Factors That Militate Against The Academic Performance Of Boy Learners From Poor Families In Zimbabwe: An Ecological Perspective

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Abstract:

This article examined the factors that militate against the education of form three (3) boys from poor families in two secondary schools in Masvingo, Zimbabwe. The main purpose of the research was to establish the magnitude of the effects of the factors that are known to militate against the education of boys. Recently, education in Zimbabwe has mainly concentrated on the girl child at the expense of boys,yet there are unique factors that the boy child faces that must be addressed in order to achieveEducation for All by 2015.The study is grounded in Urie Bronfenbrenners' ecological theory.In this study, a qualitativephenomenological design was used with focus group discussions, interviews and observations as data collection instruments to ten (10) boy children and six (6) teachers in Masvingo province. Findings revealed thatbroken families, poverty in households and poor supervision by parents negatively affected retention of boys in school. Also, child labour, low self-motivation and lack of interest in education were identified by teachers as being the major factors influencing academic performance. The boys implicated involvement in bad company/peer pressure, drug abuse, malnutrition and health related problems and misuse of technology as the major factors that influence academic performance.The government should conduct awareness campaigns to ensure parents and pupils fully appreciate the importance of basic education.

Key words: ecological, militate, phenomenological, education, poverty and boys

1.Background

Countries world over have endeavoured to achieve gender equality in education given that education is central in empowering people and propelling national growth and development.Although the Zimbabwean government has made significant progress in terms of education, with literacy rates reaching 80 per cent for women and 90 per cent for men, this has not had the desired effect of meeting the millennium goal of Education For All by 2015 (UNESCO, EFA 2007).With the prevailing economic hardships faced by the majority of the people in Zimbabwe, a lack of resources by parents and guardians for schooling costs negatively affects the schooling of many children in Zimbabwe. The children are mostly affected since education in Zimbabwe requires payment of tuition fees at all levels, pre-school, primary, secondary and tertiary. This means that a huge burden falls on parents to send their children to school irrespective of gender.

UNAIDS, UNICEF, and USAIDS (2006) posit that current estimates indicate that more than 200 million children in developing countries are at risk of not developing to their full potential because of poverty and HIV / AIDS. Poverty is therefore a significant threat to the healthy psychosocial development of children, where the boy child is not an exception. Poor families do not have means to sustain life, thus adversely affecting children's health, intellectual capabilities, academic achievements, emotional, physical, moral, behaviour and social development (Chinyoka and Ganga, 2010). Understanding the scope and severity of poverty is critical in Zimbabwe so as to develop interventions and social policies to protect children at risk.

The Poverty Assessment Study Survey (PASS) conducted by the Government of Zimbabwe in 2005 revealed that sixty two percent (62%) of Zimbabwe population was poor, forty six percent (46%) of them being extremely so. On 18 July 2007 "New Zimbabwe" Agencies wrote, "More than 65 percent of Zimbabweans are living below the poverty datum line" (http:// www. New Zimbabwe.com / pages / inflation 12.11615. html) , of this 65%, 66% stayed in rural or arid lands where they depended on subsistence farming (http://www.quest connect.org/Africa Zimbabwe.htm) at a population density of twenty-nine people per square kilometre. The successive droughts exacerbated the problems of boy learners in Zimbabwe, as food become not only expensive but sometimes unavailable especially in the rural areas. In 2008, the situation in Zimbabwe had reached its peak also because of the effects of the Fast Track Land Resettlement Programmes (FTLRP), socio-economic instability, and political unrest due to the much disputed elections, HIV / AIDS and economic sanctions imposed on the

country (Moyo and Yeros 2007).The Fast Track Land Reform Programme (FTLRP) meant to address the problem of urban and rural poverty led to political unrest, socio and economic instability. Investors withdrew from the country, and many people lost their jobs. This led the country's economy to a standstill, and the government found itself making budget deficits and supplementary budgets because of inflation (Frame, 2008). All this has a bearing on the psychosocial development andacademic performance of children.

Ganga and Chinyoka (2010:190) assert that more than 50% of children in Zimbabwe live in households where no one is employed. Abebe (2009:48) postulates that one (1) in every three (3) children in African countries is poor and malnourished. The number of hungry children is also rising thus affecting their attendance and retention at school.

