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Reconnoitring the Academic Performance of Adolescent Secondary School Learners under the Fetters of Family Financial Constraints in Zimbabwe

By Kudzai Chinyoka and Moses Kufakunesu

Abstract

This study examined the impact of financial constraints on the academic performance of adolescence in Masvingo province, Zimbabwe. The Poverty Assessment Study Survey (PASS) conducted by the government of Zimbabwe in 2012 revealed that AIDS and poverty have reversed progress towards human growth and development. The study is informed by Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory. A qualitative phenomenological design was used with focus group discussions and interviews as data-collection instruments to ten (10) form 2 children and four (4) teachers who were purposively sampled in two secondary schools in Masvingo Province. The use of the phenomenological design helped to bring to the surface deep issues, and to make the voices of the adolescence heard. The Tesch's open coding method of data analysis was used to identify themes and categories. Findings from this study revealed that over seventy percent (70%) of the families in Zimbabwe do not afford basic human needs (food and non-food items). Form two learners encountered financial stress and drop out from school due to lack of support from extended families thus adversely affecting children's health, intellectual capabilities and academic achievements. This study also established that the academic performance of adolescence is affected by unemployment leading to child labour, motivation, early marriages, and delinquent behaviour. This study recommends early intervention programmes for children, sustainable development of both rural and urban communities and the need to provide food hampers to the affected children. This study also recommends that the problems be addressed by the microsystems of the school, and of the families, and the neighbourhood mesosystems (linkages) and exosystem, as well as by the macro-systems (political, ideology). Collaborative work is also needed among Zimbabweans and all stakeholders to revisit the root causes of poverty.

Key words: adolescence, academic performance, financial constraints, ecological system, phenomenological

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Background of Study

Poverty has and will continue to precipitate enormous suffering to children in Zimbabwe and the world over (Chinyoka, 2013). Academic performance is affected by a number of factors including age, gender, geographical belongingness, ethnicity, marital status, socioeconomic status (SES), parents' level of education, parental profession, income and school background (Chinyoka and Naidu, 2013; Hafiz, Tehsil, Malik, Muhammad and Muhammad, 2013; Hlupo and Tsikira, 2012, Chabaya, Rembe and Wadesango 2009). The school is an umbrella governing children from different parental background and socio-economic background. It is estimated that about seven out of ten families in Zimbabwe live in dire poverty because of political unrest, socioeconomic instability, economic and political sanctions and HIV/AIDS, which exacerbates poverty among families (Chinyoka, 2013).

Constantine (2005) in Chinyoka (2013) examined six communities in the Greater Los Angeles, California area and found out that children in high income communities had access to significantly more books in their homes than those in low socio-economic status. From a research carried out by the U.S bureau of the census (2000) cited in Chinyoka (2013), poor families were more likely than non-poor families to experience a non-working water heater, toilet or other plumbing system in the houses, the previous winter, more likely to have exposed wiring, more likely to live in homes with rats, mice or cockroaches and are more likely to live in crowded homes. McLoyd and Wilson (2002) observed that in their sample of low income African American families, adolescent girls whose mothers discuss more frequently financial difficulties exhibited higher levels of anxiety than girls whose mothers discussed such matters less frequently. The anxiety would affect the concentration span of the adolescent and this seriously affects the academic performance of the adolescent.

According Krenman, Millerand and Sjaastad (2005) cited in Ganga (2013) lack of support and cognitive stimulation in the children's home environment account for one third to a half of the disadvantages in verbal, reading and mathematical skills among persistently poor children. Same sentiments are echoed by Chinyoka (2013) who argues that poverty results in poor home circumstances for learning and affects the children's physical wellbeing and ability to learn which is associated with low parental education and limits the resources for investing in education.

Chinyoka (2013) asserts that poor parents may be less able to buy them games, toys, books, computers and other resources that promote learning or to provide them with high-quality child care. In support of this idea, Chinyoka and Naidu (2013) assert that children from low socioeconomic status sometimes live in places that are not safe for outdoor play; hence children from poor socioeconomic backgrounds are not afforded the same luxuries and opportunities as from the rich families. Chindanya (2012) avers that differences in vocabulary and reading ability are associated with family income. On the other hand, Okeke, Nzewi and Njeku (2012);

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Chabaya, Rembe and Wadewesango (2009) conclude that poor families are faced with the direct as well as the indirect consequences of their economic situation including the lack of resources and stress associated with their predicament.

