Article

Education and the Development Agenda: An Analysis of Factors Influencing Primary School Learners' Outcomes in Hwange and Binga Districts, Zimbabwe

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Abstract

This article reports on a study which focused on analysing factors that influence primary school learners' outcomes in Hwange and Binga districts, Matabeleland North, Zimbabwe. Education policies that have been implemented by the government of Zimbabwe guided the philosophy underpinning the study. The researcher used both qualitative and quantitative approaches in the research methodology. The study participants were selected through purposive sampling of schools with a zero pass rate in the Hwange and Binga districts. School authorities that responded to the semi-structured interview were purposively sampled by focusing on the school heads and the Grade 7 teachers. The learners who participated in the focus group discussions were randomly assigned to the sample making use of the school attendance registers and limiting the focus group discussions to a maximum of six participants per school. The findings revealed that the challenges that affect learners' academic performance include the shortage of textbooks in the newly introduced learning areas; the poor infrastructure in schools; and the low motivation of teachers. One of the recommendations of the study was that local gatekeepers should engage in community awareness campaigns aimed at educating communities on the importance of education for children and advocating for the legislation of punitive policies that will see parents who unnecessarily absent their children from school being punished.

Keywords: academic performance; human capital; education and development; infrastructure; library; qualified teachers

UNISA university of south africa PRESS

Africanus: Journal of Development Studies
https://upjournals.co.za/index.php/6526
Volume 49 | Number 2 | 2019 | #6526 | 20 pages

https://doi.org/10.25159/2663-6522/6526
ISSN 2663-6581 (Online)

Introduction

Education is recognised as an important apparatus which can be used to break structures that subject individuals to vulnerability, exploitation and poverty (Handley, Higgins and Sharma 2009; Mahon 2010). According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO 2005), an educated child is mostly likely to succeed socially, economically and politically; this is key in achieving community development. Sen (2003, 78) states that "the capabilities that adults enjoy are deeply conditioned on their experiences as children and that a securely preparatory childhood can align our skill in living a good life". The understanding is that when nations invest in educating children they impart skills that the learners can use in future as a form of livelihood which is important in breaking intergenerational poverty (Sen 2003). Mahon (2010) explains that there has been a shift by the World Bank and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) from neoliberal welfare cuts to advocacy for programmes aimed at investing in children's human development capacities in the process eradicating extreme poverty and promoting wealth creation. According to Sachs (2018, 85), education is one of the key goals of the 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs), with SDG 4 aiming to "ensure inclusive quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all". In other words, education is a pivotal component for the sustainable development of global society. UNESCO (2011) claims that each additional year of schooling raises a country's average annual gross domestic growth by 0.3%, adding that no country has ever climbed the human development ladder without steady investment in education. It is important to understand that although developing countries have often made considerable investment in the education sector, they still compete for the bottom position on the human development ladder. An analysis of the 2015–2020 Zimbabwe national budgets revealed that the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (MoPSE) was allocated the largest chunk of the national budget when compared with other government ministries over the past five years (Taruvinga 2019). It is important to note that despite the considerable investment in education, the human development index value for Zimbabwe stood at 0.535 in 2017, which put the country in position 156 out of 189 on the human development ladder. As such, it is critical for the study to assess the factors that affect learners' educational outcomes whilst appreciating that a considerable amount of investment has been committed to the Education Department. This analysis comes through recognising that it is difficult for a country to progress economically, socially, politically and economically without educating its people (UN 2018; UNESCO 2011; Yeats 2010).

According to the Education Sector Strategic Plan 2016–2020 (MoPSE 2016), Zimbabwe's national vision of becoming an upper middle income country by the year 2030 looks to education to provide a workforce with competency in Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Mathematics (STEAM). MoPSE (2016) notes that whilst the nation prides itself on a

literacy rate of 92%, there is a need to ensure that schools are built and equipped, particularly in the new resettlement areas. The idea is to improve the learners' academic performance through raising a generation of educated individuals which is key to the reduction of income poverty and promotion of community development.

