

The Impact of Poverty on Girl Learners' Cognitive Capacity: A Case of Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT In this article the impact of poverty on the cognitive development of the girl child in Masvingo province, Zimbabwe, is examined. The majority of the people in Zimbabwe have endured adversity since 1990. In addition, the number of girl children living in poverty is continually escalating and is becoming a major issue due to scarcity of resources. This negatively impacts the schooling of many girl children in Zimbabwe. Even though the Millennium Development Goal number one (1) aims at eradicating poverty and hunger by 2015, girl children continue to be faced with many psycho-social challenges that are somehow perpetuated by the rising Total Consumption Poverty Line (TCPL) in Zimbabwe. A qualitative approach was used with focus group discussions, interviews and observations as data collection instruments for fifteen (15) girl children and six (6) teachers in Masvingo province. The study established that girls' cognitive development is affected by household chores/child labour, financial constraints, and early marriages, lack of food, health issues and sanitary wear, long distance to and from school, stigmatisation and marginalisation. This study recommends the sustainable development of both rural and urban communities. Collaborative work is also needed among Zimbabweans and stakeholders in revisiting the root causes of poverty.

INTRODUCTION

It is estimated that an average of seven out of ten girls in Zimbabwe live in dire poverty, and drop out of school because of poverty-related factors (Nyamukapa and Gregson 2005). UNICEF (2007:13) states that girls are disproportionately victims of intolerance, discrimination, and violence in the education system in Africa despite countries being signatories to the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child, the 1990 World Summit for Children and the 1990 World Conference on Education for All (EFA) in Jomtien, Thailand. All of which affirm the right of every human being to education and universal primary education by 2015. The Millennium Development Goals also advocate equal education for all by 2015 (Mahlomaholo 2011; UN 2012). According to the World Bank Report (2013), more than 350 million people, over half of Africa's population, live below the poverty line of one dollar a day. This implies that poverty to a larger extent, excludes many children from school. Despite heightened international efforts to bring more attention to poverty and human development, the most vulnerable children, the girls, are still the most invisible (Chilton et al. 2007: 263).

This perpetuates the cycle of poverty and poor human development (Engle and Black 2008). Research on the constraints to girls' schooling explains the persistence of gender gaps and indicates how the combined effects of household poverty and gender reduce educational opportunity for girls. Without achieving gender equality for girls in education, Kofi Annan stated, "the world has no chance of achieving many of the ambitious health, educational, social and development targets it has set for itself" (UNICEF 2010). Thus girls' education is a crucial precedent to meeting the broader goals of gender equality, women's empowerment and children's rights.

Economic factors are responsible for widening the academic gaps between boys and girls in developing countries (Ignowski 2013; Juma et al. 2012; UNICEF 2010; Manwa 2010). High education costs have seen the male child being the preferred child to continue with his education. In many cases parents may argue that the girl child will get married, and that the boy child will need to support his family, hence the family always strives for him to have a career. Primitive as this might sound, many girls still face this dilemma in Zimbabwe and in most African countries. These researchers conclude that the more

difficult it is to send children to school; the more likely it will be that the girl child's education suffers.

Most of the hurdles faced by the girl child in Zimbabwe are therefore poverty-related. These range from situations like lack of food, school fees, housing, education, medical care, sanitation facilities, abuse, stress, violence, child labour, early pregnancy, intergenerational sex, diseases, stunted growth, stigmatisation, societal discrimination and globalisation driven social inequalities (Ganga and Chinyoka 2010; Abebe 2008). Research done in Burkina Faso, Nepal, West Africa, Nigeria and Zimbabwe shows that girls are generally required to spend more time on household chores than boys (Hlupo and Tsikira 2012; Engle and Black 2008; Watkins 2008). Girls' labour is made use of to substitute for mothers who are at work, such as caring for siblings, fetching fire wood and water, caring for animals and pounding grain (Herz et al. 2001). Kapungu (2007) posits that when girls or women try to combine schooling with home apprenticeship, the choice between work time and study time may lead to family tensions, poor performance, poor lesson attendance and discontinuing schooling. Gender inequality in education also manifests itself in fields of study opted for by boys and girls in schools, leading them to particular careers and employment. There is a general perception that boys are better than girls, for example in mathematics, sciences and technology. Since women are more verbal they are therefore more oriented towards languages, home economics, food and nutrition (Manwa 2010). All these situations impact heavily on the cognitive development of the girl child.

