Teachers' Experiences with Learners from Child-Headed Households: Eastern Cape Teachers' Voices of Despair

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ABSTRACT

Child-headed households (CHHs) phenomenon is evident in South Africa and stretches beyond our borders and across the globe. Among the contributory factors are socio-economic conditions, HIV/AIDS pandemic, migration, and abandonment to mention a few. This study sought to explore the lived experiences of teachers who teach learners from CCHs. The researchers used Bronfenbrenner's theory as the lens to interrogate the interaction between the teachers and learners from CHHs. This was a qualitative study underpinned by interpretivism paradigm to gain an in-depth experiences of teaching learners from CHH through semi-structured interviews. As a case study, the researchers identified and constructed appropriate daily experiences of teachers of learners from CHH in Duncan Village, East London, South Africa. Four (4) teachers from three Duncan Village schools were purposively selected. The collected data was categorised and thematically analysed. The study found that the learners from CHH experienced persistent deprivation of necessities and school resources Deprivation led to these learners to lack concentration in class and poor academic performance, just mention a few. Therefore, this study concluded that schools and teachers as micro-systems need to be empowered and be sensitive, welcoming, and accommodating to the learners from CHHs. Based on these findings, this study recommends schools to establish functional school-based support teams of teachers to look at the welfare of the learners from CCHs, by providing psycho-social support. Furthermore, recommends a collaborative engagement with various stakeholders to act in the best interest of the child.

Keywords: Child headed-households, Discrimination, Schooling Experiences, Stigma, Vulnerable Children.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In South Africa, the phenomenon of child-headed households (CHH) is evident due to several factors such as, socio-economic conditions, AIDS/HIV pandemic, migration, and abandonment to mention a few. These factors cause a growing number of children to fend for themselves, (Phillips, 2015). Child headed households (CHH) are those families in which the oldest child has assumed most of the everyday responsibilities of providing leadership, decision making, and running daily chores of the family because of death of both parents (Motsa & Morojele, 2021; Phillips, 2011). UNAIDS (2015) argued that child headed households are the results of socio-economic and political issues such as crime, political and economic insecurity, wars, displacement, migration, and separation. The social and economic result of CHH is that these children experience adult burden in their childhood (Maushe & Mugumbate, 2019; Ayieko, 2010). Consequently, these children are vulnerable and are prone to various challenges at school and in the community. These challenges include absenteeism, role adjustment from being a child to being adulthood, lack of adequate food and school material (Nyaradzo, 2013). Furthermore, some girl learners experience teenage pregnancy, and some boy learners engage in substance abuse and worsened by dropping out of school (Nyaradzo, 2013). Phillips and Le Roux-Kemp, (2015) allege that these children have no one to turn to in terms of support and guidance. These children's future depends on quality education, to ensure life full of opportunities and hope to decrease deprivation and vulnerability (Mathibethi, 2014). Lack of basic needs such as, shelter, electricity to do their homework are common challenges experienced by learners from CHH (ibid). this sought the lived experiences of teachers of learners from CHHs.

1.1 Statement of The Problem

Research evidence suggests that CHH from child headed households (CHH) experience difficulties in learning and schooling (Le-Roux-Kemp; van der Mark, 2015; & Phillips, 2011). The absence of the adult to vulnerable children brought burden as the responsibilities are above their power and thus resulted to lack of commitment to their schoolwork. The main problem is that these learners' faces unfair and deprivation of basic care, lack of resources such as books, school uniform, school shoes and moral support that and guidance by adults, therefore faces significant disparities in their schooling (Phillips, 2015). Whist there is insufficient literature on CHH in South Africa, there remains a gap in empowering schools and teachers to assist these learners holistically and destigmatise their conditions. This study therefore seeks to reveal teachers' experiences of learners from CHHs.

1.2 Research Questions

- What is a CHH?
- What are schooling experiences of learners from CCHs?
- What are the teachers' experiences learners from CHHs?

