

Developmental Experiences of OVC in Child-Headed Households and the Impact on Cognition and Learning

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Abstract

In this phenomenological descriptive case study the researchers investigated the ecological encounters of orphaned and vulnerable Children (OVC) in child-headed households (CHHs) and the impact on cognition and learning. The qualitative enquiry is based on Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory. The triangulated data was collected through participant observations, open-ended questionnaires, interviews and focus group discussions. The purposefully selected participants comprised 20 double orphans and vulnerable children, four headmasters, eight teachers, one education officer and one social welfare officer, comprising a total sample of 34. Tesch's qualitative model of data analysis was used to group the findings into themes, each differentiating into sub-categories. The findings revealed most OVC to suffer from loneliness, feelings of inferiority, stress, anxiety, low self-esteem, lack of concentration in class and heightened negativity that militates against effective assimilation and accommodation of learning materials within their ecological environment. The situation was exacerbated by poverty, need deprivation and overwhelming household and parenting responsibilities. As such, most of the children's voiced responses expressed great despondence. Orphanhood was found to be a psychological deterrent to cognition and learning. The local community, education administrators, policy makers, children's rights advocates together with the children's representatives need to map out life-lines to promote the cognitive learning of double OVC residing in CHHs.

Keywords: Orphanhood, child-headed household, orphans and vulnerable children, ecological systems, developmental, learning, cognition

1. Background to the Study

One of the eight millennium development goals (MDGs) calls for care and support for orphans (MDG 6 in The Zimbabwe Millennium Goals, 2004 progress report: 47). Many of the OVC come from parents who died of HIV/AIDS, mainly before the new anti-retroviral drugs (ARVs) were introduced and provided to patients including the poorer populace. Globally the HIV/AIDS epidemic has been growing, including in Asia where an estimated 7.4 million people are living with HIV, and 1.1 million people became newly infected in 2011 alone, - getting to 60% of the world's population (UNAIDS, 2006). According to the UNICEF Global Estimate (2004) report, the epidemic has had huge global implications. The orphan and vulnerable child (OVC) in a child-headed household (CHH), for instance, is one such implication.

In Zambia, a study by the International Labour Organization in several districts showed that the majority of children in prostitution were orphans who were living in the streets. In Ethiopia, the majority of child domestic workers in the capital city of Addis Ababa were found to be orphans too. In Uganda, focus group discussions revealed that girls orphaned as a result of parents dying of AIDS were especially vulnerable to sexual abuse in domestic housework because of the stigma attached to their orphaned status. Moreover, studies from numerous regions have shown that orphaned children have substantially lower levels of education than children who are not orphaned (UNICEF, 2010).

According to recent studies by the Zimbabwe National AIDS Council (2011), there has been a dramatic increase in the number of orphans in Zimbabwe where an estimated 240 000 orphans are believed to be living in CHHs. The Basic Education Assistance Module (BEAM) funds have been overwhelmed by the demands and cost of living involved in

caring for the affected children. In fact, the Zimbabwe National AIDS Council (2011) executive in Zimbabwe is encouraging extended families to intervene and the council is trying to promote the idea of fostering children orphaned by AIDS. The researchers, however, found that many older OVC preferred to head their households when their parents died.

According to UNAIDS, UNICEF and USAIDS (2004) cited in Ganga and Chinyoka (2010), the proportion of orphans whose parents have died from HIV and AIDS was increasing, hence the mushrooming of child-headed households (CHHs). This study thus investigates the ecological encounters of OVC in CHHs and the impact on cognition and learning in order to find the best way of caring for and educating the affected minors.

1.1 Research Question

What are the developmental experiences encountered by orphans and vulnerable children (OVC) in CHHs as far as their cognition and learning are concerned?

1.2 Objective of the Study

To determine how the developmental experiences encountered by orphans and vulnerable children (OVC) affect their learning and cognition.

2. Theoretical Framework: Ecological Systems Model (Urie Bronfenbrenner)

The assumptions in Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, illustrated in Figure 1 (appendix A), are based on the fact that relationships or interdependence between organisms and/or people are holistic, where every part is vital in sustaining the life cycles of those concerned. In other words, there has to be a balance within the ecological concept (Donald et al, 2010). The theory thus views different individuals as interacting systems. For instance, a child-headed household (CHH) is a system with different individuals living together as siblings or other vulnerable children who might decide to join an OVC already in a CHH. The head or older child usually takes up the parental role with the help of extended family members if available as overseers (Chirwa, 2002 and Foster, 2003).

