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Untold Micro-Level Factors That Hinder the Pursuit of Higher Education by Ethnic Minority Students: A Study of Chewa Communities in Zimbabwe

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Abstract: Purpose: This study focused on micro level factors that hinder the pursuit of higher education for its praiseworthy. The focus was on students from 3Chewa ethnic minority communities located in commercial farms in Zimbabwe. **Design:** A phenomenological research philosophy and a constructivist research approach guided this qualitative study. Interviews, focus groups and in situ observations were used to collect data from 24 participants. Thematic procedures were used to analyse the data. **Findings:** Results show that 83% of students in the research sites were not pursuing higher education. These students were employed as unskilled labourers in their respective host commercial farms. The problem was rooted in the ethnic communities' historical background of non-participation in higher education. The other key findings are disengaged parents, peer pressure, lack of role models and availability of farm employment in contrast to the souring graduate unemployment in Zimbabwe. This study offers three policy recommendations that could be used to address the problem. **Originality:** The use of the cultural-perception framework is a paradigm shift from the 'race and colour divide' lenses that are traditionally used to investigate inequality in higher education. The formulated framework provided a fresh angle for identifying barriers that are camouflaged in contextual vulnerabilities that are rooted in historical foundations of immigrant ethnic groups.

Keywords: Higher Education, Educational Inequality, Ethnic Group, Social Mobility.

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INTRODUCTION

Every child has the right to receive an education that aligns them with the dynamic world of work, characterised by skills fluidity due to the changing technological landscape. The global economy has evolved threefold, transitioning from industrial revolution to knowledge-based economy to the present day learning economy (Lin, 2016; Stokes, 2015). At the core of this evolution is higher education, whose key role is to produce workers with the requisite knowledge and competences. Besides, higher education moulds better citizens of the world who are capable of engaging in lifelong learning in line with the demands of a learning economy (Krstic, Filipe & Chavaglia, 2020; Khan, Yang & Waheed, 2019). However, the challenge is to ensure equity in higher education across the ethnic divide. Research shows that higher education inequality continues to persist despite long-standing international and national commitment to end disparities along ethnic lines. Evidence also shows that inequality in higher education is the basis of further inequalities, a problem not just for the concerned ethnic minority students but humanity at large (Johnson, 2020; Morgan *et al.*, 2020). In Zimbabwe, inequality in higher education is prevalent among Chewa ethnic communities located in commercial farms, where the majority of deserving students fail to pursue higher education. The global consensus is that higher education positively shapes the socioeconomic future of students. This study explored untold micro-level factors that hinder students living at the margin of society from pursuing higher education.

The specific focus was on Chewa ethnic communities in Zimbabwe. The paper comprises a background, literature review, methodology, discussion of results, implications and recommendations.

BACKGROUND

The United Nations estimated the world population at 7.9 billion as of April 2021 (Worldometer, 2021). This population is diverse, each individual is unique with no two people alike but all equally important despite their individual or group differences (Ismail & Tekke, 2015; Maslow, 1956; Rogers, 1969). The humanistic perspective is that every single person is born good and is endowed with an inherent potential for growth under conditions of worth (McLeod, 2018; Polkinghorne, 2015). Rogers (1969) described this innate potential as the self-actualising tendency, a concept which entails the ability to learn until one reaches his/her full potential as determined by nature and nurture. Carl Rogers favoured us with a positive view of humanity.

We can say that there is in every organism, at whatever level, an underlying flow of movement toward constructive fulfilment of its inherent possibilities. Human beings, too, there is a natural tendency toward a more complex and complete development. The term that has most often been used for this is the 'actualizing tendency,' and it is present in all living organisms (Rogers, 1980, pp.117-118).

According to Rogers, the self-actualising tendency is not just the capacity to learn but also the freedom to do so. More importantly for this study, the tendency and freedom to learn does not depend on culture, ethnicity or the community where a person is born or live. This innate capacity is universal across all cultures and transcends the ethnic divide (McLeod, 2018; Ismail & Tekke, 2015; Rogers, 1969; Maslow, 1943). This humanistic perspective is based on the positive view of humanity, a firm belief in the capacity for persons (when unfettered by social, psychological and many other contextual obstacles) to pursue goals that enable them to develop into positive, creative, flexible, and altruistic beings (McLeod, 2018; Moss, 2015). This psychological approach is based on an unshakable trust in the positive nature of each person.