Socio-economic status, therefore, forms a huge part of the equation, children raised in poverty rarely choose to behave differently but they are faced daily with overwhelming challenges that affluent children have to confront and their brains have adapted to suboptimal conditions in ways that undermine good school performance. From another study carried out by Rafiz etal (2013), it was discovered that children who drop out of school suffer from a host of negative consequences ranging from high unemployment and low earnings to poor health and criminal activity. These researchers also indicated that family social status was highly predictive of students' dropping out of school and that ethnic race group differences in drop outs rates could be explained largely by such family background differences.

As a result of the prevailing economic situation, some parents may not afford to send their children to secondary school and others may not afford to buy their children enough resources for the learning process to take place successfully. However, the government may intervene to help parents who cannot afford to pay for their children's education. The same sentiments are echoed by Zvobgo (1995) who postulates that the government of Zimbabwe through the (1991) economic reform programme introduced the social dimension fund for the parents who have problems in meeting expenses for their children's education. Consequently, these particular adolescents would be motivated to learn so that they would have a better life compared to their parents' lives. Rutter's Pathway Model (Rutter 2008) in Chinyoka and Ganga (2011) reveals that children born in poverty can have self-righting tendencies making them much more resilient to pressures of poverty. In the current study, the researchers found that some adolescents from poor socio-economic backgrounds did well, thus, they managed to excel even if they came from poorest backgrounds.

The study was embarked on at a time when the Zimbabwean society is experiencing a high rate of unemployment. Some parents in Zimbabwe are currently not working and others are forced to retire early or are retrenched. Chinyoka and Naidu (2013) established that unemployment lead to adult labour migration leading to an increase in the number of households which comprise children without parental guidance. Bradley and Cowry (2000) pointed out that a child who comes from a stressful home environment tends to channel that stress into disruptive behaviour at school and be less able to develop a health social and academic life, for instance, impulsivity is common disruptive classroom behaviour among pupils who come from a poor background. Disciplinary problems are rampant in both urban and peri-urban schools.

Ecological Perspective

This study is informed by Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological perspective. The ecological theory explains the role played by the child's surroundings, for example, their home, church, schoolwork, neighbourhood, culture and government on the way the child develops. (Chinyoka, 2013). Bronfenbrenner (2008) emphasised that individual development is a culmination of many direct and indirect influences which either facilitate or impede individual potential. The influences consist of five nested structures: micro-systems, mesosystem, exosystem, macro-

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system and chronosystem. The micro-system refers to any immediate organizations or relationships the children interact with, for instance, the immediate family, school, peers, neighbours and caregivers. According to Bronfenbrenner (2008), the mesosystem describes how the various aspects of the micro system work together. The exosystem deals with aspects that indirectly affect the child which have a great impact on the academic performance of adolescents, for example, the neighbourhood, the parents' work place and the extended family members whose lifestyle indirectly affects the child which in turn affects the academic performance of adolescents.

Macrosystem involves the cultural aspect of the human component which involves dominant socio-economic structures (Bronfenbrenner, 2008). The culture includes the norms, values, beliefs and practices that influence all other social systems. Therefore, the individual's performance is greatly affected by the cultural beliefs of the society in which the child lives, thus, the individual is not independent of his/her own culture.

The chronosystem takes into account the aspect of time. According to Chinyoka and Naidu (2013) the chronosystem involves development overtime that affects the interactions between those systems. Understanding the interactions of these systems is essential in order to understand how a child develops and factors which led to the child's failure.

Research questions

1. What are the effects of financial constraints of the family unit on the academic performance of adolescents?
2. What can be done to attenuate the effects of financial constraints on adolescents?

Methodology

Research design

The study adopted a phenomenological design in order to explore and present the impact of financial challenges that impact on the academic performance of adolescence in Zimbabwe. Qualitative phenomenological approach is used to highlight the specifics and to identify phenomena through how they are perceived by form two learners. One of the advantages of this approach is that it allows the researchers to gain an understanding of social phenomena from participants' perspectives in their natural settings (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010).

Sample and Sampling

The sample comprised of 10 learners (5 from each secondary school). The 10 form two's participated in both interviews and focus group discussions. In this study, purposive sampling was found to be more realistic than other sampling methods in terms of time, effort and cost needed in finding informants (Bernard, 2012). The two secondary schools were chosen because of their proximity to the researcher.

Instrumentation

Data were collected through interviews and focus group discussions. Creswell (2013) argues that, capturing what people say in their own words is the most important contribution of

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qualitative research to understanding human behaviour and perception. The advantages of using interviews in this study was to allow the researcher to adapt the questions as necessary, clarifying doubt and ensure that the responses were properly understood by repeating or rephrasing the questions (Patton, 2012). Another advantage of using face-to-face interviews in this study lies in the quality of the data obtained. This implies that the participants were in a position to seek further clarification on some of the responses through probing. Each interviewee's tone, voice and facial expression was captured by the researchers.

