

Causes of School Drop-Out among Ordinary Level Learners in a Resettlement Area in Masvingo, Zimbabwe

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Abstract

This article examined the causes of school drop-out among Ordinary level learners at a resettlement secondary school in Zimbabwe, with the aim of suggesting sound measures and solutions thus promoting learner retention in schools. The study was done in response to high dropout rates and poor academic performance of children in Zimbabwean resettlement areas. The study is informed by the attribution theory. In this study, a qualitative phenomenological case study design was used with focus group discussions, interviews and observations as data collection instruments to twelve (12) O' level learners and four (4) teachers at a resettlement secondary school in Masvingo province. Data analysis was done through the process of thematic coding. Findings revealed that poverty in households, child labour/household chores, broken families, poor supervision by parents, involvement in bad company/peer pressure, drug abuse, malnutrition and health related issues, low self-motivation and lack of interest in education among ordinary level learners were identified by teachers and learners as being the major factors influencing school dropouts. The study recommends that the government should increase the allocation of funds to resettlement areas to provide more amenities that promote learning. Further, parents should provide adequate school learning materials to their children such as school uniforms, school fees and stationery to encourage school retention. *There should also be need for the government to introduce poverty alleviation strategies targeting resettled farmers since they tend to experience the impact of poverty in more adverse ways.*

Keywords: attribution, phenomenological, drop-out, poverty, resettlement, ordinary level

INTRODUCTION

The number of children dropping out of school is alarming and it is becoming a cause of concern among educators and the governments in Zimbabwe and the world over. More than 190 000 secondary school children and 30 percent of primary school pupils drop out of school each year in Zimbabwe (UNICEF, 2012). Zimbabwe's resettlement communities have an annual school dropout of over three hundred thousand children per year. Dropout refers to those students that leave school without the school's consent or permission either to another school or to stay at home. Mawere (2012:12) defines dropouts as "those pupils who leave school before the final year of the educational cycle in which they are enrolled, which could be primary, ordinary or advanced level, or even college or university levels". These are therefore pupils who cease to attend school either temporarily or permanently before they complete a given educational cycle for example, ordinary level or advanced level. A study conducted in 2008 in Zimbabwe communal areas showed a decline in the number of students registering for the O-level examinations (Chinyoka & Ganga, 2011:145). These figures show that the extent of school dropout is rampant hence the need to explore the causes of school dropouts among ordinary level learners in Zimbabwe.

Several factors contribute to poor academic performance and high school dropout among students in resettlement schools in Zimbabwe. Most Zimbabwean resettlement areas have makeshift structures that accommodate schools. Mutenga (2012) posits that most satellite schools operate in tobacco barns, disused mine buildings, old chicken runs and the majority use pole and dagga huts which are not suitable for learning and human habitation. These schools were introduced during the fast track resettlement programmes in 2000 and up to now very few resettlement schools have developed. Also, the increased cost of living has an adverse impact on the education of students (Chinyoka, 2013). Poverty is associated with the high rates of academic failure or grade retention (Stevens, Finucane, Paciorek, Flaxman, White, Donner & Ezzati, 2012; Chabaya, et al., 2009; Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 2007), and the higher incidences of school drop-out (Lacour & Tissington, 2011). Adolescent parenthood is higher among poor teenagers (Chabaya, et al., 2009). Furthermore, an increased likelihood of smoking, prostitution, teenage pregnancies, and illegal drug use is associated with school drop-out among children (Chinyoka, 2013). In Zimbabwe, girls are sometimes abducted for marriage when they are younger than eight years old (Hlupo and Tsikira, 2013).

Research has shown that millions of children do not have access to education, despite concerted efforts to push the cause forward. Okeke, et al. (2012) identified child labour, poverty, and the lack of sponsorship, a quest for wealth, bereavement, truancy, broken homes, and the engagement of children as house helps, as the factors, or the clog in the wheel of children's access to education. Mwangi (2010) also indicated that a combination of poverty, disease and backward cultural practices continued to deny the girl-child her right to education. Even with the introduction of free primary education, access to education still remains a pipedream to many Kenyan children. Despite the introduction of free primary education in the country, which accounted for an increase in enrolment, a sizeable number of children still find themselves out of school, owing to a number of reasons (United Nations, 2012). According to the World Bank Development Report (2012), more than 350 million people, over half of Africa's population, live below the poverty line of one dollar a day. This implies that poverty to some extent excludes children from school.

