

# Academic Challenges Faced by Adolescent Orphans and Vulnerable Children in Manicaland Province in Zimbabwe

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## ABSTRACT

This study examined the academic challenges faced by adolescent orphans and vulnerable learners from child-headed households attending secondary schools in Zimbabwe's Manicaland Province. Learners from homes without parents are becoming more and more prevalent, but no one has yet taken notice of them. Using Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of human learning as the theoretical lens, the researchers scrutinized the phenomenon. Thirty participants were chosen from four secondary schools in the Chimanimani District for the qualitative research study. In-depth data about the academic challenges faced by adolescents who are orphans and vulnerable children was generated through focus group interviews. The thematic approach was employed in the analysis of data and invaluable themes were identified. Ultimately, the study's conclusions were as follows; facilitators and learners need constant motivation, parents can help supervise learners' work, and teachers should have access to professional development opportunities. The results indicate that in order to guarantee high-quality instruction, guidance and counseling teachers should receive support and opportunity for ongoing professional development. By utilizing learner-centered methodologies, the teaching and learning process should integrate learners' real-world experiences to improve the learners' comprehension of the learning materials covered in class.

**Keywords:** Academic Performance, Focus Group Interviews, Learner-centered Methods, Participatory Action Research, Teaching and Learning

## INTRODUCTION

Adolescent learners' poor academic performance in rural schools is influenced by a number of issues, including a lack of resources and learning materials, unskilled and demotivated teachers and parents who find it difficult to be involved in their children's education (Estrada, Monferrer, Rodriguez, and Moliner, 2021). This academic challenge is manifested in learners' reluctance to participate in class, poor attendance, failure to submit written tasks, and poor academic performance in their homework, tests, and examinations. The issue of poor academic performance in education is not unique to Zimbabwe; it is encountered globally as well (Komro et al., 2020). According to a research on learners' academic performance by Akpanobong, Akpan, and Ekpedeme (2008), teachers continue to teach in their native tongues instead of English. The practice impairs learners' comprehension of the material being taught (since some concepts do not have

direct translations to English). Adedoyin (2011) and Molise (2015) argue that placing too much emphasis on learners' native tongue hinders their ability to engage with the material because they must submit their responses in English for evaluation. The lack of subject matter expertise among teachers may be the cause of this practice. These writers contend that facilitators fail to teach for quality in their classes due to a lack of subject mastery and learners fail to achieve academic success (Magwa and Magwa, 2017).

According to a study by Reche, Bundi, Riungu, and Mbungua (2012), one factor impeding facilitators' capacity to deliver courses effectively is the lack of instructional materials. On the other hand, the availability of instructional materials enables educators to carry out their duties in an efficient manner. We contend that the issue of insufficient instructional materials, such textbooks and workbooks, jeopardizes the quality of instruction and turns learning into an intangible task for learners. Muraya and Kimamo's (2011) suggestion that learners become passive during classes and stay passive in the absence of adequate instructional resources supports this conclusion. Wadesango (2010) discovered that certain educators express dissatisfaction about being left out of subject allocation meetings and lacking any influence over the textbook choices made for their learners. The argument that instructional resources are not always available or, when they are, are unsuitable for independent study is supported by (Molise and Hlalele, 2014). According to Kearney and Perkins (2011), teachers are unable to impart a passion for the subject because of their lack of enthusiasm and unfavorable attitudes toward learning and teaching. Ifamuyiwa and Akinsola (2008) argue that it is not imperative to provide facilitators with ongoing motivation by not involving them in decisions about how the curriculum is delivered. Magwa and Magwa (2017), who conducted a parallel study focused on the academic challenges in Shurugwi, also provided support for the study. According to Reche et al. (2012), unrewarding teachers cannot boost their motivation and impede competition among those who are eager to have their work recognized. Asikhia (2010) had a view that if parents are restricted chances to be involved in their children's education by keeping an eye on their work and helping with school discipline hence academic challenges emerged. We contend that if learners lack scaffolding at home will continue to lack motivation and find it difficult to overcome academic challenges they are facing. According to Berthelsen and Walker (2010), when parents are not involved in decisions about their children, it makes it difficult for parents to support teachers in dealing with disruptive learners and to identify other parents who may not be eager to collaborate with the school (Magwa and Magwa, 2017). According to Chowa, Ansong, and Osel-Akoto (2012), having no meaningful conversations with learners on their academic progress is strongly unfavorably related to academic success. This opinion is supported by Mannathoko and Mangope (2013) findings, which show that many parents are incapable of making meaningful contributions to school activities. We believe that academic challenges faced by adolescent orphans and vulnerable learners from child-headed households are perpetuated by parents who could not assist with general cleaning of school facilities, gardening and making donations, to help the school buy instructional resources that may be lacking. In Nojaja (2009) view, non-integrating parents in school events will not enlighten them about the numerous responsibilities they can play to aid with the inherent issues schools confront.

