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The Interface of Child-Headed Households and Academic Performance: A Case of Primary School Learners in Beatrice Resettlement Area, Zimbabwe

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Abstract:

This study sought to establish the impact of the child-headed household on the academic performance of primary school learners in Beatrice fast track land reform resettlement area in Zimbabwe. The study adopted a qualitative approach and utilised the case study design. The target population of the study comprised 15 learners from child-headed households, 12 school heads, 84 teachers as well as the learners' relatives. Data for the study were generated from a purposive sample of 6 child household heads, 10 teachers and 4 school heads. The data were presented as cases and analysed using the thematic approach. In interpreting the data, Bourdieu's theory of practice was utilised. The child-headed household has emerged as a context of child development due to severe economic challenges which are undermining the extended family's capacity to cope with orphans. In contemporary Zimbabwean society very few extended families can provide support to orphans as they struggle to look after their own children. The child-headed household presents numerous socio-economic challenges that are not favourable for the academic performance of learners from such households. Living in conditions of want and deprivation characterised by hunger, stigma and discrimination, child labour, failure to afford schooling costs, sexual abuse and ill-health is impacting negatively on the academic performance of the children. Household responsibilities in child-headed households take a gender dimension with girls overburdened and their academic performance affected to a greater extent. These challenges are a result of limited support from the government, donor organisations and the disintegrating extended family safety net. It is therefore imperative for communities with support of the government, the corporate world and donor organisations to establish community orphanages. These orphanages will not only enhance the academic performance of orphaned and vulnerable children, but also mould them into acceptable and productive members of society.

Keywords: *child-headed household, child household headed and academic performance.*

1. Introduction and Background

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, Makufu, Drew & Kralovec, 1997; Naicher & Tsenhase, 2004). 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 situation has been exacerbated by the HIV and AIDS pandemic, which is leaving many children without parents to provide them with basic needs, socialisation and education (UNICEF, 2008). This has resulted in the emergence and proliferation of the child-headed household as a context of child development. The child-headed household has received a lot of attention in sociological inquiry in Zimbabwe. However, most research studies (Foster et al, 1997; Rugaranganda, 2003; Germann, 2005) focused on the causes, prevalence and coping strategies of child-headed households. There is a knowledge gap on the impact of the child-headed household on academic performance. It is against this background that this exploratory study was conducted to provide an in-depth understanding of the interface of child-headedness and academic performance.

1.1. Statement of the Problem

The child-headed household has emerged as a context of child development due to the weakened capacity of the extended family safety net to cope with orphans. 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. Paradoxically these children heading households offer care, support and guidance to their siblings when they themselves still need adult support and guidance. It appears as if the structural conditions of the child-headed household do not foster socio-economic experiences which

enhance academic performance. The study, therefore, sought to explore and determine the impact of child-headedness on academic performance.

1.2. Research Objectives

The study sought to:

- establish the socioeconomic challenges faced by primary school learners from child-headed households in fast track land reform resettlement areas;
- determine how these challenges influence their academic performance; and recommend strategies to mitigate the challenges.

1.3. Delimitations

The study was conducted in Beatrice fast track land reform resettlement area which is located 53km South of Harare in Zimbabwe. The four resettlement areas which were selected as cases were former white commercial farms. Although the study was confined to a relatively small study area, it illuminated the nature of the challenges that influence the academic performance of learners from child-headed households in similar settings in Zimbabwe.

1.4. Theoretical Framework

This research study is informed by Bourdieu's (1988) theory of practice which attempts to reconcile the structure and agency dichotomy in sociological inquiry. Bourdieu argues that human behaviour is enabled and constrained by social structures and human agency. The central concepts of his theory are habitus, field and capital. He utilised the following scheme to represent his theory:

habitus + capital + field = practice.

In the context of this study, habitus, capital and field are structural constraints of the child-headed household, which can enable or constrain the learner's academic performance (practice). According to Bourdieu, habitus refers to socialised norms that guide human behaviour. In other words, habitus is the cultural capital, which the child acquires within the family institution through socialization. Bourdieu claims that, the educational system reinforces the habitus of middle and upper classes. As a result, students from these social class backgrounds may experience academic success because of the congruence between their culture and the culture in the school curriculum. Students from other social class backgrounds may underachieve because of the variance between their culture and the culture in the school curriculum. Learners from child-headed households may underachieve because of lack of primary socialization from biological parents and other adult caregivers.

