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Exploring Enduring Microsystem Constraints That Hinder the Pursuit of Higher Education: A Case Study of Minority Ethnic Students in Zimbabwe

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Abstract: *This paper provides a roadmap that sets out potential future scenarios for stakeholders in the education system, allowing them to address persisting barriers that are camouflaged in contextual realities of minority ethnic students. Phenomenology was used to capture lived experiences of 24 participants drawn from Danckwerts Chewa Ethnic Community, majority of whose students were not pursuing education beyond high school. Data were generated through ethnography and interviews and findings show that the community's disadvantaged immigrant background, its focus on farm employment ahead of EBHS, disengaged parents, peer influence and lack of relevant role models sustained the pervasive EBHS disparity that characterised the research site. By focusing on hindering factors that are camouflaged in contextual realities, this study provides readers with a novel understanding of the enduring hurdles that are traditionally overlooked. Audience of this study may draw implications, conclusions and interventions that are applicable to their situation. The main goal of this study was to accelerate EBHS equality to pave way for its pursuit by all students regardless their ethnic proportion.*

Keywords: Education Beyond High School, Minority Ethnic Community, Social Mobility, Substantive Equality in Education, Farm Employment, Commercial Farm.

INTRODUCTION

Progressive societies across the globe share the view that access to higher education is a right for everyone who needs it. Access to higher education is a right for all who need it, according to progressive societies around the world. However, not all students in plural societies have an easy path to higher education. The path to higher education for some students in plural societies is marked by turns and twists that perpetuate and nourish inequality at this instrumental level of education. While access to higher education has become a hot topic in recent years, inequality in higher education continues to manifest along ethnic lines. This study provides an overview of current trends and future scenarios that stakeholders could use to address persistent barriers that prevent minority ethnic students from pursuing higher education. The paper provides a brief overview of issues concerning higher education inequality, a synthesis of the reviewed empirical literature on trends in higher education and the benefits of pursuing them, the methodology that guided this study, and a discussion of key findings. The paper also offers conclusions, implications, and recommendations based on both the emic perspective of participants who were drawn from the ethnic communities where the study was conducted, and the etic perspective of the researcher's conceptual categories derived from many years of observing the exclusion of ethnic students in higher education. This novel approach assists readers in identifying interventions that are applicable to their own situations.

BACKGROUND

Higher education is not just a pillar of modern economies and a facilitator of social mobility for students but also a necessary endeavour for the achievement of social justice and prevention of further discrimination. The disparity in benefits accruing to those who pursue higher education compared to the drawback of those who fail to pursue it, represents a perpetual injustice. Everything is fast revolving around technology which is transforming human life, hence, our argument that 'no one should be left behind' in higher education where technological skills are accomplished. Notwithstanding these conveniences, existing literature indicates that higher education inequality persists along ethnic lines despite high sounding international and national calls to end this epidemic inequality. What is intriguing is that no one is accepting accountability for this persisting educational inequality. The affected ethnic groups blame uncontrollable factors for their disadvantage, government blames ethnic groups for snubbing higher education in order to preserve their cultural practices through enculturation and socialisation of their successive generations as a way to hold on to their ethnic identities. There is so much complaining about this injustice, everyone finds someone to blame for inequalities in higher education. Everyone lives in the

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heyday of irresponsibility and the problem continues abated across different parts of the globe. But the real issue is failure to focus on context specifics and existential realities that are hidden in layers of each ethnic group's existential reality. This study focused on education beyond high school inequality affecting minority ethnic groups.

Zimbabwe is a plural and democratic society with deep and reasonable agreement about the principles of justice, including the state's obligations in respect of addressing all forms of social and economic inequality that manifest along ethnic lines. The country is located in the Southern African region, and by 2020 its population was estimated to be 16 million consisting of 14 known ethnic groups. These groups are 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 Zimbabwe's economy. The Chewa ethnic group, descendants of Malawian diasporic immigrants, have a rich heritage dating back to the 1960s working on commercial farms in Zimbabwe (Daimon, 2015; & Boeder, 1974). While most of the original farm-based Chewa communities were abandoned during the government's land acquisition program in the 2000s, some of them persisted to date because their host commercial farms were spared from the land reform program. Consequently, a noticeable number of Chewa ethnic communities still thrived in Zimbabwe's commercial farms by 2021.

