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AN ASSESSMENT OF FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO HIGH SECONDARY SCHOOL PUPILS DROPOUT RATES IN ZIMBABWE. A CASE STUDY OF BULILIMA DISTRICT.

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ABSTRACT

The study sought to assess factors contributing to high secondary school pupils dropouts in Bulilima District in Zimbabwe. Bulilima District has for a long time been experiencing high dropout rates amongst secondary school pupils due to a number of factors which needed exploration in order solve the problem. The study used a case study design and a qualitative method with individual and group interviews (focus group discussions) as data collection techniques. The study participants included teachers, heads of schools and members of the community who included both adults and the youths, selected through the purposive convenience sampling technique. The study was anchored on the human capital theory which advocates for investing in human capital through education that in turn is expected to stimulate socio-economic development of a country. The findings are absentee parents, financial hardships, hunger and poverty, home school distance, teenage pregnancies and peer pressure .The study recommends that the government of Zimbabwe subsidises examination fees, implements 'free primary education for all' in line with the constitution of Zimbabwe. Furthermore the government of Zimbabwe in collaboration with key stakeholders builds more secondary schools in Bulilima district. Finally more research be done on the problem of secondary school pupils drop out in order to bring more insight on this problem bedeviling Bulilima district.

Key Words: factors, drop outs, dropout rates and secondary school pupils

1. INTRODUCTION

Education is a significant pre-requisite tool for socio- economic, and political transformation of any nation. Based on this fact many governments across the world have expended a lot of financial and other resources to develop their education systems as a precursor to national development. While Zimbabwe has been viewed as having one of the best education systems in the continent with the highest literate rate in Africa, the same cannot be said of one of its districts (Bulilima). Bulilima district in Matabeleland south province is plagued with high Secondary school pupils drop outs. In this district secondary school pupils are dropping out of schools in droves year in and year out with the majority migrating into neighboring countries such as South Africa and Botswana lured by the prospect



of better employment and better living conditions there. This study is an attempt to assess the factors contributing to high secondary school pupils dropouts in Bulilima district with a view to recommend strategies to arrest this undesirable state of affairs.

2. BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Secondary school pupils dropout is an international phenomenon, as studies have shown that both the developed and developing countries are experiencing high school pupil dropout rates. According to Koedel (2008) cited in Cornelious and Lockett (2015), the high school dropout problem had become such a damaging public concern that some urban schools were being tagged with the nickname-dropout factories because they were graduating fewer than 50% of their students. For many years, nationwide, approximately one third of American high school students have not been graduating from high school. For example, Mishel and Roy (2006) indicated that twenty five percent (25%) of dropouts were white students, and 50% were African American students. Similarly Colvin (2010) assert that leading researchers now agree that 25 to 30 percent of students who enroll in American high schools fail to graduate. In many of the country's largest urban school districts, such as Detroit, Cleveland, and Indianapolis, the dropout rate is as high as 60 percent, and rates are similarly high in many rural areas. The above scenario shows that school dropout is prevalent in the United States of America and it affects both the whites and African American students as well. Similarly Sabates, Akyeampong, Westbrook and Hunt (2010) assert that, policies to improve school progression and reduce the numbers of children dropping out of school are critical if Universal Primary Education (UPE) is to be achieved. Children are starting primary school in greater numbers than ever before but dropout rates are significant and lead to low levels of primary school completion in many countries. In Benin, for example, the primary school completion rate in 2005 was 62 percent, in the Democratic Republic of Congo, in 2007 was 51 percent and in Bangladesh it has been around 60 percent since 2000 . In the same vein Mzuza, Yudong and Kapute (2014) report that Malawi has one of the highest school dropout rates in southern Africa, with 15% of girls (three in every 20 girls), and 12% of boys (3 in every 25 boys), dropping out between Grades 5 and 8 of primary school.

