Challenges faced by learners who live in squatter camps: A case of one primary school in Rustenburg province of South Africa.

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Abstract

Despite the increasing awareness of the importance of education worldwide, in South Africa there seem to be very little being done on the learners from low class especially those living in squatter camps. Yet home background is considered to be an essential aspect on the child's educational achievement. Therefore the principal objective of this paper is to explore those factors that affect the learning of squatter camp learners and how they can be assisted in order to get equal educational access as others. Since the researchers want to find out the opinions, experiences, feelings, beliefs and attitudes of those who live in these squatter camps interpretive qualitative approach was used to analyse data collected through interviews, questionnaires, documentation analysis and observation. Data analysis and collection was done simultaneously for accuracy. The study employed case study design since data were collected from only one squatter camp from which one of the primary schools in Rustenburg draws its students and a sample of 54 participants was used which consisted of teachers, students and parents. Drawing from the findings the research revealed that pupils who live in squatter camps face a lot of challenges which contribute to their low academic performance, which are lack of school requirements such as books and proper uniform, descent accommodation and overcrowding which hinders them from doing their school work properly, land and noise pollution from the environment, parental level of education and anti social behaviours for example drug abuse and crime. The details of the findings are discussed and recommendations for further studies suggested as the paper progresses.

Key terms: Squatter camp; socio-economic status; absolute poverty; academic performance

Introduction: Background and context

In spite of many developments that have been made by the South African government in providing accommodation to the needy since 1994, many people are still staying in squatter camps in urban centres and in farming communities. South Africa has a high rate of urban population growth that directly contributes to the mushrooming of squatter camps or informal settlements (Saff, 1993). The government is struggling to cope with the ever increasing population in urban centres. Many people are migrating from rural areas and other provinces such as Eastern Cape and from neighbouring African countries to the mining town of Rustenburg and most of these people find themselves staying in squatter camps or informal settlements. An informal settlement (squatter camp) is an unplanned settlement on land which has not been surveyed or proclaimed as residential, consisting mainly of informal dwellings (shacks) (Srinivas, 1997; South Africa, 2001) . A squatter camp refers to an illegal and unplanned occupation of land resulting in dense settlements comprising of communities housed in self constructed shelters (Saff, 1993). Squatter camps are typically the product of an urgent need for shelter by the urban poor and working migrants coming from rural areas to the cities in search for employment and better living conditions (Chirisa, 2013).

The continuous increase of people living in squatter camps in Rustenburg has motivated the researchers to carry out this research. There are more than 1, 2 million informal dwellings in South Africa (South Africa, 2008). This implies that many children are born and bred in squatter camps. Most of South African youths drop out of the school system early or fail to achieve a senior certificate especially those in impoverished environments (Department of Education, 1995). It is the aim of this study to explore the challenges experienced by primary school going children who live in squatter camps.

A research conducted by Bashman (2008) in South Africa on high school students living in squatter camps revealed that sexual abuse is rampant in such an environment. Another research by Pillay (2004) on experiences of learners from informal settlements at predominantly Indian secondary school concludes that many learners have negative experiences at their schools as well as their homes. Pillay (2004) further notes the problem of racial discrimination at the school, the

students from squatter camp were segregated in sporting activities like rugby, cricket and tennis and they were only participating in netball and soccer.

In squatter camp environment there is absolute poverty which is defined by Giddens, 2008) as the absence of financial resources required to maintain a certain minimal standard of living. Absolute poverty can be set based on factors such as the financial resources needed for the most basic needs or income level required to purchase basic food needs (Fields, 2000; Deaton, 1997). Home background is important as it influences the learners' capabilities of learning inside and outside school and the home factors that affect a child's academic performance include socio-economic status, level of education of members of the family, religion, culture and parenting styles (Mwamwenda, 2004). The natural quality of life and the environment in which the child grows up is of vital importance to his/her development and the home circumstances may also feature insecure or unstable environments and financial insecurity often leading to anxiety and emotions stress, which maybe increased by violence and abuse in some houses (Van Greunen, 1993). Research has found that socio-economic status, parental involvement and family size are particularly important family factors (Majorbanks, 1996). Further more children from low socio-economic status households and communities develop academic skills more slowly compared to children from higher socio-economic status groups (ibid). This research explores how such factors affect the learners who live in squatter camps in Rustenburg in South Africa.