Background of the Study

An analysis of the learners' academic performance showed the stunted progress of the education sector in developing human capital. Twenty-nine schools in Matabeleland North recorded a 0% pass rate in the November 2018 Grade 7 public examinations. This is a negative outcome that is affecting the education system in Zimbabwe with implications in derailing the efforts of the nation towards building human capital. Matabeleland North continues to suffer from poor performance in relation to national school examinations. In 2018 alone, 29 schools from the aforementioned province recorded a 0% pass rate, whereas in the previous year a total of 31 schools had recorded the same disappointing 0%. The province has been on the tail end of performance nationally, standing at a staggering 10th position out of 10 for three years as of 2018 (Katongomara 2018). An analysis of the November 2018 Grade 7 results highlights that of the 29 primary schools with a 0% pass rate, six were satellite schools while 23 were well established schools. Satellite schools are those which MoPSE has given permission to be established with a minimum of 20 children but they are not yet registered as they do not meet the criteria. Each satellite school is overseen by a registered mother school and the head teacher responsible for the satellite school is the head teacher from the mother school (MoPSE 2016, 7).

The study sought to identify the root causes affecting the education system and slowing down progress towards achieving the national vision of becoming an upper middle income country by the year 2030. A number of factors have received attention in an effort to understand the root causes for poor performance. From an administrative point of view, the mismatch between the number of staff and learner enrolment has attracted concern. In one interview the deputy director responsible for primary education highlighted that 230 permanent teachers were employed and deployed to Matabeleland North, yet there was still a deficit of about 300 teachers (Katongomara 2018).

What is obvious to outsiders is that the province is performing badly and that is a cause for concern. The province has received a number of government programmes, such as the Early Reading Initiative (ERI), the Performance Lag Address Programme (PLAP) and school feeding programmes, as part of efforts to enhance performance; however, the performance challenge persists. From this backdrop, the study sought to disinter the factors influencing provincial outcomes for Grade 7 learners.

Table 1: Matabeleland North Grade 7 percentage pass rate analysis (2014–2018)

Year	Grade 7 percentage pass rate
2014	38
2015	18
2016	24
2017	29
2018	29

Source: Katongomara (2018); MoPSE (2016)

Key National Policy Documents for Education

Presidential Inquiry into Education and Training (1999)

In 1999, the former president of Zimbabwe set up a presidential inquiry to review the entire education and training system in the country (Mawere 2013). The inquiry provided a comprehensive picture of the strengths and weakness of the education system in Zimbabwe which was vital in the development of a framework that was going to help the education system produce graduates who are able to meet the country's development needs (Nziramasanga 1999). According to Mawere (2013), the inquiry recommended that it was critical to overhaul the curriculum at all levels. The central objective of the proposed recommendations was to promote practical skills in primary school through the introduction of vocational education which was to be complemented by vocational training in secondary school (Nziramasanga 1999). The idea was to ensure that learners at all levels are equipped with practical life skills (Nziramasanga 1999).

Short Term Recovery Programme (2009–2010)

The government of Zimbabwe introduced the Short Term Recovery Programme in reaction to the crisis period between 2000 and 2008 that saw a number of teachers migrating to neighbouring countries in pursuit of greener pastures (Allen 2009). According to Kanyenze et al. (2011), the crisis period left the education sector in a deplorable state which negatively affected learners' academic outcomes. It was on this basis that the Short Term Recovery Programme had the objective of improving the teachers' working conditions which included providing incentives to attract those who had migrated to neighbouring countries (Allen 2009). It was vital for the study to establish if the teachers in the two districts under review had good enough working conditions to address the challenge of high attrition.

Zimbabwe Medium Term Plan (2011–2015)

The Zimbabwe Medium Term Plan of 2011–2015 emphasised the importance of investing in the education sector through the provision of five key policy targets that included: reducing the teacher pupil ratio at primary school to 28:1 by 2015; reducing the pupil-text book ratio at primary school to 1:1 by 2015; allocating 30% of the total budget to the education sector by 2015; achieving gender parity at secondary and tertiary level by 2015; and increasing the literacy rate from 88.4% to 98% by 2015 (MEPIP 2011). According to the Ministry of Economic Planning and Investment (MEPIP 2011), the policy measures put in place in the Zimbabwe Medium Term Plan were aimed at promoting quality education in Zimbabwe through appreciating that human capital development in the form of education is a major tool for sustainable development.

