



# A dilemma of primary schools' transition: A stance from classroom teachers in Assaba-County, Mauritania

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## Abstract

This study aimed to explore factors influencing students' transition from primary to secondary schools, the discrepancy of primary and secondary enrollments. The study used cluster sampling for identifying schools from the district of Assaba. The study aimed to explore the issue from teachers' perspectives. Classical Liberal Theory was adopted as a framework to guide this study. The theory argues that all individuals have the right to access education without any disparity. So, education systems are found to develop human capabilities and enable individuals to further their inherent skills. A qualitative approach was used as a study methodology, using a narrative inquiry approach to explore participants' perceptions about factors influencing the transition from primary to secondary. Interviews were the instrument used to collect data from 12 participants selected randomly from 3 schools. The study found that discontinuity of learning, home distance from schools, gender preference in education, and low income impact the transition from primary to secondary levels. The study recommends that school principals enhance counseling guidelines in schools for students, engaging parents' participation in the education process.

**Keywords;** Primary enrollment; post-primary enrollments; theoretical framework.

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## 1. Introduction

The School system is a mechanism by which modern societies rely on young generations' education, allowing children to improve their talents and skills (Evans et al.,2018). Child access to education services is a pivot for society and human capital development. In its 28th article, United Nations(UN) declared children's right to access education regardless

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of gender. Also, Millennium Development Goal 2 (2000), United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and Education for All are international agencies that call for schools for young generations. The paradigm concerning child access to schools has resulted in a student booming access to primary level in both high and low-income countries (UNESCO, 2016). A transition to secondary school education has been identified as a crucial period for teenager learners to enjoy adventuring knowledge-based at the post-primary level (Evans et., 2018). A student's coherent transition to post-primary education is an identical factor for human capital growth and societal development (Chung et al., 1998; Coelho & Romao, 2016; Akos et al., 2015). In another way, the transition to post-primary education is a platform where students get to learn for their future careers. Still, it also empowers student's ability to acquire knowledge-based for future life (OCED, 2013). In a study (2017), Viner and his colleagues concluded that students bounded to post-primary education have more chances to get avoiding early marriage, child fertility. The finding assumes that students who happen to retain post-primary experience and learning have a privilege to advantage wealth-being. Though the importance of transition in students' learning life, a few pieces of literature is yet concerned with elementary schools' transition in Africa, and no single study in this area is known in the context of Mauritania.

On the international level, reports showed that more than 85% of students who attend the final grade of primary education transfer to post-primary education. Contemporary Africa was labeled among countries that suffer students' low enrollment and transition to secondary schools. The actual transition rate is estimated at 52%, while it is reached 67% in the Eastern and Northern parts of Africa (UIS, 2015). According to Kajunju (2015), Children's Access to primary schools has undergone significant progress in some Sub-Saharan countries. Enrollment of primary schools was increased from 54% in 2000 to reach 85% respectively in Sub-Sahara regions. In a study in 2006, Kattan indicated that education fees are an essential factor affecting students' access to primary and transition secondary schools. So, Malawi and Burundi's countries increased their primary enrollment when their governments implemented the repealing tuition fees of primary education. For example, school enrollment increased to 51% and 94% in Burundi and Malawi's primary education level, but the transition to the post-primary was not enhanced accordingly to meet the universal standards (UNECEF & World Bank 2015; UN statistics Division 2013) cited in Earl 2018.

In North Africa, where Mauritania is, data shows that North zones of the African continent, including Mauritania, had maintained significant progress regarding students' enrollment in the basic elementary education. According to a World Bank report (2018), the rate of students enrollments was 99% in Morocco, Algeria 98%, Mali 59%, and over 79% was reported in Mauritania. The data entrusted that the mentioned countries are ahead to secure their Millennium development goals regarding

student's access to primary schools. This indicator assumes that the accessibility of education is no longer an issue in this part of Africa. However, keeping students' perseverance in education and transition to post-primary is the issue that remains challenging the progress of education in some African countries.

## 2. Literature Review

Evidence from literature demonstrated adequate resources, and parents' economic status is an indispensable factor for students' learning and the transition to post-primary education (Bloyce & Frederickson 2012; Khalid & Tadess, 2020). Yet, the transition concept has an overlapping meaning that undergoes beyond students' shift from one level to another. A student transition means an adaptation to new process of learning. Adjusting to the adaptation, students need additional facilities and support to cope with the new changes (Cox & Kennedy, 2008; Aslam et al., 2019). In a study (2015), Mutiga declared that a family expenditure on education, whether tuition or accommodation fees have a significant impact to influence students' transition in low-income countries. Mutiga also concluded that education costs make low-income families reluctant to support students' transition to post-primary education. This factor contributes to enlarge the gap of students' enrollment in primary and secondary schools.