In terms of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, there are components that characterize any human system. This structure echoes Bandura's reciprocal determinism. According to Bandura (2001) cited in Kosslyn and Rosenberg (2008), in human behaviour there is an interaction process involving both psychological and social forces. Factors such as thought, expectancies and feelings all influence the environment and behaviour. In turn, behaviour influences the environment and personal factors. A reciprocal relationship, that Bandura in Kosslyn and Rosenberg (2008), calls reciprocal determinism, is thus established. An OVC, like any other human being within the environment, may be influenced by the environment in which they are surviving and in turn the environment influences the OVC thus leading to a reciprocal relationship.

The child-headed household as a whole system can interact with other systems (other CHHs) around them in the form of children's informal play centres, the school, the church, the chief's homestead or other systems that may be found in the OVC's vicinity. As one subsystem interacts with the next, the learning that takes place may eventually affect the whole CHH system. Thus all related systems in the main CHH affect all players in the whole system.

In a CHH, the individuals are shaped by patterns of interactions within the system. For instance, if one OVC gets ill, the children in the whole system are bound to sympathize and empathize with each other and this can psychologically affect the whole OVC household. Older children may fail to attend school in order to take care of the sick child or to take the child to hospital. Neighbours and caregivers in the extended family are also affected by the sick child's case and may want to offer a meal service for the day. The church pastor and the government social welfare officer may also be affected by the situation and might offer to assist at such a time of need.

The goals and values within each child-headed household also influence the whole system in different ways and will have both negative and positive effects on the learning and cognition of each subsystem (i.e. child). Even if effective learning is a higher and powerful goal for every OVC in the CHH, it can be overshadowed by more powerful goals such as obtaining the status of a CHH from retrogressive members of the extended family. If, for instance, the OVC live in a poor CHH, then dealing with their poverty may tend to override the education goals of the individuals in the CHH.

As far as communication in a system is concerned, there may be some obstacles to overcome between subsystems. A situation where a dysfunctional CHH is unable to communicate well may result in situations where

learning and cognition of each OVC is affected negatively. The psychological effects may end up placing the learners in stressful life circumstances that can result in a dysfunctional system if prolonged. If performance at school is affected negatively, it may result in failure, anxiety and stress. Eventually the child may decide to leave school. Staying at home in turn exposes the learner to perpetrators of child abuse who may impregnate the child if female, or possibly introduce the child to drug trafficking in the case of a male OVC. Thus, as a result of poor communication within the system's network, the whole system's function can be disrupted.

The CHH tries to allocate individual roles to members within each section. For instance, the girls will often gather vegetables, go to the grinding mill, wash clothes and prepare family meals. The boys will often be responsible for trying to earn the family's income as in the case where the children may decide to merge school with work in order to make ends meet within the CHH. A good example of this practice is the "earn and learn" system that is run by Tanganda Tea Company in the Chipinge district. In the *earn-and-learn*, programme pupils are provided with education, meals and boarding facilities on condition that they spend substantial time plucking tea. The pupils pay school fees and a token payment for board, and in return receive the same wage rate that adult pluckers receive. Besides paying the pupils their wages the company also spends appreciable amounts in subsidizing the schools.

Older adolescents are regarded by the whole CHH subsystem as mature and able to look after the rest. Some become income earners, nurturers, problem solvers, child-parents, blame takers, etc. (Donald et al, 2010) just like in any other normalized family system.

There are boundaries within sub-systems. The openness or rigidity of the boundaries affects the system's functioning in as far as time and development are concerned. Any system is bound to develop and change over time. Any one part influences the whole system, e.g. a developing orphaned adolescent in a CHH might begin to experience growth that forces him or her to change behaviour which might result in role confusion (Erikson's psycho-social theory, in Berk, 2007). Any inconsistencies in the manner in which the developing adolescent behaves may affect the rest of the other children in the system. For instance, a girl may start to be intimate with boys, as a result get pregnant and bring in an additional child to the system or what one participant in Ganga and Chinyoka (2010) referred to as "*zvanazvevana*" literally meaning "*children from children*". The introduction of a new offspring affects the family budget, relationships, and brings about changes in emotional interactions between siblings and eventually these changes filter into the school and the rest of the community. Therefore, development and change in one section of the system influences development in many other sections.

