

Implications of Lived Experiences of Learners from Child-Headed Families at Ordinary Level Performance in Secondary Schools in Matabeleland South Province of Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT

This study seeks to examine the implications of the lived experiences of learners from child-headed families at Ordinary level performance in secondary schools. Its ultimate aim is to come up with strategies that could be employed to assist child-headed families' learners in improving their performance at Ordinary level. The study was underpinned by Bronfenbrenner's ecological social theory that uses different types of relationships and surroundings of a person to help for development. An interpretive paradigm that employs a qualitative research approach and a case study design for in-depth information of the lived experiences of learners from child-headed families were used. Purpose sampling was also used to select thirty-five participants from Ordinary level learners and their teachers from two schools to gather information through focus group discussions and face-to-face interviews respectively. The study revealed that child-headed-families' learners concentrate on fending for their siblings, household work, vulnerability, poverty and social isolation instead of schooling. The study also found out that there is need for the Zimbabwean Government to strengthen the school feeding programmes by engaging Non-Governmental partners to assist to curb hunger at school. It was recommended that making use of low costs boarding could reduce the vulnerability of learners from child-headed families.

Key words: Implications, lived experiences, child-headed families, Ordinary level, performance

INTRODUCTION

Support systems are a continuum of love and care that address the social, emotional, spiritual, and psychological wellbeing of a person and they influence both individual and the social environment in which people live (Mangwaya, 2018; Teh & Otman, 2018). Members in child-headed families need support systems that are sensitive to their loss of parents and for affection that is greater than daily material needs (Sirgy, 2021). Thus, a support system working with orphans need big eyes to see, big ears to listen to children's problems, a mouth to speak words of comfort and wisdom, a heart to feel for and understand the child's plight, and time to visit and share with such victims of circumstances (Thwala, 2018). However, learners from child-headed families are facing challenges that are a major barrier to their learning (Magwa and Magwa, 2016; Lemeyu et al, 2023). Hence, this study seeks to examine the implications of the lived experiences of child-headed families on their Ordinary level performance in Matabeleland South of Zimbabwe. The study discusses background and literature of the problem where the gap was identified and conceptualises lived experiences. It also highlights the objectives, theoretical framework and the methodology that was employed to solicit data. Findings of the study are presented, interpreted and discussed thematically.

Conceptualisation of lived experiences

Lived experience refers to an individual's personal and subjective encounters, including emotions, perceptions, preferences and goals that shape their inner world at a specific point in time. It represents a distinct domain of understanding that influences how individuals interpret and respond to various social and biological factors (Karunamuni, Imayama & Goonetilleke, 2021). Lived experience is a depiction of a person's experiences and decisions, as well as the knowledge gained from these experiences and choices. Things that some people have experienced themselves, especially when these give the person a knowledge or understanding that people who

have only heard about such experiences do not have it. These experiences belong to people who have gained knowledge through direct, first-hand involvement in everyday events, rather than through assumptions and constructs from other people, research, or media (Chandler & Munday, 2011). Given that and for the sake of this study, lived experience is the knowledge that learners gain from direct or actual involvement experiences, not simply what they have heard about or learned from school or through their peers. Learners with lived experiences are those directly affected by social health or public health at home or other issues that disturb their learning and wellness at school or by the strategies that aim to address those issues. This gives learners' insight that can inform and improve systems, research, policies, practices, and programs for their quality education. Lived experiences are based on learners' perspectives, personal identities, and history, beyond their proficiency or educational experience. Thus, people with lived experience can endure stigma and trauma in various contexts, including in the workplace.

Background and literature

Child-headed family (CHF) is a type of family, which is rapidly growing especially in Zimbabwe. This is due to increased death rates of parents caused by Human Immuno-Deficiency Virus and Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (HIV & AIDS), road accidents, violence, broken marriages and economic hardship, leading to migration to other countries (Chinyoka & Naidu, 2013). In African culture, child-headed families did not exist much. There was no orphan in the African community as they were other family members who could look after them when parents died (Tutu 2008). Contrary, the issue of extended families has ended due to financial challenges that the families face, thus, bringing the rate of child-headed families high every year (UNICEF, 2018). Hence, an increase in the number of orphans worldwide and child-headed families nationally and internationally (De Klerk, 2016).

