured interviews (Riessman 2008) to research the experiences of ESLs. This methodology was used because narrative analysis is valuable in 'shifting the emphasis from macro-dynamics to individual lives and is highly effective for researching individuals' experiences' (Tanyas 2012, 698). Narratives are good for 'eliciting inner views of respondents' lives as they portray their social worlds and experience' (Mueller et al. 2008, 66) as well as for exploring the 'meanings of those experiences for the individual' (Creswell 2008, 512). Tilleczek (2008), Hunt (2009) and Hodgson (2007) expressed the need for researchers to employ in-depth interviews and narratives to understand the life stories of ESLs as their lived experiences have not been adequately explored in the existing literature. This study is an attempt to contribute to this necessity.

Prior to collecting data for this study, the objective of the research study was first explained to the participants, and consent was obtained from each of them. The

participants all willingly agreed to take part in the study. Although participants saw study participation as an opportunity to tell their hitherto untold stories, it turned out that, for most of them, narrating their experiences was sometimes difficult and emotional, as ESLs can be a vulnerable and sensitive group of young people. Accordingly, all the names used in this study are pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality (Hyden 2008). The in-depth interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and were conducted by appointment and in quiet locations to avoid any interruptions. These young people were asked to tell their life experiences based on prompts such as: tell me about your experience at school and what made you leave; describe your feeling after leaving school; what has been your experience out of school?; and what are your future dreams? The interviews were tape-recorded and later transcribed verbatim.

The data transcripts were read by the researchers several times to familiarise themselves with the data, and they were analysed inductively with the use of emerging themes from the data. Data analysis was aided by a qualitative data analysis software ATLAS.ti. Though we tried to pay attention to the structural and social contexts of the stories (Kolar, Erickson, and Stewart 2012; Riessman 2011), more emphasis was put on 'thematic analysis – [on] *what* is told' (Tanyas 2012, 699). This was performed to 'illustrate' the experiences of these, so often marginalised, ESLs whose experiences are underrepresented in literature (Hunt 2009). To ensure the accuracy of the information, during the process of data analysis, summaries from each participant's transcript were shared with the respective participants to confirm the authenticity (or lack of) of the major issues in their stories. All the participants confirmed that what they were presented with was a true record of what they had communicated in the interview.

The next section presents the findings of the study according to the themes developed from the in-depth interviews of the ESLs. To illustrate their experiences and lived realities, excerpts from the interviews are used to represent the ESLs' own voices.

Life at school and eventual leaving

In the privacy and quietness of our interview locations, which were specifically chosen to make the participants comfortable and to avoid interruptions (usually in the backside gardens of some small restaurants in the participants' home areas or under a tree in the neighbouring school compound over the weekend), we always started our interviews by asking the young people to tell us about their school experiences and what made them to leave school early. School environment can be a major contributor to ESLg especially when it is perceived by young people as being oppressive and unsupportive of their learning or irrelevant to their needs and wishes. Surprisingly, 11 out of the 16 participants in this study indicated that they enjoyed school and would go back to school if they had the opportunity and means. The following is what some of them said when asked about their school experiences:

> I was doing very well … I liked studying … I was in a rural school but I loved it, and I loved studying, and I know that if I had money for school fees, by now I would be at university. (John)

> Everything was well at school. At least I had the brain, and I think that's why I am still missing my school … obviously I felt bad, but I still have hopes of going back [to school] to do a course to help me do other things. (Janet)

> I was feeling the desire to keep in school and continue studying … I was feeling bad about it [leaving school] because my classmates were proceeding and now some are teachers, so I was feeling bad. (Tom)

Such views of displeasure about leaving school were echoed in most of our interviews. For most of them, leaving school before completion or at a lower stage (primary or secondary) meant that their future dreams of going to university, and later getting a white-collar job, were shattered. Like many other young people in Uganda, the ideal situation for many of the ESLs would have been to climb the educational ladder until they obtained the 'prestigious' university degree. However, there were contrasting views and experiences. For example, Abdu, who had learning difficulties, used to be abused by the teachers in front of his fellow students, and sometimes these teachers would beat him. As a result, he developed aggressive behaviour, and when he was in secondary 2, he participated in a strike and was expelled from school. Abdu is currently enrolled in a farm school for a course in agricultural studies where he hopes to gain practical skills to help him earn a living. This is how he described his short-lived secondary school experience:

> When I was in primary school I liked it … but secondary [school] I was tired of school … the teachers would abuse us and beat us because we failed an exam or because I would not answer the questions in class. Is it my fault if I don't know something? … So one day when the students wanted to strike, I was also angry, and I joined them … then I was expelled from school. (Abdu)

Abdu's story illustrates how the school environment can impact students' behaviour, cause them to hate school and, for some, prompt them to leave prematurely.

