

Barriers to Learner Achievement in Rural Secondary Schools in Developing Countries: The Case of Rural Zimbabwe

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Abstract

This study sought to analyse the perceptions of 24 secondary school principals on the key barriers to secondary school effectiveness in rural Zimbabwe. The perceptions of secondary school principals (n=24), organised in four (4) focus groups of six participants each, on the key barriers to secondary school effectiveness in rural Zimbabwe were solicited. The study was guided by the following questions: Why are rural secondary schools in Zimbabwe ineffective in enhancing learner achievement? The study employed the focus group interview as a qualitative research technique to generate data on the reasons for rural secondary school learner achievement ineffectiveness in Zimbabwe. The researcher began by providing some broad statement to the focus group to steer the discussion in the intended direction. The results of the discussion vividly captured the ill-tempered feelings, anxieties and frustrations of the participants as they repeatedly cited several barriers, chief among which were: lack of meaningful funding; lack of quality teachers; unfriendly rural schools' environment, and lack of teacher retention. To this end, the study has achieved its primary purpose of highlighting some of the major causes of rural secondary school ineffectiveness in Zimbabwe. Given the fact that there is hardly any rural education research in Zimbabwe, therefore, the importance of this study lies, principally, in its value-addition to the understanding of rural secondary education in the country. Furthermore, the significance of the results of this study seems to lie in the emphasis that rural secondary school learner achievement in developing countries cannot be addressed by a one-size-fits-all approach to rural secondary school effectiveness.

Keywords: qualitative research, achievement diversity, learner achievement, data generation and trustworthiness

INTRODUCTION

Perhaps, the greatest challenge to understanding the concept of rural secondary school learner achievement in developing countries in general, and in Zimbabwe in particular, is that there is hardly any rural education research. Consequently, there is limited awareness of rural learner achievement diversity. Generally, in developing countries, rural secondary school learner achievement is dependent, to a large measure, on national and urban economics. In this sense, secondary school learner achievement in rural schools is firmly situated in poverty. In Berliner's (2004) perception, poverty is the "600 pound gorilla" that is sitting on rural secondary school effectiveness in most developing countries, including Zimbabwe. It is perhaps for this reason, among many others, that Ayers (2012) makes the salient point that implementing school reform in most developing countries is often thought of as applicable in urban rather than rural secondary school settings. In this regard, rural secondary schools are generally not associated with learner achievement.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The achievement of rural secondary school learners in Zimbabwe is consistently far below that of their counterparts in the urban settings. It was in this context that this study sought answers to the following two question:

- *Why are rural secondary schools in Zimbabwe ineffective in enhancing learner achievement?*

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

McClure and Reeves (2004) seem to succinctly summarise the factors contributing to rural secondary school ineffectiveness in developing countries when they posit that poverty, small populations and geographical isolation are critical dimensions which school administrators ought to take into consideration in order to offer quality education to rural school learners. To put it more graphically, poverty is like the metaphorical albatross around the necks of most rural schools in most developing countries. In the case of Zimbabwe, for instance, rural secondary schools are, to all intents and purposes, dependent on national and urban economy. In consequence, these schools face poor conditions. For example, these rural secondary schools lack basic facilities, mainly, because of the insufficient funding they receive.

Collins (1999) postulates that one major problem with rural secondary schools that militates against learner achievement in developing countries is the lack of quality teachers. In the case of Zimbabwe, there seems to be one fundamental driver of this problem: many teachers do not want to stay in rural areas because of isolation, whether it is social, professional or cultural. For this reason, among many others, rural secondary schools in Zimbabwe have a

very high teacher turnover rate. In this regard, Gibbs (1998) suggests two strategies that may help rural secondary schools to retain teachers for longer. First, there is need to involve teachers with the community more and second, it may be useful to introduce programmes about rural schools and teachers for college students.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology used in this study conforms to the broad qualitative research tradition in education in which the individual interpretations of the twenty-four (24) secondary school principals were generated through focus group interviews. Interviews were carried out to generate relevant data on what rural secondary school principals in rural Zimbabwe considered to be barriers to rural secondary school learner achievement in rural Zimbabwe.

PARTICIPANTS

The participants in this study comprised four (4) groups of secondary school principals, each comprising six (6) participants. The sample of twenty-four (24) secondary school principals (14 males and 10 females) were divided into four (4) groups of six participants each. The four groups of principals were purposively selected, initially, by selecting four educational provinces out of a sampling population of eight primarily rural educational provinces out of a possible sampling frame of ten educational provinces in Zimbabwe. The two provinces that were excluded from this study are primarily urban in character. It was, therefore, from each of the four rural provinces that twenty (24) secondary schools were purposively selected. This was done to ensure that the remotest parts of Zimbabwe were adequately represented. The principals from the twenty-four (24) rural secondary schools were then used as units of analysis.

