Investigating Factors Impacting School Completion Rates Among Boys in Serrekunda, The Gambia: A Qualitative Case Study

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Abstract

This study explores factors contributing to the rising school dropout rates and irregular migration among schoolboys in Serrekunda, The Gambia. The data was collected through semi-structured virtual interviews with key stakeholders in the Gambia and the United States, using qualitative research design. Guided by a research question, the findings reveal that poverty, peer influence, and social pressures contribute to high dropout rates among boys. The findings emphasize the need for an integrative approach addressing socio-economic, educational, and cultural factors to empower boys with skills, knowledge, and opportunities for socio-economic advancement within their communities.

Key words: Poverty; Peer influence; Boys' education; Irregular migration; Dropout rates; Mentoring

1. INTRODUCTION

Citizens' access to quality education and completion rates are requisites for economic growth and national development. The school system is pivotal to Gambians' access to formal education in rural and urban communities. Although there has been an increase in school enrollment figures and parity in access to basic education between boys and girls in the Gambia (United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 2015), the same cannot be said concerning school completion rates for boys and girls. The United Nations Report (2014) on Gambia's progress towards implementing the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) indicated that the net attendance ratio declined marginally from 74.5% in 2012 to 73.4% in 2013. Similarly, there has been a further decline in school completion rates at higher levels of education, with fewer children completing lower secondary education (46%) and completing secondary education (29%) in areas such as Serrekunda, Kanifing, and Brikama (UNICEF OOSCI Report, 2017). Socioeconomic and cultural factors such as poverty, irregular migration, and early marriage have been attributed to increased school dropout figures in the Gambia (Chant & Jones, 2005; Awosusi et al., 2020).

Efforts to improve literacy and school completion rates for girls have made the Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education (MoBSE) introduce an intervention known as 'Second Chance Education' to accommodate women and girls to access formal education (Olagbaju, 2020; Keita & Lee, 2022). The initiative is to equip girls with skills that improve their employability and literacy. However, the Gambia National Study on Out-Of-School Children (2017) showed that Gambian children, especially the boys, enrolled in schools within the urban centers do not complete their schooling because they often abandon schooling to pursue other interests. Percentages on school enrollment and completion rates in the Gambia show that the out-of-school children in the urban centers are higher than those in the rural areas and the margin is even greater between boys and girls, with only 65% of boys between 15 to 17 years completing primary education in the Gambia (UNICEF OOSCI, 2017).

Similarly, the National Study on Out-of-School Children in the Gambia (2017) reported that 41,276

children comprising 19,085 females and 22,191 males dropped out of school before reaching the final class of secondary school education in Serrekunda metropolis. The strategic location of Serrekunda as an economic nerve center of the Gambia with business activities and a thriving tourism industry creates a distraction for students, especially the boys who are often lured out of school to engage in petty crimes or work as tour guides for tourists (Jobarteh, 2022). The map below shows the proximity of Serrekunda to Banjul and the beautiful beaches which make it the economic nerve center and a tourist hub of the Gambia.

Figure 1
Map of The Gambia

Source: Google Maps

As shown in Figure 1 above, Gambia is a small country in West Africa, and the land mass extends almost 300 miles. The country is shaped like a long strip of land within Senegal. Irregular migration in the Gambia cannot be dissociated from the influence of the nation's tourism industry. The influx of tourists has exposed school-aged children in Serrekunda to the flamboyant lifestyles of tourists and monetary gratification as returns for errands. The implication of this is high rates of school avoidance and truancy among schoolboys in Serrekunda metropolis.

Camara and Hunt (2018) reasoned that these youths assume that life is better in Europe, and they would abandon their schooling to pursue the 'backway' to Europe. Most of these young travelers, mostly school-aged boys, are self-trafficked because they willingly drop out of school to pay agents to take them to Europe through the 'backway'. Several socioeconomic and cultural barriers hinder boys' access to and success in formal education in the Gambia. Bah and Batista (2019) and Awosusi et al. (2021) lament the growing number of irregular Gambian immigrants to Europe and the consequences of the rising dropout figures in Gambia including high rates of illiteracy among the youths, drug or substance abuse, and steady rise in criminal activities.