Using this perspective to reflect on the context of the 3 Chewa ethnic communities of interest to this study, it was apparent that in their inner-selves, the concerned students had the capacity to successfully pursue higher education not just for its perceived benefits but also for the fruition of their potentiality of growth and the realisation of self-actualisation. Reflecting on the missed opportunity to pursue higher education, this study argues that the inequality in the 3 research sites, does not reflect an issue of ability. Rather, the problem was hinged on the struggles of life and existential challenges that truncated the affected students' natural tendency to self-actualise, through pursuing of higher education. The position of this paper is that the higher education inequality which prevalent in the studied ethnic communities was a nurturing and not a nature issue. Hence, the focus on the affected students' microsystem with its dynamics.

The sociocultural school of thought illuminates the idea that each person belongs to a certain ethnic group (big or small) with its own history, origin, language, religion, rituals, mythology, food, traditions and values among other cultural variables (Lin, 2020; Packer & Cole, 2016; Kitayama & Uskul, 2011). At the core of the sociocultural perspective is the noble idea that there is beauty and strength in our diversity. This is what compels us to seek inclusivity in all endeavours that contribute towards the improvement of our living conditions, together as a global community. Focusing on higher education, it is imperative for nations to develop policies and concrete programs of action that ensure equitable access to it. After all, access to higher education is not just a right but also a sound foundation for lifelong learning as we align our skills with emerging market demands (UNESCO, 2017; United Nations, 2015). According to UNESCO (2020), equitable access to higher education is a key element of economic development and a key factor towards the attainment of a just society. Notwithstanding this argument in favour of higher education, some ethnic minority communities remain marginalised because

their students are excluded from this important level of education by one reason or another.

In Zimbabwe like elsewhere in the globe, not every student has the opportunity to follow a linear education process from primary, secondary to higher education. Many barriers are encountered along the educational process including higher education pathways. It may not even be the pathway everyone wishes to pursue. The reasons vary from context to context or from one students to another. However, with their history of educational disadvantage, students from ethnic minority groups can experience social mobility in their lifetime by pursuing higher education for the multiple economic and social doors it opens.

While secondary education provides a sound foundation for further learning, no one should fail to pursue higher education if they deserve to do so. Doing so would represent a drawback to the 'No one left behind' principle. Ability and willingness to learn should be the determinants for consideration when choosing a career of choice. The defining characteristic of higher education is therefore, the acquisition of relevant skills through formal training provided by colleges, technical and vocational training centres, apprenticeship, universities and professional institutions and access to it should be based on individual capacity more than anything else. The conceptualisation of higher education in this paper aligns with UNESCO's (2020; 2016) concept of universal access to education which they described as equal opportunity for all people to participate in an education system regardless of their characteristics.

In the emerging 21st century learning economy, the focus of education has shifted from literacy and numeracy provision, to the development of skills and capabilities that align with the usage of Information, Communication and Technology (ICT) core competences that support organisational functionality, market-related access and integrity for positive performance outcomes (Mamonov & Peterson, 2020; Khan *et al.*, 2019; Havarkhor *et al.*, 2019). The importance of higher education is captured in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals whose target 4.3 (SDG 4.3) obligates governments to "*ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university*" (United Nations, 2015).

Higher education is important to the extent that it is pursued for its necessity in life rather than for its prestige value. Its importance in contemporary human life draws from its economic and social values. Besides attracting a legion of research studies, the argument is that higher education should be accessible to anyone who need it and who stand to benefit from it. This is why its discourse has found its way into the agenda of international, continental and national fora. To cite a

few, in September 2015, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a resolution (A/RES/70/1) which committed member states to ensure that higher education is affordable and accessed by all citizens regardless of gender (United Nations, 2015). The passing of this resolution was indicative of the centrality of higher education in sustainable human development going forward. In the same year a declaration that the “hour of higher education is now” was made by African higher education summit in Dakar, Senegal (TrustAfrica, 2015). This declaration portrays the African view of the importance of higher education and the urgent need for taking on board students who are traditionally excluded. At national level, countries strengthen their resolve to deliver equitable higher education through constitutional provisions. The complementarity of these three levels (international, continental and national) illuminates the need for a deeper understanding of the nuances of higher education as well as the context specific factors that hinder its access by ethnic minority students.

While the utility of higher education appear to be universal, the same cannot be said about the hindering factors that stifle students’ transition in different contexts (*et al.*, 2017; Bathmaker, 2017). Achieving equal access to higher education for all students is be a difficult task to execute. However, understanding the nature of complexities affecting disadvantaged minority students due to their history of exclusion is profound. This research paper describes the perspectives of ethnic minority parents’ on higher education disparities that distinguish their children from their counterparts from major groups. The disparity was better understood together with the participants’ contextual reality, which was conceptualised in terms of their interaction with their microsystem and informed by their immigrant background as well as their present existential reality. In this respect, the paper explored the participants’ lived experiences to illuminate the micro level factors which nourished the studied higher education inequality. This study posed the following research question;

Research Question

Which micro level factors hinder the pursuit of higher education by students from Chewa ethnic communities in commercial farms in Zimbabwe?

