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Explaining the Low Primary School Performance in the Rural District of Black River, Mauritius: A Teacher's Perspective

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Abstract

Pass rates at the end of primary schooling for the rural district of Black River are alarming as they have remained at a low level over many years. This research seeks to explain the situation from a teacher's perspective and to unveil the causes which persistently hamper student progress. Statistics show that children in Black River are on a par with their counterparts in other rural and urban areas in respect to access to school facilities, qualified teachers, and provision of pedagogical materials and learning tools. This study shows that students' motivation, follow-up of learning at home and parents' involvement in children's studies are at an unacceptable level and require urgent consideration. The last two determinants were found to be positively related but the correlation coefficient is not very high ($r = 0.518$). Analysis also points to the low and inadequate level of pre-primary education of children when they enter primary schools, and to the difficulties of teachers in educating children with social problems. One seminal finding of this research study is that, without sustained parent/community support and encouragement, learning performance of students in the Black River region is unlikely to improve. This finding is in agreement with the results of many studies reported previously in the literature. Respondents made some valuable suggestions for remedying the situation, the most important one being the need to implement community-based strategies to encourage parents and the surrounding community to support the education of children.

Keywords: Certificate of Primary Education (CPE), teachers, parents, community, school performance

Introduction

Mauritius is economically ahead of most African countries as it has a relatively high GNP per capita. With 12.5 % of its total expenditure dedicated to education, the country is well poised to provide education to all in congenial conditions. In fact it has one of

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the highest literacy rates in Africa - predicted to reach 90% by 2015 (UNESCO, 2007). Schools are close to children's homes in most cases.

Black River lies along the east coast of the island of Mauritius and occupies 14% of the land. However, only 4% of primary school students live there and many of them come from poor families (Statistics Mauritius, 2012). Despite recent economic development of the region, the stark reality is that primary education there remains at an alarmingly low level, as measured by the end of primary school examination, the Certificate of Primary Education (CPE). The pass rate has stagnated at around 42% for the last five years, with some schools going as far down as 20%. Compared to other areas in the country, Black River has shown the poorest performance in CPE (MES, 2009-2011). Analysis of CPE performance of individual schools shows that some rural schools do better than some urban or suburban schools. However, remote-rural and coastal-rural schools in general perform less well than urban ones. Data show that the average pass rate for the 17 government schools of Black River was 40.5% in 2011 which was well below the average of 69.75% for other rural schools in the country.

Data from Mauritius Statistics (2012) also show that many indicators which are important determinants of successful schools, e.g., pupil/teacher and pupil/computer ratios and number of students per school, are actually on the high side for Black River schools. Thus the reasons for the poor performance of Black River schools require investigation. Set in the context as described above, this paper intends to explore two main research questions: What are the most influential factors causing the poor school performance in Black River district? And what remedial actions can be taken to overcome any flaws in the system?

Little Progress in the Black River Area

The urge for rural transformation is a worldwide concern as half of the world's population lives in rural areas and 70 % of the world's poor live there (Gustafsson & Gasperini, 2011). But how is the term rural defined? Bhola (2011) contends that there are challenges to re-define what rural condition means in our times. Concerning Mauritius, the three most applicable characteristics of rural area as defined by the FAO-UNESCO monograph (Bhola, 2011, p. 11) are "a space where human settlement and infrastructure occupy only a small share of the landscape; natural environment dominated by pastures, forests, mountains and deserts; settlements of low density (about 5 – 10000 persons)" (p. 11). Technically rural areas are a reality of Mauritius; in fact 58.2% of the population lives in these areas, but the country can boast to have wiped out major differences between the urban and the rural areas, offering nearly the same learning opportunities to all children of the island. However the disparity in learning performance between the urban and some rural schools has not disappeared altogether and Black River remains the district where the difference is the most obvious.

