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Perceptual Barriers Affecting the Pursuit of Education Beyond High School by Ethnic Minority Students from Agrarian Communities in Zimbabwe

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Abstract: *This research paper is an extract from my PhD thesis titled "Microsystem factors that hinder the pursuit of education beyond high school by ethnic minorities in peri-urban Harare of Zimbabwe." In this paper I argue that while international and national calls for equal access to education beyond high school (EBHS) by all students regardless of their backgrounds generate hope, full realisation of this shared vision remains problematic. In the three Chewa Ethnic Communities that this study focused, pursuit of EBHS was constrained by both distal and proximal factors. This study explored the hindering microsystem factors from the perspective of their community leaders' perceptions of EBHS. The study used in-depth interviews to generate primary data from 15 community leaders who were purposefully selected from the three research sites. Results revealed that together, historical legacy of exclusion, lack of information on EBHS pathways and transitioning processes, narrow view of the benefits of pursuing EBHS and preference for local farm employment compounded the pervasive EBHS inequality affecting students in the three research sites. Based on the key findings, the study recommended a range of programs aimed at helping Chewa communities in agrarian communities in Zimbabwe to embrace the pursuit of EBHS for its existential and instrumental benefits.*

Keywords: Ethnic community leader; education beyond high school; ethnic minority group; social mobility; perception.

INTRODUCTION

This research paper is an extract from the corresponding author's PhD thesis titled "*Microsystem factors that hinder the pursuit of education beyond high school by ethnic minorities in peri-urban Harare of Zimbabwe."* In this paper we argue that while international and national calls for equal access to education beyond high school (EBHS) by all students regardless of their backgrounds generate hope, the full realisation of this shared vision remains problematic. Evidence shows that the most efficient education systems are those that ensure that students' socioeconomic backgrounds are not obstacles to available educational opportunities (Krstic, Filipe & Chavaglia, 2020; Krstic, Krstic & Dekic, 2018). The argument is that equitable access to EBHS by all students from diverse backgrounds is the foundation of glonacal (global, national & national) sustainable development. Thus, the pursuit of EBHS by all students pays off for the individual, their families, communities and society at large (Psacharopoulos & Patrinos, 2018; Chan, 2016; OECD, 2012). In line with our arguments, this paper unfolds in six sections. The first section provides a brief background to the study leading to the research question and an outline of the theoretical framework that guided this study. The second section deals with related literature. In the third section we expose the methodology used in this study. The fourth section discusses the results of the study. The fifth section looks at the implications of this study followed by the sixth section which provides recommendations based on the key findings.

BACKGROUND

Zimbabwe is located in the Southern African region, and by 2020 its population was estimated to be in the region of 16 million people. The country is a diverse ethnic society comprising 14 recognised ethnic groups. The groups are the Chewa, Chibarwe, Venda, Nambiya, Ndau, Ndebele, Shangani, Shona, Sotho, Tonga, Tswana, Koisan, Kalanga and Xhosa ethnic groups (Constitution of Zimbabwe, 2013). Agriculture is the backbone of this country economy and immigrants Chewa people from Malawi have a historical legacy dating back to the 1960s working in commercial farms in Zimbabwe (Daimon A. , 2015; Boeder, 1974). While most of the Chewa commercial farm-based communities were displaced during the governemnt's land acquisition program in the 2000s, a significant number of Chewa agrarian communities were not affected because the commercial farms that housed them were not acquired. As late as 2021, commercial farm-based Chewa ethnic communities still thrived on some commercial farms in Zimbabwe.

In terms of education, the United Nations Econonmic Commission for Africa (UNECA) declared that Zimbabwe was the best educated country in Africa

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(UNECA, 2018). This declaration was based on the 94 % literacy rate which obtained in the country at the end of year 2017 (Zimstat, 2017). This paper argues that in the 21st century whose economy is knowledge-based, literacy alone is not an adequate level of education given the high skills demanded in the modern job marketplace (Chankseliani, Qoraboyev & Gimranova, 2020; Boni & Walker, 2016; Chan, 2016). In this regard, the importance of pursuing EBHS by all students including traditionally non-college bound minority students, cannot be overemphasised. In fact, the whole world strongly stands against all kinds of educational inequality affecting the pursuit of EBHS by students on the basis of their ethnicity (Bowen, 2018; Meng, 2017; OECD, 2012). In the 21st century, the pursuit of EBHS is espoused as the fundamental benchmark for student accomplishment in an increasingly integrating technological and knowledge-based economy. This view is echoed in a study by Chankseliani, Qoraboyev & Gimranova (2020) who argued that higher education enhaces the students' potential to support glonacal development. Glonacal is an encompassing concept which describes the global, national and local development. in fact, wide scholarship (McCowan, 2019; Owens, 2017; Boni & Walker, 2016; Ndaruhutse & Thompson, 2016) acknowledge the centrality of EHBS in the development of economies at all levels of society as represented by the glonacal concept of sustainable development.