Bronfenbrenner called these relationships the proximal interactions, referring to interactions occurring between each other, e.g. between child and child, child and teacher, or child and a friend - all in social contexts. There are thus reciprocal influences in families, peer groups, classrooms, schools and local communities. According to Bronfenbrenner (1979 cited in Donald et al, 2010), development occurs in four nested systems, namely micro-, meso-, exo- and macrosystems that all interact with the chronosystem. Microsystems involve roles, relationships patterns of daily activities that shape aspects of cognitive, social, moral, emotional and spiritual development (Shummon, Smith and Smith, 2009).

Microsystems interact with each other, e.g. a household and peer group can influence how children respond to school. Therefore, it becomes vital to understand how children's development is shaped by their social contexts (Berk, 2007; Dawes, Bray and Van Der Merwe, 2007). Therefore, occurrences in the microsystem of a child's family, peer groups and school may interact negatively with the child's mesosystem and thus reinforce developmental difficulties. Mesosystems include the neighbourhood or local community.

Cultural values that involve obedience to senior community members and authority may also influence the proximal interactions in a child's microsystem and the whole mesosystem. Take for instance how the government or non-governmental organizations distribute resources in society. The procedures can affect every level of the system. An adolescent OVC heading a household can be denied access to food rations due to the child's political affiliation and who may then be forced to steal from community members who do have food. Eventually the adolescent may be arrested. His whole CHH and the whole community are in turn negatively affected by this move. The OVC's macro system is equivalent to a wider community or a whole social system covering economic, social and cultural systems, as well as families, local communities and schools (Broderick, 1993; Lamanna and Riedmann, 2006; Oswalt, 2008).

Developmental time affects the interaction between the ecological systems and may influence an individual's development, e.g. if the CHH, extended families and all other systems in which the child is developing are involved, the OVC continually change and develop themselves. These changes interact with a child's progressive stages of development which affect the child's learning and cognition. By examining the ecosystem, one can see how things might change, develop and be healed (Donald et al, 2010).

It is vital to concentrate on the levels of systems that take account of an OVC's situation. Education is important

for the OVC, so is learning and cognition. Learning may also be influenced at family level by factors such as resources, language (home language versus medium of instruction at school), values and degree of cognitive and emotional support a learner receives from the family (Eberstadt, 2003; Case and Ardington, 2005; Evans and Miguel, 2005; Musengi, Ganga and Mugweni, 2011).

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Ethical Considerations

The major concern of this study was to construct a social reality based on the ecological encounters of the OVC in child-headed households. This being a sensitive study, a number of ethical considerations took precedence in order to safeguard the orphaned and vulnerable child, as well as the researcher, teachers, government and non-governmental stakeholders involved. The ethical considerations included issues of confidentiality, autonomy, beneficence and non-maleficence of human research participants as stipulated in the Unisa Policy on Research Ethics (2007).

The status of the main participants, which was orphanhood, raised attitudinal fears that would have inhibited orphans from becoming participants in this study. An effort was thus made to allow the participants to go through some individual and group psychosocial counseling during which the main purpose of the study was explained. The issue of signed consent and assent forms formed a vital part of the study right from the beginning.

3.2 The Research Design

This study was conducted within a qualitative research paradigm. The researchers made use of a phenomenological descriptive case study. The main intention in phenomenology is to understand the phenomenon through descriptions of human experiences by the subjects experiencing the conscious, social experiences (Creswell, 2007). The OVC in CHHs were thus allowed to talk about their experiences with regard to cognition and learning. The teachers and headmasters working with them most of the time assisted in observations that aimed to authenticate the learning experiences presented by the OVC.

According to Schram (2006) and Yin (2003), a case study design can be adapted to a wide range of frameworks such as phenomenology in which the researcher strives to describe, analyse and interpret phenomena; in this case the developmental encounters that affect the learning and cognition of OVC in CHHs. The study thus endeavored to explore and present an authentic situation in terms of the developmental and learning experiences of OVC. This case study involved an exploration of a bound system involving multiple cases over a period of time through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information from varied data collection tools as well as from the purposefully selected participants (Creswell, 2007).