Sabates (2010) et al, Mzuza et al (2014) and Colvin (2010) indicate that the U.S.A, Benin, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Bangladesh and Malawi are experiencing school pupils dropouts which confirm the fact that the problem of pupil dropout is has a cosmopolitan character and comes with both social and individual costs. Literature also shows that a number of countries across the globe are grappling with the challenge of school pupils dropout at all levels beginning from the primary level up to tertiary level.

In 1980 the government of Zimbabwe liberalized the education system which had been characterized with bottle necks from the lowest to the highest levels to make it responsive to the socio-political dispensation of the time. Policies such as the Universal Primary Education, Automatic Promotion, the Tuition Free Primary Education and the building of more primary and secondary schools in the country in general and in the rural areas in particular made education accessible to all children in Zimbabwe. In fact the dismantling of the colonial administration ushered in the education for all policy which made education a birth right for all children in the country.

In spite of the declaration and implementation of pro-democracy education policies, the problem of school dropouts still exists in Zimbabwe today. The Financial Gazette of (March, 12 2015) reports that the rate of pupils dropping out of school in 2013 rose to over 13 000, an increase of about 40 percent from the 2012 figures. Overall, boys contributed the bigger number of school dropouts at 7 083 while 6 170 girls dropped out of school for various reasons. This is in spite of the presence of government sponsorship such the Basic Education Assistance Module (BEAM) which pays fees for deserving students. This fact is complemented by the ZLHR (2015) which postulates that although there are policies in Zimbabwe protecting students' rights, these have not helped to alleviate the problem of dropouts as students across the country continue to drop out of school particularly at primary and secondary levels. To this end the Bulawayo 24 News (**October 2015**) reports that; a total of 1 253 pupils from primary schools in Matabeleland South province dropped out of school during term 1(one) of 2015 while 1 572 also dropped out from secondary schools. Matobo recorded 654 drop outs, Beitbridge 634, Mangwe 582, Insiza 509, Gwanda 297, Umzingwane 92 and Bulilima 57.

The above quotation shows that Bulilima District is not spared from the secondary school pupils drop outs. Although the district is one of the beneficiaries of the progressive policies of the post colonial Zimbabwe, school in the district have become more of white elephants. Secondary school pupils drop out of school year in and year out to the extent that both the local communities and the educational authorities seem not to have an answer to this challenge. It is this persistent problem of high secondary school pupils' dropout rates which has whetted the researchers' appetite to carry out this study in order to unravel this scourge with a view to recommend strategies to remedy it.



3. PROBLEM STATEMENT

Although the government of Zimbabwe has taken steps to make education accessible to every child in the country, secondary school pupils in Bulilima district have not embraced this gesture. Year in year out, secondary school pupils in Bulilima district drop out of school in large volumes which has become an issue of concern to key stakeholders in the district. This problem has been in existence for a long time, hence it warrants an assessment in order to curb it to move the district forward in as far as development is concerned. This study sought to assess the reasons behind this phenomenon in order to suggest strategies to curb it.

4. STUDY OBJECTIVES

The study sought to:

- Identify the reasons contributing to high secondary school dropouts in Bulilima district.
- Assess the government initiatives towards alleviating the problem of secondary school pupil dropouts in Bulilima district..
- Recommend strategies to solve the problem of high secondary school pupil drop outs in Bulilima district.

5. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study sought to answer the questions below.

- What factors contribute to high secondary school pupil dropouts in Bulilima District?
- How has the government of Zimbabwe responded towards the problem of high secondary school pupil dropouts in Bulilima District?
- What strategies can be put in place to curb the problem of high secondary school pupil dropout in Bulilima district?

6. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE.

The issues interrogated in this section include poverty, economic meltdown, unemployment, home-school distance, teenage pregnancies, family socialisation and cultural beliefs.

6.1. Poverty

Societies which are poverty stricken are the ones whose children have to quit school and start working at a tender age to supplement family incomes or get married (child marriages). In the United States of America poverty is high among Hispanics and African American populations and school dropout rates are high among these groups (National Center for Education Statistics :2003). According to Forster (1997) and Allen (1997) poverty is one of the leading factors causing high dropout rates as children have to walk long distances bare footed and hungry to school. Similarly in a study conducted by the Ministry of Education in Zimbabwe (1995), it was found out that those pupils from low socio-economic backgrounds drop out of school to seek employment.