THE DISCUSSION GUIDE

The focus group moderator used a discussion guide to help control the interview and guide the discussion. The discussion guide included written introductory comments that sought, among other things, to clarify the focus group purpose and rules. In this sense, the discussion guide served as the focus group outline. The flexible structure of this discussion guide allowed the moderator to explore, probe and ask pertinent follow-up questions. Broadly speaking, however, the researcher sought the insights of the participants, as already alluded to, on the possible barriers to rural secondary school effectiveness in Zimbabwe.

DATA GENERATION AND ANALYSIS

Focus group interviews were used as a primary qualitative data collection technique. The researcher's objective, in this regard, was to gather high quality responses in a context that allowed participants to

screen and refine perceptions on the barriers to rural secondary school learner achievement in rural Zimbabwe. Each interview session lasted about 45 minutes. The analysis sought, among other things, to discern patterns in each group or among the various groups.

Interviews were recorded on audiotape and thereafter transcribed into a written form. The researcher then proceeded to conduct a content analysis of the data obtained from the four (4) groups. The analysis, as already alluded to, sought to discern trends and patterns within each group or among the various focus groups.

For the analysis of data, the researcher relied principally on recursive abstraction whereby datasets were summarised. Those summaries were further refined until a more compact summary had been achieved. To establish trustworthiness, the researcher, acting as the moderator ensured that there was sufficient prolonged engagement and negative case analyses. To ensure further trustworthiness, as aptly advised by McLeod (2008), the researcher asked the participants to confirm the data at regular intervals.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analytical approach taken was informed by recursive abstraction and guided by the following research question:

- *Why are rural secondary schools in Zimbabwe ineffective in enhancing learner achievement?*

Demographic Characteristics of the Participants

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of principals in each focus group by gender (n=24)

Gender	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4	Totals
Male	4	3	4	3	14
Female	2	3	2	3	10

Table 1 illustrates the distribution of participants by gender. As can be seen, the table portrays an imbalance between male and female participants. This is so in spite of the fact that a concerted effort was made to achieve equal representation. In Zimbabwean secondary schools in general, school management is dominated by males. The situation is even more pronounced in rural secondary schools.

Participants' Views on Why Going to a Rural Secondary School in Zimbabwe

Negatively Affects Learner Achievement

Sixty eight statements were generated by the participants in all the four focus groups. Because most of these reactions were similar, a list of categories into which the statements fitted was

established. The kinds of comments (verbatim) made by the participants are illustrated in table 2.

As requested, the initial statements made by the participants related to barriers to effective learning in rural secondary schools in Zimbabwe. Such statements were made with varying degrees of specificity. For example, the following are excerpts from two participants from two separate focus group:

- *“Where the child lives greatly affects the type and quality of education she or he will receive.”*
- *“Trained teachers do not like to work in rural secondary schools. Many teachers do not want to stay in rural areas because of poor accommodation.”*

The two immediately preceding quotes reveal quite a sophisticated range of contributions. As can be discerned from the sample statements in Table 2, the trend was maintained throughout the participants’ entire contributions.

Table 2: Participants’ sample statements on barriers to learner achievement in Zimbabwe’s rural secondary schools

Barrier Category	Synopsis of participants’ statements on possible barriers
Lack of resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ <i>Many rural secondary schools are situated in poverty-stricken areas; insufficient learning and teaching materials becomes the major result.</i> ❖ <i>Because of conditions that are not motivating to learners, learners tend to suffer from learned helplessness.</i> ❖ <i>Because of limited funding, the conditions in some remote rural secondary schools are terrible.</i> ❖ <i>Some very remote rural secondary schools, including those on farms, have dilapidated buildings which make the learning environment unsafe and not motivating for the learners.</i>
Geographic isolation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ <i>Because of the remoteness of some rural secondary schools, many teachers experience professional, social or cultural isolation.</i>
Lack of teachers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ <i>Most teachers in rural secondary schools in Zimbabwe are relatively young and inexperienced.</i> ❖ <i>Many learners in rural secondary schools are taught by either under qualified or unqualified teachers.</i>
Low parents’ level of education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ <i>Parents of learners in rural schools tend to be low in education and educational aspirations; this tends to lead to lower educational aspirations for the learners.</i>
Limited community participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ <i>Most rural secondary schools tend to have limited community support, resulting in muted support for both the schools and the learners. The net effect of all this is general low learner achievement.</i>

As Table 2 clearly illustrates, the barriers to learner achievement in rural secondary schools in Zimbabwe fall into five broad categories, viz: lack of resources; geographical isolation; lack of teachers; low educational levels of parents; and indifferent community participation. The above finding seems to lend credence to a number of previous findings including that of Brown (2003) whose survey found out that many challenges exist in rural secondary schools in developing countries such as teacher qualification, money, school attendance and parental involvement, among others. Let us discuss each of the categories in turn, and for ease of reference, in the order they have been captured.

