

The Interface of Orphan-hood and Schooling Experiences in Rural High Schools in the Republic of Zimbabwe

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Abstract

The child's socio-economic background is very critical in influencing the school experiences of learners. This study was conducted in February 2017 in Goromonzi district in Mashonaland East province of Zimbabwe. It explored the nexus between orphanhood and school experiences of rural high school learners in Zimbabwe. A qualitative approach was adopted to interrogate the impact of orphanhood on academic performance. Using the purposive sampling technique, orphaned learners, orphaned high school dropouts as well as teachers manning classes with orphaned learners were identified for in-depth interviews. The study also utilised the social capital theory as a theoretical framework to analyse data collected from learners and teachers. Findings from the study showed that one's socio-economic background is critical in influencing educational experiences of learners. The study also revealed that orphanhood is associated with poverty hence issues like; schooling costs, hunger, child labour as well as domestic responsibilities were seen to be detrimental to the educational experiences of orphaned learners. Last and most importantly, the study revealed that the girl child is worse hit by orphanhood as she becomes vulnerable to sexual abuse.

Key terms: Orphan hood, social capital, educational experiences, economic capital, child-headed household.

Introduction

Orphan-hood is one of the major social problems in contemporary society, particularly in developing countries like Zimbabwe. The effects of poverty tend to proliferate to schools thereby affecting educational experiences of students in that predicament. Most research studies have focused on the general socio-economic challenges faced by orphans within the home environment. This study will go a step further to investigate and unpack the interface of orphan-hood and academic performance of orphans in the Zimbabwean Secondary Schools. The study focuses on Tsatse High School in Goromonzi District, Mashonaland East as a case study.

Parental death introduces a negative economic shock to the household that is likely to affect the living standards of its members. The extent of the impact depends, among certain other conditions, on whether the deceased parent was a main earner in the household, whether the household becomes eligible or receives transferences in response to the death, whether children are fostered out, and the economic conditions of the household where the children are fostered in (Case, Paxson & Ableidinger, 2004). There are some orphans who lost both parents and others living with a single parent. Orphans are usually left under the care of the extended family and in the worst cases; some are relegated to child-headed families due to poverty. It has become very difficult for the majority of orphans to meet basic needs and schooling costs. This has resulted in erratic school attendance and in worst cases to school drop-out. It is against this background that this study explores the impact of orphan-hood on students' educational experiences.

Statement of the problem

The sting of orphan-hood tends to be exacerbated by poverty which deprives children growing in such family contexts social capital as well as financial capital; resources critical for children are learning experiences. This tends to lead to long periods of absence from school or even school push-out due to child labour meant to generate funds to meet basic needs and schooling costs. Such challenges tend to interfere and militate against students' academic performance. It is against this backdrop that the study explores the impact of orphanhood on children's educational experiences

Research questions

The study intends to address the following research questions: what socio-economic challenges are faced by orphaned high school students in rural areas; how do socio-economic challenges faced by orphaned high school students in rural areas affect their academic achievement; what other challenges affect the academic achievement of orphaned students in rural high schools; and what intervention strategies can be implemented in high schools to deal with the challenges of orphan-hood in an effort to enhance students' academic achievement?

Conceptual Framework: The Social Capital Theory

According to Bourdieu Social Capital is the aggregate of actual or potential resources which are linked to a group like a family which provides each of its members with the backing of the group. By implication, orphans lack this backing which tends to affect their schooling experiences. Thus social capital is a relationship immanent in social groups that provides useful support when it is needed. Stable relationships create honour and reputation among its members and thus become most effective for building and maintaining trust (Bourdieu, 1984:204). Social capital can be transformed into economic or cultural capital. According to Bourdieu, disparities in the amount of cultural and economic capital of families lead to differential transfer of capital to children. In this regard some poverty stricken families possess very little social capital which can compromise the educational experiences of their children. It is argued here that with the demise of the extended family, orphans are likely to live in poverty which then can affect educational experiences of children growing in such contexts.

