

Circumstances leading to the establishment of child-headed households.

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Abstract

It is estimated that 2,3 million children today in South Africa are orphaned mainly due to HIV/AIDS. As a result most child-headed households exist. The confounding rise in the number of orphans due to HIV/AIDS has left many children in child-headed households. Most research on child-headed households in South Africa reveal that there are as a result of HIV/AIDS. However there is a danger of assuming that all child-headed households exist only because of the AIDS phenomenon. This paper investigates the circumstances leading to the establishment of child-headed households. The study on which this paper is based was carried out in Thulamahashe circuit, Bushbuckridge district, Mpumalanga. The paper is based on qualitative phenomenological research with 20 children in grades 10 and 11 who live in child-headed households. In the study it was revealed that although HIV/AIDS is a major factor leading to the establishment of child-headed households, there are also other factors such as migrant labour, failure of the extended family to absorb orphaned children, urbanization, poverty and being abandoned by parents that lead to the existence of such homes.

Key words: Circumstances; establishment; child-headed household; urbanization

Introduction

A number of empirical studies in South Africa have contributed AIDS as the only factor leading to an increase in child-headed households. The studies estimated that 2,3 million children have lost their parents due to AIDS. However it is important to note that studies in South Africa on the specific number of orphans is very inconsistent. While acknowledging that AIDS is the main factor of the emergence of child-headed households in South Africa, it is advisable to look at other factors and circumstances leading to an increase in such homes. This empirical study would be the first to explore the other factors contributing to the emergence of child-headed households.

This paper acknowledges that AIDS is the main factor contributing to the emergence of child-headed households in South Africa it also explores how other factors such as urbanization, poverty, being

abandoned by parents and failure of the extended family to absorb orphaned children are also critical factors in explaining an increase in the number of child-headed households.

Understanding these factors is important for a number of reasons. One of the reasons is that, Abdool and Abdool (2008) indicate that about 2.6% of children living in child-headed households are between 12-18 years which implies that most of these children are still in secondary school. It is therefore vital for educators and other stakeholders to understand the factors leading to the establishment of such homes to provide the necessary care, support, guidance and counseling to such children. Further this study will enable educators to be aware of the background of the learners that they teach. The paper will also assist educators to understand the nature of the unstable family life that these children are exposed to.

The AIDS pandemic

Phillips (2011) expounds that HIV/AIDS is regarded as a major factor leading to the establishment and increase in the number of child-headed households in Southern Africa. Foster et al (1997) indicate that the death of parents as a result of HIV/AIDS has resulted in orphan-hood and child-headed households. Daniel and Matthias (2012) have noted that AIDS is still a major cause of orphaning. Abdool and Abdool (2008) suggest that the number of orphans as a result of HIV/AIDS is expected to be at a level of 5.7 million in 2014. This is in agreement with Johnson and Dorrington (2011) who predict that by 2015 there would be 5.7 children who would have lost one or both parents as a result of HIV in South Africa.

The figures above are alarming and they indicate that there will be many orphans in schools who are living in child-headed households. According to the Nelson Mandela HSR survey (2005) 2.6% of the children aged between 12-18 years claimed to be heads of households. This means that the majority of these children are children who are in secondary schools. In 2005 the 2.6% represented about 180 443 child-headed households in South Africa.

Tybazayo (2009) indicate that there are a variety of factors that lead to the establishment of child-headed households. In the past amongst Africans, the extended family served as an institution of support and care for children in the absence of parents, child-headed households never developed. Phillips (2011) and Daniel and Matthias (2012) added that the extended family can no longer absorb the orphaned children. Abdool and Abdool (2008) suggest that it was traditional for children who had lost both parents to be absorbed by the extended family, but this is now being eroded by the epidemic and relatives are no longer available to cope with the rising number of AIDS orphans. As a result a new family type structure emerges as an increasingly familiar pattern-The child-headed household. The extended families that would traditionally have cared for these orphans are less and less able to do so as they are in turn financially and emotionally overburdened by the disease. Abdool and Abdool (2008) added that the AIDS pandemic forces many young adolescents into drastically premature parenting roles. Phillips (2011) suggests that the formation of child-headed households is attributed to the fact that children choose to remain together despite the lack of adult support because they do not want to be separated from their siblings and they wish to protect their late parent's property out of fear of being exploited by their potential carers and a promise to a dying parent to keep the family together. It is therefore imperative to look at the impact of HIV/AIDS on a child's home. Gilborn (2001) summarized the impact of HIV/AIDS on a child's home.