Similarly, Weya (2010) argued that transition to secondary education is measured by the number of students who succeeded in getting admitted for post-primary education. Weya has substantiated the correlation between the financial income of parents and student enrolment in post-primary education. In his study, Weya assumed that the more student parents have a higher income, is the more chance for students to enjoy and proceed to secondary level. The World Bank (2005) reported the effectiveness of funding public schools to increase the transition and enrollment in both primary and secondary.

Mwikya (2019) observed that most families in Africa suffer from education costs since governments have limited funds for public education (Mwikya, 2019). Sponsoring education is an identical factor to students learning, and the continuance of post-primary education and providing education facilities is a rationale for the country's economy and human development (World Bank, 2009). Another study conducted by Lewin (2007) found that education charges reduce the chance of many children to fulfill post-primary education, and the case has more influence on students whose parents earn less financial income. Chimombo and Wangari (2009, 2012) concluded that a child's opportunity to pursue post-primary education is contingent on social, economic status (SES). Students from low-income backgrounds mostly fail to make transition cease education journey at the elementary level. Another factor influencing students' transition is family education background (FEB). In a quantitative study (2020), Galiano and his colleagues found that parents' education level is significant for determining children's engagement in

education. The finding of Galiano and his colleagues assumes parents with high education levels put much effort into supporting students' transition to further their academic achievement. Also, Behrendt and Franklin (2014) emphasized the role of family educational level to influence students' transformation from one education level to another.

A finding's of Behrendt and Franklin described that the family's education level has a significant influence on students' schooling where educated families are aware of education values and their benefits on the development of humanity. Families play an essential role in determining the education of siblings. According to Mbui (2010), the social environment is a substantial factor to change an individual's mind, and home is the environment in which students spend most of their time. The more students see the inspiration of family members towards education; the more students get inspired to teaching and vice versa. In addition to the cost of education, education level of the family, the literature labeled culture as another factor that might influence students transition to secondary. In a study in 2018, Wanjala explained that transition from primary to secondary is still an actual issue that affecting education progress despite the abolition of education fees in many regions of the world. Achoka and others (2007) reported similar findings when they deduced the low number of students who shift from primary to secondary. Auralia (2008) attributed students failing to seize transition of post-primary to the cultural factor in some countries. Auralia justified his argument by articulating some cultural contexts consider girls as mothers and wives entrusted to look after children and house affairs. So, early marriage is termed as a matter impeding for girls to advantage education as they are not required to further education as boys do. This cultural phenomenon interferes as an impediment of transition for a considerable number of female students. Unsurprisingly, some findings on gender disparity in education showed that female students are disadvantaged when it comes to education in some Asian and African contexts, where education regarded as a male-oriented (Duran-Narucki, 2008; Nyawara, 2007; Fazal, Badar et al., 2013 & Cheolhao & Romao, 2016; & Hopwood, 2016). In Mauritanian education system, every student has to sit for and the pass the examination of NEPC before transferring to secondary schools, failing to make this exam, a student won't be to get education service in the secondary level. A student can have a second opportunity to sit for the exam if he/ she doesn't cross the age 16 years. Following data in (Table 1) reveals the recent available students' result of the NEPC exam in Mauritania:

Table 1. Students' result of the NEPC exam

Year	Rate of students' passing NEPC exam
2013	52.6%
2014	53.3%
2015	51.8%
2016	55.7%
2017	57.7%

(MoE, 2018)

The data shown on the table entails us that students score positive results when sitting for the NEPC exam, a bridge in which every grade 6 has to cross to transfer to secondary level. The more access to the primary is, the more students can transition to secondary education, mainly when the education is free (Lewin, 2005; Chung et al., 1998; Cheolhao & Romao, 2016). In the case of Mauritania, it was noted that secondary enrollment is still far from the average despite the increase of child access to the primary level. Consequently, this study's attention was to explore students' transition to post-primary schools in Mauritania. So far, divergent literature was carried out (Hopwood et al., 2014; Rice, 2001; Wesalet al, 2010 & Hopwood, 2016; Hopwood & Dymont, 2012; Hopwood & Dymont, 2014) the transition issue and its impact on students' development learning. This body of literature focused on challenges that may confront students during the post-transition period. The current study recognizes that multiple factors such as education facilities, socioeconomic and cultural aspects can influence students' transition to secondary education. Thus, this emerging phenomenon in Mauritanian education was the cardinal stimuli for the researcher to conduct this study to address the school transition matter.