The reasons for leaving school, according to the interviews, are varied. However, the issue of direct and indirect costs of schooling was cited by most ESLs as the main cause for their ESLg. Many of them mentioned a lack of means to pay school fees or for other scholastic materials as the reason why they left school. Of those who left due to this reason, four were orphans while others came from poor backgrounds or had parents who deliberately refused to pay their school fees. In Uganda, the government is implementing 'free' UPE and USE, but they do not cover all schools, especially private schools. Furthermore, students' parents or guardians are expected to cover other school costs (such as the cost of books, pens, pencils and meals, etc.) aside from the tuition fees that the government is supposed to subsidise. Therefore, some parents/guardians cannot afford to pay these costs, while others just refuse to pay for other reasons:

> I stopped in secondary 3. I didn't study to finish senior 3. I studied one term in it. My parents could not afford money to sustain them and also to pay school fees and my studies were always interrupted. I would always be the one to be sent away from school for fees, books, whatever. Okay, all necessities at school remained lacking. (aaah …) I decided to quit from there. (John)

John's story is not different from those of many other ESLs interviewed. They narrate stories of frustration and decisions to quit school due to their parents' or guardians' failure to meet the costs of their education. Jackie, who now works as a housemaid in Mbarara town, had completed primary 7 with good grades and had ambitions of going to secondary school, but her hopes were dashed when the parents told her that she could not

continue school because they had no money to pay for her. That is how school life ended for her, and she has since worked as a housemaid in several homes. In the process of working, she was impregnated by a *boda-boda* rider who promised to marry her but later abandoned her, and she now has to take care of her one-year-old baby girl as she continues to work as a housemaid. Life has not been easy for her since she had her child because some families do not want to employ a maid with a child:

> What led me not to continue studying is that I finished primary seven and lacked money to continue to secondary school. When the money got lost [parents lacked money], we [the family] put an effort as human beings [to find money]. When money got lost, I saw that there was no money completely to make me continue to secondary. That is where I ended and left school. I have now become a 'professional' house girl [house maid]. (Jackie)

This finding about the direct and indirect costs of schooling being a determining factor in ESLg is consistent with other studies that have been carried out in different parts of SSA, in general, and Uganda, in particular (see, for example, Blaak, Zeelen, and Openjuru 2013; UBOS 2006; Nakanyike, Kasente, and Balihuta 2002; Lewin 2009; Hunt 2008). However, as Kanyandago (2010) observed, sometimes, a lack of money to pay school fees may obscure other important factors that cause ESLg.

In this regard, this study found that while most participants mentioned the lack of means to pay school fees as the main cause of ESLg, within the stories, other causes surfaced. One additional cause for ESLg concerns the cultural beliefs about the education of females. Dorah – a 20-year-old young lady now engaged in petty trading in one of the trading centres of Mbarara – left school before completing secondary 3 because of what she calls 'the ignorance of my parents'. 'If I was a boy, I think I would have continued … my father never wanted the girls to study because they are going to get married'. Her story is more or less similar to the one of Esther:

> My father had a heart of educating children, but because of people's words and influences about educating a girl, he refused to let me continue in school … for example they would ask him why he was educating girls, and I was the eldest among girls, so they told him that money put in a girls' education does not make profits and returns. They told him that you will educate a girl child and she will enrich her husband, and for you, your money gets wasted; and he decided to stop educating us. (Esther)

Esther's story demonstrates that some people in Mbarara still keep the old belief system where parents would only educate boys, thinking that the education of girls was a waste of time and resources as the girl would be married away to benefit the husband's family. Others held the view that educated girls would be exposed to the 'world' and that this would lead them to 'promiscuity'. This story clearly shows that it is not only Esther's father who made the decision to stop her from continuing with her education. His decision was influenced by other people who could also be doing the same to their daughters. It seems that gender issues still play a role in individuals' access to education and level of educational attainment. In some communities, gender issues have also been found to influence the educational attainment of young boys. For instance, in a recent study by Ngabirano (2010), it was found that in some communities of western Uganda, some boys were being forced to leave school early to help with family work at home,

such as taking care of domestic animals, or to engage in petty trading to earn quick money.