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This study was guided by an integrated cultural-perception conceptual framework which the researcher formulated using two concepts; culture and perception. These two aspects hold profound influence on manifest behaviour of members of an ethnic group. This conceptual framework was formulated on the premise that culture and perception have a symbiotic relationship that is explained as follows: culture offers the framework and software for consistent perception of occurrences while perception is responsible for

receiving and interpreting information from the groups’ natural surroundings (Oatley, 2017). This is conceivable because culture impacts how people attend, think, react and create their life perspectives and philosophies. Thus, culture and perception serve as the primary source of a group of people’s conceptions about their universe (Kim-Pong, 2015; Kitamaya & Uskul, 2011).

In formulating the cultural-perception framework, I considered that there are two sorts of culture that shape the behaviour of cultural groups as well as define the goals that are pursued by its members. One sort of culture exists within individuals while the other sort exists outside of them. The first sort of culture that exist within the individual is subjective culture, which is a form of mental software that encompasses perception, attitudes, beliefs, values and the group’s internalised interaction patterns (Kotta, 2011; Lavenda & Schultz, 2010). Extant literature have shown that subjective culture is acquired and transmitted through the processes of enculturation, socialisation and internalisation (O'brien, 2017; Lantolf *et al.*, 2015; Lott, 2010; Mead, 1955).

The second category is objective culture, which includes everything that a cultural group has built, including their institutions and cultural practices (Bennett, 2013). It is apparent that this second category is made up of the man-made environment. Thus, in exploring the underlying factors that hindered the pursuit of higher education by students from the three case research sites, the study considered that there are visible and invisible aspects to culture. It was apparent that both the visible and invisible aspects of culture influence how individuals see themselves and others, as well as how they relate to one another.

Thus, the formulated conceptual framework provided a new angle of perceiving the micro-level factors that hindered the pursuit of higher education by students from the three case study sites. The adoption of a guiding conceptual framework aligns with Cooper (2012) who opined that by focusing on a group’s culture, researchers can gain critical perspectives of the studied group’s ordinary life. To put it another way, the formulated conceptual framework helped the researcher to link how the studied ethnic group’s culture and their perception interacted to generate an unexpected impact (Hofseted, 1980) on ethnic minority populations’ view of higher education and the importance of pursuing it.

Subjective culture of the studied three Chewa ethnic communities, which has been passed down over the generations, clearly systematised and guided their behaviour (Bahar, 2016; Chudek & Henrich, 2011; Deligiorgi, 2005) and failure to pursue higher education by their children was not immune from the group’s cultural influence. Similarly, individual disparities in perception of phenomena are bridged by culture. Hence,

behaviour variance among students from the same cultural grouping was unlikely (Samovar & Porter, 2007). This is so because manifest behaviour is a product of reciprocal interaction between culture and perception (Imai & Masunda, 2013). Several other researchers (Hamlyn, 2017; Ou, 2017) concur that culture has a variable impact on perception of phenomena. Overall, this conceptual framework sparked the researcher's imagination and allowed him to pose crucial questions, allowing him to gain a better knowledge of the phenomenon under investigation.

RELATED LITERATURE

Evidence shows that in the last two decades the global higher education enrolment doubled from 19% to 38% (UNESCO, 2020). While this is encouraging, more still need to be done to address persisting and disconcerting layers of barriers hindering the pursuit of higher education by traditionally excluded students. The pursuit of higher education is described in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals framework as the greatest opportunity for social mobility (United Nations, 2015). The strength of SDG 4 is its vision that no one should be left behind in life-changing opportunities. In particular, the key objective of SDG4 is to ensure that all barriers that stifle the pursuit of higher education by students including traditionally non-higher education bound ethnic minority students, are removed so that they can join their counterparts in higher education as part of their sustainable development trajectory (Zishiri, Mapolisa & Magumise, 2021; Banks & Dohy, 2019; Meng, 2017). The argument is that in a fluid technological landscape which characterise the 21st century economy going forward, there is no better way of securing sustainable livelihoods than pursuing higher education (UNESCO, 2020; United Nations, 2015). Besides, higher education initiates the process of lifelong learning in response to rapidly changing skills and competences due to technological advancement (Krstic *et al.*, 2020; Lin, 2016). Research has shown that education does not just respond to a changing world but it actually transforms the world through ICT driven innovations (Khan *et al.*, 2019; Havarkhor *et al.*, 2019). It is clear that in a transforming world, lack of higher education credentials is a limiting factor on social and economic opportunities. In their report, Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC & U) (2015a) conceptualised participation in higher education as the ticket to the middle class. Similarly, other studies show that the pursuit of higher education present students with the opportunity for further personal development because it develops the students' critical thinking skills which comprised of the ability to think, to ask questions, to analyse issues and to reflect. These aspects are crucial across all areas of human life inclusive of social and work related spheres. Thus, critical thinking is cultivated in higher education and is important not only to enable students to identify real life problems but more importantly to provide solutions to such problems

