The Dual Burden: Adolescent Learners in Child-Headed Households and Their Battle for Academic Achievement in Secondary Schools in Manicaland Province, Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT

The holistic development of learners from child-headed households has attracted the attention of many researchers globally. The current study specifically focused on the challenges and barriers to secondary school education experienced by adolescent orphans from child-headed households in Manicaland province in Zimbabwe. The study was anchored on Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory. The aim of the study was to determine the barriers to secondary school education faced by adolescent orphans and impoverished adolescents in Zimbabwe's Manicaland province. The study used a qualitative interpretive research paradigm with a phenomenological research methodology. Focus group discussions and open-ended questionnaires were used as data collection instruments. A purposively chosen sample of 32 research participants was used. Data analysis was done topically and presented with rich, detailed descriptions bolstered by quotes from the respondents. The study found out that unsupportive living conditions experienced by learners from child-headed households negatively affected their scholastic achievement. This was principally attributed to lack of much needed psychosocial support. Findings of this study show that adolescent learners from child-headed households were negatively impacted by a dysfunctional ecological system. It is recommended that parents, the community, and the government should collaborate to provide a non-threatening atmosphere that takes into account the requirements of these learners. Such collaboration can be achieved by implementing child-friendly interventions for vulnerable learners and orphans.

Keywords: academic challenges; academic performance; adolescent learners; child-headed households; orphans; vulnerable learners

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of the study was to look at the scholastic difficulties that disadvantaged children from child-headed households (CHH) and adolescent orphans in Manicaland province encounter. Poverty is recognised as a worldwide societal problem that cuts across nations, race, location, culture and religion. Research shows that learners from low-income families underperform academically because they frequently miss school or are too busy trying to provide for their siblings and themselves (ActionAid Zimbabwe, 2020). Given these socio-economic issues, educators need to be aware how poverty affects the academic progress of such learners. Life is particularly challenging for learners from low income families because they deal with a variety of demands and problems compared to those from higher income families (Baker & Bakopoulou, 2024). This underscores the fact that academic achievement is largely determined by socio-economic status (Raj & Chand, 2023).

Children from impoverished backgrounds, who are likely to experience negative psychological effects of poverty, are a cause for concern, not only to educators, but society as a whole. This necessitates the development of sound support programmes to ameliorate the negative psychosocial challenges they are exposed to (Cleary et al, 2024). Such programmes are only possible if the signs of poverty are quickly recognised and dealt with. Worldwide, a lot of research has been done on academic challenges and orphaned

learners (Rahmadhani & Budiraharjo, 2024). However, there is a dearth of studies why orphaned learners in Zimbabwe are not completing their elementary education. In the Chimanimani District of Manicaland Province, secondary school dropout rates for vulnerable learners are greater than those for non-vulnerable learners, indicating that vulnerable learners' prospects of finishing school are adversely impacted by the passing of their parents (Christodoulidou &Sidiropoulou, 2024).

A qualitative study (Magwa & Magwa, 2016) which examined educational difficulties of orphaned and adolescent learners in Shurugwi district, determined that given the challenges that learners from child-headed homes face in the classroom, very few learners had chances of educational success. The study further revealed that the loss of important human and material resources that were necessary for the accomplishment of educational attainment exacerbated the situation. Given these challenges, we sought to explore the connection between adolescent academic achievement and poverty in a Zimbabwean context.

Statement of the problem

Extant literature reveals that there are numerous difficulties that children from child-headed homes face. Studies show that such children have to deal with stigma (Svensson et al, 2024), inadequate bereavement assistance and noticeable regular departure from school. These difficulties frequently have a detrimental effect on the academic achievement of the learners (King et al, 2024), which highlights their dehumanizing experiences of poverty and social disempowerment, often worsened by a lack of social support from their family and communities (Attawet et al, 2024). Therefore, the goal of this study is to examine a sample of secondary school adolescents from child-headed homes in Zimbabwe that has never been studied before in light of these difficulties.

