

## **Performance in Schools by Students from Child Headed Families in Zimbabwe: Successes Problems and Way Forward.**

Mr John Mpofu<sup>1</sup>, Dr Sylod Chimhenga<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Senior lecturer, Department of Languages and Media Studies at Zimbabwe Open University.

<sup>2</sup>Senior Lecturer, Center for Student Management; Zimbabwe Open University;

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**Abstract:** *Experienced teachers are well aware of the benefits of family involvement in children's education. In the past, parental support was always thought to be a critical component of education, and teachers assumed, whether accurately or not, that parents supported their efforts and expectations for children's learning. Yet in contemporary society issues about parental support and involvement are complicated by diverse family arrangements and vast socio-cultural differences among classroom teachers, children and families. The focus of this study is to analyze how children coming from child headed families who are often marginalized, are affected by poverty, tribalism, language and cultural differences, and the absence of parental socialization influence their performance at school. This research will make use of mixed methodology which involves descriptive surveys, interviews, focus group discussions and ethnographic studies. Data will be collected from children, Heads of schools and policy makers in the Ministry of Education. These respondents provided information on how children in child headed families perform in school setting. Qualitative data will be analyzed using grounded theory. In this article, we attempt to describe the situation of double orphans (having lost both parents) who are heading sibling-headed households in Zvishavane District, Zimbabwe. The term "sibling-headed households" is used because we have included young adult orphans who were under the age of 18 when they started acting as breadwinners after both parents had died.*

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### **I. Background to the study**

The child-headed household is a rapidly growing phenomenon in contemporary Africa in general and Zimbabwe in particular mainly due to increased death rates of parents caused by HIV and AIDS and the weakened state of the extended family safety net in taking up care and raising responsibilities for orphaned and vulnerable children. Communities with high rates of HIV/AIDS infection have for many years experienced a rapid increase in the number of children becoming orphaned. Therefore regions and countries with high levels of HIV/AIDS will continue to have an increasingly higher number of double orphans as the pandemic advances. According to the Zvishavane District Local Government, one of the reasons for the increasing number of orphans and other vulnerable children living on their own is the combination of poverty and the increasing intra-household dependency. This study focused on the performance of children from child headed families in Zimbabwe. The study identified the challenges of the child-headed household and explored how they influence the academic performance of primary school students from such households in Zvishavane.

In traditional African societies the child-headed household was assumed to be non-existent since orphans would be easily and naturally looked after within the households of their extended families (Foster et al, 1997; Naicker and Tsenhase 2004). In this set up, the extended family acted as a social security safety net for vulnerable children. The responsibility of caring for orphans has become a major problem due to poverty which is undermining the extended family's capacity to cope with orphans (Foster et al, 1997). The child-headed household has emerged as a context of child development due to the disintegrating extended family as a safety net. In this household, older children are usually forced to take up adult responsibilities of care and support for younger siblings and vulnerable elders with little or no support from the extended family and government when they themselves still need adult support and guidance. It appears as if the socio-economic conditions of this household do not foster cultural experiences which enhance academic performance.

The majority of studies on child headed families in sub-Saharan Africa have focused on their physical and socioeconomic factors, such as access to education, food, shelter and clothing, factors which are observable and therefore easier to address. The focus of this study is to evaluate to what extent orphans cope with the responsibility of looking after other siblings and their academic performance in primary schools.

### **II. Statement of the problem**

A large number of children in sub-Saharan Africa especially in Southern Africa are the hardest hit by the effects of Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS). The number of children becoming orphans is increasing sharply in Zimbabwe. The death of parents is leaving a large number of orphans who remain in child headed families. These children tend to be orphaned by AIDS at a younger age and they then look after

themselves. This study seeks to establish to what extent orphans cope with the responsibility of looking after other siblings and their academic performance in primary schools.

### **III. Research questions**

- What role does socialization from the child who heads the family play in influencing his / her performance at school and the performance of his/ her siblings?
- To what extent do the orphans cope with school performance whilst living in child headed families?
- What role are teachers and administrators playing in the education and counseling of the children living in child headed families?

### **IV. Research objectives**

**This study seeks to:**

- Identify the role which socialization from the child who heads the family plays in influencing his / her performance at school and the performance of his/ her siblings
- Establish the extent to which the orphans cope with school performance whilst living in child headed families
- Examine the role to which teachers and administrators play in the education and counseling of the children living in child headed families
- Describe the psychosocial challenges that the orphans face and how they solve them.