Given the above, most of the hurdles faced by theboy child in Zimbabwe are poverty related. These range from situations of lack of food, education, medical care, abuse, stress, violence, child labour, diseases, stunting growth and stigmatisation(Meintjes and Bray, 2006:409and Abebe, 2008). Childhood poverty is associated with higher rates of academic failure or grade retention (Brooks-Gunn and Duncan, 2007), and higher incidences of school dropout (Connell, 2010 and Chinyoka and Ganga, 2010). Adolescent parenthood is higher among poor teenagers (Manwa et al 2009), and children raised in poverty have poorer employment records as adults (Abebe, 2009). Further, an increased likelihood of smoking and illegal drug use is associated with poverty among boy children (Kapungu, 2007).UNICEF (2007:8) posits that 40% of the boy child's population, who does not attend schools, have behavioural problems and are subjected to HIV/AIDS.

To date, associations between poverty and the academic performance of the boy child have not been robustly demonstrated in Zimbabwe. Limited research has been conducted thus far and in Zimbabwe, not much has been written on this subject. While, most researches that have been carried out adopted the quantitative design, these researchers will try to close the gap in research by only using qualitative methods to establish the factors that militate against the schooling of the boy children in Masvingo, Zimbabwe. It should also be noted that since independence in Zimbabwe, the call has been to empower and educate women thus side-lining male students. To date, the following Non-Governmental Organisations, Care International, Action farm, Christian care, God's Garden and Vision Trust International are giving a lot of support to the education of the girl child in Masvingo, in form of school fees, uniforms, exercise books and sometimes

food. This has gone a long way in promoting the education of the girl child in Masvingo. It is against this background that this research is done to establish factors that militate against the academic performance of the boy child with the aim of suggesting sound policies and solutions to attenuate negative effects of poverty on the boy child.

2.Theoretical Framework

This study is informed by Bronfenbrenner's (2008) ecological theory which suggests that a person's surroundings including their home, school, work, church, neighbourhood, culture and government have an influence on the way a child develops (Donald, Lazarus and Lolwana, 2010). This theory looks at learner's development within the context of the system of relationships that form their environment.

The ecological model states that child development occurs within an interactive system of nested influences between the child and the environment. His ecological environment consists of the following five nested structures: microsystems, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem and chronosystem(Rathus 2006:23, Berk 2007:24 and Donald et al 2010:41). Children's microsystems will include any immediate relationships or organisations they interact with, such as their immediate family, school, peers, neighbours and caregivers. How these groups or organisations interact with the boy child will have an effect on how the child grows, the more encouraging and nurturing these relationships and places are, the better the child will be able to grow (Donald, Lazarus and Lolwana, 2010).

 Bronfenbrenner's next level, the mesosystem describes how the different aspects of a boy child's microsystem work together for the sake of the child (Cole, Cole and Lightfoot, 2009). The exosystem level includes the other people and places that the child herself may not interact with often but still have a large effect on him, such as parents' work places, extended family members and the neighbourhood. Bray, Gooskens, Khan, Moses and Seekings (2010) describe the macrosystem as the one that involves dominant social and economic structures as well as values, beliefs and practices that influence all other social systems. The chronosystem involves development over time that affects the interactions between these systems as well as their influences on the academic and intellectual development of learners.

Given the above, understanding the interactions of these systems is therefore the key in understanding how the boys develop and what factors lead to their failure.

3.Purpose of the Study

This study seeks to explore the factors that militate against the academic performance of form three boy learners in Zimbabwe. It is guided by the research questions below:

- What are the factors that militate against the academic performance of form three boy learners?
- What recommendations can be suggested to mitigate negative factors that hinder the education of form three boy learners?

4.Methodology

4.1.Research Design

According to Smith (2007), a research design refers to the plan and structure of the investigation used to obtain evidence to answer research questions. A good research is therefore not accidental. The qualitative phenomenological design was adopted for use in this study. It is good at surfacing deep issues and making voices heard (Creswell, 2010) and was thus found suitable to explore the factors that militate against the education of boy children in Zimbabwe. It also allows the researchers to gain understanding of social phenomena from participants' perspectives in their natural settings (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010:315).

4.2.Sampling

The study was carried out in two secondary schools in Masvingo district, Zimbabwe, one rural and another one urban. The target population comprised boy students doing form three (3), aged between 15 and 17 years at the two secondary schools and also teachers teaching these pupils in nine different subjects. About eighteen teachers (18) teach form three (3) students. The total number of boy students doing form three in the two selected schools is one hundred and thirty (130). The target population is therefore one hundred and fortyeight (148). A sample of ten (10) boy learners, five (5) from each school and six (6) teachers, three (3) from each school was purposively drawn.