Theoretical framework

The researchers chose Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory as our theoretical lens because it makes a proposal that environmental conditions can determine the way a child develops (Hoang et al, 2024). The five layered systems known as the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem are derived from a variety of direct and indirect influences that ultimately contribute to an individual's development
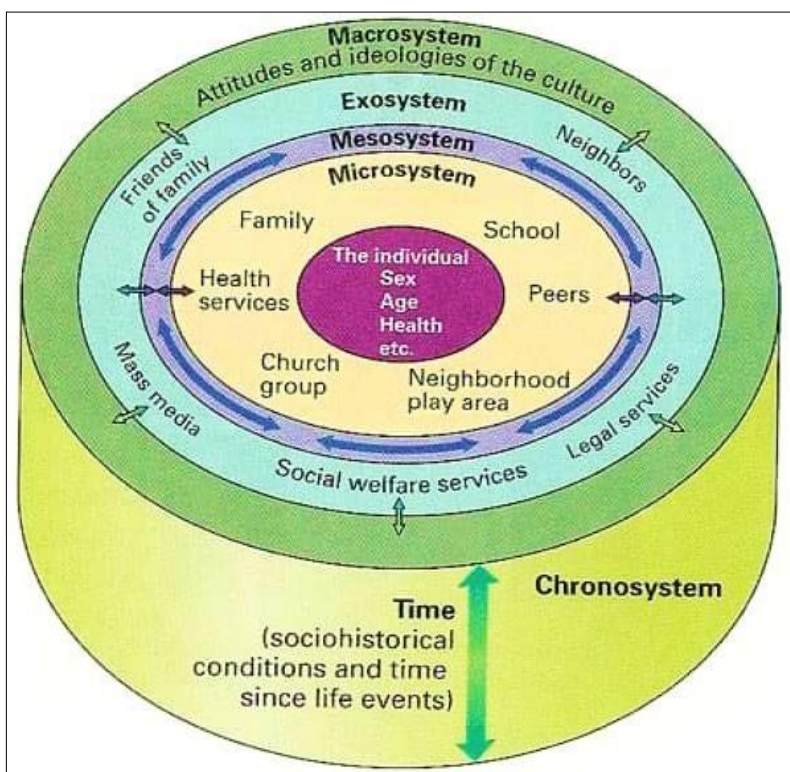

Figure 1: Bronfenbrenner's nested system (Donald et al, 2010)

First, the microsystem infers the adolescents' environments which include their families, friends, and schools (Crawford, 2020). A learner cannot explore other systems of his/her settings if there is a breakdown in the immediate microsystem. Based on this theory, the most irreparable alteration in the growth of learners from child-headed homes is the instability and unpredictability of certain families' experiences. Second, the mesosystem describes the links and interactions between the school and the home (Crawford, 2020). The mesosystem is an interconnected system of microsystems, and what occurs can influence a person's behavior in a different system (Blount et al, 2024). The mesosystem directly affects the development of learners from households headed by children the most. Third, the ecosystems' structures for adolescents from child-headed homes include extended families, community social services, and health services. Some literature shows that learners from child-headed homes may not have direct interaction with the societal processes that comprise the exosystem (Chowkase, 2021). For instance, adolescents from child-headed households sometimes do not have access to health facilities because of their financial situation. This has an adverse effect on academic achievement because ill health frequently makes learners pay less attention in class and often leads to frequent absenteeism. In addition, they frequently lack access to psychosocial care from government social workers in these situations, which makes them even more vulnerable. As a result, prevailing social, cultural, and economic systems as well as prevailing beliefs, values, and conventions are referred to as the macrosystem (Blount et al, 2024).

Fourth, macrosystems include the political, educational, and legal systems that have an impact on the microsystems, mesosystems, and exosystems (Blount et al, 2024). It is imperative to take into account the significant influence that Zimbabwe's political climate has on the upbringing of learners from houses with children in charge. There generally is a lot of mistrust between government and non-governmental groups which occasionally inhibits the latter from providing aid to underprivileged children. Furthermore, the political environment of the day influences the trajectory of the country's economy. This suggests that if the government is not doing its best to stabilize the economy, such as is the case currently, children from child-headed households will be denied financial support through educational grants from interventions like the Basic Education Assistance Module (BEAM) as the government will fail to adequately fund the programme. Finally, the chronosystem relates to the individual's developmental period and encapsulates temporal variations and occurrences in the environment (Porlares & Tan, 2021). This can be exemplified by the transition from childhood to adolescence, which is fraught with some challenges. When Bronfenbrenner included the chronosystem in his ecological systems theory, he first introduced the idea of time. Thus, the difficulties faced by learners from child-headed households as well as the time during which these learners survive and develop become important (Crawford, 2020).

