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Poverty-Related causes of School Dropout- Dilemma of the Girl Child in Rural Zimbabwe

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Abstract

The study sought to examine teachers' and heads' perceptions on the poverty-related causes of school dropout among girls in rural Zimbabwe. A sample of 40 randomly selected teachers and five heads from schools participated in the study. An open-ended questionnaire was administered to the teacher sample while heads were interviewed. The content analysis approach was used to analyse data. From the findings, poverty emerged as the underlying cause of school dropout, combined with more obvious causes such as HIV and AIDS, monetary constraints, attitudes towards education, cultural practices, religious practices, misconduct, schools and teachers, and peer influence. The findings indicate a need for communal support systems to be encouraged to assist struggling families who cannot afford to pay school fees for their children. Cultural and familial practices should be addressed to afford girl children opportunities to attend school until they meaningfully complete their studies.

Keywords: Females, Poverty, School Dropout, Zimbabwe

Background

Internationally, education is recognised as a basic right (Global Action for Children, 2010). At the Jomtien World Conference on Education for All (EFA) (1990), nations committed themselves to fulfill the EFA goals of accessibility to education at all levels of the education sector and to achieve equity in education across all levels and age groups catered for within educational circles. The EFA goals were confirmed at the Dakar World Forum on Education for All (2000). The Dakar Conference further mandated nations to attain Universal Primary Education (UPE) by 2015. All children of schooling age should have access to free quality education devoid of gender disparities. The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), drawn from the UN General Assembly Resolution A/56/326 in September 2001, affirmed the need for poverty alleviation and elimination of gender inequalities in education systems. In spite of such goals, school dropout is still a common phenomenon, which frustrates the

developing nations in their effort to attain access to basic education for all (Polelo & Molefe, 2006).

School dropout appears to be affected by a number of factors, chief among which are: poverty, which may give rise to illness, malnutrition and absenteeism; high inappropriate curricula and examinations; badly trained teachers; lack of textbooks and materials for schooling; overcrowded schools, as well as HIV and AIDS associated problems (Ballantine, 1993; Cara, 2005; Chivore, 1987; Koloj, 2007; Paula & Gruskin, 2003).

Ballantine (1993) referred to children dropping out of school as the “at risk” students. They are at the mercy of an underclass culture, which offers little promise for success in life. Andersen and Taylor (2005) described ‘underclass’ as consisting of those people who have been left behind by contemporary economic developments and who are likely to be without much means of economic support. Paula and Gruskin (2003) indicated that multiple factors such as poverty, child abuse and lack of respect for women collude to disadvantage women and girls. According to Molamu and McDonald (1996), poverty can lead girls to drop out from school and engage in prostitution as a means to earning a living. Poverty was also identified by Foster (1997); Allen (1997), as a factor affecting children in rural schools who had to walk long distances bare footed and hungry to school, which led to school dropout. The Global AIDS Alliance (GAA, 2010) argued that children will not attend school if they have to walk several kilometers to sit in a room without books and staffed by ill-trained teachers.

Several studies on school dropout looked at causes that are part of internal processes within schools and failure to meet the various individual needs of learners (Bray, 1984; Weeks, 1987), and examined processes that impede children in their staying on at school (Dei et al, 1998; Breitkopf, 2007; Wehlage & Rutter, 1986). According to Rumberrger (1987), factors causing school dropout are complex and diverse. They can be categorised into demographic, economic, family related, peer related and individual factors. Studies in Africa point to in-school and out-of-school factors (Lloyd, 2000; Baine & Mwamwenda, 1998). In Kenya, Lloyd (2000) studied in-school factors. Out-of-school variables included learners’ age, mother’s education, and parents’ marital status. In a South African study, Baine and Mwamwenda (1998) revealed that in-school variables included parental support, teacher quality, facilities, funding and teacher-pupil ratio. Research from various African countries revealed that girls’ labour, social traditions and deep-rooted religious and cultural beliefs are barriers to expanding girls’ educational opportunities (Breitkopf, 2007). In regions worldwide, poverty has the face of a girl child (Ponte, 2006) and low school enrolment figures are tilted more towards girls at primary school level.