4.3.Data Collection And Analysis

In addition to intensive review of related literature, data was collected through interviews, focus group discussions and observations with the target population comprising ten boy learners and six teachers. During the focus group interviews, the

researchers created a social environment in which group members were stimulated by one another's perception and ideas. This technique was believed to increase the quality and richness of data, more than one-on-one interviewing could have done alone (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010:360).

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. Similar responses were grouped together into categories. This identification of themes provided depth to the insights about understanding the individual views of the boys and teachers. Similar codes were aggregated together to form a major idea from the data (Creswell, 2010: 256).

4.4.Validation/ Trustworthiness Of Data Collected

The interviews and focus groups were audio-taped and the researchers made observations and copious notes during the interviews. This strategy helped to eliminate the problem of inaccuracy or incompleteness of the data which, according to Maxwell (2006:89) is the main threat to the valid description of what the researchers saw or heard. Information was obtained from individuals in their respective focus groups and settings, using different sources, cross checking and verifying sources of information (Creswell, 2010).

4.5.Ethical Considerations

Permission to conduct the study was secured from Masvingo Provincial EducationOffice, Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture, Zimbabwe as well as from the selected heads of schools. Further permission was sought from the parents of the selected learners.

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. Permission was first obtained from the participants for the interviews to be audio recorded. They were assured of anonymity in the research report.

4.6.Findings And Discussion

Findings and discussions were done in line with research questions. The analysis of the empirical data yielded the following themes, as shown by fig 1.1 below:
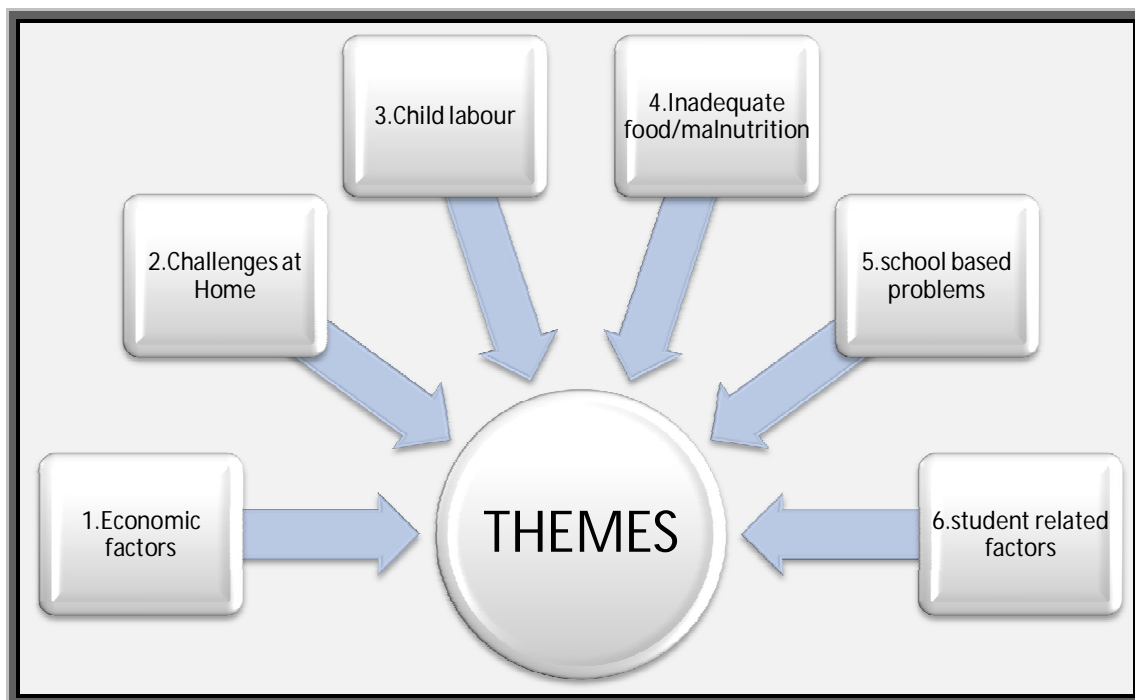
Figure 1: Summarising themes derived from the study

Field data, 2013

4.6.1.<u>Theme 1: Economic Factors</u>

This study established that the financial costs of schooling are often high, making it difficult for poor parents to afford schooling for their children. Boys interviewed and participated inthe two focus group discussions established that financial costs include not only school fees, but also other indirect costs such as the costs of food, transport, writing paper/exercise books, textbooks, pens, and school uniforms. Due to economic hardships, parents cannot raise the required money for school fees, uniforms and stationery. Unfortunately, many boy children are forced to leave school as a result. During interviews, one teacher, TR, purports thattextbooks and uniforms were beyond the means of many poor families thus exacerbating the academic performance of learners. The boy learners, B1 and B9 also emphasised that:

… There is a serious problem of textbooks at our schools; students depend entirely on the research notes done by the teachers.Teachers always sympathise with girl learners, thus they are given more attention and resources by the teachers.

