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## Perceived Impact of Financial Assistance Program on Retaining Vulnerable Children in Lesotho's Secondary Schools

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### ABSTRACT

Following the high influx of learners in primary schools due to the Education For All (EFA) policy, many learners could not access secondary education because of the high costs of tuition fees and other hidden costs. In response to this, the Lesotho government introduced several financial assistance strategies to narrow the gap between primary and secondary education. The paper focused on the Lesotho government's financial assistance programs (FAP) to increase access for learners from poor socio-economic backgrounds and the factors that make it difficult for such learners to complete secondary education. We used a rational approach as a theoretical framework to unravel the contextual conditions of FAP and their impact on retaining OVC in schools. The paper was lensed under the interpretivism paradigm and designed using qualitative research, relying on the case study of one school in the poor area of Lesotho. Using the purposive sampling method, one principal and two teachers were selected in a secondary school and engaged in semi-structured interviews. The paper employed thematic analysis to derive themes and trends that emerged from the data. The findings point to poor contextual conditions, such as OVC socioeconomic backgrounds, resources, and other social issues, which did not address the deeper problems of OVC in accessing and completing their education. The paper concludes that for this FAP to have a lasting and meaningful impact on OVC in accessing secondary schooling, they need to thoroughly review their objectives to fully address the needs of OVC in and outside school.

### INTRODUCTION

Lesotho declares education as a basic human right. Section 28 of the Lesotho constitution declares education as a human right, and as enshrined in the national constitution, education will be made available to all, and the government should adopt policies aimed at securing it (Kingdom of Lesotho, 1993). Thus, the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) in Lesotho introduced and committed to the EFA policy by introducing Free Primary Education (FPE) in all government and church primary schools. This was implemented annually and incrementally beginning from the first grade of primary schooling. With this, the government covered the school fees, textbooks, and feeding in schools. As a result of FPE, there was an increase in enrolments in primary schools (MOET,

2016). Despite this increase, the Education Statistics Report reveals that for some learners, progressing from lower basic education to secondary education was very low (BOS, 2015). This means that many learners completed primary schooling, but the transition to secondary school was challenging.

In Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), increasing enrolments in secondary school education has become a priority, especially after an astounding growth of primary education across the African continent, pushed by the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the EFA goals (Kiden & Musaiwa, 2020, and Bangdady & Zaki, 2019). Nonetheless, general access to secondary education remains challenging in Lesotho, as proven by the big gap between primary and secondary education.

This could be resulting from factors such as individual and household income (Delproto & Farieta, 2023). Yet the United Nations (UN) Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) 4 is committed to providing inclusive quality education for all children by 2030 (UN, 2015). Thus, targets to meet this goal include but are not limited to quality primary and secondary schooling for all, but also free, equitable education and good education facilities with deployment of competent teachers (ASEC, 2020). Despite all these, Chikoko and Mthembu (2020) suggest that in the SSA region, education is not adequately financed as compared to other regions. As a result of the low budgets, it becomes impossible to respond to the targets of SDG4.

Although Lesotho has achieved significant progress in primary education enrolments due to the introduction of FPE, progress in secondary education remains low in comparison to other Southern African countries (Kingdom of Lesotho, 2019). This is because the flow of funds by development partners is heavily directed towards primary education. Yet secondary school is prohibitively expensive and remains inaccessible for most children from poor households compared to primary school. Also, tuition fees policies and a limited number of secondary schools in rural areas lower access to secondary education amongst economically challenged families (MOET, 2016). Secondary education has become a privilege mainly for the rich, further exacerbating poverty and inequalities in societies. However, the UN 2030 (SDGs) has emphasized addressing poverty and inequality through education (Quresh, Malkani & Rose, 2020). Bangdady and Zaki (2019) explain that many studies indicate that factors such as family income and location determine access, dropouts, and completion of education in SSA. Thus, it is apparent that the communities that were most affected are those in remote locations where poor households struggle to pay school fees and other costs of schooling. Without considering the learning needs of the poorest children, it becomes challenging to achieve the promise of SDG4 (UNICEF, 2020), which aims to achieve inclusive education for all, irrespective of location (ASEC, 2020).

