

Understanding School Dropout



A Case Study
By Sindh Education Foundation

TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Acronyms & Abbreviations	iii
Definition of terms	iii
Acknowledgements.....	iv
Executive Summary	v
Introduction	1
Research Context	1
Research Questions	4
Methodology	5
Research Limitations & Constraints.....	7
Research Findings	8
Recommendations & Conclusion.....	17
References.....	20
Annexures.....	21
Annexure A – Rapid Rural Appraisal (village children and adults)	
Diagram 1 – Reasons of Dropout from CSS (Girls)	
Diagram 2 – Reasons of Dropout from CSS (Boys)	
Diagram 3 – Reasons for Dropout in CSS (Adults)	
Diagram 4 – Season Calendar (Girls’ activities)	
Diagram 5 – Season Calendar (Boys’ activities)	
Diagram 6 – Daily Activity Chart during School Days (Girls)	
Diagram 7 – Daily Activity Chart during Crop-cutting season (Boys)	
Diagram 8 – Reasons of Absenteeism in CSS (Girls)	
Diagram 9 – Reasons of Absenteeism in CSS (Boys)	
Chart 1 – Pair Ranking: Reasons of Absenteeism (Girls)	
Chart 2 – Pair Ranking: Reasons of Absenteeism (Boys)	
Diagram 10 – Seasonal Diseases Diagram (Boys)	
Annexure B – Discussion Guide (CSS teachers)	
Annexure C – Discussion Guide (Community)	

LIST OF ACRONYMS & ABBREVIATIONS

CSS	Community Supported School
EDRC	Education Development and Research Cell
EFA	Education-For-All
GD	Group Discussion
GR	General Register
RRA	Rapid Rural Appraisal
SAP	Social Action Programme
SEF	Sindh Education Foundation
SMC	School Management Committee
SEMIS	Sindh Education Management Information System
VEC	Village Education Committee

OPERATIONAL DEFINITION OF TERMS

Academic calendar: The Sindh Education Foundation follows the Government academic calendar. School year starts from April. Vacations are for 2 months in summers and for 15 days in winters. Final examination in CSS is held in January / February. Government schools hold exams during March every year.

Absentees: In this study the absentees are defined as those who remain absent from school.

Dropout: As per the Sindh Education Management Information System (SEMIS) dropouts are defined as “children who leave the schooling system before completing the academic year”. Government calculates dropouts as the difference in enrollment between two consecutive years (SEMIS).

CSS considers a child dropped out of school and excludes her/his name from the General Register (GR). For this study, however, dropout students were identified based on the GR and consultation with teachers.

School Year: A school year is defined as the 12-month period of time beginning with the regular opening of school in the fall.

Vacations: The period for which school breaks in an academic year for 2 months in summers (June & July) and for 15 days in December.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The study was conducted through the efforts of many. The authors i.e. Mr. Naeem Nizamani, Mr. Ibrahim Maznani and Ms. Sadaf Junaid Zuberi are especially thankful to the Community Supported School (CSS) Program team and CSS teachers in providing relevant details, documentation and insight into the schools' functioning and problems being faced generally and specific to dropout.

We are particularly thankful to Professor Anita Ghulam Ali, Noman Hafiz, Aziz Kabani and Zahra Rizvi who assisted during the design and execution of the study. Rabia Jamali, Imran Khan and Shehab Ahmed Khoro assisted in the fieldwork especially in the group discussions with the villagers.

The biggest contributor to the study is the village community, especially the children, who took time out of their busy days to speak with us and patiently and honestly expressed their feelings about the school as an institution and gave their reasons that cause children to dropout. They also provided us with their insightful views on education and ideas for improvement in the school system. Shortage of space does not allow individual thanks but we are indebted to each one.

It is hoped that the Education Department, in reading this document may find reason to further explore and act on the comments and suggestions of its stakeholders.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In Pakistan according to the *National Education Policy (1998-2010)* half of the children who enroll in grade 1, reported to drop out before completing five-year cycle of primary education¹. The latest data of the Sindh Education Department reveals that on average, the overall dropout rate in primary classes was 21% in 2003-04². This rate is 2% higher than the rate in 2002-03. A comparative study of the dropout rates suggest that the rate, which started declining in 1999-2000, shot up again 2002-03 onwards.

The Government despite efforts in accordance with commitments to the *Education for All (EFA)* has been unable to control school dropout or achieve the desired enrollment targets. In order to achieve the EFA goals and targets of providing all children with access to free education by 2015, reducing dropouts amongst primary school-goers remains a major challenge.

With a view to understanding the ground realities that result in children leaving school, a three-month study was undertaken in 2004, by the Education Development & Research Cell (EDRC), a unit of the Sindh Education Foundation (SEF). The study explored the real issues behind low retention rate at a Community Supported School (having reported dropout of 40%) setup by SEF in a local village in the province of Sindh in Pakistan.

This report presents the case study of the village school, and discusses the field learnings based on community's perceptions regarding the causes of high dropout. Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA) techniques – including group discussions and a variety of qualitative visual methods such as locale mapping, time lines, and causal diagrams – were employed for data collection. These participatory methods helped in facilitating a democratic involvement of school stakeholders: children enrolled in school, children who had left school, their parents, teachers and village elders. The respondents themselves prepared all the charts. RRA techniques enabled the villagers to analyze and share their experiences, priorities and perceptions about the dropout dilemma and to express suggestions for making school a more meaningful endeavor for the community.

Study findings reveal that:

- Actual triggers for student dropout are embedded in both in-school (incompatibility of academic calendar with local life patterns, non-utility of curriculum and lack of teacher attention) and out-of-school (primarily poverty, cultural constraints and health problems) aspects;
- Children's involvement in economic activities during wheat growing season or temporary migration for cultivation of cotton induces high absenteeism. Routine absenteeism ultimately results in student dropout;
- Health is a serious issue in the village which causes high absenteeism and often translates into dropout of students from the school;
- According to girls, female education is not a priority for villagers and also non-affordability of school expenditures is a common rationale in families to discourage girls from attending school regularly;
- Lack of teaching skills in school staff and their inability to provide proper attention

¹ National Education Policy, 1998-2010, sec: 5.2.4

² Sindh Education Management Information System census data for 2003-04

causes dissatisfaction and lack of interest amongst students to continue with education.

Reasons for high dropouts ascertain the inextricable relationship between education and economic and social factors. Research argues that if dropouts have to be curtailed and schooling is to be made a reality for all children, then reform in the primary education sector must occur. Following are the key recommendations:

- Establishment of an education system committed to not just providing access but also offering relevant education that is less mechanical and rigid and promotes indigenous needs and values;
- Reorganize the school calendar (session/ vacation timings) to suit local community requirements;
- Greater community involvement efforts for instigating parents' interest and participation at all levels of their child's education;
- Professional development of teaching staff to enhance interactive teaching strategies;
- Synchronized strategies for economic and social development should also be taken into account by the Government.

Taking a lead from the study findings, education researchers ought to focus at a national scale to develop a thorough understanding of the real scope of the dropout problem so that appropriate solutions become apparent and policy interventions turn out more meaningful.

The crux of change in strategy is rethinking the education and development paradigms, and recognizing and legitimizing alternative forms of learning. This will lead to an education system that empowers communities and will not only nurture their inherent potential but also extend their social possibilities.

INTRODUCTION

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the United Nations in 1948, asserted that 'everyone has a right to education', and subsequent international conferences and normative texts have reaffirmed this goal and sought to achieve it.

During International Literacy Year (1990), the World Conference on *Education-for-All (EFA)* was convened in Jomtien, Thailand, to address concerns about the inadequate provision of basic education, especially in the developing countries. The conference adopted the World Declaration on *Education-for-All* and agreed on a framework for action to meet basic learning needs. Some 1,500 participants, comprising delegates from 155 governments, policy-makers and specialists in education and health, social and economic development from around the World, identified a number of problems facing the primary schooling sector in developing countries. These mainly included access, retention, completion and quality.

Pakistan is presently implementing several policies and programmes in line with *Education-For-All* which constitute the National Education Policy (1998-2010) and Pakistan 2010 programme. The policy goals propose to enhance the retention and completion of primary education cycle up to 90% students (both boys and girls) by the year 2010. Simultaneous efforts are proposed for improvement in the quality of schooling (infrastructure, physical environment, curriculum etc.) offered to the school-goers¹.

Unfortunately the Government in the past has been unable to achieve the desired enrollment targets or control the dropout rate². Official estimations show more than 5.5 million primary school children between the ages of 5 and 9 are left-outs and during 2003-04, a total of 40% boys and 28% girls (both rural and urban) of total enrollments in the first year of primary schooling failed to reach middle and secondary schooling levels. For rural areas this rate was 58 and 66% for boys and girls respectively. The significant levels of dropout have hindered optimum utilization of school space and resources and the expected benefits of increased enrollments have also stayed less effective. Improving retention and completion in the primary schools thus remains one of the major challenges facing the Government.

Although school dropout is a very critical area, the literature on causes of dropout and solutions in the country leaves much to be desired. An array of reasons relate to social and personal lives of students and their families causing school dropout while the school remains protected from a serious analysis of its contribution to the problem³. Recent studies have drawn attention to school-based variables. These variables include teacher training, curriculum, textbooks and examination improvements⁴ and out-of-school factors such as financial considerations and employment conditions that are necessary to reduce dropout rates. A more recent country report by the Education Ministry speaks of inconsistencies in education policies and programmes, lack of teachers competency, low motivation and commitment, (partly) non-relevance of curricula to the needs of the learners and the community, over centralization and inadequate level of local capacity to programme formulation, institutional management and evaluation as factors that contributed to the dismal situation and hindered attaining of the Jomtien targets.