In terms of education, the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) has declared Zimbabwe to be the most educated country in Africa (UNECA, 2018). The announcement was grounded on the 94% literacy rate data obtained in the country at the end of 2017 (Zimstat, 2017). With this trajectory, the country was on a sound footing given that like elsewhere in the world, its economy was fast becoming knowledge-based. Apparently, literacy alone was no longer adequate given the high skills required in modern economy. Accordingly, the importance of pursuing EBHS by all students including traditionally excluded minority ethnic students cannot be overemphasized. EBHS has been touted as a vital to the development of a technological and information economy. This view is borne out by research conducted by Chancels, Qoraboyev & Gimranova (2020) who stated that higher education enhances the ability of students to support an economy that is rapidly evolving along technology advancement. Recent research (McCowan, 2019; Owens, 2017; Boni & Walker, 2016; & Ndaruhutse & Thompson, 2016) acknowledged the importance of EHBS in economic development at all levels of society as it stands for the splendour of sustainable development. Yet it was evident that EBHS inequality is still noticeable along ethnic lines (Bowen, 2018; Meng, 2017; & OECD, 2012).

While the gains made by Zimbabwe's education system show encouraging hope as evidenced by the high levels of literacy, the same cannot be said of EBHS. When it comes to the expansion of EBHS pathways and the achievements that have been made so far, the EBHS disparity affecting Chewa minority students in agricultural communities often has very low turnaround speech. This was so despite that evidence on the ground shows that that access to EBHS remains low among students from Chewa communities located in commercial farms (Daimon, 2018; Garwe & Thondhlana, 2018; & Shizha & Kariwo, 2012). Interestingly, Zimbabwe signed various international agreements that acknowledge the importance of equitable societies. One of such protocols is the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In particular, SDG4 compels governments to ensure equal access to post-secondary education by all students regardless of their background, not only as a developmental issue but also as a matter of sustainable livelihoods (McCowan, 2019; Owens, 2017; & United Nations, 2015). Equal access to EBHS means that personal or socio-economic conditions, such as gender, ethnicity or any other social background, are not barriers to academic access and success. However, these high aspirations have not addressed transition issues affecting minority students, especially those with immigrant backgrounds.

Despite their history of educational disadvantage, students from ethnic minority groups have the opportunity to experience social mobility in their lifetime by pursuing EBHS for the numerous pecuniary and social doors it opens. Notwithstanding, as in the rest of the world, not every student in Zimbabwe has the opportunity to progress to education beyond high school. While it may not be the path that every student wants to take, impediments can also thwart transitions to desired higher level of education pathways. The whys and wherefores differ from one context to the next, and from one student to another. Nonetheless, this choice cannot be left to the compulsions of certain ethnic communities or individual students. Every student should be provided the opportunity to pursue EBHS in fulfilment of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals' pledge to leave no one behind. The vision of this vital pledge is to achieve a just, equitable, tolerant, open and socially inclusive world in which the needs of the most vulnerable groups are met. Such a noble vision cannot be met when other students are excluded from EBHS opportunities. This problem has prompted the conduct of this study which addressed the following research question.

Research Question
Which microsystem factors ostracised minority ethnic students from pursuing education beyond high school for its substantive benefits?

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Conceptual Framework

This research was guided by an integrated cultural-perception conceptual framework developed by the researcher by combining two concepts: culture and perception. These two factors have a significant impact on the outward behaviour and decisions made by people in life. This conceptual framework was developed on the premise that culture and perception have a symbiotic relationship, which is explained as follows: culture provides the framework and software for consistent perception of occurrences, whereas perception is in charge of receiving and interpreting information from the individual's habitat (Oatley, 2017). This is plausible because culture influences how people attend, think, react, and develop their life perspectives and philosophies. As a result, culture and perception are the primary sources people's conceptions of their universe (Kim-Pong, 2015; & Kitamaya & Uskul, 2011).

