Post-pandemic Behavioral Trends of School Dropouts

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Abstract

The widespread of Covid-19 had caused a massive disruption towards education sector. The instant transition and challenges faced by students during the pandemic led to changes in their behaviour and an increment in drop out. This study aims to identify post-pandemic behavioural trends among secondary school students. A qualitative case study utilising interview involving counsellors, at-risk students from 5 schools and documents on dropout-related obtained from systematic literature review were employed. This study will assist school and educators in determining the crucial elements contributing to student dropout so that they can better serve at-risk students by recognising the behavioural trends.

Keywords: Post-pandemic; Behavioral trends; School dropouts; Dropouts

1.0 Introduction

Every aspect of people's lives has been profoundly impacted by the COVID-19 outbreak. We were forced to change our way of thinking and how we lived in order to accommodate the fast-increasing number of coronavirus cases in the impacted countries. A quarantine period was abruptly imposed on people all throughout the world without giving them the chance to understand what it meant or what consequences it would have. Instant adaptation to a new way of life led to issues including physical and social isolation. The "new normal" now involves complexity and unpredictability (Allen, Rowan & Singh, 2020). Of course, education could not be an exception, and urgent dramatic modifications and adaptations were required. Global education has faced several obstacles and hurdles as a result of COVID-19. One of the biggest obstacles was the widespread closure of educational facilities like schools. Due to the disruption of the regular learning process, students suffered serious learning loss.

The pandemic had caused substantial disruptions to Malaysia's education system, which required adaptation to maintain learning. In order to stop the virus's spread, the Malaysian government closed schools in a number of different phases. Schools switched to remote learning strategies during these closures by using e-learning platforms, video conferencing, and online courses.

Despite the fact that such a choice is advantageous for controlling each pandemic wave, it could be harmful for students' general growth and the efficiency of the learning process (Babalis, 2011). The bulk of the impacted nations have implemented synchronous and remote learning, which has brought out one of the most critical issues that have plagued society for ages, namely, school dropout issue to the extend where it is inimical for the future of our nation.

The study addressed the following research objectives:
1. To identify post-pandemic behavioural trends of school dropout among secondary school students.
2. To determine the factors that influence the behavioural trends of secondary school dropouts in Perak.

2.0 Literature Review

Experts previously saw this young generation of dropout children as a serious problem. Students who have dropped out of school are referred to by any of the terms we have previously used, including early school leaving, exclusion, disconnection, or stop outs. The phenomenon of school dropout is exceedingly common, intricate in design, and has several subcategories. While some researchers categorise specific circumstances and standards when looking at dropout cases, these circumstances and standards also apply to students who are not enrolled full-time or those who want to leave school before they reach the legal school age but are prevented from doing so acceptance into another institution (Mughal, 2020). Many experts who have long studied this issue, like Rumberger and Larson (1998), contend that early school leaving is best understood as an outcome of a process that

gradually makes young people lose interest in going to school. Koslouski et al. 2022) report that the majority of students who leave school early originate from socially disadvantaged homes. As a result, figuring out why students leave school early requires looking at how they interact with one another and their immediate environment. Individual characteristics and connections to one's family, school, and community are the three stages of behaviour aspects in the setting of school dropouts (Bae, 2020; Rumberger, 1995).

Focusing on post-pandemic, immediately following the commencement of the pandemic, researchers and groups began estimating potential learning loss. Kaffenberger (2021) noted that a three-month school closure could cause the loss of up to a year's worth of learning. In regards to children who are unable to read with comprehension by the age of 10, Azevedo (2020) noted an increase in "learning poverty" worldwide of over ten percentage points (from 53 to 63 percent). Models based on data from Sub-Saharan Africa by Sabates et al. (2021) predicted a learning loss of up to roughly three years, with effects continuing for many years (Gustafsson & Nuga Deliwe, 2020). Adding on, Tsolou (2021) noted that rapid adoption of online learning and protracted school closures had widened the equity gap for various student groups. Given that at-risk students are the ones who attend school the least, the situation is urgent, especially for them. This particular set of students may struggle to stay up with their studies and are more likely to lag academically than they were before to the pandemic. These situations have a detrimental effect on the students' development, drive, health, and capacity to create social networks, which is likely to impede attendance at school and performance once the school reopens.