(Stokes, 2015). In a world depending on technology, it is apparent that higher education is an enabler of progress of students in their personal lives, their families, communities and nations at large. For Lin (2016), economic development, work efficiency and social mobility are some of the key desirables which accrue from pursuing higher education. Beyond its social and economic utility, the pursuit of higher education by all students is an issue of social justice.

As it stood, equity issues in higher education remained prevalent among communities living at the margin of society (Banks & Dohy, 2019; Bathmaker, 2017; Washington Student Achievement Council, 2013). Given this global challenge, equal access to higher education by all students was an ongoing debate with no quick fix solutions in the horizon. The advent of massification of higher education had seen more traditionally excluded students being embraced into mainstream higher education systems. However, this success was not universal across different contexts. The factors that nourish higher education inequality tend to be context-specific and manifest differently contexts. The key challenge was absence of universal policies compelling all students to pursue higher education for its instrumental and intrinsic value. This problem was amplified by the half-hearted commitment by governments in creating unified higher education systems that address access barriers to higher education by all students who need it (Atchinson *et al.*, 2017). Given these equity gaps, access to, participation and success in higher education by students from marginalised communities remain outstanding dilemmas that need answers.

As an African country, Zimbabwe has done well in educating its diverse ethnic population. With a literacy rate hovering above 94 % at 2017, the country was positioned at the summit of the African continent in terms of educated people (Zishiri *et al.*, 2021; Zimstat, 2017). However, despite this encouraging achievement, the visibility of ethnic minority students in higher education remains low. This problem cannot be allowed to persist, the time to address it is now. Like other students, ethnic minority students have a right to pursue higher education so that they can experience social mobility. Besides, their continued exclusion is a setback for their communities and humanity in general. As a signatory of various international conventions that promote equality in all spheres of human activity, Zimbabwe share the global view that all students should have equal opportunity to access higher education despite their social background and diverse needs. Specifically, Chapter 4, Part 2, Section 75 (1) (b) of the Constitution of Zimbabwe states that;

Every citizen and permanent resident of Zimbabwe has the right to further education, which the state, through reasonable legislative and other measures, make progressively

available and accessible” (Constitution of Zimbabwe, 2013).

The import of this piece of legislation is that every student who need to pursue higher education should have an opportunity to do so regardless of their demographics including geographical location and ethnicity among other hindering socioeconomic factors. However, the major concern of this study was that some students from ethnic communities in commercial farms of Zimbabwe were not pursuing higher education because of certain vulnerabilities related to their group’s existential realities. To a large extent, the predicament of these students was overlooked in the higher education discourse despite that their visibility at this level of education was very limited. This study critically noted that the factors that hindered the pursuit of higher education by the affected students were camouflaged in layers of disadvantage which were historical, psychological and sociocultural in nature. In the same view, evidence shows that global economic trends favours emerging technologies which demand high level skills and competences. Since the inception of the SDGs in 2015, some students fail to pursue higher education for different reasons (Bouchrika, 2020). In Zimbabwe, the most affected ethnic minority students are those with immigrant backgrounds and living in commercial farms.

In sum, most of the reviewed studies (Morgan *et al.*, 2020; Bouchrika, 2020; Johnson, 2020; Kirp, 2019; Banks & Dohy, 2019; Lin, 2016) focused on distal factors that perpetuate higher education inequality affecting ethnic minority students. Common findings from these studies include ineffective policies that fails to achieve universal access to higher education, disparities in higher education success rates among races, variations in degree grades, quality of higher education institutions accessible to different ethnic groups and races, and performance issues in higher education among other distal challenges. The affected minority students together with their families, communities and groups had little or no influence on these impediments. Nonetheless, this study was built on the foundation of these empirical studies some of whose findings align with what obtained in this study’s research sites. However, the major argument of this paper was that while equal access to higher education is an agreed position, the reality is that this ideal is easier said than done because of the diverse challenges in each context. Therefore, this study focused on the contexts of 3 Chewa minority ethnic communities’ in Zimbabwe in order to unfold the untold micro level hindering factors.

