

The Lived Experiences of Adolescent Secondary School Learners from Child-Headed Households: A Case Study of Cranborne Boys High School, Harare, Zimbabwe

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Abstract

This study focused on adolescent secondary school learners living in child-headed households. It was carried out at Cranborne Boys High School in Harare, Zimbabwe. Qualitative research methodology was used in which a case study was adopted. Purposive sampling was done which resulted in eight adolescents from child-headed households participating after they agreed to take part. Semi-structured questionnaires, interviews and Focus Group Discussion were used as data collection instruments. The study found out that the participants faced a lot of challenges in their households. The challenges included inadequate basic needs like food, clothing and accommodation as well as having limited or no access to health facilities. They also do not attend school regularly and resorted to seeking part time employment for their daily survival. It was also revealed that the extended family no longer provides a reliable safety net for these adolescents. It is recommended that adolescents living in child-headed households be given psychosocial support both at school and in their communities. Professional counselling, exemptions from paying fees coupled with peer support programmes can improve their coping mechanisms. School teachers should be readily available to offer support to adolescent learners from child-headed households. Finally, a lot more needs to be researched on child-headed households as evidence suggests that they are on the increase.

1. Introduction

Whilst a lot has been researched on children and grief; effects of terminal illness on children and the effects on parental death on children, not much research has been conducted on child-headed households (Nkomo, 2006). This view is also substantiated by Foster (2002) who notes that literature on child-headed households is almost non-existent. Yet in Zimbabwe today, there is an upsurge of child-headed households (National Action Plan for Vulnerable Children, 2004). Cooutz in Gladding (2002) posits that the structure of families is constantly changing world wide. In most cultures in Zimbabwe, a family in a household consists of both parents and children but this traditional family structure is becoming less prevalent due to the HIV and Aids pandemic. This study sought to find out the secondary schools learners' experiences of living within child-headed households so as to unravel the psychosocial impact of coming from such households.

Significance of the study

The researchers hope that the results of this study will prompt educational psychologists to play pivotal roles in supporting the school system in dealing with vulnerable children such as those living in child-headed households. Educational psychologists and other stakeholders may then become actively involved in intervention programmes that may run in schools to assist adolescent secondary school learners including those living in child-headed households. Since this study directly involved the learners from such households, it is hoped that a better understanding of the coping mechanisms that these learners employ will be explored and appropriate support methods may be developed. A study by Germann and Siwela(2002) highlights that adolescents' coping strategies can improve if adolescents from child-headed households receive training in life and home management skills. Therefore, this study can be vital in assisting these adolescents to cope with their situations.

Research design

A research design has been defined as “a strategic framework for action that serves as a bridge the research question and the execution or implementation of the research” (Durrheim, 2006:34). This study is guided by a qualitative paradigm in which a case study is adopted.

The nature of qualitative research

Qualitative research seeks to understand a social phenomenon within its cultural, social and situational context (Gubrium and Sankar, 1994). It focuses on the construction of social reality (Neumen, 2006). Merriam (2002) contends that meaning is socially constructed by the individual’s interaction with their own world and these constructions change constantly.

De Vos (1998) observed that a qualitative design is ideal if current literature indicates deficiencies in an area of interest (Nkomo, 2006). When exploring issues concerning human beings, it is important to note that human beings are constantly creating meaning. Meaning shapes the way people view others, the world and themselves. In this regard, Gubrium and Sankar(1994) submit that qualitative research explores these constructions in order to view individual worlds through the participants’ eyes. Qualitative research is holistic, naturalistic and inductive in nature (Durrheim, 2006: Patton, 1990). In using the qualitative paradigm, Henning, Van-Rensburg and Smit(2004) contend that the researcher can easily understand the participants’ lives and interpret how they make meaning of their realities by getting extensive in-depth data from ordinary conversations with them. In addition, Terre Blanche and Kelly (1999:23) note that “the people’s subjective experiences are real and should be taken seriously. The fact that qualitative research is inductive, means that data is gathered to build concepts and information is collected from people’s experiences. Research themes are recognised and categorised (Durrheim, 2006). Qualitative research aims at eliciting data through interviews, participant observations, document analysis and focus groups. Once data has been generated, relationships and patterns are discovered by taking a close scrutiny of the data. Data is thus analysed and interpreted inductively (De Vos, 1998).