Zimbabwe Agenda for Sustainable Socio-Economic Transformation (2013–2018)

With the agenda of pursuing a new trajectory of economic development, in 2015 the government of Zimbabwe implemented the Zimbabwe Agenda for Sustainable Socio-Economic Transformation (GoZ 2015). The policy underscored the notion that whilst the nation of Zimbabwe prides itself on a literacy rate of 92% there is a need to ensure that schools, particularly those in the rural areas, are built and equipped to meet the needs of the learners. The policy recognised that that the education sector had been facing the challenge of a curriculum that did not match the country's development needs and hence proposed the implementation of the Nziramasanga Commission of Inquiry recommendations (GoZ 2015).

Education Medium Term Plan (2011–2015)

According to the Ministry of Education, Sport, Arts and Culture (MESAC 2011, 18), the Education Medium Term Plan was premised on seven strategic objectives drawn out of a stakeholder consultation process done across the 10 provinces of Zimbabwe. The objectives had a timeline of 2015 and were targeted at: (1) having highly motivated and competent teachers who are able to provide high quality learning opportunities for all learners in Zimbabwe; (2) having a renewed and integrated curriculum in schools which is supported by effective learning assessment and necessary learning materials; (3) improving the conditions of learning through building and renovating classrooms and ensuring clean sanitation; (4) ensuring quality assurance and staff development through enhanced monitoring and supervision of schools; (5) reinvigorating school and system governance management through ensuring efficient government and management systems at all levels; (6) focusing resources on those with the greatest need; and (7) revitalising sports, arts and culture in schools (MESAC 2011).

Methodology

The study made use of the mixed methodology approach in the collection and analysis of data. Schools that were analysed in the study were purposively sampled focusing on those that recorded 0% pass rate in the Grade 7 public examinations. It was against this background that the population for the sample was comprised of 29 schools that had a 0% pass rate in 2018. Through the sample size calculator focusing on a margin of error of 10% and a confidence level of 90% from the population of 29 schools, the study focused on 21 schools in Hwange and Binga districts. The study participants from the 21 schools selected into the sample included the school head and a Grade 7 teacher from each of the schools. Thus, a total of 42 school authorities responded to the semi-structured interview. In each of the 21 schools, a focus group discussion was conducted with a maximum of six Grade 7 learners randomly chosen through the attendance registers to participate. The Grade 7 learners were chosen because of the need to understand their learning environment and experiences as learners who are preparing for the public examinations. The study also made use of transect walks around the schools in the sample. This was done in order to validate information presented by the respondents. Transect walks around the schools were also done to observe the infrastructure at the schools which is vital in appreciating the learning environment that has an instrumental role in affecting learner outcomes. Reference was made to secondary sources with the chief aim of relating the study findings to literature in the education discourse. The quantitative data for the study was analysed through the use of descriptive statistics while the qualitative data was analysed through the use of thematic analysis and Nvivo.

Findings and Analysis

Challenges Affecting Learners' Academic Performance from Teachers' Lenses

Poor Health and the Home Care Economy

Poor health as a result of HIV and AIDS was cited by the school authorities as one of the major causes of poor performance among some of the learners. Seventeen per cent of the participants revealed that some of the learners are living with HIV; hence, in some instances they will miss school because of the need to collect tablets for their survival. One of the respondents revealed that the school attendance of some of the learners who are living with HIV at her school ranged between 50 to 70%. This was attributed to the fact that the learners miss some school days when they are sick or have to collect their medication from the clinic. The teacher revealed that:

> HIV and AIDS is still a major problem in this community, affecting the school attendance of quite a number of our learners; either they miss school because they are sick or because they have to go and get their medication. The medication is strong and

> it affects them because at times they come to school without eating because of the persistent drought that is affecting the community.

