



Challenges Faced by Orphaned Learners in Rural Primary Schools in Hurungwe District, Zimbabwe

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Abstract

In Zimbabwe, economic hardship and family breakdown have stripped primary-school orphans of their traditional safety nets. Their vulnerability extends far beyond material lack into the realm of profound emotional isolation. They face daily bullying and stigmatisation at school. Many attend classes without fees, uniforms, or food. This neglect fractures both their academic performance and their psychological health. This qualitative phenomenological study explored these lived experiences through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. Participants comprised six Guidance and Counselling teachers and twelve orphaned learners, purposively sampled from three primary schools in Hurungwe District. Findings confirmed that orphaned learners face a devastating convergence of psychosocial exclusion, material deprivation, and poor educational attainment. In response, this study recommends strengthening school-based counselling to help learners process grief and build resilience to discrimination. It goes further by calling for the deliberate establishment and reinforcement of community-based support groups, such as neighbourhood care networks and local faith-based circles. These structures can offer consistent mentorship, tangible material assistance, and peer-to-peer emotional solidarity.

Introduction

The number of orphaned and vulnerable children has continued to rise alarmingly throughout the world. This is owing to a wide range of causes such as HIV/Aids, crime, gender-based violence, and suicide, among other factors (Mutiso & Mutie, 2018; Kanjanda, 2018; Mbwirire & Madubani, 2017). According to Mohamed El-Said et al. (2022), losing a parent (or both) is a double tragedy for children. Not only do they have to deal with the experience of loss and grief associated with parental loss, but they also have to confront the additional stressors that arise after the death of a parent(s).

The challenges facing these children have been a cause for global concern, particularly in our motherland, Africa, and our country, Zimbabwe. According to statistics, there are about 153 million orphans worldwide (Christopher & Mosha, 2021), and Zimbabwe has about 1.1 million of them (Mutiso & Mutie, 2018). In 2014, South Africa had about four million orphans (Statistics South Africa, 2015). As these statistics show, the issue of orphans is not confined to Zimbabwe only but is a global phenomenon. A host of studies by scholars and researchers indicate that orphaned learners face a range of challenges as they navigate their daily lives at home and at school.

Global research reveals that orphaned primary school learners face extreme vulnerabilities, including inadequate resources, forced labour, emotional and psychological distress, and inconsistent support



systems (Ogina & Ramare, 2019). According to World Population Review (2025), orphans constitute 7.6 per cent of the world's population. Nar (2021) points out that sub-Saharan Africa bears a disproportionate burden, with a significant number of orphans after the HIV/Aids pandemic, leaving in its wake harsh realities such as hunger and other poverty-related problems. South Asia, Syria, Latin America, the Caribbean, and Eastern Europe also have substantial orphan populations who face challenges such as political instability and economic deprivation (Nar, 2021).

A 2019 study conducted by Tefera and Refu in Ethiopia revealed that the challenges facing orphaned learners in primary schools included a lack of food, high labour demand from those living with them, a lack of parental love, a lack of school uniforms and learning materials, behavioural and emotional problems, and feelings of isolation and rejection, among others. Mbwirire and Madubani, in their 2017 study in the Wanganui community of Zimbabwe, found that orphaned primary school learners also faced psychological challenges, such as a lack of attention (89%), a lack of love (78%), withdrawal (56%), and hopelessness (33%). These challenges, spanning material deprivation, emotional distress, and social rejection, are by no means confined to Ethiopia but reflect a broader pattern of hardship consistently observed across sub-Saharan Africa.

With reference to Zimbabwe, research evidence highlights several of the challenges facing these vulnerable children at the primary school level. According to studies in Manicaland province in Zimbabwe (Kanjanda, 2018; Mutiso & Mutie, 2018), the African perception of *ubuntu*, where the extended family takes responsibility for an orphan, has died a natural death due to cultural and family dynamics. Kanjanda (2018) postulates that the extended family was once determined and sacrificed to educate and take care of orphaned children, but due to family disintegration, poverty, the high rate of unemployment, economic meltdown, and laxity of moral values, relationship gaps within families have left orphaned children to face adversity on their own.

