

# UNDERLYING SCHOOL DROPOUTS ISSUES IN SARAWAK

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## ABSTRACT

Students who leave school without completing formal education still remain an issue in Malaysia. This study is based on the research tracing the journey of school dropouts in Sarawak, Malaysia and the focus of this paper is identify the issues behind it. A cross-sectional survey was used to complete the data collection process among 120 school dropouts selected through purposive sampling. The obtained data were analysed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), described in frequency and cross-tabulated. The study discloses that most of the school dropouts come from the suburban areas (69.2%) compared to urban areas (30.8%). More males (54.2%) than females (45.8%) dropped out of school and most dropped out at secondary (77.5%) compared to primary (22.5%) school level. Interestingly, the number of students who dropped out from the academic schools (96.7%) is higher than those from the technical school (3.3%). More females than males got married at the schooling age of 18 years old and below. What is thought-provoking on these findings are issues underlying the school dropouts such as the lack of opportunity and social inequality, quality of education, inadequate facilities and infrastructures to facilitate students to continue and complete their education. These issues should be taken into seriously. It is not just the economic concerns of poverty and unemployment but there is also a need to include structural and social concerns such as inequality and violation of children's right. The underlying background of those who are still in school need to be addressed and studied by all the stakeholders involved and they should be sensitive to their backgrounds in order to identify relevant measures to prevent those who are at risk from further dropping out of school.

**Keywords:** Demographic profile, Education System, Gender, Sarawak, School Dropouts, Various ethnic group,

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

School dropout is not foreign to Malaysia particularly in Sarawak. Although the Malaysian government is committed to Education for All (EFA) and Millennium Development Goals (MDG), the school dropouts still persist (Mokshein et al., 2016). No Child Left Behind (NCLB) is adopted in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) by world leaders for the well-being of the children and it is clearly highlighted in SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 2 (Zero Hunger) SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-Being), SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions) (UNICEF, 2015). Ngo et al. (2020) explain that one of the causes of the child being left behind is because of the geographical location and population demographics, consequently leading to dropouts. Student dropout is a serious problem not only for the individual and school but for society as a whole (Christle et al., 2007; Mohamed et al., 2017). Student enrolment is a key indicator of the reach of education in Malaysia but it does not necessarily reflect the quality and effective implementation of education policies and initiatives of a country (Patel, 2014). In Malaysia, the school dropout rates are low. However, the number of students leaving the education system before complete on a secondary education reaches into the thousands (Patel, 2014). A study conducted by Kohno et al. (2020) in Sarawak discovered that due to family poverty, the girls in the family chose to drop out from school at the age of 12 and 13 to get married to reduce the burden on the parents.

The psychosocial approach looks at school dropout as individuals. Some psychosocial factors like social environment have impact on their physical and mental wellness. Thus, the issues related to school dropout needs to be studied. Previous studies (Patel, 2014; Mokshein et al., 2016; Mohamed et al., 2017), using quantitative and qualitative methods, focus primarily on the roles of parents and teachers but less emphasis on the demographic background of the school dropouts. On the other hand, the view points of the dropouts themselves have not been sufficiently explored. The demographic profile of school dropouts needs to be studied in order to comprehend the root cause of the problem. Therefore, this study aims to identify issues behind the school dropouts in Sarawak and is based on hypothesis that there is relationship between demographic profile and the issues of school dropouts.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

School dropout refers to students leaving the school and class before completing the prescribed courses (Mohamed et al., 2017). According to Drewry (2007) there are three types of dropouts, namely cohort dropout, event dropout, and status dropout. The problem of dropouts in Malaysia is greater in the transition Primary 6 to Form 1, between the ages of 11 to 12 years. This trend continues within the subsequent years in secondary school (Patel, 2014). This situation was supported by the Ministry of Education Malaysia (2007) report which claims that dropout happened most frequently during the transition between grades, particularly during the transition from primary to secondary. Mokshein et al. (2016) added that dropout cases are more serious at the secondary level, particularly among male students.

