School Based Factors and the Dropout Phenomenon: A Study of Zhomba Cluster Secondary Schools in Gokwe District of Zimbabwe

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Abstract

The main purpose of the study was to examine school related factors and circumstances that lead to students dropping of rural day secondary schools from Zhomba cluster in Gokwe district, Zimbabwe. The descriptive survey research design was adopted for this study. A total of twenty students who had dropped out of school in the past year participated in the study. These were purposively sampled from five schools randomly chosen from nine secondary schools in the cluster. Data were collected through administering a researcher constructed 16 –item Likert-type questionnaire to the participants. The data obtained was compiled and analyzed using simple numbers and percentages. The study established that poverty and financial constraints were critical in the dropout phenomenon. The study also revealed that school dropout is primarily grounded in school problems such as schooldistance and inadequate teacher-student relationships, inadequate resources and facilities as well as an irrelevant curriculum that fails to meet the individual's vocational and intellectual needs. The study therefore recommends that schools should widen and diversify their curricula to cater for students' varied interests, needs and aptitudes to make school more relevant to the world of work and that parents, teachers as well as pupils should team up to work together to encourage and assist children on the verge of dropping out to remain in school.

Key words: Dropout; Poverty; School based Factors; Student; Distant Schools.

1.Introduction

The majorconcern in basic education is ensuring that students stay in school until they complete their education. Dropping out is a serious problem because it denies individual students their fundamental human right to education. Internationally, the individual right to education has been repeatedly affirmed in many treaties and conventions such as The 1948 Convention on the Rights of the Child and the 1990 World Conference on Education for all (UNESCO 2000). There is general consensus that the school dropout problem has reached epidemic proportions internationally and has become a global problem confronting the education industry round the world (Patrick 2008; Wotherspoon 2004; Bridgeland et al., 2006; Oghuvbu, 2008).

The students who withdraw from school prematurely end up not obtaining any certificate of graduation (Ajaja, 2012).The major social costs of dropping out of school include reduced political participation, increased demand for social services, increased crime rates and poor levels of health (Azam, 2007). Individual costs include lower earnings, unemployment prospects, greater likelihood of health problems (Thurton et al. 2006). It is clear from the foregoing, that by dropping out of school, most students severely limit their chances of economic and social well-being in the future.

In this regard, a UNESCO report (2000) on the state of the world's children, points out, that about 130 million children in the developing world are denied their right to education through dropping out. To Maton and Moore (2010), the problem of dropping out should be the concern of every member of society since it has negative consequences at both the individual and social level. Thus dropout is not a mere problem that affects or impacts an individual but it is a problem that

affects the entire community as it has been noticed that certain dropouts get involved in crime (Jamil et al., 2010).

Therefore, a study of this nature is pertinent and crucial as it is meant to raise awareness concerning school dropout and to understandmore specifically the phenomenon of school dropout in secondary schools, especially in rural communities. In addition tounderstanding the causes and consequences of school dropout at the secondary school level thus stimulate the enactment of social policies that will help keep students in school.

Ajaja (2012) has categorized reasons why students drop out of school into four clusters that include; school related, Job related, family related, and community related. Frendenberg and Ruglls (2007)identified a number of factors under each cluster as influencing student dropping out of school. The factors identified under family cluster include; low family socioeconomic status, low family support for education, low parental education, conflicts between work and school, having to work and school,having to work or support family, substance use and pregnancy among others.

Under school related cluster, Chirtes (2010) observed factors such as; low socioeconomic status of school population, high level of racial or ethnic discrimination of students, school phobia, school violence, conflicts (with teachers, school mates) among others. The job related cluster entails: those students who could not workand school at the same time, those who had to do a job to survive and those who found job while in the community cluster, the following factors wereindentified: living in a low income neighborhood, having peers with low educational aspirations and having friends or siblings who are dropouts (Ajaja, 2012).

Studies in India (Rani, 2011) found financial difficulties, child not interested in studies, parents not interested in studies, lack of education facilities in the nearby village, lack of quality education, imposition of parents'choices upon adolescents, lack of privacy, and toilet facilitiesfor girls in school and security reasons as reasonscited by adolescent for dropping out. In Pakistan, Mohsin et al (2004) noted the weak primary education system, non-availability of trained teachers, and parent-teacherrelationship as the major causes of dropouts while in the USA , Bridgeland et al (2006) identified five major reasons why studentsdrop out of school as including; (i) classes not interesting, (ii) missed school for many days and could not cope again, (iii) spent a lot of timewith those not interested in school, (iv) have absolute freedom to do what I like and (v) failing in school.

