

Unveiling the Challenges Militating Against the Boy Child's Education During Times of Socio-Political and Economic Disintegration

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ABSTRACT

The world over, there has been a crusade to cushion the growth, education, and transition of the girl child throughout their educational and social life, which is noble and commendable. However, the boy child also has their own challenges, which go unnoticed, or get taken for granted. The current qualitative case study departs from the enshrined norm and focuses on the issues bedeviling the boy child in their education during turbulent times. The turbulence were induced by the Fast Track Land Reform Programme of February 2000 in Zimbabwe, which has caused the collapse of the economy, affecting all sectors, schools, and the boy child included. Two primary and two secondary schools in the Marondera Education District were sampled, using sixteen teachers and four school heads. The following questions guided the study: What factors affect the boy child's education during turbulence? How are the issues affecting the boy child in their education being addressed? Is there anything more that can be done to resolve further the issues affecting the boy child in their education? Data were generated through in depth semi structured interviews and focus groups. It emerged that drug abuse, gambling, theft, sexual immorality, child-headed homes, and bullying were among the issues impeding the boy child's education in the current Zimbabwean milieu. The study recommends a deliberate thrust in engaging parents, school personnel, government departments, and other key stakeholders to address the challenges emerging from the study.

Key Words: Boy child, Juvenile delinquency, Instruction, Stake holders, Engagement, Turbulence

INTRODUCTION

Chang'ach (2012) refers to the boy child as a male person under the age of eighteen, and further laments that, the boy child of the 21st Century is confronted with tremendous challenges, through which unless correctly addressed, the society is losing him. Over the centuries, society and schools have been concentrating on the challenges that militate against the girl more than the male child (Porter, 2016; Evans & Yuan, 2022). Granted that this study does condone this stance, but a gap has been identified that needs to be closed, hence the focus on the boy child, particularly in the current Zimbabwean crisis. This research launches from the helipad that, Zimbabwe had a land reform programme in February 2000, where land was repossessed from the minority white farmers and redistributed to the black majority (Chimbunde & Moreeng, 2024). This land reform has been going on to date, taking various twists and turns (Chibaya, 2021), but the bottom line is, it has left the economy dead, and the local currency collapsed in 2009 (Chimbunde & Jakachira, 2024), millions of people have left for the diaspora (Ngwenya, 2021), unemployment is pegged at 90% plus, with an estimated 95% of the workforce in the informal sector (Dube, 2024). These occurrences have caused a collapse in public service sectors funding, and education is one of the worst hit beneficiaries.

It is against the above background that this study posits that the boy child has been left vulnerable to a number of challenges, socially, economically, culturally, spiritually and emotionally, and all these have taken a toll on their education. Granted though, that the girl child is exposed to a similar environment, but the challenges of the two genders are not exactly the same in some quarters, hence the focus on the boy child in this paper. Amongst the factors identified as endemic to the boy child are, drug and substance abuse, alcohol abuse, gambling, gangsterism, truancy, promiscuity and bullying (Chimbunde, 2024, Kgari-Masondo & Chingwanangwana, 2024). The problems underweighting the boy child in Zimbabwe and elsewhere on the globe will not be solved overnight, but there must be starting point, hence this study and others related to it.

This qualitative case study, which was conducted in four schools (two primary and two secondary), with twenty participants was guided by the questions; The following questions guided the study: What factors affect the boy child's education during turbulence? How are the issues affecting the boy child in their education being addressed? Is there anything more that can be done to resolve further the issues affecting the boy child in their education? The theories that guide this study, Positive Youth Development, and Critical Pedagogy.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Current Zimbabwean Milieu

In Zimbabwe, given the pursuant socio-political and economic turbulence, that has dragged on for more than two decades, educational provision and the environment around the boy child has suffered a fatal knock on the head. This comes in the wake of runaway inflation, a record workforce migration running into millions, an unemployment rate above ninety percent, and some ninety-five percent of the working population in the informal sector, alongside a visibly collapsing education system (Bakasa & Mokomane, 2024). There has been a massive brain drain in the education sector, for the informal sector and the diaspora, schools are now staffed with young inexperienced personnel (Chingwanangwana, 2019; Chibaya, 2021). Parallel structures now exist in education, Chimbunde and Jakachira (2024) refer to these as shadow education, where teachers run private tutoring on their learners to squeeze extra money from them, neglecting the formal schools to create a need outside of the schools (Chingwanangwana, 2024). As such, teachers have been known to visit the schools, as most of their time is spent hustling, doing cross border trading or running a private side business to survive (Bakasa & Mokomane, 2024).

