

CHALLENGES AFFECTING SCHOOLING FACED BY CHILD-HEAD FAMILIES: A STUDY OF PERCEPTIONS BY TEACHERS, PARENTS AND LEARNERS IN MASVINGO DISTRICT

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ABSTRACT

Child only household is a new form of family that is rapidly growing especially in the sub-Saharan African countries. The meaning of childhood is redefined for many around the world by the death of parents. Children living in such households are denied a sense of childhood comfort and are burdened physically, emotionally, socially and psychologically. This study set to investigate the challenges faced by children from child only households that interfere with learning. The study is grounded in Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory. In this study a qualitative case design was used with interviews, focus group discussions and questionnaires. A total of forty four participants were used in the study. Data indicates that children heading families encounter many challenges in their everyday life that interfere with learning. They are left with an arduous task for fending for younger siblings. The children shoulder all the bulk of the housework and are vulnerable to poverty and social isolation and this creates an environment which does not foster academic performance. In conclusion the authors recommend that parents be encouraged to find means of ensuring that their children are well provided for when they pass on. It is also recommended that communities, teachers and peers be conscientised to treat children in child-headed households with respect, because they are humans and they are the nation's resources. They should refrain from cultural beliefs which promote stigmatisation, marginalisation and segregation of such children.

Key words: Child, learning, orphan, household, child-headed household.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The rise of families being headed by children is being witnessed very much both internationally and nationally (Phillips, 2011; Mthethwa, 2009). Child-headed households (CHH) are a reality that cannot be ignored. Martinus (2009) cited in (Lepheana, 2010) defines child-headed households as those in which there is absence or permanent incapacity of the adult caregiver which has necessitated the taking over of responsibilities by children. Bequele (2007) describes a CHH as a household where everyone who lives in the household is younger than 18 years of age and household is headed by one of the children who are recognised as being responsible for providing leadership and sustenance of the household.

Child-headed households consist of children only due to mostly parental deaths. Countries strongly affected by Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) related deaths have witnessed the emergence of CHH (Phillips, 2011). The HIV/ AIDS epidemic has killed off millions of parents robbing children of their first line of protection. Sub-Saharan Africa has been identified as the world's poorest region with the largest proportion of vulnerable children in the world. As of 2005, an estimated 12 million children have lost one or both

parents to AIDS. More than four fifth of all children orphaned by HIV/ AIDS worldwide live in Sub-Saharan Africa (Mishra and Bignami–Van Asche, 2008; Lepheana 2010).

Children are also left without adult caregivers on account of road accidents, mental disability of parent, chronic sick parent. When children are also left behind by one or both parents due to economic hardships that is, when they migrate to other countries leads also to the emergence of CHH (Bakker, Elings-Pels and Reis, 2009). All these factors have led to a decrease in the proportion of adult population in the families.

Once left parentless many of the children establish a household where the eldest sibling takes over the household leadership (Tsegaye, 2008). Traditionally the African system provided security, social and safety net of its members, there was no such thing as COH. The extended family networks took care of all children. In case someone lost a parent they were taken in as own children by aunts, parents and grandparents (UNICEF, 2008; Awino, 2010). Children can no longer rely on the support of the traditional extended family system which provided care and support for the orphans. This coping mechanism has been overstretched by poverty. (<https://core.ac.uk/download/files/153/6236012.pdf>).

In Sub-Saharan Africa a total of 0.5% of all households are headed by a child. In Namibia CHH have become more common since (2006). Research indicates that approximately 2% of households are headed by a child. Estimates in Rwanda put all children heading families at 13% of all households. Research in South Africa in a South African General Household survey show that 100 000 children were living in a household headed by a child (Phillips, 2011). Ian Breda 2010 cites a research in South Africa by Chiastilite (2008) where it was found out that 7 270 of the 2.1 million households in Gauteng province were child headed. In Zimbabwe there are over 5 000 children heading families. An average of 100 000 children are living without parental care and supervision (Zhangazha 2010; UNICEF, 2008)

The above statistics clearly show that the CHH is fast becoming an integral part of the society. The number of children living without parents is rapidly increasing. Parental loss affects children's welfare. This study set to investigate the challenges encountered by children in CHH.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Absence or permanent incapacity of adult caregiver has led to the taking over of responsibilities by children below the age of eighteen. The child-only-household has emerged as a context of child development as a result of mainly parental death. Young children who themselves need adult care and support are taking care of their own siblings (Mpofo and Chimhenga, 2016; Abdool and Abdool, 2008). This deprives them of their childhood. This study set to investigate the challenges faced by learners heading families.