Research Context:

Despite some of the causes for student dropout being highlighted in various studies and reports, it still remains one of the biggest challenges and dropout is a commonly observed

¹ National Education Policy, 1998-2010, Section 5.1.12

² **Sindh Education Management Information System census data for 2003-04**

³ 1998 Census Report

⁴ *What are they teaching in Pakistani schools today?* by Pervez Hoodbhoy (link: www.chowk.com)

phenomenon in the national educational system. The Sindh Education Foundation (SEF) has established the Community Supported Schools (CSS) Program in three districts of Sindh – Dadu, Larkana and Malir rural. The absenteeism and dropout of children (average dropout 18% but as high as 35% in certain CSS) has also been observed as a common phenomenon across these schools especially in districts Dadu (Sehwan and Mehar tehsils) and Larkana (Warah tehsil). To closely examine the in-school and out-of-school factors that induce student dropout, the Education Development & Research Cell (EDRC) at SEF carried out a case study during 2004 in one of the community supported schools (having dropout of 40%) established by SEF in Sindh.

The CSS Program commenced in 1998 with the aim of facilitating active community participation in education. A total of 100 schools were opened mostly in local indigenous structures like straw huts whereas at some places, after due approval from authorities, in defunct government-school-buildings. The furniture, reading material, trainings and monthly salaries of teachers were provided by SEF. A typical CSS with one teacher (preferably female) and an average enrollment of 35 students is registered as a private school in the name of Village Education Committees (VECs). Sindh Education Department policies relating to school timings, syllabus (of Sindh Text Book Board), examination and vacations (twice in a year) are followed in the schools⁵.

While the Program endeavors continually to maintain a strong community interface, the dropout problem persists causing a considerable amount of wastage of resources and investment in schools. Eight schools were closed over the years (which were reopened in other areas) due to various factors one of which was the high rate of student dropout.

This study focuses on the factors due to which retention rates are so low in the community supported school which in turn might help in developing a better understanding of the factors that cause dropout at the overall primary school level. Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA) techniques were used for collecting information. RRA tools instigated a participatory approach and provided a good qualitative picture of social dynamics as well as historical processes and conditions. The analysis presented in this report integrates discussions with the study partners, observations from the field and recommendations that may help in addressing the problem.

The research suggests that in most developing countries where the vast majority of children work for survival, dropout is an economics driven issue. With poor living conditions each child in the village is expected to contribute to the monthly income by helping his/her family from a very early age. Since school education does not come with promise of job, sending the child to school means less household income coupled with rising expenses. Moreover the curriculum is not sensitive to local cultural and social context and needs. Also discriminatory teacher attitude and teacher incompetence are important factors influencing the incidence of student lack of interest. In this situation, the existing state of schooling would continue to result in high drop out ratios, as children even if they want to pursue education out of pure interest, would be forced out of it not just due to economic reasons and family pressures but owing to the alienating school environment.

A suggestion by the stakeholders of the education process, advocates that it would be wiser to make education impart basic knowledge together with social and practical work-related skills that will be of use to the students in the future. To suit the indigenous way of life, efforts should be in place to make the school calendar and timings flexible in order to accommodate local activities, traditions and income generation schedules. In addition, professional training for teachers and adapting the curriculum to local context through community recommendations will make schools more responsive. These suggestions call attention of

⁵ CSSP – Annual Performance Review report, 1998-99

education researchers to highlight the real issues on a national scale so that policy makers can address the actual triggers that result in high rates of student dropout in schools.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

A series of following questions was prepared to explore the various causes of dropout in CSS:

1. What are the SEF and/or Government regulations regarding the school calendar?
2. What are the SEF and/or Government policy vis-à-vis drop-outs?
3. What are conventional ways to tabulate drop-out rate in Government schools and SEF's community schools?
4. What are the trends of drop-outs and absenteeism in the community school?
5. What are local life patterns in relation to absenteeism/ dropout of students from schools?
6. Is there any relationship between long absenteeism and dropout rate?
7. What are children's activities during school vacations and during school days?
8. Do school vacation timings fall in line with local community practices?
9. How can the dropout phenomenon be addressed?

METHODOLOGY

As the study aimed to understand a specific instance: Low retention rates at a community school to illustrate a more general principle: Why children dropout of the school system? The 'Case study' approach was deemed as the relevant research strategy. The researchers followed, over a period of three months, the environs, behaviors, practices and activities of children who were enrolled in the community supported school and drop outs along with their families and teachers. This was done to understand the causes of absenteeism and dropout in the community supported school, significance of CSS to villagers, and ways the CSS will be better able to serve the needs of the community. This approach allowed researchers to connect abstract theories with real people in real situations through capturing the in-depth details of circumstances that trigger children to dropout.

More specifically the adapted methodology is of an 'instrumental case study' (Stake – 1994) that examines a particular situation in the village school to gain insight and develop a broad understanding of the dropout issue. It can therefore be used to complement other large scale researches.

The study was conducted in the following phases:

Phase – 1

Preliminary discussions were carried out with the CSS Program team which revealed that school dropout was more serious in Dadu and Larkana districts. Quantitative data – on absenteeism and dropout was collected from 65 CSS in the two districts. Attendance and general registers (GR) were referred. These records in schools as per the CSS Program document are maintained since 1999.

Phase – 2

After careful review of attendance and enrollment data as well as Monitoring and Evaluation records, three schools belonging to villages in Sehwan were identified, where dropout was determined to be very critical. Two of these schools were not chosen for further research as one had only female enrollment while the other was in the fishermen community and would have been too case specific. The CSS in a village at Sehwan was selected through purposive sampling based on its varying livelihood activities that heavily engage children of all ages. Main livelihood sources are agriculture and livestock. Children assist their families in harvesting/ cultivation, animal grazing, fishing and/ or household work. Both boys and girls are enrolled in the school and absenteeism and dropout has been commonly observed as seen from the quantitative data gathered and the M&E records. Since 90% of the CSS schools lie in similar socio-economic setting, study findings can provide learning for other schools as well.

Simultaneously, relevant secondary literature was reviewed on issues of school absenteeism, dropping out and dropout prevention. This provided information on possible risk-factors that contribute to children dropping out of schooling systems and perspectives on the elements of effective dropout prevention approaches.

Phase – 3

At first the research team spent time interacting with the villagers informally. During the course of interaction, different games were played with children and elders like cricket and *Naev Tin* – a local game played with stones on the ground. Once researchers developed a good rapport with the community members, Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA) techniques (Refer to Annexure A) were used to learn directly from the stakeholders the causes of children

dropping out of school.

RRA enabled rapid and direct learning from a group of 30 children. These included 8 children who had dropped out of the school where as the rest are those who are currently studying in CSS. These children were between the ages of 5 and 14 years. RRA sessions also included 8 parents and 20 village members. Discussions were held regarding local occupations, livelihood dependency, and children involvement in economic and household activities. Supplemented through observations in the field, an understanding was gained of how different activities may/ can become the cause of absenteeism or dropout the school is faced with.

RRA techniques employed included:

- Group discussions: An important technique used during the course of RRA. A checklist was used as guideline by research team. Group discussions were held with teachers of the CSS and also with parents and children who had left school or stayed absent frequently. Other members of the community also participated in the general discussions. Information was triangulated by using various techniques and conducting sessions with different groups of respondents. (*Refer to Annexures B & C*)
- Mapping: Rough maps of the area were drawn up. Preparation of the map enabled the research team to supplement information on key population distribution, local settlements & their distance from school.
- Calendars and time use diagrams: The diagrams captured the activities that children and the community engage in daily and seasonally. This helped the research team to understand where school fitted into the lives of villagers and its relative importance. The timelines highlighted the differences between boys' and girls engagements.
- Causal diagrams: Parents and children (boys and girls) drew diagrams in separate sessions, to show the causes of absenteeism and dropout from the school. The primary reasons for low retention were highlighted.
- Ranking: Different pair-wise ranking grids were drawn up that provided a useful focus to discussions with the children. Preference ranking was led by a child from the study group.
- Seasonal disease chart: This grid reinforced the serious health problems that exist in the village and their causes. Research points to revisiting the overall development approach and a dire need of medical facilities.

During the RRA sessions, respondents themselves prepared all the charts. This facilitated democratic participation of children in the process of reflection and analysis of why they remain absent from school or drop out due to any reason.

Phase-4

Data analysis and research documentation was completed in the concluding phase.

RESEARCH LIMITATIONS & CONSTRAINTS

- This case study was carried out over a period of three months. There are a number of factors such as seasonal and environmental events e.g. migration, drought, etc., that could have influenced the research context. However given the time frame of the study certain factors could not be explored.
- This research is limited to one school. While the CSS studied is fairly typical of other public schools in the country and similarities do exist in respect of social setting, economic activities, traditions, and culture, but results can be generalized for the whole schooling system to an extent only.
- Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA) does not clearly provide the hard data that would give a quantitative picture of conditions in community around the school being looked at.
- The data are based on qualitative reports and captures perspectives of various respondents. Usually multiple methods of data collection are used in case study. For this research most data were obtained from two or three groups of informants (teachers, parents, and students), allowing for subsequent checks of possible reporting bias. However use of Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) techniques would have provided more elaborative results.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Profile of the Community Supported School

The Community Supported School under study is situated in a village, 8 kilometers southwest of Sehwan Shareef, west of Manchar Lake. The village is more than hundred years old and constitutes 33 households and approximately 336 inhabitants belonging to two different castes. Sindhi is the mother tongue of villagers and few members speak and/or understand Urdu. Weather is generally hot with summer temperatures between 45 to 48 °C and winters experiencing 10 and 25 degrees C. Agriculture and livestock are the main livelihood sources of people.