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study used, Urie Bronfenbrenner Ecological Systems Model Theory as the lens to interrogate the interaction between the children from CHH learners and their status *vis–a-vis* – their learning experiences. Bronfenbrenner ecological system is best suited for the present study because it covers all the interactions surrounding the child. The Ecological systems theory categorises *micro, meso exo, macro* and *chrono-systems*, which have the impact on the development and academic performance of the child (Ganga & Chinyoka, 2013). For this study, Bronfenbrenner' ecological system and bio-ecological system theory were used interchangeably. The *micro-system* layer is closest to the child and contains the structures with which the child has direct contact. The *micro-system* includes the relationships and an interaction a child has with her immediate surroundings (Bronfenbrenner, 1998). The composition of the *micro-system* includes family, school, neighbourhood, or child carer. The *micro-system* involves roles, relationships patterns of daily activities of the child and that he/she interacts with, and these shapes the cognitive, social, moral, emotional, and spiritual development of the child. According to Collins, et.al., (2013), a family is limited to members related to blood in such as biological parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins; arranged according to values, beliefs, and morals. In terms of *micro-system*, the learner's acquisition in his/her schoolwork is influenced by the family, and if not family, peers, teachers, community, and councillors will take part in supporting vulnerable learners (Donald, et.al., 2014). In the *micro-system,* the CHH learner is incomplete because of the lack of parental support and involvement. This means the ecosystem is affected due to poor linkage between the parents and the school. Therefore, parental absence creates a breakdown in the ecological system that probably impact negatively on learner's academic performance (Thwala, 2017; Mushayi, 2013). This argument is further supported by Ebrahim (2013), who alludes that CHH learners are faced with lack of school needs, resources which results to low self-esteem and poor academic achievements.

The *meso-system* according to Bronfenbrenner (1998), is linked with the neighbourhood, teachers and friends and the community of which the children interact with on daily bases. The *meso-system* provides the connection between the structures of the child's micro-system, which is the immediate family (Donald, et.al. 2014). The traditional or normal family according to Bronfenbrenner (1998), in the *meso- system,* children have the support and the involvement of their parents, families, teachers and the community. Thus, when children experienced the loss of parents, may be supported, and cared by teachers and the community. However, the CHH learners do not have parents who interact with the community in raising them. Therefore, CHH in this study experienced abandonment by extended family members and the community. The CHH learners rejected by the extended family experience socio-economic problems. (Okeke & Thwala, 2021).

The *exo-system* defines the larger social system in which the child does not function directly but belongs. These structures affect the child's development by interacting with some structures in her/his micro-system such as parents, caregivers, workplace, peer group, teachers, and school councillors' involvement in a local community organisation (Donald, et.al., 2013). The *Exo- system* involves the links between social settings and broader community and

extended families (Bronfenbrenner, 1998). The learning is influenced at family level and the support the learner receives from the family.

The *macro -system* is considered as the outermost layer in the child's environment and is comprised of cultural values, customs, beliefs, laws, and practices that influence all other social system, and how the availability of the resources is influenced by one level to other (Donald, et.al., 2013). The parents' ability or inability to carry out responsibility toward their child within the context of the child's micro-system is affected. Charlesworth (2017) argues that *macro-system* covers the dominant beliefs and ideologies of the cultures of CHH learners. In the African culture, the philosophy of *Ubuntu* is admired. Ubuntu is linked with sharing, caring for others and compassion for others according to (Chisale, 2018; McDonald 2010). Ubuntu philosophy is defined as African view that places communal interests above those of the individual where human existence is dependent upon interaction with others (Glade, 2012) and Mashau, & Kgatle, (2019). Mangena (2016), further relates to the phrase that "*I am related by blood; therefore, I exist because* I *belong to the family* ", which explains the humanity or U*buntu* philosophy. Culturally, in African countries, extended family members take over responsibility of orphans after the death of parents, however, because poverty and the economic status of the country, extended families normally decline to be supportive to the CHH learners. However, *Ubuntu* values of sharing and caring are deteriorating thus CHH children are less cared and rejected by extended families. CHH learners are often illtreated from all levels of structures in ecosystem and this negatively affect their development and disrupts learning. This situation is worsened by lack of resources and support from the society. Serpell and Marfo (2014), further notes that OVC and CHH learners experienced poor developmental, educational, and mental health outcomes.