The reviewed related literature here focuses on the general causes of orphan-hood, some statistics of orphans in Zimbabwe and the region, the importance of parents, the African traditional philosophy of *Ubuntu* on children, child-headed families and the role of the extended family in caring for orphans, socio-economic and psychological challenges of orphan-hood. Since the studies by some authors on orphan-hood are silent on how it affects academic achievement, they formed the infrastructural base and premise for this study on the interface of orphan-hood and academic achievement.

HIV/AIDS and Orphan-Hood

There are many causes of parental death and as such children are left in the predicament of orphan-hood. The causes of death of parents range from AIDS and other diseases, armed conflict, natural disasters, forced displacement and extreme poverty (UNICEF, 2004). The scourge of HIV/AIDS is registering the highest number of deaths in Zimbabwe, hence the ever-rising statistics of orphans. From the research made by National Plan of Action for Orphans and Vulnerable Children (NPA for OVC) (2004) an estimated 761,000 children in Zimbabwe have lost one or both parents to HIV/AIDS and projections suggested that by the year 2005, there would be approximately 1.1 million children under the age of 15 who would have been orphaned due to AIDS. UNAIDS (2010) gathered that the estimated number of children orphaned by AIDS and living in the region by then was 11 million, highlighting the need for an urgent response to provide care and protection for this vulnerable group.. This problem has a negative impact on the socio-economic lifestyle of orphans and their care-givers in society which in turn affects their educational experiences.

Children in African Traditional Society

In the traditional African society, children belonged to everyone implying that following parental death, the extended family and the community at large made collaborative effort to take care of the children of the deceased. According to Tirivangana (2014) under *Ubuntu*, children are never orphans and as such a man or a woman with *hunhu* would never allow any child around him or her to be an orphan. This explains the importance of the culture of assuming responsibility of giving care to the orphans as informed by the philosophy of *hunhuism/ubuntuism* which valued children as everyone's social responsibility. This means that children belonged to everyone in the community, a principle of collective responsibility essential in the African traditional society. However, the demise of the Shona concept of *mhuri* (family) (Muchabaiwa, 2017) and the socio-economic challenges have left orphans vulnerable resulting in the child headed family phenomenon. Therefore, owing to socio-economic strain, African communities are abandoning the traditional role of giving care to orphans; hence the continued existence of orphan-hood and the socio-economic and psychological challenges associated with it. Poverty has broken the traditional bond of African communities and dissolved their voluntary passion for the welfare of orphans.

And when orphaned, children are left to fend for themselves, taking on the responsibilities of managing the household and younger siblings with minimal to no financial support. Child-headed households are living in very difficult circumstances without basic needs and sustained adult guidance (Maushe & Mugumbate, 2015). This implies that orphans can assume parental responsibilities, though they are financially incapacitated to do so, hence challenges in gathering basic necessities. Thus, Chizororo (2010) asserts that the most distressing consequences of HIV/AIDS pandemic's impact on children have been the development of child-headed households (CHHs). AIDS leaves a trail of problems which give birth to child-headed families. Child-labour is one of the socio-economic vices associated with orphan-hood in an attempt to meet their basic needs. According to Human Rights Bulletin (2015) as a result of epidemics such as HIV/ AIDS, most children have been orphaned and become their own breadwinners. Similarly a report by UNICEF (2002) Zimbabwe has 1.3 million orphans and 1 00 000 live on their own in child-headed households where they are forced to work as street vendors or farm labourers. This study thus explores how such a family context impacts on the educational experiences of children growing in such contexts..

Research Methodology

The study utilised the qualitative research paradigm because the nature of the problem under study required an in-depth interrogation of the challenges faced by orphaned learners. Qualitative research is critical because it emphasises the emic perspective and collecting data from natural settings (Gall, Borg and Gall, 2007). Thus in-depth interviews with learners and teachers were the data collection method. The interviews were complemented by content/document analysis which focused on the attendance registers and school performance reports.