### 3. Theoretical Framework

This paper used Classical Liberal Theory as a conceptual framework. The classical liberal theory originated by Mann in 1889. Classical Liberal Theory argues that all individuals come to the world with some capabilities and competencies. So, education is found to develop human capabilities and enable individuals to further their inherent skills. Based on the notion of classical liberal theory, education systems' initiatives have to pay attention to all aspects that could hamper students learning and not permit them to continue their education (Edwards et al., 2014). The founder of this theory (Mann1796-1889), the classical liberal approach, has prescribed education as "the great equalizer of opportunity and chance". Therefore, the classical liberal theory strongly emphasizes equity in education among individuals and rejects all kinds of nepotism or preference of gender in education. Every person has the right to access education. Education is a creative concept that confronts many challenges and burdens, and education systems are

found to tackle these challenges and reduce obstacles to enable students to further their education. The theory suits this study's objectives as classical liberal theory appeals for ongoing education at different levels, from primary to secondary education.

The classical theory underlines that education systems exist to eradicate social, economic, and cultural boundaries, so students can smoothly transition from primary to secondary. The instauration of the free education policy in 1999 has permitted schools to enroll many students at the primary level. This amendment is considered a turning point from the government toward equity in education and allows students to participate in education. Therefore, the classical liberal theory is convenient for this study since the classical liberal perspective highlights that education is mandatory to develop individuals' inherent capabilities. When the government makes a rational distribution of learning materials and resources, students may get the benefit to improve their academic achievement, which in turn leads students to transfer successfully from one educational level to another. On the other hand, cultural beliefs, gender favoritism, and limited economic resources are factors that may affect students' academic achievement and their transition from one education level to another (Ondieki & Orodho, 2015).

### *3.1. Research Background*

For a long decade, the government of Mauritania implemented a free education policy to maintain Melliniuem Development and Education for All Goals by improving child access to education. The free education policy enabled many students from low economic backgrounds to get education services at public schools. Despite various education challenges in the country, Mauritania made remarkable progress regarding students' enrollment at the primary level(Draft Report, 2018). According to the Ministry of Education statistics of primary schools in 2016/2017, Mauritania has 4 271 schools to run education service at the elementary level, including private and public schools, where the private schools constitute 14% of the schools country. Primary education in Mauritania comprises six grades, starting from grade 1 to grade 6. More than 4000 primary schools in the country, but only 35% of schools are only considered complete schools that furnish education from level 1 to level 6. This data entails that about 65% of primary schools do not provide teaching for all primary levels. With all these challenges together, Mauritania was able to paint its primary education with a significant improvement in enrollment and Child access to education services from the national level. Student enrollment grew from 601 364 in 2015 to 627 710 for 2016/2017(MoE, 2017).

Based on the World Bank report in 2018, Mauritania has a significant realization of primary enrollment. The World Bank document showed that Mauritania has about 836 students attending both primary and secondary cycles. Of this number, 627 students are enrolled at the primary level. About 75% of Mauritanian students attend basic

elementary schools for a different primary education level. Statistics from the Ministry of Education indicated that primary underwent a significant achievement concerning student enrollment rates. The gross enrollment(GE) went from 51.3% in 2000/2001 to 69% for the academic year of 2016/2017, and 51% of those enrolled students were girls. UNESCO (2020) reported that primary enrollment surpassed 79% in the academic year 2018. With this record, the country boosted the enrollment rate by 10% compared to GE in 2017(UNESCOS,2020). The bellow (Table 2) displays students' enrollment in both primary and secondary levels:

Table 2. Enrollment Rates in Primary and Secondary

Primary Education	Year	Enrollment Rate%	Secondary Education	Year	Enrollment Rate%
	2014	76.29		2014	23.7
	2015	-		2015	24.98
	2016	73.11		2016	27.46
	2017	77.82		2017	28.19
	2018	79.57		2018	30.98

Source: UNESCO 2020

The table1 articulates the enrollment gap in the primary and secondary levels. While students' enrollment alleviated in the basic elementary level, the transition to post-primary level is yet to reach the average. This study identifies students' transition to post-primary level as the advantage students get to enroll at secondary level after passing the entry exam of the secondary education. The exam is known in Mauritania as the (PEPC EXAM); students need to sit for this exam when they reach grade 6 of primary level. The common understanding is that transition to post-primary education helps students enhancing their based-knowledge as enjoying the service of education at the secondary level.