The respondents indicated that there are learners who are affected by HIV and AIDS in the sense of them having the burden to take care of their sick loved ones at home. The implication is that they may miss school and they also may not get the opportunity to do their homework and study as they have to attend to their sick relatives. The findings suggested that poor health and the development of the home care economy as a result HIV and AIDS has also played a role in contributing to the learners' low academic performance.

Food Insecurity

One hundred percent of the participants reported that hunger is a contributor to the learners' poor academic performance. The respondents highlighted that recurrent food insecurity as a result of the vagaries of climate change leaves learners vulnerable to hunger. The school authorities pointed out that on average the majority of the learners have one meal per day and this affects their level of concentration in class. Another respondent added that hunger is affecting a lot of learners to the extent of some of the children fainting because of starvation. The teacher explained:

> We have not received adequate rains over the past years and this has affected access to food among the villagers. Majority of the people in this community rely on rain fed agriculture, now that rain is a challenge communities are left vulnerable to starvation.

According to Elliot (1996), Abraham Maslow propounded a theory where he proposed that physiological needs such as hunger and sleep are dominant and basic to motivation. Unless they are satisfied everything else recedes. Thus, a child who is starving generally becomes lethargic and stops interacting and in the process their learning potential is severely lowered. The teachers also revealed that through the school feeding programme, MoPSE has tried to address the challenge of food insecurity affecting learners in schools. However, the supply of grain from the Grain Marketing Board has not been consistent. This finding has brought about the need for a study that will conduct a formative evaluation of the school feeding programme in addressing food insecurity affecting learners in schools. The results seem to suggest that food insecurity is playing a role in contributing to the learners' low academic performance.

Shortage of Learning Materials

Shortage of textbooks related to the new learning areas introduced by the education curriculum and writing exercise books was reported by 72% of the respondents as another challenge resulting in the learners' low performance. The respondents argued that in rural areas it is difficult to obtain exercise books and even more so text books for the new learning areas that include mass displays and physical education. Eleven per

cent of the respondents added that the government may assist learners in paying school fees through the Basic Education Assistance Module (BEAM), but still the majority of the learners do not have anywhere to write their school work and also do not have textbooks to refer to; in particular, some schools do not have libraries and resource centres equipped with materials for the new learning areas.

Poor Infrastructure

The respondents highlighted that poor infrastructure in schools makes the learning environment unconducive for learning where the learners have to use bricks as chairs and do not have tables on which to write hence affecting their academic performance. They added that the learners' situation becomes worse when it rains as the water can easily leak into their classrooms which results in them missing out on some school days during the rainy season. It is interesting to note that the Education Medium Term Plan of 2011–2015 sought to improve the conditions of learning through building schools, renovating classrooms and ensuring clean sanitation. However, the poor infrastructure in these schools is an indication that the objectives of the plan have not yet been achieved thereby compromising the quality of education in the country. Usaini and Abubakar (2015) relate infrastructure to the cognitive development of children. According to Usaini and Abubakar (2015), a safe, stimulating and healthy environment is a prerequisite for children to mature and learn. Throughout the year, children spend six to eight hours at school where the environment (infrastructure and resources) plays an essential/critical role in their development. Usaini and Abubakar (2015) conclude that the school environment, resources and infrastructure are of great significance in moulding the learners' intellectual capacity and ability. The relationship between infrastructure/resources and academic performance has been widely discussed, and the conclusion has been that supportive and comfortable school environments with adequate learning facilities and constructive climates help learners to concentrate on their academic activities which then results in improved academic performance.