The purposive sampling technique was adopted to identify orphaned learners in secondary schools and their respective teachers. To cater for gender related issues, the sample constituted three male learners and three female learners. There were also two female and three male teachers in the sample. The data were presented as emerging themes and analysed using the social capital theory by Bourdieu. To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, the study utilises pseudonyms for the research participants. Hence, the data collected are presented as emerging themes and analysed using the social capital theory by Bourdieu. In doing so, the relationship between orphanhood and academic performance becomes very clear. And consequently, data collected from interviews with orphaned high school students, orphaned school leavers and teachers were augmented by orphaned students' attendance registers, progress records of marks and report books to examine trends in school attendance and academic performance. This illustrated the relationship between orphanhood and academic performance. It is quite clear here that lack of social capital for children growing in orphan-hood contexts has grave ramifications for their educational experiences. As indicated in literature review, social capital entails both cultural and economic capital. According to Bourdieu (1984) academic success depends on the amount of cultural capital one possesses. Thus most orphans are likely to live in poverty which then affects their educational experiences. In other words, low socio-economic background of orphan-hood tends to mediate their depressed academic performance.

Hunger and Academic Achievement

Lack of financial capital tends to be detrimental to the schooling experiences of most orphans. Susan is a sixteen year old girl, doing Form 3 at Tsatse High School. Her father passed on seven months before she was born. Her brother, Steven who is twenty years old is doing Upper six. The two students live with their maternal grandmother. The mother who is a maid in Harare struggles to meet their basic needs and tuition fees. In narrating her ordeal, Susan had this to say:

Despite the fact that our home is near the school, my brother and I do not go for lunch because grandmother has nothing to prepare for lunch. We were trained to have one meal per day until evening when we have supper. At times I will be hungry during school hours especially in the afternoon.

Hunger is one of the aspects of poverty which impedes students' academic performance, with rural day high school paternal orphaned students being the hardest hit by the poor socio-economic background which seriously affects concentration in class. Even if the student in that situation performs well, their results will not be reflective of the best of their ability.

Tinashe a sixteen year old male student doing form four also explained that he also experiences hunger during schooling hours. His situation tends to be exacerbated by the fact that he walks six kilometres to school. He had this to say during the interview:

My only source for pocket money is engaging myself in menial jobs. At times I don't have pocket money so I can't commit myself to attendance for free extra lessons in Shona offered just after schooling hours because I will be so hungry.

It is quite clear that hunger disturbs concentration in class and this compromises academic performance for the orphaned learners. It can also be argued that lack of financial capital may affect the self-concept, confidence, motivation and ultimately academic performance of orphaned learners.

Orphan-Hood and Schooling Costs

An interview with Rosemary, an eighteen year old orphaned female student doing Upper six confirmed that orphan-hood has a negative impact on academic performance citing challenges of meeting schooling costs. When the upper six Shona class went to Marondera for a seminar with other high schools, she had no one to raise fifteen dollars that was needed to cover transport costs considering that she also had school fees arrears for this second term. She said:

I was disappointed that only I out of the fourteen students failed to attend. I have no hope of going for Divinity seminar to be held in Murehwa this term.

Given this low socio-economic background, poor and working class orphaned students may not afford ample schooling costs incurred in an attempt to improve the pass rate of the school. Costs for taking students to seminars are supposed to be met by the school but on account of non-payment of fees by the majority of students of working class background because of economic hardships, rural day high schools are underfunded so students shoulder such costs and orphaned students become victims of circumstances. This situation reveals that socio-economic background of orphan-hood is a drawback to academic achievement as failure to attend educational seminars deprives the student of content that is likely to contribute to high academic achievement. More so, such a student becomes emotionally affected and that retards academic performance.

An interview with Tinashe further revealed that orphans in rural day schools have challenges with meeting schooling costs like decent school uniforms. He lives with his maternal grandmother and his young brother doing grade six. His father who was in the army had divorced his mother passed on when he was ten years old. The mother passed on in 2012.

Tinashe mentioned that Basic Education Assistance Module (BEAM) pays for his tuition fees. BEAM is a facility provided by the government of Zimbabwe to assist disadvantaged learners with fees. However, he explained that he has to do menial jobs to cover other schooling costs like uniforms, books and pens. It is because the grandmother is too incapacitated to find the means of generating income to sustain the orphaned grandchildren as Mafumbate (2013) posits that the extended family heads are too old and financially constrained to provide care for the grandchildren.