### 3.2. Statement of Problem

Measures on primary enrollment indicate that Mauritania maintained progress towards making its universal enrollment at the primary level. This progress on the primary level coincides with the low transition and enrollment of students in secondary schools. Literature conducted on students' transition signified that tuition fees are constraint factors influencing students transition and seizing post-primary education (Hopwood et al, 2014; Rice, 2001; West et al, 2010 & Hopwood, 2016). On the other hand, some research findings regarding students transition to post- primary revealed that socio and economic status are main factors which can interval to impact students transition. The existing literature focused on exploring students post- experience of transition( Hanewald

2013; Hopwood et al, 2016; Kükner, 2015 ; Nyawara ,2007 ; Hopwood et al, 2014 & Akinkunle 2003, Topping,2011; Cox & Kennedy, 2008; Aslam et al., 2019; Wanjala ,2018; Duran-Narucki, 2008 ;Nyawara ,2007; Fazal,; Badar et al., 2013 & Cheolhao & Romao, 2016; & Hopwood, 2016 ). The present study aimed to focus on the investigation of factors that influence students to transit to post-primary education. Exploring factors influencing students' pre-transition to secondary education through the lens of grade 6 classroom teachers is the uniqueness of this study. The documented literature regarding transition focused on the transition effect on students' academic achievement and their well-being and interactions with peers and teachers at secondary schools. This research will go beyond the current findings on the transition issue to add a contribution to the literature body. Moreover, little is known about education and student transition in Mauritania. Therefore, the study would shade light on Mauritanian education concerns and issues that impede students transition to secondary level. Despite the execution of free education policy from elementary level to tertiary education, the transition process is still not coherent as expected, the emerging incident is that more access to elementary level but less transition to secondary education. Currently, report in 2020 showed the huge gap between primary and secondary enrollments taking into the account that no tuition fee is needed when students transferring to post-primary level. Mostly, education costs, infrastructure shortage, and education resources are boundaries limiting students' access to educational organizations (Cheolhao & Romao, 2016).

In Mauritania, every student possesses the right to enjoy free education, and student parents are not mandatory to pay tuition fees when a student moves from primary to secondary level. Besides, the government of Mauritania launched a project called the National Program for Schools Improvement and Educational System (PNDSE II). The project was found in 2011 to sustain schools for education quality and ensure child access to primary and secondary education levels. Such policy made Mauritania moving forward to make its universal development regarding students' access to elementary education. Based on a UNESCO study in (2020), primary school enrollment reached 79.57% in Mauritania, but the scenario diverges when it comes to students' transition to secondary schools. Data reveals that less than 30% of primary students are only succeeding to achieve the transition to post-primary despite the positive results of students' performance in the NEPC examination. This emergent situation of the Mauritania education system was the underlying motive for the researcher to carry out this empirical study to investigate factors that influence students' transition to post-primary education from classroom teachers' stance.

### ***3.3. Significance of the Study***

This study's findings would define factors influencing students' transition and enrollment at the post-primary level. The writer would have a plan to share the results of this



research with the Ministry of National Education in Mauritania. So, stakeholders could use the study's implications to set out plans to reduce the gap between primary transition and secondary enrollment. The study also will identify measures for enhancing student perseverance in post-primary education. On the other hand, the paper will open doors for other researchers to explore more the issues that hamper students' transition to the post-primary level. Researchers can use this study as a base to ground their researchers since there is no document yet in Mauritania regarding this matter.

The study's objectives are:

- 1- To explore factors influencing students' transition to post-primary education through a stance of classroom teachers.
- 2- To identify barriers challenging students to make a coherent transition to secondary level.

As a consequence; the study developed the research question of; "Why do elementary students suffer the transition to post-primary despite introducing free education policy in the Mauritania education system? ".

#### **4.Methodology**

A qualitative approach was adopted to explore factors influencing students' transition to post-primary education. Creswell (2018) articulated that qualitative is a method to examine the phenomenon through an inductive process, where the researcher figures out the phenomenon through the interrogation of participants. Researchers focus on exploring the central concept in qualitative studies; exploring a central phenomenon permits researchers to get more ideas about the phenomenon studied. The study used a narrative inquiry design to explore participants' views about influencing students' transition to secondary schools in Mauritania.