Research evidence from Magwa and Magwa (2017) in Masvingo, Zimbabwe, also indicates a higher school dropout rate among orphaned primary school learners compared to their non-orphaned counterparts. This finding clearly demonstrates the gravity of the situation confronting orphaned primary-school learners; hence, through this study, these challenges may be amplified to persuade the government, social workers, the donor community, and well-wishers to address the plight of these youngsters. This may help open doors to assistance, so that orphaned children may also be granted the opportunity to flourish and reach their full potential, as is the right of every child, particularly for orphans in this country. Notably, most related research has been conducted in urban centres rather than in rural areas. The rural-based research has tended to target the broader context of orphaned and vulnerable children. Hurungwe District presents a uniquely challenging context for orphaned learners. As a predominantly tobacco-farming area, the district is characterised by high levels of poverty, limited access to social services, and widespread child labour practices that further compound the vulnerabilities of orphaned children. Chikoko (2021) identified the need for targeted research to understand the distinct challenges facing orphaned learners in Zimbabwe. Hence, this study sought to examine the specific realities of orphaned primary school learners in rural Hurungwe District. The objectives of this study were to: (1) identify the social, economic, and educational challenges confronting orphaned learners in selected rural primary schools in Hurungwe District; (2) explore the psychological effects of orphanhood on the academic performance of these learners; and (3) establish the extent of psychosocial support available to orphaned learners within the school environment. The results of this study are critical for informing policymakers about interventions tailored to build the capacity of those youngsters, so that they might also enjoy equal educational opportunities.



Theoretical Framework

The Bio-ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) is the primary theoretical framework that guided and informed this study. It is discussed in detail below and is followed by the study's methodology, findings, and conclusion.

Bronfenbrenner's Bio-ecological Systems Theory

Various theories on child development have been propounded by a range of schools of psychological thought. According to Feldman (2009, in Magwa, Ndlovu, and Madekunye, 2022), Bronfenbrenner's Bio-ecological Systems Theory posits that child development is influenced by interlocking social systems, including the family, peers, the school environment, the community, and culture at large. Feldman (2009) further postulates that the system is interconnected like a spider web, such that when a single element of the unit is touched, the whole system vibrates. This demonstrates that a child lives through and develops in multiple contexts, each of which has the potential to shape his or her development independently and interactively.

