Perception on Student Dropout in Secondary Education: An Insight from University Students and Staff in Battambang Province, Cambodia

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ABSTRACT
This study primarily aims to gather initial data on the quantity of four universities, Battambang province in Cambodia, with a secondary goal of characterizing student dropout patterns. The collected data was intended to inform the Cambodian government’s recent initiatives to decrease dropout rates and increase numbers of enrollment. Data was gathered from three universities and an upper secondary school, using a sample size of 120 participants who completed a questionnaire. The data was then analyzed using Microsoft Excel and the R program. The results were utilized to investigate the reasons behind student dropouts in grades 10, 11, and 12, and to devise strategies to prevent such occurrences. The study’s findings highlighted that: The correlation circle, which represents the impact of all factors contributing to student dropout, showed significant contributions from factors accounting for 10% (0.1) to 40% (0.4) of the total variances. There are varying perceptions regarding student dropout. This study helps us comprehend the key factors influencing dropout rates, which include domestic violence (DoVio), student health issues (Unhe), school violence (SchVio), parental attitudes (PaAtt), and immigration (Imm), which are still prevalent issues.

Keywords: Dropouts, Secondary education, Battambang Cambodia

Introduction
The contemporary general education system of Cambodia comprises three fundamental levels: primary, lower secondary, and upper secondary school. The dropout rate is a remarkable concern at all three levels, although the government of Cambodia provides subsidies for general education, according to the Cambodian Education Law and a New Pentagonal Strategy related to the first part of the Pentagon is human capital development, which focuses on education, technical skills, health, social protection, the food system, and equity based on the spirit of leaving no Cambodian citizen behind (Manet 2023). In other words, all Cambodian children are eligible to receive general education at public schools for free and human capital quality. According to the statistics revealed, overall in Cambodia in 2015, the dropout rate was high for the upper secondary school at 20.20 % (MoEYS, 2017), and in 2016 the dropout rates still kept the same percentage (20.20%) (MoEYS, 2016). However, in 2017 the dropout rate was decreasing to 19.30% (MoEYS, 2018), and most interestingly, the upper secondary dropout rate was...
dramatically decreasing to 17.40% in 2018 (MoEYS, 2018), which was an urgent issue for the Ministry of Education Youth and Sport. It is noticeable that the dropout rate at the upper secondary school level was starting to jump up again because of the COVID-19 pandemic, which forced all schools to close, required online learning, and socio-economic factors impacted negatively. These reasons were the critical concerns for the school administrators, so the Ministry of Education Youth Sport gave a special favor for levels to be automatically passed (Huaxia 2020). According to Ministry of Education Youth and Sport (MoEYS) figures for the academic year 2019-2020, the number of upper secondary school dropouts (grades 10 to 12) nationally totaled 19.70%, with male students making up the majority at 17.2%. In a case where COVID-19 poses a serious threat to a country’s development, particularly in the education sector, school drop-out risk was high. In the provinces, the average dropout rate was 1.87%. During the school closures, 7.99% of students were at high risk of dropping out, 2.96% of students were at medium risk, and 4.10% of students were at low risk of dropping out, and a number of dropouts did not change (MoEYS, 2022).

Even with many reforms of the national educational policy, Cambodia’s education system has not been successful in meeting the Education for all goals (MoEYS, 2015), despite interventions by MoEYS, NGOs, and development partners. Inefficiency in the education system remains a major obstacle to educational development. Despite achieving equal access to high-quality education, goals for promoting student access and reducing school dropouts remain unsolved. An urgent research project is needed to understand the root causes of this issue.

This study aims to provide an in-depth understanding of why drop-outs occur in such a high-prevalence in schools. In order to achieve this goal, this study has adopted a mixed-methods approach to conduct a qualitative and quantitative survey. The problem for this study is “The Causes of School Dropouts in Upper Secondary Schools in Battambang Province”.

The current study aims to assess the most important factors influencing student dropouts in secondary education in northwestern Cambodia. Specifically, we aimed: (1) to identify the most influential factors that have dominantly caused school dropouts, (2) to perform comparative analysis of different perceptions obtained from university students and staff on the drop-outs to and (3) provide recommendations to address the issues.

The current studies were conducted specifically in Battambang; nevertheless, it could reflect the situation in other regions of Cambodia.