The second concept introduced by Bourdieu is that of capital which he extends beyond the notion of material assets to capital that may be social, cultural and symbolic. He observes that capital is not evenly distributed throughout the class structure and this largely accounts for class differences in academic performance. The dominant classes possess economic capital, which they can use to stimulate and sponsor the academic performance of their children. By implication the academic performance of learners from child-headed households may be constrained by lack of economic capital to meet schooling costs and other basic needs. In Bourdieu's view social and symbolic capitals are inextricably linked to economic capital. This suggests that lack of social and symbolic capitals may impact negatively on the academic performance of learners from child-headed households.

The third concept of Bourdieu's theory is that of field. It refers to the various contexts in which agents express and reproduce their dispositions or habitus. The child-headed household is a field in which children develop a habitus. Fields are characterised by relations of power and domination which influence human behaviour. The gender dynamics in the child-headed household tend to influence differential academic performance between male and female learners from such households.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Concept of Child-Headed Household

The child-headed household is a fluid social phenomenon which varies over time and space and as such lacks a precise definition. Gow and Desmond (2002) state that a child-headed household refers to children living in a household without direct adult supervision as they have been orphaned or abandoned by parents or the parents are working elsewhere. According to this definition, a child-headed household consists only of children. However, Sloth-Nielsen (2004) and Germann (2005) observed child-headed households in South Africa and Zimbabwe respectively in which children took over the responsibility of providing for the household when they lived with terminally ill parents or a very old grandparent. Foster et al (1997) developed two typologies of child-headed households namely accompanied child-headed household and unaccompanied child-headed household, that is, with an adult and with no adult respectively. They noted that although accompanied orphans often lived with a very old grandparent or a terminally ill adult, they were usually the sole providers of basic needs for the households.

2.2. Factors Influencing the Origin of Child-Headed Households

There are a number of factors which are fuelling the proliferation of child-headed households. A case study conducted by Foster et al (1997) in Zimbabwe revealed that some children were left to live on their own because their close relatives did not want to take up the responsibility due to economic strains; in other occasions the children opted to stay together in their own home due to the risk of separation or in keeping family property; for some it was the fear of mistreatment and exploitation by foster families; in other cases relatives lived close and could visit them often; and some had no known close relatives capable of taking care of them. Naicher and Tsenhase (2004) identified the same factors in a survey of child-headed households in South Africa.

2.3. The Prevalence of Child-Headed Households

The Central Statistical Office cited in UNICEF (2004) estimated that by the end of 2000, over 40,000 children were living in child-headed households in Zimbabwe. The figure rose to 50,000 in 2002 (UNICEF, 2004). The UNICEF National Strategic Plan for the Education of OVC Girls (2005-2010) cited in Zimbabwe National Aids Council (2011) estimated that there are 48,223 child-headed households housing 102,233 children. To date, this figure could have increased tremendously due to the economic meltdown which Zimbabwe is experiencing as well as the HIV and AIDS pandemic which is creating orphans at an alarming rate.

2.4. Coping Strategies of Children Living in Child-Headed Households

The coping strategies of child-headed households in urban areas are well documented. A case study conducted by Germann (2005) in Bulawayo urban, Zimbabwe revealed that some child household heads coped with economic strain through begging as well as engaging in part-time employment in butcheries, shops, domestic work and the informal sector. In a separate qualitative study in Harare urban, Zimbabwe Ruparanga (2003) found similar coping strategies. In a study in Uganda, Luzze (2002) observed that, some child household heads especially girls engaged in casual commercial sex to raise household income. A study by Foster et al (1997) in Mutare urban Zimbabwe found out that, utilising part of the house left by parents to rent out to lodgers was another coping strategy for the children. Ownership of the house left by parents is therefore a contributing factor to the establishment of child-headed households, as it not only provides the children with a place to stay together, but also a source of income. These research studies focused on the coping strategies of child-headed households in urban areas. There is very little research on the coping strategies of child-headed households in fast track land reform resettlement areas and the impact of these coping strategies on the academic performance of the learners.