Consequently the need to explore the extent to which poverty is a hindrance to the optimal functioning of the girl learners' cognitive capacity in Zimbabwe has arisen hence the researchers will explore the cost benefit analysis of poverty on the girl child with the aim of suggesting sound policies and intervention strategies which help to mitigate the impact of poverty on children's cognitive capacity. In this study, the terms cognitive capability, academic performance and cognitive development will be used interchangeably.

Theoretical Framework

The study is foregrounded by Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory and the humanistic perspective.

Ecological Theory

Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory suggests that a child's surroundings including their home, school, work, church, neighbourhood, culture and government, have an influence on the way the child develops (Donald et al. 2010; Berk 2007). Bronfenbrenner (2008) suggests that individual development is a culmination of many direct and indirect influences, which either facilitate or impede individual potential. The influences consist of five nested structures: micro-systems, meso-system, exo-system, macro-system and chrono-system.

Children's micro-systems include any immediate relationships or organisations they interact with, such as their immediate family, school, peers, neighbours and caregivers. Bronfenbrenner's next level, the meso-system, describes how the different aspects of a child's micro-system work together for the sake of the child (Cole et al. 2009). The exo-system level includes the other people and places that the child may or may not interact with directly but nevertheless have a large effect on her, such as parents' work places, extended family members and the neighbourhood. Bronfenbrenner (2008) describes the macro-system as the one that involves dominant socio-economic structures as well as values, beliefs and practices that influence all other social systems. The chrono-system involves development over time that affects the interactions between these systems. Understanding the interactions of these systems is essential in order to understand how a child develops, in particular a girl child, and what factors lead to her failure.

Humanistic Theory

The humanist school of thought also informed this study, especially the contributions of Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow. Basically humanists believe in the goodness of the individual, his/her ability to make choices and purposefully working towards being the best he/she can be (being a fully functioning individual or self-actualisation). The key concepts underlying Rogers' theory are unconditional positive regard, empathy, congruency/genuineness, freedom of expression and self-concept. These are necessary and sufficient conditions for the promotion of learning/cognitive development among children.

Abraham Maslow proposed a theory of needs based on a hierarchical model with the basic needs at the bottom and higher needs at the top (physiological, safety, love, esteem, cognitive, aesthetic, self-actualisation and transcendence) between the 1940s and 1950s in America. The central point in Maslow's theory is that people tend to satisfy their needs systematically starting with the basic physiological needs and moving up the hierarchy. He believed that the higher level needs can only be achieved if the lower order needs have already been satisfied. For example, a hungry child is not likely to be motivated to self-actualise until hunger is satisfied (Snowman and Biehler 2011: 45).

Research Questions

What are the constraints on the academic performance of a girl child from a poverty stricken background?

What recommendations can be made to alleviate the negative impact of poverty on the girl child?

Purpose of the Study

This research aims to determine the extent to which the girl child's academic performance is affected by poverty, with the aim of suggesting sound educational policies, measures and solutions thus minimising consequences caused by poverty on the academic performance of the girl child. This research also aims to close the gap between the boy child and the girl child in relation to academic performance.

METHODOLOGY

The researchers explored the participants' experiences regarding the impact of poverty on the girl child's academic performance. Primary data was collected and analysed using an interpretive paradigm.

Therefore, a qualitative research design was considered appropriate. One of the advantages is that qualitative research allows the researcher to gain understanding of the academic performance of girl learners from poverty stricken backgrounds from the participants' perspectives in their natural settings (McMillan and Schumacher 2010:315; Conrad and Serlin 2006:407).

Research Design

According to Smith (2007), a research design refers to the plan and structure of the investigation used to obtain evidence to answer research questions. Good research is therefore, not accidental. The qualitative phenomenological design was adopted for use in this study. It is effective for revealing deep issues and making voices heard (Maxwell 2006) and was thus found suitable to explore the effects of poverty on academic performance of girl children in Zimbabwe.

Sampling

The aim of sampling in social research is to produce representative selections of population elements (Mouton 2001; Creswell 2009). The study was carried out in three secondary schools in Masvingo district, Zimbabwe, one rural, one urban and another from a mining town. The target population comprised girl learners in form two (2), aged between thirteen and sixteen years at the three selected secondary schools. It also included the teachers teaching nine different subjects to these pupils. Twenty seven (27) teachers teach form two (2) learners. The total number of girl learners in form two in the three selected schools is 170. The target population is therefore, 197. A sample of fifteen (15) girl learners, five (5) from each school and six (6) teachers (three females and three males), two (2) from each school, was purposively drawn.

