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Universal Education: An Elusive Dream In The Zimbabwean Primary Schools, With Special Reference To Gweru District Rural Schools

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Abstract:

Education is fundamental to the prospects for economic and social development of all Zimbabwean children. At the dawn of independence in 1980, Zimbabwe saw dramatic changes in its policies and launched the Universal Primary Education Policy in an endeavour to lessen the inequities of the colonial education system. Tremendous strides were made towards accessibility and affordability of education. However there were still quite a significant number of boys and girls who are failing to complete the grades 1 to 7 cohorts. This study sought to examine the factors that led to dropout in Gweru district rural schools in Zimbabwe. A qualitative naturalistic research design was employed in order to allow the researcher to understand the participants' world view as much as possible on factors that were related to dropout and failure to access education and how this could be curbed. The participants who participated in this research were purposefully selected in order to allow them to provide information needed to answer the research questions raised. Individual and focus group interviews were conducted to collect data from the teachers and head teachers. Thematic analysis was used to analyse data from focus groups and individual interviews. This was to allow the researcher to organise and describe the data in rich detail and interpret the various aspects of the research question. Looking at the findings, poverty in the home is a leading factor which leads to drop out and failure to access education. It also came out of the study that some pupils dropped out of school because they were compelled to attend church services in some schools. This was in violation of their religious beliefs. Child labour, poor school environment, lack of motivation, truancy, illnesses in the home and travelling for long distances to school also led to drop outs. Immunisation programmes also led to drop out of some children from some religious sects. Finally some pupils with special needs failed to attend school because they failed to fit in the mainstream and their schools were few and unreachable to the general populace. The study recommended follow up programmes for dropouts by government, compulsory education for children of primary school age and monitoring the implementation of this instrument. Further recommendations were the implementing of counselling programmes in all schools, building of infrastructure by the government so that pupils are excluded from child labour, educating parents about the need for education and enabling all deserving pupils to benefit from BEAM.

Key words: Millennium, Universal, Education Policy, Drop out, primary schools, Basic Education Assistance Module (BEAM)

1. Background Of The Study

Education is fundamental to the prospects for economic and social development of all Zimbabwean children. Zimbabwe, like any other country in the Sub-Saharan Africa has cherished one of the millennium goals of universal education among other goals. Since the launch of the millennium development goals there have been improvement in the primary school net enrolment which rose from 58% to 74 % in the sub-Saharan Africa (UNESCO, 2003). At the dawn of independence, Zimbabwe in 1980 saw dramatic changes in its policies and launched the Universal Primary Education Policy in an endeavour to lessen the inequities from the colonial education system. Tremendous strides were made towards accessibility and affordability of education. Universality of education was the ideology of government which promised free and compulsory education to the masses through the education act of 1980. Many schools were built and enrolments swelled in both primary and secondary schools. The Basic Education Assistance Module (BEAM) was also put into place to assist the disadvantaged in Zimbabwe. Besides the support of this policy education continued to receive the largest vote allocation on the national budget since 1980. As a result, many schools were built and enrolments swelled in both secondary and primary schools, leading to an alarming rise in literacy levels. Despite these successes and efforts, there are still quite a significant number of boys and girls who are failing to complete the grades 1 to 7 cohorts. 75 million primary school aged children are still out of school –over half of whom are girls (EFA-Global Monitoring Report, 2008). Dropouts constitute a critical form of wastage.

It was therefore in the interest of the researcher to unravel the reasons for this situation, with a specific focus on Gweru district rural schools.

2.Statement Of The Problem

A significant proportion of children who start primary school education are not completing the grade 1-7 cohort. The problem of dropout has been well documented in Zimbabwe and worldwide. Studies reveal that universal education is difficult to attain. In Zimbabwe there is inadequate information on the factors responsible for this situation. This study sought to establish the factors that led to dropout and lack of access to education in Gweru district rural schools in Zimbabwean Primary schools.

3.Objectives Of The Study

- To establish the factors that contribute to drop-out among primary school pupils.
- To suggest solutions to the problem of dropping out of school at primary school level.

4.Research Questions

- What factors could be responsible for dropout among primary school children.
- How do the factors operate to affect dropouts?
- What can be done to improve access to education among primary school pupils?