**Literature**

Generally, there are a lot of concerns why developing countries usually don’t grow as rapidly, including low levels of productivity and human capital (Bloom et al. 2010). According to (Giordano 2021), states that are classified as developing states often fall into the poverty trap, in which they experience an economic slowdown. They are not willing to invest in human capital due to low levels of income. This results in a low level of productivity and affects the economy as a whole. They mentioned that human health, education, and skills are the components of the nation's growth. The important ingredient in economic growth is known as human capital theory. This theory absolutely emphasizes the role of formal education and how it affects individual performance in economic activity (Oliver, 2004). It shows a positive relationship between education and the country’s economic performance. Schultz's theorist mentioned education as an investment for humans that will lean towards positive returns to human capital (Sloane, Latreille, and O’Leary 2020). Countries like South Korea, Singapore, Hong Kong, and
Taiwan were the poorest countries with the heaviest investment in the highest quality of education; now these countries are listed among the most developed countries in the world (Todaro and Smith 2020). Thus, the Cambodian government has put efforts into reforming its education system, like those in the developed countries mentioned above. For the last 20 years enrollment has increased, but not the rate of school completion (Kim and Rouse 2011). The high rate of school dropouts is noticeably increasing, and it is a big concern of the Cambodian government to recognize one of the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) set by the United Nations that focuses mainly on Education for all (EFA) because education is the backbone of social development (Channa 2015). According to the Rectangular strategies-Phase III of the Royal Government towards high-middle income countries and high incomes countries in the future 2030, the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport has reformed to improve the quality of education to produce graduates who will become both economically competitive and socially responsible (Sothy 2020), but drop-out rates are still the most serious issue at secondary schools (USAID 2021). According to Khalid B, Urbanski M. (Khalid and Urbański 2021) dropping out of school results in economic push and pull factors which impact individuals and society. Economic growth depends mainly on the advancement of citizen education. Moreover, dropout results from various root causes from parents’ educational attainment, economic status (Hirakawa and Taniguchi 2021), learning behavior of students and also meticulously to help institution identify students at risk (Nachouki and Naaj 2022). The most effective intervention programs identify and track youth at risk for school failure, maintain a focus on students’ progress toward educational standards across the school years, and are designed to address indicators of student engagement and to impact enrollment status - not just the predictors of dropouts (Christenson and Thurlow 2004). Therefore, students who fit with the school environment increase their knowledge and show fruitful progress in academic achievement (Christenson and Thurlow 2004). This result of the study reveals that the ecstatic relationship of students with teachers, parents, and peers can manage their academic achievements and lessen their dropout rate during their schooling. Although some students drop out of high school, research has shown that many of these students are limited in their ability to achieve the benefits of their dropout high school options compared to their peers who graduated from high school on time. This result is typically considered the consequence of dropping out, but it could also be attributed to the more personal intrinsic characteristics and their family financial situation which cause them to make their own decision to drop out. Mostly, the dropouts emigrated to Thailand working as workers with poor knowledge (Xu et al. 2021), mostly employed in farms in the northeast region in Thailand (W.Kongnoo, et al, 2014) or worked at the garment factories where the expected wage is USD 177 per month (Finster 2015), increasing to USD 200 per month (Raksa Chan 2022) The minimum wage standard only applies to the textile, garment, and footwear industries for 80 percent of 3037 women over the ages of 24 with primary or secondary education (Edward et al. 2020), many young people continue to be engaged in self-employment or unpaid family work (McKay, Mussida, and Veruete 2018). However, the limitation of this research is that it focuses mainly on the high school dropout rate in Battambang province, drawing warranted findings from some sufficient former researchers as secondary data. The following review of the literature will further reveal impressive evidence of the reasons why students drop out of school. These reasons are often attributed to a variety of factors, including personal, social, or family issues (e.g., parental divorce, unemployment, family conflict, parental absence) or a lack of motivation and the desire to pursue further education.
Methodology
This research study aimed to investigate the phenomenon of high school dropouts, focusing on students in grades 10-12, by conducting a comprehensive survey involving university students and staff from Dewey International School. The study employed a mixed-methods approach, integrating both qualitative and quantitative research methods, to gather pertinent data on the dropout rates and associated factors. The methodology for this research was divided into two main components: primary and secondary data collection. For primary data collection, a series of interviews was conducted with university students and Dewey International School staff. The aim of these interviews was to gain firsthand insights into the reasons behind student dropouts and potential strategies for re-engaging these students with the education system. Secondary data was be collected from various sources, including relevant documents from the school under study and data produced through collaborations between international organizations and the Department of Education, Youth, and Sport, Battambang Province. This data would provide additional context and support for the findings from the primary data collection. The sample size of research was selected 34 students from Dewey International University (DIU), 30 students from International University (IU), Battambang Branch, 31 students from Preah Sihamongiraja Baddish University (PSBU), and 25 staff from Dewey International School located in Battambang Province.