Our theoretical lens reflects that each component resonates with the idea put out by social capital theory, which holds that capital, such as resources and assets, possessed by children from impoverished backgrounds is unable to effectively address these children's educational needs, which inevitably results in the children's failure to achieve academically (Zhang et al, 2020). In the current study, the various systems are important to the extent that they explicate the impact various societal factors have on the psychosocial development of the child, and more specifically how this affects academic achievement of the adolescents from child-headed households.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview of Poverty and Education

The strong association between social disadvantage and poor educational achievement is well acknowledged in the research literature, including the impact of impoverishment on the psychological health of learners. Extant literature indicates that this association is a worldwide occurrence that affects both industrialized and developing nations (Raj & Chand, (2023). According to official British government statistics, there were 3.7 million children living in abject poverty in the United Kingdom in 2019, an alarming increase of 200 000 children in only one year, more so that it reflects upon an advanced European economy. Furthermore, this scenario would seem to suggest that the education system in this advanced economy is in a serious crisis. Some scholars therefore argue that in England the experience of education of children depends on where one

lives. The proportion of learners who are out of school worldwide is still high, although there has been some e progress made in returning children to school. The poverty situation is not much better in Africa where access to education remains an elusive dream for many African children even though free education has been introduced in some countries.

Literature shows that the proportion of learners from homes with children in charge who miss school is rising. Learners who withdrew from school in the past two decades increased by 12 million and 11 million respectively (UNICEF, 2021). The situation of learners who are in school is no better. Learners from child-headed households are not safe from harm at school (Kimani et al, 2024). They are exposed to a variety of psychosocial difficulties, and society frequently does very little to help which invariably leads them to experience isolation, stigma, and segregation with some teachers viewing such learners' as being disrespectful (Gumbwe et al, 2015). As a result, it is not uncommon for such learners to be segregated and labelled if they leave something undone (Alford, 2024). Most teachers lack a thorough understanding of the difficulties that these learners may be facing both at school and at home, they are more likely to misinterpret their behaviours.

Zimbabwean Experiences of Poverty and Children from Child-Headed Households

There is growing evidence that poverty has emerged as one variable which impacts academic achievement in schools today (Mckenzie, 2019). In the context of Zimbabwe, examining connection between academic performance and poverty is of utmost relevance. This is because children from disadvantaged households are exposed to a myriad of difficulties which preclude them from accessing education. The Basic Education Assistance Module (BEAM) is an endeavor to assist individuals who are from poverty-stricken backgrounds families in obtaining education. BEAM program was primarily created as a means of reducing poverty and the number of academic challenges among children (van der Wal et al, 2024). It is however prudent to note that this programme is grossly inadequate to cater for learners coming from poor backgrounds, leaving the burden of responsibility to augment educational support to the very same families which request assistance and have no resources.

A study by (Bauer & Laura, 2023) showed that such families were in a quagmire in that they were caught up in an unsupportive home environment which complicated the learners' bid to acquire education. van der Wal et al (2024) correctly note that BEAM support only covered tuition, tax, and examination costs, and did not extend to pay other necessities like books, uniforms, and school projects. The assistance was insufficient for the children to continue their education. Another study in Masvingo Province (Ringson, 2020), found that the reasons for their demise were numerous and included other things such as lack of food, clothing, and shelter. According to Haider (2020) 1.2 billion people worldwide mostly those in developing nations live below the poverty line. From this figure, it can be gleaned that about 50% of Africa's learners live under the poverty datum line (PDL). More than two-thirds of people influenced by lack of education or instruction are learners from poverty-stricken family backgrounds (United Nations, 2019). As a result, more than 20% of learners from backgrounds affected by poverty choose not to go to school (World Bank, 2019). Such an instance serves to highlight the profoundly detrimental effects that poverty has on children's wellbeing (Gomba, 2018). Against this backdrop, it is concerning that Zimbabwe has a child poverty rate of almost two thirds, which precludes most Zimbabwean children from receiving fundamental services like health and education (de Arruda, 2018).