The Zimbabwe EBHS system is embedded within the SDGs as well as other global trends in higher education whose key objectives of EBHS include the provision of knowledge, skills and competences that match the demands of knowledge-based skills requirements as well as providing a firm foundation for lifelong learning (UN, 2015; McCowan, 2019). In addition, the contemporary view of EBHS is that it provides students with both pecuniary and non-pecuniary benefits (Stokes, 2015; Hout, 2012), which are critical in their development as well as their sustainable livelihoods through their contribution to meaningful economic development and equitable society (Chankseliani *et al.*, 2020; Krstic *et al.*, 2020; Boni & Walker, 2016). In order to help students towards the realisation of their EBHS aspirations, there are six pathways that are available for the students' who desire to pursue EBHS in Zimbabwe. Thus, teachers' colleges, polytechnic colleges, technical and vocational training colleges, apprenticeships, professional institutes and universities (Garwe & Thondhlana, 2018; Shizha & Kariwo, 2012). Institutions under these six EBHS pathways enrol students based on merit and availability of places. Students, regardless of their family backgrounds may enrol in any EBHS institution for any program as long as they meet the specified entry requirements and the going fees at the institution of their choice. This right is provided for in the supreme law of the country (Constitution of Zimbabwe, 2013). Exclusion on the basis of ethnicity or social background is outlawed.

While the gains made by Zimbabwe's education system show encouraging hope as reflected by the souring high literacy rates, the same cannot be said about EBHS. There is scarcity of literature to show the number of ethnic minority students who are pursuing EBHS after they completed high school education (HSE). Studies in this area are critical given that wide scholarship suggest that employment opportunities in the 21st knowledge-based economy and beyond favours EBHS graduates compared with their non-EBHS counterparts (Krstic, Filipe & Chavaglia, 2020; Bowen, 2018; Chan, 2016; Boni & Walker, 2016; Ma, Pender & Welch, 2016). When massification of higher education and the gains made so far are spoken, EBHS inequalities affecting Chewa ethnic minority students in agrarian communities in Zimbabwe tend to occupy the lowest echelons of the discourse. This is so despite that obtaining reality on the ground suggest that access to EBHS remains beyond the reach of many ethnic minorities with Chewa immigrant background not just in Zimbabwe but in most African countries (Daimon, 2018; Garwe & Thondhlana, 2018; Shizha & Kariwo, 2012).

Zimbabwe is a signatory to a number of international conventions and treaties which aspire for the achievement of a equitable societies. Specifically, the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) through SDG4, compels governments to ensure equal access to post-secondary education by all students regardless of their backgrounds, not just as a development issue but also as a matter of achieving sustainable livelihoods (McCowan, 2019; Owens, 2017; United Nations, 2015). Equal access to EBHS implies that personal or socio-economic circumstances, such as gender, ethnic origin or family background are not obstacles to educational success. The problem was that despite the presence of high sounding international and national blueprints that talks about equality and right to access EBHS by all students, the majority of ethnic Chewa students in commercial farm-based communities were not pursuing EBHS for one reason or another. This study argued that among other factors, the pervasive EBHS inequality was also nourished by perceptions of EBHS by significant others in these ethnic communities. Therefore, this study sought to understand the hindering perceptual factors from perspective of Chewa ethnic community leaders. We believed that understanding the community leaders' perceptions of EBHS would shed light on how EBHS was perceived by the generality of members of the studied 3 Chewa communities where an inconsistent average of 3 students out of a possible 35, pursued EBHS in any given year. In order to understand the hindering perceptual factors, we posed the following research question:

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Research Question

What are the ethnic minority community leaders' perceptions of education beyond high school and its pursuit by students from their communities?