Feedback from the literature suggests the need for a policy change in the Gambia; especially in the educational sector, if boys' school completion rates in urban areas will improve. Figure 1 shows that Gambia has a coastal line which serves as a point of entry for goods and offers a gateway to the desperate youths, mostly boys who would dare to embark on the treacherous journey to Europe through the Mediterranean even at the cost of dropping out of school. Scholars and public opinion commentators in the Gambia have called for major changes to address this problem. Such changes must begin from the content of the school curriculum to dissuade boys from abandoning their education to embark on irregular or desperate journeys through the 'backway'. In addition, there is a need for synergy between the school, family, community, and other government agencies to ensure that boys remain in school to complete their education. Therefore, the imperatives of conducting best practice research to keep boys in school and fight irregular 'backway' migration in the Gambia cannot be overemphasized.

2. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Boys in urban centers, particularly in Serrekunda, are often compelled to leave school to support their families, working as tourist guides. This exposure to tourists' luxurious lifestyles diverts their focus from education. Even during the off-peak tourism season, many boys display irregular attendance, misbehavior, and poor academic engagement. Parental support for migration, seen as an investment for future remittances, exacerbates

this issue (Bah & Batista, 2019). Investigating the factors responsible for low school completion rates and irregular migration in the Gambia is important to plan a multifaceted best practice intervention involving schools, communities, and government agencies to enhance monitoring, behavior regulation, career education, and parental involvement. Therefore, this study examines the factors that impact school completion among boys in the Gambia.

3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

What factors impact school completion rates among boys in Serrekunda metropolis of the Gambia?

4. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK - THE SOCIAL COGNITIVE THEORY (SCT)

The theory posits that changes in people's behavior occur within a complex and dynamic social context through mutual interaction of the individual, a model, and the environment. The SCT focuses on unique ways people develop, acquire, or exhibit new behaviors within a social environment through previous experiences. The theory explains how people self-regulate through observation, imitation, and motivation to attain goal-directed behavior. Bandura emphasized the importance of modeling and observation in learning. According to Bandura (1999), the process of observation in learning should involve attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation. The theory seeks to develop self-efficacious, practice-based, and influence-driven learning through models. SCT is relevant to this study because the best practices developed will foster a behavioral change, improve school completion rates, and fight irregular migration among school-aged boys in Serrekunda metropolis of The Gambia.

5. LITERATURE REVIEW

Most of the literature reviewed relied on studies that have identified some strategies and programs that have proven to be effective in reducing school dropout rates and increasing school completion rates in other parts of the world, which are worth adapting to the situation in The Gambia. This study seeks to determine factors that can contribute to keeping boys in school and fighting irregular migration in the Gambia. Parsley (2021) conducted qualitative research to identify effective ways of teaching boys in all-boys, independent schools in Virginia. Data was collected through a survey and analyzed to determine the effectiveness or impact of the instructional teaching practices used by teachers in all-boys schools. The study found that activity-based lessons or hands-on approaches, modeling, and interactive learning are effective

instructional practices for teaching boys.

Weaver-Hightower (2003) reported a paradigm shift in gender research from the traditional interest in girls' education to factors such as academic achievement, social outcomes, schooling experiences, and school completion rates of boys in the United States. The "boy turn" research emphasized the importance of gender balance in promoting equal learning opportunities for boys and girls. Research in boys' education has demonstrated huge gains in areas such as improving academic achievement, managing behaviors, and recognizing the role of learner-related variables like race, culture, and socioeconomic status.

Apart from the instructional strategy engaged by the teacher, factors such as the school climate, class size, and class atmosphere have been found to contribute to boys'/students' school completion rates. The Bridge Program was implemented and evaluated by the Independence School District of Jackson County, Missouri (Independence School District 2020). The intervention was designed to support at-risk students such as a smaller classroom environment, customized academic plan, post-graduation focused curriculum, use of graduation coaches, and credit recovery to keep them in school and ensure they complete their education. The findings showed that the attitude of the participants in the experimental groups to their schoolwork significantly improved; they also became more confident and recorded improvement in their grades.