Concerns about the condition of Zimbabwe's adolescent learners arise from the possibility that impoverished families may not be able to send children to school. Through an examination of these adolescents' lived experiences and daily survival strategies, the current study seeks to provide light on this matter. The previous literature review found that children from homes with no parents are more likely to experience abuse, become dropouts, and live in poverty. In addition, it appears from the review that most of the time, girl children fare poorly. Last but not least, it is also clear that in some nations, providing children from child-headed households with access to education continues to be extremely difficult. Children from impoverished backgrounds may continue to suffer stigmatization in the school system owing to a lack of appreciation by teachers of the challenges that such children experience. In light of this, conducting a study into issues impacting children,

particularly in a Zimbabwean setting, was all the more compelling to add afresh understanding of the problem to a growing body of literature, using a hitherto unstudied sample from Manicaland Province.

Research objectives

I. To assess the obstacles that orphaned learners confront and cause them to drop out of school.
II. To suggest mitigating measures that may be taken to prevent orphaned learners from quitting school.

Research questions

I. What obstacles do orphaned learners confront that cause them to drop out of school?
II. What measures may be taken to prevent orphaned learners from quitting school?

METHODS

Study design

The study applied a qualitative phenomenological research design drawing from the ontological and epistemological tenets of interpretivism. Using deep, rich description, the researchers collected participant impressions, interpreted them, and recounted them based on their personal experiences. The researchers were particularly concerned with assessing and evaluating how the participants interpreted and constructed their environment and the value they placed on the things they went through (Matthews et al, 2024).

Study Location and Period

The study focused exclusively on Form Four learners and examined the psychological, social, and emotional impacts of poverty on learners from households headed by children. Geographically, the study was limited to Zimbabwe's Manicaland Province and only looked at secondary schools. Location denotes the lines indicating the limits of a study (Oldenburg et al, 2024). Data was gathered by the researchers in the period of four months from January to April.

Study Population and Eligibility Criteria

Thirty-two (32) participants comprising of eight (8) teachers, four (4) parents, four (4) school heads and sixteen (16) adolescent learners from child-headed households were purposively sampled. The sample was made up of information rich participants from whom the researchers could learn the most (Wiley et al, 2024). Only learners from child-headed households were chosen due to their background and understanding of the difficulties they face in surviving. School heads, guidance and counseling teachers, and members of the school development committee were selected as samples because of their knowledge and experience working with learners from households where the primary caregivers were also the parents.

Data collection

The researchers chose a qualitative approach since it allowed us to use the face-to-face interview technique together with focus group discussions to investigate the phenomena of adolescent learners and the academic obstacles they were facing in the context of their education (Heywood et al, 2024). This ensured that the phenomenon was examined from a range of angles, enabling the understanding of the phenomenon's various characteristics.

Data analysis

In order to allow patterns, themes, and categories to emerge, an inductive method to response analysis was used (Kumar, 2024). The researchers employed a six-step thematic analysis framework for data analysis since it may be utilized to address a variety of research issues and epistemologies (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Thematic analysis permits the processing of huge amounts of data without sacrificing the richness of the original data

and helps the researcher to methodologically categorize, consolidate, and provide understanding into patterns of themes across our data collection (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Ethical and Legal Aspects of The Reseach

Ethical considerations provide guidance when applying commonly known ethical norms, protecting a participant's liberty and welfare interests (World Health Organization, 2020). Ethics are very important in qualitative research since the researchers routinely enter the personal space of the subjects. The Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education, Innovation, Science and Technology Development, and the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education are the gatekeepers who granted us permission to perform the study, together with a university ethics committee. For the study to proceed, participants provided written consent. After obtaining authorization, the researchers arranged a meeting with research participants to address issues related to informed consent, anonymity, privacy, and confidentiality of the study with assistance of school heads. Consent letters were distributed to the sampled participants, who were asked to read and fill them out. The researchers used pseudonyms to maintain anonymity of all our participants and research sites.