Chronosystem covers dimension of time, including the changing time of child's environment (Donald et.al, 2014; & Collins, et.al, 2013). *Chronosystem* is of great value to this study in that it facilitates researcher to find how families constantly build up the child's progressive stages of development. The child's systems and environments are changing and never stagnant, therefore the life events occur over time. Thus, the child experiences many changes in life such as death of the parents and adapting to new circumstances. According to (Donald et.al., 2014; Collins, et. al., 2013), family have a great influence at the development of the child and the progression in learning achievement. However, for CHH learners, the situation is different, as they have to adapt from childhood stage to adulthood because of the lack of support from the extended family members and thus affecting their development and learning. CHH learners according to Skovdald (2016), are faced with new reality of life, they feel insecurity and socially isolated, often in their critical developmental stages.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 Conceptualisation of a CHH

According to Children 's Act (Act No 38) of 2005 (2006: section 137(1), a provincial head of social development identifies CHH as household where:
(a*) the parent, guardian, caregiver of the household is terminally ill, has died or has abandoned the children in the household.*
(b) there is no adult family member is available to provide care for the children in the household.
(c) a child over the age of 16 years, has assumed the role of caregiver in respect of the children in the household.
(d) it is in the best interest of the children in the household.
According to the Children 's Act, child-headed households need to be supervised by an adult (Children Act No 38) of 2005 (2006: section 137(1).

The definition of 'child-headed households' for the purpose of this study is, a household in which the head in the family is younger than 18 years old and caring for the sick parents or the head dropped out of school because of death of parents and therefore look for a job to provide for siblings who are still at school. In terms of the United Nations (UN) Guidelines, Paragraph 37, defines a CHH in relation to living arrangements consisting of two or more siblings who have lost both parents and there is no adult person to care for them. Therefore, the older sibling is required to take adults responsibility. The UN Guidelines further conceptualise CHH as siblings living together because of death of

parents and therefore decides to stay at their parent's home. The Practice Note no.1 of (2010) provides further clarification on child-headed households for the assessment and determination of a child's ability to head the household. Thumbadoo (2013), conceptualised CHH as household, consisting of one or more members, where the parenting role has been taken over by a child under the age of 18 years. According to Children's Act No 38 of 2005, CHH is household where: (a) the parent, guardian, care-giver of the household is terminally ill, has died or has abandoned the children in the household; (b) there is no adult family member is available to provide care for the children in the household; (c) a child over the age of 16 years, has assumed the role of caregiver in respect of the children in the household. (d) it is in the best interest of the children in the household. The definition of child-headed households for the purpose of this paper is, a household in which the head of the family is younger than 18 years old and caring for the sick parents or the head dropped out of school because of death of parents and therefore look for a job to provide for siblings who are still at school.

According to Statistics South Africa (Stats SA, 2015), data from General Household Survey from 2002 -2011 shows that most child-headed households lost both parents, others lived in households where no one is employed, and social grants were vital to buy food. This contributes to the deprived household economy and is likely to have a negative impact on children's school performance (Pillay, 2016; & Meintjes, et al., 2010) The other contributory factor to CHH is the rising numbers of AIDS related deaths among adults (Phillips, 2015). In addition, Bryman, (2016) and Mogotlane, et al., (2010) state that in South Africa, families and communities are currently under the burden with the status of HIV and AIDS, particularly with care and support of orphan and vulnerable children (OVC) which then create a new family type, the CHH. According to the United Nations Millennium Development Goals Evaluation Report (2013), Sub-Saharan Africa has the highest rate of children leaving school early in the world, and the effects of HIV and AIDS have negatively play part in children dropping out of school early. Furthermore, children who lack access to quality education are underprivileged in terms of income, and health opportunity (Mwoma, & Pillay, 2015).

