At-risk students in selected schools in Zimbabwe: An ecological perspective

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This study investigates the impact of socio-economic conditions on at-risk students in 2 selected Chitungwiza secondary schools in Zimbabwe. At-risk students are characterised by irregular school attendance, high dropout rates, poor grade retention or sustained diminished academic achievement. At-riskness has increased in Zimbabwe's school population since the adoption and subsequent failure of the Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP), which has contributed to concomitant poor social conditions. A qualitative narrative enquiry on the impact of socio-economic factors on at-risk students explored the life stories of 3 male and 3 female students from each of the 2 selected Chitungwiza secondary schools. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological System Theory, where the individual is viewed as developing within a complex system of relationships, informed the study. Semi-structured interviews with participants, based on the Dan McAdams Framework were used for rich data gathering. The findings confirm the notion that poor socio-economic conditions experienced by families in Zimbabwe make a major contribution to at-riskness in secondary schools. Based on the empirical inquiry, the study recommends family support to enhance the functioning of socio-economically stressed families for the improvement of parent-child relationships/intra-familial relationships towards regular school attendance (The Children's Society, 2013). Further recommendations are presented for a more inclusive educational model to reduce school at-riskness in Zimbabwe.

Keywords: at-riskness; Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory; life story research; secondary schools; Zimbabwe

Introduction
Educational at-riskness is defined as a condition in which students are likely to experience adverse educational outcomes, such as low academic achievement, poor school attendance, grade retention and dropout due to various individual and social factors (Considine & Zappalà, 2002). At-riskness connotes a permanent psycho-educational condition (Edwards, Danridge & Pleasants, 2014), which Aronson (2001) suggests can be a result of disadvantaged family circumstances such as poverty, poorly educated parents, living in a ghetto, being raised in the care of mothers only, human immunodeficiency virus/acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (HIV/AIDS) affected families, poor socio-economic circumstances, the orphaned, the adopted, and the segregated children (Valencia, 2011). Spicker (2014) calls these the home-based factors of at-riskness and states that they are characterized by material deprivation of toys, books, and quiet space for study as well as being in poor health; all of which create a non-educationally stimulating environment. At-risk students have the potential of school dropout due to their perceived overwhelming disinterest in education and their inclination towards certain failure, together with the lack of an apparent capacity to cope with educationally discouraging unique circumstances (Fairbrother, 2008). Ormrod (2010) depicts at-risk students in terms of universally confirmed socio-economic attributes, such as belonging to a poor family. This, and many other circumstances, place students at a higher risk of dropping out before graduation unless special support is provided (Porton, 2014).

The wider contribution of this article is the contribution it makes to the academic debate on at-riskness around the globe. While the majority of studies on the educational disadvantage of at-risk students have been conducted within the United States (US) context, this paper enhances the current level of understanding of the studied phenomenon in different cultural and political contexts, thus informing academic debate within sub-Saharan Africa.

The authors' purpose with this article was to explore at-risk students' perceptions of the familial socio-economic factors that expose them to educational at-riskness in selected secondary schools in Zimbabwe. This study was guided by the following research questions:
1. What are the key causes of at-risk students in the identified schools in Zimbabwe?
2. What are the at-risk students' perceptions about their socio-economic status?
Firstly, the background of the research problem is discussed in terms of a literature review. Subsequent to the literature review, the theoretical framework that guided the study is discussed. The research methodology is discussed, and the findings and discussions are presented thereafter.

Literature Review
A high percentage of Zimbabwean students drop out of school (Mawere, 2012; Moyo, Ncube & Khupe, 2016; Zengeya, 2007). School dropout may be influenced by, among others, psychological issues, poor socio-economic factors, lack of familial support and high unemployment rates in communities. The critical educational sociological approach focusing on the meso and macro levels of livelihoods in Zimbabwe with