RESULTS /FINDINGS

We present our findings under three themes,

Theme 1: Financial hardships that limit orphans ability to attend school

A number of orphaned adolescents and disadvantaged learners in the Chimanimani District of Manicaland Province had financial difficulties that prevented them from buying uniforms, paying school fees, buying food, and using other school supplies. One orphan confirmed this by saying:

> "My parents used to buy all the supplies for school and uniforms. The problem started when I moved home to stay with my grandmother. When I ask my grandmother to buy me school uniforms, she tells me that she is not my mother and I should not bother her. She dislikes being bothered. I no longer go school since I do not have stationery such as books, pens, and rulers that I need for school. Due to financial difficulties, I also do have a school uniform."

Another learner described her emotions as follows:

> "It is not that I dislike going to school, but I cannot afford shoes. It is difficult for me to go without wearing shoes because it is very chilly outside during this time of year."

The dire financial situation affected the orphans was further corroborated in the following excerpt:

> "My grandmother is very poor and cannot afford to me adequately because of her financial struggles. When my parents were alive, I used to eat three meals a day, but after their passing, it is a struggle to get a decent meal every day."

According to school administrators and teachers, financial problems were a significant hindrance to learners' ability to succeed at school. One teacher remarked:

> "School expenses are the main obstacle faced by orphans. Basic Education Assistance Module (BEAM) used to provide school supplies and school fees for these orphans in the previous years. United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) also used to assist but now such assistance is hard to come by."

The study revealed that orphaned adolescents and vulnerable learners were absenting themselves from school for a period due to financial difficulties. The failure of extended families to generate money to buy food, uniforms, school supplies, and other essentials resulted in most of the orphaned adolescents and vulnerable learners not meeting their educational goals.

Theme 2: Psychological and social influences that induce orphans to leave secondary school

Learners and adolescents who are vulnerable and reared in child-headed households might suffer by developmental delays in their psychological, emotional, and social intelligence as well as in their ability to make decisions and communicate effectively, among other life skills.. A guidance and counseling teacher remarked:

"Orphans had a severe sense of grief, abandonment, and shame as a result of their parents' traumatic long-term illness and death. Consequently, they experience a stronger need for security and love."

Another teacher verbalized that:

"The orphans are more likely to develop depression, experience academic difficulties, engage in anti-social or delinquent behavior, and eventually drop out of school if they do not receive specific emotional and psychological help."

The following vulnerable learner who was an orphaned adolescent and was particularly disadvantaged described her guardian's severe treatment of her in great detail:

"I have no ideas why my grandfather despises me. He appears to be insensitive towards my plight. For example at one time, I lost some money and he severely assaulted me. There are times when I cannot comprehend him. Being beaten up makes me sick and afraid at all times. I am now afraid of adults who I see as aggressive, even at school."

In a similar vein, another orphan described his traumatic experiences by saying:

"There is no one who I feel I can safely talk to about my issues. My aunt and uncle are too busy to listen to me. I was not feeling well last week, and when I informed, they did not even pay attention. They simply ignored me. I wish my parents were alive. They were so loving and caring."

Heads of schools also confirmed that vulnerable adolescents from child-headed households needed emotional support and feeling included helping them cope with psychological difficulties. This study revealed that orphaned learners from homes without parents lack the basic components of self-worth, competence, and belonging because those things were gone from them when their parents passed away

Theme 3: Techniques for preventing orphaned learners from quitting school.

Several strategies to ensure that vulnerable orphans from child-headed households remained at school were verbalized. One of teachers provided the following evidence to support their position:

"To address the needs of orphaned learners, teachers need to be well-versed in life orientation skills. Orphans attendance at school would be aided by this. If they continue their education, they will acquire the knowledge and credentials required to contribute positively to society."

