

DETERMINANTS OF DROPOUT RATE FOR PRIMARY AND HIGH SCHOOL FEMALE SCHOLARS IN MASVINGO DISTRICT, ZIMBABWE

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ABSTRACT

The main thrust of the study was to establish the determinants of dropout rate for primary and high school female scholars in Masvingo District, Zimbabwe. The causes and effects of school dropout rate are best investigated qualitatively since they involve human behaviour. A case study design was used to find out the determinants of school dropout rate in primary and high schools. Data collection tools were in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. A sample of thirty-two participants was conveniently sampled from two primary and two high schools in Masvingo urban, Zimbabwe. The study established that the major determinants of school dropout rate are poverty, early teen pregnancy, religion, culture and lack of parents and or guardians. The findings also revealed that female scholars are more affected by the factors as they drop out of school more than their female counterparts. The consequences of dropping out from school were noted to be severe as most of the dropouts fail to land good jobs that offer descent salaries that terminate the vicious cycle of poverty and enhance sustainable development. The study recommends that there is need for the government to heavily finance the education of the female child. Governments through school heads may embark on fundraising projects that involve and benefit and sustain female child education. Institutions of higher education should be friendly and conducive for the advancement and sustainable empowerment of women though capacity building.

Keywords: Dropout, Poverty, Culture, Gender, Determinants, Female Scholar.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND OF STUDY

Zimbabwe among other nations is fighting to achieve the United Nations goal of education for all which is a means in achieving sustainable development. The Nziramasanga Commission (1999: 172) state that countries throughout the world are working to ensure education for all and Zimbabwe has the same goal. Educating the girl child is part of the millennial goals of all countries and all countries are also encouraged to ensure education for all. UNGEI (2009) compiled a report on enrolment figures in developing countries of both primary and high school scholars and established that most African countries including Zimbabwe are focusing on enrolment figures at primary level and are not focusing on completion figures at high school or tertiary level. This is in line with the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights Article, the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child, the 1990 World Summit for Children and the 1990 World Conference on Education for All (held in Jomtien, Thailand). All these conventions affirm the right of every human being to education and universal primary education by 2015. Currently primary education cannot help to land one a good job, hence the need to continue and reach higher education.

The fight for universal education seems to be yielding results which are not as much as expected because of the alarming rate of dropouts. Watkins (2000:154) claims that at the global level, the gender gap in primary and secondary school enrolment is narrowing. However, the rate at which it is narrowing in developing countries including Zimbabwe is far too slow because of school dropouts. Watkins (2000:155) states that inequalities in education between men and women extend across a wide range of dimensions including enrolment, completion and performance in school. The high school dropout problem is also a challenge in the United States, as it was reported that only 71 percent of students graduate from high school while the other 29 percent drops out of school (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). There is urgent need for obtaining more accurate, consistent, and timely data to analyse who is dropping out and the reasons contributing to these life-altering decisions. This may imply that the focus should not be on enrolment figures only but also on completion or drop out levels.

Gender biased discrimination in education has many dimensions. Focusing on gender equality in education is not enough since the rate at which girls drop out from school which is being experienced in developing countries is a cause for concern (UNICEF, 2013). They are enrolled but there is no concern about what happens to them as they struggle to cope with the dual task of being a woman and a scholar. Attainment of good grades or qualifications with a merit can only be achieved by someone within the education system in every sense. It is very important to participate in full when learning because absenteeism can be in two ways such as mental and physical. A very tired mind may fail to assimilate information. Nayaka and Mpofu (2004) state that as pupils grow older and pass through different grade and form levels they face more and more challenges related to learning difficulties and social problems. Dropouts face extremely bleak economic and social prospects (Rumberger, 2013). Dropouts compared to high school graduates, are less likely find a job and earn a living wage, and more likely to be poor and to suffer from a variety of adverse health outcomes (Rumberger, 2011). This implies that in such scenarios sustainable development is impeded.

