ADDRESSING THE CHALLENGES OF LEARNER'S PERSISTENCE IN A FREE BASIC EDUCATION PROGRAM IN A DEVELOPING COUNTRY

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Abstract: The basic education in a developing country struggle with parental disinterest and resource limitations, hindering education access. Despite offering free tuition and food, the school has witnessed a worrisome increase in dropouts over the past five years. Hence, the study was conducted to examine the challenges of learner's persistence. Key informants consisting of the teachers, parents, and three former students formed part of the research participants. The findings showed that challenges to learner's persistence include family problems, financial difficulties, absence of a security guard, school location, lack of parental cooperation, and inadequate learning materials. Finally, the study recommended specific strategies to address these challenges. The implementation of these strategies can greatly contribute to improving the learner's persistence and their overall learning experience in a free basic education program.

Keywords: challenges; free basic education; persistence; private school

1. Introduction

The availability of high-quality education for everyone has significantly improved around the world. Technology has made great progress in advancing and raising the standard of education in many nations throughout the world. It is required under international human rights legislation that all children get a free basic education. This law is being written so that it will be mandatory and available to all children. Furthermore, secondary and higher education will gradually become free of charge. A free education is one that is paid for through charitable organization taxes rather than student fees. In many nations, primary school and other comprehensive or required education are free.

However, it is a reality that the majority of families in many developing nations struggle to make ends meet so that their children can attend school. As a result, millions of

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children in school are denied their fundamental right to a free education. As of June 2022, 58.4 million children, or 8% of the 787 million children enrolled in primary school, were unable to attend school, according to data from the UNESCO Institute for Statistics. In South Asia, 12.8 million kids do not attend school. In light of this, numerous researchers have made analyzing learner persistence a top subject of research for education since the 1960s (UNESCO, 2022). Persistence refers to an individual phenomenon—students or learners persist to a goal (Ortega-Dela Cruz, 2015- 2016).

Many Filipinos in the Philippines place a high value on education. All Filipino students will receive high-quality education, according to the Philippine government. In the political, economic, social, and cultural life of the Philippines, education is of utmost importance. It has always been held in high regard as a cornerstone of national development and a key pathway for social and economic mobility. The Article XIV, Sec. 5, paragraph 5 of the 1987 Philippine Constitution additionally protects the right to education of every Filipino. In accordance with its provisions, "The State shall protect and promote the right of all citizens to quality education at all levels and shall take appropriate steps to make education accessible to all" (Official Gazette of the Philippines, 2022).

Additionally, the Philippine National Education for All 2015 Plan of Action, which is based on the Dakar Framework of Action and the 1990 World Declaration on EFA as well as the 2000 World Conference on EFA, ensures that every child, young person, and adult will receive the fundamental educational needs that they have and that educational disadvantages won't start developing inequitably from an early age. It aims to enroll all kids who are six years old and older in school. The Enhanced Basic Education Act of 2013 was passed in 2013 to make kindergarten the required first year of a child's compulsory formal education. The government offers free education to all children from kindergarten through secondary school.

Although the nation has previously provided free basic and secondary education, going to school still involves indirect costs. These costs, which restrict children from low-income families from attending school, include school supplies, uniforms, and travel or transportation costs (International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, 2009). How to provide access to high-quality, reasonably priced education so that the nation can fully benefit from its demographic dividend is the biggest problem. The difficulty for the schools is how to continue operating and provide a high standard of instruction without receiving any financial rewards (Dayagbil et al., 2021). The implementation of or provision of free education in schools has also been made difficult by this circumstance.

Despite offering free education, a private school located in Laguna, Philippines struggles to provide the necessary resources for the children to attend school regularly. This includes transportation, uniforms, school supplies, books, and even food. Consequently, there has been a significant increase in the number of dropouts over the past five years. It is crucial, therefore, to gather adequate information on the challenges of learner's persistence. Information on these challenges can help provide valuable solutions to help address them and increase learner's persistence for free basic education programs.

Basically, this study aimed to provide answers to the question: How will the school leaders resolve the challenges related to learner's persistence for free basic education program? Specifically, this study examined the challenges related to learner's persistence in a free basic education program.

