

Effects of Poverty among Early Childhood Development Education (ECD) Children in Chimanimani District Primary Schools: A Case Study of Muchadziya Primary School

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Abstract: This study sought to establish the effect of poverty among Early Childhood Development (ECD) children in Chimanimani District of Manicaland Province using a case study of Muchadziya Primary School. The qualitative methodology as used to conduct the study. Purposive sampling was used to select the participants who included the head, four (4) ECD teachers and ten (10) parents for the ECD children in the school. The questionnaire, interview and document analysis were used to collect and generate data. The study revealed that children who live in extreme poverty or who live with poor parents or guardians are most likely to perform badly in school work and are also very like to drop-out of school. The study also revealed that the children who were lacking basic needs like food, clothing and shelter were not motivated to initiate play, join in class activities or interact freely with peers. The study recommends that schools need to come up with more programmes to assist poor families with children in their schools. Teachers and heads of schools ought to be observant in order to notice manifestations of poverty among children under their care and assist them thorough Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) or the Social Welfare Department.

Keywords: Poverty, effects, early childhood, primary schools, district

INTRODUCTION

The education sector in Zimbabwe recognizes that Early Childhood Development education can contribute significantly to the nurture of young children at various levels that is physical, social, emotional, intellectual, cultural and spiritual [1]. Zimbabwe has a national ECD policy which requires primary schools to offer a minimum of two ECD classes for children from 3 to 5 years old and in support of this policy, primary teacher training colleges are now training ECD teachers who receive certified diplomas in ECD and universities are also awarding degrees for ECD graduates [2]. This policy came about because the Government of Zimbabwe values preschool education of its children [3].

In spite of this noble policy however, there is a trend to see declining numbers of children enrolling in these ECD classes particularly in rural areas, and those who enroll dropout before they go through the programme [3]. There are many factors that contribute to the low enrolment figures and high drop-out rates of these children, but according to Chirozva [1] poverty

tops the list. The poverty situation in Zimbabwe has reached an alarming stage where more than 50% of the rural population lives below the poverty datum line [4]. This poverty of ECD classes and there is therefore need to analyse the actual effects of the poverty to the ECD children.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Educational outcomes are one of the key areas influenced by family incomes. As Ferguson et al [5] posit, children from low-income families often start school already behind their peers who come from more affluent families. The incidence, depth, duration and timing of poverty all influence a child's educational attainment, along with community characteristics and social networks. School readiness reflects a child's ability to succeed both academically and socially in a school environment. Ferguson et. al [5] postulate that school readiness requires physical well-being and appropriate motor development, emotional health and a positive approach to new experiences, age-appropriate social knowledge and competence, age-appropriate language skills and age appropriate general knowledge

and cognitive skills. Six poverty-related factors are known to impact child development in general and school readiness in particular; they are the incidence of poverty, the depth of poverty, the duration of poverty, the timing of poverty (for example age of child, community characteristics) and the impact poverty has on the child's social network (parents, relatives and neighbours) [5].

Children from low-income families often do not receive the stimulation and do not learn the social skills required to prepare them for school. Typical problems are parental inconsistency (with regard to daily routines and parenting), frequent changes of caregivers, lack of supervision and poor role modeling and lack of support [5]. Thomas [6] concluded that children from lower income households score significantly lower on measures of vocabulary and communication skills, knowledge of numbers, copying and symbols use, ability to concentrate and cooperate play with other children than children from higher income households.

Recent evidence [7] suggests that the complex web of social relationships children experience with peers, adults in the school, and family members, exerts a much greater influence on their behavior than researchers had previously assumed. This process starts with children's core relationships with parents or primary caregivers in their lives, which form a personality that is either secure and attached or insecure and unattached [8]. As Blair et. al [9] argue, securely attached children typically behave better in school. Once students are in school, the dual factors of socialization and social status contribute significantly to behavior [8]. As Harris [7] posits, the school socialization process typically pressures students to be like their peers or risk social rejection, whereas the quest for high social status drives students to attempt to differentiate themselves in some areas; sports personal style, sense of humour, or street skills for example.