In Sub-Saharan Africa, the increase in numbers of orphans show that child-headed families are rising rapidly (Mpofu & Chimhenga, 2016). This affects the children's welfare, as a family is an institution where children learn to interact with other human beings (Obschon et al., 2017). The interactions then lead to the formation of relationships, which extend to the external world when children start school. The family is the universal entity of all institutions found throughout history in every society, and it is the basis of all human society. This means without a proper family the well-being of a child will be compromised (Pillay, 2016; Dekeza, 2018). In South Africa, HIV/AIDS was the main cause of parental death. Their parents, especially the young mothers and fathers who leave their children with elderly people who have no financial power to take care of them, abandoned some children. This has resulted in the increase of number of child-headed families who suffer emotionally, financially, spiritually and socially (Anderson & Philips, 2016). Therefore, the number of child-headed families has increased in Africa than in European counties where there is Social Welfare that takes care of such children. (Jones 2005).

Approximately, over 10 000 children in Zimbabwe are living without parental care and supervision. These children establish households where the eldest siblings take over the parent ship (Tsegaye, 2018; Garira, 2015). Some parents have migrated to other countries to seek for employment ignoring their duties as parents to the left behind children who should be under their custody. Thus, leaving children taking care of themselves, hence, the behaviour that will be portrayed by the children would be problematic such as coming to school late, truancy, inability to read and non-consultative learning (Thwala, 2018). Other challenges such as homelessness, stigmatization, loss of life opportunities, emotional confusion as well as poor education affect them as child-headed families' children. Other child-headed children are affected by absenteeism, non-fees payment, and lack of learning resources such as textbooks, uniforms, financial support and food (Goronga, 2018). Life of CHF is associated with poverty, stigmatisation and discrimination from the community, child labour and lack of clothing (Muchabayiwa & Matarutse 2018). Thus, child-headed families' learners have socio-economic problems that affect their academic performance adversely as well as social life (Gubwe et al., 2015). Some child-headed families 'children are denied of a sense of childhood comfort and are burdened physically, emotionally, socially and psychologically that negatively affect their upbringing and education at large (Magwa & Magwa, 2016). These children are often affected by tribalism, language abuse, cultural differences, and the absence of parental socialisation that have a great impact on their performance at school (Mpofu & Chimhenga, 2016).

In Zimbabwe, child-headed families are deprived access to basic human needs (food and non-food items) necessary to sustain life thus, adversely affecting children's health, intellectual capabilities, academic achievements, emotional, physical moral and social development (Chinyoka & Naidu 2013). In most cases learners from child-headed families have very limited means of generating income to sustain their households. Financial constraints or lack of economic capital leads to learners being unable to purchase learning equipment thereby affecting their academic performance and behaviour (Lemenyu et al., 2023). Thus, lack of social support systems detrimental to the schooling experiences of most orphans.

Psycho-social support is a continuum of love and care that addresses the social, emotional, spiritual, and psychological wellbeing of a person and the social environment in which they live (Mangwaya, 2018; Teh & Otman, 2018). Thus, social support assists to develop a child holistically. This suggests that the environment in which the child lives in should be full of love and care so that he/she is able to adopt and learn same behaviour from the society. However, a significant number of child-headed families' children live in fear of being victimized by the society and their peers; thereby isolating himself or herself from everyone becomes a solution. Therefore, supporting child-headed families 'children strengthens social, emotional and cultural connectedness of the school going age individuals. Hence, members from child-headed families need support systems that are sensitive to their challenges. Thus, the need for affection is greater than daily material needs (Sirgy, 2021). Consequently, the need for counselling in the life of traumatized individuals is critical and bereaved children should be given appropriate information including facts about death to assist them to grieve and map their way forward. This helps learners from child-headed families to cope with their situation in a more positive way (Nelson-Jones, 2017). As a result, people forming their support systems should find creative, loving, and long-lasting ways to send the right messages to these children (Muchabayiwa & Matarutse, 2018). It is therefore for this reason that this study seeks to examine lived experiences of child-headed families at ordinary level performance in secondary schools in Matabeleland South Province of Zimbabwe.