##### *4.1 Instrument*

The study adopted a semi-structured interview guide to collect data from participants. Gaffas (2019) mentioned that interviews are a process to investigate participants' opinions, attitudes towards various aspects of a social science issue. The researcher prepared questions related to the theme of the study in advance for the interview scenarios. The research instrument was developed based on the constant themes from the available literature. For validity, the instrument was checked by an expert in the field to ensure accuracy of the instrument. Therefore, the researcher used open-ended and probing questions to ensure that participants can provide an in-depth explanation of their responses to the interview questions.

##### *4.2 Population and sampling*

the study targeted 16 primary schools located in the Assaba region. A cluster sampling was used to identify schools with a low rate of transition to secondary schools. Available

statistics regarding schools record and students' transition were reviewed for identifying the lowest transition rate in the targeted schools. Purpose sampling techniques were employed to select participants from four primary schools located in the Assaba County. The sampling of the study was composed of 12 classroom teachers of elementary public schools. All participants were teachers of grade 6, the final stage of primary level. Since teachers are directly in touch with students throughout day-to-day contact and learning activities, the study believed that teachers have enough experience to portray the difficulties that can hamper the students from advancing their education post-primary level. So, the study wanted to explore factors influencing students' transition to post-primary through the lens of teachers who take the responsibility to tutor students and prepare them for the National Exam of Primary Cycle (NEPC) Mauritania. The National Exam of Primary Cycle is organized every year for students who enrolled in the 6th grade, the final primary education level. The Ministry of education administers the exam. The exam subjects are uniformed among all primary schools in the country.

#### *4.3. Interviews procedures*

Before the start of the interviews, the researcher dispatched consent forms to participants, informing them about the purpose of the study and its importance for shedding light on the transition matter that becomes an emerging phenomenon in the Mauritanian education system. Participants were asked to express their decision whether they tend to participate in the study. Also, the researcher notified participants that they withdraw from the interview any time they feel the interview may cause damage to him/ her regarding their teaching career. After the confirmation of the preceded points, the researcher started the scenario of semi-structured interviews. All interviews were audio-recorded with the permission of interviewees. Each interview took about 35-40 minutes.

#### *4.4. Data Analysis*

Audio-recorded interviews were transcribed based on the transcription techniques that Creswell (2014) emphasized. A transcription process helps the researcher developing accurate themes generated from the content of the interviews. The data were analyzed and categorized into themes and sub-themes. Based on interviews finding, the researcher has identified *drop out before the exam*, *low financial incomes*, *lack of learning facilities*, *home tasks*, and *chores* as emerging themes. The introduction of free education tuition fees was thought to be a catalyst factor that could balance transition and enrolment in post-primary. However, Mauritania's case is that primary schools achieved significant attainment in terms of enrollments of students and low access to secondary schools. Literature has defined several factors impacting students' transition from primary to secondary; tuition fees and parents' education level were among other issues thought to

be the main constraints of student intake of post-primary education in the low-income country-nation

Table 3 Participants demographic information

Gender	
Female	3
Male	9
Total	12
Educational level	
Brevet	2
Baccalaureate	7
Bachelor	3
Total	12
Teaching Experience	
3 years	3
4 years	4
5 years	2
7 years	1
8 years	2
Total	12

Table4- Qualitative themes and Sub-themes of participants' responses

Themes	Sub-themes
Educational Costs	Demotivation
Family Economic Status	Child labor
Regular work	Student absence
Provision of learning facilities	Financial support
Cultural Attitudes	Family obligations needs
	School distance
	Transportation
	Accommodation
	Gender preference in schooling
	Home chores and tasks
	Family social involvement activities

## 5.Findings

The study aimed to explore factors impacting students' transition to secondary education. Reports on educational enrollments showed that Mauritania had maintained a significant performance regarding access to primary education. For instance, the World Bank report (2018) indicated that Mauritania performed out Senegal, Burkina Faso, and Mali regarding Child access to the primary level (World Bank, 2018). However, the significant achievement of child access to elementary schools did not reflect positively students' transition and enrollment in secondary schools in Mauritania, where the gross enrollment of secondary level is still under the average. Therefore, the study was conducted to explore factors influencing students' transition to post-primary education. The study collected data from twelve experienced classroom teachers through in-depth interviews. Participants were composed of nine( 9) male and three(3) female classroom teachers. In general speaking, this study reported almost similar findings in the literature as challenging factors to students' transition (see table 4). The study's finding exerted that educational cost influences students' continuance learning and transition to secondary level. This phenomenon has been emphasized clearly when the participant declared:

Most of the students come from families who don't have formal jobs, so students from those families are exposed to stop school at any time because these families mainly depend on the labor work income. Some students find it difficult to continue because of financial matters, so they leave school; sometimes, students stop coming to class and start looking to help their families (Participant\_A October 5, 2020).