6.2. Economic crisis/unemployment

The economic crisis in Zimbabwe has not spared the school children as there are a number of them failing to pay their school obligations as observed by Chinyoka and Naidu (2013). The number of students failing to pay school fees has risen because of high unemployment rate in the country which can be attributed to closure of industries country wide. The World Bank (2003) has alluded to the fact that financial problems are one of the main causes of school drop outs in developing countries. Due to the closure of industries in Zimbabwe many people were left unemployed and without any source of income. Such people are unable to raise money to pay school fees for their children thereby leaving the children without any choice but to drop out of school.

6.3. Home –School distance

The Global AIDS Alliance (GAA, 2010) asserts that children will not attend school when they have to walk many kilometers to a classroom without books and without qualified teachers. In the same vein Ainsworth et al (2005) posit that distance reduces the chances of girls attending secondary education. Children in Zimbabwe in general are forced to walk long distances to and from school, which tends to be more difficult to do in rainy seasons and also in winter. This is made worse by the shortage of classrooms leading to classes being conducted under trees. Such harsh environmental factors tend to induce high secondary school dropout rates as pupils are forced to walk long distances to and from school.

6.4. Teenage pregnancies



According to Boyle et al (2002) teenage pregnancies are one of the major factors influencing school dropouts for girls. Similarly Chabaya et al (2009) assert that adolescent girls easily fall pregnant during their schooling days and adolescent parenthood is higher among poor teenagers. This scenario is very prevalent in Zimbabwe in general and in areas bordering countries with stable economies as is the case with Bulilima District due to its proximity to South Africa and Botswana. Teenage pregnancies have a huge effect in a student's life; the discrimination they get from their peers, teachers and the community at large makes it difficult for them to continue with their studies.

6.5. Family socialisation

According to Ellickson et al (1998) one of the most important factors in the education of a child is the level of education attained by the parents. Parents with low educational levels do not inspire nor motivate their children to continue with their schooling programmes. Ehrenberg and Brewer (1994) and Adams and Becker (1990) concur that parental dislike of school and lack of motivation are some of the vital factors influencing the decision by children to quit school. Likewise Garnier et al (1997) and Steinberg et al (1989) identified divorce and family stress as some of the most influential factors in a child's life, they also argue that the way parents control their children's behaviour and acceptance also have an effect on life outlook in general and staying in school in particular.

6.6. Cultural beliefs

This phenomenon mostly affects girls as they are perceived as inferior to their male counterparts. Holcamp (2009) discovered that female dropout rates in rural areas are high due to the perception amongst people that girls will eventually get married hence they will not help in accessing the family needs once they are all grown up. Leung and Zhang (2008 in Shahidul and Karim 2015) discovered that parents prefer sending boys than girls to school as an investment which will give them rewards when they reach the retirement age. Due to this belief girls always play second fiddle to their male counterparts; hence it is easy for girls to be sidelined when the family is not financial stable. In addition to that, early marriage is one of the causes of school dropouts, Molteno et al (2000 in Shahidul and Karim 2015) assert that when girls reach puberty they are considered to be old enough to get married and parents arrange their marriage on behalf of them. Such cultural beliefs have forced many girls in many communities to get married at a tender age at the expense of their schooling programmes.

7. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study was anchored on the Human Capital theory which advocates for investing in human beings through education so as to achieve personal and national development (economic and social development). It is in the light of this theory that this study was executed.

8. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study used the case study design and a qualitative method to address the issues under consideration. Yin (2003) posits that, a case study is a research design which allows for an in-depth examination of events, phenomena or other observations within a real-life context for purposes of investigation, theory development and testing, or simply as a tool for learning. The choice of the case study in the current study was due to the researchers' intention to study in depth a single case (Bulilima District out of 8 districts Matabeleland South Province) in its natural setting so as to produce credible and acceptable findings. In this study a qualitative approach was used to collect, present, analyse and interpret data from teachers, heads of schools and community members in Bulilima district.