Students' behaviours are related to their personal social life which may triggers the decision of dropping out. Their behaviour reflects their engagement. Engagement can be divided in two dimension which are academic engagement and social engagement. These elements can be both a push and pull factor to triggers student's dropout decision. For example, student's behaviour such as lack of effort completing homework, stop attending class which leads to receiving poor grade can be the pushing factor for the students to drop out of school. Social engagement on the other hand, is how the student behave and handle his or her social life. This element can be a major factor in influencing students either to stay or leave school.

A bigger proportion of the reasons why students leave school early have to do with challenging families' economic conditions and reluctance to engage in their children's education. Along with the size of the family, family crises, migration, lack of family assistance and supervision with schoolwork, and the parents' educational backgrounds, this is one of the primary characteristics of families of dropouts (Dalton et al., 2009). In some circumstances, parents' education and their impact on a student's school attendance are contextual and distinct in that they depend on the parent (Stevens, 2020).

The factors mentioned are possible contributor to negative behaviour that will build up in at-risk of dropping out students. Laub and Sampson (2003) found out that family and peer networks are referred to as sources of social capital or social risk with regard to delinquency. Through their interactions with person-level variables like internalizing

symptoms, externalizing behavioural disorders, and drug addiction tendencies, these social factors have an impact on delinquency and criminal behaviour.

To a certain extent, previous studies provided numbers and ratios of dropout percentages, but the key variables influencing the dropout rate from the perspectives of teachers and students during the pandemic were not examined in terms of the level of influence, which this study exposes. As a result, the paper is an attempt to narrow the substantial gap in the literature.

3.0 Methodology

Two methods were employed for the study. The first method employed a systematic literature review (henceforth SLR) using PRISMA review process. PRISMA is a minimal reporting framework for systematic reviews and meta-analyses based on evidence. PRISMA emphasizes the reporting of reviews assessing the outcomes of interventions, but it may also be utilized as a framework for publishing systematic reviews with aims apart from evaluating interventions.

The goal of our study was to understand why secondary school students take the decision of dropping out of school in post-pandemic. Thus, the second method chosen was a qualitative case study design as it was a suitable research approach. This was because it was able to examine and comprehend events in their natural environments.

3.1 Data Collection Procedure

The data collection process was divided into three stages.

3.1.1 The First Stage

The first stage involved the SLR. The researchers began their SLR based on this review process by developing pertinent research questions for the review. The systematic search technique is then described by the researchers. It comprises of few key sub-processes: (i) identification, (ii) screening (inclusion and exclusion criteria), and (iii) eligibility. The researchers then move on to evaluating the quality of the chosen articles, explaining the approach taken to guarantee the quality of the articles to be assessed. Finally, the researchers explained how the data were summarized for the review and how they were evaluated and validated.

The PICo model served as the foundation for developing this study's research topic, which is a tool that helps researchers create appropriate research questions for reviews. Population or problem, interest, and context are the three basic elements underpinning The PICo. These ideas served as the foundation for the researchers' inclusion of three key elements in the review, namely youths (Population), school dropouts (Interest), and behavioural trends (context), which helped to develop the main research question, "What are the behavioural trends of school dropouts among youths?"

The major keywords for the study, dropout, youths, and behaviour, were used to search along with any synonyms, related terms, and variants. It aims to increase the options

available to the selected database for looking for more pertinent articles for the review. The keywords were developed based on the research subject proposed by Okoli (2015), and they were found using an online thesaurus, terms from previous studies, terms from Scopus, and terms proposed by experts. For the two major databases, Scopus and Web of Science, the authors enhanced the already-used keywords and developed a thorough search string based on the Boolean operator (Table 1). These two databases have the potential to be the top databases in a systematic literature review due to their advanced searching capabilities, comprehensiveness (indexing more than 5000 publishers), control over the quality of the articles, and multidisciplinary focus, which includes studies related to school dropout (Haddaway, 2019).