3.2 Schooling Experiences of learners from CHHs

It was noted that the death of parents as having negative influence towards the well-being of CHH in Zambia, Zimbabwe and Swatini respectively (Gubwe et.al., 2015). The economic impact of HIV and AIDS on families and children generally encompasses from the stage of illness of the parents where children have to face financial difficulties for medication to the final death stage of parents. When parents die due to HIV and AIDS, the stigma adds to the problem in continuing schooling of these learners (Gubwe et.al, 2015). These learners therefore experience stigmatization, harassment and are often bullied at school. In some cases, leaners from CHHs (LfCHHs) drop out of school because they must search for the survival means to provide for their families. Other challenges are lack of school stationery and school uniform. In the Eastern Cape, South Africa, the study by Marongwe et al., (2016) revealed that children from child headed households have challenges that affect their education. I is further argued that LfCHHs have the heavy burden of carrying the responsibility of being parents to their siblings that weakens their bodies and minds leading to poor academic performance. van der Mark (2015) similarly observed that LfCHHs experienced challenges in their education which impacts negatively in their learning performances such as role adjustment from being a child and being an adult and to take care of younger siblings and helping them in their schoolwork. LfCHHs lack financial resources that lead to these learners seek for employment and dropout of school to provide support for their siblings (Campbell et al, 2014 & van Breda, 2010). Van Breda (2010) argues that LfCHHs at school is humiliated and not promoted to the next grade because of finances. Phillips and Le Roux, (2015) allege that these children have no one to turn to in terms of support and guidance. LfCHHs always come late for school, and they do not cope in their learning in the classroom and fail to finish their homework. Educators confronted them, yelled at them when they are late and discriminate against them (Marongwe et al., 2016; Ndonga, 2012). Educators also played a big role in isolating, ill-treating, and even labelled them as stupid and make remarks about shabby shoes and torn uniform (Chinhara, 2016; Phillips, 2015). LfCHHs experienced lack of love and support from educators thus, making learners fail to reach their goals in life (Fleming, van De Mark & Gubwe, 2015).

4. METHODOLOGY

Creswell and Poth (2016), states that research methodology contains research philosophy, research paradigm and methodological approach with detailed description of all the steps, processes and decisions made during the entire study. Almalki (2016), describes the term methodology as a theory of how research should be undertaken including philosophical assumptions upon which the research is based, and the implications of the methods and strategies adopted. In exploring explored the experiences of teachers of LfCHHs, this paper adopted interpretivist paradigm, which sought to gain the deep understanding of a perception and explored the understanding of the world and experiences in which people live (Rahi, 2017). According to Gary (2016), interpretive paradigm is the form of inquiry that employs a particular approach that assumes an in-depth understanding in the environment of the subject. The researchers sought to gain an understanding the real feelings of teachers of LfCHHs, and interpretative paradigm allowed the researchers to gain in- depth rich information from the teachers. The study employed   a qualitative research method because the researchers wanted to gain teachers' experiences of LfCHHs. The qualitative research approach, which assisted the researchers to explore and interpretate individual teachers in relation to their experiences in social or human problem (Weiten, 2018 & Creswell, 2014). Furthermore, the qualitative approach was chosen because it allowed the participants to engage with the researchers and yielded in-depth rich data of the vulnerable LfCHHs (Citienei & Pillay, 2019; Weiten, 2018). A case study was used as a research design to examine real-life research problems and phenomena in detail (Turhan, 2019) and assisted in probing the CHHs the phenomenon from the teachers' perspectives. The researchers collected data directly from the teacher-participants through semi-structured. An interview according to (Mustajoki & Mustajoki, 2017), is a social situation in which one or more people who are unaccustomed to each other meet for a short period and asked questions. Interviews were also used to elicit and understands people's feelings, perceptions, and interpretation. Braun and Clarke's (2013) step-by-step thematic procedures were used to analyse data from teacher participants. Thematic analysis, according to Richards and Hemphill (2017) is a process for identifying, analysing, and reporting sections in qualitative data.

5. PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

The data presented below are the voices of teachers' experiences in teaching LfCHHs, presented in two themes, namely deprivation and psychological trauma.