According to this study, the decision to leave school is also linked to the student's interpretation of education as being irrelevant to the realities of life due to the high numbers of unemployed educated youth in addition to the relative success achieved by some ESLs or unschooled people compared to some of those who went to school and gained professional certificates. Jose lost interest in school when she was completing secondary 4 partly because she was seeing some 'wealthy people around' who had not completed much education and were 'doing better' than university graduates. Jose's loss of interest in school had started earlier while she was still in secondary 2, and this loss of interest affected her grades. According to Jose, her lack of interest and resulting poor grades led to her decision not to continue with school. She has since started a small business and is trying to become 'wealthy' like individuals who have 'made it', despite not having 'a lot of education'. For Jose, the purpose of education is to help you earn money and become wealthy in the long-run:

> Others were educated, but those who had no any education, they are the ones you see as big people, for example the likes of [ZZZ (name of prominent businessman)]. They tell you that [ZZZ] started with ten second hand clothes and was moving around selling them, and from them he became a rich man. He is my role model … I will also get rich.

As previously stated and as seen from the above stories, the factors that are linked to ESLg vary and are 'not necessarily simple, contained, or easy to articulate' (Hodgson 2007, 10).

Nevertheless, results from this study indicate that a lack of the money necessary to pay school fees and the cost of scholastic materials is a major contributing factor to ESLg in Mbarara and most likely in Uganda as a whole. In this study, only four participants did not mention the issue of school fees: Jose saw what she was studying as irrelevant and eventually lost interest; Kato thought that joining a technical school was better in terms of employment prospects; Dina got pregnant and had to leave school; and Abdu was expelled from school.

From the narratives of these ESLs, on the surface it may appear as though the decision to leave school is simply an event or a decision that occurs at one time point. However, a close listening and analysis of the narratives reveals that ESLg can be a complex issue brought about by a number of factors that build up over time. As such ESLg should be thought of as a 'process' rather than just an 'event'. For example, from Jose's story, it is apparent that the decision to leave school was made over a period of two years. First, seeing 'successful' businesspeople who did not have much education made her lose interest in studying when she was still in secondary 2. This loss of interest eventually affected her grades, and the combination of the two finally led to her decision to leave school. In addition, as Esther narrated, her father's scepticism of girls' education as well as failure to provide school tuition payments and other school materials contributed to her irregular school attendance, and ultimately she had to quit:

> [Yeah …] for me I had no problem; I wanted to continue, but I would go to school like this year, and I finish another year of no school … I would repeat the class and become the winner [first in class] … again I would go back [spend time at home] … but when I reached in P5 [primary 5], he told me there was no longer money, so I decided to leave.

Listening to these stories gives the impression that these ESLs are, in most cases, caught in between a rock and a hard place. Whereas they would want to continue with their education, they lack a supportive environment both at school and at home.

Feelings and immediate consequences of ESLg

ESLg can be a traumatising experience for some ESLs. It is generally associated with the label of 'dropping out' of school which places a large share of the responsibility and blame on the individual that has 'dropped out'. Whether there are extenuating circumstances that are beyond the ESLs' control, the community does not understand or does not pay attention to such issues. The community will say that the ESLs have wasted the parents' money for the years spent in school and will always associate ESLg with academic failure or bad behaviour. As a result, some of the ESLs felt so bad about their situation that it was difficult for them to talk about ESLg in the first person; they would attempt to use a mixture of third person and first person in their narrative as if they were trying to distance themselves from the experience. For instance, Kelly, a *boda-boda* rider, described his feelings about ESLg in the following words:

> My sadness is mine as a person. Like you see a child leaving school, he gets so many problems. Like when you get confused and you are sad; they are those that you see have learned how to smoke, drinking, etc. Because he thinks that if I could die and cease to live. Because you feel the world has crumbled before you. Even me, where I am but because I have already started working, I work and get 'one hundred' [an expression for little money – loosely translated from the local language], and I sleep comfortably. But when I can't get it, I start thinking and wishing I had been educated more … sometimes when a person wants to hurt you, he asks you why you didn't complete school … when you actually wanted. Now those are the problems that we, I, face.