Psychological and sociological theories have viewed school dropout as the end result of a long-term process of academic disengagement which might be influenced by in-out-of-school factors (John et al., 2018). According to John et al. (2018), teenagers use the “cost-benefit” analysis to decide whether to stay in school or otherwise. In general, the expected costs and benefits of staying in school vary, depending on a student’s particular skills and family circumstances. Students who receive early investment (e.g. by their parents or through programme) in the development of their social-emotional skills and core cognitive skills are expected to gain a greater benefit from staying in school compared to their peers who entered school with poor skills and a lack of investment in life. Additionally, a study related to racially-disparate effects of drug arrest on high school dropout shows that participation in early childhood programme is associated with decreased risk of antisocial behaviour and high school dropout (Ashtiani, 2021).

Virtanen et al. (2020) stated that school dropout is a significant and persistent educational problem reflecting the level of school disengagement among students. School dropout is associated with various negative post-school outcomes which includes a poor level of education and a high level of unemployment among teenagers. Virtanen et al. (2020) further stress that the transitioning process to secondary school has become a source of discontinuity among students. A study conducted by Pedersen et al. (2019) show that psychiatric characteristics such as depression lead some students to leave school to avoid challenges. This study is paralleled with a study on students with ADHD by Virtanen et al. (2020). The study concludes that the students with ADHD are more likely to drop out of school compared to their non-ADHD peers because ADHD impairs the self-regulation and executive functioning of an individual. Another interesting study also found that male students have the highest probability to drop out from school (Pedersen et al., 2019).

With this serious school dropout problem, social support is essential. It refers to the provision of material and psychological resources with the intention of helping the recipient (Kilday & Ryan, 2019). Previous studies have highlighted a positive relationship between peer support and student engagement at school (Kilday et al., 2019). Having difficulties in handling school situations (may generate anxiety and stress) like giving speeches, school environment, social interactions with teachers and peers, and academic challenges may may cause students to leave school. Hence, the school Attendance Problems (SAP) model proposes four possible reasons for dropout namely; (i) escape from aversive social and/or evaluative situation, (ii) avoidance of stimuli that provoke negative affectivity, (iii) pursuit of tangible rewards outside school, and (iv) pursuit of attention from significant others (Gonzalvez et al., 2021). Current literatures have shown that the factors behind school dropouts are teacher-student conflict, high level of teacher control, negative perceptions of school, low teacher support, high competition, stringent rules, and inconsistent grading (John et al., 2018; Kilday et al., 2019; Pedersen et al., 2019; Gonzalvez et al., 2021). In contrast, Mohamed et al. (2017) have classified the causes for student dropout into four main categories: school, family, social, and personal factors.

School dropouts become a major concern because they are more likely to be involved in crime and dependence on state and federal welfare programme (Levin & Rouse, 2012). A majority of the

school dropouts are from low-income households and this will hinder their ability to improve their socio-economic status (Patel, 2014). According to Patel (2014), dropouts who have started working is an indication of the continuation of the poverty cycle. They rather venture into unskilled work to earn money and support their family. Mohamed et al. (2017) view dropout issue not only from the economic concerns of poverty and unemployment perspectives, but it also includes structural and social concerns such as inequality, community, social values, role of families, child abuse, and drug abuse. Emotional and Behavioural Disabilities (EBD) is also associated with education problem such as school dropouts, and wider social problems such as domestic violence, unwanted pregnancies, and physical health problems (Loeber et al., 2002).

### **3. RESEARCH METHOD**

This study is conducted in Sarawak, located on the Borneo island, which is also the largest territory in Malaysia. It is the most diverse ethnic groups with a very distinct cultures, language and lifestyle. The areas of study cover urban and suburban in the 12 Divisions in Sarawak. In this context of study, the school dropouts are those who had permanently left the education system without completing a full cycle of national primary or secondary education and had discontinued schooling with no intention of enrolling in any further educational programme. This include those who have not completed their study until Form 5 in government school and are not taking the Malaysian Certificate of Education (SPM) examination.