The study also adopted the focus group discussion because focus groups are quick, cheap and relatively easy to assemble. Two focus groups, each comprised of 5 participants participated in the study. This researcher noted that focus group discussions are good for obtaining rich data in participants' own words and developing deeper insights.

Data Collection Procedures

To allow for the collection of as much relevant information as possible, the interviews to 10 selected form twos and four headmasters were not tightly structured. Therefore, relevant issues which were not included in the interview guide but arose during the process of conducting the interviews were explored and noted in impromptu supplementary questions. This was in line with the flexible nature of qualitative research (Yin, 2012). Follow-ups and probing questions were also asked for elaboration or in order to seek clarification during focus groups and interviews. During the 2 focus group discussions, the participants were kept focused, engaged, attentive, interested, and the researcher monitored the time, and ensured that it was used effectively. The interviews and focus group discussions were audio-taped and the researcher 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) in Chinyoka and Naidu (2014) is the main threat to the valid description of what the researchers saw or heard. The research instruments were validated by research experts and a pilot study was conducted hence trustworthiness of data was ascertained.

Data Analysis

The main method that was used to analyse qualitative data from interviews and focus group discussions was thematic content analysis. This involved identifying, coding and categorising patterns in data (Creswell, 2013). In order to identify themes and categories, the researcher applied the Tesch's (2006) open coding method of data analysis. This Tesch's method is a systemic process of examining, selecting, categorising, comparing, synthesising and interpreting data to unpack the major research question of the study (Yin, 2012).

Ethical Considerations

Permission to conduct the study was secured from the Ministry of Primary and Secondary schools in Zimbabwe, ten parents/guardians of the students and four headmasters. Form twos who participated in interviews and focus group discussions completed assent forms to show their willingness to participate in the research while teachers filled in consent forms. The participants were informed that their involvement in the study was voluntary and that they were free to

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withdraw at any stage of the interviews and focus group discussions if they were not comfortable. Participants were assured of anonymity in participating in the study. Confidentiality and privacy were upheld.

Findings and Discussion

From the analysis of empirical data, the researchers established the following major themes scarcity of food, stress encountered by an adolescent, dropping out from school, lack of support from extended families and unemployment as the major effects of family financial constraints on the academic performance of adolescence in Zimbabwe.

Theme 1: Scarcity of food

During interviews and focus group discussions, the form two learners expressed that they did not have enough meals per day, that is, breakfast, lunch and supper because their parents who could not afford to provide them with the adequate meals they were supposed to eat every day. One teacher, T2 highlighted that:

Since a hungry man is an angry man, these adolescents would be aggressive to other school pupils and that hindered socialisation which is a crucial component for any learning to take place productively.

Six of the ten adolescents interviewed and participated in focus group discussions indicated that they could afford to receive a single decent meal per day which was supper and that greatly affected their mental capabilities. Researches from Chinyoka (2013) and Ganga (2013) confirmed the above emphasising that those pupils during the day relied heavily on maputi (dried ,roasted meal grains) mangai (dried boiled meal grains, groundnuts, mahewu (traditional African drink from malted grain) and other African snacks and fruits which are nutritious but not always available. A teacher, T4 said:

Malnourished children were observed to experience motor and cognitive developmental delays, thus causing attention deficit disorder, impaired school performance, memory deficiency, and learning disabilities, reduced language development and reduced problem-solving abilities.

In support of the above, Maslow's hierarchy of needs also emphasised that the basic physiological needs have to be satisfied first before moving to the needs on top of the hierarchy (Chinyoka and Naidu, 2014). Snowman and Biehler (2011) also stressed that a hungry child is not likely to be motivated to self-actualise until hunger is satisfied. Ganga (2013) concurs with the above ideas when she emphasised that failure to have enough meals per day resulted in many complaints from the adolescents such as lack of concentration during lessons and this challenge is faced by teachers in secondary schools from both urban and per-urban areas. She went on to argue that recurring problems of stomach aches and headaches from adolescents especially in Masvingo district could be attributed to hunger. Since adolescents received a diet

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which was not balanced in most cases that had detrimental effects on their academic performance, they could not perform at par with other adolescents from rich and affluent families.

Birch and Gussow (1979) cited in Dantesy (2004) claimed that poverty contributes towards educational failure simply because poor children are all culturally disadvantaged because their health and nutritional status is inadequate to allow for the maximum mental development and for the realization of their educational potential. Chinyoka (2013) in support of the above idea argues that poor diet had a bearing on cognition and learning of children because the brain needed energy to run all its functions efficiently, the researcher, therefore discovered that the unavailability of adequate meals had a role to play in the mental capability of an adolescent student.

