

GIRL CHILD DROPOUTS IN ZIMBABWEAN SECONDARY SCHOOLS: A CASE STUDY OF CHADZAMIRA SECONDARY SCHOOL IN GUTU DISTRICT

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ABSTRACT

While the incidence of childhood school dropout has been debated in recent education studies in developing countries like Zimbabwe, these studies have almost universally emphasized the child's (both boy and girl child) right to education. Insignificant attention, however, has been devoted to examining the specific causes and effects of girl child dropouts in secondary schools, particularly in the countryside where the problem is widespread. Yet, girl child dropout is a serious problem that affects the national development of Zimbabwe specifically and Africa in general. This paper examines the causes and effects of rural girl child dropouts in Zimbabwean secondary schools, using the Chadzamira secondary school of Gutu rural district as a case study. The choice of Zimbabwe and, in particular Chadzamira secondary school, is not accidental. Although Zimbabwe is a developing country with a high literacy rate, the 'girl child dropout rate', especially in rural secondary schools, remains high. Questionnaires comprised of closed and open items were used for data collection. Data was summarized in means of frequency tables and analyzed qualitatively using evaluative descriptions. This study reveals that most of the girl child dropouts were a result of early marriages, abject poverty, and economic hardships as well as religious and traditional beliefs that work against educating the girl child. This paper recommends that civil education and the conscientisation of rural parents, teachers and the girl child on the importance of girl child education be made as a matter of urgency if the current situation is to be remedied. These

are tasks that can be shared by non-governmental organizations and the national government.

Introduction

In Africa, the causes of girl child dropouts and the impact of this phenomenon on national and regional development are not well researched. Yet, most if not all developing countries in Africa are dramatically affected, economically or otherwise, by ever increasing girl child dropouts. Zimbabwe, with a population of 14.5 million, has a literacy rate of approximately 80%, one of the highest in sub-Saharan Africa (Ipsnewsnet, 2011). Yet, according to UNICEF: Zimbabwe (2006), girls are the first to drop out of school during the social and economic crisis that many developing countries like Zimbabwe face. In Zimbabwe, like in other African countries, although there have been some strides towards mainstreaming gender issues in development, the causes and effects of girl child dropout, especially in the countryside, remain understudied and thus under appreciated. The little progress that has been made appears to be concentrated in urban areas, hence the continuing marginalization of rural women.

In Zimbabwe, the education system and society at large, over the years, have been affected in various ways by girl child dropout. Girl child dropouts in many schools have resulted in overstaffing in turn causing some teachers to lose their jobs or be forcibly transferred to other schools. This job loss or transfer has serious socio-economic ramifications for the affected teachers and their families. School dropouts in any society are a serious social liability as youth and adults without sufficient education are unable to contribute meaningfully to nation building. In fact, many dropouts engage in anti-social and criminal activities that leading to further disharmony and socio-economic instability. The ongoing neglect of such an important topic to developing countries in the post-colonization era renders the problem a near permanent stumbling block on the road to gender equality and the elimination of poverty.

In Africa high rates of girl child dropout have been attributed to various factors including abject poverty, economic hardships, early marriages and the mistaken religious and traditional belief that educating a girl child is a waste of resources. While these causes may be true of Africa in general, it is important to examine whether they are the same causes affecting the Zimbabwean rural secondary school girl child. Educational planning and policies need to be contextually-specific and this focused type of research will go a long way towards informing such policies. At the same time it is likely to uncover trends and insights relevant to other developing country locales.

This paper thus examines the causes and effects of girl child dropouts in Zimbabwe's rural secondary schools. The chapter adopts Chadzamira secondary school of Gutu rural district as a case study. Chadzamira secondary school, as a rural school dramatically affected by girl child dropouts, in a way represents other Zimbabwean rural schools with the same problem. The causes and effects of girl child dropout at Chadzamira secondary school may thus be relevant to the rural schools wishing to confront this phenomenon.