In developing the cultural-perception framework, it was considered that there are two types of culture that guide the behaviour of members of a cultural group. One type of culture exists within people, while the other exists outside of them. The first type of culture found within an individual is subjective culture, which is a type of mental software that includes perception, attitudes, beliefs, values, and the group's internalized patterns of interaction (Kotta, 2011; & Lavenda & Schultz, 2010). Scholars (O'brien, 2017; Lantolf *et al.,* 2015; Lott, 2010; & Mead, 1955) concur that subjective culture is acquired and transmitted through the processes of enculturation, socialization, and internalization.

The second category is objective culture, which encompasses everything a cultural group has created, including their institutions and practices (Bennett, 2013). The second category is evidently made up of the man-made environment. Thus, when investigating the underlying factors that stalled students from the research sites from pursuing education beyond high school, I considered that culture has visible and invisible aspects. Both the visible and invisible facets of culture influence how people see themselves and others, as well as how they interact with one another. In the complex relational process, culture set the goals that its subjects pursue.

Consequently, the developed conceptual framework provided a new perspective on the micro-level dynamics that hindered students from pursuing education beyond high school. The use of a conceptual framework to guide this study was consistent with Cooper (2012), who contended that focusing on a group's culture helps researchers to cultivate boundless perspectives on people's everyday life. To put it another way, the developed conceptual framework aided the researcher in connecting how the studied ethnic group's culture and perception interacted to produce an unexpected impact (Hofseted, 1980) on ethnic minority populations' perceptions of higher education and the importance of pursuing higher education.

The studied Chewa ethnic community's subjective culture, passed down for generations, rigidly structured and guided their thoughts and actions with respect to the value the group attached to investing in education beyond high. Thus, the affected students' prospect to pursue their education was not protected from their cultural influence. Studies (Hamlyn, 2017; Ou, 2017; Oatley, 2017; & Mustafa, 2016) have shown that perception of phenomena are bridged by the culture to which one belongs. This is so because manifest behaviour is the result of a reciprocal interaction between culture and perception (Imai & Masunda, 2013). Several researchers (Hamlyn, 2017; Ou, 2017; & Oatley, 2017) agree that culture influences people's perception of phenomena in varying ways. Overall, this conceptual framework piqued the researcher's interest and enabled him to pose critical questions, allowing him to gain a better understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Vast empirical evidence shows that EBHS is an enabler of progress for students' personal lives and their families, communities and nations at large. According to Lin (2016), economic development, job proficiency, and social mobility are some of the key benefits of pursuing EBHS. For United Nations (2015), access to EBHS presents students with the greatest opportunity for social mobility and its emphasis in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals reflects its vital importance for all rather than few students. Particularly, the vision of SDG 4 is to see that no student is denied access to this life-changing level of education. Accordingly, the priority for SDG4 is to remove all kinds of barriers that stifle students' bid to pursue their chosen EBHS pathways. The objective is to embrace everyone including traditionally non-EBHS bound ethnic minority students, so that they could join their counterparts and participate in EBHS for their individual and community worth, and the shared good of society at large as the ecosphere glides towards the 2030 milestone. Walker *et al.* (2019) impartially observed that educational inequality can pull society further apart cohesion.

Research argument is that in a cutting-edge technological landscape that distinguish the 21st century economy, there is no better way to secure sustainable livelihoods than through participating in EBHS (UNESCO, 2020; & United Nations, 2015). Furthermore, taking part in EBHS activates the process of lifelong learning in response to the challenges and opportunities associated with technological progress (Krstic *et al.,* 2020; & Lin, 2016). Transformation of the world is initiated through technological innovations

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(Khan *et al.,* 2019; & Havarkhor *et al.,* 2019) which are instigated by people whose aptitudes are refined during their rendezvous with EBHS. In their report, Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC & U, 2015a) conceptualised the pursuit of EBHS as a ticket to the middle class. Literature also shows that pursuing EBHS affords students with high prospect for further personal development through the development of vital skills such as ability to reflect, ask questions, analyse issues and make informed judgements. These facets are pertinent in all areas of human life including communal and work-related spheres.