Data Collection and Analysis

In addition to an intensive review of related literature, data was collected through interviews, focus group discussions and observations with/ of the participants comprising fifteen girl learners and six teachers. An interview schedule was designed and used to obtain data. Furthermore there were three girl learner focus groups (one per school) and three teacher focus groups (one per school).

During the focus group interviews, the researchers created a social environment in which group members were stimulated by one another's perception and ideas. This technique was believed to increase the quality and richness of data, rather than merely one-on-one interviewing (McMillan and Schumacher 2010:360).

The interviews with the fifteen girl learners and the six teachers, as well as the three girl learners' focus groups and the three teachers' focus groups, were audio-taped. The researchers made observations and copious notes during the interviews and focus group discussions.

The interview schedule had pre-formulated questions which were consistently used to ensure that the same basic line of enquiry was pursued with each focus-group interviewed. The wording of questions in the schedule was simple and not abstract. This was to enhance the subsequent recording of responses and the verbatim transcripts (McMillan and Schumacher 2010:325).

An inductive approach to analysing the responses was undertaken to allow patterns, themes, and categories to emerge rather than being imposed prior to data collection and analysis. Similar responses were grouped together into categories. This identification of themes provided depth to the insights about understanding the individual views of the girls and teachers. Similar codes were aggregated together to form a major idea from the data (Smith et al. 2009).

Validation/ Trustworthiness of Data Collected

Strategies were applied to counteract validity threats. To eliminate researcher bias, a strategy of triangulation was applied. Information was obtained from individuals in their respective focus groups and settings, using different sources, cross-checking, and verifying sources of information (Conrad and Serlin 2006:380). The researchers also triangulated data by using both literature study and focus-group interviews.

This strategy helped eliminate the problem of inaccuracy or incompleteness of the data which, according to Maxwell (2006:89), is the main threat to the valid description of what the researchers saw or heard. Information was obtained from individuals in their respective focus groups and settings, using different sources, cross-checking and verifying sources of information (Creswell 2009).

Further a strategy of 'member checks' was used to overcome the threat of misinterpretation of data. Participants' responses contained in the interview data and tentative interpretations were taken back to the participants for confirmation of some interpretations regarding their

thoughts and views in order to make results more plausible (Bell 2012).

Ethical Considerations

Permission to conduct the study was secured from Masvingo Provincial Education Office, Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture, Zimbabwe as well as from the selected school headmasters. Furthermore permission was obtained from the parents of selected girl learners, and the selected teachers.

The participants were informed that their involvement in the study was voluntary and that they were free to withdraw at any stage of the interviews if they were not comfortable. Permission was first obtained from the participants to conduct the interviews and for focus group discussions to be audio-recorded. They were assured of anonymity in the research report.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In order to make sense of collected data, the researchers applied the Tesch's open coding method of data analysis to identify themes and categories. It is a systemic process of examining, selecting, categorising, comparing, synthesising and interpreting data to address the initial propositions of the study (Yin 2003: 109; White 2012:82; Leedy and Omrod 2001:150). The analysis of the empirical data yielded the following themes:

Theme 1: Home-based Variables

The study established that home circumstances are often not conducive to learning in the mining, rural and urban communities studied. The girl learners from the three schools maintained that their studies at home were affected by lack of lighting, space to do homework, domestic chores, having no desk or table to work on, an absence of books in the home and the parents lack the capacity to be supportive.

This concurs with findings made by Witt (2012) and Donald et al. (2010) who assert that poverty is strongly correlated with a range of home background variables that affect academic performance. These home circumstances may also feature insecure or unstable environments often leading to emotional stress and premature school leaving among the girl learners. Inter-

views and focus group discussions established that many families do not earn enough income to afford decent housing and thus changed accommodation regularly. Hence the children were bound to change schools, friends and teachers, compromising their education. In support of the above, Bronfenbrenner (2008) also established that what happens in the family or peer group can influence how children respond at school and vice versa (meso-system). Consequently lack of support from the family has negative impacts on cognitive development of girl learners.