The Marxist Paradigm: An overview

The social -conflict paradigm is a theoretical framework based on the view of society as a system characterized by social inequality and social conflict (Giddens & Sutton, 2013).The paradigm highlights the extent to which society is divided by social class, race, ethnicity, sex and age (Haralambos & Holborn 2013). Sociologists believe that the social inequality is resulting from the unequal distribution of valuable resources such as money, education and social prestige among different categories of a population (Giddens & Sutton, 2013). Inherent in this paradigm is the view that social patterns provide benefits to some people more than others. For example the dominant categories that is, the rich in relation to the poor have more privileges and strongly support the unequal quo as reflected in many communities such as squatter camps. This study is focusing on exploring these inequalities among learners who live in squatter camps in South Africa.

The Marxist theory asserts that formal educational and its outcomes reflect and perpetuate patterns of inequality and social class (Giddens & Sutton, 2013). According to the social conflict paradigm, the education system in capitalist societies largely reinforces the values of dominant socio-cultural groups, that is, the minority elite and their immediate subordinates. Inherent in this paradigm is the social fact that children in the lower socio –economic stratum are disadvantaged in many ways home background inclusive and consequently under perform. The educational opportunity, the equality of the schools attended and the chance for tertiary educational are all affected by the parents' social economic background (Haralambos & Holborn, 2013). The individual's social standing in part determines where a family lives, children of different social classes have varying opportunities to attend better quality schools (ibid). It is the duty of this research to look at factors the mostly affect the performance of learners who live in squatter camps in Rustenburg province of South Africa.

Impact of poverty to squatter camp learners

In South Africa, a staggering 66% of the children live in severe poverty (South Africa, 2001). Bad living conditions in squatter camps make people feel powerless. Some resort to violence to restore their sense of power or self-esteem (Hartas, 2011). Lack of financial resources also affects school attendance among the absolutely poor in developing countries as highlighted by Chinyoka (2014) who calls poverty, a plausible explanation of school disruption. Children from better off households are more likely to remain in school, whilst those who are poorer are more likely never to attend, or to drop out once they have enrolled. For example, a research conducted in rural China by Glewe and Kreme (2006) in Chinyoka (2014) saw 'poor and credit constrained children' three times more likely than other children to drop out of primary school. The researchers sought to establish if these findings are true in squatter camp schools in South Africa.

Okeke et. al (2012) in Chinyoka (2014) cited child labour, poverty, bereavement, truancy and broken homes as source of failure. There is a link between poverty and children's cognitive abilities and social-emotional competence, arguing that parents' decisions on the allocation of resources like money to purchase books and time spent on children in joint activities are considered investments that have the potential to enhance children's skills and language (Hartas,

2011). Studies have shown that parental investment in children's learning affects their early linguistic and cognitive development, which are crucial for success at school (Macionis and Plummer, 2008). Literacy rich home environments, where children are exposed to books, stories, rhymes, poems, and the alphabet, have a positive influence on literacy, language and the emotional and behavioural development of children (ibid). Poverty impacts on parenting practices and well-being and is often linked to behavioural difficulties in young children. Thus, poverty has a detrimental effect on children's academic performance, hence the need to look at children from squatter camp environments where poverty is the norm (Hartas, 2011).

Material deprivation is described as having a lack of money for resources that are needed for education, such as a computer or books or perhaps not having the financial capacity to pay for school trips or school uniform (Fry, 2013). Hartas (2011) sums it all by saying poverty is regarded as the most common primary and contributory reason for many children to be out of school.

Impact of overcrowding to learners living in squatter camps
People live in shacks that are very small and most of them live in one roomed shacks in which all family members live (Msindo, Gutsa and Choguya, 2013). In South Africa, the legacy of more than 300years of colonialism and apartheid has created a unique burden for most families, who have to struggle with both economic and political oppression, resulting in an endless cycle of unemployment, poor housing, overcrowding and inadequate community services (De la Rey, et.al, 1997). The study is there to look at how this overcrowding affects learners in a squatter camp.