However, even those who could articulate their situation in first person had unpleasant feelings about ESLg:

> When I left, I became like *omuyayi* [bad-mannered]. I started drinking [alcohol] and smoking … okay … finding that I am in things that are not necessary. The challenges were from people's talk around … that now he has finished P7 [primary 7], and there is no money to push him ahead, he is going to join his friends who are seated in the village … Some people who didn't go to school would see me and tell me that I should join them and we start drinking. (Yona)

> When I failed to continue, I felt hurt, and even now I am hurting. I see the students that I finished primary 7 with … those that went to technical school are now working; those that continued with secondary are now at university … you see a person come from there, and he has a good business or job because they continued their studies … and they bring good things for their parents at home. And for me, you find that I am here still envying them … I didn't study to get a job, and I give my parent a token … the money I get as house girl [maid] is very little. (Jackie)

> I felt very bad; I had self-rejection. Even I never wanted to see that man, my father; but after, I forgave him". (Dorah)

For these young people, being educated is associated with good jobs, a good salary and being able to give back to their parents or guardians. In their view, if individuals study

and finish technical school or university, then they can obtain a well-paying job. Otherwise, they will go back to the village and become like other 'uneducated' individuals and start 'behaving badly'. Such feelings of failure and low self-image have led some of these young people to engage in criminal activity, drug abuse, reckless sexual behaviour leading to HIV/AIDS and other forms of social ills (Zeelen et al. 2010). However, it seems that the feelings and experiences of ESLg depend on the individual and the specific reasons for ESLg. In contrast to the remorse over leaving school reflected in the above experiences, Jose does not regret having left school early. Nevertheless, it must be said that there are not many other ESLs that feel similar to Jose:

> I don't consider myself unlucky. I am now a businesswoman, and I make money enough to take care of my needs and those of my young family … my husband works too, and we are doing well. Sometimes I consider myself even better than people who have gone to school and end up without jobs and are walking the streets … what is important is to work and get money and be able to sustain yourself and family. (Jose, 24)

Life and work in the community

When individuals leave school, many return to their families and communities to determine what to do next; the options are not many. Some ESLs join their family members or relatives to help in the gardens or other activities the family may be engaged in. Other ESLs try to look for a job to earn some money and make a living. However, the search for jobs is often hampered by a lack of skills or low level of skills associated with leaving school early. Most of the ESLs in this study mentioned deficiencies in skills as one of the obstacles conferring disadvantage to them in the labour market. The ESLs indicated that employers usually ask for professional certificates or demand certain skills that these ESLs normally do not have. Some ESLs wished to start their own small businesses, but they lacked the necessary start-up capital or the required entrepreneurial skills:

> Sometimes you get a job … but, as you work for your boss, he despises you and says you aren't intelligent. He sees you as the poorest … that you don't know how to do the work … so this is the biggest problem. A person despises you and sees that what you are doing is useless. You see that he despises you so much and sees you as ignorant … that you aren't studied for that work. (Roy)

> When I left school, like after a year, the local authorities asked me to pay graduated tax. I did not have money because I was not skilled in making money. They would run after me for taxation, and when my father saw me suffering, he sold some trees from his artificial forest and paid the tax on my behalf. Later, I got a job in someone's farm, and I would dig from morning till evening … I would also fetch water for people to get some money. The people in the village were pointing a finger at me … that he left school to suffer. (Tom)

According to these ESLs' accounts, leaving school without the skills necessary for life and for the working world marginalised them and pushed them into menial work, lower-wage jobs and unemployment. This also made them and other people question the relevance of school and returns from investment in education. Kelly, a *boda-boda* rider, had a touching experience to tell about his struggles with work. The entire story told

during Kelly's one-and-a-half-hour interview is long; however, the following excerpts from the interview with him serve as a summary:

> When I left school, I went to town to look for jobs. I first worked as a house boy taking care of a child and cooking. This was not easy for me as a boy. The child would cry and cry and cry. In the evening, the neighbours would report me to my boss. Then, she decided to expel me. I returned to the village. She used to pay me six thousand shillings [about $2.50] a month, but she also provided accommodation and meals.