2. The case study

Best and Kahn(1993) define a case study as a way of organising social data through examining a social unit in order to have a view of social reality. Gall, Borg and Gall (1996) assert that in a case study, the researcher studies particular participants rather than general participants which is how qualitative researchers find meanings of social phenomena. Gay (1976:67) aptly summarises that, “In education, case studies are typically conducted to determine the background, the environment and the characteristics of children with problems”. It was with these views that the researchers used a case study in which adolescent secondary school learners from child-headed households were used as participants.

The population

Marton(1996) defines a population as a collection of objects, events or individuals having some common characteristics that a researcher is interested in studying. In this study, the population was made up all boys at Cranborne High School.

The sample

Purposive sampling was adopted for this study. Purposive sampling ensures that a small number of people participate in a study. In qualitative research, sample size is seldom determined in advance as put forward by Neuman (2006) and little is known about the wider group from which the sample is drawn. It is best to select participants from which the most can be learned because qualitative research focuses on the richness of data where a relatively small sample or even a single case is selected (Patton, 1990; Durrheim, 2006). In this study, only 8 boys from child-headed households participated. Participants were selected using the following criteria:

- Adolescent secondary school learners living in child-headed households using class social records
- Willing participation
- Informed consent

Statement of the problem

Local and international media reports have been awash with the news about the emergence and possible increase of child-headed households in the world in general and in Zimbabwe in particular. These children face a lot of challenges brought about their situation. The study explored the lived experiences of adolescent secondary school learners in order to find out the challenges they face. Thus, this study sought to find out the lived experiences of adolescent secondary school learners from child-headed households attending school at Cranborne High.

Research questions

The study was guided by the following research questions:

- What are the lived experiences of adolescent secondary school learners from child-headed households?
- How do the adolescent learners from child-headed households deal with the challenges they face on a day to day basis?
- What social support is available for adolescent learners from child-headed households in communities where they come from?
- What kind of assistance does government and NGOs offer to adolescents from child-headed households?
- How can adolescent secondary learners from child-headed-households be assisted to cope with the effects of their situation?

Data collecting instruments

Data collection involves the use of different instruments. Poggenpoel(1993) emphasises that in order to collect valuable data, the researcher should play a meaningful role of creating an open environment so that participants are not inhibited in expressing themselves. Interviews, semi-structured questionnaires and Focus Group Discussion were used in this study. The role of the researcher is very critical in qualitative research in that he/she is the main research instrument responsible for the overall quality of the research through the use of listening, writing, paraphrasing and summarising skills thus ensuring a rich, thick description of the phenomenon under study (Lancy, 1993).

Description of the participants

The 8 participants’ age range was from 13 to 20 years. They all came from child headed households. In some cases the participants had both parents deceased while in other cases one or both parents are alive but do not stay with the adolescents due to constraints where at times they had to fend for themselves. Such participants fit in the child-headed household category as they were sometimes caregivers in their households.