In Zimbabwe, the Ministry of Education conducted a study in 1995 on school dropouts (Ministry of Education, 1995) and found that pupils from low socio-economic backgrounds dropped out of school to seek employment. Early marriages and illness due to the HIV and AIDS pandemic were also reported as factors contributing to school dropout. The study looked at school dropouts in general but failed to provide information about the particular situation for girls from impoverished backgrounds. In an earlier Zimbabwean study by Chivore (1987), the specific circumstances of the girl child were also not investigated. A more recent study by the Ministry of Education Sport and Culture (Rapid, 2009) revealed that more girls

than boys were dropping out of school and found the following general reasons for school dropout: negative attitudes towards education by both students and their parents; exodus of teachers to other countries due to economic hardships and lack of educational resources.

To gain more insight into school dropout, this study aimed to explore factors that contribute to the girl child dropping out of school using the perspectives of teachers and heads of schools. More specifically, the study aimed to determine, from the teachers' and school heads' perspectives, what factors contribute to girl child dropouts from schools in a rural setting and to what extent poverty influences school dropouts among girls in rural schools.

Method

Participants and Setting: A sample of 40 teachers randomly selected from a population of 120 teachers in five schools in the Bikita District of Zimbabwe participated in the study. The heads of these five schools also took part in this study.

Instruments: A questionnaire containing open-ended questions requiring respondents to express their subjective views on factors contributing to the girl child dropout in their schools was administered to the teachers. An interview was conducted with each of the school heads.

Procedure: Permission for the study was obtained from the Ministry of Education, Sport Arts and Culture. The participants consented to take part in the study. The interviews were tape recorded and later transcribed.

Data Analysis: Data were analysed qualitatively using the content analysis technique. Each of the three researchers separately read through the questionnaire responses, aggregating content and identifying common themes. The same approach was applied to the interviews. Themes obtained from the questionnaires were compared with themes from the interviews. As a way of controlling for inter-rater reliability, the three researchers compared their analysis and agreed on common themes, hence triangulation was achieved.

Results

From the responses in the questionnaires and interviews, eight themes were identified referring to HIV and AIDS, monetary matters, attitudes towards education, cultural practices, religious practices, misconduct, schools and teachers, and peer influence as factors contributing to school dropouts among girls. All themes incorporated aspects of poverty-related circumstances as the underlying cause of female school dropouts.

HIV and AIDS

The theme HIV and AIDS as a contributor to school dropout was identified in the majority of questionnaires and interviews. More specifically, the respondents felt that HIV and AIDS forced girls into responsibilities that did not leave time for schooling. For example, participants reported that girls tended to drop out of school in order to look after sick parents or because they had to head families after the death of their parents. For some girls, the death of parents means that no-one is left to pay their school fees which forces them to drop out of school. For other girls, AIDS related deaths in the family could mean that they have to quit school in order to work and provide an income for the family. Some participants also

reported that girls might drop out of school because they suffer from HIV and AIDS related illnesses or because of the negative labels that children living with HIV and AIDS receive from their peers.

Monetary Constraints

Respondents regarded monetary constraints as contributing to girl dropout. According to the respondents, parents tend to ignore the girl child. The majority of the respondents indicated that parents preferred boys to stay in school when faced with a choice or when parents do not have the means to finance their children's education. For example, when parents have to pay school fees and to buy school uniforms and have to meet other obligations, they are less likely to invest in such expenses for a girl. Respondents also mentioned that female orphans were particularly hit hard as guardians preferred to pay fees for their blood offsprings first. Respondents also reported that when parents did not have the means to finance their children's education, they encouraged child labour, and, for example, sent their girls to work in nearby tea estates as tea pluckers.

Attitudes towards Education

Most of the respondents in this study referred to negative attitudes towards schooling as a factor contributing to school dropout. It was indicated that in some instances, parents simply would not value education for girls and that some of these parents had little or no education themselves. According to the respondents, many pupils lacked interest in schooling, had bad feelings towards schooling and lacked hope for the future which made school dropout more likely. The factor of negative attitudes towards education, however, would apply to both girls and boys.

Cultural Practices

The questionnaires and interviews revealed the theme of cultural practices as another factor leading to school dropout among girls. The respondents reported that certain cultural practices led girls to drop out from school, for example, some parents preferred to have their girl child married early so that they could benefit financially through payment of a bride price (lobola). Respondents revealed complex relationships between cultural practices and poverty, where girls were forced into early marriages to fulfill cultural rites, used as payment to appease avenging spirits and used as payment to rich men to alleviate family poverty. Respondents indicated that it was a cultural practice to sacrifice girls ahead of boys when cultural decisions such as payment of murder cases had to be made by offering young girls to the bereaved families as appeasement for aggrieved spirits or as substitute wives.