In 1998 the Sindh Education Foundation (SEF) team with the collaboration of the community established a Community Supported School (CSS). The school principally catered to girls but as there was no other school in the village, boys were also enrolled. Initially the school was established as a primary school but later upgraded to elementary (class 8) level. Presently classes are held from kachi to grade 6. School timings are from 8:30 am to 1:30 pm with a half hour lunch break at 11 am when children go home to eat. Two local teachers (one male and one female) run the school. Exams are held in December while vacations are given from mid of June till the end of July for one and a half months and also for two weeks in December. Total enrollment is forty-three (44) students with equal boys to girls ratio (50:50).

A Growing Number of Dropouts in CSS

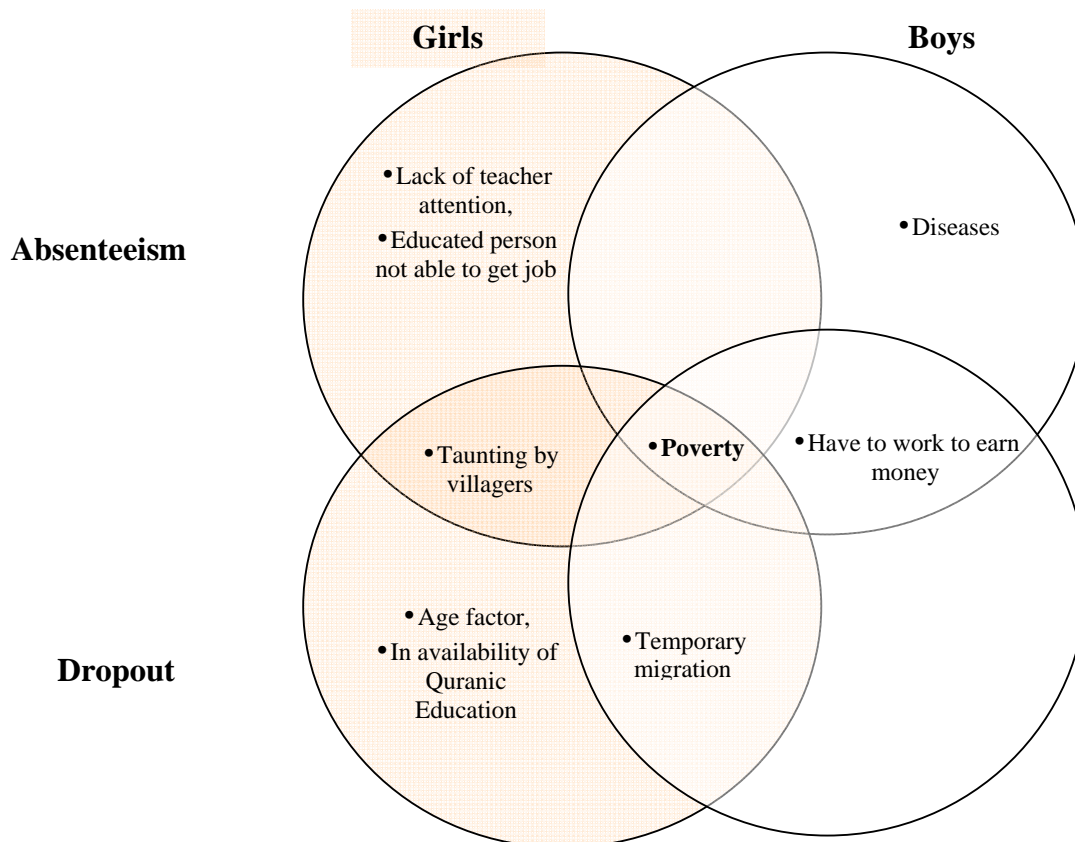
A trend analysis of statistics, obtained from school records and the Monitoring and Evaluation data, showed that every year two to four children left CSS in the village while in the last year alone 10 children had dropped out. School records did not reveal much vis-à-vis reasons for dropout. In the GR, very often the words 'lack of interest' or 'absconder' (who continually keeps him/herself absent) was mentioned. Therefore, the causes of absenteeism and dropout analyzed as part of this study are based on RRA sessions and group discussions with the dropout children and their parents as well as with village children currently in the school. Information was also obtained from teachers who sometimes came to know the cause for dropout directly on meeting the child who had dropped out or indirectly, from some acquaintance of the dropout.

Causes of student dropout

During RRA sessions, discussions with the villagers were held on economic activities in the village, perceptions of community about education/ schooling and reasons of school dropout. There was a general consensus that factors that eventually lead to drop out begin early in a child's life in the village. Children from an early age start working with their parents and assume a dedicated share in earning. This induces long-term absenteeism and finally leads to their leaving the school system entirely.

The Venn diagram represents the crux of the findings. While poverty was found to be the root reason, a host of in-school factors (teacher competence and curriculum relevance) call for serious attention and modification to suit specific educational requirements of the community.

Venn Diagram – Student dropout and absenteeism causes



Poverty:

Poverty was regarded by children as the most important cause for school dropout (refer to Table 1 below).

Table 1 Reasons of Dropout (Priority ranking)		
	Girls	Boys
1	Poverty	Poverty
2	In-availability of Quran recitation lessons in the school	Lack of money
3	Age factor	Migration
4	Migration	Involvement in economic activities
5	Elders consider education to be a curse	

Poverty is a harsh reality the village, and its surrounding areas, are currently afflicted with. For the past decade or so, rainfall and Manchar Lake, the main sources of water for cultivation have not sufficed to meet the demands. Thus yields have precipitously declined resulting in nominal economic returns and destitution. All the

above have taken its toll on the self esteem, and hope in the future. As a consequence education is of little consideration.

Highlighting the concern, an elderly villager said:

“We used to cultivate wheat by using water of Manchar Lake, but since the last ten years water has become brackish, which affects the per yield production of the crop and also destroys the fertility of the land. Earlier we used to cultivate around ten acres which was enough for household consumption and some was even left over for sale. Things have changed since we can cultivate hardly three acres due to salinity and have very little wheat for daily consumption.”

The villagers treasure their hundred-year association with the land. The emotional attachment with their ancestral homes does not allow them to move to other regions. A closer analysis of feedback from villagers and the children (See Annexure A: Diagrams 1, 2 & 3)) vis-à-vis causes of dropout shows that poverty, lack of money, and migration are inter-linked and all provide a compelling account of the dropout problem. Each of these causes was studied more thoroughly and the analysis of findings is presented below.

Economic factors:

Group discussions established that most villagers earn their livelihood through farming. During the harvest time, villagers depend heavily on family labor. When parents were asked why they involve children one of the parents retorted:

“If we don’t involve our children in these activities we might not be able to survive economically, we are highly dependant on our family members.”

Another villager added:

“When a child, either a girl or a boy, becomes eight years old, he/she starts working with the parents. Children help in cultivation, animal grazing and during the wheat cutting period, boys spend most of their time in the field.”

At harvest time, boys carry food to fields and often help with cutting and threshing of the wheat crop, and girls do household work and look after the siblings in absence of the parents. Throughout this duration children frequently miss school and lag behind in classes and as a result are hesitant to go back to school.

If the village gets ample rainfall then vegetables are also grown. However, rains in the area are scarce and the water of the Manchar Lake only allows cultivation of wheat in small quantities, hardly sufficient for personal consumption. Few households go to the left bank of Indus River for cotton growing and wheat cultivation. In that case family members temporarily migrate to that area.

According to one of the villagers:

“Last year it rained after seven years and except for rain we have very little water to cultivate anything. Several families of Khaskheli clan have already migrated from the village to Kotri and Sehwan. Others temporarily migrate to the left bank of the river Indus to cultivate cotton.”

Temporary and permanent migration as a result of the diminishing economic resources has a definite role to play in children dropping out from school since children have no choice but to miss classes during that period. Women and girls are also engaged in cotton-picking. A mother divulged:

“During the cotton picking season we go to the left side of Indus River. This time also we have planned to go there. Then how can we manage to enroll our girls in school?”

One girl who had earlier left school said:

“When I was in class one, I got involved in agricultural activities. During the cotton-picking season I migrated along with my mother to the river area and would stay there for nearly two months in winters. Therefore, how could I have continued my studies? I told my teacher that I feel ashamed when I remain absent from school. I cannot remember my lessons, so I left school when I was in class three.”

When asked why he stops his daughter from going to school, a parent responded:

“If we send our daughters to school then who will take care of animals and other household chores? If I send her to school then I will have to sell my animals. Our livelihood depends on animals and God.”

Another girl, who had dropped out of school when she was in class four, narrated:

“When I was in school I started doing household work. Whenever I went home from school my mother would ask me to help with work which included fetching water for animals, washing clothes and taking care of sibling. Work load went on increasing day by day and finally I could not continue my studies and left school forever.”

Cattle is also a major source of income for villagers and mainly children (both boys and girls) look after the livestock. Feeding them, fetching water for them from the village well and taking them out grazing comprise a village child’s regular daily routine.