Similarly, one of the headmasters suggested the subsequent actions to prevent learners from homes with no parents from quitting school:

"Schools and Non-Governmental Organizations) must work together to equip orphans who have difficulty attending school with the requirements they need to succeed in the classroom. So that orphans can finish their basic education, schools should foster an environment that is more supportive of their needs."

The provision of academic requirements by private organizations, plus a nurturing school atmosphere may cut back on education withdrawals, according to the findings of focus group interviews with vulnerable learners and orphaned adolescents. The study found that in order for orphans to attend or remain in school, a special

curriculum that is pertinent to the issues they encounter on a daily basis is required. Life skills and practical skills for daily living should be emphasized in such a curriculum.

DISCUSSION

The study revealed three themes, namely; financial hardships that limit orphans' ability to attend school, psychological and social influences that induce orphans to leave secondary school, and techniques for preventing orphaned learners from quitting school. The findings are consistent with the study conducted by Fauk et al (2017) which found that vulnerable learners and orphaned adolescents in Tanzania's Mbeya Rural District were not attending school due to economic difficulties because people in the district resorted to cutting back on school supplies and prioritized saving in order to pay for other necessities. This was also evident in our study where the level of assistance by the government and the community was constricted on account of a poorly performing economy. Other study by Anil & Pradeep (2024) corroborate our findings by revealing that vulnerable learners and orphaned adolescents face difficulties including the failure to pay for tuition and access to educational material such as stationery. Such a constrained environment negatively impacts the academic performance of adolescent learners from child-headed households.

The current study reveals that adolescent learners from child-headed households lamented not having enough material or emotional requirements. This deficit of psycho-social support caused them to experience increased absenteeism from school and, in some cases, dropping out of school altogether. This finding is consistent with the Martha & Domiziana (2022) study which revealed that psychological and social factors can cause children to leave school early. Furthermore, Hurley et al (2024) also confirmed that a learner who is denied parental care, which includes emotional and psychological support for their wellbeing, may suffer from emotional distress. Other studies by Chilwalo et al (2024) show that exposure of orphans to a range of psychosocial problems, such as bereavement, hopelessness, anxiety, stigmatization, physical and mental abuse, and labor abuse is harmful for such children. Additionally, the loss of parental love and community support; social disengagement; feelings of guilt, depression, and aggression; and finally, the lack of parental love and support contribute to psychosocial problems of the children leading to disrupted or uneven development. This makes the children to be susceptible to difficulties with eating, sleeping, and studying which ultimately may lead to absenteeism or dropping out of school. The finding therefore confirms the arguments made by Kabonga (2023) who emphasized the need of psycho-social assistance in preventing school dropout among orphaned learners. It can be challenging for adolescents raised by orphans in child-headed households to pursue their academic goals due to a variety of psychological, social, and emotional challenges.

CONCLUSION

The findings show that a dysfunctional ecological system is a manifestation of the lived experiences of adolescent learners from households headed by children. These children face serious obstacles at each of the five levels, such as a lack of financial support, material welfare from the community, state, and non-governmental organizations, and psychosocial support. Many obstacles that are detrimental to academic achievement are present in child-headed households as a framework for child development. Apart from financial hardships, the absence of parental direction and presence has a negative influence on the adolescent head of the family. These adolescents not only become surrogate parents but also undertake a lot of difficult and improper household chores. Adolescent learners from child-headed households are more likely to turn to prostitution and criminal activity as a means of making ends meet due to financial problems. Additionally, because of being frequently underprivileged, they are often forced to engage in child labour which keeps them from going to school. Children from child-headed households experience prejudice and isolation from peers, teachers, and society, which can result in irregular school attendance and the development of negative self-concepts. Adolescents who live in families without parents are therefore particularly susceptible to numerous challenges and negative experience which prejudice them from enjoying a normal childhood. And ultimately perform poorly academically. The results of this study demonstrate that a dysfunctional ecological system has a detrimental effect on adolescent learners from child-headed homes. It is advised that parents, the community, and the government work together to create a welcoming environment that takes these students' needs into

consideration. The implementation of child-friendly interventions for vulnerable learners and orphans can facilitate this kind of partnership.

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