To define the primary factors influencing student’s dropout in upper secondary education in Battambang, the principal component analysis (PCA) was performed on the perceptions survey table. PCA is one of the well-known variable reduction techniques to explore and visualize the data set in the multi-dimensional space (Dray & Dufour, 2007). Accordingly, the determinants of student dropout were examined based on the important contribution of each factor shown in the PCA correlation circle. Moreover, comparative analysis of different locations on dropout determinants was shown through PCA’s factorial map. The above analysis was performed in R programming using packages “ade4” and “factoextra”(Kassambara & Mundt, 2020).

Results
The most influential factors of student dropout in upper secondary education

Figure 1. The results of the survey revealed that 120 respondents from the four institutions—Dewey International University (DIU), Preah Sihamongiraja Buddhist University (PSBU), International University (IU), and Dewey International School (DIS) 45 percent were men and 55 percent were women. The 120 respondents said that 25.30 percent of domestic violence (DoVio) was the highest rank, 25.20 percent of students’ unhealthiness (Unhe) was the second rank, and 24.80 percent of parents’ attitudes (PaAtt) was the third rank. 24.20 percent of immigration (Imm) was the fourth rank, and 24.00 percent of school violence (SchVio) was the lowest among the top five influential factors of school dropouts.
**Figure 2.** The DIU Pie Chart (Figure 2a) depicts the primary drivers of dropout rates in upper secondary schools. Out of all of these components, school violence (SchVio) has the lowest proportion (5.7 percent). It is heavily impacted by 6.3 percent of domestic violence (DoVio) and 6.3 percent of parental attitudes (PaAtt), with the second influence being 6.2 percent of immigration (Imm) and 6.2 percent of student unhealthiness (Unhe) at Dewey International University (DIU). Pie chart depicting PSBU Fig. 2b, illustrating five key factors: The most influential factors are 6.1 percent of domestic violence (DoVio) and 6.1 percent of student health issues (Unhe). 5.9 percent of parents' attitudes (PaAtt) appeared to be the second course, while 5.7 percent of school violence (SchVio) was less influential at Preah Sihamoniraja Buddhist University (PSBU). Figure 2c displays five key factors: The most important factor appears to be 6.6 percent of domestic violence (DoVio), followed by 6.4 percent of student unhealthiness (Unhe). At International University (IU), 6.3 percent of parents' attitudes (PaAtt) and school violence (SchVio) are the same, but 6.1 percent of immigration (Imm) has less impact. According to Fig. 2d, the most influential factor of Dewey International School-DIS was students' unhealthiness (Unhe) (6.5 percent), followed by parents' attitude (PaAtt), school violence (SchVio), and domestic violence (DoVio) (6.3 percent), and immigration (Imm) (6.1 percent). In conclusion, the percent of DoVio factors in four institutions was from 6.1 percent to 6.6 percent, and the percent of Unhe was from 6.1 percent to 6.5 percent. The percent of SchVio between IU and DIS was the same: 6.3 percent; DIU and PSBU were the same: 5.7 percent. The percent of PaAtt factors in...
four institutions ranged from 5.9 percent to 6.3 percent, but the percent of PSBU Imm was 5.7 percent, which was the lowest percent among IU, DIS, and DIU.