For the aforementioned manifold advantages, UNESCO (2020) reported that global higher education enrolment has doubled in the last two decades, rising from 19% to 38%. Zimbabwe was making commendable progress in educating its population as shown by Zimstat's (2017) report which indicated above 90 % literacy rate, making Zimbabwe one of the most educated African country. Although Zimbabwe's education achievements vary depending on data sources and collection methods, country reports by UNICEF (2020); & World Bank (2019) confirmed that literacy rates was at 94% by 2017. While this was encouraging, additional effort was required in order to address persisting barriers that thwarted traditionally excluded students from pursuing their education beyond high school. Despite the confirmed progress, low visibility of minority ethnic students in EBHS remains disturbing (UNESCO, 2020; Lebeau & Oanda, 2020; & Choudaha & van Rest, 2018). This problem cannot be allowed to continue, there was no better time than at the present to take significant steps to address this disconcerting inequality. As a signatory to a horde of international agreements that promote equality in all spheres of human activity, Zimbabwe was obligated to ensure that all her students including minority students, have unimpeded opportunities to pursue their education notwithstanding their social and cultural backgrounds. In particular, Chapter 4, Part 2, Section 75 (1) (b) of the Constitution of Zimbabwe states;

> *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.*

Nevertheless, constitutions, institutions, frameworks and visions do not deliver equality unless they effected, monitored and prescribed. Blueprints remain cheap talk if they are not implemented to help those designed to benefit from them, increased transitions to EBHS by minority students should be the measure. When it concerns EBHS inequality affecting minority students, evidence show that many countries just talk the talk, but they seldom /never walk the walk. Particularly in the studied ethnic community, there was little evidence to show that anything meaningful was being done to increase the number of students who

pursued EBHS for its desirable fruits. Equality should be measured by substantive transitions rather than mere hypothetical frameworks and high-sounding agendas that are not felt at the grass roots where the barriers persist.

A UNICEF (2020) education analysis report found that Zimbabwe's delicate economy remains the principal challenge to transitions to higher levels of education. This problem was aggregating odds of inequities and abridged access to EBHS by students from vulnerable socio-economic backgrounds. Given that Zimbabwe's EBHS pathways are mainly bankrolled by parents, financial burden on these parents naturally translate to problems of education access. Such a situation was bound to exacerbate historical educational disparities. Students from vulnerable backgrounds are left with no option but to absorb themselves in other activities that generate income for survival motives. One of the available options was to get employed in commercial farms where low rewarding opportunities existed. Research studies (Firdous & Ali, 2017; Meng, 2017; Baum *et al.,* 2013; & Contini & Scagni, 2013) have shown that students still find it difficult to transition from high school to EBHS. This problem was more distinct among traditionally discriminated students, especially those with immigrant backgrounds. In their study titled *"Equity and Quality in Education: Supporting Disigned Students and Schools"*, OECD (2012) found that in many OECD countries, 1 in 5 students were unable to further their education beyond high school. Consequently, they failed to acquire the skills needed to function in a knowledge-based economy.

There are two streams of data that emerge from the reviewed literature. The first stream is that EBHS is the conventional gateway to social mobility (Krstic *et al.,* 2020; McCowan, 2019; UNESCO, 2017; Bowen, 2018; & Chan, 2016). Hence, it must be accessible to all students who need it. The United Nations (2015) perceived that EBHS is the fulcrum of sustainable development and must be made be made progressively available. The insertion of higher education in the SDGs highlights the importance of pursuing it for the many doors it opens. Hitherto, transition to EBHS remains a challenge for students from some sections of the population, with minority ethnic students suffering the most. The majority of the reviewed studies (Morgan *et al.,* 2020; Bouchrika, 2020; Johnson, 2020; Kirp, 2019; Banks & Dohy, 2019; & Lin, 2016) focused on distal causes that contributed to the disproportional inequality, and found that ineffective policies, achievement levels, racial disparities, and outright discrimination were among the impediments affecting the achievement of equality in EBHS. The second stream (Bouchrika, 2020; Garwe & Thondhlana, 2018; Owens, 2017; & Burke, 2012) is that most countries have expanded their EBHS pathways and systems with a view to accommodate formerly excluded students. However, the magnitude to

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which this expansion embraces traditionally excluded societies remains a contested issue. What was apparent to this study was that the models that were used to problematise the flagrant EBHS inequity affecting minority students do not sufficiently address the context-specific impediments.