Boy child in the home

Manguvo, Whitney, and Chareka (2011) claim that the majority of Zimbabweans who moved to the diaspora left their children behind, resulting in millions of child-headed families. Children whose parents died from COVID-19, HIV/AIDS, and other illnesses burgeoned these child-headed households. The boy child, together with the girl, are drastically obstructed as this setup promotes a permissive environment in the home, where adolescent delinquency—including theft, drug and alcohol abuse, larceny, promiscuity, and even rape—becomes widespread. The male child from such socially explosive backgrounds will inevitably engage in similar activities in school, and some of these involve their teachers. This is compounded by the fact that school personnel do not have any parents to communicate with on school or discipline matters, causing the learners to suffer psychologically, with some getting physically and sexually abused or neglected, because there is no one to give account to, due to the missing parents. This scenario jeopardises the instructional leadership and discipline of the boy child.

School environment and the boy child

Currently, the school environment is not conducive for the learners in Zimbabwe, given the collapse in educational funding structures, dwindling instructional resources, aging and inadequate infrastructure, coupled with ghost teachers in the schools (Wuta, 2022). Pedagogical as well as human resources became a chief challenge to the delivery of education due to the breakdown of the economy, Nyazema (2010). Basic laboratory, technical subjects, and classroom requirements such as chalk could not be availed owing to non-existence of funds (Chibaya, 2021). The Government of Zimbabwe (2020) states that in the current fluidic milieu, a further 200,000 teachers are needed, while teachers' colleges produce about 10,000 graduates yearly, and around 300 teachers abandon the profession every month. The young, inexperienced teachers filling the schools (Chingwanangwana, 2019) and the shortage of teachers hitting education (Zimbabwe Teachers' association (2020), coupled with the ghost teachers who sometimes visit the schools (Chimbunde & Moreeng, 2024) create a vacuum in the schools where the learners have a free for all liberated zone, more like adult nursery schools where they come to kill time and grow chronologically, most of the time, un supervised. Such an environment leaves the learners with all the space and time to engage in all forms of shenanigans, such as gambling, truancy, fighting, promiscuity and you name it (Chibaya, 2021).

Social environment and the boy child

The unsettling legacy of Zimbabwe's political and economic unrest has contributed to the collapse of the teaching and learning culture (Hammer et al., 2016). Crisis situations like this led to a rise in criminal activity, political polarization, domestic and political violence, and a breakdown in trust. Children experience trauma from witnessing such violence, becoming victims, or being recruited to commit acts of violence, which can have long-term physical and psychological effects on them (Munroe, 2015).

Edwards (2008) enunciates that the family, school, and society are some of the many different and complex environments that contribute to school indiscipline and other learner problems. Mthiyane (2013) espouses that these factors include internal, external, social, and communal components. Relatedly, Edwards (2008) chronicles that students often bring problems from other areas of their lives, such as divorce, abandonment, death, and other challenges, to school. Based on the Ecological Theory of Human Development, Chaux (2009) asserts that a country's political and economic environment has a big influence on how children behave. Furthermore, Chiviru (2008) has demonstrated that educators think that students' lack of discipline is being made worse by the current deterioration in the sociopolitical and economic environment currently prevailing in Zimbabwe.