As a researcher of educational issues in Africa and Zimbabwe in particular, I have come to realize that most researchers of Zimbabwean education (Chivore 1986; Chanakira 1986; Manyuchi, 1990) try to tackle educational problems that affect all students, those in both rural and urban schools. They fail to acknowledge the significant differences between these two educational settings and thus overlook issues of specific importance to the rural pupil, particularly the rural girl child. Education in Zimbabwe has failed to document, by default or otherwise, the causes and consequences of girl child dropouts in Zimbabwe's rural secondary schools. The country's rural citizens are systematically marginalized from the drafting, development and implementation of education policy and the many related issues that directly affect their everyday lives.

Conceptual Analysis of Dropout

Loxley in Hussen & Postlewhite (1985, p. 12) defines dropouts as “those pupils who leave school before the final year of the educational cycle in which they are enrolled, which could be primary, ordinary or advanced level, or even college or university levels”. In more or less the same way, Chivore (1986, p. 11) defines a dropout as “a pupil who ceases to attend school either temporarily or permanently, before completing the given educational cycle”. Both of these definitions emphasize the fact that a pupil leaves school before completing a given educational cycle. What needs to be emphasized in both definitions, however, is that the pupils do not only leave school, but do so without the school’s consent. This makes it difficult for schools to account for the dropout or to help the pupil intending to dropout before s/he does so. In light of this, I shall use the term dropout to refer to a pupil who leaves school before completing a given educational cycle without the school’s consent.

Research Question and Methodological Issues

The present study seeks to address the question: can the results from an analysis of girl child dropouts be used to foster positive behavioral changes in rural populations and thus improve Zimbabwe’s future educational policies and socio-economic situation?

This research relies on archival studies (school registers), questionnaires and in-depth interviews. This study was carried out at the Chadzamira secondary school in Gutu district, Masvingo province, Zimbabwe between January and July 2011. In addition to school registers, this study involved a sample of 30 people (12 students, 9 teachers and 9 parents/guardians). This study has been located in the Gutu communal area, and in Chadzamira secondary school in particular, in the hope that it will be representative of other rural secondary schools in Zimbabwe facing similar educational problems.

As highlighted above, unstructured interviews were used in this study. Unstructured interviews here entail orally presenting questions to an informant and recording the responses either in written notes in pocket books or on an audio-recording device for

subsequent transcription and analysis. In framing questions for these in-depth interviews, I was guided by the works of Erik Hofstee. According to Hofstee (2006, p. 135), “background type questions are important when carrying out in-depth interviews and it is also important to keep the interviewee to the topic being discussed, but it can pay not to be too rigid”. One of the advantages of in-depth interviews is that the interviewee may give you more than what you had expected. However, “if not carefully administered, interviews can produce misleading responses, thereby affecting results” (Hofstee, p. 136).

The aim of interviews was to complement and substantiate data collected from school records. As these were in-depth interviews, respondents were not asked questions that would elicit only a yes or no answer. The individual interviews thus generated elaborate explanation of respondents’ views and opinions on educational problems affecting the girl child. The use of both archival studies and interviews was a suitable approach for the gathering of comprehensible information on the causes and effects of girl child dropouts in rural secondary schools. The archival study was used to select the project location and then to determine the major issues confronting Chadzamira secondary school. To supplement the archival study, interviews were conducted to get more information on the possible causes and effects of girl child dropouts, and on how the problem could be addressed.

Those who participated in the study represented a range of socio-economic backgrounds in the hopes that this would render the study more representative of rural African society. Participants ranged in age from thirteen to sixty-five years old, an age group considered appropriate for the study given that most of those involved in educational issues in Zimbabwe fall within this range. More women than men were sampled for the simple reason that the issue being studied has more of a direct impact on women. More so, women are generally less represented or misrepresented in social science research, a trend that this study did not wish to continue.