reference to educational analysis views education as currently reflecting unequal distributions of power and educational resources in ratios that marginalise certain groups and positions them as educationally at risk while giving privileges to others (Chabaya, Rembe & Wadesango, 2009; Raffo, Dyson, Gunter, Hall, Jones & Kalambouka, 2007). It may be argued that the World Bank sponsored Zimbabwean ESAP introduced in 1991 (Saunders, 1996) came with more of the education user-pays approach as part of government austerity measures package. That reduced government educational spending. Government legitimated the process by the adoption of the Education Act of 1992, the legislation that formalised the state's abandonment of the Zimbabwean poor's education. According to this legislation, the running of schools would now be devolved to (School Development Associations) SDAs/SDCs (School Development Committees) (Chikoko, 2008), placing a huge responsibility on already impoverished communities. At the same time, working class household incomes dwindled to destitution levels while the government continued to reduce spending on real education, leading to increasing educational inequality (Hood & Waters, 2017). Consequently, some communities have failed to meet livelihood basics, and this has placed the right to education low on the list of priorities among the poor (Liebenberg & Goldblatt, 2007; Shadreck, 2012; Tshabalala & Ncube, 2014). That the government continues to reduce investment in education is confirmed by the United Nations Children's Fund ([UNICEF)], 2016); investment in education was 9.5% lower than the 2015 allocation and as much as 98.4% from the US$810.43 million total education budget was absorbed by employment costs. This left very little towards educational quality improvements and to ameliorate against the educational at-riskness of the poor.

This has precipitated a socio-economic situation, exacerbating at-riskness among school-age children from poor households more than other age groups (McCartney & Phillips, 2011:21). This exposes these children to different levels of at-riskness dependent on gender and parental prejudices because they have very particular needs, are the least powerful and youngest of all family members and thus receive less from the available resources. Poor children quickly fall behind in school due to the inequalities found in their household circumstances that rapidly translate into inequalities in learning and at-riskness in general (Woodhead, Dornan & Murray, 2014). Thus, at-risk children should be encouraged to relate their experiences (Dornan & Boyden, 2011).

At-riskness in Zimbabwe has tended to deal with single focus studies on the fragmented aspects of at-riskness. Chikoko (2008) illustrates dropout rates, Chinyoka (2014) emphasises poor nutrition for Zimbabwean students, and Mhishi, Bhukuvhani and Sana (2012) report on the disadvantage of brain-drain in schools. There appears to be no comprehensive investigation on student at-riskness. However, a key issue of interest to this study from the available literature, albeit disintegrated, is the correlation of poverty to at-riskness and the fight for the student's emancipation from stressful socio-economic lives as a legal right (Liebenberg & Goldblatt, 2007; Mawere, 2012). Children's rights are human rights and children have the right to unimpeded educational access.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework that informed this case study draws upon Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979). This theory and the Enabling Component Model may both be jointly used to analyse the current Zimbabwean educational state when looking at economic and human resources deficiencies as well as students' lack of desirable educational access due to qualitative deficiency inequities (Adelman & Taylor, n.d.). Urie Bronfenbrenner posits that human beings should be understood as multiple nested systems and that their development is the result of complex interactions between the individual and various systemic factors that influence each other. Further, the theory suggests that this complex relationship is influenced by several environmental systems. To augment the latter, three actions from Adelman and Taylor's Enabling Component Model are used to corroborate Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory.

Bronfenbrenner and his colleagues (Lerner, 2005) revisited the theory in 1990 and the term "bio-ecological" was added to the environment. The term "bio-ecological" emphasises the central influence of the individual's characteristics on development. Bronfenbrenner, in summary, focuses on an approach that emphasises the interrelationship of different processes and their contextual variation (Darling, 2007).

The structure of the environment is broken down into five systems:
1. Microsystem: This is the system where the individual participates and is in direct contact with people in the immediate contexts. The structures that are involved in the microsystem include the school, community, and family environments. Individuals/children may relate to their environments. The Enabling Component Model suggests augmenting Bronfenbrenner's microsystems by supporting the child through transitions in school and home to limit at-riskness.
2. Mesosystem: This system describes how the different parts of a child's microsystem work together for the sake of the child. An example of the system would be the connection children have with their teachers and parents, as well as between their church and neighbourhood. This strategy in which mesosystems work together also corresponds with the function of "connecting families to schools and school activities" are similar to the Enabling Component Model's working

together of families and schools to eliminate at-riskness.