The general consensus among all the four focus groups was that the general environment of rural secondary schools in Zimbabwe is characterised, chiefly, by poverty makes it difficult for learners to succeed. This, most participants argued, coupled with the low levels of funding by the government ensures that learners in rural secondary schools find it extremely difficult to achieve. Furthermore, most participants argued that the materials that rural secondary schools receive are generally out of date, and technological equipment such as computers and internet access are not available in most rural secondary schools in Zimbabwe. In this regard, these conclusions by the participants in this study seem to affirm the conclusions reached by McClure and Reeves (2004) that rural secondary schools in developing countries face poor conditions that their learners are exposed to on a daily basis. In elaboration, McClure and Reeves (2004) add that these schools lack the facilities, learning materials and programmes that wealthier schools in urban settings have.

Three groups out the four focus groups brought up the point of geographical isolation of most rural secondary schools in Zimbabwe as a significant barrier to learner achievement. The participants argued that the location of most of the rural secondary schools in Zimbabwe forces teachers and learners to use more effort compared to their urban counterparts to network. In fact, in one of the groups, one participant retorted: “There is no networking to talk about. It is incarceration.” In this sense, the participants opined that both teachers and learners find themselves isolated because of long distances between schools.

One other major barrier that was highlighted by all the focus groups was the lack of quality teachers. In amplification, most participants who contributed mentioned two variables in particular: first, reluctance of qualified and experienced teachers to work in rural secondary schools and second, the proliferation of untrained teachers in most rural secondary schools. Most participants’ sentiments, in

this regard, seemed to buttress De Young's (1991) conclusion that rural secondary schools in developing countries struggle to find quality teachers and if they do, these schools find it even more vexing to retain them. This situation leaves most rural secondary schools in Zimbabwe with no option but to engage large numbers of unqualified teachers, commonly referred to as "temporary teachers." In turn, the teaching suffers and so does the learner achievement.

While still debating the issue of teachers, in amplification, most participants repeatedly mentioned the fact that many teachers did not want to stay in rural secondary schools in Zimbabwe because of either professional, social or cultural isolation. Probed to explain further, the participants noted that there was a high teacher turnover in the rural secondary schools of Zimbabwe mainly because of poor working conditions. The participants further argued that supporting rural secondary school teachers who choose to work in rural settings was vital to retaining them in their positions. This argument seems to support the conclusion reached by Redding and Walberg (2012) who strongly assert that the teachers have the greatest impact on the learners' achievement. Therefore, to recruit qualified teachers who are willing to work in rural secondary, school authorities need to offer equitable pay and meaningful incentives.

Three focus groups out of the four groups discussed at length the low educational attainment of most parents of learners in most rural secondary schools. Most participants made the observation that most parents of learners in rural secondary schools in Zimbabwe tend to be less involved in their children's lives in general and education in particular. The participants saw this as a barrier to learner achievement in most rural secondary schools. This view seems to confirm the observation by Redding and Walberg (2012) that most parents in the rural areas of most developing countries are more intimidated in their child rearing approaches. Prompted to elaborate on this view, participants cited the lack of educational achievements of parents as one of the major barriers to learner achievement in most rural secondary schools in Zimbabwe. They argued that parents of rural learners tend to be low in their own personal achievements which tends to lead to low aspirations for their children.

The variable of lack of active participation by communities in most rural secondary schools in Zimbabwe was debated passionately by two of the four focus groups. Most of the participants in these two groups highlighted the fact that communities have a huge influence in rural environments, explaining that rural communities have relationships that are close. In this context, the participants argued that families and communities in rural settings are

crucial to learner achievement. Most participants also stressed the point that lack of involvement of the communities in most rural secondary schools in Zimbabwe tends to retard out-of-school activities that would otherwise facilitate learner achievement. These views by the participants in this study seem to lend credence to a research by Brown (2003) which showed that community norms and values are more influential for rural secondary school learners than urban secondary school learners. Additionally, based on Chance and Segura (2004)'s findings, after-school programmes can be effective if they strive to involve learners' parents and communities in their achievements. In this regard, it is clear that communities have an enormous influence on rural secondary school learners, particularly in relation to what they achieve at school.

CONCLUSION

It is clear from the results of this study that many challenges exist in rural secondary schools in Zimbabwe. Given this situation, it would seem rural Zimbabwe ought to develop new approaches to education: approaches that would address the issues of poor learning environments, shortage of qualified teachers, insufficient involvement of parents and communities in the education of rural secondary school learners. Hence, it is essential for rural secondary school educators and administrators to voice their opinions on strategies that are appropriate for their schools. In this regard, the contributions by various participants in this study clearly demonstrate the importance of this research: rural secondary school issues in Zimbabwe are unique; they cannot, therefore, be addressed by a one-size-fits all approach to school improvement.

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