5.Significance Of The Study

The study assumes that dropouts are a cause of concern in the education system, hence the study was designed to find out the factors that contribute to dropout in the primary school using qualitative methods. It was believed that this would give a better understanding from the perspective of teachers and head teachers themselves. It is hoped that the results may influence policies pertaining universal education. Policy makers may re-examine the present policies with the view of redressing some of the shortcomings. The study should therefore hopefully provide the information which is lacking at present. The study also suggested solutions to some of the problems that militate against universal primary school education.

6.Review Of Related Literature

A significant proportion of children who start primary school are not completing the cycle. A pupil who does not complete a seven year course constitute a form of educational wastage (UNESCO, 1989). Failure to complete a basic cycle of primary school education not only limits future opportunities for children but presents a significant drain on limited resources that countries have for the provision of primary education (UNICEF: 2011). There are many factors associated with dropout .They include family related factors, individual related factors and school related factor.

6.1.Family Related Factors

Family background is one of the factors that lead pupils to drop out of school. According to Makasi (1989:71) pupils drop out of school as a result of lack of money to pay various types of fees. A number of studies link between poverty and dropping out of school (UNICEF, 2005). According to Porteus et al (2000:10) "Poverty is the most contributory reason for students to be out of school."Furthermore other factors related to the family background emerge from such situations such as child labour and poverty (Colclough et al 2000). World Bank (1986) discovered that parents from high economic status value education and do not tolerate drop out of children. Todaro (1982) concurs with Colclough et al (2005) when he points that pupils from poor homes are hardly encouraged to attend school. Gwarinda (1985) also states that poor families also lack food, school requirements, and also the hope to better their children, hence communicate the message to their children who in turn lack the motivation and interest, so they opt dropping out of school. Poverty at home is the most contributory factor to lack of success and poor performance at school by pupils who occupy the lowest socio –economic stratum in society (Gordon and Chimedza (1994:12).Poor households tend to have lower demand for schooling than richer households .Whatever the benefits of schooling, the costs for them are more difficult to meet than in the case of richer households (Colclough et al, 2000:25). Difficulties in raising money to buy uniforms and paying various school levies that include book levy, special building levy or desk levy leads to some pupils dropping out of school. Mpfu et al (2003) also pointed out that a child raised from a violent home will witness violence and that an aggressive family breeds an aggressive child .Such children are likely to be frustrated and drop out of school.

Bereavement amongst family members makes children more vulnerable to drop out (Case et al, 2005).Chipfakas' research of Uganda has shown that deaths from AIDS are associated with reduced schooling (Save the Children, 2000:14).

Family migration can also be linked to increase or decrease in educational opportunities (Hashim, 2005).According to the Government of Zimbabwe (2005) the land reform programme from the year 2000 onwards led to high population movement that resulted in some children failing to find schools within walking distance in farms in which their parents were resettled. In the family context, family child labour also leads to dropout. Child labour constitutes child care for young members in the home and agricultural activities that may destruct children from undertaking schoolwork (Hardley, 2010).

6.2. Individual Related Factors

Pupil related factors result in dropping out of school (VanWy, 1999). According to Natriello (1994:1604-5), "Student absenteeism from classes is often cited as a factor strongly associated with low educational attainment and dropping out of school." Furthermore due to absenteeism, Galaway (1985:57) posits, "The longer the pupil remains out of school the greater the difficulty in persuading him to return." The other factors are according to Chanakira (1987) undetected psychological and physical attributes which have a negative impact on students who feel neglected and discriminated. Such students are labelled as misfits and they are demoralised and become isolated leading to them dropping out of school. Other factors included poor health, under nutrition, or lack of motivation (Hunt, 2008).

6.3. School Related Factors

School related factors include socio –economic status of the school population, high levels of ethnic and or racial discrimination of students, school phobia, school violence, and conflicts among teachers (Chirtes, 2010). School related factors also include teacher absenteeism ,school location and poor quality of educational provision (UNICEF Global monitoring Report,2011).Distance from school, poor quality of education, inadequate facilities, overcrowded classrooms, inappropriate language of instruction, teacher absenteeism and safety in the school are common causes of school dropout (Colclough etal, 2000).

7. Research Methodology

A qualitative interpretive research was preferred as it allowed participants to get data directly from teachers and head teachers. The researcher was allowed to sit with participants and hear their views, voices, perceptions and expectations in detail. "Qualitative research enabled the researcher to study things in their natural setting attempting to make sense of or to interpret phenomena in terms of the meaning people bring" (Denzin & Lincoln ,2000:3).The flexibility of qualitative research allowed the researcher to follow unexpected ideas during research and explore processes effectively. The researcher visited teachers and school head teachers and talked to them about the factors that led to lack of access to education and drop out in the schools.