3.3 Sampling Procedure

Four secondary schools were purposefully selected because these schools were found to have a large number of OVC coming from child-headed households. From each of the four schools (two rural and two urban) schools, five double orphans (making a total of 20), the school heads (four in all), two teachers (eight in all), one district education officer and a social welfare officer were purposefully selected to make up a total sample of 34 participants. By using purposeful sampling, the most characteristic representation of attributes was obtained that served the purpose of the study (Grinnell and Unrau, 2008). The sample in this qualitative case study, 34 participants, was small and was aimed at allowing participants to give their life experiences (Rubin and Babbie, 2008).

3.4 Data Collection

Prior to visiting the schools and CHHs, the researchers obtained permission to conduct the research in the Chipinge district. Some senior government of Zimbabwe (GoZ) ministry's authorities had to be consulted in this regard. After having obtained research permission and consent from the Chipinge district administrator at the Chipinge local government offices, the researchers also sought consent from the Secretary of the Ministry of Education, Sport, Art and Culture (MoEASC) at the Zimbabwe MoEASC head office, the education director at the provincial office as well as the education officers at the MoEASC Chipinge district offices. .

Numbered alphabet codes were used to identify each of the 34 participants at each data collection venue. Open-ended questionnaires and interviews, focus group discussions and observations were used to collect data that was needed to find out the developmental and learning experiences of OVC living in CHHS.

3.5 Data Analysis

For data analysis, the thematic procedures (O'Neill, 2011) involving cross-tabulations, descriptions, narratives, anecdotal records, vignettes and other manual procedures were augmented by the use of a Tesch qualitative data analysis tool developed by Tesch (1990) in Creswell (2002). The procedures occurred simultaneously with the data collection and interpretation (Creswell, 2002). This led to a reduction of the data, and particular codes and clues were categorized into themes.

4. Research Findings

Fifteen OVC (i.e. BR6 –DR20) attended rural secondary schools and five OVC (AU1-AU5) attended urban secondary schools. All the 20 OVCs were literate and attending school (form 2-5) within their locality. Most of their parents had left the children with some debt and the children inherited no big assets from their parents except for either a 2-4 roomed house or hut(s). Codes AUS21up to DRS32, US33 and US34 were pseudo names of the 14 stakeholders involved. Figure 2 (appendix B) shows a pictorial representation of the developmental experiences of OVCs in CHHS in terms of cognition and learning.

Numerous factors were identified as contributing to the developmental experiences encountered by OVC in CHHS (appendix B). A number of constraints seemed to hinder effective intellectual development in the children due to circumstances that were beyond their control. It was observed that most of the OVC's surroundings were uninteresting and sterile, a situation that matches Rice's (2006) description of a non-stimulating environment.

The interviews with OVCs, open questionnaires, focus group discussions and the observation guide resulted in rich data. Findings included both negative and positive developmental experiences in OVCs which were categorized as shown in Figure 2 (Appendix B). This paper deals mainly with the first three ecological encounters, namely:

- OVC's major sources of supplies
- The socio-economic status of OVC and cognition
- Ecological encounters within CHHS.

It was found that the children continued to construct knowledge or process it through assimilation and accommodation with the hope of settling for equilibration in scheme formulation (Piaget 1932 in Bhattacharya and Han, 2009). In most of the difficult situations encountered by the OVC, it was noted that the older OVC encountered much more difficult times than the younger children. It was also found that on its own, orphanhood can lead to defects in the OVC's cognitive growth because the children expressed different feelings with regard to being orphaned. Some of the effects of orphanhood seemed to hinder the learner's brain function. Poverty, for instance, was observed in most of the CHHS visited where the OVC's role as a child was seen to be altered and rather dominated by parental roles especially in the children who headed the CHHS. According to the literature, the neuro-plasticity perspective on cognition (Merzenich and Wood, 2009), could assist educationists to focus on the portion of the OVC brain functioning that should be stimulated more than the other parts in order to allow learning and cognition to take place effectively.

Moreover, it was found that the developmental experiences encountered by the OVC led to immense cognitive conflicts (Macleod, 2010 and Driscoll, 2009), i.e. sometimes the children failed to handle the problems they encountered and this in turn affected their school attendance and thus their learning. A major recurring problem in both urban and rural CHHS was the issue of not being able to pay school fees or the late payment of such fees by well-wishers resulting in most of the OVC failing to learn effectively.