5.1 Psychological Trauma

Techer-participant indicated lack of concentration among the LfCHHs caused by hunger. It is revealed in the studies that without food, one cannot concentrate. Teachers 1: *These children come to school hungry and cannot concentrate.*

5.1.1 Sleepy

In this study it was observed that LfCHHs are always exhausted and sleepy during classes due to hunger and overloaded with hard work that is supposed to be done by caregiver at home. Teacher 3 stated that: *Some of them come to school, crying, dirty and always want to sleep during teaching situation*.

5.1.2 Anger

Teacher-participants indicated that LfCHHs become angry towards other learners and want nothing to do with peers.

Teacher 2: *Learners become touchy and do not want to talk to other learners.*

Teacher 3: *CHH learners show anger issues in the class*

Teacher 4: *They become violent, showing anger.*

5.1.3 Reserved

The findings in this study showed that LfCHHs are always reserved in the class and are hardly participating like other children who are not from CHHs in class activities.

Teacher 1: *It is sometimes frustrating to see the child as the child would not co-operate in the class, there is high rate of absenteeism.*

Teacher 2: *These learners are reserved in the class*.

Teacher 3: *They come to class dull, reserved, and not interact with others.*

Teacher 4: *They do not participate in the class, and they are reserved and shy.*

5.1.4 Low Self Esteem

The research showed LfCHHs have low self-esteem, they do not believe in themselves and doubt their potential to do better.

Teacher 1: The *learners have low self-esteem, isolate themselves.*

Teacher 2: *They have low self-esteem. They become victims to other learners and bullied.*

5.1.5 Absenteeism and Poor Performance.

The study revealed that LfCHHs have a high failure rate due to absenteeism and not cooperating in class. Teacher-participants reported that absenteeism and late coming of LfCHHs as a challenge. Teacher 1: *Acute absenteeism is noticed of these learners.* It is further revealed that these learners do not do their homework and are not active in the class.

Teacher 1: *The failure rate is noticed to these learners as they know nothing.*

Teacher 2: *They become dull and not cooperating during tuition period.*

Teacher 3*: They also do not do homework. Thus, add to the reason these learners fail.*

6. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The main teacher experiences on LfCHHs are discussed below in two main themes: deprivation and psychological trauma**.**

6.1 Deprivation

Teacher-participants alluded to the fact that LfCHHs often do not access social grants because there is no adult caregiver or have no birth certificates and identity document to apply for it. According to teacher-participants LfCHHs experience economic hardship as they do not have a source of income, thus being negatively impacted in school performance. The lack of financial support for LfCHHs found in this study concurs with the findings of the studies by Phillips (2015) that LfCHHs lack financial resources and struggle to meet educational requirements (Fleming, 2015). Marongwe et al., (2016), indicated that LfCHHs are affected by hunger, exhaustion, emotional and psychological distress. Teacher-participants indicated that LfCHHs often come to school hungry and for some, school nutrition is their only daily meal. Studies have confirmed that that LfCHHs experience hunger and teachers struggle to teach these children (Masondo, 2017 and Marongwe et al., 2016). Teacher-participants lamented that LfCHHs do not have the necessary stationery and school uniform. Similarly, this corn and observation was confirmed by studies conducted by Van Breda (2010) and Hlengwa (2010).

6.2 Psychological Trauma

The teacher-participants in the study expressed stories of learners caring for the sick parents or seeing their parents dying. The death of parents is the other issue that caused trauma to LfCHHs. Mabaso (2011) indicate that LfCHHs have to make adjustment from being a child to be an adult after the death of parents. These children are deprived of their childhood. They have to do multiple tasks of caring for young siblings and monitoring behaviour of which that is the duty of adult people. They have no time to play (Evans 2012). LfCHHs are forced by circumstances to engage in adult responsibilities, economically or otherwise, Chimbiro (2013).