8.1. The target population

Tuckman (1994) views a target population as any target group of individuals that has one or more characteristics in common that is of interest to the researcher for purposes of gaining information and drawing conclusions. The target population in this study comprised of all secondary school students, teachers, heads of schools, members of the greater community and the district education officer in Bulilima district. It was from this population that a sample was chosen for an intense study through relevant sampling strategies.

8.2. The Sample and Sampling Strategies

This study used the judgmental or purposive sampling or techniques to get a sample of participants. According to Kumar (2005) the judgmental or purposive sampling or techniques is the selection of key informants whom are regarded as having the required



information to achieve the goals of the research. The study sampled, teachers, heads of schools and villagers who are highly knowledgeable and understand the issue of secondary school pupils dropouts.

8.3. Data Collection Methods

Data were collected through individual interviews and focus group discussions. Teachers and youths were engaged in focus group discussions while heads of schools and community members were individually interviewed. Both structured and semi-structured interviews facilitated the direct face-to-face interaction between the researchers on one and the study participants on the other to collect rich descriptive data from the information rich informants that provided a deeper understanding to the question at hand.

8.4. Data analysis

Borgden and Biklen (1982 in Shava 2012) define qualitative data analysis as, working with data, organizing it, breaking it into manageable units, synthesizing it, searching for patterns, discovering what is important and deciding what is important and is to be learned and deciding what you will tell others. The data from interviews and focus groups was qualitatively analyzed to answer the question of secondary school drop outs in Bulilima district.

8.5. Ethical considerations

All the necessary precautions were taken to protect the study participants from possible harm in participating in this study. The objectives of the study were explained to them and were assured of both anonymity and confidentiality of the data given. The participants were advised of their rights to withdraw from participating if they find the questions being asked contradicted what they expected and that they only participated if they are willing to. Finally the researchers sought permission from the relevant ministry, through the district office to visit schools and communities to collect the much needed data on the question on hand.

9. RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The study came up with a number of reasons why secondary School pupils drop out of schools in Bulilima district. These reasons are presented and discussed below.

9.1. Absentee parents

The study revealed that many parents of pupils in Bulilima district are in the diaspora especially in South Africa and Botswana as well as in other countries in Europe and in the United States of America. Children are left in the care of their grandparents, relatives, workers or even in the care of their older siblings (child headed families). These guardians lack the proper care, guidance and counseling skills to make sure that children go to school on a daily basis resulting in children's of lack interest in school activities. One of the interviewees had this to say of the absentee parents, 'many parents in this district are in the diaspora while children have remained behind with workers and in some instances on their own. This has seen many children dropping out of school due to lack of proper guidance'. Burrus and Roberts (2012) asset that parental involvement in a student's education plays an important role for his or her success in school, hence several dropouts in the Bridgeland et al (2006 cited in Burrus and Roberts (2012)' study indicated that their parents were not engaged in their education, or had become involved too late to make a difference. Consequently these children drop out of school due to lack of interest in school resulting from lack of supervision and support from parents especially the thirteen to sixteen years (13-16 years). This age group (adolescence) needs close supervision, guidance and support from parents/guards as well as from teachers so that the children are not ill advised by peers since their moral development is still at infancy.

9.2. Financial Challenges/Hardships

The study participants indicated that the economic hardships in Zimbabwe caused by de-industrialization and high unemployment rate are a cause for concern for most people in Bulilima district as many of them are unemployed. The few who are employed earn paltry salaries which are way below the poverty datum line hence many families are wallowing in poverty. With such meagre salaries it is difficult for most families to pay fees and other related school obligations for their children resulting in them dropping out of school. This is confirmed by one villager thus, 'in this district we are very poor because we are unemployed and we do not have livestock due to persistent droughts, we are therefore unable to pay fees for our children hence many of them are out of school'. In the same vein, Shahidul (2015) et al posit that direct and indirect schooling costs are important factors for the education of children and some research indicate that schooling costs especially school fees, are a central reason for early dropout from schools.