The Lesotho Education Sector Plan (LESP) 2016 – 2026 indicates that lower basic education

gets the most significant share of the national budget in the education sector, and it is followed by secondary education (MOET, 2016). This inadequate share of the national budget for secondary education suggests that secondary education remains the responsibility of parents. Consequently, many poor families fail to pay tuition fees for their children in secondary schools. It becomes even more challenging to pay other indirect costs of schooling, such as uniforms and textbooks. Since secondary education receives second preference on the national budget, children in remote, poor households are not able to access secondary schools. Yet Bangdady and Zaki (2019) assert that because of an increase in access and completion of primary education, which has led to growth in demand for secondary education, many countries across the region have made some positive steps in creating access to secondary education.

After introducing FPE, many vulnerable learners who come from poor communities and households could not proceed to secondary schools as a result of the high costs of schooling. Lesotho is a signatory to the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, which prescribes education as a fundamental human right; thus, this mandates the Lesotho government to widen access to secondary schools. From 2004 onwards, the Lesotho government introduced various Financial Assistance Programs (FAP) to create accessibility to secondary schools for children from poor families. The MOET, together with the Ministry of Social Development, introduced and implemented a bursary program to help Orphans and Vulnerable Children (OVC) in secondary schools.

According to the Ministry of Health and Social Development (2008), the bursary scheme is jointly funded by the Lesotho Government, the World Bank, and the Global Fund, targeting learners from marginalized communities, such as those who have been abandoned, and others with other vulnerabilities. The program aims to offer secondary tuition fees, stationery, and feeding in schools. In the same year, another program - the Textbook Rental Scheme - was implemented to assist all government secondary school learners to reduce the costs of buying textbooks. Subsequently, in the year 2009, MOET implemented another financial assistance program to further broaden

access to secondary school education by rationalizing school fees in all newly built government secondary schools. Learners had to pay a fee of R500 annually as tuition, and the government took the responsibility of the remaining costs (MOET, 2016). These programs reduced the burden of tuition fees, which significantly increased enrolments in secondary schools (Bhuwanya, Fluh & Heymann, 2023).

Since the introduction of FPE, a lot of research has focused mostly on the beneficial effects that free primary education has had in creating educational spaces for learners in primary schools. However, there is limited research on its outcomes on secondary schooling. This paper aims to address this gap and add more to the body of knowledge, especially in Lesotho, where the literature remains relatively scarce to be reviewed for better policy practices. Given the emergence of FAP in helping to create access and completion of secondary schooling, it is essential to review their opportunities and benefits in the provision of secondary education for learners from poor rural households. The paper is constrained in terms of its scope as it focuses on one secondary school. Thus, it does not generalize but only points to trends and patterns that can assist the education sector and give policy direction to improve learners' access from marginalized rural contexts. This paper is part of a Master of Education dissertation; it only reports on the data resulting from one of the research questions of the study, which focused more on the implementation of the FAP; what are the perceived impacts of FAP, and what are the implementation problems of the FAP in enabling education for learners from poor rural context?

## **METHODS**

The study paper is lensed under the interpretive paradigm (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2017) to help the researchers assess the impact of the FAP in increasing access to secondary education. The qualitative approach was chosen for this paper since it investigates human experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Creswell & Creswell, 2017). As a qualitative case study, the paper depended partly on the case study approach of one school in the poor area of Lesotho. Yin (2018) explains case study research as an empirical inquiry that explores a phenomenon comprehensively in a

real-life context using different sources. Therefore, a qualitative interpretive approach seemed to be a suitable research design for this paper. It has helped the researchers to see how far the FAP has increased secondary schooling and understand the factors associated with poor attendance and dropout.