Another study in India on girls' drop outs in rural schools identified causes of dropping out of girls from school in rural areas as reluctance of parents and participation indomestic activities. Another major reason was problem of financial constraint. The parent's educational status was poor and they did not give much importance to the education of girls as they did to their sons. They perceived that sons support them in their old age (Kotwal and Rani, 2007). Other studies on dropping out have attributed the phenomenon mainly to poverty(Barton, 2006).

Barsaga (1995) described dropouts as coming from low-income families whoseparents had little or no education, and who were unemployed or had jobs that gave them little or irregular income. The study also identified reasons for dropping out such as poor health due to malnutrition, distance between home and school, lack of interest, and teacher factor. It concluded that the education system then was —socially selective since most dropouts were from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

Stewart (2008) strongly contends that schools attended by students have the sole responsibility and task ofreducing dropout rates. In this regard,Machingambi (2003) contends that lack of diversity in the school curriculumcan predispose students into dropping out while Wootherspoon (2004) underlines the influenceof school-related factors that are central to thedropping out problem. namely: policies and practices; student teacher relationships; the nature of the school curriculum; resources and quality of learning. On the other hand Azzam (2007) contends that many dropoutswould have attended schools that have poor facilities and inadequate resources, conditions that affect the performance of the children and ultimately their decision to leave school. It is absolutely clear from the above thatthe poor quality of education and the schools themselves act as depressant on the demand for education by children. Thus if schools are to keep students in schools then there is need to pay particular attention to the quality of education that the children get from such schools.

Contributing to the debate on school drop outs Bridgeland et al (2006) contends that to help students stay in school the following should be observed: (i) improve teaching and curricula to make school more relevant and engaging to enhance the connection between school and work; (ii) improve instruction and access to support for struggling students; (iii) ensure strongadult-student relationships within the school; (iv) build a student relationships within the school; and (v) improve thecommunication between parents and school.

1.1 Statement of the problem

The main purpose of the study was to examine school related factors and circumstances that lead to students dropping of rural day secondary schools in Zhomba cluster , Gokwe, Zimbabwe. More specifically, it focuses on students' social and academic risk factors by examining how schools and the community play a contributing factor to students dropping out of school. The study contributes to body of knowledge that unveils   how the school academic environment and school social relations are linked to students' decision to drop out.

1.2 Research questions

The study was guided by the following research questions:
1. What are the causes of school dropouts in Zhomba cluster secondary schools?
2. How does the school academic environment and school social relations influencestudents' decision to drop out ofschool?

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Design

The study employed the descriptive survey method. This method focused on systematic description or exposure of the salient aspects of a situation with a focus on the patterns that emerge. Since the focus was the breadth of the findings the descriptive survey methodology was found suitable for the study. The study was analytic (qualitative) in that the researchers focused on the relationships between variables and further interpreted the relationships. The survey design was preferred because it is the most appropriate design where self-reported beliefs and opinions of participants are sought (David and Sutton 2004).

2.2 Population and Sample of the Study

The population consisted of 50 form three students who had dropped out of school during the past year. Twenty students (10 male and 10 female) from five randomly selected secondary school in the cluster were chosen through purposive or judgmental sample of four students per school to participatein the study. The reason for using Form three learners instead of form ones and twos was that it was assumed that these students would haveacquired valuable experiences concerning the factors that predispose students into dropping out. Therefore, they would be in a better position to provide fairly credibleand valid data about the phenomenon understudy.

3. Research Instrument

The instrument used for data collection was made up of two sections. Section A asked participants about the reasons for dropping out of school. Section B was16 item Likert-type of questionnaire soliciting data on the influence of the school academic environment and school social relations on the student's decision to drop out. The focus of this section was mainly on student-teacher relationships, the nature of school curriculum and school physical environment on dropping out. The likert – type

scale technique was adopted for the scoring of the instrument. Respondents were free to agree or disagree with any statement on the questionnaire on a continuum ranging from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree as follows:

Strongly Agree 4 points ; Agree 3 points; Disagree 2 points; Strongly Disagree 1 point

The responses for each item were counted.Prior to the main data collection, a pilot study that involved 8Form 3 students who had dropped out of school the previous year but who were not part of the sample was conducted to ensure suitability, readability, validity and reliabilityof the questionnaire.Thus enabling the researcher to improve the reliability of the research instruments in terms of content, wording and bias.