## **Problem Statement**

In Zimbabwean secondary schools, underprivileged adolescent learners who are orphans are struggling academically. Van Wyk (2013) postulated that education should be presented in such a manner that learners can easily relate what they learn in class with the out-of-classroom realities of life. Regrettably, the situation is not always like that. This is because education deals with challenges that Content is often taught as dry, analytical material that is hard for learners to apply to real-life situations. In order to prevent learners from memorizing information without understanding it, Ongeru (2009) adds that teaching and learning must be made relevant to the learners' experiences. The learning situations that are not contextualized to real life experiences by the foster parents become vaguer to orphans since there would be no parents to foster embodiment of content. The purpose of this study was to examine the academic challenges that adolescent

orphans and vulnerable learners encounter in secondary education.

## **Theoretical framework**

According to Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of human learning, human intelligence originated in society or culture, and learning is a social activity. The central idea of Vygotsky's theoretical system is that social contact is essential to the growth of cognition. Everything is taught on two levels, according to Vygotsky. Initially through social interaction, and subsequently incorporated into the person's conceptual framework. Every cultural function that a learner experiences has two appearances: on the social level initially, and then on the individual level; between individuals initially (interpsychological), and within the child later (intrapsychological). This is true for concept generation, logical memory, and voluntary attention alike. Every higher function begins with genuine interpersonal ties (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 57). The concept that the potential for cognitive development is restricted to a "zone of proximal development" (ZPD) is a second feature of Vygotsky's theory. The learner is cognitively ready for this "zone" of discovery, but in order to completely grow, they need assistance and social connection (Briner, 1999). The learner can receive "scaffolding" from an instructor or more seasoned peer to assist in the development of sophisticated abilities or the learner's growing grasp of various knowledge areas. Strategies for enhancing learners' intellectual knowledge and abilities and promoting purposeful learning include collaborative learning, discourse, modeling, and scaffolding of which all of the above are not implemented by parents and guardians of those adolescent orphans and vulnerable learners.

"The gap between the levels of potential development as assessed by solving problems under adult supervision or in cooperation with more experienced peers and the actual developmental level as assessed by solving problems on one's own."

A more skilled person's arrangement or guidance, known as scaffolding, can take many forms though it lacks in the learners' guardians. Some examples include dividing a task into manageable chunks, offering sufficient incentive, and giving frequent updates on the active person's progress on a given task but this is lacking in these learners since they do not have parents to assist them in their education. In the aforementioned instance, the mother of the child helped the child; in that case, the mother served as a scaffold but in this study these adolescent orphans and vulnerable learners lack this assistance. Additionally, Vygotsky explained the importance of social interaction between individuals and their environment for the best possible cognitive growth. In children's zones of proximal development, assisted learning occurs when they can only complete new tasks that fall within their developmental potential with the guidance of an instructor or a peer hence these learners from child-headed households are restricted from that. Other interactional contexts that support assisted learning include cooperative learning groups and scaffolding though it restricted those learners from child-headed households. The theory of cognitive development finally shows that social engagement is essential for the highest level of cognitive growth to those who come from normal family and restricted those from child-headed households.

## **Research Question**

What are the academic challenges faced by adolescent orphans and vulnerable learners at secondary school level?

## **METHOD**

The case study design was combined with an interpretivism paradigm in the research. The interpretive model is also known as the phenomenological method. Creswell (2013) states that the interpretive paradigm aims to understand the individual's comprehension of conditions; in this instance, the researchers

investigate the academic difficulties faced by vulnerable learners from child-headed households and adolescents who are orphans. The study employed the qualitative method as a result. A handy and purposeful sample of thirty participants from the four secondary schools in the Chimanmani district served as the foundation for the qualitative methodology. The researchers employed purposeful sampling in conjunction with non-probability sampling. Participants in this research were specifically selected to address a given question. Baker et al. (2012) elaborate on this strategy as a way to represent the traits of a particular group. There were thirty participants in total: four parents, four teachers, eighteen learners, and four principals. The participants were chosen in part because they are knowledgeable about the subject at hand and may be able to provide information to the question.