RESEARCH QUESTION

What are the challenges faced by secondary school learners in child only households?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper is anchored on the theoretical underpinnings of Urie Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological theory which holds that development reflects the influence of several

environmental systems. The model uses different types of relationships and surroundings of a person to help explain development (Bronfenbrenner, 2004). The environment constitutes five distinct systems namely; microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem and chronosystem each having direct or indirect influence on child's development. The microsystem is the small, immediate environment the child lives in. Children's microsystems will include immediate relationships or organisations they interact with such as family, peers, neighbourhood and school (Krishnan, 2010). This layer has the most 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 school work. The children adapt the parental role. Janes (2015) points out that children are not miniature adults and should not be treated as if they were. As a result of the absence of a parental figure a child bypasses most stages of childhood as they take over the roles of parents and this has a lot of challenges in the school work and social life.

The second immediate layer, the mesosystem, comprises the linkages and processes taking place between two or more settings containing the developing person (Bronfenbrenner, 1994:40). In other words a mesosystem is a system of different microsystems such as home and school. What happens in a home for example, influences what happens in school. In the case of CHH the link 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). The children may have difficulties developing positive relationship with teachers and tackling homework to lack of links among settings.

According to Bronfenbrenner, (1979) the exosystem comprises the linkages and processes taking place between two or more settings, at least one of which does not contain the developing person but can indirectly have a strong impact on the individual's development. An example is the relationship between the home and parent's work place. Children who live in parent-absent homes have challenges since there will not be a bread winner in the family. Schooling will be a challenge, with no fees and they may end up engaging in prostitution so as to raise funds.

The macrosystem may be thought of as a societal blueprint for a particular culture or subculture (Bronfenbrenner, 2004). It has to do with the economic, political and social stability of the country. Children from child-head households may if the country's economy is poor fail to get assistance in terms of food or health services and they are bound to experience strain in their development.

A chronosystem encompasses change or consistency overtime not only in the characteristics of the person but also of the environment in which that person lives for example change of the life course in family structure, socio-economic status, place of residence or the degree of hecticness and ability in everyday life which might be as a result of death of a parent. Children who are left parentless find themselves heading families. They take on new roles and responsibilities in keeping the family on its feet.

Understanding of these interactions is the key to understanding how the surroundings namely; home, school, neighborhood, culture and government of the children from homes without parents influence their development. The ecological system provides the ideal theoretical

base for discussing different social contexts that influence and mold the everyday life experiences of children in CHH.

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative approach was chosen as relevant for this study because Hancock, Windridge and Ockleford (2010) argue that it is concerned with developing explanations of social phenomena. It helps to understand the social world in which people live and why things are the way they are. With this insight the researchers choose to understand the world of children living in parent-absent families by making sense of different comments and experiences conveyed by participants. In support Cresswell (2009) points out that qualitative research allows for documentation of personal perspectives and views.

A case study as a qualitative method was used during investigation in order to answer research question. A case study is an in-depth study of an individual or social unit within its real life context (Magwa and Magwa, 2015: 53). The research was a case study of Masvingo District in Zimbabwe.

Sampling

Blanche, Durrheim and Painter (2006) opine that qualitative research focuses on the richness of data where a relatively small sample is selected. The researchers produced representative selections of population elements through sampling. Purposive sampling was used to select information from participants. Participants from which the most can be learned were selected because as echoed by McMillan and Schumacher (2010) and Creswell (2009) the aim of purposive sampling is to ensure that a small number of information rich participants participate in the study. A total of 44 participants comprising of 20 teachers, 8 parents and 16 learners constituted the sample.

Data Collection and Analysis

The qualitative case study is an approach to research that facilitates exploration of a phenomenon within its context using a variety of data sources (Baxter and Jack, 2008). This ensures that the issue is not explored through one lens, but a variety of lenses which allows for multiple facets of the phenomenon to be understood. To explore the views of participants on challenges experienced by children from parent absent homes parents were interviewed, focus group discussions were held with learners and questionnaires were distributed to teachers.

An inductive approach to analysing the responses was done to allow patterns, themes and categories to emerge (Cresswell, 2010). After collection of data the researcher reflected on it, its themes and identified themes by categorizing data and lastly developed general conclusions.

Measures of trustworthiness

The study used credibility and transferability as measures of trustworthiness.

Credibility

Qualitative researchers demonstrate that their data are accurate and appropriate through triangulation (Magwa and Magwa, 2015). Credibility of findings was checked using informant triangulation. Three groups of participants namely teachers, learners and parents were involved in the study to get their views on challenges encountered by children from parent-absent families.

Transferability

This refers to the degree to which the findings of the research can be applied to other settings or groups in population (Halloway and Wheeler, 2002). Establishing transferability was attained through purposive sampling of appropriate participants and a rich description of the methodology used in the study.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

If perceptions of people are to be understood adequately, close relationships should be established between researcher and participants, (Oliver, 2010). A non-hierarchical relationship with participants was created so as to clearly understand their perceptions on challenges affecting education encountered in CHH.

Participants of this study were informed about purpose of study, estimated time and what will be done with data. They were also told that their identity would be preserved by the researchers at all costs. With insights from Magwa and Magwa (2015) informed consent was sort and confidentiality was maintained in reporting information.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Aligned to the main research question posed to the participants, the findings established domestic, financial, and stigmatization as main challenges faced by learners from CHH. The challenges clearly reflect their social disempowerment and devastating experiences affecting their academic learning.