Objectives

1. Examine the implications of the lived experience of learners from child-headed families on their performance on Ordinary Level in secondary schools.
2. Evaluate strategies of improving performance of learners from child-headed families at Ordinary level in secondary schools.

Theoretical Framework

The study adopted the Ecological Systems Theory (EST) by Bronfenbrenner (1979) that conceptualises the relationships between the home and school. The model uses different types of relationships and surroundings of a person to help explain development of a child. Given that, the environment constitutes five distinct systems namely: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem and chronosystem that have direct or indirect influence on child's development, these must all be considered significant to the individual's life. Where the microsystem is a small, immediate environment, the child lives in. These include relationships and organisations children interact with such as family, peers, neighbourhood and school (Krishnan, 2012) and has the immediate and earliest influence on the child. In their microsystem children heading households, have no parents to help them learn values, attitudes of society and give help in schoolwork. The children adapt the parental role and bypass most stages of childhood and this has many challenges in the schoolwork and social life (Janes, 2015).

The theory emphasises the importance of parents' involvement in their children's learning (Guy – Evans, 2020). Thus, the theory comprises of the linkages and processes taking place between two or more settings containing the developing the child (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). In this case, the links that parents provide in the network of interactions is lacking. The breakdown of a child's microsystem leaves a child without proper adult supervision (Chidziva, 2014). Hence, the children may have difficulties in developing positive relationship with teachers and tackling homework as they lack the links between settings. Therefore, a balance closes linkage between children's home and school without operating as separate entities (Chinyoka & Naidu, 2013). Given that and for the sake of this study, all the ecosystems surrounding the learners are a societal blueprint for

a particular culture or subculture that become one body to nurture children well and help them to understand what is done at the educational institutions.

METHODOLOGY

An interpretive paradigm, commonly known as anti – positivism, is a research method that argues that truth and knowledge are subjective and are culturally or historically based as well basing on understanding their experiences and behaviours (Flick, 2014). Interpretivists believe that they are multiples reality that are socially constructed and researchers should be part of the participants actively interacting with them to understand their behaviour and the matter in its natural settings (Taherdoost, 2021). Through the interpretive paradigm, a qualitative research approach was adopted for this study. Qualitative research involves an in- depth understanding of the phenomenon, (Wilson, 2015). Thus, employing a case study that allows for describing and interpreting events conditions, circumstances or situations that are occurring in the present. It is concerned with an exhaustive study of particular instances emphasising on the interrelationship between different attributes of a unit that deepens one's perception and gives one a clear insight into life. It as well enabled the researcher to examine data within the context lived experiences of child-headed families.

A sample of thirty-five participants that were purposively sampled was used to gather. Thus, a smaller sample allows data collection process to be faster and easy and triangulation to ensure trustworthiness of qualitative data (Taherdoost, 2021). The purposive sampling was more relevant to select learners from child-headed families and Ordinary level teachers who are also class teachers of both form three and form four classes as they are directly linked to CHF learner and they had adequate information on academic performance of learners. Focus groups discussions and interviews were used to collect data where focus group discussions allowed for beliefs, opinions, expressions of agreement or disagreement with other participants and processes in which individual or group identities to be constructed (Stromer-Galley & Muhlberger, 2009). Face-to-face interviews allowed the one-on-one interaction whereby the participant is flexible to answer in a conversational aspect although the questions answered were semi-structured. The interviews allowed the researcher to get first- hand information (Flicks, 2014).

Findings on Implications of lived experiences of learners from child headed families on Ordinary level performance

From the interviews and focus group discussions, the study revealed that the causes of low performance of child-headed family learners was stigmatization that happens during break time where lunch boxes are being opened. As other learners do not want to share, their lunch packs saying their classmates are HIV positive. This lowers confidence and self-esteem of learners from child-headed families. The findings further found out other teachers also discriminate learners from child-headed families because of not having learning material, making them to feel isolated and dejected such that they end up not performing well academically. The above findings suggest that there is a lot of stigmatization and discrimination in schools especially to those learners who lost their parents after long illnesses. Some teachers do not want to give themselves time to understand these learners' challenges, and learners lose confidence willingness to learn. Thus, lack of self-esteem is the greatest enemy of child intellectual development. Without self-esteem, confidence and intrinsic motivation learners will not participate well at school (Kabede, 2016; Whyken, Modise & Percy, 2022).