Participant H mentioned that;

Student parents are not asked to pay tuition fees for pupil enrollment. Still, parents need to provide books, uniforms, and transportation to their kids because some families live far away from schools in remote areas. Students need to pass long distances to come to school; this makes some students stop studying and look for a job to help family finance (Participant\_ H October 9, 2020).

Participant I indicated that:

Yes, students register in primary schools, but this doesn't mean students retain schooling until they transition to the next level. For example, I have seen students were attending classes, and their names exist on the NEPC applicants' list ..but they are missed on the day of the exam...Later on, it was discovered they just stopped the school a couple of weeks before the exam( Participant\_I, October 10, 2020).

Participant L also added:

Yes, my school records a considerable number of students when it accounts for students enrollment, ..am..mm...the number of students enrolled is negatively reflecting transition rate to secondary education....class size is used to exceed 40 students at the beginning of the academic year ah, ah, when it comes to the third semester, you may get the class accounts 25-30 students, this something that frequently happens every year( Participant\_L October 16, 2020).

Participants (B, C,D ,E &I) had reported similar responses when asked to explain their opinions regarding the mismatch of students' enrollment in primary schools and the transition to secondary level. Participants stated, “students are much dominated by family decision...Young boys can not stop going to schools without the blessing of their families.....how much the family values education it matters for the education of their siblings”( Participants\_B October 11, 2020).

Participants D, E, and F mentioned that the inconsistency of students' enrollment in primary level and their transition to secondary level is attributed to social background and cultural attitudes, "When we look at the number of students enrolled at school. Female students exceed boys in terms of quantity; some families do not like sending daughters to another place for the sake of study when there is no secondary school in their village. Most female students are exposed to end early schooling; as a female, I would have faced the scenario, but I was lucky because my uncle was living in the city so"( Participant\_D). Participant E stated, " girls number in my class is higher than boys, this can impacts students transition because most female students in remote zones fail to make the transition( Participnat\_E)

Also, the study found that *parents' financial background* is another factor contributing to impact students' transition to post-primary education. Indeed, student families are not mandated to pay any tuition fee to public schools, whether primary or secondary. However, student families bear accommodations and transportation expenses that low-income families may not be able to afford. To explain this phenomenon, one participant added: "Yes/ families have to accommodate uniforms, books, transportation, accommodation to their students. It is not easy for students of remote regions; usually, this kind of students face financial support because of the low income of their families" Another participant explained, "market opportunities are available, adolescents don't need to get waiting long to find who can hire them. They need to work to fulfill some needs ." Another participant commented, "You find a man leaves the house, and the wife becomes in charge of providing food and other family needs, teenagers leave school to join the market labor to help their families." "Students from poor and divorced families don't have the willingness to continue the study, though some of them are performing well in schools. They can't see themselves going to schools while mothers are suffering to provide their basic needs of clothing, books and food" was described by one of the participants.

The study also found that the lack of secondary schools in remote areas is another factor influencing students' transition to post-primary schools. Participants reported a shared vision that students must shift from remote villages to enjoy secondary education. This finding can be implied when one of the interviewees stated:

My students are excited to participate in the NPEC exam. They want to move to the next level...One thing they worried about is moving to the neighboring city after the completion of primary level, there is no secondary school in the village, and students need to shift if their parents want them to enroll in the secondary schools (Participant\_B).

Also, participant I stated that;

Imagine students are qualified to get enrolled in the secondary level; when parents are not living in the city, this could challenge their enrollment, female students suffer the situation more than boys, parents don't like to allow daughters to study away from home (Participant\_I October 9, 2020).

Moreover, *cultural attitudes and biased opportunities* among gender were found as a factor influencing students' transition. Participants believed that parents are biased toward boys when it comes to education. Boys have more advantages to further their education while girls help in the daily home domestic chores. Such societal practices impede some girls from getting the opportunity to join post-primary learning, which in turn impacts students' overall transition rate, as girls' access to primary schools outscore boys in Mauritania (MoE, 2018). However, female students are lagging behind boys when it comes to transition from primary to secondary level. Based on participants' responses, girls have fewer advantages than boys to transit to secondary schools. This

notion is understood when the participant answered, "boys and girls leave home to schools at the same time, they spend the same credit hours in class, when boys and girls back home from school, girls start to help mothers in their home duties while boys can enjoy free time to rest or to revise their lessons" (Participant8, October 12, 2020)

Another participant declared that;

Yes/ Community culture encourages men to work hard out of the house, while females are active in house duties. A female student is not excused when she is not taking her part to participate in the housing work. Girl students help cook, clean, and other home duties (Participant\_D).