Table 1. The search string

Database	Search string
Scopus	TITLE-ABS-KEY(("school dropout*" OR "school leaver*" OR "school withdraw*") AND ("youth*" OR "teenager*") AND ("behavioral trend*" OR "behavior*" OR "attitude*"))
Web of Science	TS=(("school dropout*" OR "school leaver*" OR "school withdraw*") AND ("youth*" OR "teenager*") AND ("behavioral trend*" OR "behavior*" OR "attitude*"))

3.1.2 The Second Stage

In the second stage, data on the number of school dropouts was gathered from the Perak State Education Department and the District Education Office. From the data collected, the researchers chose 3 districts that met the criteria outline. The main criteria are the district with the highest number of dropouts. Next, in selecting the school, the researchers chose the school with the highest number of dropout during post-pandemic in the district. Other criteria include location which have easy access and availability of counsellors to be interviewed. The names of the districts and schools remain confidential to preserve privacy. The districts were identified by the researchers as Districts A, B, and C (refer to Table 2)

Table 2 Types of Districts

No.	District	Types of School/Description of School
1	District A	Semi Urban
2	District B	Rural
3	District C	Urban

3.1.3 The Third Stage

The third stage was interview. The interviews involved at-risk students to drop out of school and the school counsellor. The counsellor's advice served as the basis for the students' selection. Six teachers from the chosen three districts as well as at-risk students from each school participated in the interviews in order to glean more detailed information (refer to Appendix on the sample of interview questions). Pseudonyms were used in place of the people's real names (Refer to Table 3). Although it was originally conducted in Malay, the interview transcripts were translated into English and was checked by a certified translator.

The participants reviewed the translated version to ensure that it was accurate and maintained the original meaning.

The interview took place between 30 minutes to one and a half hour.

Table 3 Teachers' Working Experiences

No.	Teacher	Working Experiences
1	Teacher 1 (T1)	5 years
2	Teacher 2 (T2)	11 years
3	Teacher 3 (T3)	20 years
4	Teacher 4 (T4)	20 years
5	Teacher 5 (T5)	21 years
6	Teacher 6 (T6)	6 years

3.2 Data Analysis

3.2.1 First Stage

3.2.1.1 Screening and eligibility process
To obtain the most recent papers as of the time of writing, the search is restricted to peer-reviewed publications from 2018 to 2022. This is based on Okoli's (2015) suggestion that the researchers should choose a period that they are able to study because it is nearly difficult to review all of the currently published studies. Additionally, it is restricted to research concerning elementary and secondary education only. 320 items were found in the first search of Scopus and 250 on the Web of science. Filtering to only article type of document from 2018 to 2022 and only English articles were considered led to 243 exclusions from Scopus and 182 from Web of Science. The researchers were aware that excluding non-English papers would leave out important information that might have impacted the outcomes reached. The third step, eligibility, involved the researchers carefully checking each collected item to ensure it meets the requirements after being screened. Reading the paper titles and abstracts was done during this step.

3.2.1.2 Second Stage and Third Stage
To develop a thorough knowledge of participants' viewpoints and ideas, inductive data analysis with combined with qualitative methodologies (Creswell, 2014). Additionally, data analysis goes beyond counting and interpreting ranks by collecting opinions, attitudes, and behaviours (Lochmiller, 2016). It encourages people to elaborate their personal experiences and creates a more expansive point of view by allowing for a lengthy discussion of why people act in different ways and their ideas regarding particular actions. Next, a thematic analysis strategy was used. The interview procedure involved gathering a variety of data types, which were then categorised and arranged under different themes in order to put the complete data set through an inductive process that was used to extract a

detailed set of themes (Harding, 2018). Themes were gathered and examined from the interviews and documentation. For the collected data, a thematic analysis was done.

4.0 Results

4.1 For research objective 1, on post-pandemic behavioural trends of school dropout among secondary school students, the themes and sub-themes are highlighted in Table 4, which shows the behavioural trends of school dropouts. The findings illustrate that the behavioural trends are consistent with the findings of previous studies. There are four behavioural trends which are dominant and influence the students to dropout which are student-related, family-related, school and community.