In the interrogation of factors affecting learning amongst primary school learners in India, Kapur (2018) indicates that resources within schools play a critical enabling role in the learners' academic performance. Kapur (2018) accentuates his line of thought by highlighting that when learners are provided with the necessary tools and equipment, they are able to attain a better understanding of academic concepts and how to put them to the test, especially for science and practical subjects. In support of the contention that school resources influence learners' academic performance, Mwaura (2010) observes that in some parts of Malawi, children from disadvantaged, marginalised and socioeconomically backward parts of the community, who face constraints in affording the books and materials required for learning, heavily depend on library facilities and fellow learners to obtain books and other materials, hence limiting their flexibility and capacity to learn at their own pace.

Ahmed (2003) posits that provision of educational facilities that include the availability of library facilities at schools enhances the learners' academic performance. He adds that such school facilities embody educational resources that facilitate effective teaching and learning in schools. Farombi (1998) reiterates that school libraries may not be effective if the books therein are not adequate and up-to-date; hence, there is the need for schools to keep abreast by updating their libraries. Farombi (1998) adds that the impact of a library can be realised if the library is always accessible to the learners for a considerable length of time during a school day.

Figure 1: Classroom where some of the learners have their lessons

Figure 1 highlights the poor quality of physical infrastructure in some of the schools. The challenge of poor infrastructure is further exacerbated during the rainy season as water can easily get into the classrooms. The classrooms are not paved thereby leaving the learners exposed to dust which, in turn, renders them vulnerable to diseases such as hay fever. The bricks shown in Figure 1 are used as chairs, an indication of the dire shortage of infrastructure.

Learners' Responses to Challenges Affecting Their Academic Performance

Long Distances

Eighty-two per cent of the participants noted that walking long distances each day to school was one of the major challenges affecting learner performance. Learners indicated that they have the option of staying in a low cost boarding facility in some of the schools. However, this becomes a costly option considering that they have to look for food to cook at the school. As such, walking long distances seems to be a better option but it comes with the disadvantage that as the children get to school they would already be exhausted, which in turn affects their concentration in class and in the process negatively affects learning outcomes. One of the learners indicated:

> Each day I walk an average of 15 km to school, which means that I have to leave home early in the morning around 05:00 and arrive at school around 08:00 in a very tired state. After school I have to walk the 15 km again and arrive home around 19:00.

Kelly and Kanyika (2000) and Mbozi (2008) argue that when learners travel long distances to school there are high possibilities of them reporting very tired and late for school, thereby reducing their level of concentration when learning is in progress. The learners explained that challenges facing them due to the location of their schools includes late coming – usually well after the first two lessons – tiredness, school dropout, negative attitudes towards school, absenteeism and less time allocated towards study at home. All this is exacerbated by lack of resources and poor family socio-economic status. The Education Sector Strategic Plan of 2016–2020 (MoPSE 2016) explains that satellite schools have been established to reduce walking distance to school as a means of promoting access and equity of education. The study results indicated the need for more satellite schools and low cost boarding facilities to be established in order to close the gap in the number of learners who have to walk long distances to school.

Gender Roles

Thirty-eight per cent of the respondents, representing 67% of the female sample population, noted gender disparities at household level as a challenge that was being experienced by the female learners. This challenge was brought up by the female learners who argued that the girl child has to do most of the household work before going to school. This results in the girl child getting to school late and tired. In addition, as they get back home the respondents argued that they have to make sure that they fetch water and cook and as such do not get enough time to study. Thus, gender division of labour where socially determined roles and activities seem to disadvantage the girl child was noted as one of the challenges that is faced by the learners in the process contributing to their low performance at school. According to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF 2011), girls are often overburdened with household responsibilities within the extended family household thereby preventing them from paying attention to their school work. In the African context it is critical for girls to be equipped with skills for handling household responsibilities; however, these responsibilities should not overburden the girls in their quest for academic achievement.

Religion

Religion was also cited as contributor to the challenges that are being faced by the learners. Twenty-six per cent of the participants listed attending to religious or cultural functions during school days as one of the factors contributing to their low academic performance. Respondents revealed that there are cultural activities like the Makande ceremony in Binga district aimed at appeasing to the spirit of the dead. The respondents pointed out that this ceremony is conducted three to four months after the passing on of a loved one and can take up to five days. It is in this instance that the learners end up

missing out on some of their school days in the process contributing to their low academic performance.