The impact of HIV/AIDS on a child's home

Table 1

Gilborn et al (2001) suggests the impact of HIV/AIDS on a child's home life.

Increased	Reduced
.Poverty	.Access to food
.Household responsibility	.Access to health services
.Psychosocial distress	.Access to school
.Vulnerability to abuse, child labour and sexual risk	.Material goods such as clothes
.Stigma and isolation	.Guidance, protection and love from adults
.Hunger	
.Malnutrition	

Source Gilborn et al (2001)

Other factors leading to the emergence of child-headed households

Sloth-Neilsen (2004) indicates that children can be orphaned or left without care givers for a range of reasons, not just because of HIV/AIDS pandemic. For instance parents may die from other causes such as motor vehicle accidents. They may migrate and otherwise abandon their children.

A study conducted in Limpopo noted that that parents who had acquired Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) homes in the townships left their children to care for themselves while they went to Gauteng in search of employment. Foster et al (2000) also suggest that child-headed households in some instances are as a result of migrant labour due to the concentration of work in the cities. Such children are left without financial means to care for themselves and roamed after school soliciting the services of mine workers, staying in the hostels and were eager and willing customers.

Without parents children may find themselves in child-headed homes. Foster et al (2000) suggest that there might be no known relative in the family to take care of the children after the death of parents, such children end up staying alone. In some instances even if the relatives are known they might not want to take care of the children because they have their own lives to live, they have no space or they are in need of care themselves or they do not have love for the children. In their research, Foster et al (2000) added that the children did not want to move to the relatives' households especially if the relatives were living close by and would visit them regularly. Some of the children did not want to be split and they desired to retain access to and ownership of the family's land and other property. By avoiding being split up among various relatives and being able to stay in their home and familiar surroundings children may face less emotional and psychological trauma.

Tsegaye (2005) expounds that in some instances following the death of their parents, older children or adolescents feel that they have acquired the requisite skills during the parent's illness and are capable of

coping with the household responsibilities. Foster et al (2000) however suggest that this situation puts the child or adolescent head in a role that he or she may not be prepared to undertake even if visited regularly by close relatives or friends. Children may find themselves living on their own because of the death or illness of a relative who had previously taken charge of these orphans.

Gow and Desmond (2005) noted that children in rural areas seem to have a greater opportunity to remain in their parents' home after their death because living costs are higher in some cities which leads some orphans to relocate to rural areas where food, accommodation and education costs are lower and where community structures might be more stable. In some instances determination by orphans to continue with their schooling resulted in the emergence of child-headed households. This happens when poor-non orphaned rural children are drawn to urban centres due to limited access to schools in their areas and form a family unit to share costs and attend their education. In some countries children might set up their own households as a result of the intervention of NGOs which are increasingly espousing the home-based approach as opposed to institutional care.

Germann (2005) suggests that child-headed households may emerge because grandparents care for many orphans and households where grandparents have no ties with extended families are especially vulnerable to becoming child-headed households after the grandparents have died. In addition to such households single mother households are vulnerable to becoming child-headed households. The number of such households is likely to increase considerably in the face of poverty as the number of new orphans increases and as care-giving grandparents and uncles become sick and die. Households headed by children represent a new coping mechanism in response to the AIDS pandemic in communities. Edmondson (2004) suggested that urbanization, poverty, migration and new residential patterns have caused an increase in child-headed households.

2.4.4 Categories of child-headed households

Tsegaye (2008) indicates that child-headed households can be categorized into two:

- a) Accompanied child-headed households- These are households where a child is providing income and care to siblings in which parents or primary care givers are incapacitated by chronic illness, old age or disability.
- b) Unaccompanied child-headed households- This is where a child is supporting and taking care of siblings without an adult in the household because both parents have died, cannot be found, are unknown or have given up supporting the children for economic reasons. A child with no siblings taking care of him or her also falls into this category.

3.2 Research Design

A qualitative research approach using phenomenological research method was used in this study. McMillan and Schumacher (2010) assert that the purpose of a phenomenological study is to describe and interpret the experiences of participants regarding a particular event in order to understand the participants' meaning ascribed to that event. This study therefore aimed to describe and interpret the schooling

experiences of secondary school learners who live in child-headed households in Thulamahashe Circuit, Mpumalanga.