METHODOLOGY

This study focused on three Chewa ethnic communities in peri-urban Harare of Zimbabwe. These research sites (Danckwerts, Butler & Maruva) were chosen because the majority of students in these communities were not pursuing higher education. Given

the complexity of studying minority ethnic groups, this study employed a phenomenological research philosophy because it values subjective lived experiences. The adoption of this philosophy helped this study to focus on a specific aspect of life (i.e. pursuit of higher education) that affected students from selected research sites which shared similar life experiences. The choice of this philosophy aligned with scholars from the past and present (Husserl, 1970; Howitt, 2010; van Manen, 2014; Vagle, 2018) who concur that the goal of phenomenology is to allow the researcher to provide a detailed description of the studied problem from subjective and lived experiences of participants. Thus, the study tapped from the participants’ worldview to understand the significance attached to pursuing higher education by students in the realm of intervening events, tools, the flow of time, the self and their interaction with others in society. Several related studies (Zishiri *et al.*, 2021; Lin, 2020; Vagle, 2018; Packer & Cole, 2016) have used phenomenology as a research philosophy with resounding outcomes. Hence, I considered that phenomenology was the most appropriate research philosophy for this study which sought to understand the structure and types of the participants’ experience, ranging from their perception, thought, memory, imagination, emotion, desire, and volition to bodily awareness, embodied action, and social activity with specific reference to higher education and what entails.

The study also adopted a constructivist research paradigm. The central goal of this research paradigm, according to literature (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Creswell, 2014; Cooper, 2012; Guba & Lincoln, 1989), is to grasp the subjective world of human experience. Using this paradigm, this study made a serious attempt to ‘get inside the heads of the participants,’ so to speak, in order to comprehend and interpret the meaning they attached to higher education. A constructivist research paradigm places high value on the collaboration between the researcher and participants’ in the co-creation of knowledge. Ethnography was the chosen research design and it was selected on the basis that vital aspects of life among minority ethnic communities are hidden behind their contextual essences. Extant literature (Gibbs, 2018; Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Creswell, 2014; Hammersley, 2013) concur that ethnography is the systematic study of people in their natural setting, without interfering with their daily activities. Guided by the phenomenological philosophy, constructivist paradigm and ethnographic design, the study used interviews, focus groups and in situ observations to collect data from 24 participants who were purposively selected. Thematic procedures were used to analyse the data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Although higher education is not pursued by all eligible students from across the diverse ethnic groups in Zimbabwe, students with immigrant ethnic

backgrounds, especially the Chewa communities which are located in commercial farms, are impacted the most. Data show that at most two students from each of the 3 research sites, pursued higher education on a given year. This meagre number was not even a yearly constant. Participants indicated that more often than not, several years passed without a single student from their communities transitioning from high school to higher education. Looking at this problem from its face value, one could hasten to conclude that students from these ethnic communities lacked the desire to pursue higher education. However, analysis of their situation shows that the problem was deeply rooted in their existential reality. Despite the fact that these three ethnic communities had a history non-college going students, there was no explicit evidence to suggest that current generation of students exclusively not motivated to pursue higher education and reach their full academic potential. Looking at the data from a humanistic psychology angle, it appeared that the affected students, just like their counterparts from major ethnic groups, were fundamentally good, with an innate desire to better themselves (Polkinghorne, 2015; Rogers, 1969), their families, communities, nation and the world at large. The humanistic perspective emphasises not just the inherent tendency to self-actualise but also the individual's personal worth, the importance of human values as well as the creative and active nature of humans. Nonetheless, such potentialities were hampered by powerful microsystem forces that were camouflaged by a relational combination of the studied communities' disadvantaged historical foundations and their present existential reality. The specific key micro level barriers which unfolded from the data are discussed in the sections that follow.

Community factor

Overwhelming evidence from data shows that the Chewa communities located in commercial farms in Zimbabwe were preoccupied with working in farms since the early days of their migration to this country in the 1970s (Daimon, 2015; Boeder, 1974). Although primary and secondary education were later fully embraced, the initial focus on farm employment was still persisting in the studied 3 (Danckwerts, Butler and Maruva) Chewa ethnic communities. This reality was echoed by one participant who reflected;

My parents came from Malawi to look for work here. They came here to work in the farms because there were no jobs in Malawi. They worked in the farms and they did not focus on education. They just wanted to earn money and go back to Malawi and build their homes.

For many decades, these diasporic Malawian immigrants believed they were only in Zimbabwe to work and return to their homes in Malawi. While others returned, the majority remained and later became citizens. After these immigrants and their succeeding

generations became Zimbabwean citizens, they remained in their original farm based communities and continued to be the primary source of labour for their host farms. Thus, this initial preoccupation was the root cause of the higher education inequality which persisted throughout their stay in Zimbabwe. Looking at the pervasive higher education inequality trends in these three Chewa communities, it was apparent that the problem was not just imbedded in these ethnic communities' immigration foundations but had become an integral part of their lives. Investing in higher education for their children was perceived as an endeavour not worthy the financial problems it exerted on their meagre income earned for their labour in their respective farms. The following excerpt from one of the study participants reveals how the pursuit of higher education was viewed by most parents from the 3 research sites.