Teachers interviewed said that those children who constantly changed schools were at a disadvantage because they tended to miss valuable contact time as they moved from one village to another, from one town to another and from one school to another. The girl children are forced to move with their parents so that moving from school to school is either temporary or permanent or dropping out altogether. The teachers interviewed said that school attendance was often irregular amongst children whose parents were frequently mobile since transfer to a new school becomes the norm. Four out of the six teachers interviewed asserted that moving often hindered learners from developing consistency in their lives; children often came to school with no records from their previous schools, and it was difficult for schools to track the records. Teachers had no idea what these learners had learned. This reinforces findings made by Engle and Black (2008), who also established that frequent change of schools by the learners is detrimental to their academic performance. Cameron (2012) maintains that mobility also compounds the difficulty these children have in making friends. They manifest their problems by acting out, exhibiting aggression, depression, regressive behaviour, inattentiveness, and anxiety. Hence the academic performance of children is limited.

Interviews and focus group discussions with the teachers established that poor households sometimes consider investment in girls' education as not worthwhile as they expect daughters to leave the household upon marriage. The teachers confirmed this by saying that some parents in the Mapanzure communal area are sceptical about educating their girl children, since education for girls is seen as a waste of limited family resources. It is at this point that cultural reasoning and gender based ideologies, marginalisa-

tion and stereotyping come in to play. During the interviews and focus group discussions the girl participants intimated that parents see the benefits of educating boys as more tangible. They stated that the majority of the parents think boys are a better investment; hence girls should remain at home to help their mothers with the domestic chores. These researchers observed that even when girls are provided with the opportunity to pursue secondary education, their preparation level is far below that of boys, because of unequal treatment at home and at school. Thus, Bronfenbrenner (2008) urges educators to establish and maintain family-school dyadic relationships in order to enhance pupils learning. Without education, girls are denied the opportunity to develop their full potential; they will therefore fail to self-actualise as proposed by Rogers and Maslow, thus affecting their self-esteem, self-concepts and academic performance.

The study established that the girls are losing out on education because they are needed to support their households with their labour. These researchers observed that the situation was overwhelming in child-headed households where there is no mother to whom burdens may be shifted. Instead, the elder girl child, in most cases, was observed to substitute as mother. As such she struggles to make ends meet within the child-headed household.

Girls explained, during the three focus group discussions, that some of the challenges that they faced and how they affected their participation in school were:

...As girls we are given so much work at home such that we do not have any time to read. We are usually exploited, while boys just roam around. We do all the household chores like washing clothes, cleaning the house, feeding young ones, cooking for the entire family, fetching firewood and water before we go to school. We also sell vegetables, fruits, juice, cards and sometimes our bodies to supplement family income. We do not have time to study and to do our homework.

This was reinforced and supported during the interviews when all the girl learners spoke about their personal home experiences. Moreover the three teacher focus groups also concurred with the girls experiences. Research studies by Hlupo and Tsikira (2012), Watkins (2008), and Manwa (2010) confirmed the above saying,

that learning barriers are excessive for girls because they carry a larger burden of domestic responsibility than boys do. It is common knowledge in Zimbabwe that women care in every respect for the family. They plan, prepare and cook meals, wash clothes, clean the home and take care of the sick. The culture of Zimbabwe has a proverb which says, "*Musha mukadzi*"; the interpretation is that women are the nest builders. In simple terms it says, women own the home and they are in control as they determine what everyone should eat. Girl children spend too much time on domestic chores thus compromising their academic performance.

Teachers observed that, where socio-economic status was low, girl children were often left home to fend for themselves and their younger siblings while their caregivers worked long hours. As a result, teachers complained that parents did not have time to supervise their children's homework thus compromising their academic performance. This breakdown of the learners' micro-system leaves a child with no tools to explore other parts of the environment. Without proper adult supervision or loving care, girl children may look for attention in inappropriate places thus affecting their self-discipline (Donald et al. 2010). These researchers observed that parents' involvement in the girl child's schooling had more effect on the child's academic success than the socio-economic status. Thus, if parents with low-income want their children to succeed, they must get involved in their children's schooling. Girls fail to try as a result of their parents' lack of encouragement; some even drop out of school as a result (information from a teacher who was interviewed). In support of the above, Trawick-Smith (1997), cited in Bronfenbrenner (2008), asserts that parents under the stress of poverty, may be less effective, more punitive and less warm towards their children.

Despite coming from poor backgrounds, some teachers noted that some girl learners defied the odds and excelled academically. Other factors like resilience, inborn factors, family support and motivation came into play.