The preference of the United States dollar over other currencies in multiple currency regimes by schools in the district has eroded the value of the rand and the pula leaving parents worse off. Study participants indicated that most students were able to pay their fees when schools did not mind which currency students paid their fees with, but when they started demanding fees in US dollars only a number of students are unable pay. Study participants also pointed out that in some cases parents are to raise tuition fees for their children but fail to raise examination fees. Examination fees are deemed to be too high and unaffordable for most rural folks. To this end Ananga (2011) asserts that Children from low socio-economic households, and those that are vulnerable and prone to income shocks, commonly face some form of demand to withdraw from school if their parents cannot afford the direct cost of education.

9.3. Poverty and Hunger

Poverty and hunger were also highlighted by study participants as some of the causes of secondary school pupils dropouts in Bulilima District. The district is poverty stricken with most families dependent upon remittances from family members who are based in the diaspora especially in South Africa and Botswana. These remittances are generally not enough for essentials like foodstuffs and children's school fees. Bulilima District is in region 5, which receives the least rainfall in Zimbabwe. Drought is therefore a persistent feature in the district, thus children in Bulilima District are adversely affected by hunger, making it difficult for them to go to school on an empty stomach. 'In this district poverty and hunger are the order of the day as our parents do not have the resources to feed us and send us to school at the same time, hence many of us are out of school', these are the words of one focus group discussant. Burrus and Roberts (2012) found a strong relationship between poverty and the dropout rate: The higher the percentage of a school's students living in poverty, the higher the dropout rate. Poverty seems to be one of the strongest, if not the strongest, predictor of a school's dropout rate. Consequently, due to hunger and poverty secondary school pupils in Bulilima are forced out of school so as to find some form of employment to supplement family income.

9.4. Home- School distance

The study established that in Bulilima district there are very few secondary schools in comparison to primary schools. This means that secondary school pupils in the district walk long distances to access education. In extreme cases pupils leave home as early as 4am and arrive back home around 6pm. One interviewee acknowledged this fact thus, 'we have very few secondary schools in this district, leaving our children to travel long distances to and from school as a result some children drop out of school due to these long distances especially girls'. Ainsworth et al (2005) posits that distance reduces the chances of girls attending secondary education. In the same vein Ananga (2011) opines that research points to distance to school being an important determinant of educational access. For example, in cases in which there are more primary schools than junior high schools in the locality, and in which the only available secondary school is further away, the distance to the latter may be considered too far for younger children, especially girls. This issue becomes more problematic during the rain and winter seasons, when children have to cross flooded rivers and waking up at dawn during the winter season. Such harsh and unfriendly weather conditions immensely contribute to high secondary school drop outs in Bulilima district.

9.5. Students migration

Study participants also indicated that a combination of factors comprising of poverty, unemployment and the pull of the rand and that of the pula, are some of the major causes of secondary school pupils dropping out school. It was revealed that the desire to migrate to South Africa and Botswana to seek employment is a major reason to drop out of school by teenagers in Bulilima district. These pupils are easily enticed to drop out of school by their peers who come back home from these two countries wearing the latest trends in the fashion industry and some even driving flashy cars to join the great trek to South Africa and Botswana seen as the land of milk and honey. 'Our children here are forced to drop out of school in order to go to seek employment in South Africa and Botswana because they envy those who are already working there that seem to be doing well' said one interviewee. Soares, Fernandes, Nóbrega and Nicolell (2015) report that in Brazil, high school dropout is influenced by the need for youngsters to enter the job market, be it because they need to contribute to the family budget or a desire to have their own money.