While the reviewed studies stimulated policies to address EBHS inequality, most of them used macro-system lenses to understand the problem. Without dismissing the contribution of these studies to what has been achieved thus far in addressing teething barriers, this study argues that equality itself is a good which is easier said than done. Time has come to renew efforts to address persisting barriers that account for disparities in EBHS. This study focused on the on a specific minority ethnic community to understand some of the thwarting elements that are camouflaged in the group's microsystem.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study used a phenomenological research philosophy because the researcher wanted to develop a deeper understanding of the subjective lived experiences with respect to EBHS disparity suffered by their ethnic community. The selection of this philosophy aligned with several scholars (Husserl, 1970; Howitt, 2010; van Manen, 2014; & Vagle, 2018) who agree that the goal of phenomenology is to allow a researcher to provide detailed descriptions of the studied difficult grounded on the participants' subjective and lived experiences. Hence, this study drew on the participants' worldview to understand the perceived significance of education beyond high school and why the majority of students in their community shunned it. The emphasis was to develop this vital understanding from the wisdom of community leaders, parents and the affected students' perceptual reality in terms of intervening events dating back to the initial inception of Chewa communities in commercial farms in Zimbabwe. Thus, phenomenology helped this researcher to develop an in-sider understanding of the studied ethnic community's cultural tools including their understanding of flow of time, the self, and how interaction with others in their community influenced their academic choices. Therefore, the appropriateness of using phenomenology in this study hinged on its high regard for the participants' emic perspective, ranging from their perception, thought, memory, imagination, emotion, desire, aspiration, awareness, embodied action and their shared worldview with specific locus to EBHS and what it entails.

A constructivist research paradigm was also used in the study to complement the selected research philosophy discussed above. According to the literature (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Creswell, 2014; Cooper, 2012; & Guba & Lincoln, 1989), the central goal of the constructivist research model is to help a researcher to grasp the subjective world of human experience. Using this paradigm, the current researcher was determined to "get inside the heads of the participants" so to speak, in order to comprehend and interpret the meaning they ascribed to the value or lack thereof, of pursuing EBHS. In this regard, a constructivist research paradigm places high value on alliance between the researcher and participants in the co-creation of new understanding of real problems affecting people in society.

The chosen phenomenology philosophy and constructivist paradigm was consolidated by adoption of ethnography as the research design of choice. In selecting this design for this study, it was considered that vital aspects of life, especially in minority ethnic communities, are concealed by their circumstantial essences. Extant literature (Gibbs, 2018; Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Creswell, 2014; & Hammersley, 2013) supports the idea that ethnography is the systematic study of people in their natural environment, without interfering with their daily activities. Using these research models, the study used interviews, focus groups, and in-situ observations to collect data from 24 participants who were judiciously but purposively chosen. The data was analysed using thematic data procedures.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The pursuit of education beyond high school hold high hopes for minority ethnic students to experience social mobility. This level of education halts further inequalities that separate societies along visible vulnerabilities that agonise ethnic groups at the margin of society. Essentially, equality in EBHS is not just virtuous for the concerned students but also vital for their families, community and strengthening of democratic and equitable societies. Equal access to EBHS conveys social cohesion and substantive justice to all citizens as cherished by supreme law of the land, the constitution. In DCEC, the current research site, the majority of participants were overwhelmingly agreed that at most 3 out of a possible 35 students enrolled for an EBHS. The rest were hired as unskilled labourers in their host commercial farm. This marked the end of their educational journey and the continuation of poverty trap that was passed to subsequent generations. This was happening despite that research (Banks & Dohy, 2019; McCowan, 2019; World Bank, 2019; & Bathmaker, 2017) has shown that participation in EBHS affords numerous benefits to individuals, families, communities, and the nation as a whole. These benefits include economic and social, and these merits, pursuit of EBHS has become a global phenomenon. Every student has an inalienable right to it. Nonetheless, this study discovered that the high prevalence of EBHS inequality that students in DCEC faced was exacerbated by microsystem-based factors. While these factors were numerous and intertwined, the most significant micro level challenges were related to DCEC's immigrant background. The community suffered from an omnipresent legacy of exclusion from EBHS, a