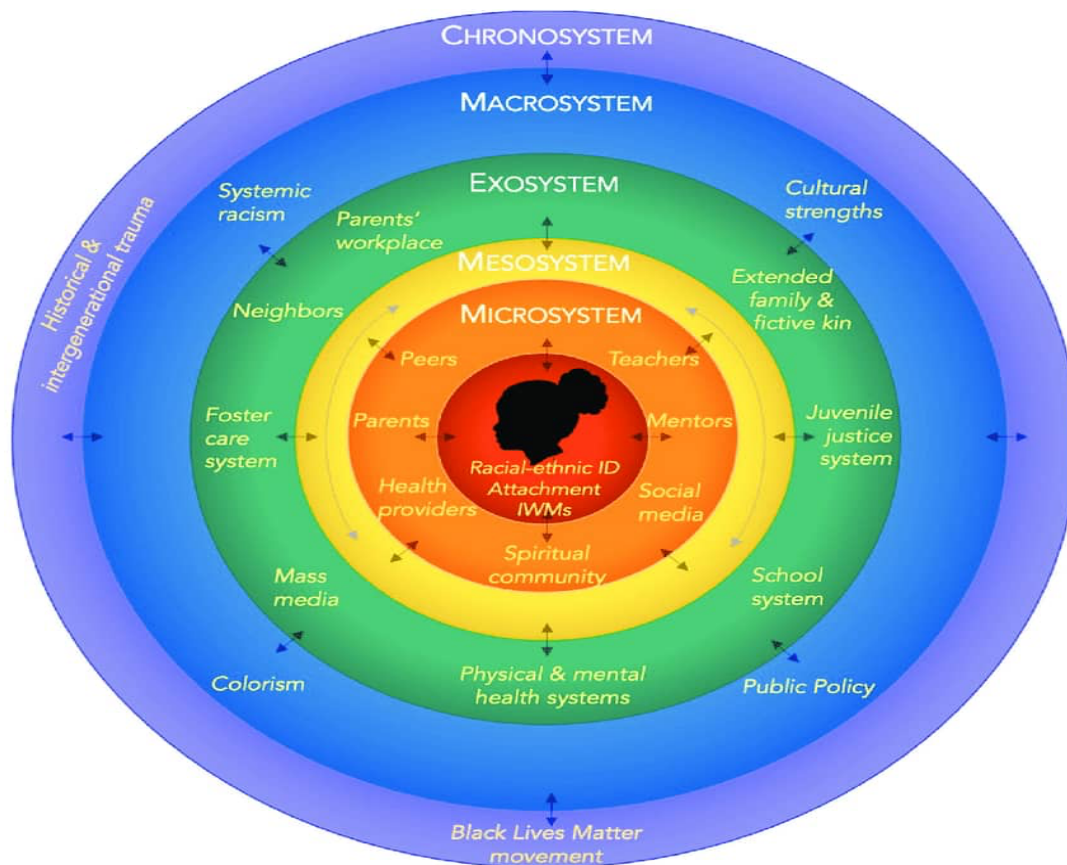


Figure 1: Diagrammatic representation of the Bio-ecological Systems Theory
Adapted from Stern, Barbarin, and Cassidy (2021)

According to McGucken and Minton (2014, in Mwoma and Pillay, 2016), Bronfenbrenner conceptualised the child's environment as having different interconnected layers, nested together, with agents that influence his or her development to varying degrees of directness, as illustrated in



Figure 1. It is possible to unravel this theory as one would the layers of an onion. The first, or microsystem, is the central layer and directly affects the learner. The microsystem is the most influential level, encompassing immediate family members (including guardians and caregivers) who directly shape the child's primary socialisation within that system. The loss of parents at this level may disrupt the core environment, leading to instability and a potential lack of emotional support. This can affect the child's social development, especially if he or she faces negative or stigmatisation within the school environment.

Motsa and Morojele (2016, in Lemeyu, Goshomi, and Chikutuma, 2023) posit that the mesosphere comprises interactions among different microsystems (e.g., the home, school, peers, clinic, and church). Guy-Evans (2024) concurs that this level involves interactions among different microsystems that significantly impact a child's development. Orphaned learners may have strained relationships with their extended family, who might be caring for them, or might lack the necessary support from the school or church environment, as they struggle to come to terms with their grief and trauma.

Guy-Evans (2024) further explains that the exosystem is a component of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) theory, which incorporates other formal and informal structures, such as the mass media and parents' workplaces. Thus, the exosystem has indirect effects on a learner. Examples include the economic hardships caregivers face, their limited time or resources due to work demands, and the lack of formal support systems. However, Guy-Evans (2024) points out that, although not directly interacting with the child, the exosystem still influences the microsystem, which in turn directly influences the child.

According to Lemeyu, Goshomi, and Chikutuma (2023), the macrosystem concerns the interrelationships between the developing child and broader society, such as culture and the economy, that indirectly influence the individual child. Contextually, the macrosystem emphasises how cultural elements (cultural ideologies and societal attitudes) affect orphaned learners. Discriminatory practices and a lack of access to education or support programmes can create barriers to their academic and societal development.

The Onion Theory, often used in developmental and social research, explains human development as a set of layered systems that influence an individual from the most immediate environment to broader societal and historical contexts. Each layer represents different levels of influence and temporal factors. This framework helps researchers understand how various environments interact to shape a child's growth and experiences over time.

The chronosystem, the fifth and final layer of the Onion Theory, focuses on major shifts and transitions throughout a child's lifetime (Guy-Evans, 2024). Major life events, such as the loss of a parent, have long-lasting effects on an orphan's emotional and academic well-being, shaping their educational journey and overall life trajectory.

In essence, the Bio-ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) provides a framework for exploring the challenges orphaned learners face and emphasises that these are not isolated incidents but rather the result of complex interactions across the respective systems. Addressing these challenges requires a multi-faceted approach that considers each child's needs and promotes harmony across the five systems of the model (see Figure 1).

It is important to note that Bronfenbrenner later refined his theory into the PPCT model (Process-Person-Context-Time). It emphasises the active role of the individual and the dynamic processes of interaction (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). In this study, we adopt a contemporary lens, conceptualising the death of a parent as an "ecological transition" that disrupts the microsystem. We used instances of bullying as "negative proximal processes" that actively impede



development. This theoretical engagement enriches our analysis of the orphaned learners' lived experiences.

Challenges facing orphaned learners at the primary level

The loss of a loved one is an extremely difficult experience to process for an adult, but for a child, it is overwhelmingly devastating, especially if the loved one is a parent. When a child becomes an orphan, he or she is more susceptible to a wide range of obstacles, including educational, social, psychological, and practical challenges.

