

Perceptions of learners in rural schools in Zimbabwe regarding the factors influencing their academic achievement

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Abstract

The growing performance gap between learners attending rural schools and those attending top tier schools in Zimbabwe remains a concern that needs to be addressed to assist all learners to develop holistically. This study aims to investigate what learners attending rural schools perceive as factors that influence their academic achievement. This qualitative study was executed by making use of focus-group interviews with eight (8) grade six learners. We furthermore interviewed one parent and one teacher to triangulate the data obtained. From the data obtained, we conclude that there is a direct association between the environment in which the learners live in and academic achievement. The findings revealed that the school environment, teacher involvement and support from parents are the major challenges facing learners from these communities. The distance from school has a significant influence on academic achievement, as learners feel demotivated to attend school on extremely hot or cold days; they often miss classes because they arrive late. A lack of resources, negative teacher attitudes and a lack of parental involvement and support are viewed by learners as having an influence on their academic achievement. We end with suggestions for future research that might deepen our understanding of the important roles that both teachers and parents can play in meeting the needs that these learners have.

Keywords: Academic achievement; motivation; parents; socio-economic; teachers

1. Introduction

Academic performance is one of the indicators of quality education (UNESCO, 2015), yet many learners in Zimbabwe are denied educational opportunities due to various reasons. As a result of prevailing economic hardships faced by the majority of people from rural areas in Zimbabwe, education and academic performance is compromised (Robertson, 2011). The plight of learners who attend rural schools in Zimbabwe is alarming; their dreams, visions and ambitions for a successful future are being crushed under the inability to receive quality education and the lack of an inspiring environment to motivate them to reach greater heights (Makepeace et al. 2003). Educational inequities remain a major issue; millions of children are

still denied opportunities in life due to their home circumstances or the income of their parents. Socio-economic inequalities – particularly between rich and poor – are often hidden, despite being unjust and damaging for the wider society. The socio-economic status of the learner has a strong correlation on their academic achievement, as does the parents' income, level of education, parental interaction, the type of neighbourhood surrounding the learner, and class attendance. It becomes increasingly necessary to understand the variables which contribute to the tendency of the poor staying poor, even after being empowered through education. The general direction in the country has shown that learners who come from poor families enrol mostly in rural areas, while the few that have migrated to urban areas are enrolled in local government schools (Matarutse 2010; Jongwe 2010; Muumba 2011). Learners with an affluent lifestyle are mostly enrolled in private schools, with a few enrolled in church-run schools that have an academic history of success.

Education has always been the foundation for success for most individuals and the nation at large. While every child has a fundamental right to education, empirical evidence has shown that this right to education does not transcend to the desired quality education. This, according to Jongwe (2010), stems from the fact that there is no consensus on what quality education means. This has been exacerbated by the role of the Zimbabwean government as a key role-player and provider of education through government schools, as well as its role as the formulator and regulator of education policies through the Ministry of Primary and Secondary education. This conflict of roles has given rise to an incapacitation of most government schools due to lack of learning materials and demotivated teachers. Most government schools in rural areas were established to provide the masses with adequate quality education, while cushioning them from high costs of tuition fees found in private schools. In essence the provision of quality education to learners of low-income parents lie in rhetoric. Against this background there is a need to understand what learners in rural schools perceive as factors influencing their academic achievement.

2. Background of the study

The capacity of human beings to learn is unlimited. It is however dependent on the variables offered by the environment in which the process of learning is carried out. Umoh (2010) posits that the environment that learners come from, initiate their development. Our surroundings have an impact on the way we perceive and interpret situations, activities and events that happen in our daily lives, and consequently impacts both social and cognitive development (Mwamwenda 2004). Chinyoka (2013) uses the following metaphor: “The rich will become richer, while the poor will always remain poor” to describe the demise between fate and destiny of different groups of people based on their social status.

According to Oredein (2016) most excelling learners emerge from top tier schools in the modern academic system. Statistics have shown a downward and worrisome shift in the academic performance of rural schools against top tier schools in Zimbabwe. This dispensation is being caused by the differences in quality of education received. The general

propensity is that schools which are incapacitated are the ones with most learners coming from disadvantaged backgrounds. In most cases learners who enrol in such schools underestimate their natural ability to succeed because the school's characteristics contributes to learners overestimating the challenges they might face.

Even though there is a growing gap between the education received by learners from poor backgrounds and those from rich backgrounds, the government has made little effort to understand and control the situation. It is against this background that this study seeks to explore the effect of social status on the quality of education for primary school children to gain insight into their experiences and contribute to the growing literature on how best they can be assisted.

2.1 Research objectives

1. To examine the perceived influence that disadvantaged social environments have on the academic achievement of learners from poor backgrounds.
2. To determine what learners from poor backgrounds, need to support them.