2. Materials and Methods

Research Design

Qualitative research design was used to examine the challenges related to learner's persistence in a free basic education program in a private school. Specifically, the study used key informant interviews.

Research Participants

The participants were composed of three former students, five parents, five teachers, and two school administrators. They were chosen purposefully for the study.

Instrumentation

Guide questions were prepared to obtain qualitative answers from key informants, including former students, parents, teachers, and school administrators. The challenges faced by the school administrators and parents were derived using the same interview schedule prepared by the researcher. Key informant interviews were conducted to gather more qualitative and in-depth information.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data from key informant regarding the challenges were analyzed using content analysis.

Ethical Considerations

The discussion regarding ethical considerations includes recruitment of participants, informed consent, confidentiality, and data storage procedures. For the recruitment of participants, the researcher wrote a formal letter to seek permission to conduct the study. The participants were informed that the researcher would only use the data they provided for the study. The collected data was stored in a digital drive with password protection and security, accessible only by the researcher.

3. Results and Discussions

Results of the Key Informant Interview show that among the challenges that have a significant impact on learner's persistence include family problems, such as separation of parents and financial challenges; weather-related concerns, such as poor classroom ventilation; health concerns, such as malnourishment of students, lack of motivation and absenteeism, the proximity of residence to the school, which can affect attendance, limited awareness among some parents about the importance of education, and insufficient school security that can compromise student safety and welfare.

Specifically, the first response highlights two main challenges: family problems and financial challenges. These issues can create emotional distress and financial burdens, leading to an increased likelihood of dropping out of school (Chang et al., 2021). The mention of some students being "lazy" is a potential contributing factor. However, it is worth noting that laziness may have underlying causes, such as lack of motivation or mental health issues. It is essential to address the root causes of any behavioral issues. Addressing family problems requires a holistic approach that recognizes the impact of these challenges on learners' persistence. School-based interventions may include counseling services for students to cope with emotional difficulties related to family problems (Chang et al., 2021). Several parents were interviewed to gather their perspectives on the challenges of availing free basic education and its effects on their children's persistence to study.

Parent #1 (mother) expressed satisfaction with the school, stating, "Ma'am, in my opinion, there are no issues with the children's experiences at the school because it is free, and snacks are provided". Our only expenses are for transportation to and from the school.)" Parent #5 (mother) and Parent #6 (mother) had positive experiences with the free education program, with Parent #5 (mother) stating, "So far, we have encountered no problems in accessing free education in this school…", and Parent #6 (mother) expressing, "Ma'am, there are no problems in accessing free basic education. My only minor concern is the requirement for a school uniform, as we need to incur expenses for a dressmaker".

Additionally, fostering strong communication and collaboration between schools and parents can support students by providing a stable and supportive environment (Ahmadi et al., 2020). Family counseling and parent education programs can equip parents with the necessary skills to navigate family issues effectively, reducing the negative impact on their child's education (Guo & Wang, 2021). To address financial challenges, it is crucial to implement targeted interventions and support mechanisms (Chang et al., 2021). Initiatives such as scholarships, financial aid programs, or sponsorship programs can help alleviate the financial burden on families, ensuring that students have access to the necessary resources they need. Parent #3 (mother) highlighted the challenges of limited learning materials and outdated books, stating, "Since education is free, there is a shortage of learning materials, handouts, and books. However, I do understand that not everything can be provided by the sponsors from Korea".

Collaboration with community organizations and government agencies can offer additional support through initiatives such as school feeding programs, which address

nutritional and financial needs (Wang & Fawzi, 2020). By reducing financial barriers, students are more likely to persist in their education without compromising their basic needs (Chang et al., 2021).

The second response focuses on a specific weather-related concern: the classroom's ventilation, which is particularly important in hot and humid climates. Poor ventilation can lead to discomfort and distractions for students. Therefore, schools must prioritize adequate ventilation and cooling systems to create a comfortable learning environment (Wyon et al., 2019). Addressing poor classroom ventilation requires attention to infrastructure and design considerations (Barrett et al., 2019). Implementing proper ventilation systems such as fans or air conditioning can help regulate temperature and improve air quality, thus creating a more conducive learning environment (Barrett et al., 2019). Additionally, incorporating natural ventilation strategies, such as windows or skylights, can enhance airflow and promote fresh air circulation. Investing in infrastructure improvements and adhering to regular maintenance routines are essential to ensure optimal classroom conditions (Barrett et al., 2019).