Research has established that in both developed and developing countries girls are likely to drop from school more than their male counterparts (Hungu, 2011; Saito, 2011; UNGEI, 2009). In Africa, for the girl child education is an uphill fight as they face so many challenges such as gender bias, poverty, early teen pregnancy or marriage, societal beliefs and lack of access to school (Nayak, 2004). The minister of child welfare speaking at the opening of the Zimbabwe Children's

Parliament and commemorations of the Day of the African Child, the minister said that children were dropping out of school not only from failing out, but for socio-economic reasons including failure to pay tuition and school fees. Poverty and dropouts are inextricably connected in the three primary settings affecting healthy child and adolescent development: families, schools and communities. These settings influence child development and have negative effects on economic empowerment and sustainable development.

Gender bias has caused the girl child to be a victim of many cultural, social and political issues (Manwa, 2014; OECD, 2012). LaFraniere (2005) lamented that throughout sub-Saharan Africa, schoolgirls can only empathize in the region where poverty, tradition and ignorance deprive an estimated twenty four (24) million girls even of an elementary school education, and the influence of completion rate and attendance and academic performance. In Zimbabwe, during the pre-colonial era the female child was considered as a minor and was regarded as a dependent even at old age. Females were not given priority in everything including schooling. The culture of Zimbabwe reinforces and emphasises that men should take care of females and that they should be more empowered so as to earn a better living. This has resulted in many families giving priority to male education than female education.

In India the same culture prevails as they believe that educating a female is like watering a neighbour's garden (Berns, 2007). Such beliefs have great influence on the dropout rate of the girl child from school. There are no follow-up mechanisms from the government to ensure that the enrolled children get the chance to complete their education. Some governments Zimbabwe included have blamed the dropout rate to failure or poor performance (Hungu, 2011; Saito, 2011). This may have caused negative attitudes towards dropouts as they in most cases were considered to blame. The plight of the girl child with regards to dropout rate has covered very little attention by most scholars as the events were overshadowed by economic issues such as poverty which is another major cause of school dropout rate. High school students especially female scholars are dropping out at alarming rates every day across nations worldwide (OECD, 2012; Hungu, 2011).

Poverty affects both the boy and the girl child; however, there is evidence in most African countries that the first dollar is set for the boy child which causes the girl child to be severely disadvantaged (UNGEI, 2009). The girl child may drop out from school for a certain period of time and then join later after the brother has completed or when the parents are economical stable. Across the globe in countries such as America twenty percent (20%) of girls between the age of fifteen and seventeen are involved in early teen marriage or pregnancy (UNICEF 2013). This has caused the girl child to opt for marriage and never to return to the education system. However, this goal is very difficult to realise as the dropout rate is quite retrogressive (UNICEF, 2013). Empowering women can also be achieved through education. There is great concern that it is difficult for women to be empowered with financial resources when they are not educated. Education is an important avenue whereby women can be emancipated from the vicious cycle of poverty. Thus, emancipation of women entails educating the girl child throughout the education system. Education for the African girl is an option and not a must for most families across developing nations (Somanje, 2007). This may imply that the girl child faces so many challenges that may cause her to drop out from school.

UNICEF (2012) state that there is an alarming dropout rate of the girl child from school in developing countries and the major causes were cultural beliefs, religion, teen pregnancy and marriage and poverty. School dropout rate due to early teen pregnancy varies between countries with Brazil, Dominican Republic, Honduras, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Haiti and Ecuador Republic. Some of the highest rate is among the Americans (World Vision, 2013; UNICEF, 2012; UNPF, 2011). The consequences of dropping out from school are enormous and cause the vicious cycle of poverty to continue hounding

the girl child. There is a lot of evidence which reflect the high school dropout rate of girl child as compared to their counterparts. Raj (2012) found out that poverty is the major cause of school dropout rate in Africa followed by teen pregnancy and marriage. In Zimbabwe most people are living below the poverty datum line (Hungu, 2011; Saito, 2011).