A cross-sectional survey is used to complete the data collection process among 120 school dropouts selected through purposive sampling and who are willingly to be involved in the study. With the constraint of COVID-19 pandemic, online surveys via Google Forms and also printed questionnaire are used in data collection. The close and open-ended survey via Google Forms and printed questionnaire are asked through mobile phone or face to face depending on the accessibility of the internet connection and situation of 120 various ethnic school dropouts in order for clarification on the part of participant; those who could not read or those that require detailed written responses. The enumerators' interviews are more structured based on a standard set of questions based on the Google Forms or printed questionnaire. The areas that are not covered with the internet connection, the hard printed questionnaire is used by the enumerators, whereas areas covered with the internet connection the Google Form is used. The questions in the Google Form and printed questionnaire are the same. For those participants who are illiterate the enumerators would help them to read and write. In addition, the enumerators involved in this study are from local community who are familiar with participants's native languages.

The age of the participants ranged from 11 to 29 years old. For those participants who are below 18, consent from parents or guardians are obtained and granted. A total number of 34 closed and open-ended questions are self-developed. The questions developed are based on the aims of the study and suitable to the context of research participants. Closed-ended questions can be answered with "Yes" or "No," or they have a limited set options (such as: A, B, C, or All of the Above). The participants are to tick in the box provided or they can write their answer if not listed. The questions are divided into three parts; Demographic Background, Schooling Background/History, and

Current Situations. Before the main survey is conducted, a trial run was conducted to volunteers among school dropouts. They are not to be included in this research. This is to ensure that the wording and the order of the questions, and the range of answers for multiple-choice questions were easily understood. Its purpose is also to get feedback to identify ambiguities and difficult questions. Open-ended questions are included to allow the participants additional comments. The questionnaire is in the Malay language. The data on demographic profile of the dropouts are entered and analysed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) and are described in frequency and cross-tabulated analysis.

#### 4. RESULTS

The findings of this empirical study are presented through demographic profile based on 120 participants among various ethnic school dropouts.

##### 4.1 Demographic Profile

**Table 1:** Demographic Profile

Profile	Frequency	Percentage (%)
<i>Area</i>		
Urban	27	22.5
Suburban	93	77.5
<i>Divisions</i>		
Kuching	11	9.2
Samarahan	7	5.8
Serian	2	1.7
Simangang	3	2.5
Betong	5	4.2
Sarikei	13	10.8
Sibu	10	8.3
Bintulu	3	2.5
Kapit	10	8.3
Miri	20	16.7
Limbang	13	10.8
Mukah	23	19.2
<i>Ethnicity</i>		
Iban	41	34.2
Bidayuh	9	7.5
Malay	22	18.3
Melanau	20	16.7
Kayan	1	.8
Penan	14	11.7

Chinese	4	3.3
Kadayan	6	5.0
Jawa	1	.8
Kelabit	1	.8
Lun Bawang	1	.8

**Age Dropped Out of School (years)**

7	4	3.3
8	1	.8
9	1	.8
10	1	.8
11	3	2.5
12	17	14.2
13	13	10.8
14	17	14.2
15	24	20.0
16	29	24.2
17	10	8.3

Table 1 is the summary of demographic profile of the school dropouts who took part in this study. The descriptive analysis finding shows that (at the time the study was conducted) the participants involved in the study come from urban (22.5%) and suburban (77.5%) areas within 12 Divisions, and are from various ethnic groups in Sarawak. The participants are Iban (34.2%), Malay (18.3%), Melanau (16.7%), Penan (11.7%) and other ethnicities (below than 10%). Most of the dropouts left school at the age of 16 years old (29%), followed by 15 years old (24%), 14 years old (17%), and 12 years old (17%). The youngest age left the education system is at the age of 7.

**4.2 More males than females are dropped out of school and mostly at secondary school compared to primary school**

**Table 2:** Gender, Last Class Attended and Dropping out of Secondary or Primary School

Profile	Frequency	Percentage (%)
<b><i>Dropping Out of Secondary or Primary School</i></b>		
Primary School	27	22.5
Secondary School	93	77.5
<b><i>Last Class Attended</i></b>		
Pre-School	1	.8
Primary 1	3	2.5
Primary 2	1	.8
Primary 3	1	.8
Primary 4	1	.8
Primary 5	3	2.5

Primary 6	17	14.2
Form 1	13	10.8
Form 2	17	14.2
Form 3	24	20.0
Form 4	29	24.2
Not Completed Form 5	10	8.3
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	65	54.2
Female	55	45.8

Table 2 shows that most of the school dropouts left the education system at secondary (77.5%) compared to primary school level (22.5%). The earliest level to drop out of school is at pre-school but most of them left when they were in Form 4 (24.2%) and Form 3 (20.0%). On top of that, they are more males (54.2%) dropping out of school compared to females (45.8%).