Moreover, even if the school fees were paid, the children expressed that the absence of parents affected them. The scaffolding, a social process that all children need, was thus not available to the children, especially after school and during the vacations. Vygotsky (1968) in Chaikin (2003) reiterates the importance of a child's cultural experiences which involve new connections. All such cultures and learning encounters seemed to be incomplete or unavailable in CHHS where the OVC spent most of their home time. It is culture that enables interrelations and learning to take place, yet obstacles to learning and cognition seemed to disable worthwhile learning activities in the children's culture.

Figure 2(appendix B) shows that some ecological perspectives within the OVC's phenomenal fields were noted to be at the centre of it all beginning from the children's encounters within the micro-, meso- and exosystems, up to the

chronosystem (Oswalt, 2008; Donald et al, 2010). Some encounters made the OVC smile whilst some made them sad. The reciprocal interaction within the learner's systems was noted in the anecdotal stories of the learners in their responses to the open-ended questionnaire and interview guide.

Urban and rural CHHs showed different patterns. To some OVC, the absence of parents meant there was a huge gap in their ecological systems, while in others it created more reciprocal interactions with the children's chronosystem or the outside world. For instance, some mentioned the fact that even though they were parentless, their orphanhood connected them to the wider world where they have well-wishers who help in paying the school fees and supply support materials that enhance the children's learning. However, this should not be misconstrued to mean that the OVC were happy without their parents. The researcher and teachers noticed some psychological crises in the OVC that seemed to be unresolved even though the children were attending school.

4.1 Main sources of OVC supplies

The survival supplies that the 20 OVC received came from extended family members. Others received daily supplies from farmers where they worked, social welfare rations, churches and donors. In many cases children also received aid (supplies) from their late parents' family and friends. This is a clear indication that people do not live in isolation, but that they are part of an ecological chain supporting each other thus allowing a family system to function fully. Bronfenbrenner's constructivist thought (Oswalt, 2008) within the theoretical framework is clearly demonstrated by this finding. It was found that both government and non-governmental organizations were giving aid to the rural OVC (most of the poorer OVC were located in the rural parts of the country).

With regard to the type of accommodation, three of the 15 rural OVC were living in huts, but the majority of both rural and urban OVC lived in 2-3 roomed houses. All of the 14 OVC indicated that they did not have any belongings that were left in their homes except for beds and radios in the 6-7 roomed houses. Televisions were mentioned by OVC who came from urban CHHs. All the five urban CHHs used both electricity and firewood as fuel. All the 15 OVC from the rural CHHs used firewood.

Of interest were the responses with regard to the number of daily meals taken by the OVC. The children described their meal types as:

1-1-1 Referring to three meals per day, namely breakfast, lunch and supper

1-0-1 Breakfast, no lunch, but supper only.

0-0-1 No breakfast, no lunch, but supper only

Figure 3 (appendix c) illustrates how the 20 OVC received their daily meals depending on availability. All three groups said that they were used to their feeding routine though it affected their class performance.

A worrisome figure is that 28% of the 20 learners indicated that they relied heavily on one main meal at night, and that during the day they settled for snacks such as maputi (dried, roasted meal-grains), mangayi (dried, boiled meal-grains), groundnuts, sugarcane, maheu (traditional African drink from malted grain) and other African snacks and fruits which are nutritious but not always available. Hunger and food shortages affected many learners negatively. Most, however, had learnt to endure the hardships. Below is a quote from an urban learner (AU2):

I am used to the 0-0-1 meal time table. It is kind of hard for me but because I am keen to learn, I need to manage the situation. The situation is aggravated by the need to fetch firewood for cooking, since there are too many power cuts these days.

Failure to procure adequate food resulted in many complaints such as lack of concentration during lessons and psychological issues that seemed to affect every OVC in both urban and rural CHHs. It is also possible that recurring problems of stomachaches and headaches experienced in the OVC, especially in the rural parts of the district, may be related to hunger and the number of meals, 0-0-1 and 1-0-1, taken each day by the greater number of the OVC. The poor diet thus has a bearing on the cognition and learning of children because the brain requires energy in order to function effectively.