This study used purposive sampling. Purposive sampling incorporates identifying and selecting individuals or groups that are well informed and knowledgeable about a topic of study (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016). The paper is a case study of one secondary school in the rural areas of Butha-Buthe district. Many poor, underprivileged rural communities characterize this particular district. The secondary school was selected because it is situated in a rural community, in poor neighborhoods where the researchers were acquainted with and had many OVC. It was decided to choose this particular school as it benefited from different FAP which the researchers wanted to assess. One principal and two teachers were selected in this rural location since they were experienced in various aspects of this FAP implementation and their impact on schools and learners' education.

To collect data, the paper used semi-structured interviews with one school principal and two teachers. The questions focused mainly on the background of the programs, implementation context, and the problems they faced on the ground, and how this FAP assisted these learners to ensure retention and completion. Triangulating from different participants strengthened the trustworthiness of the paper (Abdalla, Oliverira, Azevedo & Gonzalez, 2017).

The study used thematic analysis, which was informed by research questions, by deriving themes and trends from the collected data (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Kiger and Varpio (2020) mention that thematic analysis constructs patterns or meanings to understand participants' experiences, thoughts, and behavior across a data set that answers research questions. In this particular case, data were coded for the identification of themes, which is partly a reflection of the theoretical framework informing the research questions and any other themes that came out. Coding was done by identifying similar patterns evident in the data analysis that revolved specifically around their FAP implementation

problems and the impact they have on these learners.

To meet the demands of trustworthiness for this paper, the four principles were considered: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 2003). The gathered data was read to participants several times to ensure that the researchers truly captured and reflected what they said. The role of ethics approval is to ensure the protection of participants from any kind of harm and to ensure their right to privacy in research. The University of the Witwatersrand Ethics Committee accepted an application to conduct this research for ethical clearance (Protocol no. 2011ECE106C). Moreover, we also obtained permission from the MOET in Lesotho to carry out this research in a secondary school. The MOET endorsed the letters to interview the school staff. After the permission was granted, the participants were presented with an information sheet indicating the details of the study with an informed written consent, which articulated their voluntary participation and the freedom to withdraw from the study at any time. In order to protect the participants and their school, the researchers used pseudonyms.

This paper is informed by the rational approach (Glewwe & Kremer, 2005) to unravel the contextual conditions of FAP and their influence in retaining OVC in Lesotho rural schools. The rational approach points to the poor contextual realities of implementation, which make it difficult for FAP to realise their intentions. These are financial, human, and material resources necessary to enable the implementation of FAP (Glewwe & Kremer, 2005; Reddy & Sinha, 2010). It also encourages strategic reviewing of other needs of these learners at school and at home to be able to meet their basic needs. The paper further takes into account whether learners, as the beneficiaries of the FPA programs, are fully supported in secondary schools and complete their education. This approach provided a rich perspective to generate and analyse data on the context of implementation and how FAP impacted their education at the secondary school level for learners from poor socio-economic backgrounds.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

In line with the rational approach, the findings reveal that access to secondary education has been

widened to a certain extent, as evidenced by an increase in the number of learners attending school. As thus, two themes emerged; the first theme relates to the impact of financial assistance programs in making secondary education accessible, with two sub-themes: an increase in the school roll and large class size. The second theme addresses implementation challenges of these programs, and in line with this theme, there are six sub-themes that came out. These are: late payments for schools, limited school budget, quality secondary education, learner dropout vs completion, poverty, and more than tuition support, and lastly, cultural issues.