3.2. Factors influencing student’s dropout in upper secondary education

Five primary factors, i.e. domestic violent (DoVio), students’ unhealthiness (Unhe), school violence (SchVio), parents’ attitude (PaAtt), immigration (Imm), influencing student’s dropout in upper secondary education in Battambang were exhibited from the principle component analysis (PCA) correlation circle (Fig. 2a). DoVio is the most influencing factor on student dropout followed by Unhe and PaAtt. Beside these factors SchVio and Imm seemed to be important cause behind the student dropout at upper secondary school in Battambang. Accordingly, education quality (Edqu), lack of parent’s discipline- LPDis, and forcing to work-EaM seemed to be the secondary causes of student dropout in upper secondary education in Battambang. However, the contribution of these factors on the first two axes of PCA was quite low and accounted only for 26.7 percent of total variances (Fig. 2a).

Variation of factors on student dropout was observed across different studied locations was observed on the first axe of PCA (Fig. 2b). For instance, DIS was defined by DoVio, PaAtt and Imm as primary cause of student dropout, while at PSBU, Edqu and Unhe seemed to be the primary factors influencing student dropout. Only DIS exhibited clear factors of student dropout in contrast to the remaining three institutions (i.e. DIU, IU and PSBU). Indeed, DUI, IU and PSBU were defined by other factors besides DoVio, Unhe, PaAtt and SchVio. More investigation needs to done in order to define the clear factors from these institutions.

Figure 3

Fig. 2 Principal component analysis (PCA) showing the primary factors influencing upper secondary school student’s dropout in Battambang province. (a) Correlation circle showing the contribution of all factors influencing student’s dropout, while the gradient of black colors indicated the important contribution of factor ranging from 10% (0.1) to 40% (0.4) of total variances and important factors were depicted in bold characters. (b) factorial map showing different perception on student’s dropout across studied locations, red color denoted Dewey International School (DIS), “green” – “blue” and “violet” denoted respectively Dewey International University (DIU), International University (IU) and Preah Sihanouk Reach University (PSBU). The detailed description of variable was given in Table S1.
Discussion

The study's findings offered the best chance to pinpoint the protective and risk variables that were essential for creating successful prevention initiatives and regulations. The finding will also allow a deeper analysis of the intersecting contexts in which dropout occurring in the most influential factors as follows:

First, 6.3 percent of Domestic Violence, which is a critical issue against children, requires more attention. It is against children and happens in all settings, including families, communities, schools, businesses, and recreational venues such as sports clubs. In 2013, the Ministry of Women's Affairs organized and coordinated a study on violence against children in Cambodia, which revealed the degree and form of sexual, physical, and emotional violence and neglect experienced by girls, young women, boys, and young men. Furthermore, many of the long-term effects of childhood violence include a deterioration in social, mental, and cognitive development, as well as an increased chance of disease, mental health problems, and suicide attempts (UNICEF, 2017). Another report of Cambodian Violence Against Children Survey said the occurrence of violence was commonly witnessed in their homes, school and communities. Approximately 60 percent of males and females experiencing emotional, physical or sexual violence during childhood (UNICEF, 2019) and 20.6 percent of peer violence of students have been bullied, 50 percent of corporal punishment is common in classrooms, 43 percent of violence in home of school children have been discipline using physical violence and 85.70 percent of Cyberbullying influenced school children (Manith Chhoeng, Yoeurn Yoeurt, 2022). And also, in 2020, there was a report detailing the murders of 26 women and 5 children, 13 women and 4 children killed in 2021, and 7 women killed in the first half of 2022 (Ngay Nai, 2022).

Secondly, 6.0 percent of Student’s Unhealthiness (Unhe) is affected from two sides: one is physical unhealthiness (nutrition food), and another one is psychological unhealthiness, which is an intrinsic life goal by learning and emotional support from significant adults in school, perceived competence in the learning situation in school and in the workplace, and well-being in interaction with residents and children were all positively associated with persistence among health and social care students. Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport of Cambodia (MoEYS) cooperated with World Food Program (WFP) on the Joint School Feeding Transition Strategy outlines the initial phase of the handover of school feeding implementation and management only for 1,167 primary schools with nearly half a million children for eight provinces in Cambodia (MoEYS 2022). Improving social care services and infrastructures needs good organization, planning, and proper financial allocation (Khim & Andermann, 2021).