Economic downturn has caused numerous vulnerable schoolchildren to drop out over the years, though new programmes aim to rectify the situation (Chinyoka and Naidu, 2013). The parents fail to raise their children's school fees due to poverty because they mainly rely on farming which is continually being affected by shortage of adequate rainfall. It is against this background that this study is done to explore the causes of school drop-out among ordinary level learners at a resettlement school in Masvingo.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study is foregrounded by Weiners' attribution theory.

Attribution Theory

Fritz Heider, originally proposed the attribution theory which was later developed by Bernard Weiner and his colleagues. This theory deals with four major perceived causes of success and failure in achievement situations. Snowman and Beihler (2012) define an attribution as an inference that individuals make about the causes of behaviour. O'Neil (2012) posit that people generate these causes or explanations to make sense of their world. In the same line of thought, O' level students' attributions can serve as a guide to their expectations for future success or failure thus leading to either retention or school drop-out.

According to Woolfolk (2006:319) students may attempt to explain their successes or failures by focusing on ability, effort, mood, knowledge, luck, help, interest or clarity of instruction. But O'Neil (2012) contends that Weiner's model deals with four major perceived causes of success and failure which

are ability, effort, task difficult and luck. These attributions can be classified along three dimensions which are: locus of causality, stability and controllability (Snowman and Bieler, 2012). Locus of causality or locus of control refers to the origin of the causes. The origin may be within or outside the person (O'Neil, 2012). Effort and ability originate within the person, so they are internal causes. O' level learners who attribute their success or failure to either of these two causes are said to be internally oriented. Luck and task difficulty originate from outside the person, therefore they are typical external causes. O' level learners who persist to attribute their success or failure to either of these two causes are said to be externally oriented hence the causes of school dropout can be both internally and externally oriented.

Stability is another dimension of casual attributes. According to Weiner, Nierenberg and Goldstein (1976) in Hayes (2008) stability distinguishes between causes which are temporary and fluctuating such as (mood or effort) and causes which are stable and enduring such as aptitude and ability. A cause for success or failure which persists across time is stable while a cause which is transient is unstable. Most learners who drop out of school attribute their success or failure to ability. Assumptions on ability are usually based on past experiences of the children (Trevors, Elliot and Kratochwill, 2003). O'Neil (2012) posits that when students attribute failure to lack of ability, they are likely to give up leading to school drop-out. Thus an individual who views failure as due to lack of ability will hold less hope for doing better in the future. This is common among pupils from poor backgrounds who believe that they are not capable because they are poor leading to learned helplessness. In this view, students who question their own ability pose a serious challenge since their history of failure and feelings of incompetence undercut motivation and learning leading to drop-out.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

In this study, the qualitative design will be employed. The qualitative paradigm was used to elicit the teachers' and learners' reasons for school drop-out at a resettlement secondary school in Masvingo, Zimbabwe through the use of interviews, two focus group discussions and observations.

The study adopted a qualitative phenomenological case study design in order to explore and present the causes of school drop-out among resettled ordinary level learners in Masvingo, Zimbabwe. Qualitative phenomenological case study approach is used to highlight the specific and to identify phenomena through how they are perceived by the actors in the situation. A case study design was developed in order

to gain insights into, not only what was happening to children’s access to schooling, but also why events might be happening in that way (Yin 2012; White 2012). One of the advantages of this approach is that it allows the researcher to gain an understanding of social phenomena from participants’ perspectives in their natural settings (McMillan and Schumacher 2010 cited in Chinyoka and Naidu, 2013).

Sampling

The study was carried out at one secondary school in a resettlement area in Masvingo district, Zimbabwe. The selection of the school and the classes was purposefully done to ensure that the findings were authentic. The target population comprised students doing form four (ordinary level) and also teachers teaching these pupils. A sample of twelve (12) ordinary level learners comprising six (6) males and six (6) females as well as four (4) teachers comprising of 2 males and 2 females were purposively drawn. “The logic and power of purposeful sampling depends on selecting information-rich cases for study in depth. The information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great about issues of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry” (Patton 2012:169).

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

In addition to the intensive review of related literature, data was collected through interviews to purposively selected twelve ordinary learners, two focus group discussions, each comprised of six learners and observations made by the teachers and the researcher. During the two focus group discussions with the O’ level learners, the researcher created a social environment in which group members were stimulated by one another’s perceptions and ideas. This technique was believed to increase the quality and richness of data, more than one-on-one interviewing could have done (McMillan and Schumacher 2010:360). The research instruments were validated and reliability of data was ascertained.