#### 4.3 Most dropped out from type of academic curriculum school compared to technical school

**Table 3:** Type of Curriculum Attended \* Area Last School Cross tabulation

		<i>Area Last School Attended</i>		<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>
		Urban	Suburban		
<i>Type of Curriculum</i>	Academic School	34	82	116	96.7
	Technical School	3	1	4	3.3
<b>Total</b>		37	83	120	100.0

Table 3 indicates that most of the school dropouts who left the education system are from the academic curriculum (96.7%) compared to technical school (3.3%). When the type of school is cross tabulated, there are only four technical schools; three schools located in urban areas and one school is in suburban area.

#### 4.4 Most of the school dropouts came from suburban area

**Table 4:** Area Last School \* Last School Cross tabulation

		Last School		Frequency	Percentage (%)
		National Primary School	National Secondary School		
<b>Area Last School</b>	Urban	5	32	37	30.8
	Suburban	22	61	83	69.2
<b>Total</b>		27	93	120	100.0

Table 4 shows area of the last school attended by the school dropouts and it is mostly located in suburban area (69.2%) compared to urban area (30.8%). When area of the last school attended is cross tabulated with primary or secondary school, the findings reveals that most of the last school attended by the dropouts are either at the Primary or Secondary schools and are located in suburban area. This is a clear indication that the school dropouts are from suburban area.

**Table 5:** Last Class Attended \* Gender Cross tabulation

		Gender		Total	
		Male	Female		
<b>Last Class Attended</b>	Pre-School	0	1	1	
	Primary 1	0	3	3	
	Primary 2	0	1	1	
	Primary 3	1	0	1	
	Primary 4	1	0	1	
	Primary 5	2	1	3	
	Primary 6	12	5	17	
	Form 1	7	6	13	
	Form 2	11	6	17	
	Form 3	13	11	24	
	Form 4	15	14	29	
	Not Completed Form 5	3	7	10	
	<b>Total</b>		65	55	120

Table 5 shows that more females dropped out of school at lower primary (Primary 1-3) compared to males. However, more males dropped out of school at upper primary (Primary 4-6) compared to females. In particular, more males dropped out at Primary 6 compared to females. The study also shows that more male dropouts at lower secondary compared to females.

**Table 6:** Boarding or Day School\* Last School Cross tabulation

	<i>Last School Attended</i>		<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>
	National Primary School	National Secondary School		
<b>Student Status</b> Boarding School	13	46	59	49.2
Day School	14	47	61	50.8
<b>Total</b>	27	93	120	100.0

Table 6 shows that there is an insignificant difference in the number of school dropouts from boarding school (49.2%) and day school (50.8%). Out of 59 (49.2%) school dropouts in boarding school, 13 of them are from primary school and the remaining 46 are from secondary school level.

**Table 7:** Boarding or Day School \* Age dropping out of school Cross tabulation

	<b>Age dropping out of school (year)</b>											<b>Total</b>	
	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17		
<b>Student Status</b> Boarding School	3	1	0	0	3	6	9	12	1	0	9	6	59
Day School	1	0	1	1	0	11	4	5	1	4	2	4	61
<b>Total</b>	4	1	1	1	3	17	13	17	2	4	2	10	120

**4.5 Some are stayed in the boarding school at the young age**

Table 7 shows that 13 dropouts who are from the boarding school started staying in the school as early as seven years old. It reveals that the students have to be away from their parents and spent most of their times in the boarding schools.