A boy who had left the school shared his story:

“When I first got admission in the school, I was almost 10 years old. Whenever my father went for farming, he would engage me in animal grazing. Finally my father decided that I should go with cattle, therefore, I left school forever. If I hadn’t abandoned school I could have passed class five this year.”

Social factors:

The absence of girls at school could be explained further by the family's attitudes and priorities regarding non-expenditure on education. Girls mentioned schooling to be quite low on priority of their elders who perceive no utility of education. In certain cases taunting by villagers was cited that discouraged families to allow their daughters to attend school.

Nonetheless, the villagers realize the significance of education as commented by one local:

“Schooling is very important and an educated person is more valuable than an uneducated one. The educated person eats sitting in the cart while an uneducated has to do physical labor. I know how this world is moving. An educated person lives a prosperous life.”

But the education is still perceived as being more useful for boys. The father of a second-grader who had two school-going-age children added:

“My son is studying in class two and whenever he does not go to school I beat him. It is not possible to send my daughter to school however because there is no one to help my wife at home, especially during the wheat cutting season.”

Another father was asked why he did not send his daughter to school. He replied:

“Those who have got education they also don’t have jobs (Jekay Parya likhya aunhan khey kahree nokree milee aahay). Look at Shaman he has passed class ten but he is still jobless.”

When asked if he would send his daughter to school if government promises to provide jobs, he replied:

“Surely, if we know that after education our children will get good jobs than we will send them to school.”

During RRA, girls laid emphasis on factors including the in-availability of Quran recitation lessons in school and the age factor that lead to girls leaving school.

According to one girl who is presently enrolled in the school:

“There is no woman to teach recitation of the Quran in the village. Few girls have left school due to this reason. If the school had provided these lessons girls would not have left; parents also want their girls to learn to read the Quran.”

Commenting on the age factor, one girl remarked:

“Older girls are embarrassed to attend the classes with youngsters, and other children also tease them about it.”

Routine absenteeism patterns:

School students who are habitual absentees from school and fall into truant status are more likely to be at risk of dropping out (*Source: Rumberger, 2001*). The CSS student records exhibit regular absenteeism. RRA sessions were held with children, parents of school dropouts and children currently studying in school, teachers and other community members to identify the reasons for this trend. Sessions with children engaged both girls and boys (drop outs and enrolled).

As identified across the multiple stakeholder groups, the main factors that stimulate irregularity in attendance and eventual drop out from school were family poverty, cultural constraints, poor health and the irrelevance of school curriculum for the villagers. Discussions with schoolteachers and parents revealed that ‘dropout’

generally occurred where students had a history of absenteeism. When students are habitually absent from school, they fall far behind in their class work and dropping out is an easier option than catching up.

During RRA sessions children drew up a season calendar (See Annexure A: Diagrams 4 & 5), time use diagrams (See Annexure A: Diagrams 6 & 7) and pair-wise ranking grids (See Annexure A: Chart 1 & 2) that displayed their daily activities and school absenteeism reasons (See Annexure A: Diagram 8 & 9). The information from the diagrams is summarized in Table 2.

Table 2 Reasons for Absenteeism (Priority ranking)		
Girls		Boys
1	Taunting by villagers	Diseases/ infections/ generally poor health
2	Not able to afford school fee/ books	Lack of money
3	Lack of attention by teacher	Carry lunch to fields
4	In-availability of job for educated person	Fetching food for livestock

Girls mentioned socio-economic, socio-cultural, and personal reasons as well as school related factors, which, in their view, make them miss school. As Table 2 depicts, community attitudes and economic factors were identified as major causes. Girls stated that village elders do not feel good about school education and say: *'why are you studying in school when none of you will be able to get any job in future? How will you get employment, when Shaman (who is the most educated person in the village and a matriculate) still does not have a job?'* Since educating girls is not on the priority of elders as they perceive no cogent reason for educating them, the families facing taunts from the community prefer not to allow their daughters to attend school. One community member reinforced this view:

"Due to purdah few of us do not send the girls to attend school on a regular basis, because the school has no boundary wall."

A village boy responded to the above statement:

"These girls visit the fields and work there during harvesting season, which is not considered to be bad but when they come to school it is considered bad."

The girls explained also that their education is of low concern. Non-affordability of school expenditures is used as a rationale for discouraging girls from attending school. This factor was identified by boys also as reason for high absenteeism and ultimate dropout. A boy who had dropped out from the community school said:

"I used to remain absent because I did not have books. Whenever the teacher asked children to open their books, I felt humiliated therefore, I quit school deliberately."

A girl responded:

"SEF does not provide books for all subjects and they are too expensive for us to purchase."

Another boy commented further that:

“Our parents have no money to meet our basic needs then how can they buy expensive books for us?”

Boys related that several of their classmates who cannot afford school expenses and fees are irregular in school. Most of them are involved in income generating activities. In a different RRA session children had drawn daily activity charts that showed an array of responsibilities they shared, including cattle grazing, fetching water, household chores and heavy engagement in agricultural activities especially during the wheat picking season (in April and May).

A boy presently studying in CSS said:

“During harvest, we take food for the family in the morning and afternoon; there in the fields we also help in harvesting wheat, therefore we can not attend school, and in the evening when we come back we are very tired.”

The workload thus does not allow the students to attend school regularly. In further sessions, several children who had left school related how they eventually had to leave the school in order to help their parents with the work.

A mother explained:

“My daughter helps me in washing clothes, cooking, looking after household activities and siblings in my absence, when I go for wheat cutting.”

In discussions with teachers, the school teacher who has been with the school since its inception reaffirmed that:

“During the months of April and May almost 90 percent of the children enrolled in the school remain absent. Most of them carry food twice a day to the fields. Boys also help parents in wheat cutting and threshing, only girls of ages 5 to 6 attend school during this period. We meet with parents regarding the absenteeism; they explain the reasons, and we know what they are saying is true so we do not force them to send their children during the wheat cutting season.”

Health problems:

During harvesting, male students reported to fall sick more often, a phenomenon they linked with heat and dust they are exposed to when they carry food to fields and also work alongside their elders. In the pair-ranking exercise (Table 2 above) boys rated *health problems* as a top source of absenteeism. A more detailed seasonal diagram (See Annexure A: Diagram 10) was charted that reflected the multitude of afflictions rampant in the village. Table 3 made by school students shows the frequency of occurrence and the causes of the ailments.

Diseases	Frequency of occurrence	Causes

1. Fever	6	Due to cold winters and also the change in weather
2. Diarrhea	1	Due to heat; hands not clean before eating; dirty water, bacteria from coats of animals
3. Stomach ache	4	Due to heat; hands not clean before eating; dirty water; ingesting sand, manure etc.
4. Head ache	5	Due to hot and cold weather
5. Malaria	3	Mosquito bites (in winters since livestock is kept inside, mosquitoes swarm in stagnant water around the houses)
6. Influenza	1	Conditions are exacerbated due to change in weather and during crop cutting owing to dust
7. Cough	6	Conditions are exacerbated during crop cutting owing to dust
8. Eye infection	9	Conditions are exacerbated during crop cutting owing to dust
9. Mumps	6	Conditions are exacerbated during crop cutting owing to dust; drinking ice cold water
10. Leshmeniasis	2	Sand fly bite in dry weather

As evident from Table 3 diseases are usually aggravated by extremes of hot and cold weather and unhygienic conditions. While children suffer from bouts of illnesses throughout the year, Table 4 depicts a trend towards health problems that aggravate during the crop-cutting season.

Diseases	Month(s)
1. Diarrhea	March / April
2. Cough	April
3. Eye infection	April / May
4. Mumps	April – May
5. Headache	May

The high frequency of occurrence of diseases keeps the children from regularly attending school. Moreover, despite the gravity of the issue, the village lacks any medical facility. People travel to the nearest city in order to get any kind of aid, which obviously diminishes chances of early recovery.

In-school factors:

As far as in-school factors are concerned, girls had reservations about the quality of teaching and teachers who in their view do not give proper attention to students. During the course of discussions many children (mostly girls) appeared bitter about the lack of attention by the teacher. They were of the view that this was the main cause of absenteeism amongst students. Since the school has been upgraded from

primary to the elementary (class eight) level, senior students (being more aware) expressed dissatisfaction with attitude and ability of the teachers. They also pointed out that the courses taught in the school do not prepare them adequately for getting jobs or enhance their vocational skills.

Discussion with the school teachers cited low salary as an important source of teacher burnout. They also complained that the low level of student interest in studying leads to stress and job dissatisfaction amongst the staff and impinges on their performance.

RECOMMENDATIONS & CONCLUSION

The study involved all segments of community and provides a holistic view of the dropout context in the village school. Children, the prime stakeholders of the education process, were key partners in the study. Findings indicate that the dropout problem is a community, economic and social problem.

Discussions with community members circled around the fact that the dropout problem is rooted in rampant poverty and dearth of resources in the village. Villagers pointed out that disregard of economic activities would mean a threat to survival and since education does not come with promise of future jobs, they find little meaning in preferring schooling for the child. Thus, heavy dependence on family labor for livelihood is crucial. School related factors were also argued as contributing towards students' absence and their dropout from the school.

Recommendations for reducing the incidence of dropout are presented below. These recommendations are a synthesis based on suggestions by the study partners to deal with the problem. Options focus on making the village school a place of learning in an atmosphere that does not alienate students from their local environment. The role of education in acknowledging the diversity present within communities ought to be re-envisioned to better suit the local life patterns and needs. This re-envisioning hopes to facilitate not only the Sindh Education Foundation but also the Government to address the dropout issue.