6.3 Lack of concentration, Anger, and Low Self-Esteem

Participants highlighted the fact that LfCHHs lack of concentration and often caused by hunger and resulting in poor academic performance. These assertions are supported by Zhangazha (2014); Gubwe et al., (2015) and Marongwe et al., (2016), that when these learners are hungry, they become sleepy and exhausted. Teacher participants indicated that learners from CHHs displayed emotions of anger due to deprivation and loss. LfCHHs expressed their feelings to the teachers that the presence of their parents would have made life easier and enjoy the benefits of being children and

have food like other children. Because of loss, LfCHHs isolate themselves from other learners. This kind of behaviour indicates that these learners need someone to talk to and express their feelings. Accordingly, Newlin, et al., (2016) and Bonthys (2010), anger and isolation are evident among LfCHHs.

6.4 Stigma and discrimination

Teacher-participants mentioned that LfCHHs are regarded as outcasts by some peers, and this prejudice affects their schoolwork and performance. The sentiments above are shared in the studies by Marongwe et al., (2016) and Fleming (2015) that LfCHHs experience discrimination by peers and teachers which negatively affects in accessing education. Motsa and Morojele, (2016), found that LfCHHs are stigmatised and discriminated against because they are associated with poverty and HIV and AIDS. According to Ibebuike, et.al. (2014), children from CHH experience challenges at school as peers make fun of them because they don't have parents, they don't have school uniform, nor clean uniform, for late coming, not doing their homework and failing at school which resulted to some of them dropping out of school.

6.5 Poor performance.

Teacher-participants indicated that LfCHHs have poor concentration caused by hunger and they sleep in class and lead to poor academic performance but more importantly, irregular school attendance. Scholars are of the view that LfCHHs absenteeism pattern is due to loss of self-confidence, low self-esteem that leads to depression, and ultimately negatively affect schoolwork (Ganga & Chinyoka, 2013; Zangazha, Ganga & Maphalala, 2014; & Gubwe, 2015). Teachers in this study also alluded to the fact that LfCHHs do not do homeworks or have incomplete work both classwork and homework and is worse with projects and assignments. The non-completion and non-submission result in LfCHHs failing school-based assessment (SBA) that contributes to the year mark. In the study conducted by Masondo (2017), found absenteeism of LfCHHs being caused by overloaded duties at home and parenting whilst the heads are still children. This study reveals that CHH learners have a high failure rate due to absenteeism and not cooperating in the class. According to Marongwe et al., (2016), CHH learners give schools a challenge of high failure rate which is caused by absenteeism together with academic performance in class.

7. CONCLUSION

This study conceptualised the Bronfenbrenner's Ecological System Model Theory as the lens to interrogate the interaction between LfCHHs, the teachers, and the community around them. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological System Model Theory in this study manifested in various levels. The *micro-system* level focused on the daily relationships and interaction between LfCHHs with their immediate surroundings. This study found that the learners from CHH were abandoned and rejected by their relatives after the death of their parents. These learners were left to fend for themselves with the oldest sibling taking a parental role. Thus, the rejection influenced these learners to be aloof and angry and extended to the meso- system level, where they interact with teachers and peers at school and the *exo-*system level when interacting with the community. The loss of their parents at a *macro-system level* not only presented grief to the LfCHHs, but fast-tracked psychological trauma as they continuously experienced deprivation. The deprivation over time – *Chronosystem level,* made the LfCHHs experience low self-esteem, be vulnerable to bullying, absenteeism from school, and poor academic performance. This study, therefore, concludes that schools are micro-systems that need to be empowered to be sensitive and welcoming and accommodating to the LfCHHs.

8. RECOMMENDATIONS

The study obtained valuable information on the teachers' experiences LfCHHs. It therefore recommends that schools as micro-systems should establish functional school-based support teams (SBST) of teachers to primarily look at the welfare of LfCHHs through psycho-social support. Teachers need to be trained on how to manage and respond to these learners to minimise stigmatisation and discrimination. At the meso-level, the community, need to be conscientized about the plight of these learners and restore Ubuntu values of caring and sharing and more importantly that, '*it takes a village to raise a child'.* The plight of these learners, in our view needs collaboration of various stakeholders, schools, community, and government departments to act in the best interest of the child.

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