The interventions provided through the Bridge Program in the Independence School District align with the findings of Olagbaju and Nnorom (2019) and Rumberger et al. (2017) on the effectiveness of having smaller class sizes and customizing boys' academic plans through themes that are career-focused on future employment opportunities. Common predictors of school dropout include poor or inconsistent school attendance, misbehavior, and poor academic performance. Effective school-based interventions include monitoring, mentoring, and support. To support at-risk students, Rumberger et al. (2017) suggest that schools and teachers conduct routine collection, organization, and analyses of data to identify students who miss school, have behavior problems, or have poor grades. Efforts should be intensified by stakeholders to monitor students' progress and support before students become disoriented and drop out of school.

In the Gambia, irregular migration has become a social problem within the community, and this requires a community-participatory approach. According to UNHCR (2011), best practices in community-participatory interventions aimed at fighting irregular migration should focus on so many factors. For example, the choice of language should be simple and sensitive to the gender, age, and culture of the community or target population. The community-participatory interventions should include

awareness-raising activities on the plights of irregular migrants and the legal implications of unauthorized or undocumented entry and stay in the country of transit or destination (UNHCR, 2011). Tyrer and Fazel (2014) reported that school-based interventions are effective in helping children overcome difficulties associated with forced migration.

Similarly, Tjaden and Gninafon (2022) investigated the effect of awareness about the risks associated with irregular migration on intentions, perceptions, and knowledge among potential irregular migrants in rural areas of Northern Guinea. The study adopted a quasi-experimental research design using the difference-in-difference approach to evaluate the effectiveness of the program. The study reported that potential migrants in the experimental group showed more awareness gains and were significantly less likely to migrate irregularly. According to Browne (2015), the impact of communication campaigns to deter irregular migration is significant when the intervention is planned to disseminate accurate information and educate on the risks associated with irregular migration, trafficking of persons, and smuggling. The best practices for fighting irregular migration discussed in the preceding paragraphs have shown evidence-based interventions that can be effective in curbing the rise in school dropout rates among school-aged boys in Serrekunda metropolis, The Gambia.

Dropping out of school is often gradual, and addressing such a problem requires a systematic approach. Several studies have established that dropping out of school is a process and not accidental because there are early signs that can predict if a child will drop out or complete his or her education (Kassner et al., 2020). Therefore, schools need to establish an effective system to keep their students in school and check truancy or absenteeism. According to Rumberger et al. (2017), the four-step school-driven interventions to effectively prevent school dropout include: (1) Monitor the progress of all students and proactively intervene when students show early signs of attendance, behavior, or academic problems. (2) Provide intensive, individualized support to students who have fallen off track and face significant challenges to success. (3) Engage students by offering curricula and programs that connect schoolwork with college and career success and that improve students' capacity to manage challenges in and out of school. (4) For schools with many at-risk students, create small, personalized communities to facilitate monitoring and support.

A good school climate fosters high school attendance for students, particularly for boys because it makes them come to school more regularly, stay in school, and complete their education. Jia et al (2016) investigated the relationship between school-wide measures of an authoritative school climate and high school dropout rates in 315 high schools. When the school climate is perceived

as being consistently passive towards acts of bullying, indiscipline, and the monitoring of students, this can lead to truancy, a drop in students' grades, and eventual dropping out of school. According to a study conducted by Townsend et al (2008), bullying behavior within the school predicts high school dropout in Cape Town, South Africa. Neild et al. (2015) reported a positive effect of school-driven programs on improving school completion rates. Similarly, Kemple (2001) found indeterminate positive effects of school-based intervention on school attendance figures and school completion rates. There is a reasonable amount of empirical evidence on the positive effects of school-based interventions on improving school completion rates through the monitoring of students' attendance, behavior, and grades (Neild et al., 2015; Olagbaju & Nnorom, 2019).

The availability of such data within the school system equips educators with the tools to support boys to stay in school. Establishing an effective school policy or code of conduct on vices such as late coming, absenteeism, indiscipline, and other student-related misdemeanors has been found to create an enabling school climate that plays an important role in addressing dropout rates. The culture of monitoring and communicating high expectations regarding attendance to students and their parents or guardians can improve students' school attendance figures. Rumberger and Losen (2016) reported that reducing the number of times that children are likely to be absent from school increased the quantity of instruction received by the students, the chances of completing school, and prevented behavior problems.