Shortage of Qualified Teachers

Sixty per cent of the respondents revealed that the shortage of teachers in their schools is a challenge that has been affecting their academic performance. The participants noted that in some instances they may finish a term without having a teacher in a particular subject. The results indicate that the school environment is not favorable for teachers, with some teachers sharing rooms and failing to get access to water for their household chores which in turn has affected the rural areas in Zimbabwe with teachers leaving the schools for better resourced schools in the urban areas hence contributing to their low academic performance. One teacher highlighted that Hwange and Binga districts introduced the teaching of Nambya and Tonga, respectively. This has also affected the deployment of teachers into the districts as it is critical to deploy teachers who are conversant in the indigenous languages which in most cases are encouraged to be used as the language of instruction. Mwaura (2010) views the teachers' abilities and skills as an important facet of the learners' academic performance. Furthermore, Mwaura (2010) attacks the teachers' level of importance and criticalness by uncovering how teachers exercise the power to plan, coordinate and direct all classroom activities and oversee the learning process. Tshuma and Chikiwa (2019) argue that Matabeleland is facing a severe shortage of teachers, with some schools having three – often unqualified – teachers teaching classes from ECD up to Grade 7. This presentation of the Matabeleland school environment contradicts Mwaura (2010) who argues that it is critical and important for the teachers to possess adequate knowledge and information regarding the subjects that they are teaching, which also allows them to leverage the utilisation of technology and innovative approaches in the teaching and learning processes. Agyemang (2015) explains that teachers who do not have both the academic and the professional qualifications would undoubtedly have a negative influence on the teaching and learning of their subject.

Limited Study Time

Limited time to study in the rural areas was noted by 69% of the participants as one of the challenges that are faced that is affecting the learners' academic performance. The respondents were also in agreement in the focus group discussion arguing that there was limited time to study in the rural areas since there is no electricity. Respondents argued that even though they had received solar lanterns from some non-governmental organisations, taking the solar lantern home would mean that they would have to share the light with other family members and in some instances the guardian goes to their hut with the solar lantern leaving the learner with no light to use to study. One of the respondents noted:

> As for me my aunty takes the solar lantern to her hut and each time I tell her that I need the light for studying she tells me that I do not appreciate that she is taking care of me.

When non-governmental organisations donate solar lanterns they hope the learners will use them at home to study; however, the results show that at home the learners have to share the light with others and in some cases do not get to use the light in the process reducing the study time of the learners and further resulting in their low academic performance.

The Family Institution and the Demand for Labour

The respondents concurred that household chores in the family institution have undoubtedly contributed to their low performance learners at school. The respondents were in agreement that when they get home from school they are supposed to go to the fields and herd cattle. By the time they get back home from the fields they would now be feeling tired and as such fail to study – in the process contributing to their low performance at school. These results seem to concur with the findings of UNESCO (2005) which argue that in farming communities the labour demand on both boys and girls to work in farming plots makes it difficult for children to attend school regularly. A supportive family background plays a critical role in how children perform at school as learners. The role of the family institution has been analysed and viewed from a number of varied lenses, such as: family as a support structure for learning; family as a source of cognitive and learning motivation; and family as a socialising agent (Kudari 2016). Chukwuemeka (2013) discusses the role of the family by noting that children's first educational encounters are rooted in their home, where their concepts, attitudes, ideas and general pattern of behavioural performance are shaped through the process of child rearing. The differences seen in the learners' academic achievement can arguably be related directly to differences in their home background and the influence of the home on their performance (Chukwuemeka 2013).

Kapur (2018) labels the home as the place from where the groundwork for learning and education is laid. Kapur (2018) asserts that to produce good academic results, it is essential for parents and family members to encourage a learning atmosphere for children within their homes. For example, when learners experience problems in certain subjects, their parents are their go to persons or the hub of knowledge for solving homework problems (Kapur 2018). Kudari (2016) adds that parents play a significant role in leading the effective growth and development of their children in schools. Kudari (2016) reiterates that whatever challenges children encounter concerning education and other areas, they normally communicate to their parents. Parents are sources of security, encouragement and help their children in providing solutions to their problems (Kudari 2016).