The questionnaires in this study consisted of open-ended (free response) questions and closed-ended (fixed alternative) questions (White, 2005, p. 126). This was in agreement with the CACC Module (s.d, p. 103) which states that “a good questionnaire should contain both open-ended and closed-ended questions so that the responses from the two can be checked and compared.” The open-ended questions allowed the respondent to reply as s/he liked and did not confine him/her to a single alternative (Behr, 1988). This is to say, open-ended or free response questions give a respondent an opportunity to answer sufficiently and provide all or additional details to clarify their answers. Open-ended questions are best suited to more complex issues that cannot be elaborated in closed-ended questions. They evoke a fuller and richer response as they go beyond statistical data into the hidden motivations that lie behind attitudes, interests, preferences and decisions. However, it was not possible to discuss all the responses received since, as White (ibid) notes open-ended questions may lead to the collection of worthless and irrelevant information. With this view in mind, the researcher selected and discussed (below) what he thought were relevant responses.

Close-ended questions were used because this type of questioning facilitates answering and makes it easier for the researcher to code and classify responses, especially in this case where a large number of questionnaires were to be dealt with. Close-ended questions may, however, have the effect of forcing the respondent to think along certain lines which s/he might not have done had s/he been left to generate his/her own responses. In view of this, both types of questions were used to bring the benefits of both to this study and so that the responses from the two could be checked and compared (Behr, 1988).

Participants were assured of the confidentiality of their responses and were asked not to identify themselves by name. The data collected from school registers, questionnaires and interviews was tabulated to show frequencies before being subjected to evaluative analysis. Tables 1, 2 and 3 respectively contain the details of the people who participated in the study and the data that was gathered.

Table 1: Respondent Demographics

Occupation/Status	Age Range	Gender	
		Male	Female
Teachers	20-60	3	6
Parents/Guardians	35-65	4	5
Students	13-20	4	8

Table 2: Closed Questionnaire Item Responses

ITEM	RESPONSES		
	Strongly agree	Strongly disagree	Uncertain
1. Child dropouts in rural secondary schools are more common among girls than boys.	30	0	0
2. Girl child dropouts are a result of early marriages.	24	5	1
3. Girl child dropouts are a result of pregnancy.	21	7	1
4. Girl child dropouts are a result of the traditional belief that it is a waste of resources to educate a girl child.	24	5	1
5. Girl child dropouts are a result of economic hardships.	24	5	1
6. Girl child dropouts are a result of illness and death.	2	27	1
7. Girl child dropouts are a result of abject poverty among the rural population.	24	5	1
8. Girl child dropouts are a result of expulsion	2	28	0
9. Should measures be put in place to curb girl child drop outs	27	2	1
10. Girl child dropout results in high unemployment rates	27	3	0
11. Girl child dropout results in high HIV/AIDS rates.	24	4	2
12. Girl child dropout results in uneducated mothers yet educated mothers have more socio-economic value to their husbands and society.	27	2	1

Table 3: Details of the Records for Dropouts between January and July 2011 at Chadzamira Secondary School

Forms	Initial number of girls	Initial number of boys	Total number of boys and girls	Number of girl drop outs	Number of boy drop outs	Causes		
						Poverty/ Economic hardship	Pregnancy/ Marriage	Traditions/ Beliefs
1A	20	16	36	1	0	0	0	1
1B	22	22	44	2	0	1	1	0
2A	19	24	43	2	0	1	0	1
2B	26	13	39	2	2	1	2	1
3A	27	10	37	2	0	0	2	
3B	15	19	44	0	2	0	1	1
4A	25	19	44	2	1	1	2	0
4B	17	32	49	3	1	1	2	1

DISCUSSION

The findings presented in this research are based on data collected from residents of Gutu rural district over a period of six months, from January to July 2011. The primary objective was to obtain comprehensive information about the causes and effects of girl child dropouts in rural secondary schools through a combination of school records, questionnaires and interviews. The secondary objective was to explore possible solutions to the girl child dropout problem from those who are directly affected.

The research results as shown in Table 2 reveal different perceptions on girl child dropouts in rural secondary schools. The main reasons for girl child dropout at Chadzamira secondary school were poverty and economic hardships, which accounted for 80% of the dropouts. Given these dire economic circumstances, parents cannot raise the required money for school fees, uniforms and stationery. With the economic crisis that Zimbabwe has recently been experiencing, money to buy food, a basic need, is still a serious problem. It is thus difficult for impoverished children to attend school and cope with school work because of hunger and lack of funds for fees, uniforms and stationery.

