

Developmental Challenges Faced by Adolescent Orphans and Vulnerable Children in Chimanimani District in Manicaland Province, Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT

Background: African communities established strong family support systems because they considered children as the future of their civilizations and an essential component of humankind. The family structure in Zimbabwe has changed as a result of the severe effects of pandemic diseases and the country's economic collapse from 2009 to 2022. In Zimbabwe, children were often expected to be cared for by adults and community members closest to their immediate family. The inquiry is based on Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory.

Aims: The study investigated the psychosocial consequences of poverty on rural Zimbabwean learners from child-headed households who are lagging behind in their learning. The study also target to generate recommendations based on the research findings.

Sample: Through purposive sampling, a sample of 32 research participants comprising 16 learners, eight teachers, four school administrators and four members of the School Development Committees was selected. The sample members were in one way or the other connected to the issues regarding the challenges experienced by secondary school learners from child-headed families.

Methods: The study was qualitative in nature. The phenomenological research design, which was couched in an interpretive research paradigm, was employed. Data was collected using in-depth interviews, focus group discussions and document analysis.

Results: It emerged from the study that learners from child-headed homes found it exceedingly difficult to support their daily needs. Children in such homes lack a sense of childhood security and are subjected to emotional, social, and psychological stress. The majority of learners' obligations are handled at home, putting them vulnerable to social isolation, poverty, and the formation of an atmosphere that does not support academic brilliance.

Conclusion: In light of the research findings, it was concluded that communities, instructors, and peers be mindful of treating learners from child-headed households with dignity because they are human beings and

resources for the nation. They should avoid cultural perspectives that increase marginalization and segregation of these learners.

Key words: child, learning, orphan, family, and family headed by a child.

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INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

African societies are widely known for fostering a strong family structure that regards children as the community's future and as an essential component of humankind. The family support networks have changed for a variety of reasons. The Zimbabwean system has seen some changes as a result of the terrible effects of pandemic diseases and the country's economic collapse from 2009 to 2022. In Zimbabwe, elders in the community and close family were traditionally expected to take major responsibility for caring for learners. Learners from homes where the primary carers were children were expected to obtain care from extended relatives and neighbors.

The study investigated the psychosocial consequences of poverty on rural Zimbabwean learners from child-headed households who are lagging behind in their learning. Since the rapid eruption occurred in December 2019, the new corona virus has spread to nearly every nation and area of land. As of March 31, 2020, more than 750,000 corona virus illness cases had been confirmed. It can be significantly more difficult for pupils from low-income households and vulnerable groups, such as those who lack access to safe, readily available water at home, an estimated 2.1 billion people worldwide, to adopt basic preventive actions such as hand washing with soap and water (UNICEF, 2020).

Globally, school closures and restrictions imposed by governments in order to exert influence over the extension of Covid-19 have resulted in almost 1.5 billion learners studying remotely or without access to beneficial education (UNICEF, 2020). Learning will be difficult for many people without sufficient supervision in many scenarios when disconnected learning is not available to those without internet connection. Learners on the move are already disproportionately affected by learning disruptions, and they are at a high risk of being excluded from online and other alternative learning opportunities. School food and other support services are no longer available to learners from low-income families as schools close. Even after schools reopened, an estimated 53% of them had essential sanitary services (UNICEF, 2020).

The Covid-19 eruption created a fast changing atmosphere that has harmed the global education system. Maintaining education delivery through alternate learning and teaching channels became a major priority for institutions seeking to mitigate the effects of the crisis on education. As a result of the revision to the national social distancing directives, education institutions around the world were required to adopt distance learning settings and other e-learning tools, which harmed learners from child-headed households and families with poor financial resources (Rad, Otaki, Baqain, Zary and Al- Halabi, 2021).

The transition from in-person classes to online distance learning sessions proceeded swiftly. Because they had never before taught remotely or online, many educators were compelled to quickly master a wide range of abilities. Educators must adapt the form and substance of their contributions in order to engage their learners in the virtual environment. There are instructional designs, course design, and communication tactics skills that are required for building distant learning courses. However, due to the continuance of the Covid-19 scenario, institutions were not given enough time to plan and adapt the proper, gradual means of transitioning, which sometimes necessitates major capacity building. Because they were in a distant learning environment, the pupils had to acclimate rapidly.