Theoretical Framework

The study used the Bio-ecological System Theory (BEST) (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) and the Sociocultural Theory (SCT) (Vygotsky, 1978) to develop an understanding of Ethnic Minority Community leaders' perceptions of EBHS and its pursuit by students from their communities. These two theories places context (culture and physical environment) at the centre of human development. Perceptions about phenomena are formed as we interact with others in society (Imai & Masunda, 2013; Hamlyn, 2017; Ou, 2017). During social interaction, meanings attached to phenomena are negotiated and agreed and this tends to pattern behaviour of individuals who share the same context including cultural and physical contexts. Imai & Masunda (2013) argued that culture and perception reciprocally interact to produce manifest behaviour. In selecting the guiding theories, we we concurred with empirical evidence that posit that culture provides the context in which human beings ascribe meanings to phenomena. Thus, our argument is that the pursuit of EBHS or lack thererof, was not independent from the perceptions of EBHS held by significant others in the studied ethnic communities. Thus, the prevalence of students in the studied Chewa communities who were not pursuing EBHS could be a representation of the perceptual reality of EBHS by people in the communities concerned. Research has shown that the interaction between culture and psychological processes influence the both the way we think as well as the goals that we pursue as individuals members of our society (Kotta, 2010; Lott, 2010; Kitayama & Uskul, 2011). Similarly, the goals pursued by individual members of society is just a miniature of the overall goals of the society. The use of BEST and SCT was meant to shed light into these social relationships.

RELATED LITERATURE

It is known that the pursuit of EBHS signifies upward social mobility (Bathmaker, 2017; Bowen, 2018; Chan, 2016; Hout, 2012). Unfortunately, it is also a well-known fact that crossing the bridge from high school education (HE) to education beyond high school (EBHS) is not always smooth (Firdous & Ali, 2017; Carnevale, Jayasundera & Gulish, 2016). The problem is even daunting for students from communities living at the margin of society, especially ethnic groups with protracted histories of marginalisation. This is why Conley (2010) stressed the importance of helping all students in their diversity, so that they could access, participate and succeed in EBHS. In agreement, Burke (2012) argued that higher education was in actual fact a right to every student who needs it regradless of their circumstances.

Evidence (Firdous & Ali, 2017; Meng, 2017; Baum, Kurose & Ma, 2013; Contini & Scagni, 2013) shows that ethnic minority students with immigrant backgrounds find it difficult to navigate from HE to EBHS. From each of the 3 research sites for this study, an average of 3 out of a possible 35 students pursued EBHS in any given year. These low numbers were not even consistent across the years. It was common in some of these communities for many years to pass without a single student making a successful transition to EBHS. This phenomenon was not peculiar or isolated to the studied Chewa ethnic communities. Various studies (Carrel & Sacerdote, 2017; Jackson, 2013; Selingo, 2013) found that ethnic minority students faced difficulties in their bid to transit from HSE to EBHS. Traditionally marginalised and college-unbound ethnic students are alienated or face outright exclusion from EBHS. In their study titled *"Equity and Quality in Education: Supporting Disadvantaged Students and Schools"* OECD (2012) found that in most OECD countries, one out of every five students fail to pursue their education beyond secondary school. As a result they fail to acquire the skills that are required to function in a knowledge-based economy. The findings by OECD (2012) demonstrate that some students still remain unskilled because they have failed to pursue EBHS. However, failure to pursue EBHS does not mean the concerned students were not capable to do so. Looking at this problem from a humanistic perspective, it can be argued that these unfortunate students were equally endowed with the inherent potential to realise their potential through attaining the relevant skills required to sustain themselves in a competitive job market (Ismail & Tekke, 2015; Rogers, 1969). From this angle, one could logically analyse that the problem of lack of skills can be located in lack of opportunity rather than the students' personal attributes. Vulnerabilities including low income (Carnevale *et al.*, 2016), poverty (Pick & Sirkin, 2017), ethnicity (UNESCO, 2017) and self-efficacy (Seaton, Marsh & Craven, 2010) are some of the factors that combine to exlcude minorities from pursuing EBHS for its instrumental and existential purposes.

It is apparent from the reviewed literature that the pursuit of EBHS is accepted as a fundamental gateway to upward social mobility (Krstic *et al.*, 2020; McCowan, 2019; UNESCO, 2017; Bowen, 2018; Chan, 2016). The importance of EBHS in the sustainable development matrix, was confirmed by the United Nations (2015) who recognised that higher education improves livelihoods. The inclusion of higher education in the SDGs is indicative of the necessicity of pursuing EBHS as a key factor in unlocking many doors to better opportunities in life. Nonetheless, EBHS inequality still persists among ethnic minority groups and the studied three Chewa farm-based communities (Danckwerts, Butler & Maruva) are classical cases in this regard.

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The goal of pursuing EBHS has been a subject of intense and prolonged debate, stretching over many centuries. Historical footprints of this discourse dates back to the 1600s, well before Harvard College was founded in 1636 (Rudolph, 1962). Recent studies have shown that the benefits of pursuing EBHS are encompassing, extending beyond economic value to include social benefits. (Burke, 2012; Bathmaker, 2017; Bowen, 2018). Prominent scholars (Dewey, 1916; Rogers, 1969; Baum, Kurose & Ma, 2013; Chan, 2016) concur that EBHS refines, strengthens, nourishes and enriches cognitive development of the student. Thus, it improves human living conditions through broadening their horizon and preparing them for the rigor demanded by the ever-changing technological environment (Krstic *et al.*, 2020; Stokes, 2015; Selingo, 2013; Ballantine, 2012). For these reasons, Conley (2010) opined that no student must be left behind in this noble endeavour. The question to answer in this study was; for what benefit should ethnic minority students pursue EBHS? The paragraph that follow discusses the key benefits for which EBHS should be pursued.