3. Exosystem: This system refers to the larger social system. This system includes the other people and places that children do not interact with directly, but which affect them, such as parents' workplaces, extended family members, and the neighbourhood. For example, if a child's parent is retrenched or unable to buy daily necessities for the family, this may have a negative effect on the child. Adelman and Taylor (n.d.) recommend the engagement of public and private agencies like universities, businesses, artists, and cultural institutions whose benevolence may alleviate the effects of at-riskness from retrenchment and that can enable continued educational access. Oprah Winfrey's school in South Africa (EducationWorld.com, n.d.) illustrates this exosystem partnership to alleviate disadvantage.

4. Macrosystem: This system involves a set of people and things that influences a child but are far removed from the child's environment. The system involves the economy, government policies, the values, customs, and laws within children's communities.

5. Chronosystem: This system involves the dimension of time.

This study assumes that a student's success against at-riskness in education is determined by their capacity to navigate Bronfenbrenner's environmental factors. A child is influenced by his world and, unlike experimentation, this theory takes a realistically practical view of the child's circumstances to justify its applicability in this study.

Method
This problem was investigated through a qualitative case study using a narrative approach within the realist, postmodernist, and constructionist tradition (Elder-Vass, 2012:11). The advantages of a case study are its strength of depth in focus, analysis, and explicit purpose (Miller, 2010). The narrative inquiry examines the storied nature of human recounting of lives and events (Roberts, 2002) and makes use of one's past, present and future by paying attention to one's place within the events, the stories one generates, and one's role in the unfolding events. It is appraised as a powerful research tool for capturing the epiphanic moments, a crisis, or significant events in a subject's life (Lemmer, 2009:85). By using a socio-educational approach, which not only makes use of an individual's intelligence but aptitude, situational contexts, and learning outcomes (Taie & Afshari, 2015), this narrative inquiry employs life stories to gather experiences on at-riskness as a phenomenon for research. As such, the narrative inquiry promises three distinct advantageous characteristics: temporality, sociality, and place, which refer to the continuous revision attached to experiences, personal/social conditions, and geographical boundaries of events.

Location of Study
This study was carried out in Chitungwiza in the Harare Metropolitan Province. This was a suitable location for the study due to Chitungwiza's typicality for at-riskness due to overwhelming poverty among its impoverished people (Kamete, 2002). Most families in Chitungwiza are informally occupied within the neighbourhood or within Chitungwiza's sparse industries (Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency, 2012) and represent a typical community with increased educational at-riskness.

Selection of Participants
Chitungwiza has seven secondary schools with 8,400 students. The researchers used data from the Ministry of Education relating to the characteristics of educational at-riskness for the selection of two secondary schools: highest absenteeism rates and worst performance in the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) rankings. The headmaster of each school (School A and School B) identified three male participants and three female participants based on each school's records of class repetition and absenteeism [$N = 12$] for students in Form 4 in 2016. These students were deemed to be information-rich participants on family educational resource limitations and educational at-riskness.

Data Gathering
This study was done over seven months in 2016, which makes this a time and geographically limited study for the year 2016 Form 4 cohort. A gatekeeper was recruited from the teachers to facilitate issues of identity, confidence, efficiency, and a trusting relationship between the participants and the principal researcher who remained the principal data gatherer throughout. Data was gathered by engaging participants in conversations as they narrated their experiences of family educational resource limitations and educational at-riskness. These were autobiographical representations, which are appraised as free and rich self-narratives (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

At each school, data gathering commenced with an introductory meeting with the participants. Adopting McAdams' (1995) life story interview schedule, participants were asked to view their lives as chapters of a book. They wrote down their life stories from March to September 2016 accordingly, with each chapter in the life story representing a significant educational life event(s). The stories were read and followed up with an interview in order to obtain a fuller picture of each participant's version of family educational resource limitations and educational at-riskness. If there were issues worth probing, additional rich data from each participant was gathered through a further unstructured interview at a venue and during a convenient time suggested by the school, which would not interfere with the school programme. Interviews were recorded on a digital recorder.