Impact of milieu deprivation on academic achievement

The concept milieu deprivation refers to a divergent variety of socio-economic and cultural factors impeding the milieu-deprived individual's freedom of choice and his/her right to the optimal use of his/her opportunities (Bashman, 2008). It is quite difficult for a child to achieve according to his/her potential in such a deprived and disadvantaged environment. The child himself/ herself in a social environment is characterised by geographical-physical inadequacies, particularly in terms of the physical environment, the neighbourhood, housing ,material goods

and cultural goods; inadequate interpersonal communication, which does not enable the child to actualise his personal potential, especially his socio-communicative potential in full and the maintenance of low cultural standard (Pretorius and Le Roux, 2000).

The nature and quality of the environment in which the child grows is of great importance for his /her development. The home as an environment plays a major role in socialising the child for adult life and the home is first and basic educating agent in the child`s life (Morish cited in Bashman, 2008). Home background and community values can mar or make effective learning (Bhengu, 2009). In the school situation these children often experience feelings of rejection because of other learners' and educators' disapproval of their lack of cleanliness, wrong uniform, absenteeism, lack of exercise books and textbooks and what is also evident in squatter areas is the high rate of school drop-outs and those who never attended school (ibid). A child is environmentally (milieu) deprived when language deficiencies limit his communicative possibilities in the dominant culture and when his particular experiential background limits him with regard to the acquisition of learning life content as in the dominant culture and is therefore unable to meet the demands of modern life ((Hartas, 2011). It is the focus of this article to explore the extent to which these factors influence learners from squatter environments.

Impact of socio-economic status (SES) on academic achievement

Although there is no strong consensus on the conceptual meaning of socio-economic status sociologists typically use this term to refer to relative position of an individual or family within a hierarchical social structure , based on their access to ,or control over wealth, prestige and power (Giddens & Sutton, 2013). Parent's socio-economic status is based on family income, parental occupation and social status in the community. It is believed that low SES negatively affects academic achievement became it prevents access to vital resources and creates additional stress at home (ibid).The family provides its members with a social identity; children are born into their parents social class. It is our assumption that children from squatter camps face many obstacles and challenges because of the social class into which they are born which is at the bottom of the social hierarchy hence the need to examine these challenges through research.

Socio-economic background is one of the key issues which is being majorly considered by researchers whenever factors influencing children's academic performance are being discussed.

Socio-economic backgrounds of parents have been said to have intellectual credibility in terms of its contribution to educational attainment of the children (Gary, Julie, Frank & John, 2000). There are different aspects of socio-economic background which are said to be indispensable to the growth and development of children's academic attainment. It is of great concern to educators, researchers and policy makers to acknowledge the extent to which students of low socioeconomic positions appear to be disadvantaged or badly off their counterparts from higher socioeconomic background in areas of academic performance, educational attainment, including acquisition of post-secondary school certificate (ibid). The United Nations' programme Education For All movement (EFA) is intensively committed to the achievement of six main goals by 2015 namely early childhood care, primary education, literacy, gender equality and provision of quality education for children, youth and adult (UNESCO, 2010). The aim is to try and eradicate poverty and diminish the gap between learners from different SES. However, it is affirmed that when a relationship between educational attainment and socioeconomic position exists, those pupils who appear to be from low socioeconomic background encounter certain level of unfavourable situations while at school and thereafter in adulthood and this situation has been claimed to result into problems of human resource wastage, inefficiency of required occupational capabilities and consequently economic inefficiencies (Gary et. al, 2000). The inequalities are still there among learners of different socio-economic backgrounds hence the need for such studies.

The collaboration of different socio-economic factors like adequate financial support, parental academic assistance, availability of educational facilities at home, parental and children's value for education; jointly influence the children's academic growth and performance (Lareau & Weininger, 2006). In urban areas most poor families can hardly afford the cost of water, talk less of education of their children and this can no doubt lead to low academic performance and high dropout rate (Barry, 2005). This study aims to examine the extent to which such factors also affect learners who live in squatter camps.