Government should pay the fees if they want our children to go to college or university. They must also provide employment after the completion of those studies. We cannot waste our money to send our children to college so that they can come back and work here in the farm. After all, there are very few jobs in this farm for people who have gone to college or university.

The essence of the above verbatim excerpt aligns with the sociocultural perspective that thinking develops from the outside in. According to this psychological perspective, human behaviour as well as the goals that individuals pursue in life are shaped through social and cultural interactions (Lantolf *et al.*, 2015; Vygotsky, 2010). Each community has its own set of value priorities and behaviour scripts that its members follow in order to conform to societal expectations. According to the data, the prevalence of students not pursuing HIGHER EDUCATION in the studied three Chewa communities had become an integral norm and an accepted reality in these 3 communities. One of the participant unequivocally stated;

Students from this community do not go to colleges or universities. After completing high school education they get employed here.

There was no doubt as to where these students go. Data clearly shows that the majority of these students in all the 3 studied Chewa ethnic communities, from past to present generations, valued the work, income and houses offered by their host farms. These three aspects of their lives were valued in these communities, hence, they were strived for by the generality of members from ethnic communities. This was so because life possibilities are constituted by the individual's relationships with their environment and other humans surrounding them. Human existence entails being-in-the-world, in a concrete and historically

determined situation that limits or widens a person's choices.

Parental factor

Parents in the three Chewa ethnic communities were not involved in their children's higher education decisions. A parent who participated on the study echoed the apparent lack of parental involvement in their children's educational decision making.

It was their decision, there is nothing I could do as a parent. You cannot force someone to go to school. I am happy that all my children are working and looking after their families. When I get too old to work, they will also look after me.

This disengagement was fuelled by various parental-related factors including their low educational level, their desire to work and stay together with their children among many others. The same parents made certain that their children were hired by their respective host farms as soon as possible. The majority of the affected students who participated in this study categorically stated that their parents secured employment for them in their respective farms without giving them the choice to pursue with their education. Employment in the farms was viewed as an advantage without consideration for the long term benefits of pursuing higher education.

It is good that our children are employed in this farm after they complete their high school education. Because of their education, they are quickly promoted to become supervisors. Even those who drop out before they complete their education are also employed. This helps us to work and stay together as families.

It is apparent from the above excerpt from the account of one of the participating parents that they encouraged their children to abandon their education so that they could take up the easily available farm employment. What prevailed in the studied 3 Chewa ethnic communities confirm findings from several studies (Morgan *et al.*, 2020; Meng, 2017; Kim-Pong, 2015) that observed that as significant others, parents send vital signals to their children about worthy goals to be strived for as well as activities that could be foregone because they are considered unworthy to be pursued. An extract from one of the participating parents echoes the same sentiment.

In this farm every father teaches their sons their farm occupations while they are still young so that they can be easily employed in the same jobs as their fathers when they complete their secondary education.

In their study on the role of parental involvement in the education of their children, Harris and Robinson (2016), found that parents have a legal, moral, and social authority to impact their

children's academic success including helping them to decide on the academic paths they should pursue. It is apparent that parents are the foundation on which children construct their academic aspirations and triumphs and this has been confirmed by several studies (Zishiri *et al.*, 2020; Bouchrika, 2020; Johnson, 2020; Emerson, Fear, Fox, & Sanders, 2012; Epstein, 1985). In the studied communities, parents desired their children to be employed in their host farms and their children's aspirations were not only shaped in that direction but were actually fulfilled.

For our children to be employed in this farm, it is a matter of the parent talking to the foremen or supervisors and your child gets employed as long as they are 18 years old and above. It does not matter whether they have completed their education or not.

Several studies (Bell, Boyle, & Sadler, 2016; Goodall & Montgomery, 2014) found that parents who are involved in their children's academic matters provide their children with more possibilities to excel in school. Parental involvement in their children's education is not limited to payment of school fees. It is a multifaceted engagement that encompasses emotional support, moral encouragement, financial support, program selection and placement in appropriate institutions among various other transitional related decisions (Bell *et al.*, 2016; Epstein, 2002; 1985). With the glaring parental disengagement in the three Chewa ethnic communities, the glaring higher education inequality was not surprising.