3. Research Methodology

The exploratory case study design was adopted for this study. A case study is a qualitative research design best suited for gaining an in-depth understanding of a social phenomenon within its cultural, social and situational context without imposing pre-existing expectations (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). As part of the phenomenological paradigm the case study design stresses that reality is rooted in the perceptions of the research participants (Creswell, 2003; Yin, 2003). Data on the impact of the child-headed household on the academic performance of the learners were generated from the child household heads, their teachers and school heads using unstructured interviews, life story narratives and documentary analysis. Case studies are based on a limited number of cases; therefore they are not generalisable (Gall, Gall & Borg, 2007). Regardless of this limitation, the study illuminated how the structural constraints of the child-headed household impact on the academic performance of learners in similar situations in Zimbabwe.

3.1. Population and Sampling Procedures

The target population of this study consisted of 15 primary school learners from child-headed households, 12 school heads and 84 teachers as well as the learners' relatives and neighbours. A sample of 6 child household heads (3 male and 3 female); the heads of the 4 primary schools where the child household heads were students; and 6 teachers (4 female and 2 male) who were teaching learners from child-headed households was purposively sampled for the study. Purposive sampling was preferred because it enabled the researchers to select information rich informants (Schutt, 2009) for intensive study.

3.2. Unstructured Interviews

Since the study was conducted with exploratory research in mind, unstructured interviews were utilised. An unstructured interview consists of guidelines on pertinent issues to be discussed rather than structured questions to be asked every respondent (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). This allowed the respondents to express in detail their thoughts, feelings and perceptions on the impact of the child-headed household on their academic performance. The unstructured interviews also enabled us to probe extensively for sensitive issues such as sexual abuse and child labour. The interviews were conducted with 6 child household heads in Chishona the local language and in English with 6 teachers and 4 school heads.

3.3. Life Story Narratives

Life story narratives mainly utilise unstructured interviews to enable participants to give accounts of their life experiences which are of interest to the researcher in the form of a story (Hitchcock & Hughes, 1995). The basic concern of the life story narrative is the presentation of experience from the perspective of the research participants (Plummer, 1992). The impact of the child-headed household on the academic performance of the learners was generated from the perspectives of the research participants. Like in Robson's (2001) study of young carers in Zimbabwe, life story narratives brought memories that often led to the children crying as they narrated the deaths of their parents. However, despite this limitation, the child household heads as competent agents were able to give information rich accounts of their experiences on the impact of the child-headed household on their academic performance.

3.4. Documentary Analysis

Documentary analysis involves the systematic examination of the content of recorded information (Schutt, 2009). The academic performance of learners living in child-headed households was analysed from progress record books, report books as well as the Zimbabwe School Examinations Council (ZIMSEC) Grade seven results slips. School report books and progress record books cover long periods of time, for example ECD to grade seven. This made documentary analysis an effective method for studying trends in the

academic performance of the learners. Documentary analysis was also utilised to compare the academic performance of the learners before and after living in child-headed households. Class attendance registers were also analysed to establish the relationship between school attendance and the academic performance of the learners.

3.5. Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using the Thematic Analysis Model. It is an approach for analysing qualitative data which focuses on identifying recurring patterns of behaviour in collected data (Leininger, 1985). The recurring patterns of data from life story narratives, unstructured interviews and documentary analysis were synthesised into emerging themes.

4. Discussion of Findings

4.1. The Impact of Household Responsibilities on Academic Performance

Household responsibilities increase dramatically when parents or caregivers become ill or die. The child household head is usually overburdened by domestic chores as well as care giving responsibilities for younger siblings, ailing parents and old grandparents (Case, Paxson & Ableidinger, 2002). Household responsibilities take a gender dimension with girls overburdened. As a result girls find little or no time to consolidate learned concepts through home study and homework assignments. The household responsibilities they do before going to school make them exhausted to the extent that they fail to concentrate and participate in class. They also arrive late for lessons and miss concepts which affect their academic performance.

A case study conducted by Gordon (1995) in Zimbabwe revealed that the academic performance of girls living in adult headed households (AHHs) is affected to a greater extent by domestic responsibilities. It should be noted that in the AHHs which Gordon studied, girls shared household responsibilities with their mothers. In the absence of mothers as was the case in this study, girls are overburdened. Higher domestic work burdens for female learners from child-headed households were also observed by Luzze (2002) in Uganda. This is in tandem with the radical feminist view that in a society characterised by a patriarchal sexual division of labour, women and girls are overloaded with domestic sphere oriented responsibilities (Bryson, 1992). The household responsibilities result in obstacles in the schooling and academic performance of girls living in child-headed households which boys in the same households may not face.