The problem of language on squatter camp students

A Neo-Marxist sociologist, Bernstein also made a link between lower class and language acquisition when he distinguished two types of speech patterns; the restricted and elaborated code (Macionis & Plummer, 2008). The term code refers to a set of organizing principles behind the language employed by members of a social group and how the relationships established within the social group affect the way that group uses language and the type of speech that is used (ibid) .Bernstein argued that the lower working class (people who are most likely to be in poverty) use the restricted code which privileges context-dependant meanings, where principals are implicit, and presuppose closely shared identifications, beliefs and practices. Such a system of meanings acts selectively on syntactic and lexical choices (Abercrombie, Hill & Turner, 2006). This study sought to examine the influence of restricted code on the educational performance of learners who live in squatter camps. In schools, it is the elaborated code that is spoken, therefore giving those who cannot speak it an unfair disadvantage when trying to learn. This can lead to poorer pupils struggling to understand teachers and textbooks, and may in turn lead to lower educational confidence and outcomes. Thus Bernstein asserts a direct relationship between academic societal class performance and language (Haralambos & Holborn, 2013). Children who enter the school system without "appropriate" knowledge, skills and attitudes may be considered disadvantaged and may find adjustment to school difficult, a situation that might encumber learning (Weir, 2001). In South Africa for example, the medium of instruction is English. Children who cannot speak English will be disadvantaged compared to English-speaking children. Bernstein suggests a correlation between social class and the use of either elaborated or restricted code (Haralambos & Holborn, 2013). Bernstein's research suggests that the working class individuals have access only to restricted codes learned in the socialization process where both values and role systems reinforce restricted codes. However, the middle class being more geographically, socially and culturally mobile has access to both the restricted codes and elaborated codes (ibid).

Hasan (2002) collected data from everyday contexts of interaction between mothers and children in Britain across two social locations, designated higher autonomy professionals (families where the main breadwinner had considerable autonomy over their working day) and" lower autonomy" professionals (families where the main bread winner had no or very little autonomy

with their working day). His findings revealed significant differences in the ways these families interacted and showed the existence of 'semantic variation', that is, different ways of meaning. The ways in which mothers from lower working class backgrounds tended to control their children for instance, by threats or categorical imperatives, as opposed to appeals based on reasoning, typical of middle class mothers and the way in which they give children information (for instance, with minimal as opposed to full explanations) create an orientation required for work in school that which tends to be provided by middle class mother and school failure is often associated with language deficits (ibid). Labov cited in Jones (2007) suggests that one result of the difference between the speech of many children in Britain and the language of the school system is that lack of educational success is frequently explained in terms of some kind of mismatch between pupils' language capabilities derived from their home background or social class and the language demands of the learning environment. The researchers want to find the relevance of these findings to pupils who live in squatter camps.

Methodology

Case studies provide very little basis for scientific generalization since they use a small number of subjects, some conducted with one subject (Huberman, & Miles, 2002). Hence results may not apply to other situations. The case study approach is essentially suited for studying many areas of human behaviour (ibid) and will help in getting an insight into the challenges faced by learners living in a squatter camp. The researchers decided on a school in Rustenburg town because the school enrols many learners from a squatter camp. The school caters mainly for children from a low socioeconomic background as most of them reside in Sandla (not real name) squatter camp. Purposive sampling was used because it is usually adopted by qualitative researchers (Castillo, 2009) and focuses on individuals or settings with characteristics being studied. In this study the researchers used a purposive sample of teachers who are teaching children from the particular squatter camp, learners and parents of these children in Rustenburg, North West of South Africa. The researchers used a sample of 18 pupils, 6 parents or guardians and 6 teachers.

Measuring instruments

The setting of the interviews were the choice of the participants, and was free from distractions so as to maintain their natural context and making them more relaxed (Holloway & Wheeler,2002). The qualitative researchers are expected to draw upon multiple sources of evidence, that is, to seek convergence and corroboration through the use of different data sources and methods .By triangulating data, the researchers attempt to provide a confluence of evidence that breeds credibility (Artikinson, 1997). Thus, in this research interviews, questionnaires, observation and document analysis were used to counter all threats of validity (Robson, 2002; Krefting, 1991). The researchers analysed the documents (registers, students' portfolios and exercise books) and had some interviews with the parents and students. Questionnaires were hand distributed to the selected teachers and the head helped with the collection. All the questionnaires were returned and observations were done when the researchers visited the squatter camp to meet the parents who were randomly interviewed.

