

Dropouts in the primary schools, a cause for concern: A case of Shurugwi South Resettlements Primary Schools 2006 to 2013.

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to investigate factors contributing to student drop out rate in Shurugwi South Resettlements. The participants namely head teachers and teachers were purposely selected, in line with the qualitative research approach. Open ended questionnaires, face to face interview; focus groups and document analysis were used as sources of data collection instruments. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. The case study also allows the researcher to explore a bounded system (a case) over time through detailed, in-depth at collection involving multiple sources of information interviews, observations, documents and reports (Cresswell,2007). Qualitative data analysis revealed that dropouts resulted from an array of challenges. These included early marriages for girl child, pregnancy, and lack of finance, poverty, traditional and religious beliefs. Some of the strategies proffered to reduce dropouts included working in coalitions, creating partnership, hosting community conversations and creating prevention plans, teacher-parent consultations, and guidance and counselling programmes. This study recommended that the government, community members and teachers work together and come up with a solution to reduce the impact of school dropouts.

Key words: dropouts, primary schools, strategies.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Shurugwi South Resettlements are in the Midlands province of Zimbabwe. It is made up of five primary schools. Primary schools are battling with problems of poor attendance and performance by pupils (Nyika and Kurebwa 2014). This problem had since been bedevilling the nation even before Zimbabwe independence in 1980. This practice gives birth to truancy, absenteeism and drop out problems. The World Bank says, 15% of the children in the age ranking of 10 to 18 years after admitting and attending school in earlier period, dropped out before completing primary school in the academic session of 2001-2002. Dropping out of school has negative consequences at both individual and social level. "The students who withdraw from school prematurely end up not obtaining certificate of graduation, (Ajaja, 2012). In addition Azam (2007) says the major social

cost of dropping out of school reduced political participation, increased demand for social services, increased crime rates and poor levels of health. Furthermore, Daining (2007) feels that disengagement from school coupled with high rate of suspension or expulsion and academic failure to extended absence result in high probability that a child will drop out of school prior to graduation. Pupils who miss lessons are bound to lag behind and ultimately perform badly.

There seems a link between school dropouts and problems affecting youth. Rumberger (1987) feels that, high rates of dropping out of school create a negative momentum for youths in society, particularly during difficult economic periods when even a high school diploma does not guarantee a job. So dropping out can signal bad social orientation, poor job opportunities and problems of misbehaviour. This study is therefore imperative to dent a starting point to address dropout cases in the schools. Apparently in Shurugwi South Resettlements drop out rate is an under-researched area, even though the problem is prevalent.

Review of related literature

The nation's children are its future workers, citizens, and leaders. Education remains the major tool by which people become empowered; unfortunately the education industry has suffered low completion rates due to several factors exposed in various studies. A high dropout rate diminishes the pool of qualified people from diverse backgrounds who will enter the professional and political ranks that make important public policy decisions (American Psychological Association, 1996). Where as the mission for every school should be to educate students to equip them to become "knowledgeable, responsible, socially skilled, healthy, caring, and contributing citizens" (Greenberg et al., 2003). The causes of dropout stem from a combination of factors that are namely cultural related factors; student related and school related factors. Piromruen and Keoyote (2001) and UNESCO (2005) generally grouped dropping out factors into six factors, namely, demographic, family, socio-economic status, school-related, behavioural, and psychological.

Fredenberg and Ruglls (2007) postulated that the factors that lead to drop out also include low parental education, disruptive behaviour conduct, not liking school, harsh disciplines and having friends and siblings who are dropouts. The plight of poverty stricken students is exasperated by stringent school policies that pertain the payment of fees, attitudes by teachers and fellow students, shortage of food, school wear and stationery, (Moyo, 2013). Sometimes pupils' emotions are shattered by experiencing such harsh and unsupportive environments and will finally opt to drop out of school. In addition research has this to say, dropout rates particularly correlate with high poverty rates, poor school attendance, poor academic performance, grade retention (i.e., being held back), and disengagement from school (Hammond, Linton, Smink & Drew, 2007).

Brown and Park's research in rural China (2002) saw 'poor and credit constrained children' three times more likely than other children to drop out of primary school. Where as in United States of

America, poverty is high among Hispanics and African Americans and dropout rates among these groups are higher than for non-Hispanics (National Center for Education Statistics, 2004).

There is no single prominent risk factor predicting dropout. Rather, there are numerous risk factors that work in combination with each other to raise the probability of youth leaving school early (Gleason & Dynarski, 2002). These factors fall into four broad categories related to *individuals* (e.g., truancy, poor school attitude), *families* (e.g., low-income, lack of parental involvement), *schools* (e.g., negative school climate, low expectations), and *communities* (e.g., high crime, lack of community support for schools), according to the Center for Mental Health in Schools, UCLA (2007), There are as many factors that lead to dropout as much as there as many pupils affected by school dropping out.