Table 1: Participants’ profile

Participant	Code	Age	Additional information
1	CHW	14	A double orphan who lives with a 25 year old cousin who is unemployed. He sometimes is left as head of family and looks after a 12 year old sister.
2	ECZ	20	He is a head of household and stays with a brother. Both parents are alive but economically incapacitated and stay in the rural area. He fends for himself through part time jobs
3	KDA	15	He is a double orphan who stays with an aunt who is economically unable to adequately take care of him.
4	TASH 1	13	He is a double orphan who stays with a distant aunt who does not treat

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			him well such that he has to carry some responsibilities normally done by a head of household.
5	RIC	14	Both parents are deceased and stays with siblings. The eldest sibling is a 19 year old sister.
6	TAK	14	He stays with a distant aunt who is unemployed. His father is late and the mother is in South Africa but cannot support the family financially or otherwise. He has to help the aunt to raise money for survival and offer emotional support to a younger brother.
7	TASH 2	13	He stays with a distant aunt who is unemployed. His father is late and the mother is in South Africa. He looks up to his 14 year old brother for all forms of support
8	TMO	15	He lives with a distant aunt who is unemployed. His mother is alive but is barely in contact with her. He assists his aunt by looking for part time jobs to make ends meet. He lives in difficult circumstances.

Table 2: data codes used for questionnaires, interviews and focus group discussion

Data type	Data Codes	Example
Questionnaire	Questionnaire Number	Q 1
Interview	Interviewee	Interviewee 5
Focus Group Discussion	FGD	FGD

3. Overview of Results

The research questions guided the process of categorising the findings. Data analysis revealed the participants' lived experiences. It is critical to understand the term experiences. Plug, Meyer, Louw and Gouws (1989) in Leatham(2005) define the term as an activity which someone goes through and accumulates knowledge based on learning and practice as well as taking part in the activities. This implies that the participants in this study shared their knowledge and meaning of lived experiences as they have gone through real life experiences within their particular households. The lived experiences that emerged from this study were described according to the following themes: physical needs, economic realities, role of the external environment and psychological experiences. The themes and sub themes are tabulated below:

Table 3: Themes and sub themes

Themes	Sub-Themes
Physical needs	Lack of food Insufficient and indecent clothing Inadequate accommodation Inaccessible health care services
Economic realities	Limited access to education Struggling to survive without money Initiatives to obtain part-time jobs
Role of the external environment	Family system-----extended family Sibling relations Peer friendships Community interaction
Psychological experiences	Emotional turmoil Insecurity about the future

4. Discussion of Findings

Age and level of education of participants:

The participants were in the 13 to 20 year age group which is a stage of adolescence characterised by an upsurge of social pressures which bring a lot of stress on them. Most participants were at junior secondary with only one doing A level. This period of adjustment adds to the pressures that these adolescents are getting from living in child-headed households. All the participants live in suburbs bordering the school which include Hatfield, Msasa Park, Chadcombe and Epworth.

Size of Accommodation

The study revealed that 5 of the participants live in rented quarters. This may be an indicator of poverty where people cannot afford to buy or build their own houses. Ganga and Chinyoka (2010) contend that orphanhood and vulnerability are two variables which are positively correlated to poverty within child-headed households and that 3 of them lived in 2 or less rooms highlighting inadequate accommodation where living space is limited (Ganga and Chinyoka 2010). There were cases of 7 people sharing 2 rooms and 3 people of different sexes living in 1 room showing that orphans, vulnerable children and adolescents from child-headed households often face familial, economic and social difficulties (Foster and Williamson, 2000).

Are you a head of a household?

Of all the participants, 2 were heads of household (Q2 and Q3). Another participant sometimes heads a household as he revealed that “when she (guardian) is running out of money, she just vanishes leaving me as head of family”. (Q1). Five of the participants live in households headed by a sibling (brother or sister). Another participant (Q1) lives with a cousin who is 25 years old. This is in line with what Walker (2002) concluded in her study that the extended family has continued to disintegrate and that lack of traditional safety nets within communities increases vulnerability of children, especially orphans. Hunter and Williamson (2000) in Manegold(2004) postulate that the increase in child-headed households enforces changes in family composition and in child roles. Although Skelton (1998) contends that , by right, children must live with their parents, this study revealed that the adolescent secondary school learners do not live with their parents, not by choice but by unfortunate circumstances.