There was consensus (100%) among respondents that school dropout in rural areas was more common among girls than boys. Reasons given were varied, but included pregnancy, early marriage, and religious and traditional beliefs that educating a girl child is a waste of resources. The majority of respondents (80%) felt that girl child dropouts in rural secondary schools are the result of the religious and traditional beliefs of some parents. Some rural parents still believe that educating a girl child is a waste of resources as she will ultimately leave home for marriage. Such views were repeatedly attributed to the Johane Marange Apostolic religious sect in the area.

On whether immediate measures should be taken to prevent girl child dropout, an overwhelming majority (90%) of respondents agreed. This finding supports results from a recent study on Mozambique's education by Rambe and Mawere. According to Rambe and Mawere's (2011), impoverished students from deprived backgrounds need support to enhance their capacity to grasp the fundamental assumptions underpinning educational discourses. This is to say that for girl children to realize the negative effects of dropping out of school they will require both material and intellectual empowerment.

It should be noted that in the present study a minority (7%) opposes new measures to curb girl child dropouts. This minority still holds the belief that educating a girl child is a waste of resources (time and money). This is a belief that remains pervasive in many parts of Zimbabwean society, especially the countryside. For such people, as long as the girl child is able to read and write, she is educated enough. The children most affected by these religious and traditional beliefs are children of uneducated parents and Johane Marange Apostolic religious sect members who still consider the sale of the girl child to a husband to be desired by the parents. In these homes, the girl-child has to conform to the parents' wishes and join the husband before completing school (Ministry of Education, 1986). As long as such beliefs go unchallenged, women will remain enslaved in the shackles of subservience and on the periphery of society and development.

Though efforts have been made by the government to educate the girl child, these efforts seem to be much more theoretical than practical. The efforts have little merit for rural women and girls as they appear to be concentrated in urban areas where there are active women's rights and girl child networks. This is worrisome as the rural girl child, and thus the rural woman is again left out of policy decisions and socio-economic development. The ongoing failure to put in place stringent measures countering girl child dropout will have serious negative effects on nation building and national progress.

The Effect(s) of Girl Child Dropouts

The effects of girl child dropouts are many and vary depending who is identified as being impacted. Those affected include the girl child herself, parents/guardians, teachers, her local community and the nation as a whole.

Increase in Illiteracy

Zimbabwe, with a population of 14.5 million, has an estimated literacy rate of 80 percent, one of the highest in sub-Saharan Africa (Ipsnewsnet, 2011). Surprisingly, however, the girl child dropout rate remains high. High dropout rate poses a threat to the development of the country as this reduces the educational and literacy levels of its citizens. High dropout rates also pose a threat to the ability of a mother, the first teacher of her children, to pass literacy and other formal education skills onto her children.

Results from the open-ended interview questions revealed that the majority (90%) of respondents believe that a woman who has not attained higher education has a comprised dignity and socio-economic value in the eyes of her husband and society at large. As one of the respondents aptly commented: "It is has become a norm in today's society that a woman who has attained higher education has more socio-economic value and is more respected than uneducated counterparts". The majority of the respondents also cited education and not appearance as a value most cherished by society and most relevant to stabilizing today's matrimonial systems.

More interesting perhaps was the remark by one of the participants who happened to be a female teacher: “One of the mothers of the girl child dropout in form two is my former classmate who was also a dropout”. A number of respondents echoed similar sentiments – that most uneducated parents do not encourage or send their children to school. This is because uneducated parents normally do not see the value of education. However, the majority of respondents were also quick to point out that not all uneducated parents see little value in educating their children although they may require insight into the importance of education, especially for the girl child.

Unemployment Problems and Underdevelopment of the Country

Employees today are hired on the basis of their qualifications. Those with higher qualifications, academic or otherwise, have higher chances of securing employment. This means that the least educated, including dropouts, risk chronic unemployment. Their ability to contribute to the national economy is consequently compromised and a vicious circle of poverty, where the poor and uneducated along with their families remain poor and uneducated, is born. Women often experience the extremities of this poverty as their illiteracy and economic dependency further prevents them from challenging systemic societal discrimination. Most of Zimbabwe’s female population lives in rural areas and these women tend to be less educated, poorer and more often unemployed than their urban counterparts. The failure of the government to address girl child dropout rates as a poverty risk factor is not only a detriment to these women, but a failure to honor the United Nations 1980 Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the 1993 Declaration on Violence against Women; documents to which Zimbabwe is a signatory.

