

Effects of Poverty on the Educational Attainment of Adolescent Orphans and Vulnerable Children in Chimanimani District, Manicaland Province in Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to investigate effects of poverty on the educational attainment of adolescent orphans and vulnerable children in Chimanimani District, Manicaland Province in Zimbabwe. The contention of the study is that African communities establish strong family support systems because they consider children as the future of their survival. In Zimbabwe, children are often expected to be cared for by their immediate family members and community members close to their immediate family. In this study, qualitative research approaches were employed to explore effects of poverty on learners from households with children as primary caregivers. Using qualitative study approach, the study purposively sampled learners, teachers and parents from Chimanimani District. A qualitative phenomenological methodology was used to conduct interviews, focus group interviews, and document analysis. The study used Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory lenses to understand the phenomena under study. It was discovered that learners from parentless homes lack a sense of childhood security and are subjected to emotional, social, and psychological stress. The study recommends that communities, instructors, and peers treat learners from child-headed households with dignity and avoid marginalization and segregation of these learners.

Keywords: Zimbabwe, child, learning, orphan, child-headed family

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. The family support networks change has impact on this critical role. 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 2023. In Zimbabwe, elders in the community and close family are expected to take major responsibility in caring for learners. Learners from homes where the primary caregivers are children are expected to obtain care from extended relatives and neighbors.

The study explored the consequences of poverty on rural Zimbabwean learners from child-headed households in learning. Since the advent of COVID 19, it became 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 is difficult for many learners without sufficient supervision and internet connectivity. 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 no essential sanitary services (UNICEF, 2020).

Covid-19 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 & Al- Halabi, 2021).

The transition from in-person classes to online distance learning sessions proceeded swiftly. 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 designs, 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 et al, 2021). Some subjects like practical may not be ideal for online learning.

In an online setting, some studies have shown that 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). Due to the quick shift to online learning, which provided no time to examine its impact 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 et al, 2021). During the Covid-19 pandemic, online e-learning courses were 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 et al, 2021). The demand on such programs however remained out of reach learners from vulnerable backgrounds.

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. Learners from poor backgrounds remained untapped throughout this period due to their status.

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 in addition to poverty, 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). This meant a lot of investment in financial resources which is a challenge in most Zimbabwean poor communities. It is so for Online e-learning is conducted in synchronous environments using a range of electronic devices such as PCs, laptop computers, and smart phones (Zalat et al, 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 challenge is noticeable. 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 & Chimhenga, 2016). As a result, they are deprived of their childhood. It is to this effect that this study explored the effects of poverty on orphaned and vulnerable adolescents in Chimanimani District.

Statement of the Problem

Poverty has a profound impact of the academic achievement of learners, leading to significant disparities in educational outcomes. Learners from poverty-stricken background often face challenges such as limited access to resources, poor nutrition and inadequate healthcare resulting in lower academic attainment, reduced cognitive development and higher dropout rates. Hence this study is aims to investigate the effects of poverty on the academic performance of learners from child-headed households.

Research Question

What are the main obstacles experienced by learners from homes with no parents?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Influential American-Russian psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory emphasizes how a variety of systems can socially affect a learner's growth. The environment of the developing learner is analyzed qualitatively and contextually according to Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory of human development. Although they differ from culture to culture, environmental influences and their effects on human development are heavily stressed by the ecological systems theory (Saraswathi, 2003). According to Donald, Lazarus & Lolwana (2010), Bronfenbrenner discovered that the close, in-person contacts and lifelong bonds that he called proximal interactions are essentially the most important factors in determining long-lasting characteristics of development. The interconnected and constantly changing systems, whose interactions have a significant impact on the learner's eventual growth, are centered on the evolving learner.