4.2 Socio-economic Status of OVC and Learning

The children made efforts to survive but they seemed not to cope well, especially in the poorer places of rural areas. Some reported that they got weekend and holiday piece jobs but the money they earned this way was not enough. Both urban and rural OVC complained about the payment of school fees. Mostly there was not enough money to pay for

school fees, and if, by chance, there was money available to pay the fees, the school fees were paid late resulting in absenteeism and loss of learning time. For those who relied on extended family systems, relatives often defaulted in fees payments. An OVC (BR6) complained about the problem of school fees being paid:

They are not reluctant to pay our fees, but very often they fail to get enough resources to sustain their own families and ours. If they pay, it is usually late. Most of the times we are sent back home to collect fees and because there is no one at home, we end up loitering on the way home until other children join us from school. Most of us miss school especially during the first two weeks of school term because we are tired of being sent home to a parentless home. We fail to sleep because we do not have.

Not being able to go to school timeously because the school fees haven't been paid means that a whole chain of other problems is set into motion which eventually affect the learning and cognition of the OVC. Another child (CR12) added that orphanhood placed them in a position of responsibility that exceeded their capabilities as children:

I have to work as a house girl during weekends and school holidays in order to earn cash for school fees. Even if my mother's friend tries to assist, she might not be able to handle my family and hers too since she's only a teacher, who is earning not much for all that a family would need for survival.

Most of the children spend most of their spare time trying to find some means of survival by working in people's plots or gardens or in *food-for-work projects* organized by donor organizations.

The children did not inherit much from their deceased parents except perhaps the homestead. The 20 OVC appreciated their homes but these needed repairs, and the children expressed the hope that there would be well-wishers who could do some repairs for them. Some of the residential places were dilapidated and needed attention urgently. The children in urban areas complained about noisy neighborhoods, whereas those in rural areas expressed their frustration over the fact that they lived in overcrowded places which interfered with their studies.

The children expressed their gratitude that family members passed on text books to those in need. In fact, this move seemed to encourage some learners. One of the urban OVC (AU5) said the following in this regard:

Even if our relatives took away our parents' possessions, they remembered to live behind text books 'which they labeled (nhakayoupenyu) referring to 'estate for orphans'. They edged us to study hard so we can also buy our own belongings. It is culture that stipulates that belongings for the dead should be shared amongst one's relatives lest the dead will not be happy suppose some of their belongings are not shared amongst one's relatives. So some possessions may not worry me much. In fact, the absence of parental possessions and the sudden shift into a poverty-stricken life style encourages me to work and aim higher in my studies.

Such resilience as expressed by this learner was also seen in children who decided to reside in CHHs in Rwanda (Ward and Eyber, 2009). Most of the children's parents had died well before the introduction of anti-retroviral drugs (ARV). For the child, securing a promising life line (Rutter, 2008), even after living in dire poverty, was thus a major aim. Many of the children recognized that they needed to be resilient, particularly with regard to learning, if they wanted to succeed in life and secure themselves a more comfortable life after childhood.

4.3 OVC's Ecological Encounters within CHHs

The OVC who responded to the open questionnaire reported that they faced many different life line challenges that affected their performance at school or even how they tried to construct meaning in class. Most of the developmental encounters faced by one particular OVC in the CHHs seemed to have serious repercussions for the OVC as could be expected in terms of the reciprocal interactions between individuals, according to Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory (see Figure 1 above).

As children develop their intellect, their independence or proximal interactions can either aid in knowledge construction or in its destruction. The ecological environment can thus enhance construction of knowledge if it remains cognitive enough (Oswalt, 2008).

The first and foremost developmental effect of orphanhood was the devastating situation in which youngsters found themselves when watching their parents die and no one was able to stop this from happening. For a long time the children longed for parental care and guidance especially when they compared their situation with that of other children whose parents were still alive. The feelings of loss were expressed by one OVC (AU4) as follows:

You know, as you watch other kids being dropped off at school by their parents; you just feel it that they are better off and luckier. You just have this mentality that life is unfair and the more you think about it, the more it eats you inside, corrode you and make your heart numb. This affects my learning activities and participation deteriorates because you feel like everyone is better than you are and you are nobody. You know sometimes when you hear someone saying something like, 'hey, my mum and dad sent me this wish-you-good-luck card for my exams, you can't help crying and thus your concentration on learning is heavily affected.

The child was expressing her sorrow over developmental experiences in orphanhood that placed her in a life situation that was just too difficult to handle at her developmental stage. If concentration in class is disturbed, eventually this will result in poor school performance which will affect the entire ecological system; thus affecting the child's immediate environment which includes the CHH members - the microsystem. When the whole CHH is upset, the local community (mesosystem) and wider community (exosystem) are in turn also affected by the OVC's circumstances.