Peer factor

Data shows that 83 % of the students in the studied 3 ethnic communities got employed by their respective host farms just before or immediately after completing their high school education. An affected student summarised this predicament;

In this community about 35 students complete high school education every year. After that, we are immediately employed in the farm. It is hard for us but there is nothing we can do, this is what our parents and friends expect us to do.

Besides the desired income from such quick employment, overwhelming evidence indicating that these students were simply avoiding social pressure by conforming to their peers who expected them to make the same decisions they had made. Data shows that housing space at all the research sites was insufficient for most the families. As a result, it was a common practice in the 3 communities for teenage boys and adolescents to lodge with their peers. The majority of the time, these children were outside with their peers, out of sight of their parents. Given that the vast majority of these children had not pursued higher education, peer pressure was naturally expected to follow the direction of what the majority of these children considered

worthwhile. According to research, peer groups serve as meeting places where conformity and social contracts are negotiated (Skov, 2016; Molloy, Gest & Rulison, 2011). One student who had failed to pursue higher education had this to say during focus group discussion; confirms how peer pressure was perpetuating this inequality in these 3 ethnic communities;

Everyone in this group completed high school but look at us. We are still young but we already have children and living in small rooms allocated to us in the farm. We do not encourage each other to continue with our education but everyone encourages us to work in the farm.

The above excerpt reflects the concerned students' high responsiveness to their peers and in conformity to prevailing norms which favours farm employment ahead of pursuing higher education. It was clear that peer pressure was one of the hindering factors in all the 3 ethnic communities. Based on the balance of probabilities, peers can only influence their counterparts conform to what they believed, based on their shared beliefs and interests. According to research (Skov, 2016; Fletcher, 2015; Altermatt, 2012; Dasgupta, 2011; Molloy *et al.*, 2011), educational transitions are motivated by peers who have succeeded at that level. Their success serves as a model for others to emulate. Unfortunately, peers in the studied 3 Chewa communities were unfamiliar with higher education because they had not encountered it. Rosenqvist (2018) discovered that exposure to peers who had pursued higher education inspired others to take the same academic path. Such peers were not present in all the 3 communities.

Through observation, Bandura (1977) discovered that behaviour can be learned or unlearned from the environment. What was happening in the research sites with respect to preference for farm employment ahead of academic pursuit, provided rich content for observational learning by other students. This finding aligns with Bandura's argument on observation as a strong basis for learning certain behaviours. In the 3 research sites, peers shaped each other's employment aspirations at the expense of pursuing their education. According to Coy-Ogan (2009), deciding to pursue higher education is a significant commitment in itself. However, such important decisions are not made in a vacuum. The below verbatim from a parent who took part in this study elaborates the role of peers in decision making of their counterparts.

My child was excited by earning his own money and working with other boys from our community. Children from this community influence each other to do things that spoil their life. You see, when the results came out, he refused to return to school.

The above excerpt clearly shows that peer pressure was a strong force that students in the studied ethnic communities contended with in making their life-altering decisions on whether to pursue higher education and delay taking up employment in the farms. More often than not, employment was always preferred as a matter of group conformity. Nonetheless, this study acknowledges the complexities of human behaviour in general, and peer influence in particular. Therefore, it was concluded that peer influence was not the sole barrier but was complementing other proximal and contextual factors discussed in this paper.

Role model factor

Data shows that the few students in the studied Chewa communities who successfully pursued higher education migrated from their respective farm communities upon completion of their studies. These fortunate students relocated because they could not continue staying with their parents because they were not employed in these farms. Besides these restrictions, these students desired to live in better neighbourhoods. As a result, the farm owners, their managers and few journeymen were the only higher education graduates who worked or resided in the three farms. Their interactions with the generality of Chewa community members were limited to professional relationships. Given the foregoing context, it was clear that there were no relevant role models in these communities to motivate other students to pursue higher education. Herrmann, Adelman, Bodford, Graudejus, Okun, & Kwan (2016) found that effective role models share similitudes.

Other research (Marx & Ko, 2012; Lockwood, 2006) argued that role models are important because they motivate others in the same situation. Role models' triumphs, according to literature (Herrmann *et al.*, 2016; Lockwood, 2006), inspire higher expectations in individuals who aspire to be like them. Barone (2011) discovered in his research that girls who had excelled in their education were more likely to thrive in their careers. The role model effect is more successful when the role model's achievement is in an area of shared interest and is known by people who are modelling the behaviour. Effective role models, according to Oyserman and Destin (2010), must be positioned to help others achieve the same success they did. Participants in this study were not exposed to the triumphs of persons in their society whose lives had been transformed by their participation in higher education. According to Dasgupta (2011), the goal of role models is to immunize people who are envious of their achievements. The direction in which an individual strive to self-actualise tends to follow what is observed from others in society who are perceived as successful. This entails social learning in Bandura terms. Children tend to model or emulate the behavior they observe in their environment