Family disintegration due to separation, divorce and death were rated as some of the major causes of school dropout of the female child (Plan International, 2009; Somunje, 2007). IRIN (2011) posits that poverty, abuse and cultural practices are preventing almost a third of Zimbabwean girls from attending and completing primary school and sixty-seven percent (67%) from attending and completing secondary school, denying them a basic education, according to a recent study which found alarming dropout rates for girls. The pyramid on completion rate continues to narrow at tertiary levels as the dropout rate soars in most developing countries including Zimbabwe. "Sexual harassment and abuse by even school teachers and parents, cultural issues, lack of school fees, early marriage, parental commitments and early pregnancies are some of the contributing factors to the dropout by the girl child," said the authors of "Because I am a Girl" by Plan International (2009), a non-profit organisation that works to alleviate child poverty and assist in ensuring that the girl child completes her education.

Lack of finances for transport in some cases where there are no nearby schools has caused the girl child to drop out from school. Edwards (2003) established that some parents in remote areas of Africa have their nearest school about five kilometres away. This has caused the girl child to lag behind in schooling as they go to school much older than their male counterparts. Watkins (2000) posits that inequalities in education extend to dropping out of school at tender age by the girl child. Some parents may encourage their girl children to drop out from school as they want to continue enjoying the help they get from their daughters. Raj (2012) posits that there is a clear relationship between education and delaying marriage. This means that it is likely that the more years the scholar stays in school the lesser chances of dropping out and get in teen marriage. Long distance from school can also be a cause of early teen pregnancy and marriages (UNICEF, 2012). Lack of proper schooling dress or attire may cause the girl child to lose self-esteem and confidence. The result may be that they perform badly in school and then opt to drop out as they may be afraid of being humiliated.

Cultural and religious beliefs which encourage early teen marriage were other causes of school dropout of the girl child. The other serious cultural belief that has caused the girl child to drop from school is widower inheritance (*chimutsamapfihwa* in Shona). This practice is still a norm in most Zimbabwean ethnic groups that when the aunt (father's sister) or a cousin or blood sister dies, the person should be replaced by a family or clan member. A family member is believed to help the family of the deceased to have a smooth transition. The belief is that a stranger may abuse the children of the deceased hence they need to be replaced with the deceased's own. The problem lies in that the culture ignores the age of the one to take the position and usually accept the choice of the widower. In the case of HIV and AIDS such children fall victims of the pandemic especially when that would be the cause of then relation's death. Widower inheritance is now being discouraged in most African societies but seems to be very difficult to get rid of. Virgin pledging (*kuripa ngozi* refers to appeasing avenging spirits) is also another form of using the girl child to settle family problems or disputes. The family of the deceased chooses the girl child to settle the family dispute and it should be a girl even when the deceased is female. The girl child seems to be a source of income for many Africans.

Poverty has been another cause of early teen pregnancy and marriages as parents would marry off their daughters in search of survival and dignity. There is a saying in one of the Zimbabwean dialects Shona which says (*mwanasikana chikwama chababa*) meaning to say the girl child is the father's wallet as she is the source of riches. The bride price is considered

very important as it is a key to uniting the two families and improving the life of the bride's family. They believe that the educated girl will be an asset to the next family. In the Zimbabwean culture some families pledge their daughter as early as zero years which is called child pledging (kuzvarira). The marriage is performed based on the idea that parents pledge their daughter to a rich family in search of wealth and survival. This agreement binds the daughter to be a member of the rich family so as that the child be their bride. The girl child will drop out from school in order to fulfil her new role of being a wife. Female scholars are in some cases forced to dropout from school due to teen pregnancy and marriage (Charema 2007). Females in Zimbabwe constitute a high percentage and have a significant contribution to sustainability.

Religious beliefs which emphasise early marriages such as Masowe sects and white garment apostolic sects believe that the girl child is a sex vessel which should meet the sexual needs of men and then men in turn support them. Some religions may marry up to ten wives and as they believe that the spirit guides them, they pick any girl child regardless of the age and then instil fear in them as they say should obey what the spirit says. Mawere and Rambe (2011) established that religion such as that of apostolic sects has an influence on early teen marriages. Acculturation and media has been on the fore front of causing early teen sex, pregnancy and marriages. Films which show sexual relationships and pornography cause teenagers to crave for sex as they experiment with their bodies. In the African traditional culture it was a taboo for a teenager to get involve in love affairs. This has changed due to acculturation as western cultures were adopted and become part of life of the Africans. The social fabric of the African culture has been torn or diluted by other cultures. Sex before marriage was in most cases unheard-of in the African traditional society and was not openly talked about with children. Due to acculturation things have changed and children are not even ashamed of telling their parents that they are kissing and having intimacy with their lovers.