Discussion of the findings

The six classes of this particular school had an enrolment of 326 students and 207 (63.5%) of the learners reside in a squatter environment and this clearly shows that the school has many learners from low socio- economic background making the sample suitable for study.

The findings revealed that children living in squatter camp environment face many challenges at home as shown in the following sentiments:
"My children are suffering here because they look for firewood and also fetch water every day after school. They are always sick because of dust around this place which comes from these mines"
"My children cannot read their books at night because there is no electricity and the schools are very far. There is a problem of noise from many taverns which disturb them even at night"
"Their safety is my concern in this place, they are sometimes very sick because of the dust and pollution from these mines. Our shack if it is rain season it is wet because there is no floor and in winter it very cold"

The Sandla informal settlement residents had no access to water and electricity which are basic needs in town. The lack of water and not enough sanitation facilities was conducive to the spread of infections and diseases in and around the community. This on its own affects the quality of life of children. Another finding is that students from a squatter camp environment lacked a good home environment, they don't do their homework, they come to school hungry and that they are always absent from school.

Something of interest in the findings is that the squatter camps were generally occupied by young, single parents. There is a lack of control in some of these households probably because of the lack of a father figure. Children in squatter camp environment experience lack of parental control. All respondents in this study admitted that there is alcohol and drug abuse in the squatter camp environment. There is abuse of alcohol by both young and adults in the squatter camps.

Criminal activities appear to be like cancer in Sandla squatter camp. The study revealed that some behaviour problems were caused by alcohol abuse in the children's home and community. The home environment was found not to be conducive in raising young children as there were many beer drinking spots. Families that live in squatter camps, with the associated poverty, unemployment and inadequate and overcrowded housing, often find this responsibility impossible to fulfil. Food supplies are always insufficient, because parents are generally unemployed, making it difficult for parents to maintain the health of their children. There are a lot of single parents in squatter camps who often have large families, which they cannot support. The escalating poverty in squatter camp environment makes the life of learners very difficult. The study established that there are critical shortages of important materials such as text books, and water and sanitation facilities. The lack of such facilities has critical implications on the education of a child at home.

The researchers discovered that these shacks were closely packed together and there was no space for children to play. There were no playgrounds for children and the sanitation in this area was poor. The ablution services were poor and many families were sharing a single toilet and with some of them still using the unhealthy bucket system. The participants highlighted a number of effects that overcrowded housing had on children, such as deprivation of their rights.

A peaceful environment for concentrating and studying at home is almost missing. The entire surrounding environment was found to be dirty, filthy and unhygienic for raising children. The land was polluted almost everywhere because the camp is close to the dump site. A child needs physical, emotional and social support to develop fully. Children are deprived of their own private space. They sleep with parents in the same room, a situation which leads them to learn about and witness sexual activities at a very early stage. Such crowded households may lead to child sexual abuse though this was not revealed in the study.

The study established that most of the students lack school materials and this greatly affected their education as commented by some participants during interviews:

"My children are suffering as you can see here, they lack many things even food is a challenge, they only eat two meals in a day. These two that go to school walk a long distance to school because i cannot afford to pay for their transport"
"My children cannot do what other children are doing because of financial problems, they withdraw from many activities like spring day and they are not going to an educational trip because of money."
"Sometimes my children are teased and bullied at school because they go to school without all the things required. They cannot learn well at school because they are tired after walking a long distance to school"

This actually means that most parents of children living in squatter camp environments cannot afford to fully finance their children's education because of poverty caused by high rate of unemployment among most households in the squatter camp. Most of the households survive on social grants and only a few are working in the mining industry. Poverty stricken home environment were found to have serious implications on children's access to education (Bhengu, 2009). The findings revealed that 66.7% of the students walk to school every day. Their parents cannot afford to pay for their transport because of poverty. After analysing the class registers of different classes, the researchers noted that learners from squatter camp environment were absent from school for many days. The class registers show that most of the students from squatter camp environment were absent from school for more than twelve days in a term which might be

caused by distance to school. Data from documental analysis that is learner's portfolio and continuous assessment record books revealed that the marks of students from squatter camp were lower than the other students in all the classes.