Moreover, it is crucial to raise awareness among educators, school administrators, and policymakers about the importance of adequate ventilation in promoting learners' persistence (Chakacha et al., 2014). Professional development programs for teachers can provide guidance on classroom management techniques that optimize ventilation and air quality, further enhancing the learning experience (Chakacha et al., 2014). Creating a comfortable and conducive physical space helps students remain focused, engaged, and motivated, contributing to their educational success.

It is important to note that weather-related concerns can extend beyond poor classroom ventilation. Other weather-related challenges, such as extreme weather events like hurricanes and floods, which can disrupt regular school operations, should also be taken into consideration. Developing emergency response plans and ensuring the safety and well-being of students during such events are vital to maintain continuity in education and supporting learners' persistence in the face of weather-related challenges (Moser et al., 2021).

The third response also mentions financial challenges as a critical issue and adds the additional factor of student health. Addressing malnourishment requires a multi-faceted approach involving both school-based and broader community initiatives. Implementing school feeding programs can ensure that students have access to nutritious meals during the school day, supporting their physical health and cognitive functioning (Wang & Fawzi, 2020). Collaboration with government agencies, NGOs, and community organizations can provide additional resources and support, such as nutritional education programs, access to affordable and nutritious food, and promoting awareness about the importance of a balanced diet (Ngeh, 2013). Moreover, considering the socio-economic factors contributing to malnourishment, such as poverty and food insecurity, is crucial. Addressing these underlying issues through poverty reduction programs, income support, and social safety nets can positively impact learner's persistence by alleviating the financial constraints that impede access to proper nutrition (Chang et al., 2021).

In addition to malnourishment, other health concerns, such as inadequate access to healthcare, prevalent diseases, and mental health issues, can also impact learner's persistence. Ensuring access to quality healthcare services, implementing preventive measures, and promoting mental health awareness and support within the education system are essential components of addressing health concerns comprehensively (Marais et al., 2019).

The fourth response highlights motivational factors and absenteeism as significant challenges that impact learner persistence. Students who lack motivation and regularly miss school are at a higher risk of disengagement and dropping out (Feldman et al., 2017). To address the lack of motivation, it is essential to implement strategies that foster intrinsic motivation and create a supportive and engaging learning environment (Herman, 2012). Teachers can incorporate student-centered approaches, such as project-based learning or experiential learning, that provide opportunities for autonomy, mastery, and purpose (Ortega-Dela Cruz, 2020). Providing constructive feedback, recognizing, and celebrating student achievements, and promoting a growth mindset can also enhance motivation and learner persistence (Feldman et al.,2017).

School should focus on providing teachers with professional development programs to equip them with the necessary skills to create a motivating classroom environment. Additionally, working with parents and guardians to create a supportive home environment that reinforces the value of education can greatly contribute to the motivation of learners (Feldman et al., 2017).

The fifth response discusses the distance between a student's residence and the school, which can significantly impact learner's persistence. When students live far away from their school, it can be difficult to attend regularly, leading to increased absenteeism (Balabanian, 2020). To address this problem, schools explore options such as providing transportation services, creating satellite learning centers in remote areas, or implementing flexible learning models that accommodate students' geographic limitations. By doing so, schools can create an environment that supports students and helps them stay motivated. It is essential to consider the specific needs of each community when addressing this issue (Balabanian, 2020). For example, rural areas may require different solutions than urban areas. To develop effective strategies, it is crucial to understand the local context and collaborate with relevant stakeholders deeply. Overall, providing transportation options, fostering community engagement, and maintaining clear communication channels between home and school are critical steps in overcoming distance-related barriers (Balabanian, 2020).