Creswell (2008) further asserts that the basis of phenomenology is that there are multiple ways of interpreting the same experience and that the same experience and the meaning of the experience of each participant is what constitutes reality. In this study all of the 20 respondents were given the equal chance to describe and narrate their experiences as learners who lived in child-headed households. The qualitative research approach according to Mason (2006) enabled the researcher after data analysis to understand and explore the richness, depth, context and complexity within which children in the research operated. An excellent definition of qualitative research is provided by Creswell (2008). He states that qualitative research begins with assumptions, a world view, the possible use of theoretical lens, and the study of research problems inquiring into the meaning individuals or groups ascribe a social or human problem.

Sample and Sampling Techniques

Purposive sampling was used to select information-rich participants. Leedy and Ormrod (2005) state that purposive sampling or judgmental sampling is a procedure that relies on the researcher's judgment regarding which of the elements within the target population should be part of the corpus. McMillan and Schumacher (2010) also indicate that in purposive or purposeful sampling, the researcher selects particular elements from the population that will be representative or informative about the topic of interest. Creswell (2008) suggest that on the basis of the researcher's knowledge of the population a judgment is to be made about who should be selected to provide the best information to address the purpose of the research. According to Marlow (1993) sampling is necessary because we cannot include everyone in the study and the sample should be representative of the population.

The sample size consisted of 5 learners per school from the four secondary schools. The four secondary schools were also purposely selected because they were close to the researcher's school and hometown and no excessive travelling expenses were incurred. A total of 20 learners both female and male were therefore selected. 10 participants were boys and 10 were girls aged between 15-21 years old. Leedy and Ormrod (2005) suggest that a typical sample size for a phenomenological research is 5-25 individuals who have direct experience with the phenomenon being studied. In the present study it was however acknowledged that the researcher's judgment left learners from child-headed households in other grades.

Data Collection

Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were used as the research instrument. An interview schedule was constructed in such a way that it was in line with the objectives of the research. Creswell (2008) alludes to the fact that researchers use semi-structured interviews in order to gain a detailed picture of a respondent's particular topic. The method gave the researcher and the respondent much more flexibility than the conventional structured interview. Macmillan and Schumacher (2010) suggest that semi-structured interviews are less

formal and use of this method is flexible and useful for gaining insight into people's personal beliefs and perceptions.

Document Analysis

Official records and documents were another source of information. The researcher requested and studied the attendance registers and mark schedules for all the 5 learners per school. Macmillan and Schumacher (2010) indicate that documents describe functions and values of how various people define an organization. The researcher reviewed these official documents so as to check the performance and progress my participants as well as their attendance. The review of these official school documents suggested the trends of these children. As the above documents are official documents for the school, permission to review such documents was sought first. The researcher requested attendance registers and mark schedules from January 2011 to September 2012 so as to have a proper understanding on the attendance, performance and progress of the learners.

Research context and environment

Thulamahashe circuit is a research site for this study. It is located in Bushbuckridge Region, Mpumalanga Province. It has a total of 11 secondary schools. All the 11 secondary schools are public schools. The schools in this circuit mainly use Xitsonga as home language. There are however a few schools that use both Xitsonga and Sepedi. The researcher is an educator in one of the secondary schools. Since all the 5 schools were secondary schools, on average the age range of learners varies from 14-22 years. The schools in the circuit are exclusively black in their educator and student complement. The 4 secondary schools under my study are Mnisi, Mathebula, Ndlovu and Manyike secondary schools.(referred in this study by pseudonyms.) The 4 schools are all situated in a rural setting and nearly all the learners in these schools come from the villages.

The problem in the circuit is unemployment and poverty. As a result the schools are poor and learners too come to school with different problems since they live under poverty. They enroll learners with financially poor or challenging backgrounds. Most of the parents or guardians of this area are too poor to afford any significant expense. All the schools used in this study did not charge school fees. The researcher selected the four schools because they were the most convenient to her, they were not far from each other and this was an advantage since she encounters financial difficulties. This will reduce travelling expenses as the researcher did not receiving any funding for the research.

Findings and Discussion

Circumstances leading to the establishment of child-headed households

Child-headed households as a result of the death of parents

It emerged during the course of this study that 13 out of 20 of the respondents (65%) reported that they live in child-headed households as a result of the death of their parents. These learners did not reveal the causes of the death of their parents, however they all mentioned that the parents got very sick and later died. This is verified by the following extracts from the respondents.