The problems in fast transitioning to distance learning were exacerbated by the extra adjustments and limits that came with Covid-19, as well as the ensuing psychosocial demands that learners and educators had to deal with. Educators and learners needed to do three things to assess networking, encourage humanity in connections, and improve communication before, during, and after an online attachment. This encounter has an impact on their interpretation of events and their thoughts on schooling (Rad et al, 2021). This event influenced how people think about meaning and teaching and learning. All of the aforementioned issues have an impact on the psychosocial development of learners from low-income families and households with children.

Several established schools have implemented a number of inventive methods to handle the challenge by utilizing various tools such as Google Classroom, Zoom, and Microsoft Teams. Despite the fact that these technologies have advanced and become more generally available, remote teaching has lower student retention rates and provides less feedback to learners than face-to-face classes (Kawasaki, Yamasaki, Masuoka, Iwasa, Fukita & Matsuyama, 2021). Some disciplines may not be ideal for online learning, it has also been proposed. In an online setting, it has been stated, effective student support is impossible to deliver. However, because of its advantages such as study program flexibility and time savings, distance learning has become highly appealing. Previous studies comparing the efficiency of online versus in-person training found that, in a small number of areas, there is no difference between the two techniques (Kawasaki et al, 2021). Because of the quick shift to online learning, which provided no time to examine its impacts on educators, system design, or social impact, educators and relevant experts were unable to plan for successful online instruction that may have aided learners and faculty in making the transition (Potra, Pugna, Pop, Negrea and Dungan, 2021). During the Covid-19 pandemic, this online e-learning course was launched to boost learners' certainty and confidence in their surroundings. It was created to assist them in completing the course and staying in constant communication with one another (Zalat, 2021).

Furthermore, remote learning requires learners to have and employ self-regulation skills. Highly self-regulated learners display strong intrinsic motivation and self-efficacy in their learning process through the selection of learning materials, the determination of learning objectives, and the organization and management of their learning process (Potra et al, 2021). Previous research has found that those who are less driven and have lower levels of self-control may take too long to complete projects, resulting in late submission or mediocre work. Furthermore, the requirement for social distance during the COVID-19 crisis made learners more vulnerable to anxiety due to isolation. If you want to keep your online learners engaged throughout this crisis, even if they are studying alone at home, you must use a motivated learning technique.

Dropout rates in online and distant learning programs have long been an issue. Isolation and disconnect may result in a lack of motivation to learn because connection is one of the most important components of student fulfillment. The construction of an online-only education system without prior experience, as a response to a new public health crisis, had a further negative impact on learners' motivation and involvement (Potra et al, 2021). Lessons in Romania were ended at the beginning of March 2020, and online instruction was begun using specialized educational platforms and video conferencing capabilities. All of these changes, as well as the need for speedy adaptation, resulted in significant gaps and improved teaching strategies (Potra et al, 2021).

Online e-learning is characterized as educational activities conducted in synchronous online environments using a range of electronic devices such as PCs, laptop computers, and smart phones (Zalat, Hamed and Bolbol, 2021). Online e-learning may serve as a platform to improve the educational process's flexibility, creativity, and attention on the needs of the individual student. When educating learners in remote and rural areas, the cost-effectiveness and accessibility of online course delivery is especially noticeable.

All of the above information will be most valuable to learners who have the means and aptitude to learn online. Learners from low-income households sometimes struggled to create enough money to cover their educational expenditures as well as family food bills, making it extremely difficult for them to buy computer-related technology for online learning as well as internet connection.

As a result of the caregivers' total departure from the children's care, children under the age of eighteen assumed parental responsibilities? Child-headed homes have evolved as an environment for child development as a result of primarily parental death. Children who once needed parental supervision and assistance are now capable of caring for themselves (Mpofu and Chimhenga, 2016). As a result, they are deprived of their childhood. As a result, the purpose of this study was to look at the developmental educational obstacles that orphaned and vulnerable adolescents encounter, as well as academic underachievement in learners from families with children that impair their ability to learn.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Conflict in any system and a child's changing developmental stage are related, and this will disrupt other systems as well (Chowkase, 2021). Instead of focusing only on a child's immediate surroundings, researchers studying child development should pay special attention to how they interact with their entire environment. The ecological perspective first emphasizes the reciprocity of a child-headed family learners' environment and the interdependence of both (Jackman et al., 2022).