A microsystem is the first level, according to Rathus (2006) is the smallest structure and includes interactions between a learners and others in their surrounding environment, such as their home, school, local community, or peer group (Berk, 2007). According to Donald, et al. (2010), microsystems are those in which learners are actively engaged in close, personal contacts with other known people, including their family. Many facets of the cognitive, social, emotional, moral, and spiritual growth are shaped by microsystems, which include roles, relationships, and patterns of everyday activities. The family, the school, the neighborhood, or child care surroundings are examples of structures in the microsystem (Cole, Cole, & Lightfoot, 2009). Boyd & Bee (2006) propose that a child's biological content, which is also referred to as their genetic make-up and developmental stage, is a separate component of the microsystem. According to Berk (2007), all relationships must be considered to be two-way. Santrock (2009) contends that in these contexts, the learner actively participates in social interactions and contributes to the setting's creation rather of being a passive recipient of experiences. The child will therefore be better able to develop academically the more supportive and nurturing these relationships and environments are.

Mesosystem is the term used to describe the second level in Bronfenbrenner's theory. A set of relationships between two or more settings in which the developing person actively participates is what Bronfenbrenner (2008) refers to as the mesosystem. A collection of microsystems that are constantly interacting with one another make up the mesosystem, according to Donald et al. (2010). So, what occurs in the home or among friends can affect how learners behave at school, and the opposite is also true. An unsupported learner child, for instance, might receive compassion and understanding from a neighbor, friend, or teacher. In this way, contacts with the neighbors, her peers, or the teacher may, over time, modify her sense of insecurity, even while her lack of familial support may make her worried and uneasy (Tuckman, 2012). The interactions she experiences at home may also shift as a result of this. A link within the microsystem is often referred to as the mesosystem. For instance, parental involvement at home, interactions with friends, neighbors, and teachers at school all have an impact on a learner's academic achievement (Bee, 2007). According to Robinson & Reed's (2008) conclusion, researchers can examine the advantages and disadvantages of the family mesosystem in relation to primary school child-care initiatives and suggest ways to improve them.

The third system is an exosystem, which is a setting or settings in which a child is not actively involved but which can still have an impact on that child's immediate environment (Donald, et al., 2010). The learner does not engage in these settings, but they have an impact on their lives. School boards, the parents' places of employment, and community organizations are among them. Common locations for children include their homes and their parents' employment; activities that take place there may have an impact on the child at home. A child's development depends greatly on the exosystem. For instance, if a parent loses their job or is upset with their working environment, they may vent their anger on their family (Bronfenbrenner, 2008), which will also have an impact on their living arrangements and financial situation. A learner who will

inevitably have to switch schools, his or her peers, and the teachers will all be greatly impacted by this. According to Brown (2011), when a father is unemployed, he places a great deal of stress on the family and marital problems may occur, leading to indicators of stress, such as anxiety, anger, sadness, and delinquency in children. The learner child's academic achievement can be negatively impacted by this.

The macrosystem is the top level of Bronfenbrenner's paradigm, according to Berk (2007), and it consists of cultural and sub-cultural values, rules, beliefs, expectations, and lifestyles. According to Donald et al. (2010) the macrosystem includes important social and economic institutions as well as the beliefs, practices, and values that shape all other social systems. For instance, a cultural value will probably have an impact on the child's entire mesosystem as well as the proximate interactions in his or her microsystems. Every level of the system is impacted by how the state allocates resources in society. The larger community and the entire social system are what we refer to as two systems and the macrosystem, respectively (Boyd & Bee, 2006).

In light of the foregoing, microsystems are the consistency in the other three systems (micro, meso, and exo) that may have favorable effects on society as a whole and serve as the foundation for how people and families structure their lives. This implies that the child may not be spared if the laws and values of the parents' place of employment are used to influence the child's immediate surroundings.