Data Analysis

Raw data for this study comprised the actual spoken words per interview which were transcribed verbatim. Using the inductive narrative data analysis approach, the social patterns and structures of family educational resource limitations, which give rise to educational at-riskness, were conceptualised from that data because of this strategy's ability to enable constant comparison between the first narrative and subsequent narratives under thematic analysis. Related themes from the literature reviewed were also used. These themes enabled a comparison of the findings with what is known about the impact of socio-economic conditions on educational at-riskness. Furthermore, embedded themes from the instrument questions and the research questions were sought.

Reliability of Data and Ethical Consideration

This study was specific to time and location and, therefore, did not assume to represent students from similar backgrounds of impact of socio-economic conditions on educational at-riskness. Application to similar situations was done with caution. Findings from such research cannot be generalized (Op de Beeck, 2015). Permission was sought and granted by the relevant authorities and participants. The participants were assured in writing of anonymity, privacy, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw without penalty from the research; there were no rewards for their voluntary participation.

Findings

Using the inductive narrative method, the following themes emerged from research questions as stated above.

Parents' Income and Employment Challenges

Bronfenbrenner (1979) explains that external factors such as policy and legislation influence individuals from systems that are not directly related to the microsystem. These factors may be empowering or disempowering. The following comments indicate learners' perspectives about their parents' income and employment challenges.

> *During the week, Mother will always say she is waiting for Dad to send her money because she had a bad day selling. When Dad comes, he says he will sort it out by the weekend, then sometimes he goes for a long time leaving us without money, and Mother says she is waiting for Dad to buy my exercise books.* (Portia)
> *How can Mum get the money with also Grandmother to look after? She is not on any income but struggling buying and selling. That is hard. At present, I don't have the correct uniform, Shona poetry anthology, and a satchel. I have not had revision classes ever since. Asking my grandmother to buy it is unfair ... she has no money.* (Mary)

> *My mum can't afford that. How can she raise that from selling by the roadside where it is crowded with everybody selling the same items?* (Kalal).

The above suggests that secondary school students were aware that their parents did not earn enough income. Participants were asked to relate the work in which their parents were involved. They said the following:

> *Cone Textiles closed and there are no jobs in Chitungwiza anymore except street selling* (Shar).
> *When I went for Form 1, my father was still doing well. My mother was still buying big volumes of goods for resale and she was making much better money then. All that is gone now. She is either stuck at home or buying and selling like anyone else. All her capital was swallowed up in maintaining the home, my fees, and supporting Daddy, who has not been paid for a while.* (Siphi)
> *When I started secondary school, my mother was already into buying and selling* (Mary).

Participants' parents and guardians had been engaged in buying and selling for their household livelihoods from the time the participants started secondary school. With the closure of large Chitungwiza employers, like Cone Textiles, most parents had joined the informal sector. Cone Textiles was previously a mass employer in Zimbabwe with 175,000 employees (Sachikonye, 2003). The participants confirmed that most parents and guardians were in the informal sector/enterprise whereby the cash income was generally extremely low and working conditions very poor. This "poor quality employment" (Luebker, 2008:16) increased at-riskness through the informal sector's inability to guarantee essential materials needed for education due to low wages. That suggests the poor then access resource-challenged education due to financial family hardships and that that, as advocated by Bronfenbrenner (1979), may increase children's at-riskness (Blanden & Gibbons, 2006).

Unemployment was another problem that contributed to at-riskness in Zimbabwe. Most parents survived through buying and selling various wares and operated from home, beside footpaths and streets, and in open spaces, as confirmed by Luebker (2008). The participants said the following:

> *My father used to work in a local hardware store but lost his job. I am not clear what actually led to him losing his job, but I know he now works as a self-made mechanic doing basics for people who need help with their cars in Chikwanha.* (Chena)
> *Mother sells stuff on the road and often at Chikwanha, Huruyadzo, and the town centre taxi rank* (Godf).
> *My father works for the city of Harare. He is now also accepting more part-time jobs after work and over the weekends as a builder all over Chitungwiza at people's homes doing renovations* (Siphi).
> *My father lost his driving job three years ago. He*

is constantly in search of a permanent job as a driver. He regularly works as a freelance second-hand car parts dealer at Chikwanha. From here, he is occasionally hired as a driver by minibus owners and unregistered taxi owners servicing Chitungwiza and nearby village suburbs like Waterfalls. He sometimes goes as far as Harare. (Godf)

Mother sells second-hand clothes (Mary).