### **V. Literature review**

Formerly in Zimbabwe community members and extended families absorbed the burden of orphans. The prevailing socio-cultural values made it natural that orphaned children should primarily be cared for within their extended families. Community settings such as institutionalized care were presumed not to be good for children as it increased the stigma of the child. It was therefore natural that if parents were killed due to accidents or HIV AIDS the relatives would take over the responsibility of looking after the siblings. In addition, the care in many of these orphanages tends to be of poor quality for the emotional life of the children. Presently, the extended families remain the principle orphan-care units but due to the greatly increased number of orphans, in some regions the families' abilities to care for orphans seem to have reached the maximum elasticity of absorption UN report (2003).

The majority of studies of orphans in sub-Saharan Africa have focused on physical and socioeconomic factors, such as access to education, food, shelter and clothing, factors which are observable and therefore easier to address. As a result, psychosocial needs have received less attention. Nonetheless, research dedicated to describing these orphans indicate that studies of their psychosocial and developmental needs is warranted especially in resource-poor countries. To date, only a few studies have examined the psychosocial dimensions of orphanhood in Zimbabwe. The exceptional situation of the young who have to take over as the breadwinners of their families after their parents' death long before they are physically, mentally and emotionally prepared to do so, is hardly discussed.

Sengendo and Nambi(1997) carried out a study on the psychological effects among orphans in Rakai District (Uganda). Since their study was mainly funded by the international Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) World Vision (WV), their study population consisted of orphans receiving education sponsorship from WV, which meant that most of the children were attending school. They found that depressive thoughts and feelings such as sadness, anger and guilt were present in the children at the time of bereavement. They also argued that as the individual child, over time, accepts the loss, "the negative emotions are expected to disappear". Atwine et al. (2005) have compared psychological distress among orphans and non-orphans in the rural Bushenyi District in Uganda. According to their findings, orphans who had lost one or both parents ran greater risks than non-orphans of having higher levels of anxiety, depression and anger. However, this result may have been influenced by rather leading questions, such as "Do you think that your life will be bad?" They also argue that depression scores were higher in orphans living in smaller vs. larger households. Musisi, Kinyanda& Nakigudde (2005) argue that orphans in Rakai District reported more dissatisfaction with life, and were more emotionally needy and isolated, than non-orphans. Their study, however, focused on children in school only and does not report whether the orphans lived on their own or in other families.

This study investigates the performance of orphans in primary schools and how they cope with their school work while at the same time providing the siblings with social and psychological support.

### **VI. Methodology**

The data was collected from five primary schools in Zvishavane district. The study employed qualitative methods in order to obtain the children's own descriptions of their daily life, how they experienced being responsible for their younger siblings, how they felt to be different from many other children (with

parents) in their schools, and how they experienced being part of their village community or excluded from it. The researchers felt that the use of in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, narratives and observation methods would best describe the performance of orphans in primary schools and how they cope with their school work while at the same time providing the siblings with social and psychological support. The interviews and the focus group discussions were carried out mainly in the local language, Chishona. Some heads of households wrote autobiographical narratives.

The schools where data was collected were selected randomly. Permission to carry out the study was obtained from the Ministry of Education. All participants were selected using convenience and snowball sampling. The data collection was conducted with 5 school heads, 10 teachers and 10 school children who head the child headed families. The school heads were interviewed individually, 10 teachers participated in focus group discussions and 10 children who are heads of households wrote narratives only. The focus groups were gender-mixed.

## **VII. Findings and discussion**

### **7.1 Household composition**

The children stayed in their parents' homes for different reasons. Some said they were afraid that relatives or other people would take their properties if they left their homes. Others explained that there was no other place to go since relatives were not keen to take over the responsibility of looking after them. A few had tried to get some help and wanted to live with relatives but they were refused; others said they had promised their parents to stay in the house to take care of their belongings. The siblings tried to avoid being split up by being taken care of by different relatives. Some orphans had lost parents who had come from Zambia to work in the asbestos mines. So these orphans could not trace any of their relatives.

The school heads indicated that there were more boys than girls who headed households. The reason for this skewed distribution was that some of the girls had married young - or had just left the community: *"Our eldest sister lives in Harare. She left home without telling anyone where she was going. Ever since 2002 she has never come back"* (Boy, 1). Most of the children whose older sisters or brothers had left the home did not know why or where they had gone.