Education is the gateway to the world of work. Employment with a decent income in turn positions people at increasing levels of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, which breeds enjoyment and personal satisfaction. Successful education is one that is nurtured right at primary level and prolonged in later years through lifelong learning. In this regard, Chinapah (1983, p. 161) wrote that scholastic performance of children at the end of the primary education cycle is decisive for their further education and is affected by many factors other than the availability of school facilities.

A study carried out by the Mauritius Examinations Syndicate (MES, 1991) revealed a number of vital findings with regards to the comparison of CPE performance for students from urban, rural, and coastal rural schools. The study highlighted the alarming situation of primary education in coastal rural areas whereby the latter lagged behind academically as compared to urban and rural areas. It mentioned the urgent need for proper diagnosis and remediation so as to enable students in these regions to remain in the main stream of education as coastal pupils constituted the weakest link in our educational system. It also drew attention to the relatively low socio-economic status of students in these regions and the low level of pupil involvement. More than twenty years down the road, the MES Examinations Statistics (2009, 2010, 2011) testified that the situation has hardly improved despite incentives and remedial actions taken. Government has invested massively in all schools with a positive discrimination approach to those located in the highly affected areas, including monetary incentives to the teaching staff, yet CPE pass rate has hardly improved. There is thus more to unveil than just the provision of schools endowed with physical resources, posting of qualified and trained teachers and effective management as determinants of successful education.

It is vital to evaluate if the culprits identified by the MES study some 20 years ago still survive and are keeping the system suffocating. This paper will probe into the causes of this chaotic situation, especially from the teachers' perspective, given that teachers are major stakeholders of the educational process. Hopefully it will fuel the debate for an even more pragmatic approach to leveling education in this region. This research paper works in line with goal no. 2 of the millennium development goals (The Millennium Development Goals, 2012) which seeks to ensure that by 2015, children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling. It focuses mostly on indicator 2.2 which aims at increasing the proportion of pupils starting grade 1 who reach last the grade of primary level. Before going to this particular issue, the paper discusses the experiences of other countries in bringing rural transformation through education.

Rural Transformation Through Education: Experiences of Other Countries

Research shows that much has already been achieved to enable rural transformation through education. In China, the Wulimiao's case (Wei & Qifu, 2011) showed that carrying out digital learning among farmers improved quality of farming and developed the rural

economy. In India, Khirwadkar and Mogera (2011) made a plea for the incorporation of ICT for transforming rural communities. Is there a possibility through ICT mediation to develop the digital learning habits of the community/parents in Black River? Such achievements are instigating to investigate how learning performance could be enhanced to bring the necessary and desired transformation.

According to Sujatha (2011), the concept of successful schools in Philippines encompasses both academic, managerial, school environment and motivational aspects as well as relationship with the community. These aspects probably transcend the frontiers of Philippines and are more universal. The Coleman report (Gamoran & Long, 2006) more than 46 years ago discovered that the impact of school resources on student achievement was modest compared to the impact of students' family backgrounds, and the following quote was even suggested "Schools make no difference. Families make the difference".

The five defining components (Figure 1) of a successful learning experience are the students, the teachers, the school administration, school facilities (logistics and pedagogical materials) and the parents/community. If school facilities are excluded from the equation, since all schools of the island are endowed with the same facilities, then investigating the impact of the remaining components should shed some light on what causes CPE performance to remain so low.

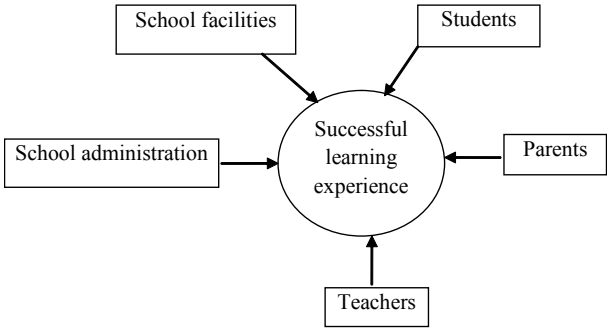

Figure 1. Components of successful learning.