Theme 2: Stress encountered by adolescence

The majority of the adolescents indicated that they come from stressed homes. The same views were expressed by adolescents through focus group discussions who posited that stress was mainly because of daily shortages of basic needs like food, school fees, reading and writing books, poor accommodation, noisy neighbourhood and unsupportive parents. From the focus group discussions held by students who resided in Masvingo District where schools A and K are situated, one student pointed out that she came from a home where parents were on a verge of divorce, as a result, they fought almost every day and that greatly disturbed the adolescent. The adolescent' night study would be greatly jeopardised by the noise and when at school, the adolescent's concentration span would be disturbed since that particular adolescent spent most of the time thinking about the horrible fight between his parents and what his future would be like if the parents finally divorced. As a result, the adolescent's concentration span would be greatly compromised. Bradley and Cowry (2002) confirms this idea when he argued that a child who came from a stressful home environment tends to channel the stress into disruptive behaviour at school and be less able to develop a healthy social and academic life, for instance, impulsivity is a common in disrupting classroom behaviour among adolescents who came from low socio economic background.

Findings from the Focus Group discussions revealed that the majority of the adolescents' parents always quarrel because of financial challenges. Chindanya (2012) emphasised that broken families, single parent families can be traumatic to children usually children from such backgrounds may develop emotional problems which may hinder good academic performance. The researchers, therefore, came to a conclusion that students raised in poverty are especially subject to stressors that undermine school behaviour and performance. Levine (2011) concurs with this view when he argues that children who come from families with conflict and divorce are prominent typically to do worse in school than children who come from families without divorce, thus if parents are divorced, that diminishes the child's wellbeing and that on its own negatively affects the child' ability to perform well in school.

Theme 3: Dropping out from school.

The study established that some adolescents absent themselves from school because of financial challenges, and that eventually resulted in school drop-outs. Adolescents lamented that they

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were given too much household chores before they went to school, usually by the extended family members who were looking after them, as a result, they would perform badly in class and would eventually drop out of school.

Out of 10 adolescents who were research participants, 4 threatened to be out of school at any time of the year because of poverty. Urie Bronfenbrenner (2008) avers that the government and nongovernmental organizations are giving aid to the adolescents, especially the OVC who could not afford to support themselves (exosystem) which happens to be the theoretical framework for this study. Though the government is working tirelessly to assist adolescents who were orphans and other vulnerable children through BEAM, the researchers discovered from adolescents that only few are assisted and the money usually was not paid regularly. According to Ganga (2013) a NAC officer confirmed that the BEAM funding was overwhelmed because the number of adolescents needing aid was high. From the interview with teachers, the researcher discovered some adolescents drop out of school because of circumstances beyond their control which surrounded them, for instance one teacher confessed that:

I know parents who are poor to such an extent that they could not afford to raise school fees for their children. As a result, children from such families would eventually drop out of school to look for piece jobs to help parents to get bread and butter on the table, thus, they would drop out of school.

Researches by Chinyoka (2013) and Chinyoka and Naidu (2014) stated that parents could not afford to pay fees for the education of their children which was soaring. Consequently, the adolescent would resort to a string of casual jobs in order to earn a living, for instance, they become vendors or become employed as domestic workers. Thus, adolescents who face challenges of this nature would end up dropping out of school, the root cause being the economic hardships the family is facing.

Theme 4: Lack of support from families

The study established a serious lack of basic requirements needed for learning to take place effectively. Adolescents, during interviews, purported that they came to school wearing dirty uniforms which were patched and faded. In addition to that, these children did not have enough stationery which was required for the learning process to take place effectively such as exercise books, pencils, pens, mathematical sets and covers. As a result of this scenario, these children did not begin learning on equal footing with pupils from affluent families. This was noted to be a serious drawback on academic performance of students who participated in this study. In support, Chinyoka (2013) emphasised that children from high and middle economic status parents generally are better exposed to a learning environment at home because of provision and availability of extra learning facilities, for instance, children who use computers at home and at school. In this study, four adolescents (all from one school) expressed their profound gratitude to the government through UNICEF which provided the main textbooks for the core subjects for each child since they could now make maximum use of the text books at home since they were no longer sharing.

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From an interview, one girl learner confessed that:

... When faced with financial challenges, a girl child had to sacrifice her education for the boy child, thus the girl child from a low socioeconomic class is already at a greater disadvantage than her counterpart.