These experiences do not stop here but penetrate the child's social system or microsystem. For instance, the researcher, as part of the OVC's macrosystem, was touched when she read the AU4 excerpt above. Moreover, orphanhood eventually creeps into the child's chronosystem, where, over time, the effects of orphanhood may eventually be felt in the entire family system and affect their entire development. For instance, failure to learn and pass school grades during childhood may eventually affect the family's entire system when the OVC ultimately grows into an unsuccessful or poorly adapted adult whose earning capacity is severely affected by life's early encounters. In the review of the literature, poverty was noted as having detrimental effects on the development of children (Ganga and Chinyoka, 2010).

Other OVC voiced their feelings which overlapped with AU4's negative developmental experiences caused by orphanhood. A female OVC, DR16, who was heading a rural child-headed-household, responded on the open questionnaire as follows;

The state of being an orphan is tough; you have to strive to get your needs. Even if the extended families lend a hand in needs such as school stationery, they will never be in a position to provide you with everything because they have their own children to look after. And so the state of being orphaned can never be a conducive environment. I bet, given a choice, no one person would ever choose to live as an orphan.

The bitterness detected in the learner's answer shows that something needs to be done for the children so that they can at least learn in more conducive environments where cognition is not disturbed to such extent that children regret that they are still alive.

Another OVC (CR11) complained of recurring stresses from CHHs that filtered into the learning situation. He wrote:

School work is sometimes affected by unnecessary mistakes, loss of focus in class and lack of concentration because of too much stress from home affecting my work in class. There is too much pressure from taking responsibilities which even a much older person may not be able to handle.

On further probing during the focus group discussions, the researcher noted that most of the household responsibilities of the children in the CHHs were related to lack of finance and extreme poverty that actually manifested in the type of life styles observed at school and within the CHHs. More financial difficulties were experienced in rural CHHs than in the urban ones. In the rural CHHs the households tended to be less privileged than in the urban areas. Dealing with poverty thus is the most important task for all children residing in rural CHHs.

Another child (AU50) discussed the difficulties in adjusting after the parental death:

Being an orphan is unavoidable but it pains so much because I used to be someone who lived well before my father died. It is so painful to adjust to a life style I was not used to. My mum passed away when I was only two and my father took over from there but in 2009 my father died and things just got changed unexpectedly. The people who used to love me now hated me. Those who used to sympathize are the ones causing more pain. But one thing for certain, I want to thank you mam for coming to our school for I did not know that there are so many orphans at our school.

The children explained in detail their developmental experiences especially those that hindered ideal knowledge construction. Based on the excerpts we received from the interviews and open questionnaires, we were able to probe further during the focus group discussions where it seemed that most of the OVC were living in extremely difficult life circumstances that had severe implications for the learner's cognition and learning processes.

The interactions between the OVC as children staying alone, between the OVC and the teacher or the church, all hold implications for the child's learning. The reciprocal influences or proximal interactions as referred to by Bronfenbrenner in Oswald (2008) all seemed to interfere severely with the learning of the child as explained in terms of Bronfenbrenner's nested systems which forms this study's theoretical framework.

Children's proximal encounters with community members can affect a child's microsystem and eventually the child's mesosystem. Take AU5's case above, who describes a situation where those who used to love her now hate her. If feeling hated, a child may be unable to trust their proximal relationships especially if the hatred comes from those who used to love them. The literature shows that often extended families are the overseers of CHHs (Chirwa, 2002; Foster, 2003), yet over time society may change as well as orphan caregivers, so it is vital to plan how best the OVC's life situation can be improved and healed. Proper cognition and learning should continue after parental death because it is the pattern within the CHHs that eventually shapes the OVC or learner living in the CHH.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

This qualitative enquiry has brought to the fore a substantial amount of valuable data. It was found that the OVC affected by orphanhood is usually left with minimal resources that leave the child vulnerable to environmental exploitation. Often policy guidelines fail to protect the OVC because many OVC may not be aware of the policies that protect them as they live in remote areas of the district. With regard to the community, they seem to make an effort to alleviate some of the negative effects of orphanhood on the learning of the OVC but the effort becomes increasingly less noticeable due to the escalating number of parentless children who are losing their parents mainly to HIV/AIDS. Some studies have found that children can be empowered by involving them much more actively in the community rather than letting them live as victims. The researchers believe that a model needs to be developed to help deal with the plight of OVC in CHHs and which would look at how a developing country such as Zimbabwe could enhance the learning of OVC from CHHs.