Age of head of household

Two of the participants (Q7 and Q9) live with extended family members who are aged above 60 and only one participant in this study stays with an aunt aged 72 who is always sick and economically incapacitated. This supports Chizororo (2006) who says that aged people are left with the responsibility of looking after orphans as the young and middle aged continue to succumb to HIV and Aids. 6 of the participants revealed that they have been living in child-headed households for more than one year while another one said that he has been in such a household for 6 months (Q6). Yet another has been living in such a household for 3 months (Q4). This indicates new cases of child-headed households and confirms that the phenomenon of child-headed households exists and is on the increase (UNIAIDS, 2006).

How often do attend school

Five of the participants indicated that they did not attend school regularly. This implies that quite a number of adolescent school learners living in child-headed households have limited access to school. This confirms some findings of a study done in Zimbabwe which revealed that only 44% of registered secondary school learners attend school. The effect of lack of opportunities is that such children continuously struggle as they are not prepared for life and adulthood in many ways (Barnett and Whiteside, 2002). Education prepares children for future roles in society and if these adolescents fail to access education, it means their vulnerability is not reduced.

What challenges do you face in your household?

Lack of educational opportunities is one challenge that was identified, meaning that the children's rights are not being upheld. Irregular school attendance was a result of lack of money for school fees. One participant said, "For school fees, I help her to raise that money. She only pays \$50." This confirms Mwanza(1998)'s assertion that the introduction of fees in schools has led to the increase in the number of children who have to work in order to contribute to their own schooling. Inadequate food was highlighted by 5 of the participants. One participant said, "Sometimes we sleep without eating"(Q8). Another participant also said, "I often eat supper only. I have no breakfast, no lunch and even nothing to eat at school"(Q1). World Vision Rwanda and UNICEF (1998) noted that the majority of children living in child-headed households have inadequate access to education and that they lack adequate food, clothing and have difficulties in paying rent for their dwellings. Two of the participants (Q3 and Q9) revealed in interviews that difficulties in paying rent resulted in landlords threatening to throw them out of the house bringing in a lot of insecurity and stress in their lives. Walker's (2002) observed that children in child-headed households often have poor housing conditions. Neglect and verbal abuse are some of the challenges that were highlighted. One of the participants told harrowing stories of different forms of abuse that he and his sister go through from the guardian. He said, "She (guardian) uses tormenting words like, "I am not the one who killed your parents, go to them". A study on child-headed households in Slangspruit, South Africa, revealed that orphaned children living with relatives experience some discrimination and ill-treatment in the form of hard labour or verbal abuse(<http://www.ukzn.ac>). As a result of these challenges, some adolescent secondary school learners reported that they thought about their deceased parents a lot.

How do you deal with the challenges you face?

Four of the participants sought solace in their siblings while three of the participants looked up to their peers and friends for advice on challenges they face. One participant (Q9) looked up to community members. A study on child-headed households in Angola, Uganda, Nigeria and Zimbabwe noted that children from such households get little support from adults in the community. Hughes (2002) and Donald et al (2002) note that at adolescence stage, peer relations are highly regarded in the adolescents' development. Some participants had a sense of helplessness with regards to the challenges. One participant said, "I do nothing about the challenges. I know one day God will help me."(Q5). This emphasises a sense of helplessness that adolescent learners living in child-headed households feel as problems overwhelmed them. Children in child-headed households' constant worry on matters of survival induce psychological disturbances in them (Ganga and Chinyoka, 2010).

5. Description of Data Analysis

Physical Needs

Under this theme, the following subthemes emerged and these are lack of food and clothing, inadequate accommodation, inaccessible and unavailable health services. The majority of the participants expressed that they did not get adequate food due to lack of income in their households because the heads of households were not employed. During one interview, one participant (interviewee 6) revealed that there was no mealie-meal in the household. Findings of a 17 household study done by Farm Orphan Support Trust of Zimbabwe (FOST) in 2001 in Mashonaland Central and Manicaland provinces revealed that participants did not have three balanced diets per day, confirming lack of food security. Similarly, in this study, all participants revealed that whenever they have a meal, they ate what is available. In Focus Group Discussion, on commenting on food insecurity in their household, one participant said, "We are used to it." Another participant said that they survive by the motto, "You do not live to eat but eat to live".