The classroom is the nucleus of the school system, and any meaningful intervention within the school system must consider classroom-related factors. Kassner et al. (2020) opined that a curriculum-based approach can make the classroom or school activities become a more concrete experience for students, especially boys. Allensworth and Easton (2007) found that schools that offer career-themed instruction were able to better engage students, promote collaboration, and create a fluid information dissemination system for the benefit of staff and students. West (2002) suggested that schools should increase choices for boys by involving them in determining what and how they want to learn. This could be done in collaboration with an adult that the students respect and if it is a co-educational school, girls' opinions should be incorporated.

Furthermore, Epstein (1995) stressed the importance of partnership between family, school, and community to monitor and motivate students to remain in school, succeed within the school system, and complete their education. The school should adopt a community approach so that students can relate well with their teachers who are often members of the community. Teaching content and activities should center around the theme of the community. The school should be a community where

students relate well with their teachers who are often members of the community. Therefore, curricular content and teaching activities should center around the themes that are jointly decided by the community. The goal of assigning learners to groups when making use of a community participatory approach is to foster diversity.

Similarly, empirical evidence of the effectiveness of community-participatory intervention shows that small learning communities significantly improved completion rates in schools. For example, Bloom and Unterman (2013) found that the use of small learning communities in schools referred to as 'Small Schools of Choice (SSCs)' increased graduation rates for special education students and English language learners.

Several studies have emphasized the importance of quality pre-service and in-service teacher training. Olagbaju (2020) stressed the need to continually train teachers because the success of any instructional process largely depends on the quality and efficiency of the teacher in the classroom. Zanniello (2015) posits that beyond improving the quality of instruction, participation in a teacher training program can improve the effectiveness of teachers at managing student behavior. Through access to quality training, teachers are better equipped to deal with recalcitrant students by monitoring and supporting them until they can self-regulate their behavior. Keddie (2005) argues that teacher training programs are essential to meeting the educational needs of boys and understanding the effect of gender variation within the classroom. Training helps teachers to be able to stimulate boys' interest and sustain their attention during the process of instructional delivery.

6. METHODOLOGY

6.1 Research Design

The study employed a qualitative case study approach to investigate best practices in keeping boys in school and fighting irregular migration among school-aged boys by interviewing key stakeholders. The qualitative case study approach was chosen because it allowed for an in-depth exploration of a context, thereby facilitating a nuanced understanding of a complex, real-life situation - particularly, its time, issue, location, and limitations (Crowe et al., 2011; Creswell, 2012). Two case studies, one from a developing country and the other from a developed country, were selected for the study. The Second Chance Education Program in the Gambia and The International Network for School Attendance in the US. The two interventions are concerned with reducing school dropout rates and improving school completion rates for students.

6.2 Participants' Recruitment

Participants were initially contacted through social media and recruited through email. Interviews were conducted virtually over eight weeks. The participants for the interviews are selected through purposive sampling to ensure they possess the requisite knowledge and experience relevant to the case. For comparative case analysis, a total of ten interview sessions were conducted comprising at least five interviews from organizations and individuals within the US and Gambia.

6.3 Demographic Characteristics of the Participants

All the participants in this study were English-speaking adults (18+ years) from Gambia and the United States. Ten virtual individual interviews were conducted, but participants' identifiable information was not required to participate in the study. Participants comprised 10 professionals working with students, especially school-aged boys in communities experiencing high school dropout rates among boys.

The description of the interviewees who participated in the study is in the table below:

Table 1
Description of Participants

Title of Interviewees	Description	Gender	Location
Participant 1	Gambia Youth Council (Staff)	Male	Gambia
Participant 2	High School Teacher	Female	Gambia
Participant 3	Nonprofit (Staff)	Male	Gambia
Participant 4	Parent	Male	Gambia
Participant 5	School Administrator	Male	Gambia
Participant 6	High School Teacher	Female	United States
Participant 7	High School Teacher	Male	United States
Participant 8	High School Teacher	Female	United States
Participant 9	Researcher (Boys' education)	Male	United States
Participant 10	High School Teacher	Female	United States

From the Table 1, the description of the ten participants interviewed in the study showed that five participants were interviewed from each of Gambia and the United States. These are six high school teachers (two in the Gambia and four in the US), a nonprofit staffer, a public servant, a parent, and a subject expert in boys' education.