McMahon (2018), Carrel & Sacerdote (2017); Bathmaker (2017) and Stokes (2015) enumerated multiple benefits associated with pursuing EBHS. First, they concur that EBHS has contributes immensely towards the collective good of society through research, innovation and skills development. Thus, EBHS is widely viewed as the key driver of economic development (Owens, 2017; Boni & Walker, 2016). The same view was echoed by both the United Nations and the World Bank who urge countries to prioritise investment in EBHS to leverage their economies (UN, 2015; World Bank, 2009). Accelerated economic development achieved by the 'Asian Tigers' (Hong Kong, South Korea, Japan and Taiwan) who leapfrogged from their previous poor economic status to become global economic giants testifies that investment in EBHS pays off. Their highly educated workforce and high technology are the twin drivers of their impressive economic progress (Yang & Martinez-Zarzoso, 2014).

At the individual level, EBHS provides enhanced employment opportunities and global relevance (Hermannsson, Lisenkova & Lecca, 2017; Ma *et al.*, 2016). A study by Trends in Education Series (2015) found that EBHS graduates were more likely to be employed than their high school graduates. Similarly, Ma *et al.* (2016) reported low unemployment rate among degree holders compared to high unemployment rate for high school graduates. In terms of incomes, EBHS graduates earn far more than high school graduates (Krstic *et al.*, 2018; Ma *et al.*, 2016). In addition to the above advantages, pursuing EBHS is considered to be a high-return investment portfolio. McMahon (2010) established that at 14% rate of return (coached in terms of earnings by EBHS graduates), was more than investment returns paid in financial markets and other investment portfolios during the same period.

Besides the economic benefits, studies (Hout, 2012; Bathmaker, 2017; Bowen, 2018) enumerated various social benefits associated with EBHS. These include human rights awareness issues, stability, improved environmental awareness, improved participation in governance processes, higher tax contribution, justice and inequality issues (Hermannsson, Lisenkova & Lecca, 2017). Research has shown that better decision making in areas of health, consumption, marriage and parenting, were some of the multiple non-pecuniary EBHS benefits (Astin, Astin & Lindholm, 2011; Oreopoulos & Salvanes, 2011; Stephens, 2013; McMahon, 2017). Studies have also shown that EBHS graduates participated in governance issue more their high school counterparts. Ma *et al.* (2016) found that during the 2014 mid-term elections in the USA, the voting rate among the 25 to 44 age group was 45% for people with at least a degree compared to 20% for those with high school qualifications. Given the vulnerability of ethnic minority populations, participating in EBHS could enhance their participation in electoral systems so that they can influence the way they are governed.

Critics claim that the benefits attributed to EBHS are exaggerated since they are not always realised. Schwartzman (2008) argued that research findings emanate from EBHS institutions and that they do not always represent what obtained on the ground. His point was that all social and economic benefits cannot be credited to EBHS as a single factor because various factors are required for the realisation of economic and social benefits in any society. In agreement, Mosweunyane (2016) observed that EBHS, especially in Africa, has not resulted in the desired economic development. Furthermore, most EBHS graduates in Africa have not realised most of the said benefits due to unemployment challenges. This part of literature highlights an important observation that pursuing EBHS is not always a passport to the desired sustainable livelihoods. Despite the critics, EBHS is widely accepted as an indispensable level of education the level skills it imparts to students. The worth of EBHS goes beyond economic benefits, it also provides students with multifarious social benefits which cannot be quantified. For students from vulnerable backgrounds including ethnic minority students who are traditionally marginalised, the pursuit of EBHS provides hope for upward social mobility.

Notwithstanding the multiple benefits associated with EBHS, part of literature (Komarraju & Nadler, 2013; Manian, Monroe & Potts, 2016; Meng, 2017) show that barriers such as low student motivation, language dissonance, parents' level of education, access issues, outright discrimination, policy deficiencies, poverty, ethnic background and a legion of other socioeconomic factors hinder the pursuit of EBHS

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by ethnic minority students (Altbach, Reisberg & Rumbley, 2010; British Council, 2012; Jackson, 2013; Contini & Scagni, 2013). Some studies have shown that together or as standalone factors, these barriers hinder access, participation and success in EBHS by ethnic minorities (McMahon, 2018; Burke, 2012). However, this part of evidence focusing on traditional barriers is not conclusive. We argue that some students have defied adversity through sheer resilience and succeeded in their pursuit of EBHS careers. We believe that positive perceptions of any endeavour could generate energy that produces positive outcomes. Our belief motivated us to focus on community leaders' perceptions of EBHS to understand the EBHS inequality affecting students in commercial farm-based Chewa ethnic communities.