Domestic work is seen militating against academic achievement considering that Tinashe is a form four student who needs ample time to study. Data gathered from content analysis confirm that this orphaned student's poor academic performance is emanating from his socio-economic background. He did not write all the daily exercises in all subjects. Absenteeism from school is too frequent as an analysis of term two attendance register revealed that he did not attend school for eleven days. There are even incomplete homework exercises in his books. His results for mid-year examinations show that he passed only two subjects out of the eight he wrote. Therefore, the poor results as extracted from the student's progress report book are critical evidence to augment that poor socio-economic background of orphan-hood impacts negatively on students' academic achievement.

Susan explained that their mother who is reportedly ill since April this year has not yet settled first and second term tuition fees for her. The grandmother confirmed giving priority to her brother Steven who is in the sixth form. It is observed here that provision for schooling resources for orphans takes a gender dimension where the girl child is greatly disadvantaged. This low socio-economic background of orphan-hood has seen the guardian considering paying fees for the orphaned brother because he is male; depicting the patriarchal nature of the Zimbabwean society in the upper form.

An interview with Susan revealed that her brother Steven who failed to pay Ordinary Level examinations registration fees in 2013 repeated form four and sat for the examinations in 2014, so she was worried that she was likely to suffer the same predicament. Owing to tuition fees arrears, Susan missed the English language paper 1 and Fashion and Fabrics practical mid-year examinations until the grandmother came to plead with the school administration and School Development Committee (SDC) to allow her to write other examination papers.

Missing some examinations was not voluntary but caused by socio-economic challenges of orphan-hood. This situation implies that Susan sees her socio-economic background as hopeless and that has a psychological effect which limits her commitment to school work. Therefore, such a socio-economic challenge also affects students emotionally and psychologically and that is the situation of the majority of orphans in rural day high schools.

Orphan-Hood and Child-Headed Families

Hurricane is an eighteen year old male student doing Lower six. Both parents passed on so he is the head of the family. He lives with his young sister and brother because no relative committed themselves to absorb them into their families. This confirms findings of the study on families by Muchabaiwa (2017) which indicate that the demise of the extended family has had tremendous negative effects on the welfare of children. Hurricane explained that BEAM paid for his tuition and Ordinary Level examination fees for six subjects. He elaborated during an interview:

I could not write eight subjects as I wanted because BEAM paid examination registration fees for only six subjects so I decided to drop History and Geography.

Low socio-economic background of orphan-hood becomes a challenge to academic achievement when it forces a student to drop some subjects. Had the student's socio-economic background been better, he would have sat for all the eight subjects he was doing. He passed all the six subjects that he sat for at Ordinary Level but with one C and five Bs, implying that had his parents been alive, he was likely to have passed with better grades. It can be argued that orphaned learners' performance tends to be greatly affected by their social background. According to a study by Jakachira and Muchabaiwa (2015, p.54):

The child-headed household as a context of child development presents numerous socio-economic challenges that are not favourable for academic performance. The household often lacks adult care, guidance, counselling, protection, encouragement and socialisation which enhance academic performance. The children are vulnerable to poverty because of inadequate material support from the government, aid organisations and the disintegrating extended family safety net.

This implies that students from child-headed households experience socio-economic challenges which do not promote positive learning outcomes. Hurricane explained some stressful moments he undergoes when the family lacks basic food and how he wishes his parents were alive.

Children in child-headed households are living in very difficult circumstances without basic needs and sustained adult guidance (Maushe & Mugumbate, 2015). Therefore, parents are important in providing social, economic and emotional cushions to a student in order to realise the best in terms of academic achievement.

The Strain of Social Responsibilities of Orphan-Hood and Academic Achievement

Tinashe's grandmother suffers from hypertension and asthma. Owing to the grandmother's health challenges, Tinashe said that he has the responsibility of helping his grandmother do some domestic chores like fetching water before coming to school. He said:

There are some days especially in winter when I don't come to school so that I help my asthmatic grandmother with household chores and monitor her condition. At times, I force myself to come to school but late, thereby missing the first lessons.