3.1 Data Collection Procedure

The research was conducted in Zhomba cluster in Gokwe disctict secondary schools with dropout students. Information about students who had dropped out was provided by the school administrators and class teachers using past class registers. The researcher explained the purpose of the study to participants (drop out students). After the explanation, participants were invited to fill in the questionnaire. Data were collected over a four week period in 2012.

4.Results and Discussion

4.1 Causes of school dropouts in Zhomba cluster secondary schools

The first research question required participants to indicate the causes of dropping out of school. The participants cited various reasons for school dropout.Table 1 reveals that the major cause of students leaving schools before the completion ofeducation was poverty and financial constraints as expressed by 80% of the respondents.

Table 1: Causes of dropout

Cause	Views (in percentage %)
poverty	80%
Poor academic performance	75%
Early marriage	20%
Financial constraints	80%
Lack of parental interest	70%
Parent's death	10%
Taking on parenting jobs and responsibilities	5%

Data analysis showed that poverty and financial constraints are the major reasons for dropout of school among students. Most parents in the Zhomba area are peasant farmers who rely on cotton farming for survival as a result of the drop in cotton prices on the international market the proceeds from farming are so meager that parent cannot afford to pay for the education of their children. In the rural areas, there is high poverty rate among parents and this may have influenced their inability to meet the financial demands for their children's schooling. The findings from this study are consistent with previous findings by Sweeten (2004), who identified economic reason as one of the reasons for dropout. The level of education of most of the parents in rural areas is very low to such an extent that they can be termed illiterates who do not know the value of education hence do not see the need of sending their children to school. Due to poor primary and lower secondary education backgrounds most students in rural Gokweare low academic achievers and end up dropping out from school. This position is consistent with the findings of Mohsin, et al (2004).

A number of studies highlight the link between poverty and dropping out from school (Birdsall et al, 2005; Bruneforth, 2006; Cardoso & Verner, 2007; Dachi & Garrett,2003; Hunter & May, 2011; Porteus et al, 2000). Porteus et al (2000: 10), whilst describing exclusionsrather than drop out per se, paint poverty as 'the most common primary and contributory reason for students to be out of school'

whileHunter and May (2011)call poverty, 'a plausible explanation of school disruption'. It seems for children from poorer backgrounds in particular the pressure on them to withdrawfrom school increases as they get older, particularly as the opportunity cost of their time increases. With the parents of most drop outs not employed, and income levels are low, most children are called on to supplement the household's income, either throughwage-earning employment themselves or taking on additional tasks to free up other household members for work resulting in them dropping out of school.

4.2 How does the school academic environment and school social relations influence students' decision to drop out of school?

This research questions required participantsto indicate the extent towhich they felt each of the following factors couldhave influenced their decision to drop out of school. Dataanalysis was done by merging theagree (A) and the strongly agree (SA) responses and treating them as agree responses. On the same note the disagree (D) and the strongly disagree (SD) responses were also merged and reportedas disagree responses.

4.2.1 Teacher-student relationships and its influence students' decision to drop out of school

According to Lynch and Cicchetti (1997), the quality of theteacher-student relationship has an impact on the student's schooladjustment.Table 2 indicates how participants perceive teacher-student relationship as related to dropping out.

Table 2: Teacher-student relationships and its influence students' decision to drop out of school

Item	Statement	A	SA	D	SD	Total
1	Poor teaching methods	60%	25%	10%	5%	100
2	Conflicts with teachers	55%	35%	5%	5%	100
3	Teachers' uncaring behavior	70%	15%	10%	5%	100
4	Discrimination by teachers	60%	20%	10%	10%	100
5	Cruelty/punishment by teachers	65%	25%	5%	5%	100
6	Teachers negative comments	75%	15%	5%	5%	100

The data from Table 2 shows that 85 percentof the students believed that poor teaching methods lead students to dropping out while 15 percent disagreed with this view. The majority of students agreed that having conflicts with teachers (90%), teachers' uncaring behavior (90%), cruelty by teachers (90%), negative comments passed by teachers (90%) predispose students into droppingout of school. On the other hand, 10 percentthought otherwise. Discrimination was cited by 80 percent of the respondentsas central to the dropping out while 20 percent refuted this view. The data clearly indicates that the majority (90%) cited teachers' lack ofcare and concern about whether they will pass or not, the negativecomments they pass, teachers' cruelty as well as conflicts with teachersas closely related to dropping out.