The model (appendix D) summarizes the four categories proposed as ways in which the learning of OVC can be enhanced. It begins from identifying the needs (needs analysis) of the OVC learning situation summarized as monitored orphan care, empowerment of OVC, policy review and the need for continued OVC research. An implementation process (Maphalala, 2006) can then follow the plan. The National AIDS Council (NAC) for Zimbabwe should establish some means of channeling procured resources for the benefit of marginalized or needy OVC without prejudicing the real sufferers found in most CHHs.

The researchers also recommend the empowerment of the OVC by including them as active members of the community. The children can form support groups alongside with the adult ones to help them cope with parenting and schooling. There is also a need for mobile counselors who give psychosocial support to all children, especially the ones taking the position of child-heads.

Members of the community should maintain a positive attitude towards every child, including the orphans. Workshops and conferences for educators, community members and OVC on effective loco-pretence strategies and ideal child-parenting styles should be arranged by GoZ Social Welfare department. This may enable a positive communal living environment for communities including the CHHs.

6. Acknowledgements

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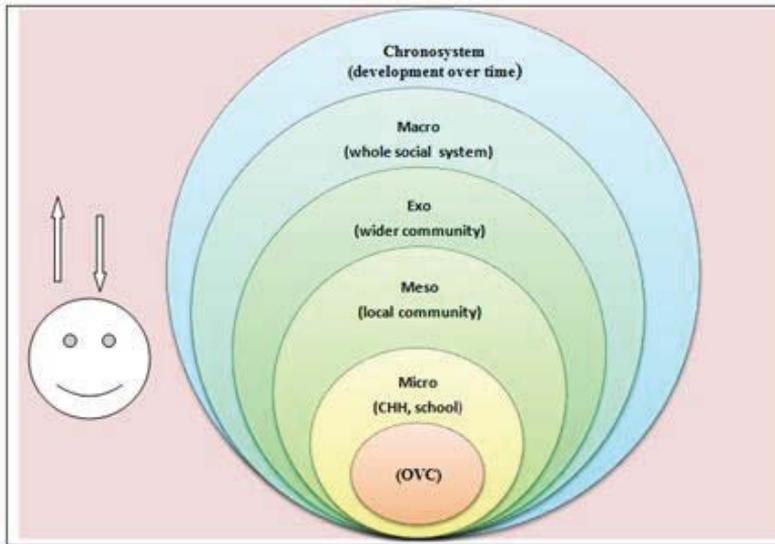
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Appendices

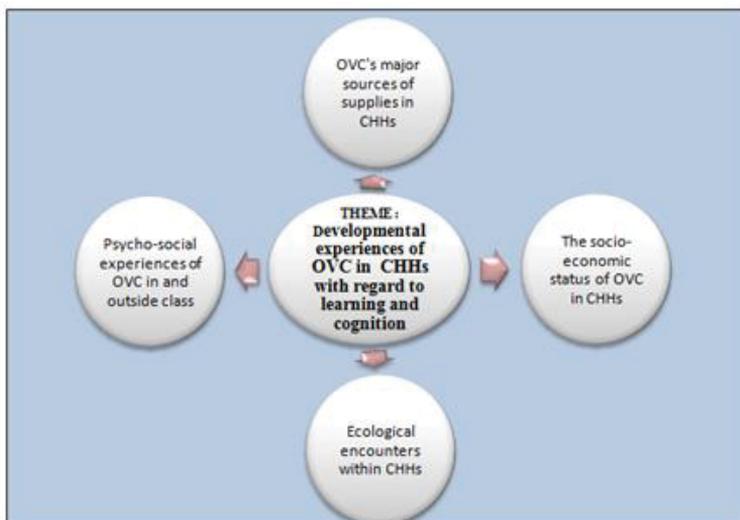
Appendix A

Figure 1: Bronfenbrenner's levels or nested systems with regard to the OVC's ecological encounters and learning (levels/systems adapted from Donald, Lazarus and Lolwana, 2010)



Appendix B

Figure 2: Developmental experiences of OVC in CHHs



Appendix C

Figure 3: Pie chart showing basic meals received by the OVC in a CHH



Appendix D

Figure 4: A proposed model for dealing with the plight of OVC