According to Mutiso and Mutie (2018), orphans lack basic needs such as food, with many flooding the streets to beg or seek food, driven by the belief that they must contribute financially to the household, despite being mere children. This is particularly true in most cities in Zimbabwe, where you find primary school-aged children not in school but roaming the streets and bus ranks, trying to make ends meet by selling freezits or boiled eggs. Some become street children in the process, going through bins for scraps just to fill their stomachs. Oyedele et al. (2016) note that orphans may be prone to exploitation by caregivers. Madhavan (2010, in Mpofu and Tshabalala, 2021) concurs, having established that when orphaned children leave their homes, they must adjust to new situations with little or no support and might suffer exploitation and abuse. Such practices derail a child's holistic development.

Most orphaned children lack basics such as food, water, and shelter, which may lead to malnutrition, poor health, and homelessness (Koltko Rivere, 2006, in Mafumbate, Makoelle, and Magano, 2013). Such deprivations may hinder the overall health and well-being of that child; hence, both the micro- and meso-systems would have failed him or her.

A 2025 study by Matshepete, Makhado, and Mashau, in South Africa, found that orphaned children face numerous challenges, including the loss/absence of their parents (Matshepete et al. 2025), living arrangements, deprivation and neglect, abuse, and alienation. These results are corroborated by the findings of Namiro (2019), who identifies poverty, domestic violence, child labour, and child abuse as challenges. These findings clearly highlight the predicaments confronting orphaned primary school learners, many of which violate the rights of children, as advocated by the United Nations Charter for Children's Rights (United Nations, 1989).

Brink (2010, in Oyedele, Chikwature, and Manyange, 2016) suggests that orphans are more likely to leave temporary households and adopt a nomadic lifestyle, which disrupts their schooling. For instance, if relatives in the microsystem fail to assume responsibility for caring for an orphan, the child is left with no option but to seek an alternative temporary residence. Ultimately, such a scenario results in low academic attainment.

The results of studies by Tefera and Refu (2019) in Ethiopia, and Oyedele et al. (2016) illuminate these ideas, confirming that orphaned learners experience deprivation in terms of basic needs, a lack of food, high labour demand from those living with them, a lack of parental love, lack of school uniforms and materials, behavioural and emotional problems, poor self-esteem and a lack of confidence. Mpofu and Tshabalala (2021), working in Nkayi, found that most of the orphans in their study had difficulty paying school fees and faced logistical challenges, including attending school, acquiring school supplies, and buying uniforms. As a result, some had to work during the holidays to meet the school's requirements. Such practices tend to have a detrimental effect on child development.

Orphaned learners in primary schools also face a host of educational challenges. These challenges constitute a lack of school uniforms (Oyedele et al., 2016; Tefera & Refu, 2019), leaving school to attend to ill family members, absenteeism, poor class attendance, and dropping out of school (Mutiso &



Mutie, 2018) as well as a lack of stationery (Lemeyu et al., 2023). These findings amplify the desperate plight of orphaned children in the primary education sector. Generally, indications are that orphaned learners are more disadvantaged than their peers, as their school years are characterised by significant obstacles.

Motsa and Morojele (2016, in Lemeyu et al., 2023) note that communities tend to stigmatise and discriminate against orphaned children because they associate them with social ills such as poverty and HIV/Aids. Such negative perceptions create emotional distress and psychological dilemmas. Tefera and Refu (2019) confirm that emotional problems, poor self-esteem, and a lack of confidence are some of the challenges orphans in primary school experience. Such psychological distress disrupts an orphan's attention span, resulting in poor academic performance (Oyedele et al., 2016). The findings of the study by Lemeyu et al. (2023) affirm that orphans encounter psychological challenges ranging from a lack of love, induced stress, discrimination, stigma, a lack of concentration in class, loneliness, rejection, and isolation. As Christopher and Mosha (2021) established, orphaned learners were subjected to bullying in schools. In a nutshell, these challenges limit orphaned learners' ability to thrive in their educational endeavours and hinder their overall development.

From the above, orphaned learners at the primary level face considerable challenges in their quest to claim their right to education. The challenges outlined above adversely affect the holistic development of this cohort. It is therefore the responsibility of all five social systems outlined in the Bio-ecological Systems Theory to advance the mammoth task of ensuring the overall development of orphans. This will go a long way toward advancing the Zimbabwean national mantra of leaving no learner behind.