Socio-economic status forms a huge part of this equation. As Jensen [8] observes, children raised in poverty rarely choose to behave differently, but they are faced daily with overwhelming challenges that affluent children never have to confront, and their brains have adapted to sub optimal conditions in ways that undermine good school performance. Many low socio-economic status (SES) children face emotional and social instability and typically, the weak or anxious attachments formed by infants in poverty become the basis for full-blown insecurity during the early childhood years [7]. Very young children require healthy learning and exploration for optimal brain development, and yet, unfortunately, in impoverished families there tends to be a higher prevalence of such adverse factors as teen motherhood, depression and

inadequate sensitivity toward the infant and later, poor school performance and behavior on the child's part [7].

As Thomas [6] states, in many poor households, parental education is substandard, time is short and warm emotions are at a premium; all factors that put attunement process at risk. Caregivers tend to be overworked, overstressed, and authoritarian with children, using the same harsh disciplinary strategies used by their own parents [10]. They often lack the warmth and sensitivity and fail to form solid, healthy relationships with their children and in addition low-income caregivers are typically half as likely as higher income parents are to be able to track down where their children are in the neighbourhood [10] and frequently they do not know the names of their children's teachers and friends. Low SES children are often left at home to fend for themselves and their younger siblings while their caregivers work long hours; compared with their well-off peers; they also spend less time playing outdoors and more time watching television and are less to participate in after-schools activities [8]

Strong secure relationships help stabilize children's behavior and provide the core guidance needed to build lifelong social skills and children who grow up with such relationships learn healthy, appropriate emotional responses to everyday situations [8]. But children who are raised in poor households often fail to learn these responses, to the detriment of their school performance [10]. For example, children with emotional dysregulation may get so easily frustrated that they give up on a task when success was just moments away [6]. Jansen [8] adds that social dysfunction may inhibit students' ability to work well in cooperative groups, quite possibly leading to their exclusion by group members who believe they are not "doing their part: or pulling their share of the load and this exclusion and the accompanying decrease in collaboration and exchange of information exacerbate at risk students already shaky academic performance and behavior.

Some teacher may interpret students' emotional and social deficits as a lack of respect or manners, but it is more accurate and helpful to understand that the students come to school with a narrower range of appropriate emotional responses than we expect and the truth is that many students simply don't have the repertoire of necessary responses [8].

Statement of the problem

Poverty presents a chronic stress for children and families that may interfere with successful adjustment to developmental tasks including school achievement. Children raised in low-income families are at risk for academic and social problems as well as poor health and well-being, which can in turn undermine educational achievement.

Significance of the study

The study sought to expose the magnitude of poverty among ECD children in order to come up with strategies to reduce the impact of this scourge. It was also hoped that teachers taking ECD classes would appreciate that the emotional and social deficits exhibited by children from poor families did not mean that they were rude or ill mannered, but actually needed help from the teachers and school authorities.

Research questions

The study was guided by the following questions:

1. What is the extent of poverty among ECD learners?
2. Are there strategies implemented by schools to alleviate the plight of children from poor backgrounds?
3. How best can the children from poor backgrounds be assisted?

Limitations of the study

The major limitation will be the use of the small size of the sample which may confine the study's findings to a very limited area. The researchers' presence during data generation which is often unavoidable in qualitative research can affect subject's responses and issues of anonymity and confidentiality can present problems. This was mitigated through use of multi methods.

Delimitations

The study delimited itself to the effects of poverty on ECD children at Muchadziya Primary School in Chimanimani District of Manicaland Province in Zimbabwe. The sample comprised the head of the school four teachers and ten parents of the ECD children who were selected using the purposive sampling technique.

METHODOLOGY

The qualitative methodology was adopted for this study and the design used is the case study design. The population comprised of all teachers and parents of children of the ECD classes at Muchadziya Primary School. The sample was made up of 4 teachers, 10 parents and the head of school. Permission to conduct the study was sought from the District Education officer and the head of school. All participants were assured that the information they volunteered would not be used for any other purpose outside the study. The data were generated using a questionnaire, interview guide as well as use of document analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study revealed that in all the four ECD classes' teachers indicated that the percentage of children from poor families was above 70%. This was probably due to the fact that most parents and guardians from the area were unemployed and thus struggled to make ends meet. This finding tallies with observations

by UNICEF (2014) which state that in rural areas in Zimbabwe, 62% of the economically active persons are not working while the remainder are paid permanent employees and / or temporary or casual workers in low paying jobs. Information from headmasters indicated that there were many child-headed families from where the ECD children came from. Child-headed fall in the same category as unemployed parents families, as young children are not capable of securing employment in order to support their families.