### **7.2 Adequacy of Shelter**

During our visits, we observed the conditions of the sibling-headed households. Eight of the heads of households said that their houses needed to be repaired or they reported that they *"want [ed] a house constructed"* because they lived in a shattered house or temporarily with friends due to lack of housing. We observed that at least one third of the participating children's houses were in very bad and dangerous conditions; some had already fallen down or had collapsing walls and

### **7.3 Availability of food and maintenance of home**

In three of the sibling-headed households the children had had no food in the last 24 hours. In five households the children usually had two meals or more per day. None of them could afford to eat fish or meat. Some relied on wild fruits when they failed to get help from the non-governmental organizations. All the heads of households reported that they struggled to obtain food, water, paraffin and firewood. For most of them, the lack of these basic needs caused worries.

### **7.4 Work related activities**

The research indicated that children in the sibling-headed households had to work for other people to earn money. This included garden work, looking after animals, fetching water and firewood, and washing cars and motor cycles. The sad part was that some families abused the orphans by refusing to pay for their labor.

### **7.5 School attendance and performance**

Seven of 10 heads of households had stopped school, most of them after primary school. They cited lack of school fees as a great challenge. However, they were much focused on education and felt that skills and knowledge obtained in school could help them achieve a better life. All the heads of households participating in this study reported that they needed help to pay school fees and buy books. World Vision (WV) paid half the school fees for six of the interviewed heads of households so they could attend secondary school, yet some of them still didn't attend school because they were not able to raise the other half of the fees. A few teachers and community members tried to help some of the brightest orphans, while others assisted the neediest ones.

One of the major problems facing the heads of household was the stigma that they were associated with. The rest of the other children tended to associate the deaths of their parents with HIV/AIDS and they believed the orphans are also suffering from the disease. The tasks that they had to perform in order to support their siblings meant that at times they could not go to school.

Children were often sent home from school for not paying fees, not having a uniform or for other reasons; *"I am always chased from school because of no school fees. I blame this on the death of my parents"*(Boy, 4).

The heads of households themselves argued that if they had to do some work in the morning that would cause them to be late for school. Sometimes they preferred to stay at home the whole day because they were punished and spanked if they came to school late. One girl said, *"I wish they [the teachers] would listen to us and try to understand our problems instead of just spanking us."* Some heads of households argued that if they attended school but could not pay the fees, they would not be given their school reports, which again prevented them from continuing to the next grade.

Two heads of households held a responsible position at school such as prefect or class monitor or to *"keep the key for the staff room"*. All these had sponsors who paid for their school fees. Reasons for others not being voted into such positions included lack of school fees, irregular attendance, no uniform, etc. One 14 year old boy stated that: *"I couldn't pay my class mates to vote for me"*.

The heads of household stated that they could not participate in sports and other extra mural activities due to the responsibilities they had to encounter. Three of these heads of household stated that they requested from heads of schools to be relieved from participating in these sports activities.

### **VIII. Conclusions**

There is evidence from this study that the challenges faced by siblings who head households is insurmountable. Where they do not have social support from relation the challenges they have to solve need the miracle working power of the almighty. Their chances of doing well at school can only take place if other agencies of society or government take over some of the responsibilities that they face. It is a complex challenge to try to help the children in these difficult circumstances towards a better future. All the members of the community should be involved in an effort to lessen the burden that is carried by these sibling heading families and this inclusion requires that villagers understand, accept and respect the children in sibling-headed households and their situation.

### **Recommendations**

The ministry of education should engage or employ a full time counselor in every secondary school whose task would be to counsel children from all backgrounds and to make these children understand themselves so that they cope up with their challenges and can improve their academic performance.

At school level the researcher recommends that the administrator must develop a school library, this would expose pupil from all disadvantaged background that is those from the single and double parenting household to utilize resources so as to improve their performances as well as to cope up with their challenges.

School authorities as well as teachers should be in a position to identify problems and challenges of pupils from such backgrounds like those children from families headed by single parents and recommend them to utilize financial resources and assistance from social dimensions fund, BEAM, and other related charity organizations.

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*Performance in Schools by Students from Child Headed Families in Zimbabwe: Successes Problems..*

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