Thirdly, 5.7 percent of School Violence which is the perception of risks (crime and violence), as schools have been largely successfully in keeping students and staff safe from harm. However, many schools face serious problems, and it is important to develop an understanding of these problems so that effective strategies can be devised to prevent school violence and increase school safety. According to the Cambodia’s Violence against Children Survey 2013 (UNICEF, 2013), more than 75 percent of children experience violence (physical, emotional or sexual) before the age of 18. 50 percent experience physical violence, 25 percent emotional violence, and five percent sexual violence, and two-thirds of children had experienced a violent discipline method and physical.

For example, there is one school called Peam Ror Primary School implemented a strict negative discipline, children were subjected to various kinds of corporal punishment, and other forms of discipline with negative physical and psychological effects on students. One of these was standing on one leg with arms raised (Voctoria Laroche, 2019).
According to the Cambodia Global School-Based Student Health Survey 2013, 10 percent of secondary education students consume alcohol on a daily basis. Nearly 3 percent of students who drink alcohol have family issues or problems with friends who do not go to school or get into fights, and 0.8 percent of upper secondary students have used amphetamines or methamphetamine at least once in their lives, infiltrating the school environment. According to the survey, one in every five pupils was attacked (Peltzer et al., 2016)

**Fourthly**, 6.2 percent of Parents’ Attitudes showed that the respondents of the study are highly worried that the students’ families have not adequately helped them with their schoolwork to achieve their academic goals because of their educational, economic, social, and cultural backgrounds. Parents’ educational goals and their aspirations, values, and hopes will motivate their children to succeed in school which are the important determinants of these children's successful academic courses and school completion (Tsolou & Babalis, 2020)

**Fifthly**, 6.0 percent of Immigration related unemployment, family financial crises, quality of education will cause people move from one place to another place or to the neighbor countries. According to data from the Centre for Alliance of Labor and Human Rights in Thailand (Chea Sokny, 2023), over half of the 2 million Cambodians who work in Thailand do not have valid documents. Individuals who have recently lost their factory jobs or are unable to find work in Cambodia’s construction sector have continued to go to Thailand in quest of work. According to the Cambodia Socioeconomic Survey 2019-20, 17.8 percent of Cambodians live in poverty, with 48.7 percent of those aged 0-17 experiencing multidimensional poverty (Saroeun Bou, 2022); 33 percent of poverty of poorest students drop out school (Manith Chhoeng, Yoeurn Yoeurt, 2022a), and also there was one research of The University of the West Indies, Mona, reported several key elements that contribute to the immigration, including a lack of job opportunities that match one's talents, lawlessness, violence, societal indiscipline, economic and social opportunities (Parkins, 2011) as well.

**Recommendations**

Based on the findings of the current study, a number of recommendations are provided to reduce dropouts, particularly by improving the points of dropout influential factors. The following suggestions for strategies to enhance the students’ dropouts are:

- Preventing and responding to domestic violence requires a strong rule of law. Law enforcement, judicial, legal, and social welfare services should all be readily available for survivors to ensure their safety and healing. Efforts should be concentrated on system strengthening. For example, in the Philippines, a plan to end violence against children was successful in 2017-2022, with regional workshops attended by 423 participants. The plan focused on eight key strategies: promoting evidence-based parenting programs, capability building, the Comprehensive Communication for Behavior Change strategy, children and adolescent participation, direct service delivery, monitoring, evaluation, policy advocacy, and institution building (Manith Chhoen, Yoeurn Yoeurt, 2022c).

- There is a clear lack of direction in child social protection budget allocation and spending allocation and spending in the absence of evidence-based policy making related to psychological and physical health for children, all fundings relevant to educational field are imbalance in Ten Countries (Manith Chhoeng, Yoeurn Yoeurt, 2022d). For example, Laos allocated a fund to establish child development centers and to provide school meals to all students in their service areas, spending on education from their tax revenue and retained earnings, and can also add extra funds to schools in their
service areas, depending on their policy agenda and revenues by helping with the provision of school milk and lunches (Xayavong and Pholphirul 2018) using 1.4 percent of GDP in 2022 for the Ministry of Education (UNESCO 2017). Thailand allocated 2.6 percent of GDP (UNESCO 2017), with a Public Policy for Quality School Lunch Development in Thailand that provides a lunch budget of 0.40 USD to 0.62 USD per person per day (Kongnoo et al., 2014) including school transportation services and financial support for children by providing scholarships (Xayavong & Pholphirul, 2018). Cambodia allocated budget 1.7 percent of GDP, but without providing free food and transportation, but collaborated with World Food Programs (MoEYS 2022). There was clear research that educational budgets conducted in countries (India, Nepal, Pakistan, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam) suggested to develop country wide Plan of Action with a strong focus on creating public expenditure tracking mechanisms, based on real time sound evidence collected through research, mapping, surveillance and monitoring with a task force derived from both public and private sectors (Manith Chhoen, Yoeurn Yoeurt, 2022e).