From an economic perspective, dropouts increase the burdens placed on government planners and programs. Child trafficking to neighboring countries and child labor are both on the rise, fuelled in part by childhood dropouts. The number of children living and earning an income on the streets is likewise on the rise. All of these problems represent a

drain on the socio-economic resources of the country rendering dropouts an obstacle to the development of communities and the nation at large.

Anti-social Behavior and Increases in Crime Rates and HIV/Aids

Based on the data obtained from the open-ended questionnaire, it appears that dropouts also engage in anti-social behavior and increase crime rates in the area in which they live. The most serious problems cited for both male and female dropouts were drug abuse, robbery/pick pocketing, alcohol consumption and prostitution. These behaviors undoubtedly set a poor example for other young people in the community. Although the present research was not carried out in the United States of America, its findings seem to support those of a report by the No Dropout Organization's (2010), which revealed that in a four-year study in San Francisco, "94% of young murder victims were high school drop outs".

As depicted by the school records shown in Table 2, half of the girl child dropouts are a result of pregnancies and early marriages. This may be the result of customary marriages such as *kuzvarira* which are still common in most religious sects in the area. *Kuzvarira* involves marrying off, without her consent, an underage girl (sometimes before birth) to a rich man who already has another wife or wives in exchange for money, food and other material possessions that guarantee the girl's family will not suffer acute economic deprivation ever again (Financial Gazette, 2/12/2004). Given that these customary marriages are potentially polygamous, they permit negative practices that compound gender discrimination (Sardc, 2008). These discriminatory practices include increased exposure to HIV/AIDS. Since the wealthy men to whom the girl child is sold have many sexual partners the risk of the girl child becoming infected with HIV/AIDS is very high. It is thus clear that the Zimbabwean government must make gender equality a central part of national education and AIDS programs if it is to succeed in fighting both the dropout problem and the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

Resource Wastage in Education

As the cost of providing educational services to the entire country is very high and represents a significant investment, the Ministry of Education must account for all of its educational expenditures. According to Chanakira (1986:13), “it is imperative that the government eliminates all forms of resource wastage, financial, material and human.”. Educational wastage can be used to describe the number of years spent dropouts in the education system before they dropout. The time and money spent on dropouts at any grade level means a great loss of government investment as they do not obtain a degree or the employment benefits that come with a degree. As Hussen and Postlewhite (1985: 12) point out, “the money invested and lost through someone who does not complete an educational cycle, cannot be recovered and means a loss of resources by government”. According to Chivore (1986: 11), the implications of dropouts for educational wastage include:

- Money invested by the state is under-utilized
- Materials and resources bought for schools and classrooms are not fully used
- Dropouts do not fulfill their educational capacity or potential
- The dropout does not fully contribute to the country’s economy
- The dropout becomes a liability to the country instead of an asset
- The dropout reduces opportunities for other children who could have better utilized educational resources to the benefit of the country.

Confronting the Problem: Some Recommendations

Insignificant attention has been devoted to examining the causes and effects of girl child dropouts despite this being a common problem in rural African secondary schools. Girl child dropouts are not only a threat to the girl child’s life, but a fundamental socio-cultural, economic and national concern. Zimbabwe, like other developing countries, can be characterized by unstable education and economic systems due to a number of threatening problems, girl child dropouts being one of the most serious one.