In support of the above, boththe two focus groups, FGD1 and FGD2purport that our parents cannot afford to buy textbooks and exercise books, they always give excuses. The literature confirms and illuminates these findings. A study byUNICEF, (2011)

established that many schools lack text books and other supplies that enhance academic performance.Implicit to the above arguments, it can be opined that without good textbooks or other classroom resources, more teachers cannot necessarily improve the quality of teaching and learning in schools. Thus studies show great positive effects of more good textbooks effects that often appear to be larger than those of additional teachers (Evans, 2004:47). The study results also indicated that few classrooms had the appropriate subject level of books for the children. Students relied heavily on teacher's research notes. This however depended on the thoroughness of the teacher's research notes. The problem of textbooks was confirmed by observation. At one school which had serious problems of textbooks, pupils were not given even a single book to share.

All the six teachers who participated in this study state 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 boy children from poverty stricken households, negatively impacting on both the quality of education and on attendance rates of boy learners. The majority of the boys, seventy (70%) percent,that were interviewed and all students who participated in the two focus group discussions, FGD1 and FGD2purport that:

We lack basic school things such as writing materials, uniforms, school books, soap, pocket money, school bags and food to take to school. As a result, there are boys who end up leaving in the streets, begging to get basic needs like food and pocket money.

This was also reinforced and supported during the interviews when all boy learners and teachers spoke abouthow the boys risk their health for food and money. The implication of the above is that boys are so deprived materially, thus forcing them to indulge in street begging to make ends meet, risking their health and academic performance.

Poverty, therefore,makes boys wear tattered clothes hence suffer from cold, lack the basic needs which lead to poor health, lack learning materials and even going without lunch. All these go against good academic performance. In this study, boys were observed to withdraw themselves from school, especially if their needs for supplies like school fees, shoes and uniforms are not met by their parents/guardians. Such boys were also observed to have a low self-esteem, were not motivated, they looked down upon themselves and shunned school as a result.

4.6.2.Theme 2: Challenge At Home

The study revealed thathome circumstances were often not conducive to learning of the boy child in the rural and urban communities studied. This study established that poverty is strongly correlated with a range of home background variables, includingbroken families, poverty in households and poor supervision by parentsthat negatively affected retention and educational outcomes of boys in school.The majority of the boy children from the two schools posit that their studies at home were affected by lack of lighting, space to do homework, spending much time in the fields, having no desk or table to work on, an absence of books in the home and unsupportive parents. The problem of limited space in this study was observed to be compounded by low income. These researchers observed that in most urban communities in Zimbabwe, families from a low SES only afford rentals in high density suburbs, where houses are overcrowded. Such areas are often characterised by noise, sanitary problems, sewage blockages, water cuts, prostitution, use of drugs like mbanje and all sorts of in disciplinary problems.The boys modelled the behaviour of the significant members in the society they came from thus negatively affecting their academic performance.

This corroborates findings made by (Kapungu, 2007, Chinyoka and Ganga, 2010, Chabaya et al, 2009).Recent research acknowledges the multiple environmental influences that occur at the same time and interact over time on children and families and the influences of families and children on their environment (Luthar, 2006:785). Residing in a low income and disorganised neighbourhood was associated with negative family functioning (Kohen et al., 2008:173). This was observed to affect the self-concept and self-esteem of learners. In most poor neighbourhoods in Zimbabwe, the houses are overcrowded and the neighbourhood is often very noisy thus rendering the area not conducive for study.

In concurrence with the ecological perspective, Bronfenbrenner contends that a child develops within a complex system of relationships affected by multiple levels of the surrounding community. Bronfenbrenner, (2006 and 2008) asserts that there is a need to understand the multiple and interactive social, economic, cultural, and community-level factors, which alone and in combination influence processes of development and child academic performance. Given the above, the development and academic performance of the boy child will be discussed from a varied perspective putting into consideration the influence of everything surrounding him and also some direct and indirect factors affecting his academic performance.