Methodology

Research Approach and Design

A qualitative approach was considered suitable for this research study, as it facilitates an in-depth inquiry into a phenomenon. According to Creswell and Creswell (2023), qualitative research explores and seeks to understand the 'why' behind phenomena, providing deep insights into participants' experiences. In this undertaking, this approach was crucial as it enabled us to gain deep insights into the world of orphaned children. It gives us insight into the struggles they face as they navigate the challenges of orphanhood at a young age.

The researcher employed a phenomenological research design to gain an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences and perspectives of orphaned primary school learners. This design was appropriate, as the main objective was to understand the challenges faced by a group of rural orphaned primary school learners, with a focus on their subjective experiences and meaning-making processes.

Study Setting and Participant Selection

This study was conducted in Hurungwe District, Mashonaland West Province, Zimbabwe. Three primary schools were purposively selected based on the following criteria: (1) they were in rural settings with limited access to urban resources; (2) they had a significant population of orphaned learners (at least 20 orphans enrolled); and (3) they were accessible to the researcher within the district's geographical constraints. The selection of three schools enabled comparison across rural contexts while maintaining the depth of data collection achievable within the study's resource limitations.

Sample and Sampling Procedure

Purposive sampling was employed in this study. Study participants were selected deliberately based on their experiences that aligned with the objectives of this undertaking. The sample comprised six



guidance and counselling teachers (two from each school) and 12 orphaned primary school learners (four from each school). The sample size of 12 learners was justified by the phenomenological approach, which prioritises depth of understanding over breadth. Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) assert that saturation in qualitative research is often achieved with 6-12 participants in homogeneous groups. Similarly, the selection of six guidance and counselling teachers was deemed sufficient, as these teachers were the primary providers of psychosocial support and had direct contact with orphaned learners. The inclusion criteria for learners required that they had lost one or both parents and were currently enrolled in grades 5-7, as these learners were considered mature enough to articulate their experiences.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions to capture rich, detailed accounts of participants' lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Semi-structured interviews were administered to the six guidance and counselling teachers. This tool is effective as it allows exploration of participants' thoughts, feelings, and beliefs about a particular topic (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). Semi-structured interviews enabled the researcher to delve into deeply personal and sensitive issues in a comfortable setting of trust between the two parties. Each interview lasted between 35 and 50 minutes and was conducted in a private room at each school.

Focus group discussions were conducted with four learners at each of the three chosen schools (12 learners total). The focus group discussions fostered a relaxed atmosphere that encouraged orphaned learners to openly share their experiences as they forged a relationship of trust with the researcher. Each focus group discussion lasted approximately 60 minutes and was conducted in a familiar, comfortable space on the school premises. Both interviews and focus group discussions were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis framework. This approach offers a systematic and rigorous method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns in qualitative data. Familiarisation began the process. The researcher read and re-read the transcripts to develop a global sense of the data, noting initial observations and potential patterns. Next, systematic coding was applied to the entire dataset. Meaningful text segments were identified and labelled in accordance with the research objectives. Codes were both deductive and inductive. Deductive codes were derived from the literature and theoretical framework, while inductive codes emerged directly from the data. The third step involved searching for themes. Codes were collated and sorted into broader patterns of meaning that captured participants' experiences. Themes were then reviewed and refined to ensure coherence, distinctness, and clear supporting evidence. Each theme was subsequently defined and given a descriptive name that reflected its essence and relevance. Finally, the analysis was written up in a report. Illustrative participant quotes were embedded to support the themes, and the findings were connected to the existing literature and theoretical framework. The analysis was conducted manually, using colosur-coding and thematic mapping to organise and visualise emerging themes.

Ethical Considerations

This study was conducted in conformity with the ethical standards expected in research. We obtained ethics clearance from the University of South Africa (Ref: Ref:2023/09/06/17353093/28/AM) prior to data collection. Permission to conduct the study in Zimbabwean schools was sought and obtained from the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education of Zimbabwe. Prior to data collection, we explained the issues of confidentiality and anonymity to all participants and their guardians.