Religious Practices

The theme of religious practices also found expression in this research. Respondents indicated that some religious sects did not value education as school teachings went against their practices. The church doctrines that contradicted school teachings were also mentioned. In this regard, the issue of safe sex and the use of condoms were given as examples of the differences. Some religious sects were said to be encouraging early marriages for their girl child members. The respondents singled out an apostolic sect popular in the area under study for such practices that threatened the education of girls.

Misconduct

Respondents reported that some girls dropped out of school as a result of school dismissals that were largely caused by early marriages and sex-related offences. The respondents concurred that in families with limited resources, child marriage and early sexual contacts were often considered as normal ways of providing for the family. From respondents' point of view, monetary gains motivated girls to take this route of early marriage or sexual relationships, based on which they were then expelled from school.

Schools and Teachers

According to the respondents, various factors contributing to school dropout had to do with the school environment and the teachers' behaviour. Respondents revealed that some girls opted to drop out of school owing to the use of corporal punishment. They also cited an unfriendly school climate that was not conducive to learning. They described the school environment as characterised by very large classes, uncommitted teachers, large pupil-book ratio and dilapidated buildings. They indicated that some parents and their children had lost faith in empty classrooms manned by disgruntled teachers in poorly resourced schools where children were less likely to pass the examinations. The respondents of this study also accused their colleagues of paying less attention to girls than to boys. In the interviews, the school heads concurred with such statements and reported that teachers tended to ignore children from poor families, especially those who performed badly; instead, they interacted more with boys from well to do families. In the interviews and questionnaires, it was revealed that teachers apparently attached negative labels to girls who were victims of cultural practices and to pupils being infected with HIV, which encouraged school dropout.

Influence from Peers

Respondents cited problems emanating from other pupils, leading to dropping out of school. Many respondents referred to harassment from other pupils and playground violence that targeted girls as factors causing school dropout. Apparently, pupils also encouraged other pupils to stay from school and to engage in prostitution or border jumping to neighbouring countries to seek employment.

Discussion

This study looked at poverty-related causes of girl-child dropout from schools in rural areas of Zimbabwe, focusing on Bikita District. The findings indicate that girls drop out of school due to home situations characterized by circumstances of poverty. The findings are in line with observations that females are most vulnerable among the economically disadvantaged (Breitkopf, 2007). The social exploitation of females marginalizes them educationally, resulting in school dropouts. The findings appear to indicate that the girl child is placed on the margins whenever poverty strikes. Sadly, the decision makers fail to take Jolie (2010)'s call that people must think about the disadvantaged children not as a burden but as a great opportunity as their education and well being would be an investment in people's future.

The study identified poverty in the family as one of the main factors limiting school attendance, which is in line with other studies that identified poverty as the main factor limiting school attendance (Kann, 1990). The Global Network for Children (2010) argues that when a child is made extremely vulnerable by poverty, abuse or the death of a parent, a safety

net needs to be created to support a girl at risk of child marriage or a boy whose family cannot afford to care for him any longer. The children at risk of school dropout referred to in this study had neither of these safety nets. In contrast, children who have concerned parents and are well looked after at home have been found to perform well in schools (Andersen & Taylor, 2005).

The monetary theme emerged as a major theme in this study. Parents encourage their children to work for their own upkeep when they fail to raise money for their fees. Some children go to look for employment in neighbouring countries. This phenomenon appears to be widespread, considering that GAA (2010) discovered that in poorest countries, school-related factors keep millions of children out of school and that the cost of sending children to school often prevents people from adopting orphans. The plight of orphans was also highlighted by Matshalaga (2004) who saw grandmothers who had nothing in the form of wealth as bearing the brunt of orphan care in Zimbabwe.

Allied to the monetary constraints is the issue of child labour. One of the findings in this study focused on parents who did not have the means to finance their children's education. This encouraged child labour where girls work, for example, in tea estates as tea pluckers. The reliance on child labour is also cited as one of the hindrances to the attainment of universal primary education in the Education for All (Global Monitoring Report, 2002).