An inductive approach to analysing the responses was undertaken to allow patterns, themes, and categories to emerge rather than being imposed prior to data collection and analysis (Patton 2012). This identification of themes provided depth to the insights about understanding the causes of school drop-out among resettled ordinary level learners in Masvingo, Zimbabwe

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Permission to conduct the study was secured from Masvingo Provincial Education Office, Zimbabwe. The researcher also secured permission from the selected school teachers; and the selected O’ level learners and their parents.

The participants were informed that their involvement in the study was voluntary and that they were free to withdraw at any stage of the interviews if they were not comfortable. Participants were assured of anonymity in the research report.

Sub-Problems

What are the causes of learners’ drop out in resettlement areas?

What is being done to alleviate the causes of school drop-out among O’ level learners?

FINDINGS

The findings of the study established these causes (figure 1) of school drop-out among ordinary level learners at a resettlement secondary school in Masvingo:

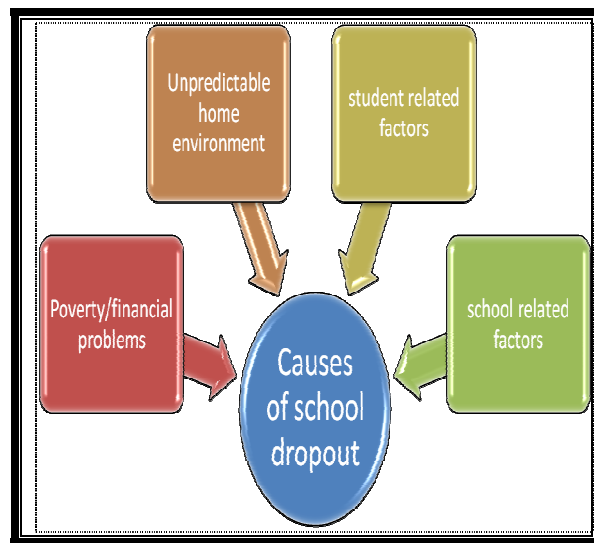


Figure 1: Summarising themes derived from the study

DISCUSSION

Poverty/ Financial Problems

The participants revealed that poverty was the major cause of school drop-out in resettlement areas. The respondents opined that the learners from poverty stricken households come to school with empty stomachs, paid their school fees late, does not have decent school attire and usually faint at school. A teacher interviewed, T1, posits that:

Due to economic hardships, parents cannot raise the required money for school fees, uniforms and stationery. Financial costs include also other indirect costs such as the costs of food, transport, writing paper/exercise books, textbooks, pens and school uniforms forcing many children to leave school as a result.

During interviews, another teacher, T3, purports that textbooks and uniforms were beyond the means of any poor families, exacerbating the academic

performance of learners thus leading to school drop-out. Participants from the two focus groups, FG1 and FG2 supported that the demand for education may be quite sensitive to the costs of education, so that high transport costs and school fees may reduce the demand for education substantially thus leading to the exclusion of children from poverty stricken households, negatively impacting on both the quality of education and on attendance rates of learners. In support of the above, the majority, eighty (80%) percent of the students who were interviewed also highlighted that poverty was the major cause of school drop-out in resettlement areas. The learners revealed that their parents could hardly get enough resources to use at school which includes stationary, uniforms and even school fees. Measured against the attribution theory, drop out is mainly as a result of external factors.

Eight of the twelve ordinary level learners interviewed narrated that the lack of food and basic meals was a contributing factor in dropping out of school. The majority of the children in the school eat nothing at all when they wake up in the morning and all the time when they are at school. This was noted to have a negative effect on the children's listening span, attention deficiencies, retention, motor reproduction, concentration levels, attendance, motivation and academic performance. This also corroborates findings established by (Chinyoka, 2013; Chinyoka and Naidu, 2013) who demonstrated that living in poverty has a wide range of negative effects on the physical and mental health and the wellbeing of children. In support of the above, Donald et al (2010) posit that a vicious cycle of poverty can be noted, when children from poor backgrounds suffer malnutrition, poor physical health and poor academic performance thus leading to school drop-out. It is therefore not easy to break the cycle of poverty among poor children. This, however, does not rule out the fact that some children are resilient and will continue to excel despite coming from impoverished backgrounds (Chinyoka, 2013).

The study also established that in resettlement areas, parents are more interested on farming than education. Poverty is the key component towards child labour (Naidu and Chinyoka, 2014). Due to poverty children are forced to drop-out of school and look for employment for the survival of the family. During interviews, student A3 highlighted that:

We are forced to work by our parents/guardians so that they can earn a living. The majority of us students come from poor families, where there are many other children. As older children, we have to go to work in order to supply the family with much-needed funds for basic family needs.