Table 4. Behavioural Trends of School Dropout

Behavioral Trends	
Student-related	**Family-related**
Substance abuse	Parent's education
Early marriage	Parent's career
Sexual activity	Family's economic status
Teenage pregnancy	Parental illness
Absenteeism	Family relationship
Grade repetition	Domestic violence
Poor academic performance	Parent's marital status
Exam failure	Fostering issue
Lack of self-esteem	Number of siblings
Concentration difficulties	Extended household
Truancy	Parental care or awareness
Disability/illness	Physical abuse at home
Mental health	Emotional abuse
Delinquency	
Truancy	
Anti-social	
School	**Community**
Type of school	Neighborhood environment
Teacher-pupil ratio in class	Neighborhood relationship
Student-teacher relationship	Ethnicity
Participation in school activities	Gender
Student-school interaction	
School facilities	
Teacher's skills	
Availability of teacher	
Accessible to school	
Peers influence	
Bullying	

4.2 For research objective 2, the factors that influence the behavioural trends of secondary school dropouts in Perak are not similar with findings obtained from the Systematic

Literature Review (SLR) that there are four main behavioural trends of students' dropout which are students, family-related, school-related and community-related. However, for this study which focussed on post-pandemic in secondary schools in Perak, the findings showed only two prominent behavioural trends that influence the dropout pattern. It was found out that during the post-pandemic there are only two behavioural trends which occurred for secondary school dropout cases in Perak, one of the states in Malaysia, which were students and family related. The behavioural trends are listed below:
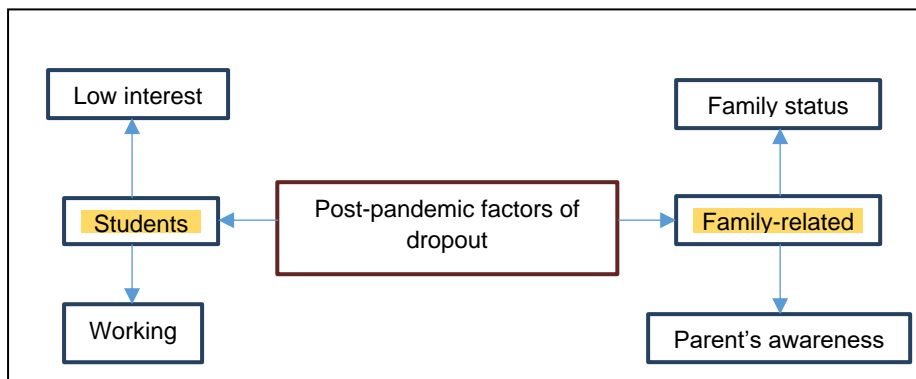

Figure 1: Dropout main elements

4.2.1 Factors that influence on Students Behavioural Trends
From the students' behavioural trend, one obvious factor that influence the students' decision to of dropout from school was loss of interest and followed by working factor during the post-pandemic year (2022).
The data from the interview with the teachers and the at-risk students also substantiated the findings above.
As mentioned by T1:
"I can compare between two batches of Form 5 students as an example which are students from 2021 and students from 2022. 2021 students clearly show their interest in study and struggling to finish their study during the movement control order (MCO), while the 2022 students, the teachers can count by fingers how many students are interested in their study. They are too comfortable at home, the motivation to continue learning has long gone." (Int 1 T1 March 2023)

She further explained:
"The teachers had really high hope for this 2022 batch because they performed well in their academic achievement during their Form 1. However, after MCO, they've changed. They started to show negative attitude, no effort to study, being rude to teachers, and breaking school rules". Discipline problems increase." (Int 1, T1 March 2023)

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Students lose interest in learning when they encounter challenges. This is consistent with what the teacher said.

T5:
"After a few months of distance learning, things have gotten worse as students start to lose interest in finishing and turning in their homework. To adapt and reduce learning losses, remote learning is used. Although much has been learned throughout the MCO phase, it will take a long time to get these students passion for studying back on track." (Int 1, T5 March 2023)

According to T4, there are a number of causes for students' lack of interest in going to school, including:
"A few of the students are exceptionally bright and show enthusiasm in their studies in school. They did, however, change during the pandemic. They lost interest in their studies because it was tough for them to attend lessons and they needed help with their homework. March 2023 (Int 1, T4)

Teachers' concerns about the students' lack of devotion are widespread. The students' dedication to their education earlier crumbled during the outbreak, and it was demonstrated when several of them failed to show up for class the first week after the school reopened after the pandemic.

The situation gotten worse with the attachment with gadgets which consider as a need during the phase. However, the attachment is still unbreakable during post-pandemic.