The above confirmed the flexibility and the precarious nature of the informal economy, as alluded to by the International Labour Office ([ILO], 2014). It also highlighted the increased poverty among some of the informally employed, confirmed by a link, albeit an imperfect one, which created an association between informal employment, being poor, and children's at-riskness. Low family resources do not seem to inspire children for greater educational achievement but rather to conform to the disadvantaged status or non-mainstream life goals. Parents were influenced by a lack of formal employment role models due to their distance from the strengths of the education route into the labour market (Kallio, Kauppinen & Erola, 2016). Such children's immediate needs also cause them to often miss school or drop out because they are too hungry and lack clean clothes to wear to school (Thomisith, 2014).

Required Socio-Emotional Support

The larger systems of cultural beliefs, values, and community support for families are imperative for children (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The lack of this support may expose children to psychological and social harm (Garbarino, 1992). Orphanhood was the most challenging issue for most participants because it exposed them to psychological, financial, social, and parental challenges (Taukeni, 2015). Participants Tonde, Gerry and Kudzi concurred with one another.

> *Coping with life's challenges without my parents was enough of a challenge on its own. I do not always have somebody to share my emotional problems with. Neither am I able to confide in anybody some of my dreams and hopes or frustrations of having no one to buy me school uniforms and books ... this is poverty.* (Tonde)
> *I wonder what it feels like to have the joy of just seeing my parents. That is affecting the whole of my school life. I feel very lonely* (Kudzi).
> *I only remember my dad from the pictures. He passed away when I was a baby. Yes, I think about him a lot and wonder how life would have been different with him around* (Gerry).

Gerry believed that because his father was no longer alive, it restricted his future opportunities. DeAngelis (2012) confirms this perception when he states that orphans face significant personal roadblocks preventing them from doing well in school. Participant loneliness was also confirmed by Chi and Li (2013), who linked HIV orphanhood with poorer psychological well-being.

Most participants said they lived alone most of the time, which made them vulnerable. Child loneliness and the link to vulnerability are substantiated by Datta (2009), who summarise the challenges of orphanhood as children not living with their parents most of the time, not living like a family but on their own, living unsupported in child-headed households, and living under the care of a grandmother.

> *I am behind in most things because it is hard to manage things on my own. I just do not have the time to get ready for supper, fetch water for the night, get firewood, and cook when Mother is away. It's better when Mum is around or Grandmother is better. Grandmother helps a lot but her asthma is the challenge. I then feel very lonely with a lot to do and nobody to help me.* (Mary)
> *I don't have a table for homework. Our landlord allows me use of his family lounge for any homework but that is difficult for me because that family stays awake almost all night every day* (Godf).
> *Not hearing from my father makes me feel very lonely. My mother is struggling* (Much).
> *I wish there was support for us from whoever. My grandmother is overworked. There is just too many of us. Nobody ever visits us to help of all my father's relatives. It's just my grandmother* (Kudzi).

The participants' feeling of loneliness put them at increased at-riskness. The challenge of loneliness increases the risk of depression and anxiety disorders, and further raises the possibility of high-risk sexual behaviour, such as earlier sexual debuts, more and older sexual partners, and transactional sex (Pascoe, Langhaug, Mavhu, Hargreaves, Jaffar, Hayes & Cowan, 2015).

Inter-Parental Conflict

Inter-parental conflict, which may result into violence, is one external influence to which a child may not directly relate (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This external system impedes parenting and involvement in school performance (Swick, 2005). Three participants mentioned how inter-parental conflict made it difficult for them to obtain their birth certificates when they were in the final grade of primary school with a view to register for the final primary school public examination.

> *My father was very angry after my grandmother objected to his intended marriage to my mother because she said he was a thief and therefore unsuitable to marry her daughter despite the pregnancy. Father is said to have then just walked away and never agreed to my birth registration. When in Grade 7, as usual, the school insisted I needed to get one. My mother wanted my birth certificate in my father's name but he was uncooperative and still bitter.* (Mary)
> *My mother struggled to get my birth certificate because she was expected to bring some witnesses, which required money. Mother has never mentioned to me where my father is. She keeps saying I will meet him one day* (Daisy).
> *I have never met or seen my father, and that alone*

was a big problem for my mother to get my birth certificate. Eventually, she just registered me in her name and that's it (Much).