In line with the above argument, parents tend to nurture their children towards farming. Child labour may result in absenteeism, truancy and poor academic performance (Naidu and Chinyoka, 2014). In the light of the above, 75% of the interviewees highlighted that learners are highly exposed to child labour since their parents need to clear off their land. Teacher, T2, indicated that due to prolonged drought many children are forced to drop out of school and work as herd boys and house maids for the sustenance of the family. The same sentiments were echoed during focus group discussions. The researcher also observed that in resettlement areas during the summer seasons, learners dropped out of school and did the farming throughout the season. This reveals that when the child returns back to school, she/he will not master concepts properly leading to further learned helplessness which leads to drop out.

Unpredictable Home Environments

During interviews with learners and teachers, the following factors leading to school drop-out were given:

- *Unpredictable home environment*
- *Death of parents*
- *divorce/separation*
- *Domestic quarrels by parents*
- *child neglect*
- *unstable homes*

In support of the above, a teacher lamented that the exposure of the ordinary level learners to divorced parents, unstable homes which are characterised by domestic quarrels by parents and negative role models from an early age contribute not only to poor academic performance but also to learners' dropping out. Thus, children from intact homes were less likely to drop out of school even when socio-economic status was removed (Adell, 2002). Given the above, learners from unstable families are emotionally disturbed and therefore underperform. Many studies indicate that the types of attributions that individuals make influence their subsequent behaviours in predictable ways. Both the expectancy beliefs and the emotions that individuals experience as a result of the attributional process tend to determine future behaviours (Snowman and Biehler, 2012).

Findings from this study also reveal that because poor parents are also overstressed in trying to meet the daily needs of their families, the resulting depression and negativity often lead to insufficient nurturing, disengaged parenting and a difficulty in focusing on the needs of children thus leading to school dropout. Parents may also be too exhausted from constantly working and worrying about making ends meet to provide children with the emotional support and guidance they need. Some studies indicate that children view this lack of emotional support and

guidance as more harmful even than inadequate food (Chinyoka, 2013).

Measured against attribution perspective, parental school involvement is also beneficial because families and schools establish appropriate behaviour that is reiterated to children at home and at school (Berk, 2007). Conversely, the students whose parents do not care about their school work tend to perform poorly and end up dropping from school. It appears that children whose parents regularly communicate with their children, check homework, and have high expectations for their children thus positively influence student educational outcomes.

The findings from interviews revealed that those learners whose parents are not adequately literate are disadvantaged because children need to be helped with assignments and homework. Learners from the focus group discussion said,

“handina munhu anondibatsira kuita homework kumba” (I don't have anybody to help me in doing my homework)

As espoused by the attribution theory, parents' expectation encourages their children to pursue goals with hard work, enhance self-efficacy and nature good habits of studying (O'Neil, 2012). Research indicated that a positive family climate favours the development of well adapted, mature, stable and integrated learners while unfavourable family climate promotes non-adaptation, maturity, lack of balance and insecurity among children (Woolfork, 2006). From the above analysis, the more the parents are involved in their children's education the more the chances of school retention among the learners.

Student Related Factors

During interviews and focus group discussions the majority of the learners mentioned the following reasons as leading to school dropout:

- *I got a job, had a family to support, or had trouble managing both school and work*
- *Got married, got pregnant*
- *Had a drug or alcohol problem*
- *Walking long distances to school*
- *I don't see the reason of going to school, my educated brothers and sisters are not employed*
- *Illness due to hunger and HIV/AIDS*
- *Had disciplinary problems, were suspended, or expelled*

In line with the above challenges, teachers interviewed narrated that:

The students themselves make wrong decisions. They get involved with drunkards and get pregnant and commit crimes. Many have a poor school attitude and are frequently not motivated by school. They do not see the reasons they need to go to school. Many children live in families

where education is not valued. They are not involved in school activities and lack self-esteem. Some have undergone major illnesses and have missed too many days of school and have been informed that they will be held back. Because of the factors listed above, they have been suspended and have fallen behind in their work and see little purpose of returning to school...

It was also established in this research that teen pregnancy can pose concerns for students trying to complete secondary school education. Nearly one-quarter of the girls who drop out of secondary school stated early pregnancy and parenthood as the main reasons for their decision. Pregnant girls may feel embarrassed about going back to school, struggle with morning sickness or fatigue, and have difficulty keeping up with their classwork (Chinyoka and Naidu, 2013).