The results revealed that poverty makes learners from child-headed families to perform badly at school. These learners do not have stationery or proper uniforms and school fees is not paid and they are always absent from school. Some have developed health problems and they cannot afford clinic bills. The above sentiments suggest that poverty is the root of all consequences and implications of lived experiences faced by learners from CHF. Such learners are economically disadvantaged due to unavailability of parent to take care. The effects of poverty can affect their entire lives if no interjection comes up. Learners from poverty-stricken family are the most affected and the effects of it can last for long if it is not broken in between, thus the vicious cycle of poverty will affect the generation for a long period (Pillay, 2016; Ngwenya & Chiroro, 2020).

The findings indicate that learners take responsibilities of household at an early age; they look after their siblings, giving them financial and physical support. The study also revealed that learners from child-headed

families are forced to attend gatherings such as food aid distribution events, which provide essential food assistance to individuals of which it is a duty for adults whilst they attend school. It was as well found out that learners from CHF also take care of siblings' health needs and school needs. This reflects that learners taking parental roles struggle to cope with schoolwork. Some resort to drug /substance or alcohol abuse for stress relief and girls involve themselves in love with elderly men in order to get both a father/parent figure or to financial assistance (Moyo, 2013; Razer & Friedman, 2017).

The study found out that shortage of sanitary pads significantly affect attendance of learners particularly girls from child-headed families. One of the girls from the focus group discussion highlighted that:

"..I do not have never used a sanitary pad in my lifetime. The only thing that I can get are the pieces of fabrics from old and torn clothes that I normally use to pad. However, the challenge that I monthly face is soap to wash them clean after use. Therefore I throw them in the pit latrine of dig a pit and bury it. At times when I am at school it gets soaked-up and I end up staining my school garments and get embarrassed. That is the reason I am not coming to school daily."

The above findings show that poor socio-economic status of learners from child-headed families has a negative impact on their learning as girls are always absent from school because they have a challenge in sourcing pads. Sometimes they even fail to get soap to wash their clothes and the pieces of fabrics they use as pad. Several learners from CHFs in rural Zimbabwe are usually not financially stable so they resort to crime. Lower-income students perform worse in school, with literacy skills lagging behind their higher socio-economic status counterparts. It is as well a disadvantage that is associated with lower academic outcomes, lack of confidence and creativity, and informed citizenship (Lemeyu et al., 2023).

The study found out that teenage pregnancies, lack of education, lack of information about sexual and reproductive health, child marriages, sexual violence and drug abuse among others are problems that affect the school performance of girls from child-headed families and the reason why they drop out of school. These findings from the interview show that pregnant girls were allowed in school however; very few have the courage to continue with education after falling pregnant. One interviewee added that:

"....Girls usually drop out of school due to stigmatization and labelling by other learners and teachers when they fall pregnant by hiding at home. Some commit suicide because of unwanted pregnancies and others illegally abort."

The findings suggest that pupils from child-headed families dropout of school because of falling pregnant as they would be searching for the resources to take care of their siblings because they would be stigmatised by other learners and teacher. Some of them prefer staying at home until they give birth, commit suicide or illegally abort. These findings are in line with Chanda (2023) who highlighted that, due to teenage pregnancies, there is high levels of school dropout rates on child-headed female learners. Also poverty, lack of education, lack of information about sexual and reproductive health, child marriages, sexual violence and drug abuse among others, result in teenage pregnancies.

From the focus group discussions, the study revealed that not every learner from child-headed families is a result of death of the parents however, due to migration and artisanal mining. The economic situation in Zimbabwe is forcing parents to migrate to other countries such as South Africa, Botswana America or Dubai in search for greener pastures. Parents leave their children with no source of income, parental care and guidance. This implies that people migrate because of the economic situation in Zimbabwe leaving children behind, hence the increasing number of child-headed families in the society, as a result pass rate is negatively affected since children has no parental guidance from home. Teenagers with uninvolved parents tend to make poor decisions due to lack of guidance and boundaries. Consequently, they may be rebellious and defiant, involved in drug and substance abuse, or even exhibit delinquency. When adolescents are allowed to do whatever they want with no consequences, they can end up rebellious or defiant. They may also resort to aggressive, violent, or criminal behaviour hence their performance at school drops (Sehat 2022).