Thabo stated: *"I live alone without my parents because they both got very sick and died in 2009. My mother died in March and only after 3 months my father also died."*

Paledi stated: *"I do not know why both of my parents died in the same year. What I know is that they were both very sick. When they died I decided to stay with my siblings in our parent's home."*

Eunice said: *"My father died first then my mother followed after being sick for a very long time."*

The statements above show that most of the learners who come from child-headed households have lost both of their parents. It is not clear whether the parents died of HIV or not because none of the respondents mentioned that. Only one can assume that the "long illness" that they mentioned could be as a result of HIV/AIDS. This assumption could be true and it agrees with the finding of Phillips (2011) who found out that HIV/AIDS is a major factor leading to the establishment and increase in the number of child-headed households in Southern Africa.

Failure of the extended family to absorb orphaned children

7 out of 20 (35%) of the respondents indicated that the death of their parents left them with no option but to live on their own. They attributed this to the fact that their extended families could no longer absorb them.

Thoko said: *"My relatives did not even attempt to stay with us. After the death of my parents my uncle announced that I was old enough to care for my siblings."*

In a similar tone Anike stated: *"My grandmother had six other orphans that she took care of. She wanted me to stay with her but I realized that I was old enough to stay alone in the house of my parents."*

The statements above clearly indicate that the extended family can no longer absorb these orphaned children. This finding is in accordance with Abdool and Abdool (2008) who found out that the extended family is now being eroded by the epidemic and relatives are no longer available to cope with the rising number of AIDS orphans. Despite the fact that the extended family can no longer absorb the orphaned children these children did not want to be separated from their siblings therefore they decided to stay on their own.

Child-headed households as a result of migrant labour

4 out of the 20 respondents (20%) indicated that they stayed with their mothers only and they left them saying they were going to look for jobs in Gauteng. Their mothers never came back nor do they support them financially.

Thomas stated: *"I do not know the whereabouts of my father. My mother never told me who my father is. I used stay with my mother but since 2008 I have been staying alone since she went to search for employment in Johannesburg she has never come back."*

Witness said: *"My mother is a bad woman. She has left me in 2008 saying she was going to Johannesburg to look for a job. She has never returned then she has never returned and I have been staying alone with my younger siblings."*

These statements revealed that some learners live alone because their mothers have gone to look for employment in Gauteng. This finding is in accordance with Foster (2000) who found out that child-headed households in some instances are as a result of migrant labour due to concentration of work in the cities.

Child-headed households as a result of being abandoned by parents

2 of the respondents (20%) indicated that they were left alone because the parents decided to remarry and never came back. In other words their parents abandoned them in order to commit themselves to their new marriages. This finding is in accordance with Neilsen (2004) who found out that some children stay on their own because their parents have abandoned them.

Main findings

Absenteeism

Absenteeism is a major challenge that is encountered by learners who live in child-headed households in Bushbuckridge Mpumalanga. In relation to this finding, some class teachers do not mark their registers regularly and this posed as a serious challenge where registers were used as a follow up to check on the attendance of learners.

Poor performance

Poor performance is a challenge faced by learners in child-headed households. The majority of them were repeating a grade.

Psychological trauma

Learners in child-headed households faced tremendous psychological trauma because the majority (55%) lost their parents and the other 45% had been abandoned by their parents.

Sexual abuse

Sexual abuse among girl learners in child-headed households is a challenge and is attributed to the fact that they need financial and material support especially from older men.

Less access to grants

Learners in child-headed households encounter financial difficulties as 65% of them do not receive any financial support from the government either because they have reached 18 years or because they do not have the required documentation.

Coping strategies for girls

60% of the girl learners in child-headed households have multiple sexual partners who offer them cash and other essentials that they need.

Coping strategies for boys

Boys in child-headed households engage in some part time jobs such as collecting firewood, working in the gardens and washing cars for example in exchange for cash. However drug abuse among boy learners in child-headed households is a challenge. The use of drugs had further detrimental effects on their education and ultimately the risk of contracting sexually transmitted diseases.

Lack of adequate food

Learners in child-headed households lack food, they experience hunger and they are malnourished and this results in failure to concentrate during lessons especially those that are taught before break.