4.2. The Impact of Hunger on Academic Performance

Hunger was found to be prevalent in child-headed households in fast track land reform resettlement areas. Germann (2005) also reported severe food insecurity in child-headed households in Bulawayo urban, Zimbabwe and that the children sometimes went to bed hungry. Financial constraints and inadequate food handouts expose these children to hunger. Hungry children tend to have lower academic performance because they cannot concentrate in class. Incessant hunger leads to ill-health and malnutrition (UNICEF, 2006) which can affect school attendance and participation in class. When students fail to attend school or participate in class because of hunger they miss concepts which are crucial for academic performance.

4.3. The Impact of Stigma and Discrimination on Academic Performance

Learners from child-headed households who are orphaned by AIDS or are caring for parents who are terminally ill because of the pandemic are often subjected to stigmatisation. They also experience isolation and discrimination because of their poverty reflected through torn clothes and lack of food to consume at school. Stigma devalues an actor's social identity and disqualifies them from social acceptance (Goffman, 1970). Stigmatisation denies some learners from child-headed households the opportunity to interact and exchange ideas with their peers. Becker (1963) argues that stigmatisation has labelling and self-fulfilling prophecy effects. It was observed that learners who were consistently stigmatised, isolated and discriminated by their teachers and peers developed negative self-concepts and inferiority complexes which lowered their levels of self-confidence, self-esteem, motivation, participation in class and academic performance. Stigmatisation, discrimination and isolation of the learners also created a hostile school environment, resulting in erratic school attendance, truancy, poor academic performance and school dropout.

4.4. The Impact of Child Labour on Academic Performance

Child labour is rife in fast track land reform resettlement areas. This is not a new phenomenon as child labour has always been prevalent in Zimbabwe's commercial farming and mining areas (Bourdillion, 2000; Walker, 2003). Child labour could have increased in these former commercial farming areas because of the First Track Land Reform Programme. Dube (2001) observes that some newly resettled farmers lack economic resources to afford a constant supply of labour and as a result they resort to child labour. Learners from child-headed households are pushed into child labour to raise economic capital for basic needs such as stationery, food, clothes and uniforms. Child labour results in inadequate socialisation, loss of schooling, exposure to pesticides and little opportunity for socialising and leisure (Bourdillion, 2000; McCartney, 2000), leading to poor academic performance.

4.5. The Impact of Schooling Costs on Academic Performance

Learners from child-headed households fail to meet schooling costs such as uniforms, civvies charges, extra tuition, bus fare, stationery and sanitary wear for girls because of their poor socio-economic status. These schooling costs are not catered for by the Basic Education Assistance Module (BEAM), Zimbabwe's scholarship programme for orphaned and vulnerable learners. In this regard, primary education for vulnerable children should not be perceived as 'free'. Some of these learners neither take notes nor do

written assignments because of lack of stationery. It should be pointed out that written assignments are critical for the consolidation of learnt concepts. By attending school in torn clothes, bare footed and without jerseys in the winter season the learners' levels of self-esteem, motivation, participation in class and ultimately academic performance are compromised. Zimbabwe's cost sharing policy in education (Zvobgo, 1997; Peresuh & Nhundu, 1999) has influenced schools to increase civvies days and fees in a bid to raise funds. Some learners from child-headed households do not attend lessons on civvies days because of lack of decent casual clothes and civvies fees. This also compromises the academic performance of learners from child-headed households.