With a similar view, participant F clarified;

Yes/ female students are given too much house workload and having fewer chances to stay longer in education. Most families prefer education for sons while daughters are just enough not to be illiterate. Girls are seen as future wives; they must participate in the daily house services, cooking, washing, taking care of their younger brothers/ sisters, with that they get trained before they become wives. (Participant\_F).

## 6. Discussion

The current study was conducted to explore factors influencing students' transition to post-primary education. The study explored the transition issue from a classroom teachers' perspective. Hence fore, the study was guided by this research question:

Why do elementary students suffer the transition to post-primary despite introducing free education policy in the Mauritania education system?

Twelve classroom teachers were invited to take part in this study. All participants were primary classroom teachers who deliver lessons to the final grade students at the elementary level. Participants were considered to have adequate teaching experience to describe the intervening factors that influence students' transition to the post-primary level. The findings disclosed that transition challenges identified in the literature are prevailing in the context of Mauritania despite the execution of the education system.

*Educational Costs:* the interviewees had a common perspective that educational expense is a barrier to the transition. The interpretation of this finding is that students' parents have to bear financial costs to ensure learning continuity for their siblings. This finding was identical to the findings of (Hanewald 2013; Edwards, Zimmermann, Sitha, & Williams, 2014). Also, the study found that students get demotivated attending to the classroom when feeling the financial struggle of their parents. The respondent indicated the availability of *child labor* also contributes to influencing the transition where a

student can drop out from elementary level to get a job in the labor market "they leave school; sometimes, a student stops coming to class and starts looking for a way to contribute to the daily need" (Participant1). So, the study recommends the execution of compulsory education to ensure that students do not abandon at an early age. School leaders are also advised to incorporate counseling meetings in the school curriculum and schedule. Then, students and parents can attend the advice sessions to be counseled about the advantages of education for social development.

*Economic Status Background:* Participants believed that living standard is an identical factor to students' transition. Students from low-income backgrounds mostly cease their education at grade 6, the final stage of basic elementary education. Participants believed that students from low economic backgrounds mostly get into trouble to seize the transition. Though students in Mauritania enjoy free education at all levels (from elementary to tertiary level), parents still have to provide a financial contribution to ensure that their sons and daughters can fulfill their education without any disturbance. This scenario mainly disturbs the education of students from low-income families because most of these families live in rural areas and don't do a regular job. One participant added that "parents are not asked to pay tuition fees for pupil enrollment, but parents need to provide books and clothes for students because the school doesn't provide student uniform"( Participant\_H). The interpretation of this finding is that schools structure offer no support to accommodate students' from low income –background. These students and their parents need financial aid to slow down the financial burden when students transition to the post-primary level. The current finding got in line with Mwikya's (2019) findings, who argued that supporting students from low-income backgrounds is a positive inducement to increase the amount of students' transition to post-primary levels. In the same vein, the study's results align with the findings of (Karhula 2017; Lindemann & Gangl, 2020; Lindemann & Gangl, 2019). The cited researchers found that financial support significantly impacts students' transition from primary to secondary or secondary to tertiary education. Karhula and Lindemann's studies found a strong correlation between students' economic backgrounds and performance and academic achievement. Therefore, spending on education forms a challenge for students whose parents are not regularly occupying a profession. The study believes that the transition and enrollment at the secondary level will be increased when the government offers financial support to low-income families.

*Learning facilities.* Another finding of the study was related to the provision of learning facilities. Participants of the study pointed out learning facility is a determinant factor for the school transition. This factor was found to have a significant influence on students of remote areas. Participants believed that students who live in remote places are vulnerable not to make the transition to the Post-primary level because some zones don't have facilities for secondary education. "Oh/ yes...One thing that gets my student to worry about is traveling to the neighboring city when completing the elementary education levels, there is no secondary school in the village, so they need to shift to a place where they get secondary education service (Participant\_B). Another participant also added, "OH/ yes, it happens to see students perform well in the primary level but fail to enroll in the secondary because they live in the rural and parents are not ready to