Data was gathered by the researchers during a twenty-four-month period. Thirty participants were interviewed in-depth to obtain qualitative information on the academic difficulties faced by vulnerable learners from child-headed homes and teenagers. The length of the scheduled interviews ranged from thirty to sixty minutes. In addition, a document was made for each respondent and the interviews were transcribed (the researchers recorded the interviews using an audio recording device). Subsequently, the substance of each interview was color coded to detect recurring themes and significant difficulties as they emerged. To further comprehend the phenomena, this study also analyzed secondary data from government reports, books, periodicals, and articles. These resources were utilized to create the literature review and analyze the results in light of previous research. This is intended to either add to the body of knowledge already in existence or offer fresh insights into the topic being studied. The study employed a theme technique for data analysis. For this study, the research purpose served as the main subject for thematic analysis, which made it simpler to arrange and examine the data into patterns that corresponded to each goal (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

## Data Collection

The purpose of the study was to respond to the following research question: What academic challenges do adolescent orphans and vulnerable learners confront in secondary school? The researchers were able to identify multiple themes for discussion based on the answers to this question. These themes resulted from applying Laws, Harper, and Marcus's (2003) analytical lenses to the produced data, which included the following steps:

Step 1: Examining and reexamining all of the gathered information: in order to understand the opinions of the participants, the information from the interviews was examined and reviewed.

Step 2: Creating a draft list of themes that emerged from the data: the study's research question guided the identification and arrangement of the primary concerns and themes.

Step 3: Confirming if the themes discovered matched the research question and participant comments by going over the data again.

Step 4: Connecting the themes with quotations and notes: The themes that emerged from the data were connected to different academic perspectives.

Step 5: Going through the topic categories and providing an interpretation: the researchers never lost sight of the research question when analyzing the data.

Step 6: Creating a tool to support the triangulation of data during the data analysis process and help identify emancipatory research trends in the data.

Step 7: Analyzing the data and drawing conclusions: this involved emphasizing the study's conclusions and classifying the information based on the categories the research question asked or provided.

The focus group discussions data were transcribed, coded, and divided into different topics related to the academic challenges faced by adolescents' orphans and vulnerable learners in secondary schools. Members were screened and themes were returned to the participants to confirm that the data reflected their identification of the academic obstacles that lead to subpar performance in order to assure the trustworthiness of the data (Molise, 2020).

### **Ethical considerations**

Additionally, the research adheres to the 2013 Protection of Personal Information (POPI) Act 4. By prohibiting the use of personal information without the consent of the individual in question, Chapter 1, Section 2(a) of the POPI Act 2013 highlights the right to privacy of individuals. Additionally, the research was organized and conducted in accordance with the ethical policy of Madziwa Teachers College.

## **FINDINGS**

The conclusions that were derived from the generated data are shown in this part as themes. The themes include teachers and learners being continuously motivated, parents being involved in their children's homework, and teacher professional development programs.

### **Continuous Motivation of Learners and Teachers**

The study discovered that Learners' and teachers' lack of desire presents an academic obstacle. Learners are not expected to digest knowledge at a high level, and there is little accountability for their participation in the lessons. L1, a learner, stated the following:

*Our facilitators lack motivation to educate; they frequently grumble about their difficult but unpaid jobs and declare their desire to leave the profession.*

L2 (learner) backed up this assertion by stating, *"I don't enjoy teaching."* We are contended that facilitators do not effectively instruct Learners or serve as role models for them due to a lack of passion and a bad attitude about their work.

The declaration, suggests that educators do not view teaching as a fulfilling career, and this negative mindset results in a lack of motivation. T1 (teacher) validated L3's (learner) perspective and stated,

*Although I have worked for over ten years, the learners I have taught make more money than I do, therefore I will not be pushing my learners to become teachers.*

Additionally, T2 stated,

*"We work hard, even on weekends and holidays, but the government does not care about us. Because of the small salary we receive, we are unable to pay for our children's college education."*

T2 and L3 concurred that there were few advantages to be gained from teaching despite working hard. The teacher posits that their meager pay and teachers' efforts go unappreciated. The study's participants made it easier for teachers and other co-researchers to comprehend how teachers impacted learners' lives. Sometimes improving the lives of people on the verge of marginalization serve as an effective incentive instead of the money incentive. According to Asikhia (2010), declining levels of academic achievement can



be attributed to the attitudes of some teachers towards their job, as reflected in poor attendance to lessons, tardiness, derogatory comments about learner performance, and ineffective teaching methods. This statement is in line with what the participants. T3 saw the matter differently and stated,

*Learners treat us with contempt; we labor in horrible conditions where learners are the only ones who can speak about the academic challenges they are facing.*

It is clear from T3's comment that learners lack motivation to learn. The statement, "They are disrespectful," suggests that dealing with learners' behavior in the classroom presents challenges for teachers. The participant went on to say, "*They are the only ones who have a say,*" implying that learners are favored by school policies to the point where facilitators are unable to impose discipline. It is clear that the school was not praising facilitators or learners for working hard.