7.1. Population And Sampling

The population for the study were teachers and head teachers based in rural primary schools in Gweru District. The sample was drawn from 6 schools and it constituted 24 teachers and 6 head teachers. The teachers who participated in individual interviews and focus groups were purposefully selected .All the head teachers of the schools that were purposefully selected participated in individual focus groups. Purposive sampling seeks individuals and sites that can best supply relevant information needed to answer the research questions raised (Creswell , 2008:214).

7.2. Data Collection

Data was collected through focus groups, individual interviews and document analysis. Data from the focus groups was triangulated with data from individual interviews with teachers and head teachers and an analysis of registers. Data from the documents was also verified through interviews. Denzin & Lincoln (2000:5) stated, "... Triangulation reflects an attempt to secure an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon in question ... it adds rigour, breadth, complexity, richness, and depth to an inquiry".

7.3. Data Analysis

Data analysis was mainly qualitative and took place concurrently with data collection .The overlapping analysis with data collection does not only give the researcher a head start to analysis but more importantly allows the researcher to take advantage of flexible data collection (Eisenhardt, 2008). Themes which emerged from interviews and focus groups formed the basis for further collection, summarization and analysis made it possible for themes to be identified (Bogdan and Bicklen, 1992).

8. Findings Of The Study

As stated earlier the major objective was to determine the factors that contribute to drop out and lack of accessibility among primary school pupils in Gweru district. The factors were grouped as family related factors, institution related factors and individual related factors.

8.1. Family Related Factors

Literature review indicated that home background contributes to drop outs. In separate interviews with six head teachers who participated in the interviews, virtually all the head teachers indicated that the pupils' poor home background resulted in drop out. Teachers in the focus group also confirmed that poverty was a major factor that led to drop out. One head revealed that, Out of a population of 500 pupils Basic Education Assistance Module (BEAM) pays for 60 pupils and yet about 300 pupils cannot pay for levies. In the same school the researcher perused some documents and it was found that pupils were expected to pay ten dollars (US) per term but more than half had not paid their levies since 2010.This tends to suggest that some pupils dropped out of school because of failure to pay levies.

The head teachers and teachers interviewed also revealed that pupils were expected to buy books, pens and other learning materials which pupils failed to afford. One teacher in the focus group lamented that, "The surrounding community is poor ,and the poverty cascades to the school as a result the school cannot buy the necessary requirements for use."This tallies with Porteus et al's (2000)

observations that poverty is the most contributory factor to drop out. In the teachers focus groups teachers revealed that some pupils dropped out because of lack of learning resources.

The head teachers and teachers indicated that if pupils do not have the necessary requisites in school they end up dropping out of school. Furthermore, it was also revealed that some pupils come to school without shoes, uniforms and jerseys in the cold season. Such pupils may drop out because they feel neglected. Also when it is cold, it might be difficult for the children to concentrate in class resulting in lagging behind. Lagging behind led to dropping out of school.

8.1.1. Large Families

The study revealed that polygamous families could not sustain their big families so that they pay levies for their children. In one school, it came out that one man had 14 wives and 45 children. Of the 20 children who were attending the school 15 had dropped out and 5 boys who were in grade 6 and 7 were still in school. Asked why the situation was like this the head said,

“I talked to the parents of the children and the father said, because of drought he could not afford to feed and educate the children. He only wanted the boys to go to Grade seven because the girls would marry.”

The above comment seems to suggest that culture is another factor which led to drop out especially for the girl child.

8.1.2. Religious Beliefs

Both teachers and head teachers interviewed agreed that religious beliefs led to drop out. One head teacher commented that,

“Our school is Roman Catholic and there are some religious sects that do not like their children to attend our church services.

As a result children from such back grounds end up dropping out of school.”

Furthermore there are some immunisation programmes that take place in the schools resulting in drop outs. It was reported by the head teachers and teachers that some churches do not want their children to be immunised. Children from such backgrounds drop out of schools because of such immunisation programmes. It was reported by school head teachers that in most schools Ministry of health officials visit the schools at least once a term for different immunisation programmes.