**Table 8:** Boarding or Day School \* Ethnicity Cross tabulation

		<i>Ethnicity</i>										<b>Total</b>	
		Iban	Bidayu h	Melayu	Melana u	Kayan	Penan	Chinese	Kaday an	Jawa	Kelabit		Lun Bawang
<b>Student Status</b>	Boarding School	22	5	6	8	1	14	0	2	0	1	0	59
	Day School	19	4	16	12	0	0	4	4	1	0	1	61
<b>Total</b>		41	9	22	20	1	14	4	6	1	1	1	120

Table 8 reveals that the school dropouts from ethnic minority groups like Penan, Kayan and Kelabit mostly stayed in the boarding schools when they were in primary or secondary school.

#### 4.6 More female than male got married at the schooling age

**Tabel 9:** Gender \* Marital Status Cross tabulation

		<i>Marital Status</i>				Frequency	Percentage (%)
		Single	Married	Separated	Divorced		
<b>Gender</b>	Male	55	10	0	0	65	54.2
	Female	19	29	5	2	55	45.8
<b>Total</b>		74	39	5	2	120	100.0

Table 9 shows the marital status of the dropouts. 74 (61.7%) school dropouts are single, 39 (32.5%) are married, five (4.2%) are separated and two (1.6%) are divorced. Out of 39 dropouts who are married, 29 of them are female and 10 are male. Dropouts with separated and divorced status are all females.

**Table 10:** Marriage Age \* Gender Cross tabulation

		<i>Gender</i>		<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>
		Male	Female		
<i>Marriage Age</i>	14	0	2	2	1.7
<i>(Years)</i>	15	1	5	6	5.0
	16	2	9	11	9.2
	17	1	5	6	5.0
	18	1	4	5	4.2
	19	1	3	4	3.3
	20	0	4	4	3.3
	21	0	2	2	1.7
	22	0	1	1	.8
	23	3	0	3	2.5
	24	0	1	1	.8
	27	1	0	1	.8
	NA	55	19	74	61.7
<b>Total</b>		65	55	120	100.0

Table 10 shows that 30 dropouts married at the age of 18 or below; two married at the age of 14, six married at the age of 15, 11 married at the age of 16, six married at the age of 17, and five married at the age of 18. When gender is cross tabulated with marriage age, out of 30 dropouts who married at the age of 18 and below, it is found that 25 are female and five are male. This shows that more females than males married at the schooling age.

**4.7 Many school dropouts have many siblings and the older child among siblings**

**Table 11: Number of Siblings**

<b>Profile</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>
<i>Number of Siblings</i>		
1	4	3.3
2	9	7.5
3	27	22.5
4	29	24.2
5	23	19.2
6	15	12.5
7	3	2.5
8	5	4.2
9	3	2.5
10	1	.8
11	1	.8

In Table 11, 3.3% of the school dropouts are the only child in the family. The highest percentage of 24.2 % among school dropouts have four siblings, followed by 22.5% of them who have three siblings, and 19.3 % have five siblings. Two of the school dropouts have 10 and 11 siblings respectively.

**Table 12:** Birth Order \* Gender Cross tabulation

		Gender		Total
		Male	Female	
<b>Birth Order</b>	1.00 (the eldest)	14	14	28
	2.00	16	17	33
	3.00	11	13	24
	4.00	12	3	15
	5.00	5	4	9
	6.00	2	2	4
	7.00	2	1	3
	8.00	2	1	3
	9.00	1	0	1
Total		65	55	120

When birth order is cross tabulated with gender, Table 12 reveals most of them are the older child in the family in which 70.8% are either the eldest, second eldest or the third child in the family.

## 5. DISCUSSION

Most of the school dropouts involved in the study are come from the suburban area. The last schools, either at primary or secondary school level, are mostly located in suburban (69.2%) compared to urban area (30.8%). In addition most of them are dropped out from the type of academic curriculum (96.7%) compared to technical school (3.3%). It signifies that the dropouts are not interested in the type of academic curriculum school that emphasises on academic curriculum compared to less dropouts from technical school. This is tallied with the issue underlined by Patel (2014) on the quality of education in relation to students who dropped out of school.

Moreover, the study has revealed that though there are four technical schools, three of them are located in urban areas and only one located in suburban area. This factor could hinder the suburban students to attend the technical schools. The school dropout rates in the rural areas are due to the lack of opportunity and social inequality, inadequate facilities (Rumberger, 2001), and inadequate infrastructures to facilitate the students to continue and complete their education especially the minority ethnic group in remote areas (World Bank, 2005). One of the causes of the child to be left behind is due to the geographical location (Ngo et al., 2020).