In this study, parents' levels of education have also been observed to have an impact on theboychildren's schooling. Parental level of education was noted in this study to affect the jobs done by the parents, family size, socioeconomic status, attitudes and the general income level of the family. Issues like homework supervision were viewed by teachers as beyond the capacity of uneducated parents. Forty percent (40%) of the students interviewed posit that most parents in poor households leave for work before sunrise and return after dark in an effort to make ends meet.Findings from this study 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, disengagedparenting, and a difficulty in focusing on the needs of children thus negatively affecting the academic performance of the boy child. Parents may also be too exhausted from constantly working and worrying about making ends meet to provide boy 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 and Ganga, 2010).

Measured against Bronfenbrenner's ecological perspective, parental school involvement is also beneficial because families and schools establish appropriate behaviour that is reiterated to children at home and at school (Bronfenbrenner, 2006 and 2008). Conversely, the students whose parents do not care about their school work tend to perform poorly.It appears that children whose parents regularly communicate with their children, check homework, and have high expectations for their children positively influence student educational outcomes.

4.6.3.Theme 3: Child labour

This study also established that monetary constraints and the need for food, shelter and clothing drives children into the trap of premature labour. The boy children are seen working in the fields, gardens and sometimes herding cattle for food and very little amounts of money is given to them. In rural areas during the rainy season, because of harsh economic situations, this study established that families temporarily withdraw their boys from school to work in the fields so that they could increase their chances of earning income for the survival of the family. A boy student, B8, from the rural secondary school posits that:

…we want to go to school on a daily basis but I must help uncle in the fields. He said you are not my child so I cannot send you to school.

On the contrary, B4 and B7 supported the issue of child labour saying that …kana tikasashanda mumunda mevabereki vedu tinodyei? Chikoro chinotipa sadza here?(meaning that we need to work hard in the fields so that our families get enough food to feed us. Going to school should be second priority since people are not fed at school). Teachers interviewed posit that boys are perceived to be stronger than girls; hence they are called upon, more often than girls, to contribute to the family income. In the Zimbabwean culture, boys are said to be musoro wemusha meaning that they are the heads of the families hence should work hard to provide food to their families. It should also be noted that child labour puts boys in a much higher risk position of becoming exposed to all forms of abuses and exploitation thus compromising their academic performance.

It is to be understood that child labour reduces not only the boy learner's educational achievements, but also the effect and quality of the education system. In this light, the fight against child labour has gained international momentum in Zimbabwe, and has become a major challenge for the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Most child labourers are denied an education, and from this study, one can argue that there is a strong correlation between child labour and adult illiteracy.

4.6.4.Theme: 4 Inadequate Food/ Malnutrition

The general trend from the interviews and focus group discussions was that children ate two meals a day, only three said sometimes they ate all the three meals a day. Most of the respondents narrated that lack of food and basic meals was a contributing factor in dropping out of school. Majority of the children in the two schools ate 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 boy children's listening span, attention deficiencies, retention, motor reproduction, concentration levels, attendance, motivation and academic performance. An argument that may be easier to substantiate is that a hungry child is more likely to have lower concentration levels than classmates who receive enough to eat (a teacher from the urban secondary school) and this may, amongst other factors, have an impact on a child's ability to perform in class. Therefore, receiving a regular breakfast, lunch and dinner leads to positive effects on a child's learning achievements (Michaelowa, 2001).

In support of the above, Bray et al (2010)posit that a vicious cycle of poverty can be noted, when children from poor backgrounds suffer malnutrition, poor physical health,

mental health, socio-emotional effects and poor academic performance. 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 have resilience and will continue to excel despite coming from impoverished backgrounds.

4.6.5. Theme 5: School Factors

The study concluded that there are various school, teacher, classroom, head teacher and peer factors that influence the academic performance of the boy child.Overcrowding in schools which leads a high pupil-teacher ratio resulted to lack of individualised learner attention to the boys by the teachers, difficulty in identifying and monitoring discipline problems among the boys, and competition of time between classroom preparation and handling discipline issues among the boys. The findings of the study showed that poverty, male guardian's level of education, teachers' gender and the amount of time boys spent studying affect boys' academic performance. The education level of male guardians also affects boys' academic performance. This is because educated male guardians are more interested in boys' education, act as role models, can assist with the home work, they are a source of inspiration to the boys. All these promote good academic performance among boys, if they lack, it may lead to poor performance.