The head of the schools and teachers were in agreement that the levels of absenteeism in the ECD classes were very high. Between May and mid July the number of absent children constituted approximately 50% of the total attendances. The respondents attributed this high incidence of absenteeism to ignorance on the part of parents and guardians of the importance of ECD for their children's development or it could be due to the fact that children are tired of the adult roles they assume at home while their parents run around trying to provide the families. This is congruent with observations by Thomas [6] who found that in many poor households, parental education is substandard, time is short, and warm emotions are at a premium; all factors that put attunement process at risk.

Most biological parents were late (passed on) and the children were in the hands of their children who indicated that they did not have the economic means to support their grandchildren. They admitted that they were forced to assign their young children chores that were expected to be carried out by adults; for example selling farm produce at the market place. Some grandparents indicated that they were looking after grandchildren whose parents were alive in towns and cities but could not support their children because of lack of employment opportunities. There were wide ranging accusations of being sidelined on programmes like the social welfare programmes. All the factors mean that the children from poor family backgrounds have no time for school work and thus are disadvantaged from the outset [5].

Evidence from document analysis revealed that records by teachers and in the head's office indicated that children from poor families were reluctant to be involved in physical activities in the classroom and in the playgrounds. The child study records revealed that children from poor families were found not to be so eager in initiating play like their counterparts from medium and high income families. Teachers felt that children from poor families are de-motivated to play due to hunger and sickness or malnutrition. These children were said to be lacking in confidence. The fact that the parents are running around most of the times trying to make ends meet, whilst children are left to perform all the household chores which exhausts them, means that the children have no energy left for play

time. Evans [10] postulates that the adult roles that these children assume at home make them behave like adults and thus they feel like they are too old to be involved in their peer's games or play.

Information from the study reveals that the school is doing very little to improve the conditions of children from poor backgrounds. There are no practical strategies in place to reduce the impact of poverty on ECD children. Instead, parents were complaining that the school was ill treating their children by punishing them when they come late, detaining them after school yet they will be hungry and tired. Parents stated that sometimes their children played truancy as a result of this treatment. Jensen [8] argues that some teachers may treat these children in a hard way since they may interpret their behavior (children's) as lack of respect or as bad manners and this worsens the situation of these children. There were not Government or Non Governmental Organisations programmes to alleviate the plight of the ECD from poor families. For example, Government was said to owe the school large sums of money through non payment of fees in time for the children under the BEAM scheme. In some instances as parents indicated, non deserving children benefitted from poverty alleviation programmes at the expense of the needy.

CONCLUSION

The number of children ECD learners or children living in poverty at Muchadziya Primary School is very high. This is manifested through the high rates of absenteeism and late coming. Most of the poor families are headed by unemployed and survive from hand to mouth. In some cases the ECD children are living with very old grandparents or young siblings. As a result these children were not effectively participating in school activities due to their conditions. Unfortunately, teachers were not helping the situation as they were said to be ill treating these children. Schools were also marginalising or sidelining them when it came to benefitting from programmes intended for the needy.

Recommendations

In view of the findings and conclusion of this study, the following recommendations are put forward:

- Poverty makes it harder for children to succeed in school because children in poverty are more likely to be hungry or malnourished exposed to trauma, stress or violence, or faced with severe health problems. This therefore, means that schools should address the effects of poverty.
- Schools should identify children from poor families from their records such as the social or child study record and recommend them for assistance by Government, NGOs or other well wishers that the school should contact on behalf of the children.

- Schools need to come up with viable programs to assist poor families at their schools, for example by hiring them for jobs at the school like moulding bricks, repairing classrooms, fence or any other jobs available.
- Teachers need to be very sensitive to the needs of children from poor families and avoid harassing them as this worsens their plight.
- Schools should also source for donations for food and implement feeding schemes to augment the food for the learners.

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