Theme 2: Premarital Sex and Early Marriages

The study established that early marriages are deeply rooted in most Zimbabwean rural areas, mining towns and urban areas. Mrs. Kadzvokisi (pseudo name), a teacher from Mapan-

zure communal area said some of the girls voluntarily entered into marriages to escape poverty while some were forced to do so under the (Kuputsa or Kuzvarira) tradition. Research by Kapungu (2007) as well as Hlupo and Tsikira (2012) attest to the above reasons indicating that 'Kuputsa' is a form of marriage where a young girl, sometimes as young as from birth, is given to another family in exchange for either food or livestock. During the girl learners focus group discussions the girl learners asserted that:

...our parents arrange for marriages of their daughters to the people of their choice in our culture to get bride wealth and protect purity.

This has become very common in most rural areas because of poverty, leading to early marriages and school dropouts among girls as parents prefer food, money and groceries from old men thus compromising the education of their children. It was observed that the focus group from the rural school was more outspoken about this activity compared to the other two focus groups. Girls are seen as vital sources of income for families. This means that marriage is given more priority than education by parents from poverty-stricken households. This was further confirmed during interviews with the girl learners.

This study also established that '*Chimutsa-mapfihwa*' continues to be a flourishing cultural practice through which young girls may replace a dead sister's marital position. Marrying off young girls is believed to appease spirits or to settle long standing disputes between families. Girls are also given to their living sister's or aunt's husband when a sister or an aunt fails to conceive. All this was observed to be more apparent among poor families in rural communities thus exacerbating the plight of the girl child.

The majority of girls expressed that pregnancy and marriage were a consequence of poverty and also key reasons for girls being withdrawn from school. The study also established that girls from poor households may also be more likely to engage in sexual survival strategies to secure support for their schooling, risking pregnancy, HIV/AIDS and curtailment of the education. The problem of early and unplanned pregnancy affects them almost exclusively because of the cultural practices which expect girls, instead of boys, to care for the unwanted/unplanned child. During an interview, a teacher stated that unplanned pregnancy rates are of great

concern because teen mothers and babies face increased risks to their health especially in this era of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Their opportunities to build a future are diminished. Thus parenthood is a leading cause among the girls for prematurely discontinuing school.

Teachers that were interviewed maintain that prior to 1996, a girl who fell pregnant at school in Zimbabwe attracted expulsion with no possibility of re-admission into the mainstream school system after giving birth. She could, however, further her education through the informal education system. According to the Secretary's Circular Minute Number 35 of October 1999, pregnancy at secondary school level became misconduct and a disciplinary issue punishable by exclusion from school. However, the girl could regain entry elsewhere after giving birth and providing for the care of the child. This caused the girl child to lag behind in school which led Ganga and Chinyoka (2010) to consider that falling pregnant at school is a disgrace to the family. Consequently, the girl would suffer at home and at school because the Zimbabwean culture is conservative with regard to pregnancy at school. However in August 2010, the government of Zimbabwe amended the disciplinary code and granted maternity leave to girls for up to three months instead of automatic exclusion for girls who fell pregnant as a result of consensual sex (Chinyoka and Ganga 2011).

Theme 3: Financial and Resource Constraints

Results from both interviews and focus group discussions established that direct and indirect costs of education pose major barriers to accessing secondary education in the three schools studied. It was observed in this study that most girl learners from needy backgrounds were enrolled at poor schools, with inadequate human and material resources. Qualified and experienced teachers tended to shun such schools thus exacerbating the plight of girl children. The financial costs of schooling are often high, making it difficult for impoverished parents to afford schooling for their children. Such financial costs include not only school fees, but also other indirect costs such as, the costs of transport, food and school uniforms. Teachers observed that expensive textbooks and school uniforms tend to be beyond the means of many families. For example, the unit cost of English and mathemat-

ics textbooks as of April 2012 ranged from 15 to 20 USD each. The demand for education may be quite sensitive to the costs of education, so that high transport costs and school fees may substantially reduce the demand for education thus leading to the exclusion of girl children, negatively impacting on both the quality of education and on attendance rates of girl learners (UNICEF 2010; Brooks-Gunn and Duncan 1997; Donald et al. 2010).

In all three focus groups, the girls reported that,

...We lack basic school things such as writing materials, uniforms, school books, soap, pocket money, school bags and food to take to school. As a result, there are girls who end up sleeping with several men to get basic needs. Keeping uniforms clean may add an additional weekly financial burden on a meagre family's income.

