1997

Early school leaving: a crisis in secondary schooling in Tonga

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Early school leaving - a crisis in secondary schooling in Tonga

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree

Doctorate in Education

from

University of Wollongong
New South Wales, Australia

by

Makafalani Tatafu, BA, MA

Graduate School of Education

1997
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I am deeply indebted to *AusAid* for awarding me the scholarship for this study. If it was not for their help, this study would not have been undertaken. Their willingness to help especially in the death of both my parents is another proof of their commitment to this study. I am also very grateful to the Graduate School of Education and the University of Wollongong for their financial support, in order to present part of this study at the AARE Conference in Sydney in 1995 and at the Joint ERA and AARE Conference in Singapore in 1996.

Special thanks are due to His Lordship, Most Rev. Soane Lilo Foliaki SM, Bishop of Tonga and Niue, priests and religious for the support they have always given to my family. I am also grateful to the principals, teachers, students and parents of the Catholic High Schools, Mailefihi-Siu'ilikutapu College, Vava'u District High School, Taufa'ahau-Pilolevu and St. Andrew Secondary School for their cooperation in the research fieldwork. I am deeply indebted to my brother, Taufa Tatafu, and his wife Kalisi Lata Tatafu, for the social and financial support that they had given my family throughout the duration of this study.

Leaving the best wine last, I would like to acknowledge with affection the loving support and cooperation of my wife, *Kelela Makafalani Tatafu*. Her commitment to our family and the education of our children allowed me more time to dedicate myself to this study, and the Tongan Catholic Community of Wollongong whose support and encouragement are gratefully acknowledged.
Abstract

Early school leaving: a crisis in secondary schooling in Tonga

This thesis explores the extent of early school leaving from one Anglican and four Catholic high schools in Tonga. The 'early school leavers' were the students who left secondary schooling before completing what is referred to as 'general education' (Forms 1 to 5). In other words, they were the ones who left secondary schooling before sitting the Tonga School Certificate Examination. It is argued here that the extent of early school leaving is much greater than the early school leavers themselves because it includes the 'unsuccessful completers', the students who actually completed their 'general education' but were unsuccessful with the Tonga School Certificate Examination. The early school leavers and the unsuccessful completers together make up about 90 per cent of the secondary school population in Tonga. In this sense, secondary school education in Tonga is "successful" for about 10 per cent of the total secondary school population.

The study also seeks to gauge the causes of early school leaving by the use of a conceptual model which is based on a 'systems analysis' framework (Coombs, 1985). The possible systems that could impact positively on students to either remain at school or negatively to leave prematurely are grouped under the two parallel systems of 'Schooling' and 'Community'. Each of these two systems operate at the macro, meso and the micro level. At the macro level of the 'Schooling Systems' is found the Government or the Church School Controlling Authority. The Government or the Church Education Department operates at meso level while the individual schools are found in the micro level.

At the macro level of the 'Community Systems', on the other hand, is found the Tongan culture whose umbrella encompasses the economic, social and political systems. The village
community operates at the meso level and at the micro level is found the family (both nuclear and extended). Both the 'Schooling Systems' and the 'Community Systems' operate simultaneously as push and pull factors on the students at what is called the 'Decision-making Space'. There are nine "agents" or factors identified in the theoretical model in the two major systems: teachers, school administrators, students, parents, village community, Government or Church Education Department, Tongan Government and the Tongan Culture. The research design ensured that each respondent was asked to assess the influence of each of these nine "agents" on early school leaving. The importance of this theoretical model is that each of the open ended questions on the causes of early school leaving, and on the policy measures for addressing the problem was related to each of the nine "agents".

There were five groups of respondents in this study: the early school leavers (N = 365), parents of early school leavers (N = 365), unsuccessful completers (N = 180), teachers and school administrators (N = 163) and community leaders (N = 120). The researcher interviewed the early school leavers and their parents while the other respondents completed their own questionnaires. All the questions on causes and policy measures were open ended. Three responses were asked from each respondent in order of importance.

The outcomes of the survey showed that this model is as holistic as possible in its search for the causes of early school leaving because the causes are more numerous and varied than the three causes - student and family factors, social factors and school factors - identified in the literature (Wehlage et al., 1990). Thus, in this study there were causes relating to teachers, school administrators, students, parents, village community, Government or Church Schooling Authority, Government or Church Education Department, the Tongan Government and the Tongan Culture. Similarly, there were policy measures to be implemented by each of these "agents".