Modify academic calendar to suit community requirements:

The school teachers, children and parents identified April and May as the months in which student absenteeism is maximum. Teachers and students recommended a shift of school vacations to these months instead of the regular break during June and July. Similarly giving districts the prerogative to modify the calendars in consultation with the community and the various stakeholders may perhaps reduce the high absenteeism and dropout percentages.

Encourage community participation:

While the Foundation's CSS program maintains a channel of communication with the community through utilization of the school premises as a community center is a step that can go a long way in remedying parental lack of interest in education. Motivating parents to participate at all levels in their child's education would help in overcoming social obstacles that lead to decline in the child's school attendance in turn leading to dropout.

Focus on at-risk students:

As discussed in findings, the factors that induce absenteeism have a direct bearing on dropout rates in the community school. Since absenteeism is a key indicator for at-risk students, it is important for school to continually track the patterns and address the issues that cause students to stay absent.

Reducing absenteeism requires a coordinated effort between the schoolteachers, community members, and parents. Community's suggestion, as mentioned earlier, was that school should reorganize the academic calendar to suit the local needs.

This entails modifying of session-timings during certain months and also rescheduling the vacation timings.

Since health problems induce frequent absenteeism, children who are suffering from poor health are at a risk of dropping out. Therefore, health education component within the CSS program needs to focus on preventive strategies for specific health hazards so the children are better able to cope with the problem.

Professional training of teaching staff:

A comprehensive policy for school improvement should include professional development for teachers and educators. Proper teacher training can help teachers understand the necessity for caring relationships with students and urge them to use interactive teaching strategies than can help develop positive relationships with the students. The training ought to supplement local concerns. SEF must pay attention to these strong determinants of school effectiveness including salary levels of teaching staff, when preparing budgets for education programme.

Re-assess relevance of educational program:

The research highlights the necessity of an indigenous educational system that nurtures each community's inherent potential and needs. Community regards the ability to earn livelihood as the number one priority. Thus education should extend individual capacities and reflect students' regular and longer term social and economic needs and interests.

Villagers pointed out that education is failing to equip the children with the skills the labor market requires. On several instances, they quoted the case of the most qualified village boy (he has done his matriculation) who was still without a job. Hence the villagers under rate utility of school to a great extent. Because children provide a definite contribution towards the work and earning of the family, their disengagement from it could lead to serious survival issues. Quite a few dropout cases in the village had been caused due to this reason.

However, despite their criticisms of the education system, some villagers still believe in education as good for personal development and prosperity. Specifically the numeric skills children had acquired from school were greatly appreciated by the illiterate parents to be helpful in their monetary transactions. The community proposed that in order to encourage education, the school system should prepare students adequately for work and the government should provide jobs. These concerns point to the need of contextualization of subjects taught in the school. This would entail school-to-work programs that include work experiences as part of the curriculum at school level. Community proposed provision of vocational training such as sewing and stitching classes as well as lessons in reading of the Quran. Children (including the ones currently enrolled as well as those dropped from the school) remarked that these native additions to the school curriculum could help reduce the dropout rate.

Synchronized strategies for economic and social development:

Dropout in schools is a national problem and cannot be addressed by the school alone. Most studies agree that local development strategies, which will impact on the

school community, must be pursued (Shah, 1977). Improvement in education therefore ought to be concurrent with strategies by the Government for economic and social development and also health prevention facilities etc.

Universal education is indeed a desirable and feasible goal but it must not be equated with compulsory schooling. So making primary education compulsory is not the most suitable solution for preventing school dropouts. Instead the education system, as a whole, ought to be made more meaningful and relevant to the needs of the populace in general. In view of the community's considered opinion that an education system that is community-driven and incorporates the dynamics and peculiarities of each community stands more chances of finding sustainability and reducing the number of dropouts. However, making schools open spaces of learning which are sensitive to diverse needs of learners and learning processes is a huge task that entails combined efforts by the community and school in conjunction with the government policy and non-governmental organization objectives.

REFERENCES

- *Sindh Education Management Information System* data for 2003-04
- *Education For All National Plan of Action (2001 - 2015)*
- *National Education Policy, 1998-2010* – Ministry of Education
- 1998 Census Report
- *What are they teaching in Pakistani schools today?* by Pervez Hoodbhoy
- *World Bank Policy Paper on Primary Education (1990)*
- Community Supported Schools Program (CSSP) documents and reports

ANNEXURES

Annexure A – Rapid Rural Appraisal

Annexure B – Discussion Guide (CSS teachers)

Annexure C – Discussion Guide (Community)

Annexure A
Rapid Rural Appraisal (Children & Adults)

Diagram 1 – Reasons of Dropout from CSS (Girls)

Diagram 2 – Reasons of Dropout from CSS (Boys)

Diagram 3 – Reasons for Dropout in CSS (Adults)

Diagram 4 – Season Calendar (Girls' activities)

Diagram 5 – Season Calendar (Boys' activities)

Diagram 6 – Daily Activity Chart during School Days (Girls)

Diagram 7 – Daily Activity Chart during Crop-cutting season (Boys)

Diagram 8 – Reasons of Absenteeism in CSS (Girls)

Diagram 9 – Reasons of Absenteeism in CSS (Boys)

Chart 1 – Pair Ranking: Reasons of Absenteeism (Girls)

Chart 2 – Pair Ranking: Reasons of Absenteeism (Boys)

Diagram 10 – Seasonal Diseases Diagram (Boys)

DIAGRAM 1 Reasons of Dropout from CSS (Girls)

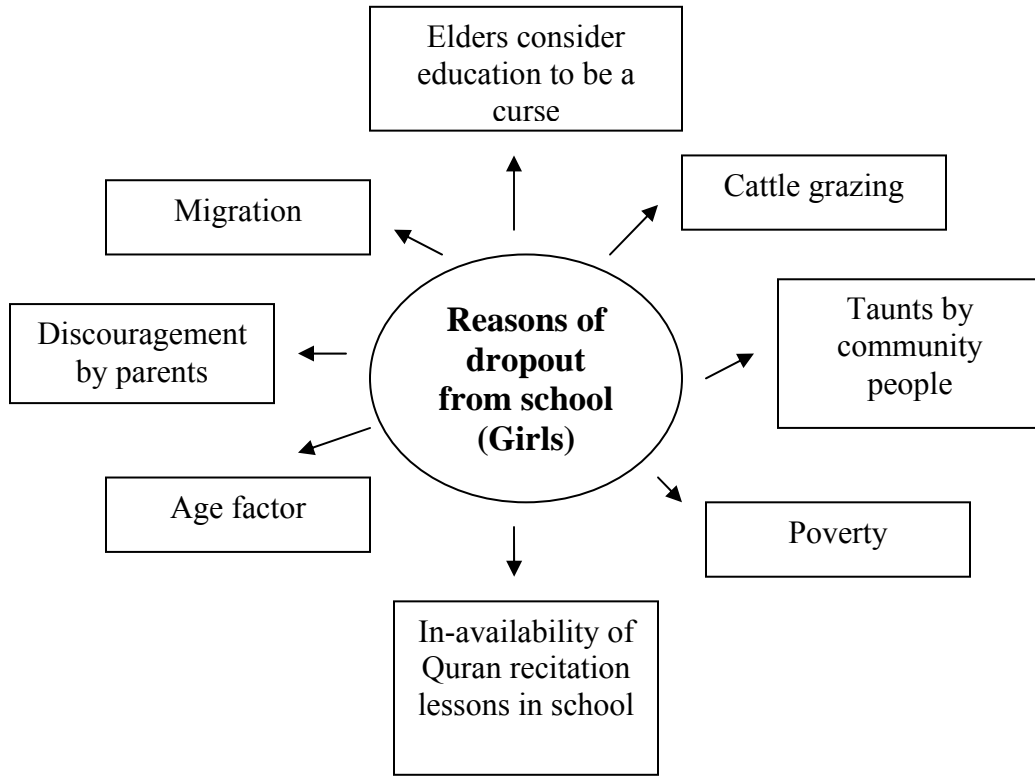


DIAGRAM 2 Reasons of Dropout from CSS (Boys)

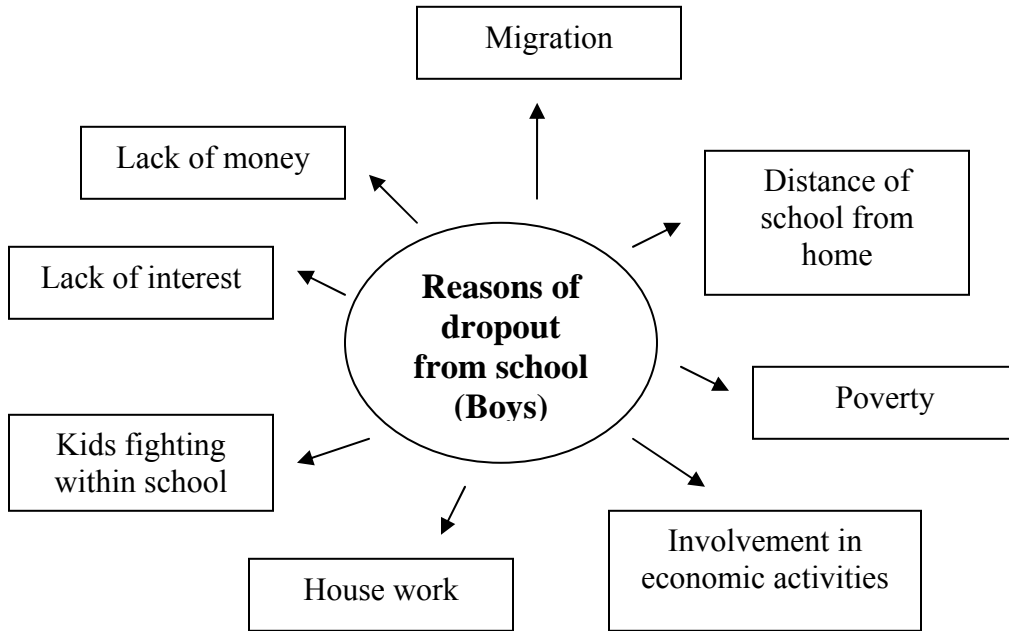


DIAGRAM 3
Reasons for Dropout in CSS (Adults)