Participants were assured that their identities would be protected through the use of pseudonyms and codes and that all data would be stored securely. Written informed consent was obtained from the guardians of all minor participants, and assent was obtained from the learners themselves. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

Data security measures included storing all audio recordings and transcripts on a password-protected computer accessible only to the research team. Physical data (consent forms) were stored in a locked filing cabinet. All data will be destroyed 5 years after the study's completion, in accordance with the University of South Africa's data retention policies.

Results and Discussions

In this section, the findings are anonymised and presented using coding (e.g., S1 for School 1; T2 for Teacher 2; L1 for Learner 1; and FG for the focus group). The research findings are discussed using a thematic approach, with reference to the available literature to validate them and illustrate their interrelationships. Verbatim quotes are used throughout to capture the voice and lived experience of the orphaned learners, serving as the primary evidence for the findings. The primary themes that emerged from the data were: (1) Psychosocial Barriers—including stigma, discrimination, bullying, and psychological distress; (2) Socio-Economic Constraints—encompassing lack of fees, uniforms, food, and learning materials; and (3) Systemic Gaps—comprising inadequate feeding programmes, low psychosocial support, and weak enforcement of policies. These thematic categories are explored in detail below.

Social Challenges and Psychological Dilemmas

Evidence from the semi-structured interviews revealed that orphaned learners suffered from stigma, discrimination, and bullying, perpetrated by their peers at school. Some research participants highlighted that this had debilitating effects on learners' development. Below are the responses of participants.

I have been in the teaching field for the past 20 years and have worked with orphaned learners. Some orphans have reported cases indicating that they suffer from stigma and discrimination, especially those who look. Such learners are segregated by their peers. (S3, T1)

Most of the orphaned learners suffer from challenges that include bullying, fighting, stigma, and discrimination. (S2, T2)

One day, a big boy beat me at school for no reason at all. I promised to report him, but he just laughed and went away with his friends. (S1, FG, L4)

The learner's account of being beaten by a "big boy" for no reason illustrates a negative proximal process, the immediate, recurring interactions between the child and the environment that actively derail development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Furthermore, the death of the child's parent(s) constitutes an ecological transition, a significant life event that disrupts the stability of the microsystem and forces the child to adapt to new circumstances without adequate support. These theoretical concepts, drawn from Bronfenbrenner's later PPCT model, help to explain why orphaned learners experience such profound developmental challenges. The microsystem, which should provide care and protection, has been fractured by parental loss, and the peer group within the school environment has become a source of further trauma rather than support.

The statement reflects an incident of bullying characterised by physical aggression and a lack of accountability from the perpetrator. It may also suggest underlying social inequalities among learners, which can sometimes influence peer relationships and contribute to unequal treatment or vulnerability, particularly among orphans or disadvantaged children. The responses clearly indicate



that, indeed, orphans at the primary level experience untold suffering in the form of stigma and discrimination. These findings validate claims of the Bio-ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), which posits that interactions within the microsystem greatly influence a child's development. In this case, the peer group is unleashing terror on their orphaned counterparts. In addition, the findings match those of Motsa and Morojele (2016, in Lemeyu et al., 2023), who report that communities tend to stigmatise and discriminate against orphaned children because they associate them with social ills such as poverty, whether this is the case or not.

Such psychological distress disrupts an orphan's attention span, leading to poor academic performance (Oyedele et al., 2016). The findings of a study by Lemeyu et al. (2023) illuminate these results, which confirm that the challenges facing orphans range from a lack of love, induced stress, discrimination, stigma, a lack of concentration in class, loneliness, rejection, and isolation, which ultimately give rise to psychological problems such as loss of self-esteem and lack of confidence. Furthermore, the research findings support the views of Christopher and Mosha (2021), who declare that stigma and discrimination are likely to cause orphaned learners to absent themselves from school and eventually drop out. Stigma and discrimination hinder the total development of an individual, hence the need for communities to come together and display tolerance to eradicate them completely. Schools also need to put forward intervention strategies to curb the scourge of bullying, which may have long-lasting effects on its victims.

Economic Challenges

The research findings from the focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews also highlighted the economic difficulties faced by orphaned learners, stemming from severe financial constraints resulting from the loss of the family's breadwinner(s). The following responses were made by the participant.