Chinapah (1983, p. 163) concluded that variation in children's scholastic performance is a function of the specific conditions of learning at home and in school. Undoubtedly a child's education rests on two major pillars; learning which takes place at school and at home, these two being obligatory complementing (Figure 2).

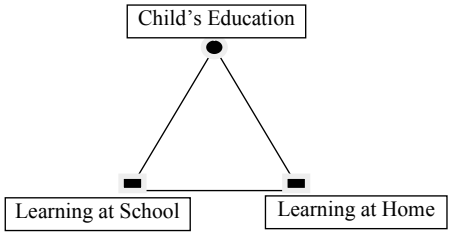

Figure 2. Education: A mix of home and school learning.

This research study runs on the strong belief that by identifying the flaws of the system and enabling the appropriate processes, we can envisage strategies that will gradually increase the percentage of children who successfully complete primary schooling.

Methodology

Understanding and assessing children's learning difficulties is a rather complex and multi-pronged task. A thorough study would necessitate the collaboration of all actors of the scenario. For the purpose of this research, the views of teachers as major stakeholders of the educational process were sought. A questionnaire was distributed to 80 of them working in half of the schools of the region. The questions were grouped into five main sections to collect opinions and views related to the student, teacher, school and parent. The last section prompted teachers to opine on the various remedial actions that could be implemented to address the flaws of the system. A first draft of the questionnaire was discussed with various members of the school staff to decide on the appropriateness of the question items and their proper formulation. The final version was then distributed to the teachers.

Furthermore to triangulate the data responses, semi-structured interviews were conducted with different staff either on the phone or in person. The list encompasses head masters, school clerks, community workers, teachers and the president of a parents-teachers association. The mix of both quantitative and qualitative approaches was adopted to provide a rich array of views and opinions, using the former approach to probe further into some of the responses provided in the questionnaires.

Data Analysis

Seventy set of questionnaires were successfully completed and returned by teachers from 9 different government schools, representing more than 50% of schools in that region. Female teachers represented 62.4%. Fifty three percent of teachers were below 35 years. Their average teaching experience was 12 years; however, 42% of teachers had less than 5 years of experience. Thus qualifying teachers in that region were relatively young and averagely experienced. As regards to their academic qualification, most teachers (93%) had at least the Higher School Certificate and 80% had a diploma as teaching qualification. The analysis that follows reveals the opinions of teachers on numerous factors which have a bearing on CPE performance.

Student Related Factors

Students in Black River district lack motivation for learning. Ninety four percent teachers believe this is true. If motivation is lacking then one important prerequisite for learning to take place successfully is unmet. This is probably related to the support students receive at home for their learning. According to the respondents, students (99%)

in that region are not supported in their learning by their parents such that the education process stops at the school's gate. Absenteeism and negative peer pressure are significant contributors to low CPE performance as opined by around 80% of the teachers.

Another contributing factor to low CPE performance is the homogeneity of the students attending these schools. This is what 80% of teachers have observed. Chinapah (1983, p. 167) posited that the integration of children from a broader range of ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds should be maintained. When students come from different socio-economic groups, the interaction between them provides processes and opportunities for the low income students to catch up and enhance their learning potential. There is mutual encouragement and the net effect is progress. Unfortunately this homogeneity in Black River based on most children coming from the low socioeconomic background does not allow these processes to take place.