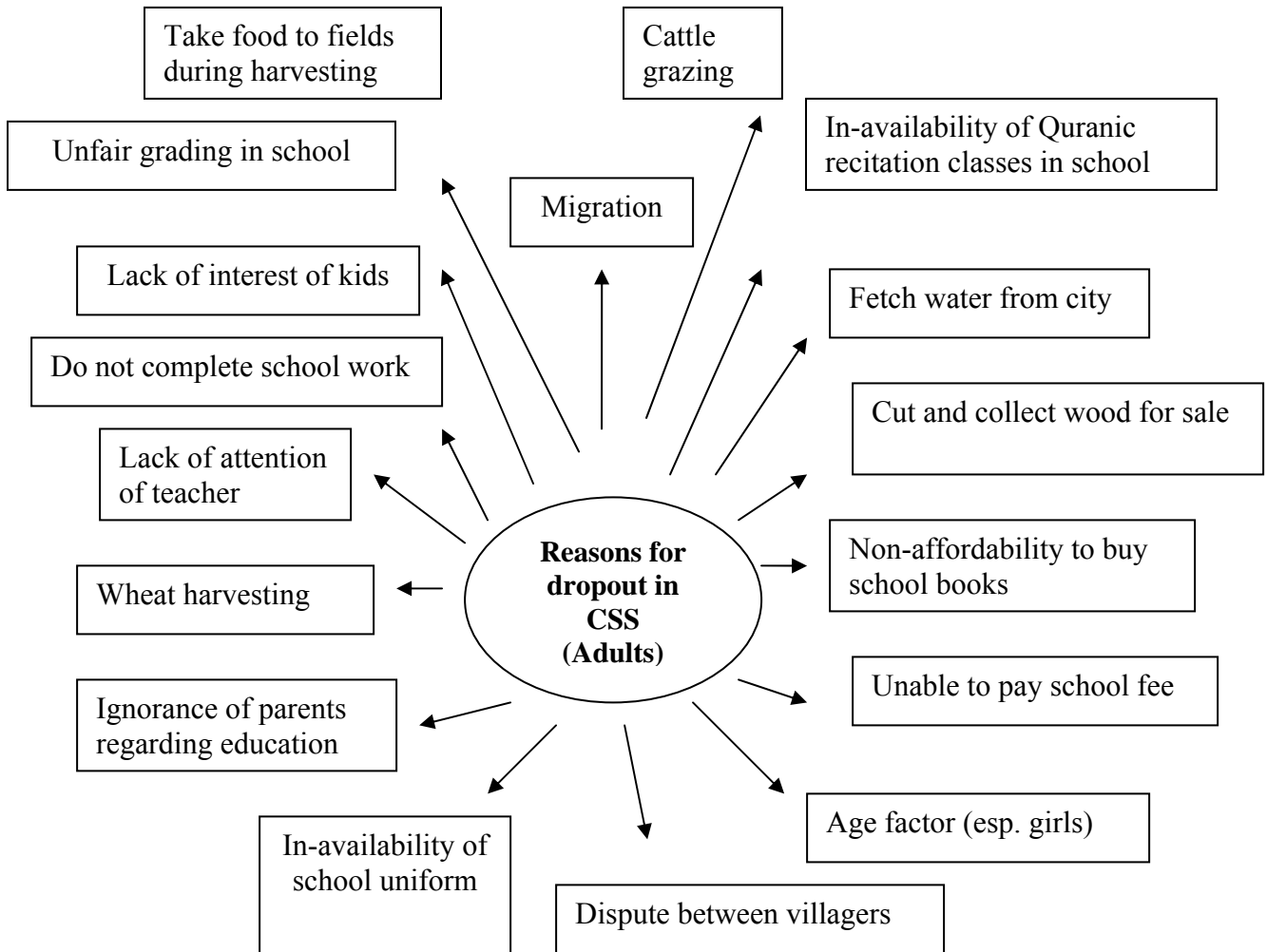


DIAGRAM 4 – Season Calendar (Girls’ Activities)

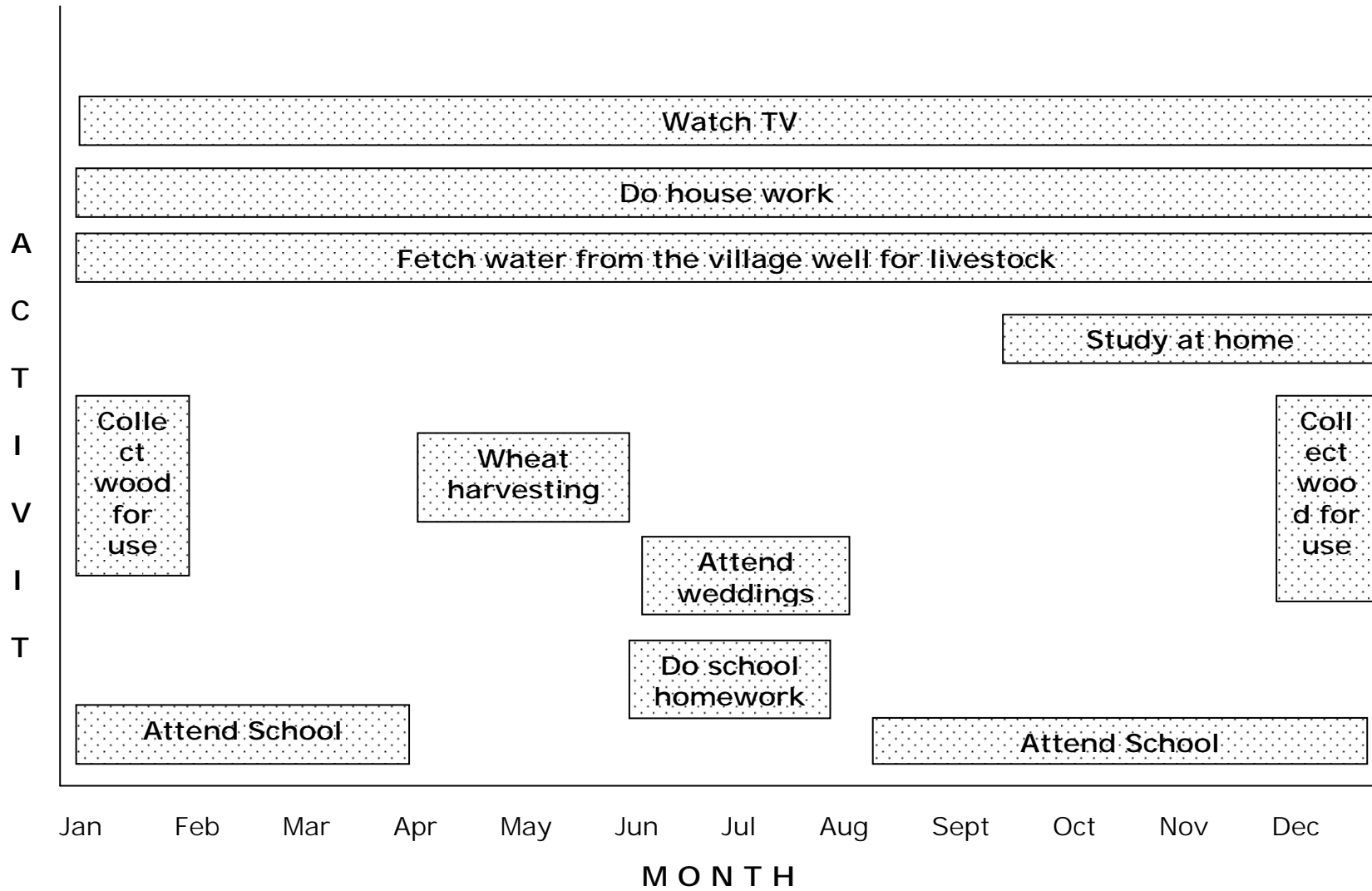


DIAGRAM 5 – Season Calendar (Boys’ Activities)