6.4 Data Collection Procedure

Ten semi-structured interviews were conducted via Zoom using the IRB-approved interview protocol. Virtual interviews were conducted to reach participants irrespective of their geographical location and store their responses for data analysis. The recorded interview scripts were transcribed verbatim to ensure that all relevant data was captured. An informed consent form was administered

to the participants before the conduct of the interviews. No identifiable information was collected to assure participants of the confidentiality of the entire process. A 2-item self-designed interview protocol was developed and administered for data collection.

6.5 Data Analysis Procedure

A thematic analysis technique was employed. The transcribed interview data will be coded and analyzed to identify common themes and patterns based on a predetermined preliminary coding sheet. The choice of thematic analysis is appropriate because it is very flexible and helps identify recurring patterns emerging from data (Mishra & Dey, 2022). The dominant themes were interpreted and related to answer the research questions.

6.6 Data Validation and Reliability

Several strategies such as triangulation and researcher's reflexivity will be employed to enhance the validity and reliability of the findings. Olmos-Vega et al. (2023) describe reflexivity as a continuous, collaborative, and multifaceted practice by a researcher to enhance objectivity through conscious self-appraisal and critique of their subjectivity in the research processes. Triangulation involves using multiple sources of data (interviews and documents) to cross-verify findings.

6.7 Compliance with Ethical Standards

The researcher has no conflict of interest to declare. Human participants (adults, 18 years, and above) participated in the study. The researcher obtained approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the University of Arkansas Fayetteville (Protocol Number 2311502398) to conduct this study. In line with the feedback from the IRB review process, all prompts that can lead to participants giving their identified information were expunged. The researcher also obtained the informed consent of all the participants and held discussions with IRB staff via Zoom to address any issues relating to export control concerns in the study and to ensure that all the ethical guidelines were being followed to maintain confidentiality and ensure the anonymity of respondents.

7. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION ON THE CHALLENGES OF SCHOOL COMPLETION RATES AMONG BOYS' EDUCATION

Factors contributing to poor school completion rates and irregular migration among boys are largely social, economic, and academic. All the responses from participants indicated that the challenges confronting boys' education are complex and interrelated because of the social nature of the problem. Based on the data and

feedback from the respondents, the researcher observed that falling school completion rate, especially among boys, is a common phenomenon in both developing and developed countries. Some of the participants in the study identified peer influence as a contributory factor to boys dropping out of school. One of the participants asserted, 'One of my students told me that his friends and parents were encouraging him to leave school and migrate to Europe because many of his mates had left Gambia for Europe' (Participant 2).

This finding aligns with the findings of Kassner et al. (2020), Awosusi et al. (2021), and Kuryliuk, (2023) that students from low-income households often struggle in school and are at higher risk of dropping out of school to support their families. Although Awosusi et al.'s (2021) study relates to irregular migration, studies conducted by Kassner et al. (2020) and Rumberger (2001) are more concerned with how poverty can influence students' school attendance figures and school completion rates. On peer influence, participants from the United States stressed the negative impacts of single parenting and gang activities on the school completion rates of most African American boys from low-income neighborhoods. This agrees with the findings of Ellenbogen and Chamberland (1997) that at-risk students had more dropout friends, more working friends, and fewer school friends.

Peer influence or social pressure was a recurring theme among the participants. In a developed economy like the United States, participants identified the influence of gang activities on students, especially boys' school attendance and completion rates. A participant from a school in the low-income neighborhood of South Bronx noted that one of the 'biggest polls out of the classroom is that a lot of the boys are gang members' (Participant 6). Influence from peers and gangmates can negatively impact boys' school attendance and completion rates. The findings on the influence of social pressures on school dropout rates among boys align with the study of Kieta and Lee (2022) that culture and gender stereotypes push society to place extra burdens on young people.