T1 said: "It began with the mentality that they developed during the pandemic. Social media has an impact on the most important elements. They have a phone addiction that causes them to lose attention, which makes them less interested in studying. (Int 1, T1 March 2023)

T2 held similar opinions. "It's difficult to change their attitude, which has been formed throughout the pandemic," she said. Teachers are unable to keep track of who is attending class and who is not because they are too comfortable taking classes online from the comfort of their homes. (Int 1, T2 March 2023)

Another student mentioned he work to attend to. S7:
"I rarely join the online class because I usually go to work from 7am to 5pm" (Int 1, S7 March 2023)
"Some began their internet businesses, which they had been doing during MCO, and felt the thrill of making their own money. They believed that they did not need a higher education to be successful." (Int 1, T3 March 2023)

4.2.2 Factors that influence in relation to Family-related behavioural trend
Another behavioural trend that influence students to dropout is family-related. Family-related behavioural trends are influenced by two factors which are family status and parents' awareness. The first factor is related to family status. According to research by Pov et al. (2022) and Lawrence and Adebowale (2023), socioeconomic status is a reliable indicator of school dropout. Some students had to help their parents by working with them.
"I sold food online for my mother during MCO. It began out minuscule, but after MCO, the business grew, and I needed to spend more time overseeing the business as a whole." (Int 1, S4 March 2023)
"My parents lost their job. I helped them starting an online business" ((Int 1, S4 March 2023)

Another respondent told that because of his family's economic status was quite bad during the pandemic, the parents can't afford to by devices for each of his siblings. They need to share.

"Sometimes I submit my task late because I need to wait for my mother to come home. The one device my parents provide was usually used by my sister." (Int 1, S2 March 2023)

Family economic status do pose an influence towards the students' motivation to study. When they perceive difficulties in learning for such a long period, their motivation to keep going will slowly fade. They adapt to the situation where there is this 'hindrance' in their process of learning which is normal during the pandemic for most students. Which result in them normalizing their study process with the 'hindrance' as an excuse.

Other than that, parents' awareness was also categorized under the behavioural trend as it influences the students' decision to go to school. As S5 reported:

"I wanted to attend to school, but my parents were afraid because of the pandemic and all of its repercussions that had been heavily hyped in the media. Because of this, I was instructed to go to school only when it was deemed appropriate." (Int 1, S5 March 2023).

"During the pandemic, I occasionally find it challenging to study at home since I have to assist my parents with household duties. Prior to the pandemic, I simply needed to complete it once I got home from school. At times, it is exhausting. (Int 1, S4 March 2023)

Because all of my siblings are at home during the pandemic I need to look after them while my parent is working. I don't feel like learning at home." (Int 1, S3 March 2023)

The necessity of working is another important factor that could influence students' decisions to attend education. S8 shared, "Since the pandemic until now, my father has asked me to run the family business because he works other jobs to support our family and I am the only son."

Parents plays an important role as well in students' choice of attending school. These students are depending on their adults. They have no power of making any decision especially during the critical time. When parents repeatedly allow their children to skip school, this will somehow become a habit for them. They will notice that skipping school is not a problem for the parents. Eventually, this habit will mould them into feeling comfortable being at home rather than in school which increases the risk of dropping out of school.

Adding on, parents are unaware of their children's need for education during the pandemic or they simply have no choice. Students too have their responsibilities to learn and study at home during the outbreak. However, because of the normalization of 'hindrance' in online learning during the pandemic, parents overlooked at the importance of education during the time of pandemic.

5.0 Discussion

5.1 Post-pandemic behavioural trends of school dropout among secondary school students.

The findings substantiate Koslouski et al. (2022), Piscitello et al. (2022), Pov et al.'s (2022) claim on the behavioural trends of school dropout. Every element of life has been influenced by the pandemic, making it challenging or nearly impossible for the majority of students—who are already struggling to make ends meet—to continue their education. The impact of school closures on education has been profound. It will take a long time to make up for these learning losses. Due to their overindulgence in social media during the MCO, students start to lose interest in their studies. These features can't be avoided because parents were equally reliant on technology at the time. The sole source available to them is through their smartphones, whether it is for work, schoolwork, or entertainment. The implications of the study garner attention to address the issue of dropout properly. The behavioural trends may be used as an early warning sign for the respective parties to understand why the students are likely to dropout and probably, they are able to find ways to encourage the school students to remain in school and continue their education.