This study is intended to bring to light all the stakeholders in the education sector, parents and community in general as the results from this study may be an eye opener on the determinants of school dropout rate of the government child. The following objectives were used as a guide in search of the factors that cause such a problem.

- a) To find out the determinants of school dropout rate of the female scholar.
- b) To establish possible strategies that can reduce the school dropout rate.

METHODOLOGY

This interpretive inquiry adopted a descriptive survey in order to find out what determines the school dropout rate of the girl child in Masvingo, Zimbabwe. The factors which determine the school dropout rate are part of human life happening in natural settings hence the need to qualitatively search for the determinants. The study focused on one urban centre (Masvingo) and two primary and two high schools which had a population of over two thousand students were the population where the sample was conveniently selected in order to thoroughly study the causes of school dropout rate of the girl child. The sample consisted of a total of thirty participants; four school heads one from each school, eight teachers two from each school and twenty pupils five from each school.

In-depth interviews with headmasters and teachers were done in order to solicit data on their experiences regarding the dropout rate of the girl child from school. An in-depth interview or a conversation with a purpose is usually between two people that are directed by one person in order to solicit information (Creswell, 2008; Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007; Babbie, 2002). The in-depth interviews were used for their advantage that they enabled the researcher to get detailed first

hand information and also probe for further details. Dropout rate statistics were collected from school heads. Gray (2009) argues that primary sources constitute first hand information such as original documents such as attendance class registers and reports.

Focus group discussions were done with the female scholars so that information on their challenges they face since education is an uphill fight for the African girl child. Focus group discussions encourage different people to converse and share understanding especially around sensitive issues, allowing for the exploration of differences as well as similarities in human experiences and in thinking (Lewis, 2000). The causes of school dropout were gathered from their experiences which were discussed during focus groups. Focus group discussions were used for they give all the participants involved the opportunities to discuss openly their experiences and those of their loved ones.

Moyle (2007) posits that focus group discussions enable the researcher to listen to participants, and this act of listening in itself empowers them to provide authentic information. A lot of data was gathered in a short space of time as there were four groups of five pupils which were involved. Silverman (2006) states the advantages of focus groups over one-on-one interviews as including: their provision of a “way of collecting data quickly from a large number of participants”; their being more ‘naturalistic’ than interviews in so far as they are “closer to everyday conversation”. The creation of “synergistic effects” as group interacts; and they reduce control of the researcher over the interaction “making focus groups a relatively ‘egalitarian’ method” makes focus group discussions best suitable for qualitative research (Denscombe, 2007; Silverman, 2006). The focus group discussions were taking about an hour while the in-depth interview thirty to forty-five minutes.

A population of about a thousand high school female scholars at four high schools was the targeted population. Four school heads and eight female teachers were purposefully sampled part of and were of the sample. Five students who formed a focus group from each school were conveniently sampled. The sampling techniques were used for their strengths that all participants who were willing to participate and forthcoming were chosen. School heads who were attending to other important business were represented by deputy heads.

The presentation and discussion of findings were presented in narrative forms and thick descriptive formats.

Presentation of findings and discussion

The findings are presented according to the research objectives in narrative forms and analysed thematically.

Factors that determine the school dropout rate of the girl child

The findings from all participants revealed that there are several factors that influence the school dropout rate of the female scholars that are exclusive to them such as early teen pregnancy. Most of the factors which were mentioned by most participants were early teen sex, pregnancy and marriages are exclusive to the teenage girl. Poverty and cultural beliefs are much heavier on the girl child than the male child. Most African societies value the education of the male child than that of the female child. The economic hardships which are being experienced in Zimbabwe were blamed by most participants for making the life of a girl child more and more miserable. Zimbabwe Sunday News (2012) state that according to a report by a local non-governmental organisation, Plan International, released that poverty, abuse and cultural practices were preventing a third of Zimbabwean girls from attending primary school and 67 percent from attending secondary school, thereby denying them basic education. Education is one of the main avenues of achieving sustainable development. Most

girls submitted that their parents are facing financial challenges of securing a maid so as to assist the girl child in household chores.