### **Involving Guardians to Monitor Learners' Schoolwork**

The study's conclusions demonstrate that parents are not permitted to disagree with the way in which their children should be taught. As opposed to this, they are thought of as ignorant people who can't do anything to help their learners achieve academic success. Principal P1 exclaimed,

*From my perspective, the school can only function properly if the parents are able to participate in their children's education. The parents whose learners attend this school do not cooperate.*

According to PR1 (parent),

*Letters are sent to them informing them of guardianship meetings, but they don't even bother to go.*

The remarks made by P1 and PR1 suggest that parents are still not actively involved in their children's education. This document served as a basis for motivating parents to participate in all school-sponsored events. Our team provided the groundwork for them to challenge some of the institutionalized injustices that sustained their marginalization. Berthelsen and Walker (2010) echoed PR1's observation, stating that a child is more likely to adopt these positive attitudes if guardians expect high levels of academic performance and commitment to education. This suggests that parents need to feel good about the school in order to enhance Learners' academic achievement.

Feelings of optimism motivate guardians to integrate with the school and make contributions that will benefit the institution as a whole. According to Chowa et al. (2012), there is a large and favorable correlation between talking to children about their schoolwork and their academic success. But T3 postulated;

*These learners receive homework from us, but they never write back.*

*The worst part is that when we call their guardians, they never show up,* T4 (the instructor) added in response to an interruption.

It is evident from PR1 and T3's statements that guardians do not keep an eye on their learners' education, and that teachers find it difficult to teach because of issues with discipline in their system. PP1, the deputy principal, voiced her dissatisfaction by saying,

*A young boy posing as the father answered the phone when I called a parent about his child's behavior in a specific year.*

The comment demonstrates how teachers take steps to involve and communicate with parents about their

children's behavior at school, but because there are neither cooperative relationships between the community and the school, nor between teachers and guardians. Learners engage in games of hide-and-seek with their teachers. As a result, P2 (parent) remarked in response to PP1 (deputy principal), saying,

*You brought to my attention that at the start of the year [name redacted] hit the other learner, and when I urged her to call the guardians, she responded that I ought to call the police.*

According to this statement, parents avoid having to discipline their learners by sending them off to school so they won't have to deal with the stress of doing it themselves. T3 (teacher) advanced the conversation by saying,

*It is highly likely that the parent is at a loss for what to do. Learners of today!*

His comment is reinforced by Mannathhoko and Mangope (2013), in whose opinion, most guardians, especially those in remote areas, are unaware that they are supposed to offer teaching assistance services at schools. Teachers indicated that guardians were not cooperative in contributing to their children's learning. Similarly, T2 (teacher) supported T3's (teacher) view and commented that,

*I think that the guardians' presence can have an impact on their children's education.*

Nojaja (2009) claims that integrating parents in their children's education has become a top priority for professionals, especially those working with at-risk learners, supports T2's point of view. A structured partnership between the community, the school, and the home is still a long way off, though. As a result, consistent assistance from the family, community, and school is necessary for academic achievement of adolescents' orphans and vulnerable learners from child-headed households. It is possible to conclude that there is a lack of integration between school and community activities and that the school operates independently of the community.

### **Professional Development Workshops for Teachers**

The study discovered that although teachers do have access to professional development opportunities, the district office does not consistently provide follow-up support to teachers following one-time training sessions (Molise, 2020). Department officials lack monitoring methods to make sure that schools are implementing the new learner-centered approaches as intended, and there is no follow-up at the school level. Teacher T3 stated,

*Our subject advisor (SA) develops us, but there is not much time for training, and they don't follow up to see whether teachers can put it into practice.*

In corroboration with T1, T3 postulated;

*You are right, but the issue is that they always look for problems rather than standing with us; they only oppose us at the end of the year.*

According to T3 and T1, the district is not providing adequate assistance to teachers in addressing the issues that face their respective systems. Topic advisers don't regularly visit schools to assist facilitators; when they do, it's solely to assess the teachers' topic portfolios; they don't provide assistance. Since facilitators continue to get uncritical emancipatory research training about how to instruct their learners effectively to attain improved academic achievement in education, the workshops that district officials (learning facilitators) organize are not productive (Molise, 2020). Tsotetsi (2013), who notes a lack of support from the district administration, supports T3's point of view. This research states that learning facilitators who find it difficult to travel to schools because of a lack of funds or having gone over budget are the ones who

suffer from a lack of possibilities for professional development.

## CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this study was to examine the academic challenges that adolescent orphans and vulnerable learners from child-headed households encounter in secondary education. The study examined international and Zimbabwean literature to demonstrate that slow learner performance is a worldwide issue as well as a local one. The study's theoretical lenses, critical emancipatory research, were also covered in the publication, along with how it advanced the goal of the investigation. The focus group meetings produced the data. The paper's conclusions were examined. The report suggests that teachers should get ongoing training in education content understanding in light of these findings. The schools have to buy enough teaching resources and keep facilitators inspired so they are prepared to embrace their roles as educators. In order for guardians to be aware of their roles and the impact they can have on improving the learning environment at the school, they should be kept updated about meetings. It is imperative that newly hired educators participate in ongoing professional development to enhance their pedagogical skills.

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