### **Impact of the Financial Assistance Programs on Increasing Access to Secondary Education**

This section discusses the benefits of the assistance programs and how they are able to retain OVC in schools to complete their secondary education. As indicated above, to show that the programs have increased access, two sub-themes emerged. These are discussed below:

#### **An Increase in School Roll and Large Class Size**

All participants acknowledged that access to education at secondary schools has increased. The principal believed that “the FAP had to a certain extent achieved their aims. However, there are a few discrepancies that need to be addressed. It is true there are many OVC in schools now and we can see the school’s roll has increased.” He further pointed out that “although no exact school numbers are indicating OVC learners’ number completing secondary education, but access has been broadened as evidenced by an increase in the school roll.” In support of what the principal said, teachers said that “the FAP have to a certain extent increased access because we have learners who can remain in school throughout the school cycle regardless of their situations.” Similarly, Teacher A stated that “before the introduction of the financial programs, the student-teacher ratio used to be 45:1 but now is 60:1. Although access has been widened, this has led to big classroom sizes yet the number of teachers remained the same. There has not been any deployment of new teachers to make up for the increase.”

This means that many learners from poor households have benefited from the FAP. The principal concurred that, “indeed, many of the learners who are sponsored by the FAP programs have stayed at school and were doing remarkably

well in many subjects. Nonetheless, there are learners whose performance was poor.” The findings indicate clearly that access to secondary schools has grown for OVC. However, lack of resources has caused overcrowded classrooms (Hummel & Engelbrecht, 2018). The programs have not fully improved attendance as they focused narrowly on admission of the learners at secondary schools and have ignored a more quality teaching and learning school environment and the sufficient support of these OVC learners at school and beyond. Compared to primary school, where the state bears the most costs, secondary school is costly and, as such, it remains inaccessible for most children from poor households (Kingdom of Lesotho, 2019). Asongu and Odhiambo (2020) warn that an increase in the student-teacher ratio means deterioration in education quality because teachers have to allocate additional time for teaching. On the same note, Ilie and Rose (2016) argue that although there is an increase in enrolment numbers but inequitable access to education remains a global concern. This leads to a sharp drop in participation in the secondary age groups. When the quality of education deteriorates, it encourages irregular attendance and drop out. These are some of the main obstacles that prevented these financial programs from achieving their intended objectives. It is recommended, therefore, that schools should create educational environments that promote and ensure lifelong opportunities and quality education for all learners (Oden & Lack, 2024).

### **Implementation Challenges of FAP**

Implementation challenges may be related to poor contextual conditions, such as socioeconomic backgrounds and social issues of OVC, and resource capacity at the school level. Schools are also overwhelmed with the influx of students who need more than fee support to complete their education. Due to poverty, cultural pressures, early pregnancies, and initiation, there is poor attendance, and many learners drop out. The complex psychological state faced by many OVC affects the intentions of the FAP and prevents these learners from completing their education because, a lot of times, they are depressed, discouraged, and feel neglected. They are orphaned, head their households, and fend for themselves and their siblings. Thus, policy goals are too ambitious as they do not confront the contextual realities of

schools as sites of implementation. Muthukrishna and Engelbrecht (2018) allude to the gap that exists between policy or program agendas and the practical realities in schools. As a result, it becomes challenging to translate policy into action when resources are inadequate (Fredriksen, 2023). In the same vein, Lewin (2022) clarifies that financing of education in SSA countries is very low; thus, reaching SDG4 targets looks bleak. All these issues have a ripple effect on the implementation of retention and completion of secondary education. To understand deeply these implementation challenges, below are the sub-themes in connection to the theme above.

### **Late Payments for Schools**

The principal and teachers agreed that the government’s delay in paying fees for OVC negatively affects the running of the school. This becomes challenging because these learners were not able to have reference material for a bigger part of the year, thus this hinders them from excelling in their school work. Teacher B protested that, “Support material for reference, such as textbooks, got late into school, sometimes almost halfway through the year. This meant learners had to depend on the notes that teachers give in class.” In line with the literature, Zubairi and Rose (2019) also raise concerns that access to textbooks is limited; students either have to share or do not have textbooks. The delay in allocating books made both the principal and teachers worried about the education of these learners. Teacher A complained that “the delay in the supply of notebooks and textbooks strained teaching and learning. That is why, as a school, we had to find other alternative sources of income to assist in getting food and textbooks for OVC. This further undermined the school’s revenue and how the school was run and managed.” Another challenge facing the OVC learners is that they lose the textbooks provided to them through the textbook rental scheme, which they are not able to replace due to financial constraints. The budget for secondary education is stringent because the funding provided by the World Bank and other international agencies is not enough to assist with the implementation costs in developing countries as promised (Alam, Hoque, Rout & Priyadarshani, 2010). Also, the current inadequate government budget share on secondary education will definitely produce poor equitable