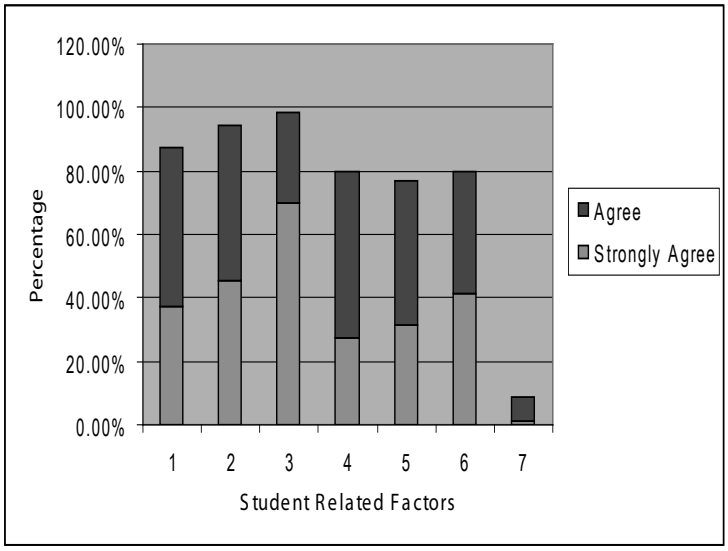

Figure 5. Students related factors.

1- Low level of pre-primary education when joining primary school
2- Lack of students' motivation for learning
3- Poor follow-up of learning activities at home
4- Students' absenteeism
5- Negative peer pressure
6- Most students come from nearly the same poor socio-economic group
7- Traveling distance to school

Black River district is the less densely populated district and schools are more sparsely located. Thus students have to travel greater distances to school. Surprisingly teachers did not rate this element as contributive to low CPE performance.

Teacher Related Factors

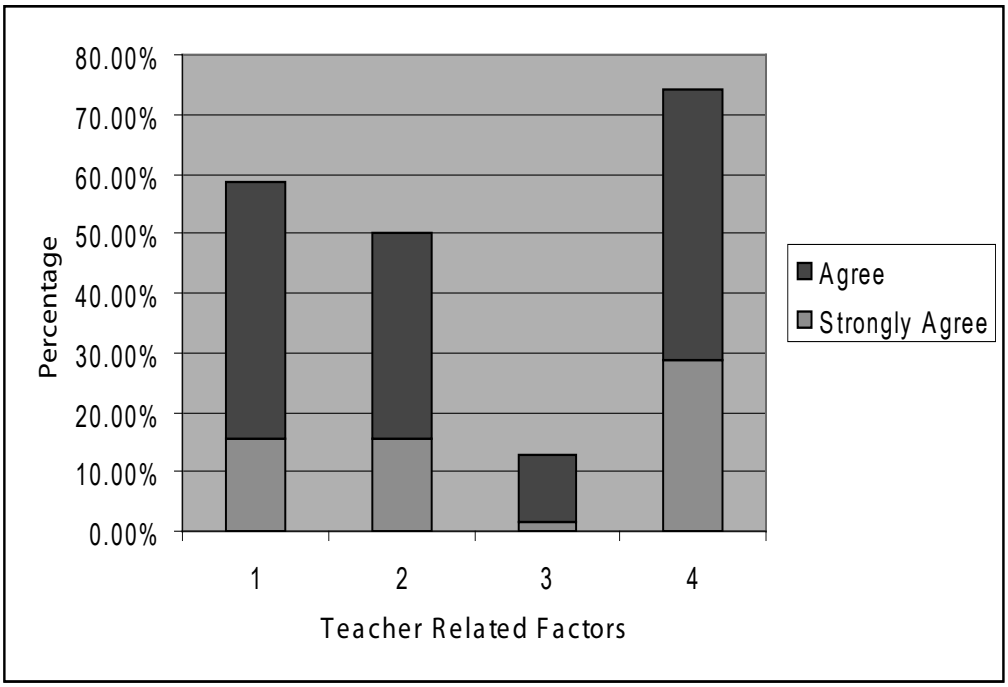

Figure 6. Teacher related factors.

1- Teachers need additional training and empowerment to work in this area
2- Teachers are not so motivated when working in such low performing schools
3- Teachers' absenteeism
4- Teachers have to travel long distances to school.