The districts under study are to a large extent characterised by the extended family system that is comprised of polygamous marital family structure and the extended

household which consists of two or more single family nucleus. The teachers explained that the extended family system is negatively affecting the learners' academic performance as the environment at home is usually not conducive for learners to study based on the competition for resources. The impact of family was also scrutinised by Durojaiye (2007) who points out that the family setup contributes to the learners' performance. Durojaiye holds the position that children who live with extended families and those from polygamous families usually perform badly due to overburdening that comes from household chores. Durojaiye (2007) opines that children from such backgrounds have too many chores and duties which leaves them with little time for studying or resting. Polygamous family backgrounds are contextualised by Durojaiye (2007) as a militating force as he argues that in some cases children from polygamous families are left to care for their younger siblings which prompts their inability to attend school. Furthermore, family stability has been found to exert serious effect on children's education. Divorce, separation and single parenthood also affect learners' academic performance; on the whole, the children's background affects their success at school (Chukwuemeka 2013). Evaluating Durojaiye's (2007) presentation on polygamous or extended families, however, leads to supposition about the possibilities and chances for children to revise, read and share insights together through forming study groups from a family basis, or rather the bigger the family, the more the complications in studying together. This leaves a gap for other researchers to research on how family size impacts the academic performance of school going children.

Lack of Motivation among Teachers

Seventy per cent of the respondents argued that some teachers in their schools somehow lack motivation to attend classes; hence, at times they may get to school early but find no teacher to attend to them. There was, however, a heated argument on this view with some respondents arguing that it is not necessarily the fact that teachers seem to be unmotivated that is resulting in the learners' low academic performance, but rather the fact that the learners themselves have no motivation to study as they do not see the importance of studying. According to Bell (2015), rural schools in Zimbabwe have been considered as being thrown into the deep end. Life in rural schools has been portrayed as being dreary and this drives away teachers who have the potential to improve the learners' performance in rural schools. The reality is that those teachers who dedicate themselves to rural schools see their motivation dwindling and ultimately dying, thus causing a ripple effect of discouraged teachers and poorly performing learners. Giving an abstract scenario of the operational environment of rural schools, Bell (2015) writes as follows:

> It's a bad experience for a teacher in rural Zimbabwe. During her first six months at the school, there was no room for her in the cottage where most teachers lived. She stayed in a school store room with another teacher.

The above scenario has presented a herculean task for rural schools to attract committed teachers; this can be considered a factor in the learners' academic performance in Matabeleland North. It is quite important to analyse the shortage of teachers in rural areas from a two-pronged approach, looking at the pull and push factors. Under such a lens, it seems that conditions in rural schools push/repel teachers.

Mulkeen (2005) argues that the problem of teachers is often misperceived as the challenge of providing an adequate number of trained teachers. However, Mulkeen (2005) outlines that although there is no doubt that many countries are faced with teacher supply challenges, there are equally serious challenges of teacher deployment with regard to the available teachers. Akyeampong and Stephens (2002) opine that there are myriad rational reasons for teachers to prefer urban schools over rural ones. Chief amongst the worries that teachers have in considering rural schools is that the quality of life may not be as good as at urban schools or the standard of accommodation may be below par (Akyeampong and Stephens 2002).

In an effort to engage in a process of sense making for the reasons why Matabeleland North schools have faced acute teacher shortages, one can leverage on Towse et al.'s (2002) contribution which considers that health concerns factor in the process of determining the suitability and consideration for teacher motivation. Towse et al. (2002) are of the view that teachers may see living in rustic environments as involving a greater risk of contracting diseases. Apart from that, the need to self-actualise also hinders teachers from considering taking up rural posts/opportunities. Hedges (2000) notes that teachers may see rural areas as offering less chances for professional development and advancement, compared to urban areas which present easier access to additional educational opportunities.