The ecological systems theory was first created by Bronfenbrenner to explain how learners from homes with children interacted with their surroundings (Buchanan, 2020). According to the ecological systems theory, learners develop as a result of the interconnection of their surroundings and the importance of these connections in accelerating the direct impacts of psychological growth (Crawford, 2020). Small, Owen, and Paavol (2022) assert that the ecological theory is predicated on the reality of interpersonal mutuality. When considering events from an ecological perspective, a model of many aspects influenced by the education of learners from single-parent households is offered.

The biological, psychological, and social sciences intersect according to the ecological systems theory (Crawford, 2020). According to this notion, learners from households headed by children and their surroundings are intertwined. According to Velez and Spencer's (2018) theory, unaccompanied domains are extremely rare, which encourages the practice of unfair challenges and demotion. In this sense, the conduct exhibited by learners in child-headed households is inevitably linked to the associations, forces, and society that shape their surroundings. As such, events that occur in one part of the system might also affect other parts of it.

A study on the targeted modifications of learners from families with children should not focus more on the student's immediate environment than on the good things that happen in it. As a result, it is reasonable to analyze how complex and ongoing the conditions of the family, home, neighborhood, school, and the comparatively larger community are in relation to the poverty experienced by learners from child-headed homes. We may create plans to prevent the negative effects of poverty by realizing how one surrounding the other affects the other. According to Zigel and Lancker (2022), research meticulously examines the relationship between the growth of learners from child-headed families and other representatives. This understanding is critical since it is necessary to attain the intended outcome.

According to the ecological systems theory, there are numerous issues that arise from their local community when learners from child-headed homes grow inside their systems. Furthermore, the ecological theory explained the conditions that ensure the growth of learners from households headed by children. Bronfenbrenner understood that one needed to consider the ecological environments surrounding children in order to comprehend the development of children from child-headed families (Buchanan, 2020).

It has been demonstrated that the ecological systems theory plays a critical role in offering a deep or clear understanding of the psychosocial development of learners from homes headed by children. This idea illustrates every interconnected system that ultimately affects the cycle of development. This fictitious depiction of a complex creature has provided anything beneficial or essential that allows or facilitates learners'

lives in their environments to be accomplished. The establishment of government policies and programs that would need the creation of education for learners from child-headed households was greatly aided by Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory. Educators can utilize this technique to assess the type or importance of the issue a kid is facing in their environment and work toward a cooperative solution. While it's critical to gain a greater knowledge of the problems that make learning from child-headed families more difficult, it's equally critical to look at the reasons why so many kids are exposed to these hazards. It is thought that the resilience built by the family against all difficulties permits children to be successful in life, despite of the problems from all the levels of the systems that were outlined above (McKinley and Lilly, 2021).

RESEARCH QUESTION

What are the main obstacles experienced by learners from homes without parents?

METHODOLOGY

Design and Participants

Interpretivism ontological and epistemological principles informed the study's qualitative phenomenological research design. To collect the participants' perceptions, analyze them, and retell them through detailed, rich descriptions based on their own lived experiences, a qualitative technique was deemed appropriate. This made it possible for the researchers to analyze and evaluate the participants' interpretations of their experiences and the meaning they placed on them in an efficient manner (Abukmail, Bakhit, and Hoffmann, 2024). Purposively, thirty-two (32) participants were selected, including sixteen (16) teenage learners from CHH, eight (8) teachers, four (4) parents, and four (4) school administrators. The participants in the sample were very informative, providing the researchers with the greatest amount of knowledge.

Data Collection, Presentation and Analysis

Semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and document analysis were the main methods used in this study to gather data. Members of the school development committee, administrators, and teachers participated in the semi-structured interview. Focus group interviews were conducted with learners. Both the focus group and the semi-structured interview were audio recorded, then transcriptions were made. All interviews took place in the private offices that the participating school heads wanted.

For the topic analysis, a deductive method was employed, which entails approaching data analysis with predefined themes and categories that the data are assessed based on. Fully deductive thematic analysis starts with a set of themes, drawn directly from a prior study in the topic area, and then aims to apply those to a new sample. This approach eliminates the need for the creation of new codes and themes (Robinson, 2022). Content analysis was applied to documents. In order to distill a massive amount of information into a more succinct representation of some of its qualities, content analysis entails the methodical classification and counting of text units (Marvasti, 2019).