The sixth response includes limited awareness among some parents about the importance of education as a challenge that can hinder learner's persistence. Parents who do not fully understand the value of education may not prioritize their child's academic engagement (Elbaum et al., 2016). Schools need to actively involve parents by organizing workshops, information campaigns, and partnering with community organizations to overcome this challenge. Indeed, parental awareness and involvement play a crucial role in supporting learners' persistence. Schools should strive to improve parental awareness by organizing workshops, information campaigns, and partnering with community organizations to emphasize the importance of education and provide parents with the necessary resources

to support their children's learning (Elbaum et al., 2016). It is essential to recognize that limited parental awareness can be influenced by various factors, such as cultural beliefs, language barriers, and socioeconomic conditions (World Health Organization, 2019). Parent #2 (mother) highlighted the lack of from certain parents when it comes to contributing to school supplies, stating, "What I see as the problem is not coming from the school. The problem lies in the cooperation of other parents who could contribute according to their capabilities, specifically for water and bond papers needed by the children in school".

Tailoring outreach efforts and interventions to the specific needs and contexts of the community is crucial for effectively addressing this challenge and promoting learner's persistence. Engaging parents and guardians in discussions about school security can help raise awareness and build a collective commitment to ensuring the safety of students. Encouraging parents to participate in safety committees or volunteer programs can also contribute to implementing and monitoring security measures (World Health Organization, 2019).

The seventh concern is insufficient school security, which is crucial for promoting effective learning and academic persistence. Inadequate security measures can have a negative impact on students, underscoring the importance of prioritizing student welfare (Wang et al., 2020). "Parent #4 (mother) expressed concerns about the school's security, stating, "There is no problem in availing free education at the school. My only concern is the security of the children since there is no security guard. The school is located along the road, and I worry that the children might wander off or someone unauthorized might enter the premises". Collaborating with local law enforcement, community organizations, and government bodies can provide additional support and expertise in addressing school security challenges. Sharing best practices, conducting risk assessments, and implementing comprehensive security measures can create a secure and conducive environment that enhances learners' ability to focus on their studies (Wang et al., 2020).

Involving parents and guardians in discussions about school security can help raise awareness and build a collective commitment to ensuring student safety (Kutsyuruba et al., 2015). Encouraging their participation in safety committees or volunteer programs can also contribute to monitoring and implementing security measures. To address insufficient school security, educational institutions should prioritize student safety, implement comprehensive security measures, and foster a positive school climate (Kutsyuruba et al., 2015). It is crucial to tailor security measures to the specific needs and context of the school community while considering local regulations and guidelines. Regular evaluation and adjustments to security protocols are also essential to adapt to evolving safety concerns and ensure a continuously secure learning environment (Wang et al., 2020).

4. Conclusions

This study highlights the need for a multidimensional approach to address the challenges faced by learners in a free basic education program. The challenges identified, including

distance and accessibility, family responsibilities, lack of motivation, insufficient support and guidance, and poor classroom ventilation, require a comprehensive intervention strategy that involves the collaboration of various stakeholders, including the government, school authorities, parents, and the community. The involvement of these stakeholders is necessary to provide a holistic and sustainable solution to address the challenges and support learners in their academic pursuits.

Overall, this study emphasizes the significance of understanding learners' needs and challenges in a free basic education program, and the importance of collaborative efforts to address those challenges for the benefit of learners' academic success and development.

Based on the results of the study, the following recommendations were proposed for the school, and for further academic research.

For the private school, the following recommendations were proposed:

Hiring and retaining high-quality teachers. The school should prioritize hiring and retaining high-quality teachers who are supportive and committed to helping students succeed. This can be achieved through competitive compensation and benefits packages, professional development opportunities, and a positive work environment.

Creating a welcoming learning environment. The school should strive to create a welcoming and inclusive learning environment that promotes student engagement, motivation, and academic success. This can be achieved through the implementation of positive discipline practices, the promotion of student voice and agency, and the establishment of a supportive and respectful school culture.

Addressing the challenges faced by learners. The school should develop a comprehensive intervention strategy to address the challenges faced by learners, including distance and accessibility, family responsibilities, lack of motivation, insufficient support and guidance, and poor classroom ventilation. This strategy should involve the collaboration of various stakeholders, including the government, school authorities, parents, and the community.

Future research may consider the experiences of learners in different regions and contexts to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities associated with free basic education programs.

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The authors declare no conflicting interests.

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