There is also an insignificant difference between the number of dropouts from boarding (49.2%) and day schools (50.8%). Out of 59 dropouts (49.2%) from the boarding school, 13 of them came from primary school level and 46 came from secondary school level. The primary school dropouts started staying in the boarding school as early as seven years old and they were separated from

their families in order to get an access to the education system. The school dropouts from ethnic minority groups such as Kayan, Penan and Kelabit had to stay in the boarding school in their primary and secondary level. Minimal family support and encouragement could demotivate them to study. Public boarding school students in Malaysia are mostly selected based on their outstanding academic performance and co-curricular achievements. These schools are mostly located in urban areas. In Sarawak, the suburban students are encouraged to stay in the boarding school. The schools are built to cater to the nearby villages in the interiors.

The indigenous peoples in Sarawak represent more than ethno-linguistic groups, with each group having its own culture, language, and traditional lands (Child Rights Coalition Malaysia, 2013). Languages are the basis for development, growth, and nation building and for many children of these minority ethnic groups such as Penan, learning in their mother tongue is a step forward ‘against illiteracy, discrimination, and contributes to the quality of education and equity’ (Yoong, 2013) as Malay language is the medium of communication in National Primary or Secondary School they are attended. Since Malay language is the official language of Malaysia, the students learn most of the subjects in that language. However, there are overwhelming evidences from previous studies in many countries that state the intellectual development in the early stages of a child’s development is best established through the mother tongue (Child Rights Coalition Malaysia, 2013) before a second language can be used as the learning medium at a later stage, and yet there is hardly any mention of the national school commitment to mother tongue education. Besides, the indigenous community is lacking the much needed language and literature materials for their learning (Child Rights Coalition Malaysia, 2013). This may lead to some of them show disinterest in the language used in schools. The quality of education is relatively associated to students drop out of school (Patel, 2014), therefore embracing sense of sensitiveness and understand the diversity of these ethnic minority groups are vital.

The study also reveals more female dropouts at lower primary (Primary 1-3) compared to male. However, there are more male dropouts at upper primary (Primary 4-6) than females at Primary 6 level. Moreover, the study also shows that there are more male dropouts at lower secondary than females. Interestingly, they left the education system at secondary (77.5%) compared to primary school level (22.5%) particularly at Form 4 and Form 3. On top of that, they are more males (54.2%) dropping out of school compared to females (45.8%), and this is an indication that males have tendency to drop out of school. This trend is similar to the finding in Mokshein et al. (2016) that dropout cases are more serious at the secondary level, particularly among male students (Pedersen, et al., 2019; Mokshein et al., 2016). According to Mohamed et al. (2017), understanding the factors of secondary students dropout is one of the key issues to address the social and economic problems that impede the progress of human resources utilization in developing countries. They also added that completing secondary education is important to facilitate basic entry into employment, apart from providing sufficient foundation that can further progress an individual’s career and enable them to be technologically literate. Thus, secondary education has ramifications toward improving individual’s socio-cultural behaviour and the socio-economic growth of a country. It is also of paramount importance for national development, particularly in the developing countries. Dropping out from lower and/or upper secondary school may cause serious educational, social, and cultural problems (Mohamed et al., 2017).