• Ensuring the school is safe, strong suggestions would be implemented with the following strategies: 1). Promoting cooperation with all stakeholders, such as local authorities, the community, schools, and students, to ensure that safe environments happen both inside and outside of schools. 2). Encouraging collaboration with local authorities to guarantee that no sort of entertainment club is closed to educational institutions. 3). Informing the schools about it if you witness any violent conduct. 4). Telling adults who see or experience violence should never stop reporting it to adults (parents, teachers, and counselors) until something is done. If an adult receives complaints about a particular child from several sources, they might be able to protect other kids and even assist the violent child in finding alternative ways to learn. 5). Making contact with people when you witness someone at the school acting agitated, furious, or fascinated by violence, try to get in touch with them. Any youngster who appears to be experiencing anxiety, depression, or difficulty controlling their emotions should be reached out to, whether they are being bullied, not, or neither of them. The youngster won't be violent very often, but you will still have assisted them by showing them support. 6). Developing a kid-friendly internet can be used in school campuses, but their role in education needs careful examination. Schools must evaluate curriculums and recognize the digital devices’ potential to engage learners. Administrators should design guidelines for adopting mobile phones in curricula, promoting effective engagement and crime prevention. Unfortunately, there was no data of school violence in the Department of Education, Youth, and Sport, including the Office of District Education, reported by Hang Virak, Office Director of District Education, Samlout District, Battambang Province.

• Developing a Community Plan should be set up to help Parents’ attitude in the purpose to What Your Community Can Do to End Its Drop-Out Crisis. Johns Hopkins University established the Center for Social Organization of Schools to advocate development of a community-based strategy to combat the problem focusing on three key elements of a community-driven plan: First is knowledge -- understanding the scope of the problem as well as current programs, practices, and resources targeted at addressing it. Second is strategy -- development of monitoring programs as a "dropout prevention, intervention, and recovery plan" that focuses community resources, the last is ongoing assessment -- regular evaluation and improvement of practices to ensure that community initiatives are having the desired effect (Roberta Purger, 2008).

• There should be more funds invested in the new teacher training and equity, and equally located teachers between urban and rural areas to help the immigration children. Provide more incentive to those
who volunteer to work in the rural area; provide free food for students. Funds must be allocated, for example, Laos allocated its fund to establish child development centers and to provide school meals to all students in their service areas, is spending on education from their tax revenue and retained earnings, and can also add extra funds to schools in their service areas, depending on their policy agenda and revenues. Home education must be organized inside a whole country and in the neighbor countries for Cambodian immigrants. For example, in America, there is a center called the Re-engagement Center that helps 1.6 million young adults’ ages 16–18 who are not enrolled in school or have not finished their secondary school education. This education participation gap has enormous consequences for the economic health and social burden of the whole nation, for example. Boston’s Reengagement Center uses a range of services to get youth back on track, including individual academic assessments, opportunities to explore different education options, and referrals to appropriate schools or other credential programs (Allen 2019).

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Conflict of interest
None were identified

References


30. UNICEF. (2019). ENDING VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND CHILDREN IN CAMBODIA


Appendix 1

Table S1. Inventory List of Questionnaires

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<th>No.</th>
<th>Statements</th>
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<td>Edqu</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Stop studying</td>
<td>WhDe</td>
</tr>
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<td>3</td>
<td>Majority of Dropouts</td>
<td>ReDr</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>School Schedule</td>
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<td>Helping house work</td>
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<td>Abbreviation</td>
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<td>Immigrating to neighbor countries</td>
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<td>Violence happening in family</td>
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<td>Significant causes to make dropouts</td>
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<td>Persons taking responsibility for dropping out</td>
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