METHODOLOGY

We conducted a comprehensive literature review between January 2020 and March 2021 to collect secondary data that helped us to develop a deeper understanding of the barriers that hinder the pursuit of EBHS by ethnic minority students in different parts of the globe. The focus was on peer reviewed journal articles, published books and credible reports on the economic and social benefits of EBHS and the barriers that hinder its pursuit by ethnic minorities. The aim of the review was to bring together research evidence related to our study so that what was already known could point us to what was not yet known with regard to perceptual barriers that perpetuate EBHS inequality affecting ethnic minorities.

In addition to the comprehensive review of literature, we adopted a phenomenological research philosophy and qualitative research approach to generate primary and perceptual data from the participants' lived experiences. The selection of a phenomenological philosophy was made on the basis that this study was focused on a single phenomenon, the participants' perceptions of EBHS. Phenomenologist scholars (Husserl, 1970; Howitt, 2010; van Manen, 2014 Creswell, 2014; Padilla-Diaz, 2015; Vagle, 2018) are agreed that this philosophy is the most appropriate for studies that focus on shared experiences of intact cultural groups. On the other hand, our selection of qualitative research approach was influenced by our desire to tap into the participants' lived experiences as well as their understanding of EBHS and its purpose. Our choice aligned with empirical evidence (Hammersley, 2013; Maxwell, 2013; Punch & Oancea, 2014). Corbin & Strauss (2015) that recommends the use of qualitative research approaches in studies that investigate real life problems facing real people in society.

The study focused on three (3) Chewa ethnic communities namely, Danckwerts Chewa Ethnic Community (DCEC), Butler Chewa Ethnic Community (BCEC) and Maruva Chewa Ethnic Community (MCEC). These three ethnic communities have Malawian origins and were located in commercial farms in peri-urban Harare of Zimbabwe. A purposive sampling technique was used to select 5 community leaders from each community, bringing the total study sample to 15 participants. The participants were selected because they were rich sources of information that we required to answer our formulated research question (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011; Choy, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Etikan, Musa & Alkassin, 2016). The 15 participants were first generation Chewa immigrants, they were all born in Malawi and migrated and settled in to Zimbabwe. Thus, the participants were selected on the basis that they were the custodians and gate-keepers of their Chewa culture in their respective communities.

We used in-depth and open-ended interviews and focus groups to enable participants to provide detailed narratives on what they perceived as the barriers that hindered the pursuit of EBHS by students from their communities. The triangulation of interviews and focus groups in generating data for this study aligned with scholars (Fetterman, 2010; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Creswell, 2014) who thought that the complexity of human behaviour requires the use of more than one data collection method. The corresponding author was the main research instrument and data was collected over a period of 9 months. Both the interviews and the focus groups were face-to-face and some repeat interviews were conducted after an interval of 2 months for authentication and validation purposes. A thematic data analysis procedure was used to get sense out of the mass of data collected through interviews and focus group discussions. The data were first sorted, coded and re-coded before it was organised under emerging themes (Braun, Clarke, Hayfield & Terry, 2018; Gibbs, 2018; Harding, 2019). Through this process, we managed to construct a general picture of the participants' perceptions of EBHS and how such perceptions contributed towards the high prevalence of students who were not pursuing EBHS for its widely accepted instrumental and existential purposes.

We observed the principles of informed consent and data confidentiality in line the guidelines set out in codes of research ethics that apply when dealing with human participants (Corbin, J., & Strauss, A., 2015; Creswell, 2014; APA, 2010). The purpose of the study was explained to participants to their satisfactory and this knowledge informed their decisions to take part in this study. The data they provided are secured under lock and key until such a time it shall be destroyed after 5 years. The data were also anonymised to protect the privacy and integrity of the participants who provided it (APA, 2010; Creswell, 2014). Participants are referred in this study using pseudo names which are allocated numerical numbers from 1-15 in synch with number of participants. Feedback of the study results was given to the

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participants as part of the validation process (Creswell, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 2015).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

While data revealed that participants held various diverging and converging views on EBHS, its benefits and rationale for pursuing it, the following are the key findings: legacy of exclusion, lack of information on EBHS pathways and enrolment procedures, narrow view of EBHS benefits and preference for farm employment. These microsystem based factors are discussed below.