Mentoring and the boy child

Leadership in schools involves the art of guiding, monitoring, and growing the capacities of students and teachers to attain educational goals (Ramazan, 2023), however this is very difficult in the current, fluid environment prevailing in Zimbabwe. Masiyiwa (2024) alludes to the Amalgamated Rural Teachers Union of Zimbabwe President, conveying that a survey his union conducted between October 2022 and October 2023 revealed that about 4,000 teachers leave the country annually. The Zimbabwe Teachers Association (2024) maintains that there are 144,000 teachers in Zimbabwe; 60 percent of these are women, and more men are abandoning the profession than women, the latter being more tied to one place due to family obligations and the support they receive from spouses abroad, in the informal sector, and other hustles. This leaves less and less of male role models in the schools for the boy child. The boy child then lacks mentoring in aspects relating to the male child, and other disciplines such as sport, etiquette, and career development. Moreeng and Chimbunde (2024) advance that teachers have become foxes that engage in a 'portfolio of activities' to survive instead of being hedgehogs that rely on one resource type, thus creating untold student (dis)engagement in learning.

The future of the boy child

Hargreaves and Fink (2016) advocate that educators and administrators should be in charge of their students' instruction if they believe that schools have a significant role in their future well-being and usefulness in society. Furthermore, there is need for a concerted effort by educators, parents, civic organizations and government to come together and deal squarely with the issues militating against (Bakasa & Mokomane, 2024). The application of the Positive Youth Development Theory (Pitman, 2017) and the Critical Pedagogy Theory (Sho, 2002) will bring in new dimensions in winning and retaining the boy child within the education arena, while helping deal with the delinquent behaviours (these two theories are explained below).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is guided by two theories, Positive Youth Development and Critical Pedagogy Theories, each is discussed briefly below.

Positive Youth Development Theory

Pittman (2017) is credited with the formation of this theory when she shifted the focus from addressing youth problems to building and nurturing assets and skills, thereby recognizing that youth are not just problems to be solved, but assets, allies, and agents of change, the famous saying "Problem-free isn't fully prepared" is synonymous to this framework. This theory, referred to as the PYD Theory, emphasises the focus on

promoting the healthy development and wellbeing of the youths. The framework builds on the strengths and assets rather than solely magnifying deficits and problems. Key to this theory are the principles of, focus on strength, promoting positive relationships, providing opportunities, skills building and community engagement that brings a sense of belonging. The cultural responsiveness, asset-based focus and community involvement gives the theory an opportunity to foster positive development in the learners, as it sweeps through their physical, emotional, cognitive, social, vocational and spiritual domains. The Positive Youth Development framework is based on five C's: Competence, Confidence, Connection, Character and Caring. All the raised factors relating to this framework directly speak to this study.

Critical Pedagogy Theory

Sho (2002) accredits this theory to Paulo Freire as its propounder, whose main emphasis is developing critical thinking, applying social justice, and empowerment in education. This theory speaks to this study in that schools need to foster inclusivity of the boy child, create participatory learning environments, and address gender specific problems of the learners. The theory speaks to involvement, care, transparency, and individual needs addressing.

Research Design and Methodology

The qualitative research set out to identify the factors fighting against the boy child's learning during turbulence. The case study was chosen since it enables the researcher to study phenomena in greater profundity to grasp a deeper understanding (Cresswell & Cresswell, 2018). Purposive sampling uses the participants with the most desirable research characteristics (Cresswell, 2014; Kelly, 2023). The researcher purposively selected twenty educators (four school heads and sixteen teachers) drawn from the four schools in the Marondera Urban District.

The researcher conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with the school heads, and focus group interviews were held with the teachers, all were audio-taped, transcribed, and checked for accuracy. After transcription, the participants were invited to add questions done to the interview protocol before and during data collection according to the advocacy of Kelly (2023). Once transcribed, the interview transcript was returned to the appropriate participants for verification and final approval, and the identified changes were done. The data were used solely for this study as indicated by Silverman (2005), Anonymity, freedom from harm, the right to withdraw from the study, informed consent, and the right to know the research outcome were adhered to as advanced by Cresswell (2014). The schools were code-named Purple, Magenta, Red, and Blue to foster anonymity, furthermore, the participants were coded H1-4 for school heads and T1-16 for teachers.