2.2 Significance of Study

Besides the increasing gap between rural learners and those from top tier schools with regards to academic achievement, there has been minimal research conducted to gain a deeper understanding into the causes of such differences. Thus, there is a knowledge gap on the effect of social status on the quality of education between primary school learners from rich and poor backgrounds. It is against this background that this study seeks to fill this gap and contribute to the literature based on the research topic. Practically, it will provide useful information to parents, communities, schools, and the government to understand the topic at hand in order to make informed decisions in policy formulation, resources allocation and implementation of programs to address the growing differences between rural schools and top tier schools.

3. Literature review

A review of literature shows that there is a direct correlation between environmental factors and the cognitive development of learners, and consequently academic achievement (Chinyoka, 2013). These factors include the level of education of the parent, parents' level of income and occupation, and how society has educated children to address challenges (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002; Anderson, Case and Lam, 2001). Matarutse (2011) posits that this correlation could be the result of the educated parents' ability to help their children with homework and inspire them to greater heights, while equipping them with problem solving skills. Parents who are more affluent can enrol their children in better schools with well-equipped facilities and resource materials for learning. Such education not only resides in the

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schooling system but extends far beyond how the immediate environment of the child helps shape his/ her success based on constructive elements of practical learning such as educational trips and access to libraries. Furthermore, parents from an affluent background are prone to provide their children with a diet that contains all relevant nutrients which assists in child development (Chinyoka, 2013).

The child's socio-economic background has a bearing on education through the experience of life's events. According to Micah et al. (2006) and Chinyoka (2013) there is a positive association between a child's local surroundings, type of home, source of energy (electricity or firewood) and his/ her educational backgrounds. Some learners use candles to study, living in crowded and noisy environments which are not suitable for studying. Learners from poor backgrounds are often burdened with house chores at the expense of their studies. Richard (2010) argues that the neighbourhood of a child influences how he or she perceives life, this being based on how society values education and job opportunities that are directly related to education.

4. Research Methodology

A research design is defined as a blueprint for the collection, measurement, and analysis of data (Rakotsoana 2018). For this study, we used a qualitative design which, according to Magwa (2014) demands that the world be approached with the assumption that nothing is trivial. Joubish et al (2011) agree by stating that qualitative research seeks to find the "why" of a topic and gain insight into the lived experiences of people.

4.1 Sampling process and sample size

We decided on purposive sampling, which implies that respondents are selected deliberately because the chosen participants could provide us with useful information, assisting in reaching the objectives as set out in the study (Burns & Grove, 2003; Wegner, 2009). For the research study to yield quality data, the sample should allow for the accurate collection of information from the respondents. The sample size consisted of eight grade six pupils (4 girls and 4 boys), and they (and their parents) had to complete a letter of consent to adhere to ethical considerations. We furthermore interviewed one parent and one teacher to triangulate the data obtained.

This research study used focus group interviews with learners, and interviews with the parent and teacher to obtain relevant data from respondents.

5. Findings and discussion

5.1 School environment

The location of Dzobo primary school is central to the surrounding villages, in the hub of rural Manicaland. It is the biggest community facility within its area besides the churches. However, all learners interviewed mentioned that they walk around 5 km a day to and from school. It takes one and a half hours to cover the distance on a one-way journey. This distance supersedes the distance recommended by the Ministry of Primary and Secondary education for schools to be within a radius of 3 km from the homes of learners. This has a bearing on the educational capabilities of learners since the long distance demotivates them from attending classes during extremely hot or cold days. One learner pointed out:

I don't like going to school because the walking is too much work. I get hungry and sometimes when it rains the river (they cross) are flooded.

This implies that classes are delayed because many children arrive late for school, if at all, which could cause teachers not having enough time to complete the syllabus. The teacher interviewed reiterated that most of the time they had to delay classes because a third of her learners are always late. Because of the slow start to the classes, they had to hurry through the syllabus to cover for lost time.

The learning facilities from the observations made by us showed decayed conditions where desks are used on a first come first served basis, with several learners doubling their hands at a table to write, along with broken windows with no classroom doors. Respondents who had the misfortune of coming late pointed out:

We cannot put our books on a desk, there is no space.

Because of the shortage of schools in the area, the classes often take too many learners to give every local child a chance at education. According to the teacher-participant, there were 68 learners in one class.

When asked what aspect of the school learners would change, one pointed out that she would change the school's name because her peers from other school mimicked her that she learns at St Nyoka (a derogatory name for a backward school name). Another respondent pointed out that he would change the school's location and uniform because of its colour without giving further reasons. All these factors point out to a demotivating educational environment which learners from poor social background experience every day, something that could affect their self-esteem and confidence.

One of the participants pointed out that learners at Heritage (an affluent school), did not have the same difficulties, even though they were also not living close to the school.

They are lucky, they are taken to school in a car

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One participant also mentioned that there were not as many learners in one class.

My niece says they are only 15 in a class – everyone has a desk

One should, however, consider that the school fees are very high – something that the parents of the learners at Dzobo primary cannot afford.