Lack of scholastic materials (uniforms)

Learners in child-headed households lack scholastic materials. 60% of them do not have proper uniforms especially jerseys and shoes. They also do not have proper bags to put their books. They use plastic bags to carry books. In relation to this finding teachers in some schools exacerbate the situation by the rigid uniform requirements that they imposed.

Effects of poverty

Learners in child-headed households live in poverty, they are poor and vulnerable and as a result they have low- self expectations and low self esteem. They believe that they are not good at school and this leads to failure.

Teenage pregnancy

Teenage pregnancy among learners in child-headed households is a challenge. 50% of the girls became pregnant. Unfortunately those who became pregnant failed to meet the minimum requirements needed to pass a grade.

Circumstances leading to the establishment of child-headed households

65% of children in child-headed households lost their parents, and the extended family could not absorb them. 30% of children in child-headed households opted to live on their own despite the invitation by the extended family members to stay with them. 20% of the children in child-headed households were abandoned by their parents .

Life without parents

Learners in child-headed households live a difficult life as there is no one to guide, supervise and encourage them. As a result child headed households suffer from loneliness and stress.

Risks encountered by girls

Girl learners in child-headed households are at risks of contracting sexually transmitted diseases because they have sexual relationships with older men who will give them cash, and also because they have no parents to give them guidance.

Risks encountered by boys

Boys in child-headed households resort to drugs believing that they will relieve their stress of staying on their own.

Recommendations

Recommendations to teachers

1. Teachers should regularly teach teenagers in child-headed households life skills, the consequences of unprotected sex and dangers of drug abuse.
2. Teachers should mark attendance registers regularly and there is need for proper supervision by school management to ensure that registers are up to date so that it becomes easy for anyone to follow up on the attendance of learners in child-headed households.

Recommendations to the Department of Education

1. There is need for comprehensive counseling for learners who live in child-headed households because of the psychological trauma that they face, therefore the department of education must employ at least one

professional counselor per school to offer professional counseling to learners who live in child-headed households

2. Secondary school teachers should be well trained through workshops by professional counselors through the department of Education on how to give guidance and counseling to learners who live in child-headed households.

3. All schools through the department of Education should be allowed to recommend to the department of social Development that all learners who have reached the age of 18 who live in child-headed households must continue to receive the support grant as they are still in need of care and support.

4. In relation to the above recommendation social workers should be deployed in schools to improve the efficiency of the social-welfare system.

Recommendations to the government

1. The government through the department of Education should provide food parcels to learners who live in child-headed households. The food parcels should be distributed by schools as they are aware of learners in child-headed households.

2. The nutrition program in rural schools should be extended to include breakfast such as soft porridge or cereals so that learners in child-headed households have at least a meal before classes so that they can have energy to concentrate on their studies the whole day.

Recommendations to the Department of Health

The department of health should work in collaboration with schools. It should have a programme of sending health personnel to all secondary schools at least once every month to teach teenagers about the dangers of unprotected sex, drug abuse and teenage pregnancy.

Recommendations to the Private sector

The private sector through the community social investment programs can do more to ensure the sustainability of supply of basic needs such as food and uniforms for learners who live in child-headed households.

Recommendations to principals

1. Principals of schools should ensure that their schools do not have rigid uniform requirements that they impose especially to the vulnerable children from child-headed households.

2. The school management team should be flexible and invite faith based organizations once every term to provide spiritual and moral guidance to learners who live in child-headed households and all the teenagers in the schools.

Conclusion

This study was undertaken to explore the schooling experiences of secondary school learners in child-headed households in Thulamahashe Circuit Bushbuckridge district in South Africa. The research

was concerned about gathering and interpreting schooling experiences encountered by secondary school learners in child-headed households. This assisted the researcher as an educator to gain a better understanding of the experiences and challenges which learners in child-headed households face. The study revealed many schooling experiences and other challenges that affect their learning experiences and these are: absenteeism, poor performance, psychological trauma, sexual abuse, lack of adequate food, lack of scholastic materials, poverty, drug abuse and teenage pregnancy.

Recommendations for further research

The purpose of this section of the report is to explain the limited scope of this study and suggest areas that can be researched for wider generalization. The schooling experiences of secondary school learners in child-headed households should be examined in other circuits and provinces as this study covered only Thulamahashe circuit in Mpumalanga province.

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