In view of the above, there is an urgent need to seek permanent and lasting solutions that will reduce the number of girl child dropouts. In the present study, the preferred solution,

ranked by respondents in terms of effectiveness, was to educate parents/guardians, teachers and the girl child on the importance of girl child education to society. The enforcement of the compulsory free primary and secondary education policy with needed resources provided to all poor girl children and an increase in education budget allocations by government was also cited as a lasting and effective solution. Such a measure however requires that the Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture expand the Basic Education Assistance Module (BEAM) through the Ministry of Social Welfare to cover all underprivileged and vulnerable groups. This could be accomplished by seeking donor funding for stationery, school fees and uniforms for poor pupils, and putting in place more punitive measures that deter parents who willingly deny girl children their right to education. Organizations like Girl Child Network Worldwide might be approached to offer financial or in-kind assistance. Girl Child Network Worldwide is an organization that supports and promotes girls' rights, empowerment and education by reaching out to girls wherever they are economically deprived, at risk of abuse, subject to harmful cultural practices, or living in areas of instability.

All of these important measures should be complemented by the provision of guidance and counseling programs to pupils to help them overcome different challenges they experience (Chivore, 1985:91-92) and to reiterate the importance of education. Such programs can help to reduce educational wastage, especially when targeted to potential dropouts including:

- Those who are two years older than their peers.
- Those who have poor attendance at school.
- Those who read below their age group.
- Those who habitually resist the teacher's and headmaster's authority.
- Those who have little or no interest in school work.
- Those who cannot afford to do what other pupils do.
- Those who benefit from automatic promotion.
- Those who resort to pleasure through the consumption of drugs or alcohol (The Ministry of Education 1986).

In order to succeed at such a mammoth task, school teachers and parents must be kept abreast of all necessary and new pedagogical skills for reducing dropouts and instilling

motivation in learners. More workshops thus should be undertaken to educate both parents and teachers on how they can help to curb girl child dropout. This study thus calls for the empowerment of the rural girl child, teacher and guardian. Empowerment “is not a means to an end but is the objective of development. It entails more than having the mandate to make decisions as it demands the knowledge to make right decisions by those that are directly affected” (Mawere 2011: 881). It is important therefore for Zimbabwe’s Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture to realize that the problem of girl child dropouts can never be solved at national level if it is not dealt with from the grassroots levels, mainly at in rural secondary schools where the problem is most rampant.

A people-centered approach, that is, the direct involvement of the affected population – the rural girl child, the rural school teacher and parent/guardian – must be adopted. These three parties should be regularly made aware of the importance of girl child education. Such awareness programs can be initiated by both the government and non-governmental organizations through civic education and workshops. If such initiatives are carefully executed in rural communities (particularly in rural secondary schools) with the aforementioned parties, they are likely to bring about positive results in terms of combating girl child dropouts in Zimbabwe and by extension Africa and beyond.

CONCLUSION

For this research, questionnaires were administered to thirty respondents and eight classes of forms were studied in order to determine the causes and impacts of girl child dropouts at Chadzamira secondary school. The data was then tabulated to show frequencies before being subjected to critical analysis and assessing the causes and impacts of girl child dropout.

In light of increasing girl child dropouts in Zimbabwean rural secondary schools, the researcher argued that contemporary Zimbabweans, and by extension Africans, must strive to advance positive intellectual thinking, or to positively challenge the internally and externally manipulated forces of mental and cultural values that are potentially

dangerous for our collective intellectual and socio-economic life. In particular, the researcher recommended that civil education on the importance of girl child education be offered to parents, teachers and the girl child if the current situation is to be improved. Education or awareness programs can be delivered by both non-governmental organizations and the national government.

This study has also revealed that although girl child dropout is an understudied subject, it is not a new and unique problem to Zimbabwe, but is common to most developing countries in Africa and beyond. It has been argued that in Zimbabwe in particular, the problem of girl child dropout is more severe in rural secondary schools than in urban schools. Traditional beliefs, economic hardships, the abject poverty of rural population, pregnancy, early marriage, illness/death and expulsion were among the causes noted in the study. These remain significant obstacles to the elimination of girl child dropouts and improved quality of life for rural women in general.

This study has recommended that the problem of girl child dropout can only be tackled if swift and immediate measures are put in place. These measures must include the active involvement of the group/people directly affected including the rural girl child, secondary school teachers and parents/guardians. Overall, this study is a bold step towards important and overdue cultural and educational reforms in Zimbabwe's education system.

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