The data generated were analysed using the Core coding methods were used to analyse the data generated (Miles, 1994). Themes that arose from the investigation were analysed, aligning them with the objectives of the research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Morgan, 2022). The themes generated insights, enhanced comprehension, and built experiential knowledge of the study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Whilst there is a global outcry on the boy child crisis and the need for early intervention, the current study does so by articulating the local issues within a global context, hence the result presented below, articulating the Zimbabwean scenario.

Boys are biologically, developmentally and psychologically different from girls—and teachers need to learn how to bring out the best in everyone (Tyre, 2006)

Child Headed Families

There are growing numbers of child headed families, due to continued parents migration for economic reasons, as the Zimbabwean economy continues to tumble over the years (Moyo, 2023). The HIV and AIDS, as well as

the COVID-19 pandemics have compounded the problem, and the majority of these child household heads are boys (Chimbunde and Jakachira, 2024). A female teacher, Participant, T7, had this to say about these learners:

“These children heading families become adults in everything, some even make advances on you, they become arrogant, do not do their homework, and are often late or absent. Not all are wild. But the majority get affected academically” (Participant T7, school teacher).

Author (2024) argue that bringing in Ubuntu, both into the school leadership and amongst teachers

and learners, would go a long way in helping to solve this problem. Freire’s Critical Theory comes in handy here, to help foster joint parenting between the adult members of these families and the schools, through fostering inclusivity, empowerment and care (Sho, 2002). Compounded with the Positive Youth Development Theory (Pittman, 2017) these youngsters would experience positive relationships, positive relationships, care, and skills development, through such initiatives. Sho (2002)’s theory, promoting the development of critical thinking, and the application of social justice, and empowerment in education in developing the boy child, will compliment the Ubuntu theory.

Truancy and Absenteeism

Participants in the study raised the fact that there is rampant truancy and absenteeism, particularly amongst boy children, and they blamed this on the ghost teachers and shadow education. Where they are in school, there is a lot of mischief and unruly behaviour, here is what one teacher participant had to say about unruly behaviour:

“Not doing their work, not covering their books, not even writing, some of them, the rest would just be sitting making noise being mischievous. At the end of the day, the Headmaster would request some exercise books from everyone” (Participant T11, school teacher).

Shadow education, according to Chimbunde and Jakachira (2024), has compounded this problem in that these learners have the laxity to miss school as they can always recoup through the extra lessons offered in the homes, by the same teachers they see at school. This has rendered schools useless, when it comes to learning, as real learning is happening outside of the schools (Chibaya, 2021). This has sparked a wave of dropouts, particularly amongst the boy child, compared to their female counterparts (Chingwanangwana, 2019). Chang’ach (2012) reiterates that, in neighbourhoods where fathers are most scarce, the high-school dropout rates are shocking, and he further mourns that, in such instances a whole generation of men lose in education completely. Through the application of the Positive Youth Development Theory, based on its five C’s: Competence, Confidence, Connection, Character and Caring, the boy child can be captured and be built to a level of productivity and healthy incorporation into the adult society.

Gambling and violent acts in class

Participants raised the fact that often times these students are not occupied in the schools, due to teacher indifference, lateness or absenteeism, so they have room to engage in all sorts of activities, like doing drugs and abuse substances right at school. It also emerged that in some instances they engage in gambling, playing cards and checkers during class time.

“Teachers because of economic hardships, the teachers are trying to put food on the table, trying to make extra cash, so at times he does not come to work, busy somewhere trying to make extra cash for a living.” (Participant H3, school head).

Some of these tendencies and behaviours, according to Mthiyane (2013) emerge from factors that are internal and external to the school, social, and communal components. This is reinforced by what Edwards (2008) articulates, that students often bring problems from other areas of their lives, such as divorce, abandonment, death, and other challenges, to school. Curing the schools begins in the community, as the school mirrors the society, the current socio-political and economic turbulence happen to be the major source of these ills (Chingwanangwana, 2019; Chibaya, 2021). The principles of Pitman (2017)’s PYD theory of focusing on the strength, promoting positive relationships, providing opportunities, skills building and community

engagement, that brings a sense of belonging and self worthy will play a dynamic role in transforming these youths.