access to education, and subsidies from the government to schools become questionable (Ilie & Rose, 2016). Thus, Zubairi and Rose (2019) believe that in order to achieve SDG4 set targets by 2030, it is important that careful consideration should be placed on how national governments spend resources, particularly on secondary education. Therefore, the MOET must sort channels to pay schools on time to enable schools to function more effectively.

#### **Limited School Budget**

Teacher participants explained that many of their poor learners do not live in close proximity to the school and travel long distances to school. As a result, a school boarding facility was in the pipeline to accommodate these learners, but it is likely not to materialize due to the limited budget of the school. The schools are challenged by these low subsidies that came with the rationalization of the fee program, which reduced the schools' budget. They also come with strict prescriptions of how schools should use them. The consolidated school budget implicated two important issues: a narrow curriculum and the impossibility of offering a boarding facility. The principal clarifies that "the fee rationalised policy and operating the school on a low budget has resulted in excluding practical subjects from the school's curricular offering. For subjects such as Computer Studies, Fashion & Textiles, Nutrition, Design and Technology, it was difficult to offer them because the school does not have funding to hire teachers and buy their material resources." Teacher participants explained that, "the plan was to have a boarding facility to enable learners to stay close to the school. But it became impossible because of the school's limited budget." The principal remarked, therefore, that "the fee rationalization policy seems like the government's political strategy to gain votes. It was not strategically planned to enable the school to run effectively and continue to offer quality education." That is why Asongu and Odhiambo (2020) also argue that when national policies become political, this always represents a challenge to education, especially in economically marginalised countries. The literature further shows that where government subsidies are line-itemised, this challenges schools to make specific improvements aligned to their needs (Branson & Lam, 2017). In our understanding, it is very important, therefore, for

the government to pay out the subsidies as promised and in time, and allow the schools the autonomy of how they use the funds.

#### **Quality Secondary Education**

Full access to education means schools that are resourced and offer quality teaching and learning. EFA advocates for an increase in access to education and mandates all countries to offer quality and equitable education in order to achieve measurable learning outcomes. There are clear indicators that FAP has strained the capacity of current secondary school teachers and infrastructure. When schools fail to offer conducive learning environments, there exists poor performance, high repetition, and dropouts. Since the enrolment increase, which undermined the school's capacity, the situation necessitates more teachers. The principal showed that, "although many OVC have been in school since the FAP, the government has failed to provide additional teachers to the school post the implementation of FAP. Sometimes they had to recruit teachers relying on the school's limited budget." Teacher A corroborates this to say, "because there has not been new infrastructure development and deployment of teachers, schools are overstretched by the crowded classrooms. This becomes challenging for teachers to reach all learners." Teacher B continued to complain that, "this deteriorated and compromised the principles of quality of education. This resulted in poor performance and dropouts." According to the World Bank (2019), the education system experiences challenges of large class sizes, high student-teacher ratios, and a lack of resources. Consequently, quality education remains unreachable for many children in SSA countries (Zickafoose et.al., 2024). Mubarak, Zauhar, and Suryadi (2020) suggest that any implementation process must consider enough funding to make the goals and objectives achievable.