4.6. The Impact of Sexual Abuse on Academic Performance

All children are susceptible to sexual abuse, but those from child-headed households particularly girls are most at risk as they are socially isolated and financially distressed. A UNICEF (2008) study reports that at least one million young girls in Sub-Saharan Africa are forced into exploitative sexual relationships because of poverty. A qualitative study by Machakanja (2004) in Zimbabwe noted that poverty pushes some school girls into sex with male teachers and sugar daddies in exchange for money to meet basic needs. Similarly, in resettlement areas poverty is forcing some school girls into exploitative sexual relationships with farm workers and teachers. Ruparanganda (2011) observes that one's genitals become survival assets in a situation where orphaned and vulnerable children do not know where the next meal is going to come from. Sex becomes a currency which some girls from child-headed households utilise for acquiring food and other basic needs. A qualitative study by Madzingira and Chizororo (2003) cited in Germann (2005) revealed that girls living in child-headed households in Zimbabwe are vulnerable to sexual abuse by men who seek to have sex with young girls in the hope that they are free from HIV and AIDS. It can be argued that lack of economic capital and parental protection exposes some orphaned girls to sexual abuse. A case study conducted by Khembo (1995) in Zambia revealed that sexually abused school girls suffer from Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs), trauma, stress, depression and mistrust of all males. The mistrust of all males including male teachers can undermine the academic performance of sexually abused female learners from child-headed households. It is also important to note that, STIs, trauma, stress and depression impact negatively on the academic performance of learners.

4.7. The Impact of Ill-Health on Academic Performance

Ill-health is another challenge which militates against the academic performance of learners from child-headed households. McCartney's (2000) qualitative study revealed that there are few clinics in commercial farming areas in Zimbabwe. As a result learners from child-headed households have to walk long distances in order to access free health services. The Children's Consortium Zimbabwe (2002) reported that orphaned and vulnerable children living fast track resettlement areas are failing to access health care services because of transport costs. This study confirmed that transport costs are a challenge to access health services by people in resettlement areas particularly orphaned and vulnerable children. These children are living in poverty; hence transport costs, delay their access to health care services. This exposes the children to ill-health which in turn impacts negatively on school attendance and academic performance.

5. Conclusion

The child-headed household as a context of child development presents numerous socio-economic challenges that are not favourable for academic performance. The household often lacks adult care, guidance, counselling, protection, encouragement and socialisation which enhance academic performance. Gender dynamics in the child-headed household mirror the patriarchal sexual division of labour in the wider society, resulting in girls being overburdened by household responsibilities which impact negatively on their school attendance and academic performance. The children are vulnerable to poverty because of inadequate material support from the government, aid organisations and the disintegrating extended family safety net. They also lack the economic capital to afford basic needs and schooling costs that include food, clothes, school uniforms, school shoes, pens, civvies charges, sanitary wear and transport cost to access free health care. This exposes them to hunger, ill-health, sexual abuse, child labour as well as stigma and discrimination. These socio-economic challenges tend not to create a nurturing environment which fosters academic performance.

Regardless of the formidable socio-economic challenges posed by the child-headed household, the academic performance of some learners from this household is quite good. The learners attributed their good performance to hard work which they claim is motivated by their desire to use education to change their poor socio-economic status. It was however noted that the academic performance of these learners was much better before they assumed household headship roles. This led to the conclusion that they already had the capability to perform well, but living in conditions of want and deprivation characteristic of the child-headed household was constraining their full potential. It is therefore imperative for the government and resettlement communities to support child-headed households in order to create living conditions that are conducive to moral development as well as effective learning and academic performance.

6. Recommendations

There is urgent need for the government, schools and communities to establish supplementary feeding schemes that benefit all children in the community. These feeding schemes may boost the health, school attendance and academic performance of learners from child-headed households.

The BEAM scholarship should be reviewed so that it covers all the schooling costs of orphaned and vulnerable children.

Students from child-headed households need material support as well as guidance and counselling services. These services assist them to cope with isolation, stigma and discrimination which they are subjected to because of poverty. Guidance and counselling services also give the children hope for the future and enable them to develop to their full potential.

Resettlement communities should respond to the apparent disintegration of the extended family safety net by establishing orphanages. The orphanages should offer the kind of support that parents would give, such as socialisation and protection, monitoring of health, clothes and food, assistance with household chores as well as school visits to check on progress. The provision of material and psycho-social needs create a nurturing environment which fosters academic performance. In order for communities to sustain the financial and material needs of the orphanages, they should forge partnerships with the government, the corporate world and donor organisations.

Access to free health care is a challenge to students from child-headed households in resettlement areas because of long distance to health centres and prohibitive transport costs. To alleviate this challenge government should pursue its goal of establishing a health centre within walking distance for all citizens particularly in resettlement areas.

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