> In the village, I got a man who contracted me to work in his banana plantation. I did pruning and chopping the stems of the plantains. I worked, worked, and worked and got some money for food and clothes.

> When the contract got finished, I got a job crushing stones [into aggregate stones used in building]. For a basin of crashed stones, I would be paid one hundred shillings [about $0.04]. Then, I would carry it for about one mile to the building site. In a day, I would make between 4 and 7 basins.

> These are the problems I have encountered in work. But now I ride this *boda-boda* which I got from my little money [savings] and loan from [XXX (name of financial institution)]. At least now I can earn three hundred thousand shillings [about $120.00] a month, but I have to continue paying back the loan.

> This world is not easy. And even now if I could get a person to give me a small good job, of my class which I have studied, I cannot leave it. (Kelly)

Kelly's experience is similar to those of most participants in this study. Each one of the ESLs had a story to tell about the difficulties they faced concerning the working world. Table 1 indicates what each of the study participants is currently doing. As seen from the table, most ESLs are in low-paying trade jobs while others are trying to obtain further training to acquire some skills that will enable them to improve their life chances and opportunities. Kelly's expression, 'I worked, worked and worked', was one way of saying that, to accumulate a reasonable amount of money, one would have put in extra effort. Indeed, most of the ESLs described the experience of working longer hours and sometimes taking on multiple jobs, including night shifts, to make ends meet. When asked about the cause for the challenges in his life, Kelly, like several other participants, attributed them to his failure to complete school to the desired level and to the school's failure to equip him with the necessary skills for life and work.

As always, there are instances of ESLs who obtain jobs that are well paying or are helped to start small businesses and are able to prosper. Among those that were interviewed, only Jose told of an experience of success in self-employment as a young businesswoman. It could be said that Jose represents those few ESLs who are successful despite ESLg. Such instances of success are often dependent on the socio-economic background of an individual, the connections one has, and the opportunities that one happens to encounter.

Future aspirations

One striking and positive aspect of all the interviews is that, despite the difficulties and challenges ESLs face, they all hold future dreams and ambitions. All of the ESLs interviewed are either thinking of getting training in vocational programmes to acquire skills to boost their employment prospects or are thinking about finding some money to

start their own businesses. There is an overwhelming desire in all of them to learn a skill or trade so that they find a better source of livelihood:

> I want to go back to school … maybe in a vocational school to learn tailoring … after, I can buy a sewing machine and work to get money for my survival and that of my child. I cannot go back to senior [secondary school]; I am a mother … how can a mother go back to study with young girls? But if I don't study anything else, I will remain working for other people and getting little money. (Dina)

> I think of starting a business in ceramics because I like them, and there is a person whom I saw doing them, and I got excited about it. So am ready to do them; then, when I sell them, I can earn some money. (Janet)

> If I get money from this job [washing cars], I would wish to be a driver … so that I also start employing myself and govern myself. (Roy)

Others such as Joshua, Abdu, Carol and Yona, who are already in training programmes, seem to like what they are learning because they hope the programmes will enable them to gain skills that will help them to obtain jobs or to learn a trade that will help them earn a better living. These ESLs have ambitions of becoming veterinary officers, accountants, carpenters, builders, electricians, mechanics, etc. Some of those in formal training also hope to use that opportunity to continue with their education until they reach university – their earlier desired level. However, all their dreams are dependent on the availability of finances to either pay for their training or start a trade.

Discussion and conclusion

This qualitative study has both explored the lived realities and portrayed the social worlds of ESLs in Mbarara, south-western Uganda; issues that are generally under-researched in studies on ESLg in this country. The primary aim of this study was not to make 'generalisations and representations' (Dekkers and Claassen 2001, 352) but to gain insight into the everyday life of ESLs from their own perspective. The findings indicate that ESLg is a complex issue linked to a number of factors and that ESLs are not a homogeneous group; their experiences do differ according to their socio-economic background, reasons for leaving school and life chances. Though the respondents' narratives show a common trend of disadvantage and marginalisation, the story of one of the respondents (Jose) indicates that some ESLs can have positive experiences.