Furthermore, the study also reveals that more females than males married at the schooling age of 18 and below. At the time when the study was conducted, 74 (61.7%) school dropouts were still single, 39 (32.5%) were married, five (4.2%) were separated and two (1.6%) were divorced. Out of 39 who were married, 29 of them are female and 10 are male. Those who are separated and divorced all are female. Out of 30, two married at the early age of 14, six married at the age of 15, 11 married at the age 16, six married at the age of 17, and 5 married at the age of 18. Those who married at the age of 18 and below consist of 25 females and five males. This shows that female students tend to get married at the schooling age. Sarawak has been reported as one of the states with the highest child marriage in Malaysia (Goh, 2022). Based on the recent 1623 cases reported on teen pregnancy in Sarawak in 2021, 109 (6.7%) cases involved teenagers age 10 to 15, followed by 483 (29.7%) cases involved aged between 16 and 17, and 1031 (63.6%) aged between 18 to 19 and out 1623 cases, 1023 (63%) were not registered their marriage (Lim, 2022). On top of that, 70% involved school dropouts where their pregnancy happened after they stopped schooling and 20% completed their studies, 6% are still schooling, 3% stopped schooling after pregnancy and 1% never go to school (Lim, 2022). Child marriage continues to occur in Malaysia for a variety of reasons and one of them is to lessen financial burden in families (Child Rights Coalition Malaysia, 2013). Moreover, Kohno et al. (2020) in his research in Sarawak, also found out that because of family poverty, the girls in the family chose to drop out of school at the age of 12 and 13 years old and get married to reduce the burden on parents. Child marriage is a violation of children's rights, continues to rob millions of girls around the world of their childhood and it forces them out of education and into a life of poor prospects, with increased risk of violence, abuse, ill health or early death (Child Rights Coalition Malaysia, 2013). In SDG 5, gender equality, includes the target to end child marriage where it stated "eliminate all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation" (Girls Not Brides, 2020).

Another interesting finding from this study is that most of the school dropouts have many siblings and are among the older child in the families. 3.3% of the school dropouts involved in the study are the only child in the family. The highest percentage of 24.2% among school dropouts have four siblings, followed by 22.5% of them who have three siblings, and 19.3% have five siblings. Two of the school dropouts have 10 and 11 siblings respectively. When birth order is cross tabulated with gender, most of them are the older child in the family. The birth order or the position of the child in the siblings is significant because the older child will sacrifice his or her early teenage years to take care of the younger one or go out to work to help the family in order to give way to the younger ones to go school. This also can be related to gender expectation where the older females need to take care of the younger ones in their siblings and the older males are expected to go out for work. As the older children, they become the breadwinner too in order to ease the burden of their family. In addition, the older child in the family is often regarded as a role model for the other siblings in the family. On the other hand, once the older dropped out of school, the other siblings might follow suit. Patel (2014) discovers that the school dropouts tries to supplement the family income but many ends up working in the same unskilled occupations. Huisman and Smits (2015) state that the birth order in the siblings is important as it is related to school dropout. However, few studies showed that the younger children in large families are more

likely to stay in school (Buchmann & Hannum, 2001; Emerson & Portela Souza, 2002) and the older children prefer to do the household chores or contribute to the household income by working (Estudillo et al., 2009). Previous studies also found out that girls, especially oldest daughters, often suffer the most (Chu et al., 2007; Ota & Moffatt, 2007). Jayachandran (2021) adds that girls are often bounded by the strict social and cultural norms compared to boys.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

Most of the school dropouts come from suburban area. They mostly came from the type of academic curriculum compared to technical school and most dropped out of secondary compared to primary school. Some had to stay in the boarding school as early as seven years old and had to separated from their families in order to get an access to the education system. Some even married at the schooling age of 18 and below, and more females than males were married at that age period. They also have many siblings and are the older in the family. The thought-provoking findings from this study are the issues underlying the school dropouts. The school dropouts still remain an issue due to the lack of opportunity and social inequality, quality of education, inadequate facilities and infrastructures to facilitate students to continue and complete their education. These issues have not been taken into seriously. This hinder the minority ethnic group in the suburban areas to continue their education. The school dropout issues are not just economic concerns of poverty and unemployment but it also includes structural and social concerns such as inequality and violation of children's right. The underlying background of those who are still at school need to be addressed and studied by all the stakeholders involved and they should be sensitive to their background in order to identify relevant measures to prevent those who are at risk from further dropping out of school.

## **7. LIMITATION OF THE STUDY**

This study is only conducted in Sarawak, thus the data presented related to the factors influencing school dropouts might differ if the study is conducted in West Malaysia due to the differences in the geographical location and demographic profile of the respondents. As this research was conducted during pandemic COVID-19, it has limited ability to gain access to the appropriate type or geographic scope of participants. Due to the number of participants and their selection through purposive sampling, this study does not reflect the general population or appropriate population concerned.

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