Promiscuity

It emerged from the study that there are thousands of child headed homes, the majority of them being run by the boy child. Participants H1, H3, T1, T4, T13, attested to the view that most of these homes end up becoming centres of all forms of juvenile delinquency and shenanigans, things such as drug abuse, alcohol taking, promiscuous activities and you name it. They further maintained that most of these youngsters have a lot of cash at their disposal, which is repatriated by their absent parents for their upkeep and other family projects, and as a result, they can fund their 'hobbies' without struggling. This has created a precarious predicament for the boy child in such settings. Over and above the parents in the diaspora, HIV and AIDS, and the recent COVI-19 pandemics have compounded the problem, as more and more children are added onto the wagon of child headed families after losing their parents.

Political involvement

Some participants echoed sentiments that political violence against teachers was also common during the run-up to elections. In some of the mentioned incidents, the students, in particular the boys, were involved and even took part in molesting their teachers. Participant T3, Purple School, recounts an incident they witnessed:

The students summoned some male teachers to the meeting, and they were beaten. Yes, in front of the community and party members, they got injured, and they declared that they did not want to see them in that school again. Participant T3, school Teacher.

Participant T8, a teacher at Red School, detailed similar sentiments that political violence indeed occurred on teachers, and the male students were used the most in helping to gather intelligence for use in harassing these teachers:

Because some of these teachers were labelled as the opposition party, they had to run away until the elections ended, but most never returned.

Political violence ends up haunting teacher deployment by gender in the sense that it is mostly men who are more politically victimised compared to women because it is men who take the lead in being politically vocal and active. This affects the staffing in schools, and offsets gender balance of the educators as well, denying the male child certain lost skills and competences. There is need to consider Pitman (2017)'s PYD Theory, and mentor and develop positive attributes in the learners to prevent such negative occurrences.

Drug and Substance Abuse

The findings indicated that the permissive environment in the schools creates room for drug and substance abuse, here is an attestation:

I can share maybe the most recent one, where we had a child who was involved in drug abuse. Aaaaa, he and some friends were taking those tablets, they called them the whatever...the 'maragado' thing. Yaaa, so we ended up losing him that was the last term. (Participant T6, school teacher).

With the current socio-economic environment prevailing in Zimbabwe, these drugs are easily accessible on the streets, and in the quest for survival, the drug peddlers do not care who they sell to. On a sad note, some of the students are the very drug peddlers. The Critical Pedagogy Theory (Sho, 2002), helps foster inclusivity of the boy child, thereby generating participatory learning environments, and address gender specific problems of the learners. The theory speaks to involvement, care, transparency, and individual needs addressing, which when applied in the school and the home goes a long way in rehabilitating the learners caught in these acts.

Lack of mentors and role models

There was consensus among both the school heads and the teachers in the study, that seasoned teachers have left the profession in mass, and this has returned to harm teaching and learning in the schools. Some of the participants did not hide their frustrations:

The problem we are facing now is that we have young kids who have just graduated, and the majority of the seasoned teachers who were supposed to groom these 'kids' to understand the expectations of the system are no longer there.” (Participant H3, school head).

In the past, boys had many opportunities to learn from older men. They might have been paired with a tutor, apprenticed to a master or put to work in the family store. High schools offered boys a rich array of roles in which to exercise leadership skills (UNESCO, 2012). Psychologists say that grandfathers and uncles can help but emphasize that an adolescent boy without a father figure is like an explorer without a map (Chang, 2012). Moreover, recent pandemics have taken their toll on the elderly people in the society, with others pushed into the diaspora, the situation become really calamitous. The cultural responsiveness, asset-based focus and community involvement advocated for by the PYD theory comes in handy to foster positive development in the learners, through impacting their physical, emotional, cognitive, social, vocational and spiritual domains.

School Related Factors

The current situation in the Zimbabwean schools is contributing to the plight of all learners, the boy child included. Due to a collapse in funding, except in private high fee-paying schools, the availability of resources has been raised catastrophic. Participant T9, had this to say:

“So, schools are under-resourced at the moment. They do not have enough to sustain themselves Like, I am HOD for practical subjects, and we do not have materials for projects,” (Participant T9, school teacher).