Russel (2009) states that poverty and dropouts are inextricably connected in the three primary settings affecting healthy child and adolescent development: families, schools and communities. This may imply that the girl child is overburdened by domestic chores which may also result in low academic performance and dropping out from school. Gumbo (2014) asserts that the issue of poverty was the main factor of children failing to complete school, and called for, as other educationists, pressure on the government to correctly deal with the education sector in Zimbabwe. The issue of the first dollar for male education was cited by most students as a major cause of dropping out of school by most from disadvantaged families. Divorce sometimes cleverly restricts children's access to and full participation in education due to stress and trauma. Lack of participation in most cases results in failure and consequently dropping out from school.

Early teen marriages and pregnancies were mentioned by most school heads and female teachers as another major cause of school female scholar dropout. Madhuku (2005) teens experiment and find themselves in situations they cannot handle. The Zimbabwean school policy allows the affected pupils by early teen pregnancies to rejoin school after delivery but in most cases there are problems associated with that, such as, lack of funds to hire a maid. UNFP (2005) found out that most teenager girls who were involved in early pregnancy and teen marriages have very slim chances of rejoining school. The future of such girls is bleak and lacks job prospects. The in-laws may refuse their daughter-in-laws to rejoin school or the husband may fail to raise fees for the new bride. In the Zimbabwean context there are a lot of complicated issues that surround teen marriages such as domestic violence and abuse as adults take advantage of the immature bride. UNICEF (2013) established that adolescent girls are vulnerable to abuse in teen marriages. In such a scenario infringements of human rights such as the right to education is violated. Religious beliefs were mentioned by most participants as reinforcing some norms and values which see the girl child as basically created for marriage. The Masowe sects were among the religious groups which allow teen marriages and polygamy. Parents marry off their children in some cases as they think that they are obeying their deity.

Poor academic performance was also mentioned by female teachers as another cause of female school dropout. There is a common belief that females are less intelligent than boys. Research has revealed that females lag behind in academic performance especially in Mathematics and Science subjects (Mutekwe, Modiba & Maphosa, 2012; Eurydice, 2009; Johnson, 2006; Evans, 2003; Aleman & Renn, 2002; Ngorima, 2001; Watkins, 2000). It seems that most girls have less confidence and low self-esteem as they lag behind in academic performance. Some girls may discourage their parents to continue paying their fees as they persistently fail and repeat and would feel that it is a waste of resources as they end up being dropouts. Mean financial resources may also be another reason parents may not allow the female child to have several repeats in order to pass.

Possible solutions that reduce school dropout rate

All teachers involved in the study echoed that all governments in developed and developing countries are concerned about the number of girls reportedly dropping out from school after the completion of their primary education. The teachers mentioned that the dropping out rate has reached alarming levels to the extent that there is need for the Governments including Zimbabwe to develop mechanisms that will effectively curb this trend. Sustainable development may also be achieved through effectively reducing school dropout rate. Tyler and Lofstrom (2009) note that the high costs associated

with dropping out from school make clear the need for programs to help students stay in school. This in itself is a worrying situation and there is need to try by all means to effectively reduce it said one of the school heads.

One senior master said that it should also be noted that the trend is also synonymous among the boy child but with the girls the figure is quite high. This implies that the participants have learnt that uneducated women are a liability to the government as they need assistance for their survival. The fact that women are among the very marginalised is a cause for concern for all governments across the globe that solutions to such a reality is necessary. Women consists a large segment of the society that requires to be empowered in order to have a sound economy and sustainable development. FAO (2012) and Hung (2011) suggest that a larger amount of resources should be channelled to female education in order to empower them.