The above findings are consistent with findings by Govindaraju and Venkatesan (2010) who found out that neglect by teachers, poor teaching, discrimination, cruelty orpunishment meted out by teachers, absence as being among the teacher centric reasons for dropping out of school in rural settings in India.In this study most students indicated that teachers' uncaring behavior acts as a push out factor to many of them. Caring teachers have been shown by Croningerand Lee (2001) in a study in America to be animportant source of social capital for students, a positive to relationships between students and teachersboth in and out of class which reduces the probability of dropping out bynearly half. Such a relationship is important particularly to students from disadvantaged backgrounds and those experiencing academic difficulties who are at risk of dropping out. Researchers such as Hale (2001), Bennett and LeComte (1990) have observed that most students drop out of school because of conflicts with teachers and other students as well as demeaning teacher attitudes and punishment meted out by these teachersof student dropout. Contributing to this debate Stearns and Glennie

(2006) note that factors internal to the school, such as disciplinary policies orconflicts with students or teachers, might serve to push students out of school. In this study it emerged that students are lesslikely to drop out of high schools if the relationships between teachers and students (asperceived by the students) are more positive a finding consistent with findings made by Wotherspoon(2004) in a study of high school dropouts in Japan.

4.2.2 The nature of the school curriculum and its influence on decision to drop out

The role of education in promoting the economic and social vitality of a country's citizen iswidely recognized, and much emphasis is placed the importance of quality education as an economic investment that deters school dropout and prevents societal costs associated with school dropout (Rolnick and Grunewald, 2006). The education system should therefore inculcation of a proper work ethic and it is the duty of schools do develop job-related competencies in students so that they are motivated to pursue education have confidence in education and thus stay in school.
     Pertaining to how the school curriculum relates to the drop out problem 90 percent and 95 percent respectively believe that a narrow rigid curriculum that lacks diversity with limited choices and options for students and does not cater for pupils interest predisposes students to dropping out (Table 3). On the other hand, 90 percentdothink that a curriculum irrelevant to the world of work is a factor in the dropping out problem; 95 percent and 90 percent respectively believe that lack of pay off in terms of income, upward mobility and job opportunities cause students to lose confidence in education therefore dropout.

Table 3. The nature of the school curriculum and its influence on decision to drop out

Item	Statement	A	SA	D	SD	Total
7	Lack of diversity in the curriculum	65%	25%	5%	5%	100
8	Curriculum irrelevant to the world of work	75%	15%	5%	5%	100
9	Curriculum not catering for learner interests	80%	15%	5%	0%	100
10	Lack of pay off and upward mobility	75%	20%	5%	0%	100
11	Poor job opportunities after school	65%	25%	5%	5%	100

The above findings are consistent with findings by Lauer(1996), who observed that a large number of college graduates havedifficulties in finding jobs and the few graduates who do find jobstend to work at tasks that do not require the kindor amount of education they have, leading to frustration and dissatisfaction an indication that educationdoes not always pay off in terms of incomeand upward mobility. This view implies this diminished economic payoff of the education system that causes students to lose confidence in education and thereby preferring to drop out. Cooper and Jordan (2003) have shown that lack of economic alternatives in thelabor market, even when graduates complete schooling,is a strong factor that influences children todrop out of school in developing countries.
     It emerged from study that the curriculum is too narrow and does not cater for student interest tends to alienate students and it is this feeling of alienation that predisposes the students to dropping out. Schools therefore need to diversify their curriculums so that every studentfinds a home in school. Mandebvu (1996) has confirmed the imperative to diversifythe school curriculum in a study on school drop outs. The findings from this study are also consistent with findings of Hussain et al (2010) who found out that in Pakistan, some of the curriculum related factors that contribute towards high dropout rate are that the curriculum atprimary level is not in harmony with the needs and abilities of children. Students feel bored and not satisfied with theprescribed curriculum which forces them to leave school. Furthermore the prescribed curriculum at primary level does not fulfill the needs and expectations of the community. Therefore, students do not takeinterest in their education and they leave the school. Attaullah (2000) quoted in Ghazi et al (2011) further reinforces this by noting that lackof education programmes to meet the individual's vocational and intellectual needs of the

students ultimately leads to dropout. Mbilinyi (2003) further notes that an irrelevant, complex, rigid and congested curriculum normally puts learners off and predisposes them to dropping out.

4.2.3 The school physical environment and its influence on dropping out

With regard to the school physical environment, findings of the study reveal that the majority of students agree that lack of facilities (95%), lack of resources (90%), poor condition of infrastructure (90%), geographical factors (85%) and administrative factors (80%) are the main causes drop out at secondary level in Zimbabwe (Table 4).