A teacher at a mining school said that:

The girl children are not supported psychologically and materially by their parents.

It should be noted that unless basic needs are satisfied, everything else becomes inconsequential (Maslow cited in Santrock 2009). Children who usually come to school without basic necessities develop behavioural, socio-emotional, moral and cognitive problems. All the human capacities such as intelligence, memory and dreams are put to work in trying to satisfy psychological as well as physiological needs (Maslow in Kenrick 2010). In support of the above, Ecker and Nene (2012) and Stevens et al. (2012) posit that when a child does not get basic needs met, the brain does not grow as it should. Such children also fail to self-actualise. Their academic performance is thus affected.

In the three schools studied, only one school had a school library which however did not contain the amount of books needed for children to effectively learn or be enriched. At that school, the children were allowed only one, monthly visit to the library. The implication is that the learners only visited the library three times a term and this was found insufficient for effective learning to occur. The rural and mining schools did not have school libraries. The study established that there were no plans to construct libraries because the schools did not have money. This was noted to be a serious constraint in the education of all children in Zimbabwe. The study results also indicated that few classrooms had the

appropriate subject level of books for the children. Learners relied heavily on teacher's research notes. The problem of textbooks was confirmed by observation. At one school which, seriously lacked textbooks, pupils were not given even a single book to share. However, some children defied odds and performed very well because of the support they received from parents and good notes they got from teachers. To say all children from poor backgrounds and neighbourhood underperformed at school will therefore be short-sighted and an underestimation of a rather complex issue.

Results from interviews and focus group discussions revealed that, for girls who had reached puberty, there was also the added cost of sanitation needs during their menstruation period. Access of schools to water and sanitary facilities remains a challenge. Safe water coverage of 77% and sanitation of 51% by 1999 was aimed at (UNICEF 2010). Girls are known to leave school when they are menstruating if water and sanitation is not available in schools.

The fifteen girls who were interviewed and who participated in the three focus group discussions echoed the following sentiments:

...During menstruation period, many of us lack sanitary pads. We are therefore forced to use tissue papers, newspapers and rags instead. We face humiliation from other pupils after we spoil our clothes. Many girls experience abdominal pains, but have no money to buy drugs. There is also no privacy in the toilets making it very difficult to attend school when menstruating. It's difficult to participate in sports and other activities at school because some of us do not have pants. These issues force us not to go to school.

The implication is that some girl children do not go to school for between three to five days a month depending on the number of days they spend menstruating. These researchers are of the opinion that more research needs to be done on effects of menstruation on academic performance of girl learners.

In the three schools studied, the increased cost of living has had an adverse impact on girls' registration for examinations. These researchers established that there was a decline in the number of learners registering for 'O' Level examinations and in the number of subjects for which learners registered in the three schools. The study established that a larger proportion

of female learners than male learners could not sit for their examinations or could only take some subjects because they were unable to pay examination fees. The successive droughts exacerbated the problems, as food became not only expensive, but sometimes unavailable especially in the rural areas. More than seventy per cent of the learners studied highlighted that they come to school without having any breakfast. Maslow, cited in Kenrick (2010), maintains that deprivation of physiological needs like food, shelter, clothes and water among children poses a threat to the holistic development of children. Thus, such children fail to self-actualise because their self-esteem and self-concepts are adversely affected.

Theme 4: Stereotyping and Marginalisation

Teachers interviewed in the three schools say that girls continue to be seen as the weaker sex and thus unable to cope with the intricacies and gruelling demands of learning, especially of mathematics and the sciences. The researchers concluded that they still hold on to patriarchal views of believing that boys are better than girls in all respect. It was observed that this stereotype becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy where, in tests and examinations, girls do not perform as well as their male counterparts because of the low expectations teachers have of them. Chabaya et al. (2009) remark that the school, intentionally and sometimes out of ignorance or omission, marginalises girls and their performance. Rogers' unconditional positive regard implies that teachers should accept learners as they are, whether boys or girls, and irrespective of their socio-economic backgrounds (Chinyoka and Ganga 2011). This reflects the need to accept pupils unconditionally hence the humanistic theory provides a rich theoretical framework in exploring the effects of poverty on the academic performance of the girl child. Learners need a sympathetic hearing when they bring concerns to school. Empathy helps teachers to understand areas where pupils need help so as to help develop a fully functioning human being.