The researchers also established that the genderof the teacher affects boys' academic performance. One of the students, B6, 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, teaching methods, failure to be good role models for the boys, and inconsistency in lesson attendance. This study also established that on the teaching side, lack of motivation amongst teachers can also affect their teaching quality; low pay and poor benefits and working conditions may cause teachers to lack motivation and this was observed to be particularly relevant in both urban and rural areas where the location may mean that teachers are unhappy with their situation which can impact negatively on their teaching standards. 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 three secondary schools studied.

4.6.6. Theme 6: Student Related Factors

Interviews and focus group discussions reveal that the distance between homes and schools often affect school enrolment, retention, completion and academic performance. Eighty percent (80%) of the boy children interviewed and all who participated in the two focus group discussions, stated that they had to travel "too far" to get to school although this statement is impossible to quantify, it does demonstrate that for many children getting to school is considered an issue. This corroborates findings made by (Baden, 2008). Teachers interviewed reveal that some children travel between 30 minutes to two (2) hours to reach school. It was observed that the largest numbers of children do not attend school regularly as a result. So overall, it may be said that the further the distance from school a household is, the higher the proportion of households where children do not always attend school.

Teachers, TM, TF, TU and TT assert that:

...children who walk long distances to school arrive late, hungry and tired, all of which deplete their concentration, retention, attention, motor reproduction and motivation abilities.

Teachers interviewed in this study also established that tired and hungry boys displayed signs of stress and anxiety, attention deficit problems; quickly forget/short memory, display moody tendencies and high absenteeismin class, which impede their teaching and learning thus negatively affecting their academic performance.Some boys who participated in this study seek accommodation closer to their schools in order to continue with their schooling. All this was observed to compromise the academic performance of the boy child.The majority of the boys from poor backgrounds have a negative attitude towards schooling. Their dislike of attending lessons was greatly revealed by responses such as:

I don't like attending lessons because most teachers do look down upon us. I always get poor grades. Teachers always shout at us, telling us thatwe are going to fail.

Furthermore, during the two focus group discussions, the boys echoed the following sentiments:

I don't need to go to school. What can I learn there? I know children who went to school. Their families paid for their fees and uniforms and now they are educated, but they are not employed. Now they are useless to their families becausethey don't know anything about farming or trading or making money…

As a result, most boy learners are totally discouraged from trying and working hard. It was found that poor performance among boy pupils was also attributed to poor background and helpful teachers.

Sixty percent of the boys interviewed blamed their teachers for being non accommodative to them as slow learners, unapproachable and threatening. The boy learners indicated that they were mostly discouraged by the way their teachers handled them. Some said that they were shouted at when they failed instead of being encouraged. They said that girls were favoured and given more chances to participate in class. Observations also confirmed this to some extent.

Peer pressure factors included, introduction to drug and substance abuse, engaging in premarital relationships, joining gangs, playing truant, chronic absenteeism, stealing, fighting, bullying and subsequent school dropout.These researchers observed that boys who live in poverty stricken households and neighbourhood are significantly more likely to experiment with drugs, alcohol, and risky sexual behaviour. Since form three boys are undergoing emotional changes, due to adolescence, they are feeling like grown-ups, who want to experiment with everything including drugs. The urban boy learners were also observed to spent too much time on internet especially face book, what's up etc. at the detriment of their studies. More research is called on this area of technology because only few respondents, two (2), boy learners, B5 and B10, raised the idea.

5.Recommendation

On the basis of the findings made in this study, these researchers made the following recommendations:

- From an ecological point of view, poverty is thus a societal problem that must be addressed by microsystems of school, families and neighbourhood, mesosystems (linkages) and exosystems as well as macrosystems (political, ideology). The government should reduce the costs associated with education, including school

fees, transport, textbook costs; and uniforms to improve school attendance among the poor boy children.

- There is also need of parenting education to capacitate them to be in a position to help their children with homework.Policies, laws and community-based monitoring systems should be put in place to eliminate child labour and all forms of abuse.

- The Government, NGOs and teachers can be sensitised and trained to provide support for children from impoverished backgrounds. The teachers need to be warm, supportive, genuine, and empathetic, nurturing and give unconditional positive regard towards learners who are psychologically unstable due to poverty so as to raise their self-confidence, self-direction, self-esteem and self-image.

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