Respondents had to rate four items (see the notes in Figure 6) and the most influential factor is the long distance travelled by the teachers to school. Data showed that teachers on average traveled a distance of 21 kilometres to school, with 25% of them travelling more than 30 kilometres. This serious concern was also raised during the personal interviews. Very few teachers live in the region, so that most of them have to travel long distances, mostly from urban areas. Hence, it is necessary to prepare local teachers. This can be achieved only by boosting the education level of the population in the district. Some 60% of teachers pointed out that there is the need for additional training and empowerment to work in this area. Once again, this remark emerged during the personal interviews to highlight that teachers be empowered to deal with students reaching schools drown in their social ills, like missing breakfast, broken families, poverty and lack of parent's support.

Fifty percent teachers agreed that they are lacking motivation to work there; this being probably related to the long distances they travel to work and the lack of students' motivation to learning.

School Related Factors

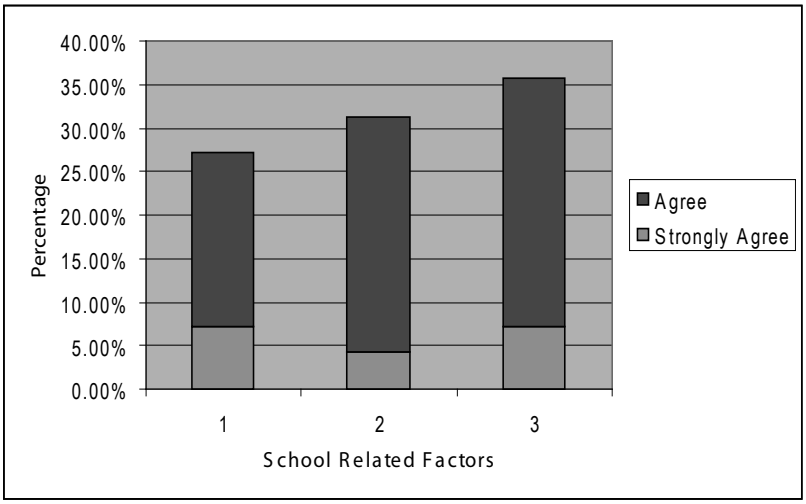

Figure 7. School related factors.

1- Poor school environment (Cleanliness, noise pollution, …)

2- Inconvenient classroom environment (Temperature, furniture, …)

3- Lack of extra-curricular activities

Are school conditions responsible for low CPE pass rate? From the analysis of the three items related to school factors it appears that most teachers are not of that opinion. With this, it can be said that schools in Black river district are comparatively in better situations compared to other local contexts.

Parent Related Factors

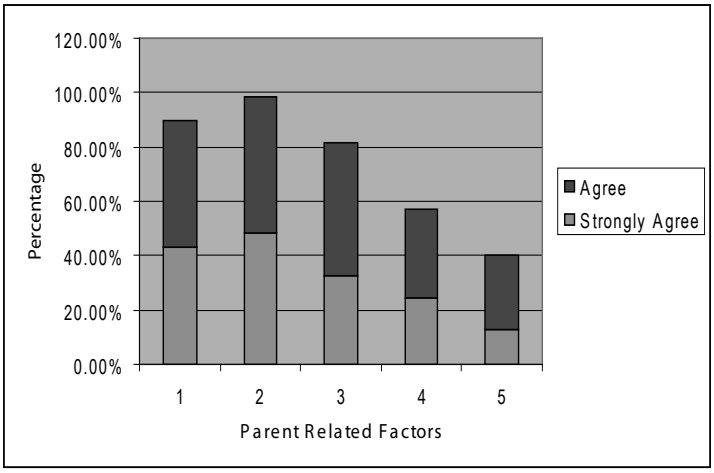

Figure 8. Parent related factors.