Teachers tend to create self-doubt, and sustain it, among girls regarding their performance by not providing enough attention and support to them in classrooms. Girl learners who participated in the three focus discussions asserted that:

... Teachers tend to favour children from well off families because they are presentable, healthy, supportive and bring learning resources to school. We also experience peer rejection, inferiority complex and conflictual peer relations than those from a high socio-economic status.

Teachers, therefore, are instrumental in shaping the self-concepts of the learners. Consequently they need to be genuine, warm, loving and to empathise with learners to help them self-actualise as discussed by Rogers cited in Witt (2012).

The researchers established that high levels of academic failure were recorded among the girls in the three schools investigated because of diminished self-confidence mainly as a result of stereotyping and labelling. The negative stereotypes that initially existed in their environment ultimately become internalised into their repertoire of meaning making, to the extent that they behave and perform as expected. Thus, some research has even claimed that cognitive abilities of girls are genetically and inherently inferior (Fausto-Sterling 2003). Implicit to the above, is a systemic exclusion of girls which has, over the years and across contexts, become normalised. The argument, therefore, is that a closer scrutiny of this is required at the micro-, meso-, exo- and macro-system levels as stated by Urie Bronfenbrenner.

Theme 5: Sexual Abuse/Harassment and Delinquent Behaviour

The researchers established that the prevailing high unemployment rates in the three communities studied contribute to adult labour migration, which often leads to an increasing phenomenon of households composed of children without parental guidance. It often happens that children are left under the supervision of older children or under the care of extended family members whose supervisory role may be limited. Both sporadic and prolonged absence of parental guidance brought about by short business trips to South Africa, Botswana and other neighbouring countries lead to an increased risk of girl children leaving school to care for their younger siblings thus risking abuse. Teachers observed that girls in towns often become victims of sexual abuse by guardians and close relatives and subsequently became pregnant. High

numbers of sexual abuse were also recorded in rural areas.

During interviews, the girls also complained of abusive behaviour by older male pupils and male teachers in the three schools as well as by adult men (sugar daddies) in the vicinity of the school. The girls commonly sought sex in exchange for money or gifts. Some girls engage in child prostitution, particularly with truck drivers, mainly at business centres and along the Harare-Beitbridge route. The teachers interviewed maintained that some girls were considered to be more at risk of engaging in various forms of abuse, alcoholism and being initiated early into sexual encounters. This implies that poverty diminished 'unhu/ubuntu' among Zimbabwean girls. The economic hardships created a 'dog eat dog' state of affairs thus directly and indirectly causing learning barriers among girl children. Educators can, therefore, use Bronfenbrenner's ecological model to assess problems in a girl child's life and aid her to adjust to her environment in a balanced way.

During the focus group discussions and interviews with the teachers it was asserted that:

...girls who live in poverty are more at risk for sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) infection because of their promiscuity and need for money and other luxuries.

Furthermore a teacher asserted that:

...girls from ages thirteen to sixteen are three to four times more likely to have an STD than a male of the same age.

Sachiti (2011) maintains that comparisons of the heterosexual AIDS rate for fifteen year old males and females show that the rate for young females is more than ten times higher than the rate for young males. The abused child is affected in many ways, such as low self-esteem and a desire for unconditional acceptance. Many of the children who experience some form of abuse carry with them negative and permanent consequences. Research by Chinyoka and Ganga (2011) as well as Hlupo and Tsikira (2012) also reveal that when someone is abused, she/ he normally does not develop positive self-esteem and craves attention in order to gain acceptance. Many times inadequate satisfaction is found from someone who will then repeatedly abuse the child. These same children were observed as having trouble with social activities and were often not well accepted into groups. They earned low grades as a result.

However, teachers interviewed in the three schools revealed that in many instances there is no evidence to substantiate accusations of abuse. This was mainly due to the absence of willing witnesses. The second major difficulty in dealing with sexual abuse cases in schools is the lack of clear guidelines on what constitutes 'improper association'. This leaves room for different and inconsistent interpretations of the concept and consequently application of suitable disciplinary measures. The teachers interviewed called for more explicit guidelines to deal with sexual abuse in schools rather than the current reliance on instruments relating to sexual offences in general and vague definitions of 'improper association'.