IMPLICATIONS

The hallmark of a progressive nation is its ability to confront inequality and acknowledge the richness of its plural society. Based on findings of this study, I argued that successful transitions to higher education are unequal and strongly influenced by micro level factors. For students in the studied Chewa ethnic communities, their failure to pursue higher education hinged on their collective (communities), parents and concerned students' subjective conscious experiences. I further argued that objective reality (the pursuit of higher education) was less important than the affected students and their parents' subjective perception (low but assured early income from farm employment). While every person is endowed with a self-actualising tendency (McLeod, 2018; Maslow, 1943; Rogers, 1969), this potentiality can be promoted or inhibited by a person's environment. Thus, the prevalence of higher education inequality in the studied Chewa ethnic minority communities was not coincidental. Rather, it was about the affected students' existential realities. This finding confirms similar findings from other studies (Bouchrika, 2020; Zishiri *et al.*, 2021; Atchinson *et al.*, 2017; Johnson, 2020; Stokes, 2015) that investigated the basis of educational inequalities among ethnic students. While it was clear that the pursuit of higher education continue to vary along ethnic lines, I was upbeat that if targeted interventions, informed by this study's context-specific findings, could enable the three Chewa ethnic minority communities to overcome the legacy adversity and despair. That is to say, the pervasive higher education inequality that was perpetuated by the lure of early income from unrewarding unskilled farm jobs, a short term benefit at the expense of pursuing higher education for its long term benefits.

The four hindering micro level factors (community, parental, peer and role model factors) should be understood from an existential angle so that effective interventions could be crafted to address this pervasive educational inequality. One of the tenets of existentialism is that a person is an open being, searching for a sense of his/her life from birth to death (Abbagnano, 2020). From consciousness arises the vital anguish of searching for a meaning to existence. The person, in this case the students who failed to pursue higher education, are also products of their own decisions because these students were conscious beings able to make a choice to pursue higher education for its long term benefits. With the support of their parents, these students had the capacity of establishing purposes, objectives and goals they wanted to achieve in terms of their academic endeavours. However, the experiences lived along the years influenced their choices. Thus, what become of these students was just the fruit of a long process of internal development in constant confrontation with their immediate environment. In this process of formation of the self, Rogers argued that positive regard play a very important role. One can

argue that the need for positive regard, a universal and persistent human trait across the ethnic divide, played a role in their ultimate decisions. The students' social environment, the people around them, especially their parents, siblings and peers, played a crucial role in the students' preference for farm employment at the expense of their education.

Beyond the focused research sites, this article contributed to an updated understanding of the fluid, multiple and multi-directional nature of the micro level factors that negatively impact ethnic students' academic choices. The study focused on barriers that are camouflaged in the existential realities of ethnic students' community life. These barriers are often overlooked and remain untold. While I concur with scholarly idea that perceive a person as a complex and rich unity in which the total is more than the sum of its parts, where a person does not exist as a metaphysic idea but inserted in a particular context, I argue that a person should not be a slave to their existential circumstances, especially their disadvantaged historical background and community vulnerabilities. I posit that existence is an individual phenomenon and each student, as an existent person, should weigh the diverse possibilities that are open to them, from among which they should make a selection to pursue higher education for its praiseworthy. They should then commit themselves to this life changing endeavour while delaying the temptation and immediate gratification that comes with income from readily available but less rewarding occupations. Based on findings of this study, it was apparent that ethnic minority students, their parents and other higher education stakeholders, should not allow students to abandon their education for unskilled occupations that trap them in cycles of poverty. The fervent hope was that epidemic educational inequality affecting ethnic students should be addressed with the urgency it deserves.

Recommendations

Based on the study findings, it is recommended that:

- All deserving students, regardless of their ethnicity, locality or social background, should pursue higher education through pathways of their choices.
- Targeted policy interventions should be formulated to address hindering barriers which manifest at ethnic minority students' micro level.
- Targeted funding modalities should be used to support students from vulnerable communities to pursue higher education. Ethnic student-centred responsive budgetary frameworks should be put in place to ensure that ethnic minority students access and succeed in higher education at the same rate as their counterparts from major ethnic groups.

- Host commercial farms should assist students in communities under their jurisdiction as part of their social and community responsibility.
- Awareness programs should be used to conscientise students, parents and community leaders on the merits of pursuing higher education, especially among traditionally exclude ethnic minority communities.
- Future research should focus on endogenous and resilient strategies that could be used to address contextual barriers affecting the pursuit of higher education by ethnic minority students.

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