Most of the participants revealed that they lacked decent clothing thus impacting negatively on them when with peers. The participants revealed that whenever there is a Civvies Day function at school, they

felt embarrassed that they did not have fashionable clothing (FGD). This concurs with Ganga and Chinyoka(2010)'s and the Nelson Mandela Trust Fund(2001)'s findings that children living in child-headed households lack proper food and clothing.

Participants revealed that they lived in rented accommodation and found it very difficult to pay rentals which forced them to live in inadequate dwellings. One participant (interviewee 8) said that there are 5 members in their house who live in 2 rooms. The family initially occupied 6 rooms, but financial constraints forced them to occupy 2 rooms for which neighbours ridiculed them. This results in stress and insecurity, especially for the adolescents who worry a lot about significant others. A study by FOST (2001) observed that all child-headed households surveyed had poor access to health facilities. A similar trend presented itself in this study where participants said that going to the clinic was a last resort. (Interviewee 5).

Economic Realities

The study found out that some initiatives by government and nongovernmental organisations to alleviate the socio-economic strains endured by orphans and vulnerable children have no or little impact on the adolescent learners from child-headed households. The Basic Education Assistance Module (BEAM) is a government initiative which is supposed to assist with payment of fees for orphans and vulnerable children. A study by FOST (2001) noted that the BEAM initiative has a positive impact in making school more accessible to orphans and vulnerable children. However, this study found out that none of the participants were recipients of BEAM funding, despite their difficult circumstances. Participants had heard of the programme but did not know how to access it (FGD).

Zimbabwe's Millennium Development Goal (MDG) number 1 aims at eradicating poverty and hunger by 2015. Manegold(2004) highlights that most child-headed households struggle without money because most relatives who assisted them somewhat in their lives were unemployed and had no money. They told stories of how difficult it was for them to get adequate food, clothing and accommodation. Similarly, Nkomo (2006) observed that the extended family as a social system is being undermined by poverty, unemployment and outstretched resources. In addition, Bradley and Whitesede-Mansell(1997) noted that regular financial uncertainty can bring negative psychological effects such as stress in adolescents living in child-headed households.

Limited access to education resulted from financial insecurity. At the time of Focus Group Discussion, only 3 out of the 8 participants had paid their fees in full for the term. A study done in Kenya revealed that 63% of the 2878 children from child-headed households who were interviewed were not going to school due to lack of funds(Ayieko,1997). As a result of lack of education, the participants felt insecure as they were banking on education to improve their situation.

Participants said they looked for part time jobs to raise money for rent, food and even school fees (Interviewee 2). Yet another participant told a story of how he had to dig, cultivate and weed people's fields, and doing laundry in surrounding low density areas (Interviewee 8). A UNICEF (2001) report noted cases of children in child-headed households ploughing other people's fields, a practice associated with rural areas but which this study has found to exist in urban setups like Harare.

Role of the external environment

In discussing the above theme, subthemes-the family system (extended and sibling relations), peer relations and community interaction were considered and explored the adolescent learners' experiences within the mentioned social systems. A social system is a perception of comfort, care or help that someone can receive from other people (Louw and Edwards 1998 in Du Preez, 2004). Moletsane (2004) notes the pivotal role played by the family in the development of children-the emotional, financial, social, daily care and educational needs. Participants in the study expressed negative experiences in their interaction with the extended family, especially at an emotional level. Interviewees 1, 5 and 8 said that

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they would not want to relive what they go through in the extended families. The negative experiences with the extended family for children in child-headed households in this study are similar to the findings made by Leatham(2005) in her study of child-headed households.