The results made known that some learners from child-headed families prefer going for illegal gold panning for quick cash instead of going to school. Those who are going to school, their performance is poor because they absent themselves a lot. Learners with parents out of the country had to find ways to survive on illegal gold mining. One of the interviewee attributed that:

“...During the previous term, I lost more than ten students due to illegal mining. These learners resorted artisanal mining instead of coming to school. Hence from the previous Ordinary level results no child-headed candidate passed. Some of them never sat for examinations even though they were registered.”

The above findings suggest that most of the learners from child-headed families have resorted to artisanal mining in place of schooling and at the average of ten learners from each school left for artisanal mining. Some come other days and absent themselves during other days. The results also imply that learners from child-headed families are not making it in their final examinations due to absenteeism and the lost focus. In line with the findings, Stromer-Galley and Muhlberger (2009) postulate that many children find themselves in this dangerous and exploitative industry lured by the promises of fast money but ultimately subjected to hazardous working conditions with the risk of accidents and injuries and also exposure to toxic chemicals such as mercury. The prevalence of illegal gold mining in Zimbabwe further exacerbates the challenges faced by these vulnerable learners from child headed families.

The study revealed that learners from child-headed families lack role models to inspire them on the importance of education. The findings also noted that in that area no one from child-headed families excelled in education. One of the interviewee said that:

“...Children from child-headed families lack determination and inspirations for them to value the importance of schooling. They choose to dodge lessons, and be casual labourers instead of focusing on their education.”

The above sentiments reflect that in the area where the study was conducted, there was no one from the child-headed families outperformed in his/her studies, whom the area can point to as an encouragement. This suggests that, learners from child-headed families lack willpower and motivation for them to see the worthy of learning, however they have potential; instead, they prefer to abscond lessons, to become casual labourers of their neighbours. Thus, lack of motivation that acts as a driving force behind willpower and potential to accomplish tasks. The underlying motivation fuels the will to utilize that strength effectively. Motivation can stem from various sources, such as personal aspirations, external recognition, or a sense of purpose. When individuals lack motivation, they do not intensify their willpower to maintain commitment and dedication towards their goals (Hugo. 2022).

Strategies of improving performance of learners from child-headed families at Ordinary level in secondary schools

Through interviews, the findings revealed that to reduce the implications of dropouts due to shortage of school fees the school administration should seek financial assistance from the government and other stakeholders like NGOs to assist

Interviewee1 added that:

“...There are many organization helping orphans and vulnerable learners such as save the child, UNICEF, CAMFED, PLAN International as well as the government BEAM Programme. The government or NGOs should help with feeding programs so that the learners from CHF's will eat at school since they come to school in an empty stomach. Life will become easier if the children from CHF's can be supported with food hampers, uniforms, and blankets on top school fees.”

The above assertions suggest that helping the learners from child-headed families through engaging NGOs in paying their fees and buying them, learning material will motivate them to come to school. Bringing in school feeding programmes will also help child-headed family learners to be retained at school. A well-nourished, healthy and educated population is the foundation for growth and economic development. Thus, investing in children's nutrition, health and education during middle childhood and sustaining this into adolescence, will

help children to reach their full potential, become productive adults and break the intergenerational cycle of malnutrition (UNICEF, 2020).

The study revealed that guidance and counselling of these learners should not be done by teachers or the school administration but by every staff member at the school. The results also found out that financial support is needed for learners from child-headed families nonetheless also basic needs such as food, clothes and uniforms. These sentiments suggest that teachers can have big ears to listen, big eyes to see these learners' challenges and big mouths to advocate for learners' challenges for the school environment to become friendly to every learner and eliminate the number of dropouts. Concurring with the findings Mangwaya (2018) alludes that school environment should be friendly and the atmosphere in schools should be appealing and welcoming in such a way that bullying, stigmatization and discrimination of any child regarding to social status should be discouraged. Thus, emphasizing the importance of providing support to learners including educational support for orphans and vulnerable children, as well as the role of school stakeholders and educators in ensuring a conducive learning environment (Mwoma & Pillay, 2015).