The relevant Ministry in Zimbabwe as well as a university ethics committee gave their written consent for the study to be conducted. Additionally, signed informed consent was provided by the adult participants for the audio recording of the interviews.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

When applying accepted ethical principles to protect people's rights to privacy and welfare, ethical considerations act as a guide (WHO, 2019). Ethics are more crucial because we frequently violated the respondents' privacy while performing qualitative research. Before we began the research investigation, we

asked the authority for permission to obtain approval for the study. Following approval, we organized a gathering of research subjects and school officials to discuss issues such informed consent, anonymity, privacy, and study confidentiality. We gave consent letters to a sample group and requested them to read and fill them out. The consent letter granted the participants the right to withdraw from the study at any moment during it for any reason, as well as the information that they could only participate voluntarily. We told the participants that neither the names of their schools nor their names would be used in the data collection procedure. To preserve anonymity, we used letters and aliases to represent the names of the schools and the participants. We kept the information obtained from the research participants in a safe place. We assured participants that the information would be kept confidential and used only for the inquiry.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The key research question presented to the participants was "What are the main obstacles experienced by learners from homes without parents?" The findings confirmed domestic, financial, and marginalization as the main challenges faced by learners from such families. The difficulties blatantly reflect their social disempowerment and traumatic experiences that have a negative impact on their academic development. Sixteen learners from households with children as the primary caregivers, eight instructors of guidance and counseling, four school heads, and four members of the school development committee from each of the four secondary schools in the Chimanamani district served as the major informants.

Household chores

Domestic chores were one difficulty associated with growing up in child-headed households that had an impact on the academic achievement of the study's participants. Several participants made the observation that heads of families tend to a variety of domestic duties, including cooking, cleaning the home, giving siblings more attention, and gardening. A parent stated:

Learners that are family-oriented perform a variety of household activities, including cleaning, cooking, and laundry, which can interfere with their academic performance. They won't be competent when they start school and won't pay closer attention to their assignments.

It also became clear through focus groups and questionnaires that being overburdened with domestic duties causes both school absence and school drop-out. In a similar vein, Masondo (2016) posited that learners from homes with children as the head of household bear a heavier responsibility of fulfilling family responsibilities than learners from homes with adults as the head of household. These obligations are viewed as developmentally inappropriate and cause disturbances in the educational process. According to the research, managing a household with a learner as the head is difficult. As a result, learners must adapt their roles after the passing of their parents. However, learners are involved in normal household chores that are exceedingly taxing on their bodies, minds, and wallets, which have an impact on their academic performance at school.

According to the report, learners from households with children are less likely to complete their education since they are required to work at home to support their families. The researcher and other participants saw that in child-headed households where there was no parent to whom the obligations may be shifted, the situation was more intolerable. The individuals who took part in the focus groups reported that older learners were frequently seen assuming parental tasks in houses headed by learners as they struggled to make ends meet in an effort to look like their parents. The incident is consistent with the Bowden-discussed facts (2002). The young child's statements below describe some of the difficulties they encountered and how they influenced their educational accomplishment.

The amount of work we undertake at home prevents us from reading because we are older children from child-headed homes. Since we have no one to turn to, we work incredibly hard to provide for my younger siblings by

putting food on the table. For the entire family, we take care of all household duties, including cooking, cleaning, seeing to the ill, and feeding the young. Before heading to school, we collect water and firewood. In order to augment the family's income, we also sell fruits, vegetables, juice cards, and occasionally our bodies. We complete our schoolwork at home as we lack the time to study.

Another student bemoaned the burden placed on them by having to do household duties that even someone much older might not be able to handle:

Unnecessary errors, a lack of concentration in class, and lack of concentration brought on by too much stress from home can occasionally have an impact on my academic performance.

Learners from houses where children were in charge of household duties addressed the situation more vividly. Teachers and school administrators also reported that learners in charge of the families were overworked and lacked time for study and homework. Their academic performance in school is significantly impacted by this. Many participants agreed that learners from homes with learners in charge have a lot of housework to do.

Money shortage

The financial challenges faced by learners from disadvantaged backgrounds were mentioned by about three quarters of the participants. It has been determined that children from child-headed homes are more susceptible to poverty since the extended family safety net has broken down and the government is not providing appropriate material support. Since the nation's economy is failing, they have very few options for making money to support their family. Financial restrictions have a negative influence on the education and survival of learners from child-headed homes, according to learners, parents, teachers, school leaders, and other stakeholders. Each parent agreed that:

Learners from low-income backgrounds frequently lack access to basic essentials including food, school supplies, and medicine. Some of them consequently drop out of school in an effort to work and support their families. Being the one who carries all potential family responsibilities makes the older child in the family the most impacted.