With the exception of a few respondents, most ESLs hold positive views about education and liked being at school. Consistent with other studies that have been conducted in Uganda and other SSA countries (see, for example, Blaak, Zeelen, and Openjuru 2013; UBOS 2006; Lewin 2009; Zeelen et al. 2010), this study indicates that issues related to household income, social class and poverty play a large role in determining who stays in school and who leaves. Given that ESLs are often children from poor socio-economic backgrounds, interventions aimed at preventing ESLg must consider ways of improving household incomes or supporting school retention among children from poor households. Relatedly, second-chance or support interventions must also be affordable; otherwise they will be inaccessible to many ESLs. The subject of culture and gender was also a main theme in the narratives in this study. Some cultural beliefs disadvantage girls; when decisions regarding school have to be made, it is the girls that are more likely than the boys to leave school early. As Hunt (2009, 2) observed, 'In many

instances it is the girls from poor households who are withdrawn earlier than the boys'. In Uganda, studies show that, in terms of access, the gender gap has been steadily narrowing (see, for example, UNDP 2007). According to UBOS (2010), primary school enrolment in the country was 8.7 million children (4.4 million males and 4.3 million females), and secondary school enrolment was 1.5 million children (0.8 million males, 0.7 million females). While this is a great achievement in terms of gender equality in education, if the same effort is not put on retaining girls in school, the achievements in access do not mean anything. Apart from household income-related issues and gender, other factors related to ESLg in this study were poor academic performance, lack of interest, pregnancy, mistreatment at school and individual behaviour. Accordingly, interventions aimed at preventing ESLg or supporting ESLs should include measures to address these issues.

Most participants view ESLg as a bad and traumatising experience which undermines their sense of self-worth. Society sees ESLs as failures and losers (Openjuru 2010), and this view stigmatises them. As a result, ESLs' relationships with their families, schools and communities are always strained. This means that many of them need assistance and may benefit from counselling and guidance services. The problem of ESLg is compounded by the lack of skills or inadequate skills that most ESLs have (Africa Progress Report 2012; Sabates et al. 2010). This limits their future opportunities and exposes them to various forms of social exclusion and marginalisation. Social exclusion is what happens when '… people … face a combination of linked problems such as unemployment, discrimination, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime, bad health and family breakdown' (ODPM 2004, 4). By leaving school early, these young people risk being excluded from society and not being able to act as full-time members of their society. They are '… mainly poorly educated individuals [who] are challenged less to take part in educational processes and the production of knowledge … All this can trigger a spiral of marginalisation, one that can threaten society's social cohesion' (van der Kamp and Toren 2003, 71). Such experiences of exclusion and marginalisation were evident in the ESLs' stories, as most of them told of experiences of being reduced to low-paying, menial jobs, having limited life opportunities and choices and feeling a lack of belonging.

In conclusion, this study has revealed that ESLg is a process that can be linked to several interacting factors and not just one event. The factors contributing to ESLg originate from the family, school or community environments. According to the respondents, the final decision to leave school is often due to 'push' rather than 'pull' factors, and, in most cases, the individual has no alternative but to leave. Interventions aimed at reducing ESLg should strive to address the 'risk factors' and causes for ESLg at individual, family, school and community levels. As Tilleczek et al. (2008a, 189) assert, 'To understand and address ESLg, a focus on the intersections between the socio-economic status and the health of families, schools and communities is needed'. Support interventions for those who have already left school should seek to rebuild the self-image of ESLs and equip them with the relevant practical skills to help them overcome vulnerability, marginalisation and social exclusion. As most ESLs in this study have been seen to harbour dreams and aspirations for the future, support interventions would be most relevant and beneficial to ESLs if they took into consideration their aspirations. Lastly, to ameliorate the stigma surrounding ESLg, support interventions should also seek to build on the talents and competences of ESLs rather than concentrate only on correcting their deficiencies.

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