The problem

Dropping out of school certainly reduces the pupils' opportunity to learn as they leave school before completing an educational cycle. It is the responsibility of teachers to manage and reduce the high incidences of dropping out in schools. It has been observed that pupils in Shurugwi South Resettlements are leaving school in spite of the role schools take to reduce dropout rates. The reasons for dropout need to be identified and solutions to this problem need to be suggested. The increase in dropping out has adverse effects to children as victims of school dropout, they end up being entangled in anti-social behaviour, and the major social cost of dropping out of school increased demand for social services, increased crime rates and poor levels of health (Azam, 2000).

Objectives of the study

The study sought to explore the following objectives:

- Identify the factors leading to school dropouts
- Explore strategies to curb school dropouts

Research questions

1. What are the causes of dropouts in Shurugwi South Resettlements?
2. What strategies can be put in place to curb school drop outs?

Research Methodology

The research adopted the qualitative interpretive approach. A case study design was employed in this study. The qualitative approach was preferred because it allows the researcher to gain understanding of this social phenomenon from participants' perspectives in their natural settings, (McMillan and Schumacher, 2010). All the participants of this study were purposely selected. Data were collected through document analysis, face to face interviews, open ended questionnaires and focus groups. The five head teachers from each school were individually interviewed and the responses were captured for further interpretation. Three focus groups of eight teachers each were

conducted at three schools and teachers from the other two schools answered open ended questions. This study had chosen to use various sources of data analysis so that diverse points and views cast light up on a topic. Thus triangulation of data sources was used, qualitative researchers generally use this technique to ensure that an account is rich, robust, comprehensive and well-developed, (Denzin, 1978). All the data gathered in this study were analysed thematically in line with qualitative research approaches.

Findings and Discussion

Factors leading to dropout

This study sought to find out the factors that contribute to drop out in Shurugwi South Resettlements, Midlands region. All the factors found were firstly grouped into family related, community related, school related and dropouts related. Discussion of the findings is in light of the following definition of dropouts. School dropouts are those children who enrol into school but fail to complete, or progress beyond, a given level within the school system (Government of Zimbabwe, 2003; Piromruen & Keoyote, 2001).

Family related factors

Financial related factors.

The study found that financial related factors led to dropout. According to World Bank (2003) financial problems contribute to drop out in developing countries. Shurugwi South Resettlements primary schools are faced with problems of child absenteeism and dropout. It emerged that parents shoulder all the responsibility of paying for their children's school requirements and finance has an effect on school drop out. The following statements illustrate the views of the individual teachers.

“Parents find it difficulty to pay for a pencil, book or ruler. A pupil may spend the whole month barely writing. The priority is to first have food on the table.”

“The government's intervention programme BEAM can not absorb all children. Fees payment in the form of levies has remained a permanent challenge.”

“These parents have no other sources of income except to rely on farming. Given this poor economic environment it is extremely difficulty to sustain children's education.”

Several of these statements were echoed. Financial difficult were a common problem in this study. 63% highlighted financial challenges as the major reason for dropout in Shurugwi South Resettlements. The head teachers were interviewed and the registers indicated that most of the dropouts were due to non-payment for school requirements. This tends to suggest that, most parents in this part of Shurugwi have common vulnerability to sustain children's education. Furthermore, it may be apparent that access to school completion is difficult particularly in poor rural communities. Where such challenges dog the community members, priority is given to having food on the table and the children drop out of the school.

Poverty related factors

Poverty related issues have been found militating against children's education. Davidoff (1987) points out that poverty is associated with a number of educational disadvantages that entail poor attitudes to school, low academic skills, little interest in formal lessons and pessimism on the part of parents. The study's participants cited lack of motivation on part of the pupils and parents leading to poor academic achievements and eventually leading pupils to drop out. The views from focus group were arrayed as follows.

“These people are living in abject poverty. It's survival of the fittest. Sometimes Pupils are asked not to go to school while parents would go to receive relief food hand outs from government.”

“We face serious absenteeism and dropouts in rainy season. Pupils are to do farming helping the parents at the expense of going to school.”

“There are lot of premature marriages taking place in these poor communities”

The head teachers who were interviewed indicated that they have always got reports of pupils who drop out due to cases motioned above. It emerged that in poverty stricken families, pupils become victims of circumstances and those affected ended up dropping out of school. Thus poverty is undercutting in Shurugwi South Resettlements schools and has severely compromised children's education by dropping out to fend for food and other basics for life.

Community related factors

HIV AIDS related issues

It emerged from this study that social issues play havoc in children's attendances at school. One senior teacher made the following sentiments on HIV AIDS. *“The plight of HIV AIDS has taken toll, leading to deaths in which some families have lost one parent and the surviving one can not support the children from one hand”*. Teachers in the focus group also indicated dropouts increasing in child headed families. The children who fend for themselves can not sufficiently meet all the basic needs for survival. The children struggle to meet basic human needs (food) and to them education becomes a secondary need and is given the last priority. The families who are either headed by mother or father have been identified as on the negative side in encouraging school attendances. Many such families are fraught with perpetual absenteeism and drop outs as indicated by one local teacher in the community.