Focus group interviews also revealed that learners from child-headed households struggle to pay for necessary school supplies, which negatively impacts their academic performance. These are the opinions of three learners:

Financial difficulties cause learners from households with children to drop out of school. Some learners may become thieves and prostitutes in order to support their families.

Financial hardships impede the education and academic achievement of learners from low-income backgrounds, as has been repeatedly stated in the literature under consideration. Due to lack of resources, learners from child-headed households are deprived of their entitlement to an education (Mokoena, 2007). Because learners were unable to purchase necessary school supplies due to a lack of funds, their academic performance suffered (Pillay, 2012). According to Mokoena's (2007) hypothesis, learners from poor backgrounds turn to criminal and prostitution activities to support their families.

According to this study, it is frequently expensive to send a child to school, making it challenging for low-income parents to pay for their daughter's education. The learners who were interviewed and took part in the focus groups revealed that other costs outside of tuition such as those for food, transportation, writing paper/exercise books, textbooks, pens, sanitary pads, pocket money, and school uniforms were also incurred.

During the interview, one teacher made the following statement:

"Many families find it difficult to afford expensive textbooks and school clothes." For instance, form two English and Math textbooks cost between \$15 and \$20 each unit. A whole uniform set would set you back more than USD \$75.

The three headmasters agreed with the aforementioned statement, noting that pricey uniforms and textbooks frequently put many impoverished families out of their price range, which had a negative impact on the academic performance of female learners.

There is a severe textbook problem at our schools; learners rely totally on the research notes offered by the teachers, some of which are not very detailed." All three focus groups, made the following claim in support of the previous statement:

Because of their constant justifications, our parents cannot afford to purchase our workout and text books.

These findings are supported and clarified by the literature. According to a UNICEF (2011) report, many schools lack the textbooks and other resources needed to improve academic achievement. Given the aforementioned points, one could contend that many teachers wouldn't necessarily be able to raise the standard of instruction in the classrooms without appropriate textbooks and other learning materials. Studies have shown that having more textbooks has advantages that frequently outweigh having more teachers (Evans, 2004). The findings also showed that many classes lacked books for learners at the proper subject level. The teacher's study notes were heavily cited by the learners. However, this was reliant on how comprehensive the teachers' research notes were. The learners at one school that had significant textbook issues were not given even one book to share.

Based on the study's conclusions about the textbook issue, the government has provided pertinent textbooks for all levels to schools at the primary and secondary levels, at a ratio of one textbook per pupil. Unfortunately, the country's economic position led to the street sale of these textbooks, which hurt the learners in need. The following was said by two teachers from a secondary school in an urban area.

We have no choice except to sell the books on the streets since one cannot teach when they are hungry, despite the fact that teachers receive very little funding from the government. Most teachers and head teachers now make money by selling these UNICEF books.

According to one teacher from Mutambara Mission:

It is true that our school received textbooks, but more than half of the donated books have now vanished. For a living, both instructors and learners steal. In the end, "sadza" is more crucial than textbooks (staple food).

The three headmasters who took part in the survey concurred that a sizable number of textbooks had vanished from their institutions. They placed the blame on the current economic climate, which had compelled headmasters, professors, and learners to steal and sell the books on the streets. This was found to have an impact on the academic success of female learners at the four schools under investigation.

In an effort to improve conditions in schools for all learners, PLAN International, a global non-governmental organization, has played a significant role in the construction of libraries and classroom buildings in rural areas. However, due to financial limitations, they were unable to support every school, and they chose not to help wattle company schools on the grounds that doing so would violate the company's' corporate social responsibility. In an effort to meet the fundamental needs of the families of the wattle company workers, the company owes it to its employees to make sure that the schools on site are sufficiently staffed and furnished.

To try to meet the fundamental needs of the workers' families, the wattle company owes it to their employees to make sure that the schools there are suitably staffed and furnished.

The results of this study also showed that only one of the four secondary schools had a school library, which did not contain the quantity of books necessary for children to learn properly. This was due to resource and financial constraints at the other three secondary schools. Children were only permitted to visit the library once a month at the school. As a result, the learners only visited the library three times during the course of the term, which was discovered to be insufficient for efficient learning.