Another participant stated, '…but what I noticed is that the students are attracted by the groups outside the school, by the environment, and by their friends … So, it's a combination of like, what we teach the culture of the place where like, …the group of friends, they hang out with, that they get attracted to like they kind of get distracted by like, by their friends around them' (Participant 8). The participants' views agree with Bandura's (1999) Social Cognitive Theory that behavior change in individuals can be influenced by social and environmental models.

Another recurring theme from participants is poverty. It is not uncommon for boys from low-income households or single-parent families to assume the role of breadwinners even as students. Boys from low-income

families often need to support their parents financially by contributing to the welfare of the home, and this pushes boys out of the school system. As one of the participants pointed out, 'Another reason why boys leave school to venture into irregular migration is the level of poverty, even though this can be debated because irregular migration is not very cheap. But poverty has forced a lot of young boys out of school' (Participant 1).

Due to poverty, most boys work to support their parents, and they may get distracted or eventually drop out of school in the process. In the words of another participant, 'You know as boys, there is always the pressure to be the breadwinner of the family. Boys are pressured to do well to be able to maintain a family later. So, boys leave school and engage themselves in irregular migration because of the picture they are portraying to them. The picture that everything is rosy in the West …' (Participant 4). Studies (Castles et al., 2012; Awosusi et al, 2021; Kuryliuk, 2023) have identified social inequality and poverty as factors influencing the high dropout rates among school-aged boys in developing countries.

A respondent from the United States explains how poverty prevents boys from completing their education, 'But definitely, my boys, most of the reasons why completing education is hard is because of the need to provide for their families… I can think of one of my really good students, he was from Rwanda. He was the only person in his family who had his papers. So, since he was 15, in Kansas City, he has been allowed to work. So, he was the only person in his family who was providing until his father was able to get over to the United States' (Participant 8).

Boys from low-income communities often work and support their parents while in school, and this can make them disinterested in school. Another participant posits, 'Some of my students had to choose whether they were going to drop out so they could work more, or continue with their education, which was very difficult because I know that in just minority communities, … to see my students must make that choice was difficult... But it became, I think, one of just survival' (Participant 8). To mitigate the effect of poverty on families and boys, Kassner et al. (2020) suggested that teachers should consider socioeconomic factors such as poverty and unemployment that can lead to economic and personal stress that can negatively affect boys' school attendance records, grades, and school completion.

In addition, poor academic performance has been attributed to boys leaving school prematurely. When students have poor grades and struggle with their schoolwork, they become disoriented and lose interest in school. Factors such as poor academic achievement, truancy, and indiscipline have been identified as some of the early signs of students who are at risk of dropping out of school (Rumberger, 2015). The participants indicated in the interviews that poor academic achievement is a leading cause of students dropping out of school. A quote from one of the participants states, 'A lot of my students … don't have, like strong family ties, a lot of single-parent households. And in our building, I think that's probably one of the biggest contributors, in addition to like, the more academic causes' (Participant 3). This result agrees with the findings of Rumberger (2015) and Rumberger et al (2017) that indiscipline, poor grades, and poor attendance records are early signs of at-risk students.

Most underperforming students, if not detected and offered remedial interventions early, become increasingly frustrated till they drop out of school before the year of graduation. A participant said, 'If a child is underperforming, he seems to drop out because the parents and the loved ones feel that was the point of continuing (school)…kind of wasting time' (Participant 2). Another participant said, 'I know dyslexia and ADHD is very high in boys, specifically black boys. So, because of that, they may be having issues with their learning… boys struggle a lot in math, though they excel in science… so it's hard to connect' (Participant 7).

The concept of school dropouts is complicated because it happens gradually. At-risk students often start to decline in attendance and academic performance before they eventually drop out of school. The process is gradual. Therefore, addressing the problem of school dropout rates among boys requires monitoring and case management. A participant narrates how boys drop out of school, '… because I teach in ninth grade, so I see the students when they first come into high school, and I also teach them towards the end of their high school career. So, I've experienced several of our boys. Just kind of like making that slow decline of being in school being present, being engaged in the beginning, and then slowly trickling out to either high truancy, where we rarely see them when we have like severe attendance issues, or them just dropping out. And, you know, either pursuing other options or dropping out of school altogether (Participant 8). Allensworth et al. (2014) reported that any student who misses 10% of the total school attendance for the term is at risk of falling behind in their classwork or considering dropping out of school.