HIV and AIDS featured in the study as a major factor leading to girl child dropout, especially when parents died and the girl child had no option but to disengage from school to either fend for her own living or work to sustain the other children in the family. The Aids crisis in Southern Africa and Asia turns young girls into heads of households (Breitkopf, 2007). The severity and impact of the HIV and AIDS pandemic on children was described in (Jackson, 2002). The Global AIDS Alliance argues that many countries with low enrolment rates are also those hardest hit by AIDS (GAA, 2010). Koloji (2007) confirmed that there is a considerable amount of social and scientific pressure, not only to find a cure for HIV and AIDS, but also to find the most effective ways and means to alleviate its associated problems which included social, economic, cultural and educational consequences. HIV and AIDS occurs in situations where many children were already undernourished and impoverished. These situations lead to dropping out of school for survival's sake. The HIV and AIDS not only results in the girls failing to go to school, but the failure itself results in further turmoil and poverty as their future becomes bleak (GAA 2010) The failure to go to school further exposes girls to the dangers of the very pandemic that ruins their school lives.

According to the findings of this study, early marriages also contributed to girl-child dropout. These early marriages are a form of sexual abuse of children. Child sexual abuse is a grave and complex sociological and physical problem that produces devastating consequences and occurs in epidemic proportions worldwide (Global Action for Children, 2010). A UNICEF 2006 information sheet, cited in the Global Action for Children (2010), indicated that 20% of women and 5-10% of men suffered from sexual abuse during their childhood years worldwide, especially in poverty stricken communities.

It emerged from the study that teacher related factors seemed to influence school dropout. Andersen and Taylor (2005) postulated that teachers who label children as certain

kinds of pupils with particular and different personalities, characteristics and academic and social abilities have an adverse effect on their achievement and positive self-concept at school. This problem was also highlighted in studies on factors causing school dropout by (Polelo and Molefe, 2006). The most damaging labels in this study were those pasted on HIV positive children and girls who were victims of cultural practices. All these appeared to be consequences of poverty, considering that the most affected were said to be girls from poor families and orphans (Matshalaga 2004).

School dismissals were also cited as accounting for some girl child dropouts. The school dismissals that were cited by respondents in this research were early pregnancies and early marriages, which are also, in themselves, symptoms of poverty (Uquieta-Slomon et al., 2009).

A startling revelation of the study was the interference of cultural practices where girls were targeted for bride price to alleviate poverty, used as payment for avenging spirits and targeted for early marriages that are common with some religious sects. Such practices only target girls and leave boys as untouchables. The bottom line of all this is poverty. Cultural pressures to perpetuate, support or submit to traditional customs that denigrate girls become more marked when the family lives in poverty. Forced marriages and payments to avenging spirits are deeply-rooted practices in the area covered by this research (Chavunduka, 1998). Pressure to accept such practices can be so strong that a girl risks being labeled a cultural traitor for opposing a rescue package for the family. Deep-rooted cultural and religious beliefs were also cited by Breikopf (2007) who stated that there were complex interrelationships between poverty, cultural, ethnic and religious practices that undermined efforts to empower girls through education.

Given the subjective nature of the qualitative results of the study, the findings have to be treated as tentative. However, despite such limitation, the findings presented here can serve as a basis for further research on this topic.

Conclusions

The findings in this study appear typical in the African scenario. The girl child has been portrayed in this study as bearing the brunt of the economic hardships in the family. In such a scenario, the culture of poverty that tends to perpetuate itself from generation to generation because of its effects on children appears to be the fate of girls in this study. The study revealed that there are complex interrelationships between poverty, HIV and AIDS, deep rooted cultural and religious practices and school factors that put girls at the margins and collude to influence their dropping out from school. Chief among these was poverty, which appeared to have a major influence on all factors mentioned in this study as girls seem to have no alternative but to sustain their lives and the livelihoods of other family members. Based on the findings of this study, one can assume that the girl-child dropout has far reaching implications for the girls as it limits their life chances, their ability for social mobility and inhibits their empowerment. In this case, the cycle of poverty is perpetuated because a girl child out of school contributes to a vicious cycle that will eventually prevent her from giving her own family a good start in life.

Recommendations

The following recommendations emanate from this study. Families should be adequately provided for so that the girl child feels safe within a bountiful and caring environment and that parents need to be sensitised to the need to afford the girl children opportunities to attend school until they complete their studies and that they refrain from cultural and religious practices that place girls at the margins. Women's groups need to be supported so that they amplify the voices of women to enable them to assert or re-assert their positions as community leaders and spokespeople against decision-making processes that seek to denigrate and exclude them. The HIV and AIDS support networks must be put in place to cater for the needs of the girl-child, especially in the situation where she is left alone to fend for herself and other members of the family after parents have died. The school teachers and heads need to be imparted with skills that will enable them to handle the sensitive issue of the girl child within school and classroom settings.

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