Participants in this study got support from their siblings. One participant said, “Brothers encourage and motivate me to pass at school”. Some revealed that if they have problems, they shared them with siblings (Interviewees 4 and 7). Parental death or their absenteeism tended to bring the siblings closer together in child-headed households. One participant said, “ I give emotional support to my brother.” Leatham (2005) concurs that older siblings tend to have a huge responsibility as substitute parents in addition to other responsibilities they have bear. For these reasons, siblings need counselling to be able to continue supporting each other within their households.

The participants described how they got emotional support from peers who were aware of their situations at home. Participants often made friends with peers who shared similar backgrounds although some had misgivings about sharing problems with peers. At times they found it difficult to trust people, and as a result had difficulties making friends. Some participants in the Focus Group Discussion stated that they found it easier to have older friends as they do not judge them harshly like the peers but pointed out that older friends can sometimes influence them negatively influencing them to take drugs and alcohol as solutions to problems.

Some participants said they got emotional, material support and advice from the community. The adolescents did not get any support from the school community because the educators were not aware of their problems. Donald et al (2002) assert that the educator has to play the role of supporter in a school which encompass identifying and addressing the barriers to learning. However, this study found out that the adolescent learners did not trust their teachers. Some participants told stories of being sent away from school for non payment of school fees without being given the opportunity to explain their situation. Their parents were either deceased or absent hence there was no reason for sending them home. Banda (2005) points out that all these have a bearing on the learners’ personal development thus adding to the psychological trauma of adolescent secondary school learners from child-headed households.

Psychological experiences

Psychosocial support, an on-going process of meeting the social, mental and spiritual needs for children living in child-headed households are essential elements in positive human development (Banda, 2005).The emotional needs underpin all other needs which include the need for love, security, encouragement, motivation, care, self esteem, confidence, and sense of belonging. Adolescent learners experience stress as a result of living in child-headed households in which some fend for themselves. One participant said, “My mother remarried and she does not want to see me, she ignores me. I do not know where my father is.”(Interviewee 8). In Focus Group Discussion, one participant said, “I sometimes ask God why he let my parents die.” Other emotional experiences mentioned by the participants are failure to concentrate at school and failure to get someone to talk to. The participants also described how they felt insecure about their future, expressing reservations about being able to finish school. Although they had dreams of becoming forensic scientists, lawyers and medical doctors, they expressed that if the situation remains as grim they could not foresee themselves going beyond Form 4 (FGD). In Zimbabwe, opportunities for employment increase when one has attained a tertiary qualification and this made participants live with a sense of hopelessness. One participant said,“Zvimwe zvinhu ukangonamata zvinopera.” [Some of these things you just have to pray for the situation to improve].

6. Conclusion

The aims of this study were to explore and describe the lived experiences of secondary school learners from child-headed households, to provide opportunity for them to voice their experiences, to ascertain the

social support available for them in communities where these learners come from and to discover their psychosocial needs as well as the challenges they face. The study brought to the fore the notion that child-headed households come as a result of many reasons including death of parents, terminally ill parents and some because their parents were economically incapacitated. In addition, the challenges these adolescent learners faced which included inadequate basic necessities such as food, clothing accommodation, access to education and health care services. The study's findings confirmed what other research studies have revealed that adolescent secondary school learners from child-headed households go through a lot of emotional stress and as a result of their home situation; they feel insecure about their future.

7. Recommendations

Any research study can never fully explore the issues surrounding a particular phenomenon under study. The researchers suggest the following areas for further research.

- Further research could be carried out in other urban areas and rural areas to establish best ways of assisting orphans and other vulnerable children in child-headed households.
- More studies are needed that look at the effectiveness of using volunteers in communities to address psychosocial needs of adolescents in child-headed households.
- More research is needed that look at the phenomenon of child-headed households in order to have a deeper understanding of the psychological challenges they face.

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