7.1 Emergent Themes from the Interviews
After the interviews, transcription, data cleaning, coding, and analysis, some themes and patterns emerged on the challenges of boys' education and best practices to keep boys in school. Participants' responses to the two interview questions that guided this study showed that some themes emerged from the data. On the causes of the rising school dropout rates among boys and the challenges of boys' education, the themes of peer influence, social pressure, poverty, poor academic achievement, and poor attitude to education were identified in participants'

responses from the Gambia and the United States. All the participants indicated that poverty, poor academic achievement, and peer influence are the main contributory factors to the rising dropout rates among boys. Similarly, most of the participants from Gambia and the United States differed on the cause of social pressures on school-aged boys. Emerging themes from Gambia describe social pressure as high expectations from family members that may negatively affect boys in school while social pressure in the context of participants from the US is largely about single parents.

Although there are contextual differences between factors militating against boys' education in the Gambia and United States, the outcomes are very similar because of the attendance rates are dropping for school-aged boys in both countries. The International Network for School Attendance puts the number of school-aged boys out-of-school at 139 million and concluded that in the US, boys are at a higher risk of dropping out of school by approximately 6% (UNESCO, 2024). Trends in school dropout rates among boys are similar in other places like Gambia and Central Asia. This study attempts to investigate factors responsible for lower school completion rates for boys.

8. RECOMMENDATIONS BASED ON THE FINDINGS

Based on the findings of this study, there are several policy recommendations in theory and practice for teachers, parents, and policymakers. Some of these are:

• Effective monitoring and utilization of data for early detection of at-risk students: Schools need to track data on students' behavior, attendance, and achievement in school for prompt intervention.

• Training and support for teachers: Schools need to invest heavily in teacher training to ensure they are up to date on methods, gender studies, and classroom management.

• Vocational-focused Education: Schools need to develop options that allow boys to acquire vocational skills in school to empower boys with future-focused skills.

• Community-participatory Approach: The school should partner with parents and community icons or mentors to support/encourage boys to stay in school. There is a need for an integrative approach that includes the parents, school, and local school districts to tackle the challenges facing boys' education in the Gambia.

• Interactive learner-centered instruction: Classroom instruction should be engaging, practical, and tailored to students' learning styles to sustain their interest in school.

• Incentive-based school programs: To mitigate the effect of poverty, school feeding or tuition assistance programs can be introduced to keep boys in school.

In conclusion, the challenges of boys' education and school completion in the Gambia are social, economic, academic, and cultural. However, implementing a few of the policy changes recommended above can largely mitigate the effects of the problem. This study has recommended a multifaceted approach that includes school and community-based interventions to keep boys in school and fight irregular migration in the Gambia.

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APPENDIX/SUMMARY OF THE PRELIMINARY CODING SHEET FOR DATA ANALYSIS (THEMATIC ANALYSIS)

This coding sheet identifies prominent themes and categories that emerge from the data. Possible themes are identified from the research questions that guided the study and literature review. The preliminary coding scheme is presented below:

Codebook for Qualitative Thematic Analysis

BEST PRACTICES

Community-based Interventions (New or Emerging Themes)
• Family, school, and community involvement became merged or interrelated.
• ~~Support from local/community leaders~~
• Support from religious and community leaders.

School-based Interventions
• Curriculum planning or redesign (More accommodations/Flexibility/Career-themed lessons)
• (School) Mentoring, Monitoring
• ~~Story Telling~~
• ~~Classroom-based interventions~~
• After-school activities (Sports, school trips, extracurricular and extramural activities)
• Education-Work Transition: Vocational Training, Skill Acquisition, Job Placement Success, Local Employment Opportunities, Career

Government and Policy-based Interventions
• Education policies
• Anti-migration policies (improved border security)
• Funding
• Teacher training.

Challenges/Causes
• Peer influence
• Poverty (Family Socio-economic Status: Poverty, Need, Money, Lack of financial support, Financial Remittances)
• Social pressure
• ~~Community Engagement~~
• ~~Interventions from nonprofit organizations~~