The paper posits that the MOET should increase human and material resources in order to provide quality education and retain learners to complete their education. Again, schools should be sufficiently financed through the provision of instructional materials and infrastructure. This will positively benefit the quality of education provided in the secondary schools in economically challenged countries of SSA (World Bank, 2015). Again, there is a need for a policy that is strategic in

addressing specifically the disadvantaged communities (Quresh, Malkani & Rose, 2020). Synopsis of literature indicates that poor investment in education can result in many challenges such as very big class sizes, failure to provide quality teaching and learning, lack of resource materials, and poor infrastructure which impact negatively on what and how children learn in schools (UNICEF, 2020; Kiden & Musaiwa, 2020 and Kronke & Olan'g, 2020).

ASEC (2020) warns, therefore that globally, the United Nations has highlighted that quality education is important, thus it is included in the SDG4, which calls for equitable quality learning opportunities for all learners. Yet Kronke and Olan'g (2020) explain that many learners attend inadequately equipped schools, creating a difficult learning environment for these learners. While for Chikoko and Mthembu (2020), attempts to increase access resulted in huge increases in enrolments, leading to high teacher-pupil ratios, failing learner retention, and reduced completion rates. Thus, given these difficult challenges, it is concerning that the targets for SDGs are not met (Dalrymple, 2016). The EFA Global Monitoring Report stated that the SDGs target for all young people to complete a good quality secondary school education looks daunting (UNESCO, 2018). This is because the statistics between 2010 and 2015 reveal that only 45% of young people completed secondary school. Hence, access to good-quality education is important for long-term effects in improving the productivity and well-being of learners. Thus, the paper findings deduce that good access to education in Lesotho indicates not only increasing school enrolments but also the need to pay attention to the quality of education offered in schools.

However, the proposition of this is paper is that the impact of this FAP on OVC schooling was limited as it focused more on increasing enrolments but ignored the deteriorating quality of the school learning environment. The goal of SDGs in education proposes quality, inclusive, and equitable education for lifelong learning (UN, 2015). The UN advises that the SDGs need to be supported through the involvement of grassroots integration into planning and development of countries at various stages of socioeconomic development. To help this planning process, it is important to identify gaps in order to address areas that require attention in order

to mitigate against risks and challenges (Quresh, Malkani & Rose, 2020).

### **Learner Dropout vs. Completion**

Although some positive strides have been attainable in providing education for all children, progress remains quite slow and worrying. School participants cited several factors as contributing to dropouts. The main causes were attributed to poor school attendance and the home situation of OVC learners. Sometimes, when schools do not offer quality education and learners come from poor households, there are higher chances of poor school attendance and dropouts. Evans, Mendey and Acosta (2021) also attribute dropping out of school to poverty and other costs of schooling. In the case of Lesotho, Rakolobe and Teisi (2024) point out that contextual conditions such as poverty and rurality are challenges affecting school attendance. This poor attendance hindered good performance of OVC at school which ultimately leads to dropouts. The principal showed that, "many OVC did not attend school regularly partly because they have no one at home to keep on ensuring that they attend school effectively." Similarly, Teacher B also indicates that, "it is evident from the increase that many OVC learners attend school because of FAP. However, many of them do not attend school regularly as they should.

Furthermore, some have to travel long distances to school, and eventually they lose interest and decide to leave school". Bandyopadhyay (2011) agrees that although many children have access to education, but the quality of education is poor, as reflected in the high levels of repetition and dropouts. As stated in the World Bank (2019) report, poor school performance leads to low learning outcomes, and this ultimately leads to dropouts (UNDP, 2015). This suggests that these programs did not address the problems that orphaned, vulnerable learners face. The evidence from the school shows that focusing on school fees and textbook support is not fully address and target the factors contributing to OVC learners' regular school attendance and completion of their secondary education.

These factors affecting access and completion can also result from geographical factors and different socio-cultural issues beyond the school's capacity. There exists a big gap between enrolment in schools and learners completing school,

especially for learners who come from poor households and vulnerable groups (Quresh, Malkani & Rose, 2020). The programs failed completely to address the socio-cultural factors and problems that negatively hinder their sustainability for completion rates. As a result, many children will continue to drop out, especially the most disadvantaged, as they progress through the secondary system (Zubairi & Rose, 2019). As such, Thaanyane (2019) recommends that the education system should consider issues such as poverty in planning for educational services.