The investigation found that there were no plans to build libraries since there was not enough funding for them to do so at the wattle company school, Bumba secondary school and Mhandarume secondary school. This was seen as a significant barrier to education for all children in Zimbabwe, not just learners. Based on the results of this study, it can be argued that some children defied the odds and performed well because of the support they received from their guardians and the nice comments they received from the teachers. This is despite the challenges raised so far on the education of learners from parentless homes due to the lack of textbooks.

Given the foregoing, it would be naive and an underestimation of a relatively complex subject to claim that all learners from underprivileged homes and neighborhoods struggled in school as a result of the lack of textbooks.

In agreement with the ecological viewpoint, Bronfenbrenner argues that a kid develops within a complex network of relationships that are influenced by various levels of the local community. According to him (2006, 2008), it is important to comprehend the various and interactive social, economic, cultural, and community-level aspects that affect a child's growth and academic performance both on their own and in combination.

The results of the focus groups and interviews also showed that impoverished families have very few material resources, and that learners who grow up with few resources typically perform poorly in school, impacting their social, emotional, cognitive, and physical functioning. This is consistent with the research of Bergeson (2006), who claimed that disadvantaged children experience both practical and material barriers to social involvement in education. According to the four headmasters who took part in this study, the demand for education may be quite sensitive to the price of education. As a result, high transportation costs and tuition fees may significantly lower the demand for education, excluding learners from the educational process.

The majority of the child-headed households, who were spoken to and took part in the four focus groups indicated the following:

Basic school supplies such as writing instruments, school fees, uniforms, textbooks, soap, pocket money, school bags, and food to bring to class are lacking. In order to meet their basic requirements, such as food, pocket money, and soap, some learners end up sleeping with multiple males for \$1. As a result, we are compelled to jeopardize our health.

All of the headmasters and teachers who participated in the interviews highlighted how the learners sacrificed their virginity for food and money, which served to support and reinforce this statement. The learners are supposedly materially impoverished, which forces them to engage in sex in order to survive, endangering their health and academic performance in the process. When their necessities for school materials including uniforms, shoes, and tuition were not provided by their guardians, the learners were seen to stop attending. Additionally, these females were perceived to have low self-esteem, be unmotivated, look down on themselves, and avoid school as a result. In Africa, there have been numerous studies relating academic success with self-concept. Mwamwenda (2010) came to the conclusion that a learner who felt more self-assured and confident would perform better on the primary learning exams. Because of the learners' lack of self-confidence and low self-esteem, this study holds the belief that academic performance will deteriorate in Chimanimani, Zimbabwe.

When my guardians can't even afford a pen and a pencil, I don't understand the point of attending to school

every day, as said by one learner from Bumba Secondary School. My uniforms are constantly messy when I arrive at school, and occasionally other learners tease me.

Given the aforementioned, maintaining uniforms adds to the family's already-scarce weekly budget. It might be argued that depriving children of physiological necessities such as food, housing, clothes, and water will endanger their holistic development when compared to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Santrock, 2009). The teachers and headmasters in the four secondary schools urged the learners to wear clean clothes, write legibly and neatly in their exercise books, and make sure that their books were neatly covered, the researcher saw.

A high school teacher from Mhandarume bemoaned the fact:

Even though their peers had voted for them to become prefects at a school where the choice of prefects involved both the instructors and the learners, some learner learners were denied the opportunity to become school prefects due to the lack of uniforms.

As evidence for the aforementioned, one headmaster additionally stated that:

Any school requires uniforms as a requirement. When pupils arrive at school without a uniform, we won't think twice about sending them home. Every day, all learners should be in their uniforms. In order to make their learners look acceptable, guardians are often pushed to purchase sports and club uniforms. Prefects should always wear uniforms since they serve as role models.

When all of the vulnerable learners discussed own school experiences throughout the interviews, this comment was further supported and strengthened. Additionally, the four focus groups agreed with the experiences of the child-headed households. The predicament of poor orphans was noticed to be made worse by financial limits and resources, as seen by the verbatim testimonies above, as they felt stigmatized and out of place at school. As a result, orphaned learners from wealthy families who could afford uniforms were given preference by teachers and headmasters for leadership roles. Headmasters have also been seen to be picky about learners wearing uniforms, which makes those without the means feel excluded. This study found that orphaned who couldn't afford these uniforms felt inferior, which prevented them from reaching their full potential. This supports the findings of Chen (2009) and Chireshe et al. (2010), who contend that if a child lacks fundamental necessities, the brain will not develop to its peak capacity at the anticipated period and will subsequently fall behind cognitively. As a result, poor orphaned adolescent children are under considerable pressure to keep up with their peers. They discuss issues of maintaining appearances. It was shown that this had a negative impact on both their academic success and dropout rates. The survey found that the majority of parents in the rural areas were low income, making it impossible for them to support their children's education.