Legacy of exclusion

Data revealed participants had accepted and normalised their exclusion from EBHS participation on the basis that since the inception of their ethnic communities in commercial farms in Zimbabwe in the early 1970s (Boeder, 1974; Mudenge, 1988; Daimon A. , 2015), their focus was never been on education but on providing labour on the farms. According to all the 15 participants' the early Chewa communities never gave much thought to education in general and EBHS in particular. It appears that this early attitude and disregard was somehow passed down the generations and was still affecting the present generation in a bigger way. The following excerpts from selected participants provides more light in this regard:

> *My parents came from Malawi to look for work here because there were many jobs in Zimbabwe and nothing in Malawi. We follow our parents' footsteps, we focus on working* **(Participant-1).**

Another participant concurred:

> *My parents worked and lived in farms since they came to Zimbabwe. They did not see the importance of education. That is why they asked us to drop out of school* **(Participant-9).**

Looking at these views, one would be forgiven to conclude that the pervasive EBHS inequality that was manifesting in the three research sites (DCEC, BCEC & MCEC), was a perceptual factor that was rooted in this ethnic groups' historical immigration legacy. This finding resonates with findings from recent studies elsewhere (Carrel & Sacerdote, 2017; Contini & Scagni, 2013) who found that there was need to trace the social origins of educational inequalities affecting students in certain communities so that targeted interventions could be put in place to help traditionally excluded students to access higher education. It was apparent the prioritisation of farm work by past and present Chewa communities in Zimbabwe was distracting their students from focusing on pursuing EBHS.

Another participants explained that for most Chewa people living in commercial farms, education was important to the point of reading and writing while work was fundamental to survival, especially in a foreign country.

> *The majority of Chewa people who came from Malawi worked in commercial farms. Education has never been very important to us because there was plenty of jobs in the farms. What is important is to read and write* **(Participant-12).**

While the claim by Participant-12 does not explain why education was never a priority of the Chewa immigrants, further probes and analysis of his claim revealed that initially, the purpose of the Chewa migration was not to settle in Zimbabwe but to work, invest in their homes in Malawi and return to their country of origin. For this reason, they remained focused on working rather than spending many years in the education system. The participants also revealed that before 1980, children from Chewa communities in farms dropped out of school soon as they were old enough to work in the fields. Thus, most of them never completed even PE, let alone pursuing EBHS. It was only after 1980 that legislation compelled children to remain in school till they completed PE. Labour laws also prohibited the employment of minors. The implication was that, children in Chewa communities, were forced to remain in the education system while they waited to reach employable age. One participant summed up the enduring problem;

> *Let me tell you. That problem is not limited to this farm, it is normal in commercial farms for children to drop out of school as soon as they are old enough to be employed. Before independence, most children in commercial farms never attended even primary school* **(Participant-7).**

Under the foregoing circumstances, it was apparent that EBHS inequality affecting students in farm-based Chewa communities, is historical in nature and the early focus on work ahead of education by Chewa immigrants was never challenged by their succeeding generations. Thus, the mental focus on the initial purpose of migration continues to negatively undermine the group's perceptions of EBHS. Therefore, there is need to re-oriented and re-purpose the current generations so that they could realise that their circumstances were different from their founding forefathers. As full citizens in their settled country, they need to pursue EBHS for all its accepted benefits.

Perceived lack of transtioning information

Data revealed that all the majority of the participants lacked adequate information on EBHS pathways available to students from their communities. Although they knew about college and universities, they were not aware of the procedures for enrolling in these EBHS institutions. The following string of excerpts provide the participants' misaligned views.

> *Only children of the farm owner and his manager go to colleges and universities. I do not know how they do it* **(Participant-1)**.

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Another participant reflected;

I wanted my children to be teachers but I did not know how to get them places to go to college. They also did not know and they never talked about going to college. They told me that they wanted to work and I helped them to get jobs here **(Participant-3)**.

Participant-4 pleaded;

You must help us because we do not know what our children must do in order to go to college

Participant 5 elaborated;

I valued good education but my 3 children disappointed me because they failed to go to college. I did not know how to help them to get the places. Anyway, I am happy because all of them work here and they are living close to me **(Participant-5)**.

The same view was echoed by Participant-15 who had this to say;

Our problem is that we do not know what our children must do after they finish high school education. Our employer sent his children to colleges but he does not help us to get places for our children as well.