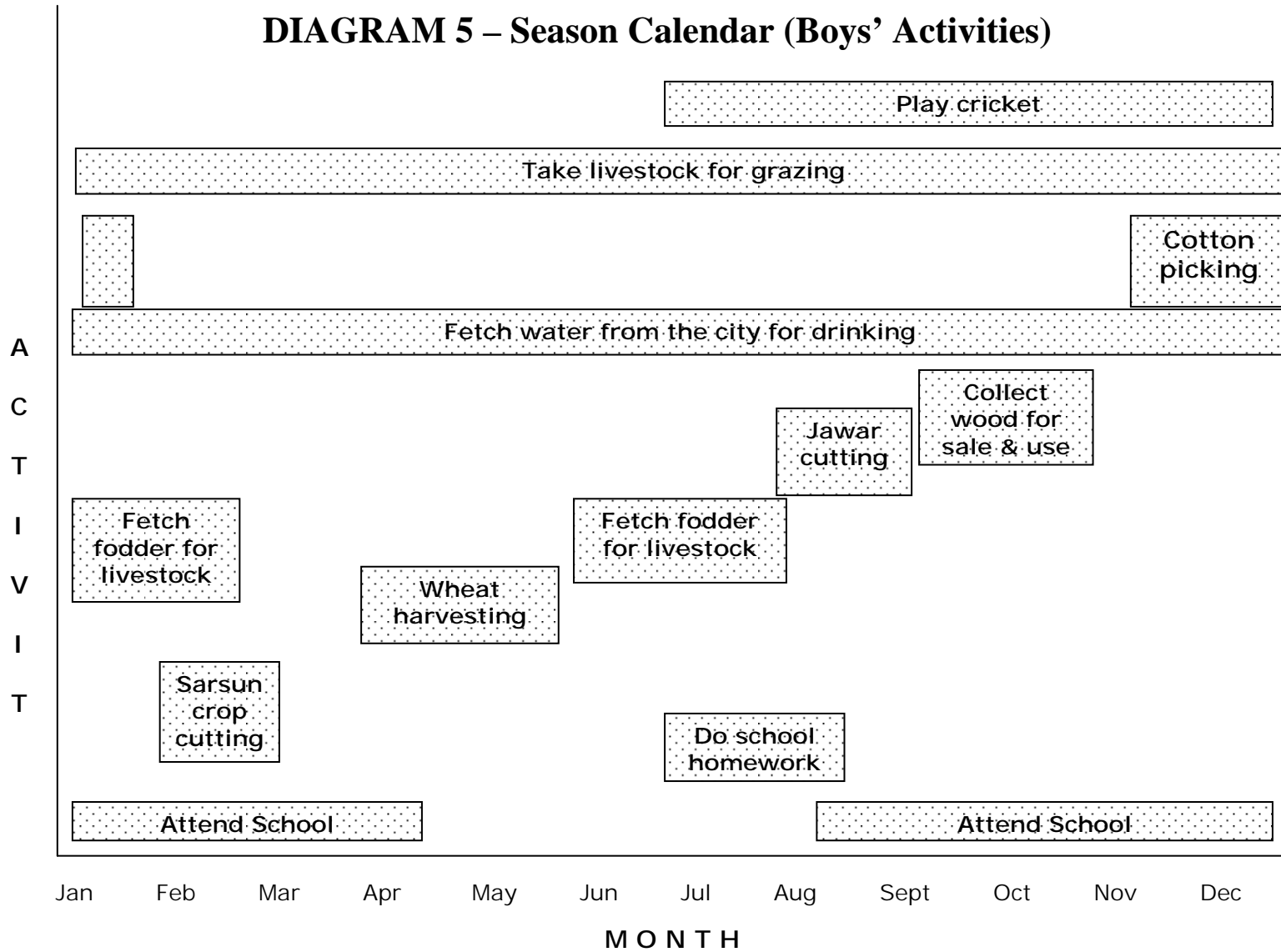


DIAGRAM 6
Daily Activity Chart during School Days (Girls)

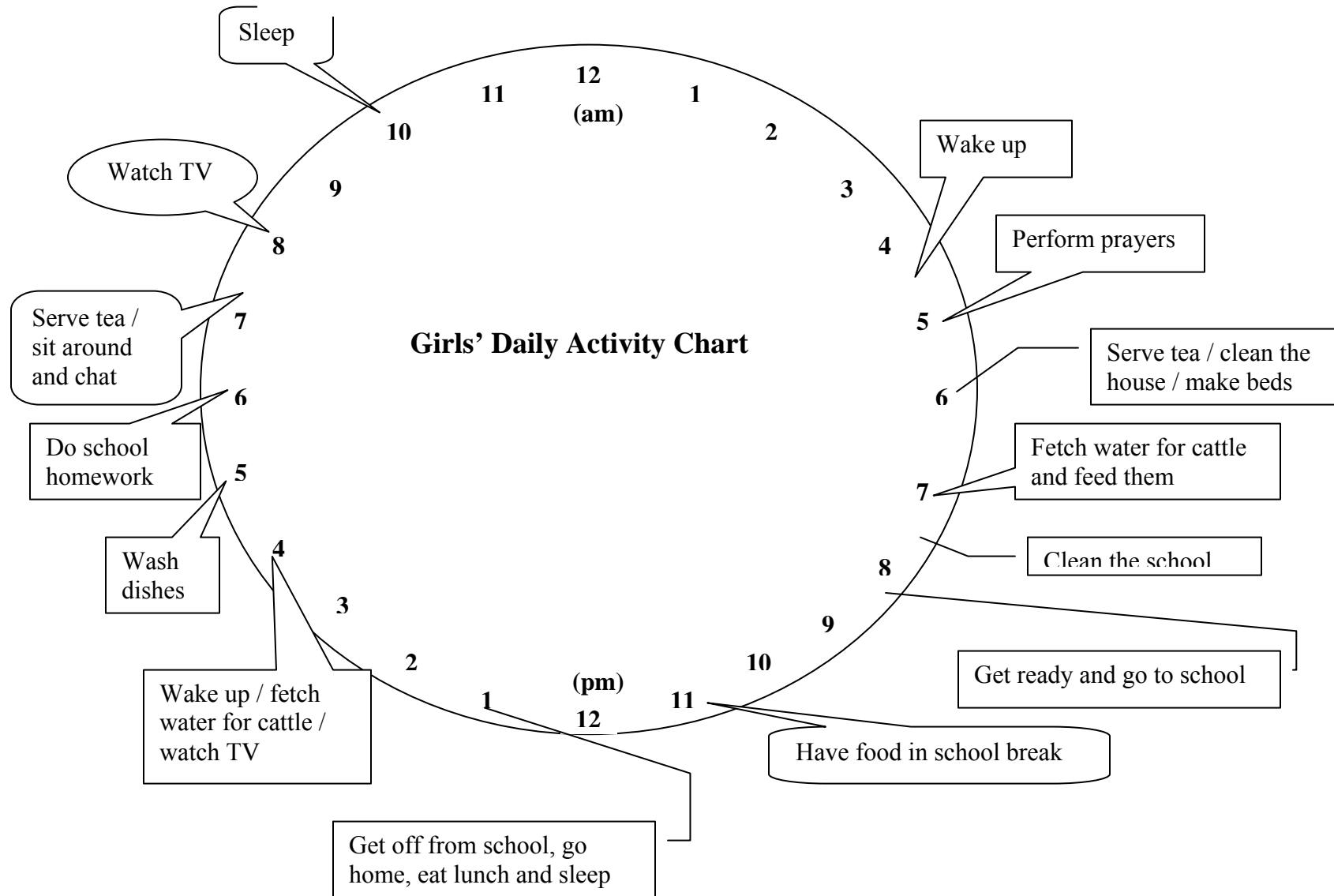


DIAGRAM 7

Daily Activity Chart during Crop-cutting Season (Boys)