distorted view of the benefits of pursuing EBHS, and readily available employment offered by their host commercial farm compared with souring graduate unemployment in Zimbabwe over the last two decades. These results are briefly discussed separately in the paragraphs that follow.

Based on the participants' narratives, since the establishment of Chewa communities in commercial farms in Zimbabwe in the early 1970s, the emphasis was on securing employment at the earliest opportune time. In this existential labyrinth, education took assumed a subsidiary venture. All the five community leaders who participated in this study concurred that the early Chewa communities placed a high value on employment as a matter of existence rather than education in general, and EBHS in particular. This initial existential reality was passed down the generations and continued to affect current generation of students in a significant way. Contemporary studies (Lebeau & Oanda, 2020; Bathmaker, 2017; Bell *et al.,* 2016; Skov, 2016; & Kim & Hill, 2015) have shown that gaps in educational attainement between majority and minority students tend to follow previous inequalities. While all the 24 participants spoke with measured reverence about the merits of investing in EBHS for themselves or their children, their own actions signposted their low regard for EBHS and what it stood for.

UNESCO (2020); & Owens (2017) highlighted that barriers that hinder access to higher education by students from ethnic minority groups are numerous and contingent on the context of each group. Findings of this study confirms findings of the aforementioned contemporary studies. Data shows that to a large degree, participants modestly perceived the utility of EBHS and its socioeconomic benefits. This low regard was cultivated by their community's historical and persistent non-participation at this level of education. According to data, 83 percent of students in DCEC were hired by their host farm shortly before or immediately after completion of high school. Exclusion of DCEC students from EBHS dated back to the farm-based Chewa communities' diasporic parents and grandparents, whose legacy was spent on commercial farm labour provision. Regardless of this history of disadvantage, the prolonged EBHS inequality posed far-reaching negative effect on the parents' estimation of the long term returns of EBHS as an investment in their children. As a result, parents in DCEC saw no rationality in committing their resources to enable their children to pursue EBHS in a situation where employment was available in the farm while at the national level unemployment had reached unprecedented heights. Beneath these contrasting conditions, utility of EBHS was simply misconstrued in the DCEC. This study concluded that this misconstruction was perceptually predisposed rather than anything else. The following excerpts from

participants shed more light on the status quo in the studied ethnic community.

> *Every year, about 35 students in this community complete high school education and only one or two proceed with their education. The majority are employed here in the farm. It is difficult for us, but there is nothing we can do, this is what our parents and friends expect of us.*

The same situation was pithily summarised by one of the distressed student;
> *I was born here, and I am now 20 years old, but I only know three people from this community who went to college.*

Another participant precisely described what influenced the students' preference for farm employment over the pursuit of EBHS;
> *It is better for us to work and support ourselves and our families instead of wasting money chasing an education that will not give us employment. So many college graduates in Zimbabwe are failing to get employment, they end up vending to earn a living.*