abandon their hometown, female students suffer more from this situation parents don't like to send daughters studying away from home" (Participant\_M). Based on the participants' responses, the study explicates the provision of secondary schools in rural is mandatory to help students to make a coherent transition to the post-primary level. Though random housing makes it hard to allocate schools in every zone, the study suggests policymakers initiate valuable strategies regarding the vision of constructing schools in remote areas. This could be regarded as a solution to treat the shortage of learning facilities in rural areas. Also, participants explained that people shift from their hometowns for only the sake of getting a school that can provide secondary education to their siblings. In a preserved society like Mauritania, girls are not likely to be sent away from family for education. So, most female students don't proceed with post-primary education due to the lack of secondary schools in their own hometown, and parents are reluctant to send them to other cities. Consequently, ending the learning process at the elementary level is fact underlining female education in rural zones. Education facilities are the pivot for the development of education. Education is a process requiring available resources and materials for achieving its objectives. In Mauritania, secondary education is distributed through only 342 schools along with the whole country; most of these schools are located in the big cities such as Nouakchott and Nouadhibou(Zahraa,2020). On the other hand, the number of primary schools is exceeded 4500. Hence, the study deems that promoting educational facilities for secondary education services could be a rational decision to enable students to make the transition in rural areas.

*Cultural attitudes.* The study found that the cultural aspect is also another factor that contributes to mitigating the dilemma of school transition to some extent. *Gender preference in education, domestic home chores are factors* influencing student's transition. Participants had a common understanding female and males are not treated equally in terms of educational opportunities and house chores. One of the respondents added, "Yes/ the culture encourages men to work hard out of the house...while women take care of cooking, and other house jobs. Female students have no excuse not to participate in house daily work. They help in cooking, cleaning, and other activities (Participant\_C). This response entails us that female students have responsibilities to perform beside the school work. The interpretation of participants' responses conveys that female students disadvantage education compared to their male counterparts. These findings were identical to those of (Abuya & Nyariro, 2018; Nyawara, 2007 & Auralia 2008), who signposted that boys have more chances to advantage education. These factors empowered gender disparity in the secondary schools, where male students were advantaged to get more opportunities to transit to secondary schools on their female counterparts' expenses. As stated earlier, female students outperform male students quantitatively at primary schools in Mauritania. So, if female students are not treated equally as male students in terms of educational support, this would definitely affect female students' performance in schools which in turn will influence the transition rate since female students outperform quantitatively male students in Mauritania. Culturally, female students are seen as a project of future wives. Participation in housing chores is mandatory to get a female trained on the housing task before the marriage. Based on the findings, the study interprets that female students are mainly home-based, doing domestic chores every day after class, while their brothers remain exempted from

this task. This gender-biased gives male students the privilege to benefit from education but at the expense of their sisters. The phenomenon eliminates female students from furthering their knowledge and skills of teaching and their transition to secondary schools. Yet, the study suggests that school leaders must have regular meetings with student parents to counsel them about the role that a female can have to make the community's progress when she is educated.

## **7. Conclusion and Recommendations**

The introduction of free education to the Mauritanian school systems had its significance to alleviate Child access to educational services. Consequently, Mauritania sustained a promising record regarding students' enrollment in the primary level. However, the current study concluded that the provision of learning facilities and accommodations alongside the free education can enhance the volume of students transiting to the secondary level. The study suggests policy makers to revise schools funding strategy with empowering the autonomy. So, school leaders can make a budget to provide learning materials to students where the study found that student parents burden accommodations, transportation, uniforms, and learning materials. This may contribute to facilitate students' transition, particularly those students who stay in rural areas with low-income status. Moreover, the study vowed the lack of infrastructure resources for secondary education impedes amount of students, mostly females, from making a coherent transition when completing the primary level. Therefore, the study recommends educational initiatives to accommodate schools in rural zones to increase the capacity of education facilities.

### *Practical Implications*

Based on the study's findings, the researcher concluded the following recommendations to be considered by educational initiatives in Mauritania for sustaining a healthy transition from elementary education to secondary level. In other words, these recommendations may help minimize the possibility of interrupting girls' education in the remote area of Assaba County.

- Allocating and hiring counseling staff for primary schools is one strategy this study recommends. The staffing counselors can be visiting schools regularly to offer counseling sessions to grade-6 students and their parents about the benefits of education for human –capitalism and social development.
- School curriculum has to integrate educational programs for adults so students who cannot continue in schools can join these programs and maintain a certificate that can enable them to get a regular job in the labor market.
- Introducing grant packages to families of low-income to support them to retain their siblings in the school encourage their sons not to drop out of schools
- Inaugurating laws to prohibit Child-labor in the market is one approach that can decrease students' dropout. The study found the availability of market jobs is enough reason to encourage students not maintaining the transition and drop out from the elementary level.

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