The issue above confirms findings from Hlupo and Tsikira (2012) who posit that education costs have seen the male child receiving preference to continue with education. UNICEF (2014) also confirms that educating daughters is seen in African Countries as a monetary loss. Consequently, the researchers came to a conclusion that norms and values of a society influence the adolescent's pattern of participation in education. Bronfenbrenner (2008) also emphasised that the microsystem has a greater role to play in the development of an adolescent; therefore if an adolescent is not adequately supported by family members, her academic performance would dwindle.

Theme 5: Unemployment and its impact on the academic performance

The adolescents lamented that they were greatly affected by the migration of the breadwinner in the family since they would be forced to transfer to other schools and that had negative impact on their performance. Teachers from the two schools confirmed this idea during the interview session that they faced challenges with students who transfer during the course of the year when their parents are transferred from one working area to another. During interviews, a teacher, T3 highlighted that:

These adolescents would face challenges whereby their original schools were offering syllabi which were not offered at the schools they transferred to. As a result, the adolescents would begin a new syllabus, because of that; they would be lagging behind in terms of performance while their colleagues would be at an advantage.

One adolescent from Focus Group discussions bemoaned that transferring to new schools all of a sudden impact negatively on adolescents saying:

Transferring to new schools would take time for them to make friends so that they would be able to form group discussions with their colleagues. As a result, new students would end up becoming isolate, lonely and withdrawn, thus the adolescent's academic performance would be seriously compromised.

Consequently, as they would try to adjust to the new environment, they would take much time, as a result, they would fail to catch up with their colleagues who would be familiar with the environment, thus, the new students would not begin on a level ground with their classmates. Levine (2011) asserts that changing schools is stressful and it may cause either temporary or

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long term problems to learners. Pianta et al (2008) argue that less positive classroom interaction among peers leads to lower growth in children's academic growth. Cameroon (2012) also maintains that mobility of the bread winner and the family at large results in the difficulty the children face in trying to make friends and this seriously affects peer tutoring. Data (2000) argues that migration of parents to neighbouring countries results in adolescents being deprived of the family support system they used to lean on.

The majority of teachers who were interviewed agreed that there is a high correlation between high unemployment rate and poor academic performance of adolescents since the adolescents, as a result of unemployment, experience abuse even from their very own parents who would be stressed because of the financial crisis they would be facing, as a result they would verbally, physically and emotionally abuse their children. This had detrimental effects on the academic performance of adolescents

Three of the four teachers interviewed pointed out that most of the children whose parents lost jobs unexpectedly performed badly to such an extent that the administrative board at school would be left with no option except to make the affected child repeat the grade. Consequently, the child would develop a low self-esteem in the classroom since he or she would be older than the other students in the class and he or she would accept the label attached on him /her that he or she is dull. The teachers went to argue that such a scenario would result in the child failing both the local and national examinations dismally fulfilling the prophecy that he/she is dull, actually this is serious demotivation of the child at its highest peak. Stevens and Schaller (2011) argue that parental job loss increases the rate of grade repetition in schools.

Conclusion

From the research findings, the researchers concluded that financial constraints results in shortage of basic physiological needs such as shelter ,clothes, and food. Adolescents received just one meal per day and this affects the learning of an adolescent since they cannot concentrate in class if they experience severe hunger pangs. The researchers also found that adolescents who face financial challenges suffer from stress and the stress would disturb the concentration span at school since the child would be preoccupied within financial problems at home and he/she would fail to pay maximum attention in class and that would negatively affects learning. Moreover, the researcher found out that movement of parents from one area to another in search of employment would lead to 'forced ' transfer on the part of adolescents since they would be forced by circumstances to transfer even if they are not willing to do so. They would settle in new areas where they would spend time adjusting thereby affecting the academic performance of adolescents. Consequently, their self-esteem and self-efficacy would be seriously tampered with and this greatly affects learning outcomes of an adolescent negatively.

Recommendations

On the basis of the findings of this study, the following recommendations were made: There is dire need for community self-help projects to curb economic hardships experienced by adolescents at the same time empowering communities financially. Teachers should provide assistance to adolescents who come from poverty stricken families free of charge during

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weekends and holidays. The government is encouraged to work in collaboration with NGOs to seek for aid for the adolescents from poor socio economic backgrounds. The assistance may come in form of uniforms, fees, stationery as well as food rations in schools. This study recommends early intervention programmes for children, sustainable development of both rural and urban communities and the need to provide food hampers to the affected children. This study also recommends that the problems be addressed by the microsystems of the school, and of the families, and the neighbourhood mesosystems (linkages) and exosystem, as well as by the macro-systems (political, ideology). Collaborative work is also needed among Zimbabweans and all stakeholders to revisit the root causes of poverty.

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