Household chores

One challenge imposed by growing up in CHH affecting the academic performance of learners established by the study was household chores. Several participants pointed out that heads of households take up many domestic chores such as cleaning the house, paying attention to siblings, gardening. One parent said:

Children who head families shoulder the bulk of housework such as sweeping, cooking, washing and this does interfere with their school work. When they go to school they will be tired and will not concentrate.

From focus group discussions and questionnaires it also emerged that heavy household duties lead to school absenteeism and eventually dropping out of school. In the same vein Masondo (2016) and Kabede (2015) also point out that children from CHH carry a burden of family roles much greater than children in adult-headed households. These responsibilities are considered developmentally inappropriate and lead to disruptions in education. In a study by Mkhize (2006) children in CHH reported that it was stressful to carry out household roles for family and making decisions. Thus, after deaths of parents children are faced by the problem

of role adjustment. Children are involved in routine household chores which are extremely exhausting physically, psychologically and financially thereby affecting their academic performance.

Financial Challenges

All participants pointed out those learners from CHH are financially challenged. It was established that because of disintegrated extended family safety net and inadequate material support from government children from CHH are vulnerable to poverty. They have very limited means of generating income to sustain their households. Teachers, parents and learners pointed out that financial constraints impact negatively on both the education and behaviour of children from CHH. One parent had this to say:

Children in CHH have many unfulfilled basic needs such as providing food, paying fees. As a result of this some of them end up missing school or completely dropping out trying to work and provide for the family. Girls especially can engage in prostitution so as to earn a living.

From the focus group discussions it was also established that lack of economic capital leads to learners being unable to purchase text books and uniforms thereby affecting their academic performance. The following quotation from a learner portrays these findings:

As a result of financial problems children in CHH end up dropping out of school. Some end up being thieves and prostitutes so as to provide for the family.

Reviewed literature has reiterated the fact that financial constraints interfere with schooling and academic progress of learners heading families. Children heading families are faced with pervasive poverty that leads to their losing out on education for the sake of financial income (Masondo, 2006; Leatham, 2005; Mokoena 2007). Pillay (2012) asserts that lack of money causes children to fail to purchase school needs, supplies and this leads to failing in class due to lack of these needs.

Mokoena (2007) points out that crime is prevalent in CHH as the families are poverty stricken which leads them to resort to criminal activities to support families. Children especially girls as echoed by Pillay (2012) may face risk of ending in child prostitution in trying to provide for family.

Stigmatisation

One challenge faced by children from CHH affecting their school learning as noted by the study was social exclusion. The children experience discrimination in the society and at school. The study established that children in CHH are discriminated against in their very own society. The words of one interviewee reflect views of most participants on this issue:

Most parents hesitate to let their children associate with children from CHH as they view these children as dirty, beggars, prostitutes since they have no one to guide them.

Similarly literature indicates that children from CHH experience pain of rejection by society especially if parents died of HIV. Society does not allow its children to play with them (Kanyamorwa and Ampek, 2007).

It was also established that even at school children from CHH face negative attitudes from both teachers and peers. Teachers were said not to have empathy for these children. Peers were also said to mock children from CHH for example when they are chased out of school due to non-payment of fees or wearing poor clothes. Pillay (2012) also says children face the problem of social exclusion when teachers fail to understand the situation they are in. Teachers for example, tend to punish these children for being late and not finishing their homework without considering the reason for such behaviour. As a result of the social exclusion, feelings of esteem strongly related to competence which leads to greater motivation and involvement in school are thwarted thereby affecting academic performance.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The CHH as a context of child development presents numerous challenges that are not favorable for academic performance. The lack of parental presence and guidance has various effects on the children heading the families. These children take on many household tasks which are demanding and age inappropriate. Due to financial constraints the learners from CHH succumb to criminal activities, and prostitution to make ends meet. Children are often impoverished driving them into work and preventing them from attending school (Robson and Kenyanta, 2007). Isolation and discrimination of children from CHH by society, teachers and peers lead to development of negative self-concepts and erratic school attendance. Thus, children living in homes where there are no parents are extremely vulnerable. They are confronted by a multitude of difficulties in their everyday lives which affect the school work. From the results of the study the following recommendations flow:

- The government through the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education should intensify the implementation, monitoring and the evaluation processes of programs such as, the Social Welfare and other Government initiatives on the lives of orphans because some of the needy children do not benefit from these programs due to corruption and general greediness of individual leaders.
- Teachers should be able to assess and understand the different backgrounds of children and stop labelling, discriminating and stereotyping these children. They should love and care for children from child-headed household since they act in loco-parentis.
- Organisations that assist children should not only focus on material needs of such children but also on their psycho-social well-being through provision and counselling.
- The children should be accorded access to information in order for them to know the contents of the law and policies on protection so that they can take informed legal action if exploited or abused.

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