The fifth system, known as the chronosystem, includes the time-dimension of Bronfenbrenner's concept, as well as consistency or change over the course of a life. Changes in the environment, such as parental divorce, historical occurrences, or social conditions, as well as changes in the developing person, such as life transitions (Bronfenbrenner, 2008). The change in the environment through time that affects the child is what Rathus (2006) identified as the chronosystem. The chronosystem, according to Berk (2007), is a dynamic system that "pays particular attention to the dimension of time where developmental changes are triggered by life events or experiences such as the birth of a child, entering school, getting married, getting divorced, gaining or losing a job, or the onset of menarche" (Duncan, Yeung, Brooks-Gunn & Smith, 2008). How the child's academic performance is impacted by environmental changes is the main focus. The theory was chosen because it highlights how environment impacts on progression of learners in school and in society at large. In this study it guides in understanding the phenomena understudy in various set ups in Chimanimani District.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research has constantly shown that poverty has a devastating impact on the academic performance of learners from child-headed households. These learners face unique challenges such as increased responsibility for caregiving and household chores (Steinberg et al, 2014). They also have limited access to resources that include clothing, food and educational resources (UNICEF, 2018). Studies have also shown that learners from child-headed households perform poorly in school, have lower academic aspirations, and are more likely to engage in risky behaviours (Hall et al, 2016). The effects of poverty on the academic performance of learners from poverty-stricken background are exacerbated by the lack of support systems and resource available to these learners (Wagner et al, 2017). Interventions aimed at providing financial, emotional and academic support to learners from child-headed households are essential to mitigate the effects of poverty and promote academic success.

METHODOLOGY

The study used a qualitative research methodology to interrogate the effects of poverty on adolescent orphans and vulnerable children in Chimanimani District. Naturalistic qualitative research was used to

understand how learners from vulnerable groups coped with their studies during the Covid19 to 2023 periods. The study examined the challenges faced by orphaned and vulnerable learners in educational settings. The investigation and thorough documentation of the processes by which schools support education in quality was a crucial component of this study.

The phenomenology research design was used. It employs a variety of data collection techniques, including semi structured questionnaires, document analysis, observations, focus group interviews and semi structured interviews. The study focused on the Chimanimani District. Four teachers, four parents and 16 learners took part in the study. Few participants are required for interviews to collect rich data (Chiromo, 2006). Interviewing was done with teachers and parents. Focus group interviews were conducted with learners because group interaction can lead to the emergence of rich data, as noted by Shneiderman and Plaisant (Thomas, 2010). Since they may be sent to a wider audience than interviews, questionnaires were mostly employed in place of those interviews (Magwa & Magwa, 2015). The surveys were filled out by teachers. The conversations from the focus groups and interviews were taped and written down. Analysis was done on questionnaire responses. Data was categorized to look for recurring themes.

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, four teachers and four members of the school development committee from each of the four secondary schools in the Chimanimani 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 make them tired before they get to school. That may affect how they perform at school.”

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 current research, 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 findings found out 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 (2002)-discussed facts. 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."

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. Because learners were unable to purchase necessary school supplies due to a lack of funds, their academic performance suffered (Pillay, 2012).

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. A whole uniform set would set you back more than USD \$75."

The three teachers 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. Three learners made the following claim in support of the previous statement:

“Due to their constant justifications, our guardians cannot afford to purchase 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.

The four teachers 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 teachers, 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 understudy.

The investigation found that there were no plans to build libraries since there was not enough funding for them to do so at the three secondary schools. 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 learners from child-headed households were 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 (2006) argues that a learner develops within a complex network of relationships that are influenced by various levels of the local community. According to Bronfenbrenner (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 child headed families in 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 one of the Secondary Schools. 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 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 learners were denied the opportunity to become school prefects due to the lack of uniforms.”

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. Teachers have also been seen to be picky about learners wearing uniforms, which makes those without the means feel excluded. This study found that orphans who couldn't afford these uniforms felt inferior, which prevented them from reaching their full potential. This is in line with 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 learners also underlined the following during focus group conversations with some learners from two 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 institutions.”

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.

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 parents. 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).

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.

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

The following recommendations are made from the study's findings:

1. The government should set up and monitor a program to help learners from child headed families in schools.
2. Teachers should act in loco parentis and provide necessary support needed by learners from child headed families in schools.
3. Learners from child headed families need counselling and psycho-social support from experts in schools.

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