On the other hand, five of the twelve learner participants revealed that the language spoken at home is different from the language of instruction used at school. The participants also revealed that learners can perform well when they are taught using a vernacular language as compared to English language. Furthermore, the participants viewed that the language of instruction is a challenge to resettlement school-going age learners since most of the learners never pass through early childhood education. The language of instruction impedes academic performance hence promotes drop-out among learners. Concurrently, there are arguments that mother tongue is the basis of all teaching and that must be the medium of instruction because bilingualism cannot be set as the aim of teaching (Ademowo, 2012). The benefits of learning in the mother tongue are aptly summarised by Prah (2002 in Makoni, Makoni and Rosenberg, 2010:2), who submits that “the value of mother tongue instruction is literary incontestable”. Whereas research has demonstrated that learning in the first language allows learners to access the curriculum with ease, those who use a foreign language are presented with multiple tasks, which disadvantage them in making school progress. Such tasks include trying to understand the high level vocabulary, the abstract concepts being taught and understanding the unfamiliar language through which they are presented (Ademowo, 2012). The study also established that learners travel long distances from their home to school, showing that the learners come to school tired and exhausted. This was also supported by the time learners from a distant come to school. Teachers and learners agreed that learners' walking for long distance is marked absent in the register due to the time they appear in the classroom. The participants on focus group discussions revealed that learners who travelled long distances ended up dropping out of

school or may be truancy when they find that there are late at school.

School Factors

The study concluded that there are various school, teacher, classroom, head teacher and peer factors that influence the school dropout of the form four learners from resettlement areas. During interviews the following reasons for dropping out were given by the ordinary Level learners:

- *Didn't feel safe in school*
- *Labelling and stigmatisation*
- *Too many students in a class*
- *We are failing, getting poor grades*
- *Didn't get along with teachers and/or other students.*
- *Teachers tend to favour learners from affluent families*

The researcher observed that overcrowding in the school leads to a high pupil-teacher ratio causing a lack of individualised learner attention to the learners by the teachers, difficulty in identifying and monitoring discipline problems among the students, and competition of time between classroom preparations and handling discipline issues among the learners. The researcher also established that the gender of the teacher affects learners' drop out and retention in school. One of the students, P9, interviewed avails that,

It is easier for a boy child to associate with a male than a female teacher. We find them more approachable and understanding.

This means that they can approach them when they have academic problems and they would help them boost their academic performance.

The teacher factors included also high teaching load, inadequate time for teaching, poor teaching methods, failure to be good role models for the boys and girls, and inconsistency in lesson attendance. Because of poor remunerations among teachers, the study established that the majority of the teachers (especially science and maths teachers) have migrated to neighbouring South Africa, Botswana, Namibia and Mozambique in search of greener pastures. Maths and Science teacher shortages can lead to overcrowded classrooms and high teacher-student ratios and in addition, a lack of trained teachers in order to make-up for the shortfall in professionals and in many cases this clearly leads to a drop in teaching standards. This was observed to affect both boys and girls in the secondary school studied.

Given the above, teachers affect students' attributions on a daily basis, through their comments to students, feedback on assignments and examinations, and the types of praise that they offer during instruction.

These comments can have important long-term effects on student learning and motivation (Snowman and Biehler, 2012). A student who consistently learns to attribute failures to a lack of ability in a particular subject area is unlikely to continue to be motivated to achieve in that subject area in the future. Educators therefore need to remember the power they have in shaping students' attributions.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings of the study revealed that learners have their challenges which they encounter such as long walking distance, child labour, poverty/ financial challenges and unpredictable home environments. Also the learners indicated strongly that their parents or guardians nurtured them on farming than education. The study also established that the language of instruction is a barrier to learning in the resettlement areas. The research indicated that these challenges affect the learner's academic performance. Attribution theory provides an important theoretical framework for examining and understanding motivation and reasons for dropout in academic settings. It examines individuals' beliefs about why certain events occur and correlates those beliefs to subsequent motivation hence this theory provided a sound theoretical framework in exploring the causes of school dropout among resettlement learners in Masvingo, Zimbabwe.

RECOMMENDATIONS

On the basis of the above conclusion, the researcher made the following recommendations:

- The government should increase the allocations of funds to provide more amenities to facilitate learning in resettlement areas.
- Parents should provide adequate school learning materials to their children such as school uniforms, school fees, and stationery.
- Parents should be sensitised on the need to make education of their children a priority.
- The parents and learners should be informed about practicing the use of English at home as it helps in attaining good results.

Parents, government, the school, NGOs and other stakeholders can help to reduce poor school drop-outs in resettlement schools through assisting in the fast tracking of the building of conducive to learning centers.

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