9.6. Teenage pregnancies

Teenage pregnancies were reported as one of the thorny issues affecting girls' participation in school in Bulilima District. 'School children in this area indulge in a lot of sexual activities, without even taking preventive measures leading to pregnancies, hence many



school children are out of school due to pregnancies' said one member of a focus group discussion. According to Bulawayo 24 News (10 October 2014), ten schoolgirls from Tokwana High School in Bulilima have been expelled from school as a result of pregnancy. In the same vein, Mzuza, Yudong and Kapute (2014) assert that many girls are caught up with age after puberty (12 years or more) and end up getting married or impregnated while at school. Similarly the Financial gazette (March12 2015) indicates that 110 primary school pupils, dropped out of school in Zimbabwe after falling pregnant in 2013 alone, while 71 stopped going to school after getting married. In the case of Bulilima girls are led astray by boys and by elderly men coming back home from South Africa (injiva) or Botswana driving flashy cars and enticing them with gifts into having sex, resulting pregnancies. Although no laws prohibit pregnant girls from continuing with schooling in Zimbabwe, it is however the discrimination they get from their peers, teachers and members of the greater community who make them quit school as they seen as people of loose morals.

9.7. Peer pressure

Study participants also revealed that peer pressure plays a huge role in children's interests to stay in school or drop out. It was reported that peer pressure leads to the involvement of teens in drug and alcohol abuse leading to dropping out of school. 'Many school children in this area dropout of school due to bad influence of friends who are not interested in education but want to spend their time drinking beer and other illicit activities' said one member of a focus group discussion. Omollo (2013) reported that in USA peer pressure significantly contributes to higher rates of cigarette, marijuana and other illicit drug usage among school drop outs than student who graduated from high school. In the same vein Sunita (2011) argues that students living in slum areas are more likely to have friends as dropouts which may also influence the decision of others to discontinue school. Around 15 percent of children cited this as one of the significant causes for dropping out as they did not like to attend school without their friends.

9.8. Family disorientation

The study discovered that broken families are also a cause for school dropouts in Bulilima district, as many families are disoriented due to cases of divorce, families living in separation including single parent families. In such family environments children suffer most as their material, financial and emotional needs are compromised; hence their schooling programmes are easily terminated due to lack of parental support. Cornelious and Lockett (2015)'s study revealed that a parents' decision to divorce influenced 15% of the students to leave school early and living with one parent (single-parent home) influenced 20% of the students to leave school early. Similarly Sunita (2011) posits that quite often family environment of households living in slums turns violent for a variety of reasons, financial constraints, job loss and chronic unemployment, addiction to alcohol and other substances can lead to frequent disruptions in the family. This can be unbearable for several children, they lose interest and attend school mechanically leading to low academic performance that may ultimately result in dropout.

10. RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of the above findings, the study recommends that:

- the government of Zimbabwe subsidises examination fees to make it affordable by all school children inclusive of those from poor families.
- the government of Zimbabwe implements the free education policy in line with the constitution of Zimbabwe so that even children from the underprivileged families can afford to go to school.
- the government of Zimbabwe in collaboration with key partners builds more secondary schools in Bulilima District in order to reduce the long distances travelled by children to school.
- the government of Zimbabwe in partnership with nongovernmental organizations provides feeding to children in both primary and secondary schools in Bulilima district in order to cushion children from poverty stricken families.
- the ministries of Primary and Secondary Education and Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare intensify both career guidance and guidance and counseling to inculcate positive attitudes towards education and be informed of career options available to them in Zimbabwe.
- the courts in Zimbabwe apply stiff penalties to elderly man who impregnates young school in order to curb school girls pregnancies.
- all stakeholders in education including health officials launch awareness campaigns targeting teenagers to encourage them to abstain from sex at all cost especially when they are still of school going age.



- the government of Zimbabwe and other stakeholders in education introduce scholarships and bursaries for children from financially disadvantaged families in rural areas in order to augment those already in place.
- the government of Zimbabwe and civil society organizations come up with community based projects such as irrigation schemes which will become a source of revenue for villagers and also create employment in the district.

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