1- Parents' restricted level of education
2- Lack of involvement in child's studies
3- Financial difficulties and instability
4- Cannot afford computer and internet facilities
5- Cannot afford tuition

Dempster (2013) wrote that a great education starts with parents who know how dramatic their influence is on the architecture of the minds and bodies of their children. More than 80% teachers agree on three parent-related items as strong causes of low CPE pass rate, namely the lack of parents' involvement in children's studies, their restricted level of education and their difficult financial situation. This analysis situates the high responsibility and contribution of parents to the education of their children. Forty six years down the road, Coleman's observation (Gamoran & Long, 2006) holds up remarkably well for Black River. Chinapah (1983) mentioned that various studies had pinpointed that a child's home background is more important than his school environment in predicting his scholastic performance. Through this research analysis, teachers are confirming that so many years down the road, the same culprit is identified once again and it has more to do with families/communities rather than with the school. So the most imminent area of intervention if we want to witness a boost in CPE performance is parent/community related and not so much related to the school.

A good 57% teachers were of the opinion that the lack of access to computer technology had something to do with low school performance. This analysis is particularly revelatory as regards to the belief of teachers that ICT can bring added value to the process of education in schools.

Proposed Remedial Actions

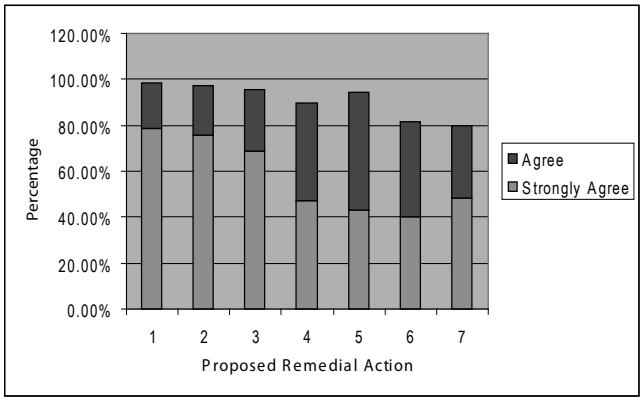

Figure 9. Remedial actions.

1- Promote parents' awareness of the importance of education
2- Sensitize students of the importance of education

3- Conduct remedial classes for students with inadequate or no prior pre- primary education right at Standard I

4- Enhance the learning environment; make classroom and school more learner-friendly

5- Use computers and other technological tools to help students to learn differently

6- Shift from the teacher-centred to learner-centred education

7- Empower teaching staff with more experienced teachers to work in these schools

The respondents' views were also sought on those remedial actions they considered would bring significant improvement in the learning performance of children.

At least 80% of the teachers agreed on all of the seven proposed remedial actions, with promoting parental awareness of the importance of education topping the list. The second ranked action relates to sensitizing students on the importance of education which relates to the affective domain of learning through motivated endeavours. The need to conduct remedial classes for those children who join school with inadequate or no pre-primary education was also highly rated by teachers. Also high on the list is the belief of teachers that technology-based learning tools are congenial for learning to take place.

While this list is certainly not exhaustive, it offers the most recommended remedial actions rated by teachers to improve learning in the rural district of Black River. So the community at large, starting with parents, is largely responsible for the learning performance of children. This issue was more than once raised in the personal interviews. Numerous research studies describe the contribution of the community to the learning process as determining. According to Li (2011), rural community participation is an important aspect of rural transformation.

Some Important Correlation Factors

From Table 1 we note some rather moderate ($r = 0.35$) ($r = 0.47$) positive correlation between parents' lack of involvement in children's studies and parents' restricted level of education, lack of students' motivation for learning and poor follow-up of learning activities at home. Rather high positive relationship ($r= 0.52$) is between parent's lack of involvement in their children's studies and poor follow-up of learning activities at home. This is evident that when parents are not interested and involved in the education of the children, they consequently do not extend the necessary learning support to children at home. The motivational aspect of learning for the children thus takes a serious blow.