The unmistakable message in all the above quotes was that participants lacked information on how their children could pursue EBHS. They thought that they needed some external assistance to secure places for their children. Data also revealed that participants were not aware of the various EBHS pathways available other than teachers' colleges and universities. For example, they were not conversant with options such as enrolling for programs with vocational colleges, apprenticeships and other on-job training programs. Bathmaker (2017) found that these hybrid pathways widen the scope of post-secondary education, thereby reducing EBHS inequalities affecting ethnic minorities. It was noted that the lack of such vital information exacerbated the EBHS inequality in this ethnic community. This view aligned with findings by Carrel & Sacerdote (2017) who found that information provision was one of the effective intervention strategies to increase student transitions into higher education.

As indicated in the excerpts, it was clear that participants had little or no information on critical aspects concerning EBHS and how students from their communities could pursue this level of education. However, it was crystal clear that the problem was not entirely due to the perceived lack of knowledge. We argue that while the participants professed that they wanted their children to pursue EBHS, no effort was made in that regard. The fact that all the participants indicated that that they secured employment for their children in the farm, is a clear indication of the low regard for EBHS which prevails in these Chewa ethnic communities. Every effort was exerted in securing work for their students as soon as they completed HSE. The fact that this problem was prevalent in all the three studied farm-based Chewa communities suggests that indeed, EBHS inequality affecting their students was also a perceptual issue.

Misaligned view of the benefits of pursuing EBHS

To a large extent, the participants' perceptions of the benefits associated with pursuing EBHS misaligned with empirical evidence (Krstic *et al.*, 2020; McCowan, 2019; Bathmaker, 2017; Meng, 2017) that shows that EBHS support local, national, and global development in diverse ways. For the participants, education was only important as long as it guarantees students employment upon completion of their studies. For them, if employment opportunities arise before one completes their education, then there was no reason for persisting with education. The majority of our participants argued that;

Participant-6

You cannot force someone to go to college. They told me that those who go to colleges and universities had difficulties getting jobs in town

Participant-10

It is better to let them work for themselves than to spent money sending them to college and fail to get jobs after they finish.

Participant-12

Our children are employed in this farm after they completed high school. What else do we want?

Participants-15

Each father trains his sons how to do his farm work so that they are employed in the same areas when they grow up. Everyone in this community wants to work side by side with their children.

It is clear from the participants excerpts above that for them education served one purpose, the economic purpose that is achieved through securing employment. The problem was that in the studied ethnic communities, employment was not based on educational credentials. Rather, it was based on reaching the 18 years employable age and that coincided with the completion of HSE for most students in these communities. Recent studies have acknowledged one of the key roles of EBHS institutions is to equip students with specific careers as well as generic skills and knowledge and academic credentials to enable them to work in professions and occupations of their choice (Chankseliani *et al.*, 2020; Bowen, 2018; Hermannsson *et al.*, 2017; McMahon, 2017). However,

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in the studied ethnic communities, the students had no particular skills or careers hence, they just provided unskilled labour which attracted low wages and makes it difficult for them to experience social mobility. Furthermore, their failure to pursue EBHS means that they also missed out on various social benefits that accrue as a result of participating in EBHS. Studies (Bowen, 2018; Chan, 2016; Hout, 2012; Oreopoulos & Salvanes, 2011) show that besides the instrumental value, the pursuit of EBHS can empower students by supporting their holistic development, including their self-formation during the years spend in EBHS. Increased human rights awareness, better decision making in areas of healthy and parenting, improved environmental awareness, improved participation in governance processes, higher tax contribution, justice and equality issues are also cited as critical social benefits of pursuing EBHS (Hermannsson *et al.*, 2017 Chan, 2016; Ma *et al.*, 2016; Dewey, 1916). Participants had little regard for the numerous social benefits of EBHS and their attitude towards these social benefits appeared to be a perceptual issue rather than anything else.

Farm employment

Employment in the three research sites was readily available to anyone who wanted to work as long as they stayed in the farm-based community. In fact, everyone who turns 18 years of age was obliged to offer themselves for employment in their respective farms. One was actually expelled from the community if they are not employed in the farm when they are above the stipulated age. The following excerpts shed more light on this matter.

Participant-7

They do not have time to read their books. They know they are going to be employed in this farm when they finish school.

Participant-3

Everyone in this community works in the farm, they do not ask for certificates.

Participant-11

Work in this farm is easy to get for anyone who need it, as long as you are above 18 years and you live in this farm.

From the above excerpts, it was clear that turning 18 years and staying in the farm community was all that was needed to get employed in the three research sites. Although completion of HSE was an added advantage for some few luck students, it was more of a coincidence than a requirement of employment. It was clear that students from the research site remained in the education system as a function of the labour laws which criminalised the hiring of minors for labour purposes (Constitution of Zimbabwe, 2013). Otherwise, their employment was guaranteed by their benefactors, the farm owners and was always taken by students in all the three ethnic communities at the expense of furthering their education. The students' eagerness to taken up employment aligns with findings from a recent study by (Gorgodze, Macharashvili & Kamladze, 2019) showing that employment was a key expectation by students. However, the finding was based on the perceptions of students in higher education. What intrigued us is that participants' considered employment in their respective farms as a privilege because it was offered without academic credentials attached to it. In essence the practice eroded the value attached to EBHS by participants. We believe that again that this problem was a perceptual problem. While employment provides the much needed incomes, it is clear that without specific skills and careers, the students in the three communities had limited opportunities for upward social mobility.