Although the utility of EBHS was supported by overwhelming empirical evidence (UNESCO, 2020; Carnevale, Jayasundera & Gulish, 2016; Ma *et al.,* 2016; Baum *et al.,* 2013; & Astin *et al.,* 2011), participants believed that pursuing EBHS was not worthwhile in Zimbabwe. Their assessment was influenced by the country's economic challenges which abridged employment opportunities for both EBHS and HS graduates, hence, the claim by one participant that *"so many college graduates in Zimbabwe are failing to get employment, they end up vending to earn a living."* No matter the reasons, this study maintained that educational inequality, especially at EBHS remains should be addressed for the good of society as a whole. A country that ignore such prejudice that torments a portion of its populace is in essence holding itself back from all-encompassing prosperity which derives from the power of diversity and inclusion. Being minority ethnic students does imply not imply lesser need for pursuing EBHS for its mutually linked pecuniary and non-pecuniary returns. In fact, the road travelled together by students from diverse backgrounds is bound to be an enriching educational enterprise that produces a health society. According to Bouchrika (2020); Lebeau & Oanda (2020); & Banks & Dohy (2019), elitist access to higher education is a primeval approach that modern educational systems have a duty to decisively address.

Although the factors that hindered the pursuit of EBHS by students from DCEC were to a large extent microsystem based, this study perceived that their failure to transition from higher education to various EBHS pathways was symptomatic of the existence of unequal access to the concerned students' substantive

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right to EBHS as enshrined in Zimbabwe's supreme law. The Zimbabwean Constitution provided for inclusive access to adult education and further education in addition to basic State-funded education. Section 75 (b) in particular requires the GoZ to make higher education open and accessible all her citizens without discriminatory tendencies of any practices. This unalienable right ought to be realized through the adoption and enforcement of practical legislative frameworks that embrace all students despite their personal subjective cultural alignment or ethnic group inclinations. Nonetheless, elusive transition to EBHS in the case study site revealed along ethnic lines and was indicative of inherent flaws in the existing constitutional provision. While such provisions had generated positive outcomes towards the accomplishment of inclusive education, substantive EBHS equality was not yet attained by some minority ethnic students, particularly those with migrant background. Equality in education is about affording student an equal chance to make the most of their lives and cognitive faculties. It is also the belief that no one should have fewer opportunities because of how they were born, where they originate from, what they believe, or their ethnicity. Education including EBHS, must not be restricted to particular ethnic groups while others are excluded. Literature (Chankseliani *et al.,* 2020; Ma *et al.,* 2016; & UNESCO, 2016) have shown that providing traditionally marginalised students with equal access to EBHS prospects would afford them an equitable start and healthier economic and social outcomes for them as individuals, their families, communities, country and humankind at large. Mandela (2007), the iconic African statesman decorously perceived that;

> *There can be no delight for any of us when there are children, millions of children, who do not receive an education that provides them with dignity and honour and allows them to live their lives to the full.*

In this paper, the argument is that the pursuit of EBHS confers students with life altering prospects that qualify them to experience social mobility and enjoy other rights that are linked to this level of education. Yet the majority of participants in this study were in accord that EBHS was overrated and not worth the cost associated with pursuing it. Looking at the few participants who held an optimistic view of EBHS as well as the few students who successfully pursued it, the incongruence between what they verbalised and the prevalence of students in DCEC who failed to make transitions to EBHS. While many factors contributed to this adverse status quo, this study found that perceptual, community, parental, peer and role model factors swayed the students' choice for farm employment ahead of pursuing their education. Even though these factors have been established by prior studies (Bouchrika, 2020; Lebeau & Oanda, 2020; UNESCO, 2020; Banks & Dohy, 2019; Bathmaker, 2017; Carrel & Sacerdote, 2017; & Bell *et al.,* 2016), the same hurdles were revealing differently in DCEC. This ethnic community was characterised by its own explicit existential realities that predisposed their choice between pursuing EBHS and taking up available unskilled farm occupations. While the opportunities provided by the host farm were vital appeared comprehensive, consequently they perpetuated the educational disparity that persisted throughout the studied ethnic group's period of settlement in Zimbabwe, causing further inequality that kept them marginalised and pigeonholed in their farm-based community.