The senior teacher who answered a questionnaire confirmed the inability of the community leaders in failing to deal with under age children engaged in gold panning. The teachers echoed *“There is a lot of gold panning in the river near by, so pools of students are panning in the river and their parents are supporting it”*. Also the study focus group's responses revealed a lack of positive attitude to schooling on the part of some parents and children. In some selected communities where gold panning was rampant the drop out rate was high. When school authorities were asked on interventions taken to curb dropouts, it is inferred that school-community relations were poor and many parents tolerated their children to do any menial jobs in order to meet their basic food

requirements. While not every parent is in support of school dropout, it is evident that children from poorer backgrounds in particular tended to receive more pressure, to withdraw from school as they grow older. The registers interrogated revealed many dropouts happening between grade four and grade seven.

School related factors

The school as an environment of learning plays an important role in increasing pupils' retention. Where some challenges to learning are school related, pupils will drop out. The ability to buy exercise books, pens and the necessary clothing for school also influenced whether children could enrol or were withdrawn from the first grade (Rose & Al Samarrai, 2001). The research revealed that school requirements such as exercise books and pens make learning too difficult for children. Most of the teachers interviewed confirmed that pupils drop out as a result of inadequate learning materials. When asked why pupils drop out of school one teacher asserted that:-

“ Some teachers are bitter about pupils who do not write home work, corrections, daily exercise and some children do not even have pencils, rubbers, exercise books and let alone uniforms.”

“The school head drops on the teacher to see to it that all pupils write. The learning temperature for the child will be difficult and the end result is to abscond from school and eventually drop out.”

The head teachers who were interviewed together with responses from focus group confirmed the incidences of dropout due to shortage of learning materials. In perusing school documents such as the registers and progress record books evidence abound that those who drop out had several missing marks against their names in the record books. It is inferred from this study that teachers are annoyed with pupils who do not write and such pupils may be beaten or discriminated against. There is dire absence of adequate communication between the school and community on how best the teachers and parents can assist children with chronic learning problems. The research revealed that there is misinformation on the part of parents on free primary education; to them it means all learning requirements were school based. Basic Education Assistance Module (BEAM) was meant to assist economically disadvantaged children. However, this programme meets part of the educational expenses, leaving the balance as a responsibility of the family. These views tend to suggest that parents still hold the entire responsibility to make their children access education.

Student related factors

The study established that distance to school contributed to drop out. Similarly, research by Ainsworth et al (2005) in Tanzania, indicate that drop outs increase in areas where distance to school is longer. Evidences emanated from the group focus were highlighted as follows:-

“Some children who come from far-away places and cannot make it to school every day.

Long distances to school have a propondence of affecting young learners, especially lower grades children”.

“Big girls are also victims of long distance to School. These resettlements schools are far away from one another leaving children to wake up very early and travel very long distances to get to school in time.”

Such statements were given and also emerged from the open-ended questions. The study found out that weariness to travel to school on an empty stomach makes learning unpleasant leading to drop out. Some head teachers confirmed that they had received reports of some girls who succumbed to sexual abuse on their way going home. Parents became worried for the sexual safety of their children and dropping out became a better intervention. So distance to school is a deterrent for girl's education in Shurugwi South Resettlements. Also girls are more affected in this study that they are dropping out more than boys due to early pregnancies. Senior women in the focus group highlighted that there is a gross sexual abuse for children who spend their learning time panning gold in the surrounding areas. This shares a similar view with Holmes' (2003) findings that overall; females receive less education than males, and they tend to dropout, or are withdrawn earlier for both economic and social-cultural reasons.

Conclusion

From the findings it is clear that there were various factors that contributed to the dropout rate among Shurugwi South Resettlements primary schools in Midlands Province. The researcher addimtedly contend that these problems can be sorted out through group support interventions to improve the access to education to every Zimbabwean child.

Recommendations

- Besides consultation days and general meetings with parents and guardians a two way communication is needed to improve interaction and interventions.
- Teachers need to undergo continuous professional courses such as classroom management in order to do their work professionally without undermining, marginalising or victimising children for absenteeism and not writing homework.

- Class teachers need to be encouraged to have guidance and counselling sessions at school so that pupils can develop confidence both in school work and in their teachers when effort and concern to solve pupils' problems are shown.
- Government to roll out programmes of adult education in all parts of the country. The importance of adult education is envisaged to aide in enhancing attitudinal change among illiterate and ignorant parents in favour of child education.
- Communities develop collaborative solutions to their local dropout problem. This can be done by working in coalitions, creating partnership, hosting community conversations and creating prevention plans. For instance the girl child can be encouraged to attend school by establishing attendance incentives.
- Government and donor organisations embark on poverty alleviation programmes that will make poverty stricken parent afford educating their children.
- Donor community is urged to consider funding education for orphans and those pupils who belong to impoverished families in order to reduce the rate of school drop-outs.

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