The findings revealed that all participants indicated that there is need to cut the vicious circle of poverty through education. Attaining good academic qualifications which in most cases help land good jobs and allow for good remunerations is one of the methods of empowering females as they may get decent salaries. Most participants were lamenting that education in Zimbabwe is too expensive for ordinary citizens. It is in this regard that all participants suggested that it should be the full responsibility of the government to educate its citizens. Education in Zimbabwe from primary to tertiary is fully sponsored by parents. Parents are struggling to ensure that their children go to school. Some school heads indicated that if the government is failing to fully sponsor education it should at least subsidise and also take care of the poor. The female is most affected by lack of school fees as alluded before that most people value education of male child more than that of the female child.

The strategy that can be effectively used in reducing school dropouts is by plummeting the poverty level of families, schools and communities and the adverse conditions within them (Rumberger, 2013). Understanding the magnitude of the problem and the forces that impact dropout rates is critically important to developing effective strategies (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). All the teachers involved in this study submitted that most pupils from a poor background have parents who are uneducated. Uneducated parents usually lack the knowledge of the importance of education of girl child (Manwa, 2014). Cultural norms and beliefs that devalue the girl child should be eradicated through campaigns and education so as to empower the female child.

Guidance and counselling services were suggested by both school heads and teachers as a means of reducing teen pregnancies and marriages. Formal guidance and counselling services are critical for all pupils especially those unhappy, underachieving or at risk of dropping out of school (Zimbabwe Secretary's Circular No. 2 of 2000). Badza (2005) suggests that effective guidance and counselling encourages scholars to remain in school as they would be having goals to achieve. Qualified counsellors who are responsible for teaching guidance and counselling may go a long way in assisting the young scholars to make good and sound decisions that reduces the cases of early marriages that result in school dropouts. Effective guidance and counselling services result in the decreased in cases of poor discipline among learners and reduced school dropout rates (Chireshe, 2006; Badza, 2005; Nyanungo, 2005).

The use of heavy penalties may also be given to adults who abuse young girls in return of monetary favours. Research has noted that poverty stricken girl scholars are prone to abuse as they struggle to get basic needs. The government of Zimbabwe have an education policy of education for all children regardless of sex. Such positive legislation was most welcome by all participants although they were worried about follow up mechanisms used to reinforce such laws. Tyler and Lofstrom

(2009) posit that the only relatively few programs that assist in improving the situation of school dropouts, have not been rigorously evaluated for effectiveness. Religious groups which encourage early teen marriages and school dropouts should be under spotlight so as to curb such practices.

OECD (2012) suggests that the adverse effects of poverty on school dropout can be mitigated through two primary strategies such as to improve the academic achievement, attitudes and behaviours of poor and other students at risk for dropping out through targeted intervention programs. Apart from being an important objective in its own right, it helps to overcome wider gender-determined inequalities and to create virtuous cycles of human development and poverty reduction (Watkins, 2000). This implies that poverty reduction helps in achieving sustainable development. Some pupils who participated in this study suggested that they should be given the chance to pass their examination as they are given enough time to read as they share domestic duties with their brothers so that they pass and proceed with their education. The plight of the girl child was said to be a problem that concerns all stakeholders such as parents, the government, civil leaders, non-governmental organisations and the global village to be involved in coming up with strategies that can reduce the suffering of the girl child.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The study concluded that for developing countries such as, Zimbabwe, educating the female child is means to achieving sustainable development. The study also established that school dropout rate of female scholars is a cause for concern for all school heads and teachers. This study confirmed that female scholars face more challenges than their male counterparts that cause them to be school dropouts. It was noted that the girl child had erratic school attendance more than the male child as they were preoccupied with domestic chores. It is against this background that this study recommends for more studies to be done regularly looking into the plight of the girl child. Presentations should be conducted and monographs should be written to enlighten the governments and all stakeholders on the issues that affect the girl child. School heads are encouraged to educate the communities surrounding them on the importance of the girl child education. Projects that can assist in raising funds can be done by both the schools and parents in order to raise funds for the disadvantaged girl scholars.

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