### **Poverty and More than Tuition Support**

Besides the tuition fee support, there are many contributory issues affecting the quality of education, retention, and completion. Although OVC were offered financial assistance, the principal argued that “some of the learners leave school because of poverty.” Teacher B concurred that “despite the OVC being given tuition fees and book assistance, their attendance often remained poor because their extreme household poverty constrained them from buying uniforms”. The principal pointed out that “as a school, they partnered with the school community to have feeding schemes that help OVC with daily meals and uniforms, and clothing”. This clearly proves that learners' poor attendance is influenced by socio-economic issues external to the school's responsibilities. However, learners who were less determined in their school work lost interest the minute they realized they would not be able to cope with the demands of schooling. Teachers further indicated that, “these children are discouraged and lack interest in their education. This is because their parents are uneducated and do not demonstrate any interest in education. Finally, some learners are orphaned, and they have to take on the responsibility of taking care of their siblings, or sometimes, they have to leave school and work to provide for their families.”

According to Zubairi and Rose (2019), eliminating fees without considering other school-related expenses has little impact on schooling and completion rates. It is evident, therefore, that financial assistance should also target things like uniform costs, transport, and boarding. At the school level, Chikoko and Mthembu (2020) suggest that the national government should strategically confront the needs of OVC if they are expected to

be in school throughout the cycle. In this case, the government should have clearly analysed the possible factors beyond the school's setting contributing to poor attendance and dropouts. School infrastructure development and training programs for teachers did not grow to respond to the increasing demands, yet it became obvious that many OVC were in desperate need of not only tuition assistance but also textbooks to attend and complete their secondary schooling.

### **Cultural Issues**

Other factors contributing to poor attendance and dropouts came from cultural beliefs and customs, such as initiation and marriage in the communities. This is in line with what Shahidul and Karim (2015) say that cultural factors are major contributing factors for dropout because parents do not believe in education. On the same note, Maine (2022) states that parental involvement is minimal in education because of their low education level. They support early marriages, initiation, and teenage pregnancies. Teachers indicated that “boys usually go to initiation schools and become herd boys. For girls, they fall pregnant and ultimately leave school.” Lewin (2019) asserts that cultural preferences are often identified as the most common barriers to education. Such cultural beliefs promote poverty, teenage pregnancy, and the spread of HIV/AIDS. These eventually hinder girls from fully attending school. The result is school dropout. Thus, the success of programs depends on the cultural implementation contexts where the policies are implemented.

### **CONCLUSION**

The paper concludes the FAP has enabled access for learners from poor economic backgrounds as evidenced by an increase in enrolment, but they are not enough in retaining OVC to ensure that they complete their education. Education for all is a global topical issue of inclusivity, as with many other developing countries, it is still daunting for Lesotho to reach full access, given the country's socio-economic climate. Although evidence from the findings indicates that access to secondary education has been widened, national priorities on education remain questionable. There are also unclear indicators and targets. The promise of SDG4 2030 is just around the corner. The question is: how far



have we gone in achieving equitable quality education? Education aims to create a world where all children, irrespective of their background and location, can benefit from it.

The paper recommends, therefore that implementation challenges raise important concerns for new policy direction. This calls for the government of Lesotho to not only focus on fee elimination but also consider other indirect costs of schooling, such as uniforms, transport, and food to mitigate factors such as irregular attendance and poor performance, which necessitate children from poor, marginalized families to fail to complete secondary education. Despite school factors, home factors such as poverty, culture, and tradition must be addressed to ensure OVC are retained in school to complete their education. The government, together with the schools, should also continuously hold sensitization programmes for communities and schools about these FPA programs to enable buy-in from the grassroots. Also, the government should build infrastructure and supply teachers to accommodate the increase in learners.

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