Table 1
Correlation Factors

	Parents' lack of involvement in children's studies
Lack of students' motivation for learning	0.349
Poor follow-up of learning activities at home	0.518
Parents' restricted level of education	0.468

The analytical framework (Figure 10) shows the relationship between some key parent-related determinants of children's education. It can be noted that a serious impact comes from parents' lack of involvement in their children's education; affecting both the latter's motivation to learn and learning support at home.

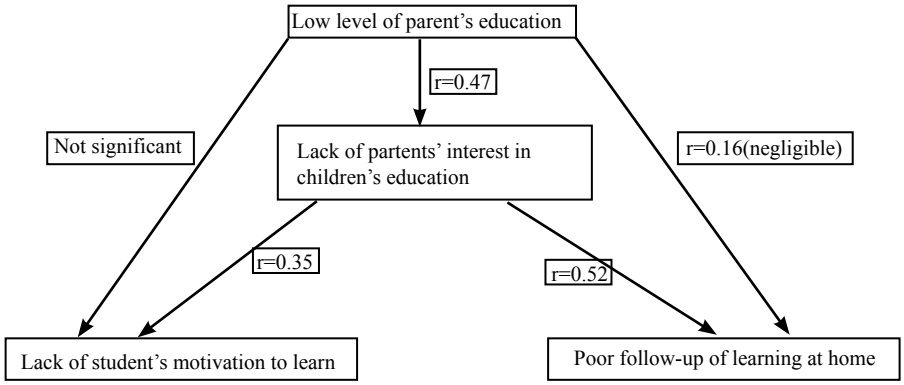

Figure 10. Correlating parents' impact on children's education.

Analysis also reveals that although parents' level of education can be an influential factor in children's education, it is yet not as significant as the lack of interest and involvement in their children's studies. A number of parents in other rural areas also have limited education, yet their children in general perform better in these areas. So there is more to parents' level of education when it comes to their contribution to the children's education, and interest in their studies, coupled with support for learning to continue at home.

Major Outcomes of the Personal Interviews

Some surprising remarks have been made by ten stakeholders including school staff, community workers and the president of a parent's teachers association, who were interviewed. Following points summarize the salient remarks by them and which to a large extent triangulate with the opinions collected through the questionnaires.

1. The home environment is often not conducive and congenial for learning to continue at home. Some children do not even have a learning corner at home.
2. Many parents in that region demonstrate a low level of education and unfortunately this often affects their involvement in the children's education. When the parents do not realize the importance of education, they fail to inculcate these learning values in their children. At times it is not because they do not want to, but they do not know how to, themselves having been victims of such a situation when they were children.
3. A number of students join primary schools with limited or no preprimary education, due to poverty or family problems. It was also proposed that remedial

actions should be implemented in lower classes where there is greater chance to redress the situation.

4. Interviewees believed that the system hardly addresses the multiple intelligences of children. The importance to recognize these multiple intelligences were raised in the sense that these so called "underperformers" are in fact talented in other areas like arts, music or sports. It was also explained how some students can be innovative and argumentative when having to justify their behaviour, good or bad.
5. Children lack the motivation for learning and they rarely see role models in their living environment to emulate. Surprisingly one head teacher even mentioned that "*Some pupils want to fail. It's success for them*."
6. Some teachers easily get demotivated when working with low performing students who themselves are often demotivated, indisciplined, and ill-equipped to embrace learning activities. Making matters worse is the added burden that teachers have to travel long distances to work. Working in regions far from home is often considered by some teachers as a punitive transfer. Few teachers come from the surrounding regions of the school. There is even the belief that the less performing teachers are sent to these schools.
7. Because parents work and have to leave home early, children are often left on their own to prepare for schools. They either stay at home or go to school ill-prepared, without a proper breakfast and appropriate learning materials. Back home some of them are given other responsibilities like looking after siblings or doing housekeeping, while parents are still away at work.
8. The socio-economic status of many parents is very low. Often fathers do not have a permanent and reliable job and earn a living on a daily or weekly basis only. Associated with this practice is the belief that there is no hope for the children to make it in life.
9. Another important point raised by a number of respondents relates to the homogeneity of the social status of the students. Many of them come from the same ethnic and economically poor stratum of the society. When students come from different social, ethnic and economic groups, there is greater chance that those at the lowest end of the education ladder will rise to higher levels, being positively influenced by their more able peers.
10. The effects of domestic violence, in some cases starting at pregnancy, have been highlighted by a few participants. Early pregnancy was also mentioned as a major cause of high CPE failures.
11. It is recognized that teachers working in these difficult areas need more than pedagogy to perform well; they need to be empowered to deal with social ills which their students have to face every day, like missing breakfast, domestic