Table 4. The school physical environment and its influence on dropping out

Item	Statement	A	SA	D	SD	Total
12	Lack of facilities	80%	15%	5%	0%	100
13	Poor condition of infrastructure	70%	20%	5%	5%	100
14	Lack of resources	75%	15%	5%	5%	100
15	Geographical factors	80%	5%	10%	5%	100
16	Administrative factors	60%	20%	10%	10%	100

The findings have shown that geographical factors prove to be a barrier for some children continuing in school. Long distances of schools from homes and poor transportation facilities are also main causes ofdropout . Previous research studies also established positive impact of distance on students' dropout and retention rate. Sathar and Llyod (1994) found that having a school one kilo meter away from home had a positive and significant effect on the primary school attendance. Swada and Lokshin (2001) also maintained that accessibility to school within the village seems to contribute to about 18% increase in a school entry and a decline in school dropout by about 16%. Other research studies (Glick & Sahn, 2006 ; Colclough et al, 2000,Ainsworth et al 2005) have already established that long distance has a strong negativeimpact on attending school.

Research studies in Pakistan (Hussain, 2011) have shown that lack of physical facilities is also one of the major reasons of students' dropping out in Pakistan with respondents stating that inadequate provision of physical facilities inschools and poor standards of health and nutrition is one of the main causes of high dropout rate in Pakistan. Schools in rural areas of the country, especially remote rural areas, lack basic facilities of life such as good roads,education and health facilities which causes the students dropout and retention rate. The study also revealed that poor condition of school buildings is also a mainreason of students leaving school a finding consistent with that of Din et al.,(2011). Educationfacilities arelinkedtoqualityin terms ofhuman resources andin-school resources.Availability of resources such as textbooks, desks and blackboards has been found to influencedropout (Brock & Cammish, 1997; Moltenoet al. 2000).

Administrative factors also play a critical role in contributing to student dropouts. Administrative factors such as policies on discipline, school uniforms, school fees as well as repetition tend to act as push factors causing students to drop out. Students who do not afford school uniforms or were financially indebted to their schools were either barred from classes or expelled from school until the debts were settled. Similarly those who could not afford the prescribed school uniforms were either excluded from classes or even expelled. Most students thus feel the pinch of such policies due to their inability to raise the required fees and at the same time there is no support that schools render to such kind of students hence they are left with no option serve to drop out of school. The findings concur with those of Gubert and Robilliard (2006) who found that Ghanaian students from low socio-economic backgrounds are vulnerable and suffer income shocks and are faced with some formofdemandtowithdraw from school.Ubogun (2004) identified school related factors such as poor administration, high cost of education as well as harsh school rules and regulations causes of dropouts among students.

5. Conclusion

The dropout phenomenon has been observed to be very intricate with multiple interwoven factors responsible for leading to this complex situation. This study has made modest attempt to explore this complex phenomenon with reference to school based factors as contributing to this phenomenon.It was found that a low socio-economic family backgroundis a major cause of the phenomenon of dropping out with students dropping out due to poverty and financial constraints. The study has also revealed that certain school conditions can lead topremature school dropout. Thus, schools appear to influence dropout behavior throughtheir organization, their structure and their school climate, policies and possibly practically push students towards a gradual exit (fade-out) or to leave school (push-out). Connected to this are yet other pertinent causes such as distance to school, inadequate resources and facilities which appeared to be among the main causes of dropout among rural secondary school students. Teacher centric factors such as un caring behavior, cruelty, negative comments and poor teaching have also been shown to act as push out factors for most rural secondary school students. Students may also be pushed out of school because of curriculum related factors.It was noted that lack of education programs to meet the individual's vocational and intellectual needs of the students ultimately leads to dropout while an irrelevant, complex, rigid and congested curriculum puts learners off and predisposes them to dropping out.

6. Recommendations

On the basis of the findings of this study, the following efforts can be made to help the students to stay in the schools:
1. Schools should widen and diversify their curricula to cater for students' varied interests, needs and aptitudes to make school more relevant to the world of work.
2. Schools should improve teaching, instruction,school buildings, furniture, facilities and access to support, for struggling students so that the school becomes a place of interest rather than of aversion.
3. An effective parent- teacher association, school development committee as well as pupils partnership should be formed and team up to work together toencourage and assist children on thevergeofdroppingout to remain in school.

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