From both the interviews and focus group discussions, the study revealed that the school should work hand in hand with the community and find ways to assist learners from child headed families. The findings also made known that introducing income generating projects, where the community members and child-headed family children voluntarily work, can help learners in need. One participant added that:

“.... Child-headed family learners can be trained to be entrepreneurs who sell items like sweets, snacks and stationery at schools so that they can raise money for their basic needs so that they can take care of their financial needs to reduce their chances of taking drugs or involved with married men.”

The above findings suggest that by starting small businesses for the learners at school, develops skills such as budgeting, financial literacy and money management, which can be valuable for their future. These initiatives contribute to economic empowerment of vulnerable learners and their siblings leading to improved financial stability. The initiative also contributes to their holistic development and long-term prospects. In line with the findings, Thwala (2018) alludes that learners should be equipped by giving them inputs to start small businesses so that they can take care of financial needs and reinforce the relevance of education and resilience building to child-headed family learners.

The study found out that there is need for children to build a sense of belonging and boost their confidence and self-esteem, by feeling protected and loved. The results also revealed that it is important to encourage empathy, understanding and kindness among students to create an environment where all learners are respected and valued regardless of their circumstances. It was as well said that using practical ways, teachers must boost the learners' confidence for the benefit of the learners from child-headed families. Given the above findings, varying the methods of teaching in the classroom helps to build self-esteem, confidence and sense of belonging of the learners. Thus using hands-on approaches where less speaking is needed. These findings are concurring with Razer and Friedman (2017) who commended that the child's interests in learning are boosted for them to participate and work hard in school to increase good academic results. Using different teaching methods of teaching learners become more participative than sticking to one method. Thus, using teaching methods that are child- centred to instil self-driven ways of learning in learners (Obschon et al., 2017; Ngwenya & Chiroro, 2020).

The findings through interviews made known that providing all less privileged girls with renewable sanitary pads presents a promising solution to address absenteeism among the girls during menstruation periods. This suggests that giving reusable pads offers a cost effective and sustainable approach to menstrual hygiene management. The initiative of reusable pads do not only help to address the issue of menstrual hygiene but also empowers young women to continue with their education without interruption. It is crucial that more schools and organizations prioritize providing access to sanitary pads for girls who do not have access (UNISEF, 2023).

It was also revealed that the Zimbabwean Government should introduce program to fund low costs boarding that provide shelter, protection and care, where teachers act like parents and the facilities provide a second

home for less privileged children. This reduces exposure of the learners from child-headed families to child labour, sexual abuse, household responsibilities and crimes. Given the above results, providing low cost boarding will not only benefit learners from child-headed families, but even those who travel long distances for secondary education will benefit. Hence, schools should be second homes for children with the help from teachers, who will be motivated to do such duties, then children will feel safe (Kedebe, 2015; Jakachira & Muchabayiwa, 2015).

CONCLUSION

The study concluded that the lived experiences of learners from child-headed families have far-reaching implications that tend to affect their educational, social and psychological well-being. Family instability and economic hardships have a negative impact of these vulnerable learners' academic performance. Poverty and lack of parental guidance are some of the main causes of implications of learners from child headed families. The study also concludes that both teachers and peers need to be counselled to stop stigmatization and have a school friendly atmosphere that promote regular attendance and interest to learning. To eradicate poverty, the community can introduce small income generating projects for the learners and the government and non-governmental organizations support the learners financially.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the study findings, the study recommends that:

1. It was recommended that schools should use low costs boarding to reduce vulnerability of learners from child-headed families.
2. The Zimbabwean Government need to strengthen the school feeding programmes by means of bringing in adequate funds to curb hunger at school.
3. The Zimbabwean Government should intensify financial resources allocated for orphans and vulnerable children programmes for the benefit of school basic requirements.
4. The Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education should revive the School Psychological Services Department by making sure that it is well-stuffed and adequately funded to effectively carry out its responsibilities of assisting orphans and vulnerable children.
5. The communities should protect and provide basic needs to learners from child-headed families to reduce bullying at school.
6. The communities, teachers and peers need to be conscientised to treat children from child-headed families with respect to reduce stigmatisation.

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