8.1.3. Child Labour

Child labour was evident as one of the factors that led to drop out in the rural primary schools of Gweru district. Teachers reported that children were asked by their parents /guardians to take care of the sick parents, sell tomatoes and air time among many other responsibilities to augment the family income. Some children head cattle, and get little income enough to buy food. Teachers and head teachers reported that some parents within the rural community fail to provide food for their children hence the motivation for children to fend for themselves and dropping out of school.

It was also reported that in many satellite schools parents were no longer interested in providing labour to build schools. As a result children were asked to fetch water, sand and mould bricks. Some children found this to be taxing leading to dropout.

8.1.4. Child Headed Families

Heading families made some children to drop out of school in Gweru district rural primary schools. The situation was like this because some parents had passed on because of the HIV pandemic and some children had to take care of themselves. The study also revealed that some parents crossed borders to neighbouring countries and never returned. One teacher in the focus group commented that,

“There is an obsession in this community to cross the border to neighbouring countries, hopping for greener pastures. Children are left with relatives who later dump them to fend for themselves.”

This tends to imply that the responsibilities that are laid on the children might be too demanding that they had to leave school and fend for themselves. Others lacked the parental guidance and became delinquent children who dropped out of school.

8.2. School Related Factors

The study also established that there were a number of factors that emanated from the school. These included school surroundings, teacher’s lack of motivation and the distances children walked to school. The participants indicated that some pupils travelled for 20 or more kilometres to and from school per day. Such distances might be too long for primary school pupils leading to dropout.

The school surroundings are another factor that participants raised as a factor to dropping out of school. One teacher in a focus group lamented, “The conditions in this satellite school are pathetic. The make shift rooms are very dusty and fail to protect pupils during winter and cold seasons.”The researcher observed that some classrooms had no window panes. Such conditions are not conducive to learning and some children ended up dropping out of school.

The research further revealed that teachers lacked motivation due to poor salaries, poor accommodation and poor working environment leading to lack of commitment by some teachers. This tended to negatively impact on the children’s interest to attend school leading to dropout.

8.3. Individual Related Factors

The study also revealed that individual factors contributed to dropout in Gweru district rural primary schools. These included illnesses and truancy. Some children dropped out because of HIV related illnesses .One head teacher highlighted that most of the pupils were on HIV/AIDS medication. It is sad to observe that most of such children are from child headed families and poor families. For the above cited reasons such pupils were compelled to drop out of school.

According to research findings some children dropped out because of truancy. While some children afforded the necessary fees and were of fairly good health, such children were reported to drop out of school. One teacher commented, "Some children leave home pretending to go to school but, never got to the school"

8.4. Other Related Factors

This research also established that some pupils never attended school. These included the deaf, the blind and the mentally retarded. One teacher in a focus group confirmed this when he commented, "There are many disabled children in this community and they cannot fit in the mainstream education. Furthermore, the schools which cater for disabled pupils are expensive and very few, making it for parents of such children to pay levies". This tended to expose how difficult it was for disabled children to attend school in Gweru district rural schools.

9. Conclusion

The major objective of this study was to find out the factors that contribute to failure to access education in Gweru district rural primary schools. The study came up with a plethora of factors that contribute to drop out and failure to access education. These emanated from pupils already in stream and those that never got a chance to go to school such as the mentally retarded and the physically challenged. Looking at the findings, poverty in the home was a leading factor which led to drop out and failure to access education. Most parents in the rural areas were poor, and found it unaffordable to pay levies for their children leading to dropout. Furthermore children from large families failed to access education because they could not to afford the different levies.

It also came out of the study that some pupils dropped out of school because they were compelled to attend church services in some schools which are in violation of their religious beliefs. Child labour, poor school environment, lack of motivation, truancy, illnesses in the home and travelling for long distances led to drop out. Immunisation programmes also led to drop out of some children from some religious sects. Finally some pupils with special needs failed to attend school because they failed to fit in the mainstream and their schools were few and unreachable for the general populace.

10. Recommendations

In the view of the above conclusions, it is recommended that,

- Government needs to have follow up programmes for pupils who drop out of school so that relevant assistance is offered.
- There is need to make education compulsory for all children of primary school age. Furthermore the government should monitor the implementation of this policy.
- There is need to have serious counselling programmes in all schools.
- The building of infrastructure needs to be the responsibility of government so that pupils are excluded from child labour.
- Parents need to be educated to appreciate the need for education.
- There is need for government to increase grants so that school do not request for high levies.
- All deserving pupils need to benefit from BEAM.
- There is need to for government to build more schools for physically and mentally challenged pupils.

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