There was unanimous agreement among the participants that schools were reeling under lack, here are somemore of the sentiments recorded from the participants:

Textbooks, furniture, classrooms, workloads. We have got hot sitting, and we teach under trees, can you imagine, if a snake falls, can you imagine the disaster? And the pupils will be sitting on the ground while you sit on a chair, you feel sorry for them when it's raining or cold (Participant T5, school teacher).

Absent (Ghost) Teachers

In most instances parents would prefer girls to go to boarding school while the boy goes to the day school. Boarding schools, and other high fee-paying schools are not affected by most of the issues be devilling government and council schools. Ghost and absent teachers are not found in boarding and high fee-paying schools, making it a 'preserve' for the other groups mentioned above.

Other factors included lack of mentors; victimization, inadequate facilities, poor academic performance and majority of teachers in primary schools are female. Brostrom (2000) asserts that most of the problems affecting the boy child are often associated with the school rather than the child. Directly. This leaves the child as a victim of their family and school environment, more than over issues of their own making (Chimbunde, 2024). For schools teachers, administrators and parents, that is a call loud enough for them to fix the socio-political and economic environment the boy child is growing up in, ahead of blaming the child for non or poor performance. This is where Positive Youth Development Theory comes in, fostering positive development in the learners, through impacting their physical, emotional, cognitive, social, vocational and spiritual domains (Pittman, 2017).

Lack of motivation on future prospects

The current situation in Zimbabwe has been described as traumatizing by the participants, for school personnel, parents, and learners:

“E..., a..., the issue is affecting almost everybody, it is everywhere. (Participant H1, school head).

Another Participant, H4, concedes that they are losing the battle, much as they try, their efforts are akin looking for grain of wheat in a stake of hay. He had this to say:

“We are trying to work under these circumstances. But we are really finding it very difficult to, very difficult. We are failing to meet most of our mandates; we are failing ” (Participant H4, school head).

The trauma experienced by the learners surpasses that of the parents and the teachers in that the students are still children and growing up, they cannot handle the challenges being encountered that easily. The learners lack motivation regarding their future, as education has been relegated to the back seat, with ninety percent unemployment (Moyo, 2023) and ninety-five percent of the people in the informal sector (Dube, 2024), and demotivated teachers, the learners do not see future prospects coming from education, creating an environment tantamount to fuel school dropouts.

CONCLUSION

This study's thrust on the challenges down weighing the boy child has been built around interventions that are derived from a socio-cultural and historical understanding of the Zimbabwean crisis, which dates back to February 2000, when the Fast Track Land Reform Programme was inceptioned, and is still in force to date. From a global perspective, the persistent campaign on the issues related to the girl child have begun to bear fruit, but in retrospect the society has ignored the plight of boy-child, this narrative has to be corrected. The issue of the Boy-Child has not been adequately addressed (World Bank, 2005). The policy implications include the need to relook into educational funding strategies that will restore human and resources in schools, and the flow of other resources. The gap in the homes requires the use of indigenous systems, where surrogate parents take charge as in the traditional African home setting. Again, dealing with the political environment, which has given birth to all these challenges with the economy and run-away migration of parents to look for greener pastures will bring lasting solutions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations were made:

- Parents, communities, and other stakeholders should support boys' education and make them aware of harmful practices and support their re-entry into school, just as you would for girls who dropped out.
- There should be more guidance and counselling in schools and reviewing of curriculum and policy materials frequently to make sure they are gender sensitive.
- Assure gender parity in the Board of Governors (BOG), Parents Teachers Associations (PTA), and School Management Committees (SMC).
- Teachers, society, and other stakeholders should protect boys from negative behaviors including drug and substance misuse.
- To increase the boy child's access to and involvement in education, a number of workshops, seminars, and campaigns to raise gender awareness and sensitization are required, along with affirmative action.
- In the District, it is necessary to find and utilise accomplished professionals who can mentor the boy child in the schools.

Conflict of Interest: The writer declares no conflict of interest; the work is entirely his own product and was not to any other Journal for publication.

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