My mother abandoned me at my father's rural home for about four months without me attending my primary school Grade 7 class. Mother only came to collect me when she heard that I had fallen ill but still went back to Chitungwiza without my birth certificate. I had to repeat Grade 7 and, fortunately, my father has, since my return to school, been cooperative and active in my life. I got the birth certificate in his name according to my mother's wishes but have continued to live with Mum, my two elder sisters and a brother. (Mary).

Mary's narrative illustrates that her parents' failure to stay together or at least to cooperate jointly to take care of her triggered a host of disadvantages; she had to go through the turmoil of being abandoned, missing school, and repeating the grade. That evidences the dearth of protective factors essential for nurturing the essential ingredients required in the development of a supportive environment for the physical and emotional needs of the child, which are lacking (Blumenthal, 2015). This causes educational at-riskness.

While the mother can register her child in her name, the Zimbabwean patriarchal cultural norm requires the father's family name for identity. Although Mary's mother tried to get her birth registration certificate in her father's name, this created barriers for Mary. The father objected to his potential mother-in-law's opposition to his marriage to Mary's mother. The acrimony between Mary's father and mother demonstrated how protracted conflict between parents can make the child feel that he/she is to blame and is therefore at higher risk of negative outcomes (Mooney, Oliver & Smith, 2009).

Lack of Minimum Basic Personal Space
Lack of minimum space may technically be equated with homelessness. Family dynamics such as loss of privacy, lack of control over daily routines, and lack of social and economic resources may result from a lack of basic personal space. These dynamics can be associated with Bronfenbrenner's (1979) microsystem where children need to interact and relate with their surroundings. In trying to understand how well these participant families interacted with their extended families, the participants responded as follows:

I hardly see any of them at all. My mother's sister does pop in once in a while to sell peanut butter but then she is the only one who visits us and stays for a week or two selling. We have no choice but to squeeze in the only space we have when she arrives. (Shar)

I don't have a personal bedroom. I share. I also don't have a table for homework but just lay on a mat on the floor to do homework (Kudzi).

There is my mother's brothers who farm in Centenary. They sometimes come to stay when they are selling their tobacco at the Bokas. A daughter of

one of them once stayed with us for over a year looking for work whenever her employment as a domestic worker ended. (Gerry)

My aunt once stayed with us for two weeks when her daughter was at Gomo General Hospital for a medical operation. That was an exception because Aunt normally comes in for an hour just to talk to my mother then she goes back. (Kudzi)

We rarely have any visitors at all. Last week, however, we had some old man from the village who slept overnight at home. Although he was welcome to my mother, his visit disturbed us as we had to seek space in the landlord's lounge. I was sent to sleep in our landlord's lounge because we do not have space. That affected my homework timetable ... I could not use my usual corner. (Mary)

In this case, families have to deal with many adverse social situations. These families often lack adequate space to accommodate their children. Reynolds (2005) argues that the lack of adequate space contributes to children staying at home.

Lack of Items for Basic Personal Hygiene
The data confirms that participants perceive that the lack of personal items, especially those necessary for personal hygiene, as contributing to at-riskness. The following statements list the items which were not readily available for daily school needs among at-risk students.

I often miss soap (Tonde).

... do without lotion, toothpaste (Kalal).

No soap, lotion, toothpaste, breakfast, tea. No butter sometimes (Mary).

I share a towel with my cousins. I do not always have soap, Vaseline, toothpaste, breakfast, tea, bread and butter most of the time (Tonde).

I always wear perfume. I share it with my mother (Siphi).

... .go to school without breakfast (Tonde).

Sometimes I have tea but usually no butter on my bread in the morning (Godf).

Participants missed the above as essentials for personal hygiene at school, in addition to food requirements for starting the school day. The participants often mentioned inadequate diet. Berliner (2009) explains that children who come from poor families tend to manifest psychosomatic problems and depression, and they are likely to be at risk.