CONCLUSION

The pursuit of education beyond high school unlocks many doors to long term prospects leading to the realisation of students' social mobility. However, trends show that EBHS inequality persist along ethnic lines. For the studied minority ethnic community, 3 out of a potential 35 students pursued EBHS in any given year. This paltry number was not even constant each year. The rest were hired by their host farm to do unskilled and low wage jobs. This has been happening since the inception of this ethnic community in Danckwerts commercial farm in the 1970s when the diasporic Chewa people from Malawi migrated to Zimbabwe. This study found that this educational disparity was being nourished by contextual factors that hinged on DCEC's migration legacy. The key micro level factors were; low perception of the significance of pursuing EBHS, the community's penchant for farm employment above EBHS, parents whose low level of education caused them to be detached from their children's post-high school education decision making, influence from peers who had also failed to pursue EBHS and lack of relevant role models. All the five contextual factors were intimately linked and none can be separated when considering the pervasiveness EBHS that characterised the studied ethnic community.

IMPLICATIONS

Just like in other areas of human undertaking, inequality in EBHS is not inevitable. Nevertheless, ethnic based disparities at this vital level of education can be circumvented by research-informed policies that focus on communities, the settings where disparities manifest. This study argued that a nation that neglects part of its population and allow them to endure any form of inequality including non-participation in EBHS, is in fact holding itself back from inclusive prosperity that stems from the power of her ethnic diversity. In the long term unjustified disparities tend to pull societies apart, undermining social solidity by eroding democratic principles. In conducting this study, it was considered that the hallmark of a health nation is its capacity to effectively address inequality and to embrace the richness of its multicultural society. It was clear that the majority of students in the studied ethnic community were not pursuing EBHS and that contextual factors contributed to this problem. Based on

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the findings of this study, it was argued that targeted interventions could be the panacea to the transitional challenges faced by students in the research site. The need to afford these student the opportunity to pursue EBHS cannot be overemphasised serve to say this level of education has potential to builds stronger and unified societies, ending extreme poverty and boosting shared prosperity. Nonetheless, the identified hindering microsystem factors (community context, parenting, peers and role models) must be understood in the milieu of the group's existential context. One of the characteristics of the existence of man is an open being, seeking to understand his/her life from birth to death (Abbagnano, 2020). With this awareness arises the dynamic tussle of searching for one's purpose in life. Man, in this case the students who failed to pursue EBHS, were also products of their own decisions. They could have made conscious decisions to pursue EBHS pathways of their choice because they enjoyed constitutional support to do so without ethnic based limitations.

Given the aforementioned considerations, the question to pose is that; are existing constitutional provisions, institutions, legal frameworks and conventions sufficiently promote EBHS equity for students across the ethnic divide? In answering this critical question, readers of this study are encouraged to consider that if these vital instruments (constitutions, institutions, frameworks and conventions) fail to focus on the grassroots where inequality manifest, they remain futile. Rather, these instruments should be used to facilitate students' smooth educational transitions to the desired EBHS level. In particular, governments should deepen their resolve in respect of their obligation to ensure the removal of all kinds of barriers that stifle students' bid to pursue their chosen EBHS pathways, especially those from vulnerable minority ethnic communities. Nothing should prevent nations from making special provisions for the advancement of traditionally excluded portions of their citizens.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are grounded on the findings of this study;
- Government and development partners in the education sector should develop an updated mapping exercise to monitor minority ethnic students' educational transitions.
- Governments should eliminate all nature of inequality that affect the pursuit of education beyond high school by minority ethnic students.
- Traditionally excluded students should pursue education beyond high school for its substantive benefits.
- Minority ethnic communities should embrace and prioritise the pursuit of education beyond high school by their students.
- Targeted policy interventions should be informed by study findings drawn from context specific settings. Such interventions should be implemented, supervised, monitored and continuously evaluated using communities as the unit of focus.
- Targeted funding mechanisms should be used to support students from disadvantaged communities living at the margin of society. Accessible budget responsive structures should be put in place to ensure that minority students access, participate and succeed in EBHS at the same level as their counterparts from affluent communities.
- Host commercial farms should assist students in vulnerable communities in their jurisdiction as part of their social and community responsibilities.

Areas of Further Research
- Future research should focus on endogenous and resilient strategies that can be used to address contextual barriers that hinder educational transitions of minority ethnic students.

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