The learners bemoaned the following during the four focus group talks:

Many learners drop out of school because they are unable to pay school fees. Since no one is home when we are typically sent back to collect fees, we wind up hanging around on the way home until other learners join us from school. The majority of us skip school because we are sick of getting sent home, especially during the first month of the school year.

Two focus groups also underlined the following during focus group conversations with some learners from the Nhedziwa High and Mutambara Mission secondary schools:

In order to pay for our basic requirements, such as food and school fees, we end up sleeping with a number of males. Some of the females at our school decide to get married after becoming pregnant. Those who don't get married simply raise their children at home. As a result, there are a lot of abortion cases at our institution.

Some of the learners who took part in this study defended their relationships with older men by saying that:

It is preferable to do so in order to obtain money for essentials rather than to wear filthy uniforms and go hungry.

Nowadays, there are no jobs; prostitution is a means of livelihood. AIDS death is preferable to famine.

Therefore, the claim that learners begin having sexual relations at the age of eleven is realistic. By doing so, they put their health and scholastic performance at risk in exchange for food and other necessities. The study also found that, as a result of their low wages, the guardians of the orphaned and vulnerable adolescents from the four secondary schools needed money for other household expenses, such as food, in addition to school tuition. The learners are consequently expelled since they put off paying the school fees. These learners' lack of interaction and learning time had an impact on their academic performance. In this study, it was discovered that poverty-related school dropouts are more likely to experience stress, dissatisfaction, discouragement, and maladjustment.

To help the weaker communities, the Zimbabwean government established the Social Dimensions Fund (SDF). The question remains, though, as to whether it actually reached the intended recipients, notably the orphaned and vulnerable learners. According to studies by Kaseke, UNICEF (2010) and Chitiga and Chinoona (2011), the Social Dimensions Fund's school fees program only reached roughly 25% of the target population, while the money for food barely reached 3%. Additionally, the Zimbabwean government offers free school uniforms to learners in several regions of the nation. To ensure that all children receive a primary education, the government only supplies school uniforms to "poor but smart" primary school learners, which qualifies the program as "selective."

The self-actualizing propensity of an individual might be upset when positive regard is withheld, according to Rogers' theory of unconditional positive regard. According to Rogers, teachers should accept all learners, regardless of gender, intelligence level, or socioeconomic status. The government must regard it as part of its duty to fairly provide assistance to everyone who requires it. Help must be given to both struggling learners if there are two. Selectivity will simply encourage the exclusion that is being challenged. The government needs to be reminded that if it continues with its current policies, Zimbabwe's commitment to the Millennium Development Goal of universal primary and secondary school completion by 2015 may be dashed.

Through the Basic Education Assistance Module (BEAM), which is currently sponsored by UNICEF, the Government of Zimbabwe has attempted to reduce the number of learners who drop out of school due to a lack of funds for school fees and other essentials. This support is intended to help orphans and vulnerable children with their school expenses, but it is riddled with fraud, unfairness, and corruption because the Committee only chooses non-deserving learners rather than those who would genuinely benefit from it.

Given that a child is not permitted to attend school without a school uniform, this study found that the fund does not provide for school supplies such as books, writing materials, or uniforms, despite the fact that these are prerequisites as demonstrated by the verbatim reports of the learners, the teachers, and the headmasters. In this way, the government undermines its own efforts to ensure universal access to education. Budgeting is challenging for schools because of how slowly the government distributes the BEAM cash. To bolster the aforementioned, Gaidzanwa (2012) criticizes the government of Zimbabwe's low budgetary allocations for the education sector, arguing that doing so not only degrades educational quality but also negates the progress that has been made.

The results of this study make it clear that the guardians of the orphaned and vulnerable learners who participated in it and attended secondary schools do not provide them with psychological or material support.