violence, broken families, poverty, absence of a conducive learning environment at home, and lack of appropriate clothing and foot wear. Most teachers are not trained to address these issues within a classroom setup and often let go, only to find a large percentage of students striving for a decent learning experience.

12. If parents were identified as key players on children's educational playground, intervention as explained by some interviewees should transcend the organization of educational awareness programs and embrace community transformation for sustained support to the young learning community. Once again community involvement was rated quite high on the scale to positively influence education of the young generation.
13. In a country where private tuition has proved to be a necessary evil for those who want to succeed, respondents pointed out that poverty deprives many children of this additional input which could have enhanced their learning opportunities.

Conclusions

This research was carried out against the backdrop that CPE pass rates in the coastal rural district of Black River compare miserably with pass rates in other rural areas despite the fact that the region enjoys equal educational opportunities in terms of school access, pupil-teacher ratio and provision of pedagogical materials and learning tools. This confirms that children's education is not simply a function of these factors.

In this study, a set of questionnaire was given to teachers in the Black River district and seventy teachers responded with their views on the factors causing this alarming situation of low CPE pass rates. The single most telling fact from this survey is that parents in Black River show little or no interest in their children's studies. Consequently there is hardly any follow-up of learning at home and children lack the necessary motivation to study. The relationship between these two factors is supported by a positive Pearson Correlation value of 0.52.

A second finding of this research is that many children join primary school with inadequate pre-primary education and thus are not as prepared as other students to undertake primary education successfully.

The homogeneity of the ethnic group of the majority of students attending these schools was shown to have a strong bearing on the school performance. Because most children come from poor families and have the same socio-economic and ethnic background, there was little chance for the mutual uplift that can occur through the sharing of life values and learning motives which usually happens when children come from varied socio-economic and ethnic groups.

More than 50% of the teachers who responded to the questionnaire did not hesitate to express their lack of motivation to work in the Black River schools and with their inability

to satisfy the pedagogical needs of the children in their classes because of the societal problems of the children.

The major remedial actions recommended by the teachers in this study to improve the situation are as follows. The most urgent action required is the sensitization of parents and the community at large to the importance of education as a pathway to social progress. An increased use of ICT has the potential to improve the learning of the children. This is based on the fact that technology is already facilitating the learning process and its affordability makes it an accessible option for transforming rural education.

Although much has been achieved in trying to provide a level playing field for all children of the island, this paper underscores the fact that there is still a long way to go. The system cannot permit thousands of Mauritian children to miss out on their right to education only because of where they are born or who their family is. Children who leave school with a poor education lack the basic skills they need to succeed in life. We urgently need to put in place mechanisms to protect the poor and vulnerable and thus to help build societies that combat inequality, so that all may benefit and prosper. Education is fundamental to sustainable development. We should continue to vigorously advocate increased investment in ICT tools for education. The education of vulnerable groups is at stake and we cannot take the risk of allowing this situation to continue. It is therefore necessary for us to reconsider our strategies so that we can develop more inclusive approaches which will protect vulnerable groups and help to overcome inequality.

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