Theme 6: School Location, Travelling Time and Safety Issues

The study established that because of the scattered settlement patterns in many Zimbabwean districts, there are considerable distances between some homesteads and schools. Eight out of fifteen girls interviewed walk four to five kms from their homes to school daily. Also, another four girls walk two to three kms from their homes to school daily, while three girls, walk six to seven kms daily from their homes to school. This data shows that most of the school girls walk at least three kilometres from their homes to school. Due to the nature of girls work at home, which they have to do before going to school, distance to school is problematic. Focus group discussions with the teachers revealed that children who walk long distances to school arrive late, hungry and tired, all of which deplete their concentration. When they walk back home, they have limited opportunities to do their homework. Some girls who participated in this study sought accommodation closer to their schools in order to continue school. This study noted that in order to pay for their rent, some of them said they resort to sex. Nevertheless they consider lodging away from home a risky endeavour. In some instances, girls may stay with extended family members, some of whom have offered them accommodation or money in exchange for sex until they are old enough to walk the distance. Girls who attended the urban schools were also accosted by older men as they travelled to and from the school, at bus stops and in the market place. This reinforces

studies by Makuwa (2004) who established that girls found it hard, and sometimes unsafe, to travel long distances to attend school. Therefore a lot more has to be done to facilitate access to schooling for as many girl learners as possible.

CONCLUSION

This paper presented evidence to answer the question on constraints on the poverty-stricken girl child's academic performance. It was found that home-based variables such as, lack of lighting, no space to do homework, too many domestic chores, absence of books and unsupportive parents impact negatively on the girl learners academic performance. In order to generate income for the family the issue of premarital sex and early marriage is common in lower income households. This situation is not conducive for the girl child to continue with schooling. In this study it was also found that financial and resource constraints meant that girl learners attended underprivileged schools where quality of education was compromised. Hence the plight of the girl learners was further exacerbated. The girl learners are very often exposed to being stereotyped and marginalised. Teachers tend to have higher expectations of boys than girls when it comes to academic performance. All pupils need to be accepted unconditionally. Stereotyping and marginalisation has also been destructive of the girl learner's self-confidence. Low self-esteem plays a part in high levels of failure in school. Parents are frequently compelled to go to other towns, or to neighbouring countries, to seek employment thus leaving the girl child to take responsibility of the siblings. Older men in the community tend to exploit the situation by offering gifts or money in exchange for sex, thus exposing the girl child to sexual abuse and harassment. Moreover, due to the absence of adults and guidance, girl children tend to display delinquent behaviour.

Because schools are located at some distance from their homes, girl learners sometimes have to walk long distances. This compromises their safety. Valuable time is also spent travelling.

By understanding Bronfenbrenner's five nested systems, and the humanistic school of thought (Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow) at work in the life of the female learner in Zimbabwe, these researchers are not only focusing on

the challenges experienced by the female learner from poverty stricken households but on the wider community as well. Possible solutions are being sought in the form of recommendations as a way forward to overcome the plight of the girl learner.

RECOMMENDATIONS

On the basis of the findings of this study, recommendations were made. It is recommended that all people and stakeholders should work hard through collaboration and networking with each other including, but not limited to, the government and NGOs to minimise the root causes of poverty (socio-economic instability, political unrest, land problem and the issue of international sanctions in Zimbabwe).

Furthermore, the Zimbabwean Government should create a favourable policy and partnership environment to make basic education affordable and available for all children, especially girl learners. The government should also initiate the mobilisation of parents, religious and community leaders to address the cultural and religious barriers to girls' education. There is also a need to educate parents through workshops, discussion forums, presentations and seminars through the school to help them improve the academic performance of children.

Teachers can be sensitised and trained to provide support for children. The teachers need to be warm, supportive, genuine, empathetic, nurturing and give unconditional attention towards girl learners who are psychologically unstable due to poverty. Such consideration should positively encourage their self-confidence, self-direction, self-esteem and self-image.

Maintaining children's schooling is an essential intervention in several ways. It retains children's connectedness to peers, familiar adults and to an institutional identity. Keeping children in school could also help prevent vulnerability to HIV infection and abuse, sexual and otherwise by protecting children and reducing the child's need to seek shelter, food and clothing through risky encounters with unscrupulous adults. Policies, laws and community-based monitoring systems should be put in place to eliminate child labour and sexual abuse. Finally, there is also a need for the government to harmonise the ILO labour laws with children's rights and make it an offence to engage children, 0-18, in any form of labour.

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