The fact that everything else comes second to meeting their basic requirements should be recognized (O'Neil, 2011). Maslow asserts further those learners who frequently lack the most fundamental prerequisites for

learning experience behavioral, socio-emotional, moral, and cognitive issues. In an effort to meet their psychological and physiological requirements, all of their human abilities including intelligence, memory, and creativity are put to use (Kenrick, 2010).

According to Rogers' Person-Centred Theory, children who experience poverty eventually grow up to have low self-esteem, conditional positive regard, insecurities, and inferiority complexes. They also become introverted and end up being excluded by their classmates. According to Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory, when one region of the body hurts, regardless of how minor and unimportant it may seem, it will cause havoc throughout the entire body until the afflicted area heals (Bee and Boyd, 2007).

The results of this study showed that enrollment in O-level examinations and the number of topics for which learners registered in the four institutions had decreased. In addition, more orphaned and vulnerable learners than male learners were unable to take their exams or could only enroll in a limited number of disciplines due to severe financial hardships. Last but not least, a lack of financial resources prevents orphaned and vulnerable adolescents children from continuing their education and performing well in their classes. These expenses include not only school fees but also other indirect costs like food, transportation, writing paper, textbooks, pens, sanitary pads, and school uniforms. From the aforementioned, it is obvious that orphaned and vulnerable adolescents learners in low-income families experience considerable educational disadvantages due to gender and poverty.

Stagnation

According to the study, the biggest obstacle preventing the majority of learners from child-headed households from achieving their educational goals was social marginalization. The majority of learners from families with children in charge encounter discrimination in their communities and at school. According to the results of the survey, learners from families with children face discrimination in their society. The opinions of most interviewees on this topic are reflected in one interviewee:

The majority of parents forbid their learners from hanging out with learners from child-headed households because they believe these learners are inhuman, dirty street learners, beggars, or prostitutes since they lack parental guidance.

The literature revealed that learners from child-headed households faced significant stress and pain from social rejection, which is consistent with the opinions of the majority of parents. The community, according to Kanyamorwa and Ampek (2007), forbids its learners from playing with learners from homes where there are learners in charge.

Additionally, it was determined that learners from families with children still experience prejudice from peers and teachers while attending school. It was said that teachers did not feel sympathy for these learners. Additionally, it has been reported that peers make fun of learners from low-income families, for instance, when those learners are expelled from school for failing to pay their tuition. In accordance with the idea above, Pillay (2012) hinted that children experience the issue of social exclusion when teachers are unable to comprehend the circumstances they are in. Teachers may be tempted to discipline learners from homes with children for arriving late to class or failing to do their assignments without taking the underlying causes of those failures or behaviors into account.

CONCLUSION

Without access to basic necessities and ongoing adult supervision, households headed by children struggle to survive. The majority of community support programs is ad hoc and fall short of providing a cogent and thorough response to the needs of vulnerable children and families with children in the home. Additionally,

any current answers are severely strained by the social and economic hardship being experienced by communities, which also exacerbates the sentiments of insecurity and hopelessness felt by orphaned children and homes with children as the primary breadwinners.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Numerous difficulties that are unfavorable to academic success are presented by the child-headed homes as a framework for a child's development. The absence of parental supervision and presence has a variety of repercussions on the learners who run the households. Many home tasks that are tough and improper for their age are taken on by these learners. The learner from child-headed households succumbs to criminal activity and prostitution to make ends meet due to financial restrictions. Children frequently live in poverty, which forces them to labor and keeps them out of school (Robson and Kenyanta, 2007). Children from child-headed families are marginalized and discriminated against by society, teachers, and peers, which results in the growth of negative self-concepts and inconsistent attendance at school. Learners who don't have parents are therefore in a very precarious situation. In their daily lives, they encounter a wide range of challenges that have an impact on their academic performance. The following advice is implied by the study's findings:

- Because some needy children do not benefit from these programs as a result of corruption and general greediness of individual leaders, the government should step up the implementation, monitoring, and evaluation processes of initiatives on the lives of orphans such as the Social Welfare and other Government initiatives.
- Teachers must be able to recognize and comprehend the various histories of learners, and they ought to stop labeling, prejudice, and stereotyping them. Given that they act in loco parentis, they ought to cherish and look after learners from child-headed homes.
- Children's welfare organizations should not only focus on the material requirements of children, but also on their emotional well-being through providing and counseling.
- Information should be made available to children so they are aware of the protection measures in place and what the law says about them. This will allow them to take appropriate legal action if they are exploited or abused.

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