5.2 Factors that influence the behavioural trends of secondary school dropouts in Perak
Although, the findings obtained from the interview are not similar with the findings obtained for the research objective 1 (SLR), two of the prominent factors in relation to secondary schools in Perak are similar with the findings obtained from the SLR. Students begin to lose interest in education as they are drowned by the enjoyment of social media during the MCO. Those elements are unavoidable as parents were also attached to their gadgets during that period. From work, school task and source of entertainment, the only available source is through their devices. This situation has led to a greater association with the information and communication technologies (ICT) period especially obsessing over social media and the entertainment industry while downplaying the value of education (Lau, 2017).

Due to this circumstance, the information and communication technologies (ICT) era has come to be more closely associated with obsessing over social media. They have so many possibilities for passing the time while engaging in other activities at home or taking a break, students perceive the traditional methods of instruction utilised by teachers to be dull (Alt, 2017).

Additionally, several students work from home during the pandemic (S7, T3). Some of them worked on online business to make ends meet when MCO was in effect, while others assisted their parents in transitioning their traditional businesses to online ones (S4). In spite of the fact that the schools have reopened, it is obvious that each respondent has come up with a different excuse for not going to class as much as they ought to. Whether by themselves or their parents, the barrier had already been built. In contrast, when the school reopened during the endemic period, student's home-based learning abilities apparently lacked the same level of development. The fact that they may see immediate results makes them more motivated to keep working to earn money.

Adding on, according to a few researchers in this field like Bloom and Unterman (2014), Farrington et al. (2012), and Rumberger (2011), among the factors that make up a family environment that acts as an agent of education and influences a child's academic performance are the parents' socioeconomic, educational status and family structure. How

well-adjusted they are to their environment, and their values and beliefs towards the need and importance of education. Some respondents from this study admit that they need to share their devices with siblings because parents could not afford to buy more Some need to wait for their parent's settle working only to borrow the device to submit their homework (S2). Other reveal that parents need their help to look after the siblings (S4, S3) and one of the respondents need to handle family business because the parent are going for more than one job during the pandemic (S8). All of the shared details may have led to students succumb in continuing and taking measures in their study. This is supported by a few researchers, students from low socioeconomic families who live in stressful home environments and have parents who are uneducated are more likely to experience academic failure and social exclusion (Stevens, 2020; Tsolou, 2020; Miller, 2020; Chenge et al., 2017; Rumberger, 2011; Rumberger & Lim, 2008).

All of the behavioural trends mentioned such as low interest, working, family status and parent's awareness is actually interconnected. Pandemic has developed the behavioural of having no interest in going to school which was cause mainly by gadgets attachment. Through the exposure of technologies, the students were introduced to opportunities such us online business and part-time job. Some of them were also struggling with their parents to survive and maintain their family economic status by working too. Since during the pandemic, it is normal for students to have difficulties' in attending classes, most parents with lack of educational awareness use the 'hindrance' as a reason to let their children to do house chores and work instead of providing space for their children to fulfil their responsibilities to study as a student.

6.0 Conclusion

Dropout is complex matter whether for the student's itself or related to family, school of the community. To encourage students to stay in school, a variety of factors must be addressed. Based on the study, there are two factors that influence the students' behavioural trends to either stay or drop out of school which are low interest and working (Student factor), family status and parents' awareness (family-related factor).

From the results, the behavioural trends of school dropout can be clearly detected during the post-pandemic time. The behavioural trends that occur might help teachers and schools to take any necessary steps to help the at-risk students before they decided against continuing their education We must face the truth that we will lose a significant educational advancement made over the past years if drastic reforms are not implemented. This is due to the fact that students won't be able to compete in the race that requires them to stay up with industrialised nations. The consequences of this educational disaster will not just be felt in research and development; they will also have a severe impact on economic, political, social, intellectual, ethical, and moral values on a broad scale. If we wish to save our future, we must therefore address the issue of student dropout, especially in developing nations.

Acknowledgement

Article Contribution to Related Field of Study

The study contributes to an understanding of how behavioural trends can be used to address the issue of dropout among secondary school students. It can be used as an early signal indicator for counsellors to assist students, who may show an early sign of withdrawal or to drop out of school, to remain in the education system. We believe that this study, which comes to light after a trying time for humanity, will help raise awareness among all interested parties of every child's right to an equal opportunity to get an education.

Authors Declaration

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