5.2 Teacher involvement

According to all the learners interviewed at Dzobo (rural school), they perceive the teachers as having a negative perception towards them.

I think the teacher don't like poor children

These participants pointed out that if, for some reason, they fail to understand a concept in class, the teacher will scold them and not give them attention. A tendency in rural schools show that there is no effort made in teaching learners or helping them with their concerns, even before exams.

The teacher interviewed at Dzobo mentioned that there was no room for the evaluation of teachers, which caused a low morale amongst them.

It is difficult to evaluate the performance of teachers when one obviously knows that they don't have the necessary teaching materials to assist with the progress of learners.

When asked why there are not adequate teaching materials and what efforts the school made towards the acquisition of these learning materials, the teacher-participant pointed out that they have reached out to different stakeholders, including businesspeople and the Ministry, but there has been no response. The challenges experienced by teachers were voiced by the following:

“wanguNhamoiripondeyekutihausisimbarakoreseiweusirikuhora, plus kunokumachonyonyo, hurumendehaitombokuoniwo.

VarimutaundivakwaranemaridzemaEkeisutichingodzungairanemadofoedukunopasinamubhad haro.” (My sister, things here are tough because we don't earn much, yet we are supposed to make these children pass. In urban areas, teachers there are better off than us because they can supplement their income through conducting extra lessons).

5.3 Support from parents

Having good academic results is influenced by the level of support parents put towards the education of their child. This involves paying school fees, providing learning materials, food, assisting with homework and providing motivation through attending consultation days. Responses from pupils at Dzobo reveal that parents rarely make follow ups on children at school to assess the progress of the child, and most of them have challenges in paying school fees which demotivates the learners by being sent off for arrears almost every term.

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My parents don't pay the school, then I cannot go to class. I don't think school is important, I will work at home

Participants also mentioned that their parents don't assist with homework and motivates it by saying their parents are tired when coming home from work. When asked about field trips, learners said that there are no field trips at their school, but they are aware that other children from "town" go on trips and holidays,

The parent interviewed concurred with what the learners mentioned:

We cannot afford the fees, and we are far away from the school...too difficult to reach after work

Participants furthermore mentioned that they did not attend pre-school prior to going to the Primary school, but one girl said that she did go to pre-school when she visited her relatives in town for the holiday. When asked about toys and gadgets, they knew about things like Play Stations, but did not own any. They recalled spending their time playing outside.

We play house (mahumbwe) or in the fields when we waited for our mom to come from work

3. Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to investigate the perceptions of learners regarding factors that influence their academic achievement, focusing on Dzobo Primary school. From the data gathered, we conclude that learners from poor social backgrounds are disadvantaged in terms of receiving quality education. Access to, for instance, technological items such as tablets or Play Stations could enhance creative thinking and language usage in the everyday life of learners (Themane et al. 2006; Bourdie in Gwirayi 2010). Bernstein (in Giddens and Sutton, 2013) agrees that children from affluent backgrounds come to school better prepared while their counterparts, from poor backgrounds, could find it difficult to deal with the demands of formal education.

Learners from rural schools furthermore seem to be deprived of a motivating environment that boost their confidence and self-esteem. We are of the opinion that if parents do not motivate their children, these parents' disadvantages are passed on to their children and consequently future generations.

The attitude of a teacher can play an important role in the academic achievement of learners from rural schools. As found in the study, teachers were more inclined to show a negative attitude towards learners from poor backgrounds. The academic success of learners from disadvantaged circumstances is aggravated by the teacher to student ratio, which allows for low achievers to slip through the cracks because of lack of attention (Bradley & Corwyn 2002). Case and Deaton (1999), in their study, observed that pupils progress more rapidly when the teacher to student ratio is below 1:18. This is true only in top tier schools where pupils are given more than enough attention by qualified teachers.

Based on our findings, we conclude that there is a direct association between the investment by the school in the pupils' education, support received from parents and teachers and the academic achievement of learners. Since there is little investment made to pupils who come from poor socioeconomic backgrounds, their educational prospects are limited.

4. Recommendations

Improving quality of education requires a holistic approach from all stakeholders, government, community, parents, teachers and learners (Richardson 2002). There is a need to educate parents about the effect of parental involvement in their children's academic achievement.

The community has a responsibility to capacitate the school to make it better in terms of facilities. Through capacity building the community can initiate a wide range of activities such as brick moulding and the creation of a mobile library.

The government, through the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, is failing to provide adequate resources that makes quality education attainable. However, it can create a program that allows for voluntary pairing of schools from top tier backgrounds with those from rural backgrounds. Employing dedicated, qualified, and experienced teachers in rural schools should be the prerogative of the government because it is responsible for devising strategies to attract and retain such staff through incentives for teachers who teach in rural areas. In addition, there is a need to speed up the government program whereby it provides supplementary meals to school children which could assist in the healthy, holistic development of learners.

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