This study revealed that in most cases the mother tongue of children residing in squatter camp environment is totally different from the medium of instruction and the First Additional Language (FAL) used at school. The problem of language was confirmed by one of the respondent who stated that:

"The problem of language, we are Xhosas and at school my children are doing Tswana which is difficult. We want them to learn Xhosa because there are many Xhosa people around"

These children encountered many problems in understanding what is being taught at school. However, they cannot express themselves because the languages spoken at home are totally different from the medium of instruction and FAL used at school. This in turn affects their performance at school and they gradually lose interest in their studies and become irregular in attending school and finally get dropped out. Learners from squatter camp environments experienced an unfamiliar situation in the classroom when they are taught using an unfamiliar language of instruction and the subject content which is not extracted from their culture.

The study also revealed that the learners play with people who do not go to school and who are older than them and end up doing bad things like drugs. Most of the parents gave the same response that the friends of their children have a negative influence on their children. These were some of their, responses:

"They make them do bad things, you see this one who is pregnant all her friends have babies and now she is pregnant. They walk during the night and this place is not good, there are many criminals and drugs in this place"

"They play with other children who don't go to school and they end up doing bad things like drugs. They make them do bad things like smoking and not going to school every day"

"The friends are not good people because they don't go to school and they are older than them. They teach them bad things, the other time I caught this one with a boyfriend in my house"

Behaviour problems may also result from the unsound relationship that the child is exposed to in the community and the prevalence of drug abuse and criminal activities in their community contributed to truancy.

Implications of the study

This research on the challenges of the squatter camp environment on the learner was undertaken by the researchers in order to enhance their professional and academic understanding. Also teachers will understand the problems of students staying in a squatter camp environment so as to help them overcome some of these challenges. The administrators will gain insight into the problems affecting students living in squatter camps, thus carry out sensitization programs on home factors affecting students during parents meetings. The government will realize the plight of underprivileged children in squatter camps and policy makers will formulate new policies bearing in mind the challenges faced by students living in deprived environments like squatter camps.

Recommendations

Given the challenges faced by learners residing in squatter camps the researchers recommend that the government to provide essential services like safe drinking water and electricity to the people living in squatter camps for the improvement of their life; the Educational Department of North West Province should provide transport to children from low socio-economic background or to build schools in the nearby communities; the government could also help the communities by establishing community libraries in the squatter camps that can be utilised by both learners and adults which would help learners in their studies. It is also recommended that parents should improve on their educational levels through Adult Education programs like ABET which is provided by the mining companies for free. This program could help adults to acquire basic skills in Numeracy and English. Parents will be able to assist their children with their school work. In order to alleviate poverty, the government should generate more employment opportunities for as many people as possible and the School Management Team (SMT) should ensure that educators identify under- performing learners in their respective classes and offer remedial work to these struggling students and assist them in solving their problems. It will go a long way in improving the academic performance of such individual learners because they do not get adequate

assistance at home. Parent's involvement and participation at school has a significant effect on the academic achievement of the students therefore it is strongly recommended that interaction and communication between the parents and teachers should be established for better growth of the students and also encourage parents' attendance during school events, parents must be afforded the opportunity to articulate their expectations and concerns.

Limitations and further study

While significant findings were raised in this study it has its own limitations that need to be highlighted. The major weakness of this study is that of using case study as its design. Results from one squatter camp might not be enough to generalise the challenges hence recommending for multiple case studies research. However based on the above findings, further research is recommended on the impact of squatter camp environment on the girl child and also on secondary school learners in general since this was focusing on primary schools only.

Conclusion

The provision of quality education to every child in South Africa is hampered by poverty in disadvantaged communities. The academic performance of children living in squatter camp environment is greatly affected by their socio-economic background. This study presented the challenges of squatter camp environment on the learner and its effects on the academic performance of the learner and suggested sound measures and solutions to minimise the consequences caused by poverty on the academic performance of such learners. This study has revealed that conducive home environment and parental involvement in school can help the students from a squatter camp to improve their academic achievement. For most children to succeed in school, their parents' interest in their learning is of paramount importance. But this interest ought to be with what happens on a daily basis, because this is how the child lives, and this is how he understands his life. The initial ingredient in most children's success in school is a positive relation to his parents.

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