IMPLICATIONS

The bulk of the studies on EBHS inequalities affecting ethnic minorities focus on students already enrolled in higher education (Baum *et al.*, 2013; Carnevale *et al.*, 2016; Chan, 2016; Firdous & Ali, 2017). Their arguments and findings highlight disparities in college and university completion rates (Chan, 2016; Conley, 2010), the expected benefits of completing higher education (McMahon, 2017; Conley, 2010), challenges of integration (Contini & Scagni, 2013), poor selection of degree programs (Bathmaker, 2017; Carrel & Sacerdote, 2017) and disparities in the grade of degrees awarded to ethnic students as compared to their counterparts from major groups (Imai & Masunda, 2013). Hindering factors commonly cited include students' cultural orientation, background, socioeconomic factors, language dissonance, choice of degree programs and choice of institution among other characteristic barriers peculiar to ethnic minorities in higher education (Jackson, 2013; Stephens, 2013; Manian *et al.*, 2016). We acknowledge these findings and arguments and extend the existing body of knowledge looking at EBHS inequality affecting ethnic students from the perceptual angle. Our key argument is that while ethnic students face multiple obstacles that hinder their smooth academic progress, their own in-group perceptions of EBHS could exacerbate their bid to climb the academic ladder. Hence, our view that while traditional barriers exist, the development of positive perceptions of EBHS could propel ethnic students to greater academic heights in the face adversity.

Another key contribution of our study is that while the reviewed literature illuminates the various EBHS hindering factors affecting ethnic students in different parts of the globe, we argue that this part of literature represents Western and Eurocentric perspectives. Our study provides evidence that illuminate the context specific findings that illuminates

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EBHS inequality from an Afrocentric perspective. Our hope is that, by understanding these perspectives together, the discourse on EHBS disparities fashioned along ethnicity, can be enriched. It is clear from our study that perceptions allocate value priorities and influence what can be pursued or not by individuals or group of people who share commonalities including ethnicity. In the case of the studied Chewa ethnic communities, the perceived legacy exclusion, perceived lack of EBHS transition know-how, misaligned view of EBHS benefits and preference of farm employment were the perceptual barriers which hindered their students from pursuing EBHS.

Recommendations

The study findings show that perceptual factors contributed to the pervasive failure to pursue EBHS by students from DCEC, BCEC and MCEC. This problem could be addressed through a combination of internal and external measures with the involvement of the community leaders from the 3 Chewa communities on their capacity as the custodians of the Chewa culture and mythology, key factors in the socialisation and nurturance of the concerned students in the studied cethnic communities. Based on key findings, we recommend that;

- Policymakers should provide psychosocial support seminars for the development of ethic community leaders' positive perceptions of EBHS as the starting point towards repurposing and orientating EBHS initiatives in ethnic minority communities.
- Policymakers to ask EBHS institutions to conduct promotional programmes in the affected ethnic communities to augment the community leaders' knowledge about the instrumental and existential benefits for their subjects. Equipped with such knowledge, the community leaders should then spearhead awareness, education, suasion & advocacy programs in their communities. These programmes should be designed to develop positive perceptions of EBHS by community leaders, parents and students in these communities.
- Policymakers should partner with community leaders to identify, motivate and help deserving student to pursue EBHS through targeted interventions.
- Policymakers should design laws that ensure all students inclusive of ethnic students should attain specific skills, careers and competencies to ensure that they are positioned for rewarding job opportunities in the short and long term.

Limitations and Future Research

This qualitative study focused on three Chewa ethnic communities in peri-urban Harare of Zimbabwe. We acknowledge that perceptions are influenced by various factors including context, culture and social status among other psychological and social factors. Therefore, we do not claim that our findings represent the perceptions of EBHS by all ethnic community leaders in Chewa communities elsewhere or other ethnic groups living in different contexts. This is a limitation in terms of the general is ability of our study findings. Nonetheless, our findings remain credible evidence that can be used to explain EBHS inequalities affecting ethnic minorities alongside other findings from related studies. As already alluded, there are fertile grounds for perceptual variations on the same phenomenon, depending on other intervening contextual factors. In this regard, we recommend future studies to conduct cross cultural studies on the same phenomenon.

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