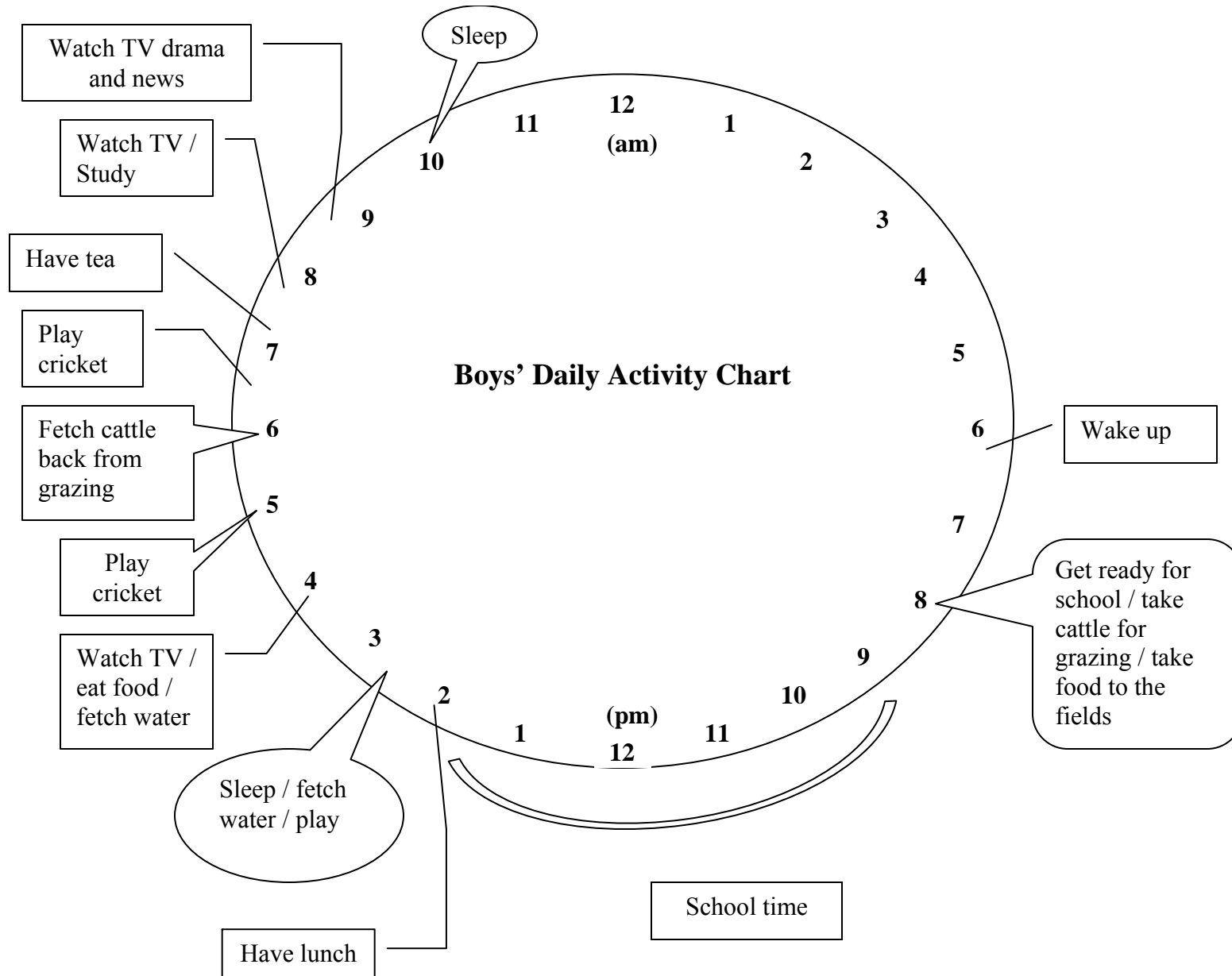


DIAGRAM 8 Reasons of Absenteeism in CSS (Girls)

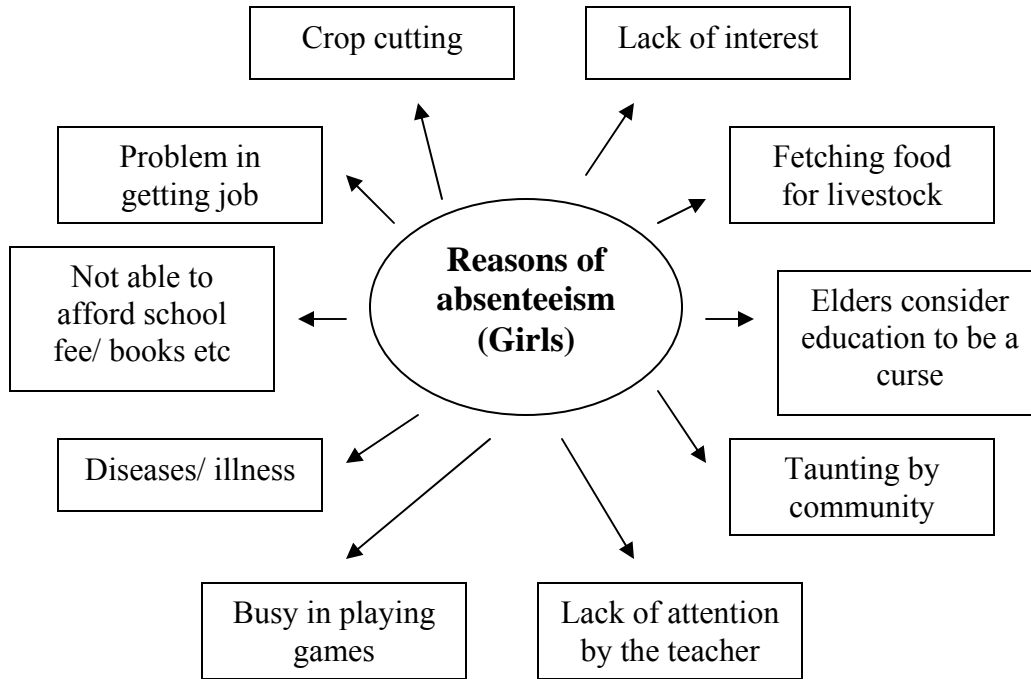


DIAGRAM 9
Reasons of Absenteeism in CSS (Boys)

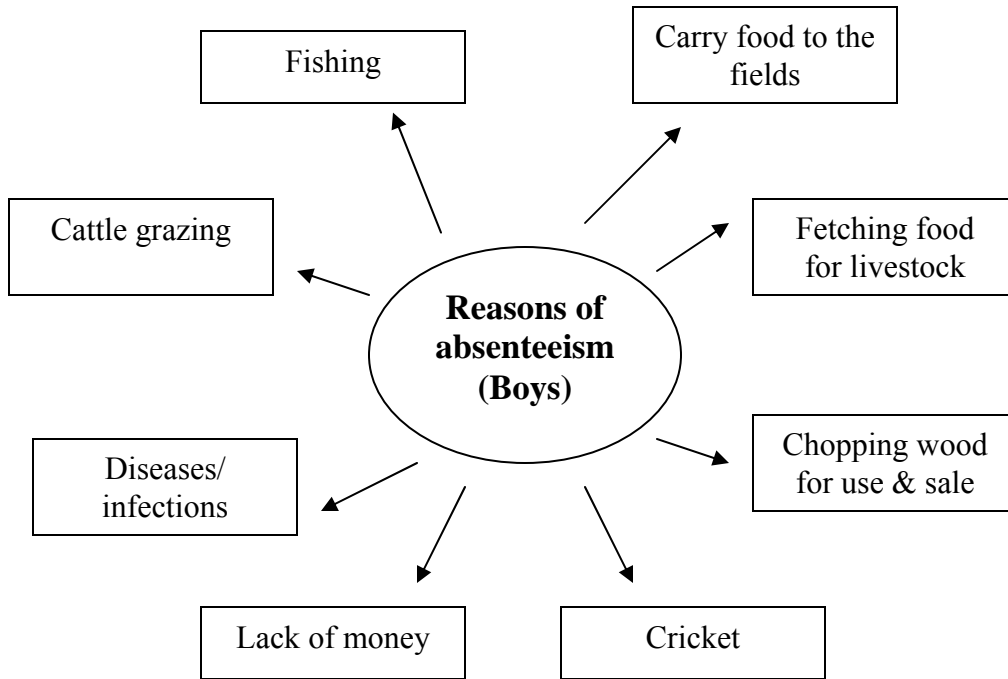


CHART 1

Pair Ranking – Reasons of Absenteeism (Girls)

Reasons of Absenteeism	Scores	
1. Crop cutting	III	(3)
2. Illness/ diseases	IIII	(4)
3. Lack of interest	IIII	(4)
4. Fetching food for livestock		(0)
5. Elders consider education to be a curse	IIII I	(6)
6. Problem in getting job	IIII	(5)
7. Lack of attention by teacher	IIII I	(6)
8. Busy in playing games	I	(1)
9. Not able to afford school fee/ books	IIII III	(8)
10. Taunting by community	IIII III	(8)

CHART 2

Pair Ranking – Reasons of Absenteeism (Boys)

Reasons of Absenteeism	Scores	
1. Carry food to fields	IIII	(5)
2. Fishing		(0)
3. Cattle grazing	II	(2)
4. Cricket	IIII	(4)
5. Fetching food for livestock	III	(3)
6. Chopping wood for use and sale	I	(1)
7. Diseases/ infections	IIII I	(6)
8. Lack of money	IIII I	(6)

DIAGRAM 10 – Seasonal Diseases Diagram (Boys)

Disease / Months	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec
Fever	ooo ooo ooo	ooo	oo	o	ooo o	ooo		oo		oo	ooo	ooo o
Diarrhea	□ □		□ □ □	□ □ □ □	□ □	□ □	□	□ □ □	□ □	□ □ □		□ □
Stomach ache	□ □	□		□ □ □		□ □ □ □	□ □			□ □		
Head ache	□ □ □ □	□ □ □		□	□ □ □ □	□ □	□ □ □		□ □		□ □ □	□ □
Malaria	⊠	⊠ ⊠ ⊠ ⊠		⊠ ⊠	⊠ ⊠	⊠ ⊠		⊠			⊠ ⊠	
Influenza	• • • • •	• •			• • •		• •		• • • • •	• •	• •	• • • • • •
Cough	oo oo	oo	oo o	o oo oo oo	oo o		o	oo	o	oo o	oo o	oo oo o
Eye infections	□ □		□ □	□ □ □ □ □	□ □ □ □ □		□ □ □	□	□ □	□ □	□	□ □
Mumps				• • • • • •	• • • • • •	•						

Annexure B
Group Discussion Guide (CSS Teachers)

1. What are certain problems that the school faces? (Ask if not mentioned: is children absenteeism a problem as well?)
2. What is the average number of children who stay generally absent? (Probe for maximum duration of absenteeism and class level)
3. What are the causes of absenteeism?
4. Which months do children mostly stay absent in?
5. Why/ when do you exclude the child's name from GR?
6. What were the main reasons due to which children drop out of school? (Is being absent for long time a reason?)
7. Suggestions as to how the dropout rate can be minimized?

Annexure C

Group Discussion Guide (Community)

1. What are different economic activities of the villagers?
2. Do the children participate in socio-economic activities?
3. What are the reasons of school absenteeism and dropout?
4. How can the school dropout issue be addressed?
5. Suggestions and expectations from the school?

Respondents

Parents of children who had dropped out of the school and the parents of children who are currently enrolled in the school as well as other members of community.



SINDH EDUCATION FOUNDATION

Government of Sindh

Plot 9, Block 7, Kehkashan, Clifton 5, Karachi-75600, Pakistan.

UAN: (92-21) 111 424 111

Fax: (92-21) 99251652 Email: info@sef.org.pk

Website: www.sef.org.pk