Discussion and Conclusion
Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979), which includes the family environment, their internal and external interactions, and relationships with children and those which children have with their surroundings, was used as a theoretical lens for this study. The participants in this study came from families that have immense income and employment challenges. McKaiser (2015) posits that such students also attend poorly resourced schools, which are situated on the wrong side of Zimbabwe's inequality divide.

Educationally at-risk children require emotional support for successful educational outcomes

through vibrant psychological, financial, social intervention strategies aimed at the orphaned and lonely. Not all Zimbabwean schools have a deliberate detection mechanism or coordinated support programme for the socio-emotionally at-risk, like lonely students. Neither do all schools have a directed state programme linking up schools with community resources for the support of the struggling school-identified student. With staff training, teachers can easily help the initial process if schools adopted (with adjustment) Adelman and Taylor's Enabling Component Model. This model has proven effective in supporting children experiencing transition challenges, connecting families to schools and school activities, thereby maximising use of community resources, reorganising crisis assistance and prevention, and improving links to external mental health and behavioural services (DeAngelis, 2012). A focus on supporting all children can narrow the achievement gap (Woodhead et al., 2014) and create equality of quality access against at-riskness.

Vulnerability to inter-parental conflict was confirmed. Poor parents are known for their possible inability to manage stressful events, causing poor family functioning and possibly resulting in difficult parent-child relationships/intra-familial relationships (The Children's Society, 2013). Schools should review the demand for non-core educational demands, such as requesting birth certificates especially in the context of interparental conflict. Parents too should avoid making children the victims of inter-parental conflict (Shelton & Harold, 2008). Early emotional disturbances can have psychological and educational effects on children, like the risk of misunderstanding one's conflict triggers (Cummings & Davies, 2010), poor school attendance, and poor management of one's psycho-social capacities both in and out of school.

Participants confirmed their background in poor households and lack of personal space negatively impacted on their educational needs. Reynolds (2005) recommends enough physical space for each child to study. Bialostok, Whitman and Bradley (2012:232) confirm persistent "crowded living spaces" as educational disadvantages. All school-attending children need personal space at home for privacy and for play, to be able to do their homework, and to bring friends over (Reynolds, 2005), which was not possible due to the seasonal "continuous flow of visitors" (Kalal).

Inadequate personal places create the risk of significant harmful effects on children's academic achievement, external behaviour, physical health, and many areas of the child's well-being (Solari & Mare, 2012). Overcrowded spaces increase the risk of cross-contamination and the inability to develop a positive body image (Downey & Lloyd, 2008), which, in turn, increases the rate of absenteeism. The government can eliminate personal-space-induced at-riskness through enabling local authorities to start affordable mass housing projects.

The at-risk participants lacked items essential to their basic personal hygiene, such as towels, and this increased the risk of the spread of disease through cross-contamination (Downey & Lloyd, 2008), thereby creating the risk of absenteeism. Poor hygiene increases the risk of common illnesses, such as intestinal worms or diarrhoea, often giving rise to absenteeism or dropout (Orkin, Yadete & Woodhead, 2012). Increased community education should be supported with resources for the practical adoption of safer practices that reduce at-riskness. Currently the widespread occurrence of malaria contributes to children's at-riskness and the government should do everything in its power to eliminate this disease (Campbell & Steketee, 2011).

The prevailing weak socio-economic environment for families in Zimbabwe has limited the impoverished family's capacity to support quality educational access, which in turn has increased Zimbabwean educational at-riskness. The contribution of this study is to indicate that personal exposure to poor socio-economic conditions may result in increased at-riskness. This study makes a substantial contribution to the contextualisation of at-risk students, not only for Zimbabweans but in diverse cultural and political contexts, thus informing the academic debate in sub-Saharan Africa and the world.

Authors' Contributions
This paper was written jointly by Professor Seroto and Dr Lloyd C Mabhoyi. Dr Mabhoyi wrote the initial manuscript then worked in consultation with Professor Seroto. Dr Mabhoyi further did the field work and jointly did data analysis with Professor Seroto. Both authors reviewed the final manuscript.

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