According to the United Republic of Tanzania (URT 2008), teachers posted to rural areas, and particularly those with difficult conditions, report in low numbers, and those who are already there, seek transfers to urban areas. This creates an acute shortage of teachers in rural areas and other areas with difficult conditions. Mawere (2013) explains that in Zimbabwe a number of teachers are reluctant to take teaching posts in the remote areas of the country because of the poor road and communication networks in those areas. Ijaiya (2011) states that an acute shortage of teachers contributes to massive failures as well as poor quality teaching. In contributing to evidence, Elimu (2014) points out that the declining quality of education in Tanzania can be attributed to the shortage of teachers; this raises the challenge of the provision of quality education under the limited human resources. Fry (2003) remarks that in most developing countries teachers' salaries are considerably low and the working atmosphere is not conducive to attracting teachers. Sumra (2004) asserts that lack of motivation among teachers is one factor that has had a significant negative impact on teaching quality. All the cited contributions stress the importance of teacher motivation and availability as a means to achieving quality teaching, learning and performance.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Based on the research findings on the challenges that currently affect learners, the following recommendations are hereby proposed to improve the learners' academic performance.

Legislate Punitive Policies

The study recommends the legislation of punitive policies for parents who purposively absent their children from school. According to Sachs (2018, 56), after liberation from Japan, the Korean government made a strong drive for literacy education, employing two approaches – mandatory education for children and literacy education for adults. Many parents were reluctant to send their children to school, and many families could not afford to pay tuition for all their children. Boys (usually the eldest boy) had priority, but girls and other siblings were not given formal schooling. To fix this problem, from 1954 to 1959, the government actively pushed for mandatory education based upon the Six-Year Compulsory Education Expansion Plan. The government strongly enforced the law. If parents or guardians did not send their children to school, they were fined or punished. If such a policy were to be implemented in Zimbabwe, it would go a long way in strengthening the involvement of parents in promoting education.

Encourage Community Engagement

There is a critical need for advocacy in the form of community sensitisation on the importance of education. The understanding is that if the community understands the plight of children and the value of education, then the environment becomes favourable for the children and supports them in achieving their educational goals. This will help different partners to collaborate in providing training sessions to the guardians of the learners and empowering them on appreciating the importance of education to the community.

Mainstream Career Guidance

It is important to mainstream career guidance in the education curriculum. Schools need to take learners on tours to different colleges, universities and other organisations; the ultimate idea being to take the learners out of their closed world in the rural areas to a place where they can see different opportunities in life. A partnership between the schools, private sector and local community leadership will go a long way in raising awareness on the different career paths that learners can take which is important in helping them understand the value of education.

Construct Satellite Schools and Low Cost Boarding Facilities

It is vital for the government to prioritise the building of new schools and low cost boarding facilities in already established schools. This is because learners are travelling

long distances to school each day, amounting to an average of 15 km per day. This is a challenge that is greatly impact on learner outcomes and needs to be addressed with urgency.

Assist with Learning Materials

The study calls for the government and other partners in the education sector to assist schools with learning materials particularly for the newly introduced learning areas. This is critical in ensuring the effective implementation of the competency based curriculum in Zimbabwe.

Provide Psychosocial Support

The learners' psychological wellbeing has to be addressed through activities such as psychosocial support. There are multi-dimensional problems affecting learners that range from the long distances that they have to travel to school to issues concerned with the development of the care economy in their homes. Nyoni (2010) posits that while there is no doubt that children have to be provided with basic services, such as food, shelter, education and healthcare, they also need care and support to cope with emotionally difficult life situations. In situations of extreme poverty children's psychological distress may appear to be of secondary importance to meeting their basic needs, but it should not be ignored or considered unimportant. Meintjes (2009) adds that when children go through difficult situations that include poverty, violence, displacement and illness, care needs to be taken of their physical needs, but also of their social and emotional needs. This brings out the need to strengthen psychosocial support in the education curriculum. The findings indicate an emerging issue of the need to research the feasibility of incorporating psychological approaches in the development discourse.

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