Erratic school attendance can be very detrimental to academic achievement as seen in the case of Tinashe. Tinashe also mentioned lack of food as one of the challenges that stresses him and negatively affects his academic performance. This clearly illustrates the fit between poor socio-economic background and academic underachievement. In narrating his situation, he said:

I decided to drop Food and Nutrition because I cannot not afford to contribute money needed to purchase the ingredients, a situation that made me fail to seat for the end of year practical examination as it was said the school was too underfunded to meet the costs.

Given this poor socio-economic background, the student could not afford to attempt a practical end of year examination, a situation which deprived orphaned student of the opportunity to assess his performance. Such an experience has a demoralising effect on the student to the extent of developing a low self-esteem which is detrimental to academic performance.

Orphan-Hood and Child Labour

Child labour is one of the themes that emerged during data collection. Tinashe explained that during weekends his mother's brother who lives in the same village with him expects him to give a hand in his garden the whole day as he is into market gardening because he is the one who sometimes takes care of the grandmother and him. He detests that experience as something done against his will but complies in fear of victimisation. According to Nyamukapa et al (2010) effects of orphan-hood contribute to child labour and increase levels of distress which in turn compromises academic performance. Tinashe further elaborated that that he finds homework given by teachers too much for him to do during the weekend as he lacks enough time to do it owing to the menial work. He had this to say during an interview:

I can't finish homework during weekends because of too much work in the garden. At times I will be too tired to study so on a Monday, I resort to copying from other students' work to avoid being punished by my teachers for not doing homework.

If a student does not have ample time to do homework on account of too much menial and domestic work, they are likely not to make it at school. Copying homework from other students makes learning superficial and becomes detrimental to the academic achievement of learners. Analysis of class documents such as the social record, exercises books, progress record and the attendance register confirm that the poor performance of orphaned learners is a result of their poor socio-economic background.

An interview with Rosemary's mother revealed that she generates income from pottery where she sells six clay plates at a dollar. She said that she engages her daughter in pottery after school hours and on a Sunday. She said:

On Sunday, my daughter Rosemary helps me to fetch water, dagga (clay) required for moulding clay plates and firewood for baking which we usually do in the evening).

This is a socio-economic situation which sees the parent of this orphaned student generating meager funds from a rigorous activity. Rosemary confirmed that at times she would be feeling tired and exhausted during lessons because of sleeping at late hours of the night. However, she revealed that she finds herself obliged to help her mother with the work because this economic activity is the source of her schooling costs since she was at primary school.

This socio-economic background of Rosemary subjects her to physical strain such that apart from being deprived of ample time to study, she would be too tired to do her studies. Amid this socio-economic background of orphan-hood, Rosemary's academic performance is average, implying that given a better socio-economic background she has the capacity to perform above average. Child labour in an effort to generate family income is one of the contributing factors to her level of performance.

During an interview one teacher also mentioned that some orphaned female students' are vulnerable to premarital sex and sexual abuse for material and financial gain. Some get unwanted pregnancies and drop out of school; for those who remain in school, their academic performance deteriorates tremendously. It can thus be concluded that orphanhood impacts negatively on the school experiences of orphans and is the girl child who is worse affected.

Recommendations

As a result of the above findings, the study makes the following recommendations:

- Since focus on feeding programmes seem to be restricted to primary schools, the government through the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education may partner with NGOs in extending such programmes to rural day high schools in order to cushion orphans from the challenge of hunger which is seen as a hindrance to academic achievement.
- The Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education through schools to involve high school teachers in selecting students who are in dire need of Basic Education Assistance Module (BEAM), particularly orphans to bridge the gap between the high school and the community so that some orphans will not be left out in the process instead of doing the selection at primary school level. If possible, BEAM should do a periodic review of their selection of beneficiaries so that they incorporate more orphans as orphan-hood is on the rise in contemporary societies.
- If the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education can partner with NGOs, the Ministry of Health and other stakeholders in providing sanitary wear for female students in rural day high schools, it would see orphaned female students comfortable to attend school on a regular basis.

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