I come to school without a lunchbox. Sometimes I even sleep without eating. At least at school, I get to eat some porridge. (S2, FG, L3)

These orphans go through a lot. Most of the time, they have nothing to eat. Some even doze off during lessons, a sign of hunger. They depend on school food or handouts from classmates or friends. (S1, T2)

I don't have a school uniform. I now wear my one old dress, and other children laugh at me, saying I am 'one-way traffic'. Sometimes I stay at home because I cry when they laugh at me. (S3, FG1, L2)

"One-way traffic" is a Zimbabwean colloquialism used to mock someone who has only one set of clothes, implying that they cannot afford variety or that no one provides for them. It is a derogatory term that highlights the extreme poverty and neglect experienced by orphaned children.

From the above, it is clear that orphaned learners at the primary school level lack basic necessities such as food, uniforms, and clothing. These findings concur with the research evidence presented by Oyedele et al. (2016), who revealed that orphaned learners experience deprivation in terms of their basic needs and a lack of food, a lack of school uniforms and materials, behavioural and emotional problems, poor self-esteem, and a lack of confidence. The literature findings reported by Koltko Rivere (2006, in Mafumbate et al., 2013) also confirm that most orphaned children lack necessities such as food, water, and shelter, which may lead to malnutrition, poor health, and homelessness.

Learners lacking basic needs may fail to attain higher levels of success due to a lack of motivation. This line of thought aligns with Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory (1943), which holds that individuals must first meet basic needs to reach higher levels of development. Strategies such as a school feeding programme should be implemented to help orphans meet their basic needs, so that



they have equal opportunities to education with their non-orphan peers. As the findings indicate, for one of the participating learners, the porridge offered at school is a lifesaver.

Low Academic Attainment

The results of the study also indicated that most orphans at the primary level tended to register low academic attainment, due to a variety of factors. Participants shared their views as follows:

Most of these learners have no exercise books. They literally come to school empty-handed, no pen, no book, nothing! (S3, T2)

This statement confirms that orphans tend to lack adequate stationery, which affects their academic performance. Without these, an orphan's path to academic success is doomed. Another participant made the following remarks:

Sometimes I don't come to school because Auntie says I have to sell some vegetables to pay school fees. (S3FG1, L3)

Clearly, for this cohort of orphans, their education is disrupted by circumstances beyond their control, compelling them to miss or fail to participate fully in class. The data align with research evidence from Mutiso and Mutie (2018) and Lemeyu et al. (2023), who state that a lack of stationery, absenteeism/poor class attendance, and dropping out of school are prevalent problems amongst orphans. Oyedele et al. (2016) and Madhavan (2010, in Mpofu and Tshabalala, 2021) found that orphans may be prone to exploitation by their caregivers, as quoted above. Notably, while there are government-sponsored safety nets targeting disadvantaged children (e.g., the Basic Educational Assistance Module [BEAM]) (Government of Zimbabwe, 2011), some orphans fail to become beneficiaries. Such practices hinder the child's overall development, as learners are forced to engage in child labour to raise funds for their school fees.

In light of the above, it is imperative that communities take collective action to assist these children in becoming better versions of themselves. It is through the macrosystem that child-friendly policies can be crafted to accommodate and nurture orphaned learners.

Lack of School Feeding Programme

Food plays an important part in the development and concentration of all learners. On the feeding programme. Various participants had the following:

We used to have a feeding programme at the school. It has since stopped. I think it is because of the scarcity of resources to assist all the rural schools. (S1, T1)

I come to school without. I need food. I sometimes come to school on an empty stomach, so I end up staying hungry. We used to eat at school. (S1, FG, L2)

The school has to start a school feeding programme for orphaned learners, as they are most at nutritional risk. (S2, T2)

As the findings reveal, the sampled schools were not feeding orphaned learners due to resource constraints. Those learners go hungry at school and fail to bring food from home because of poverty. As indicated, the orphaned learners found it difficult to concentrate because they had to spend time at school hungry. Alem (2020) found that orphaned learners failed to concentrate due to hunger and suffered from malnutrition. Similarly, Eneji and Archbong (2021) reported that some orphaned learners come to school without having eaten proper food, which affects their development. From the cited sections, the participants recognised that a lack of food stunts learners' development. If schools provide food to orphaned learners, this would go a long way in keeping them in school. Children



whose parents are unemployed often face additional challenges that can affect their well-being and development. Limited household income may reduce access to basic needs such as nutritious food, quality education resources, and healthcare. These children may also experience emotional stress due to financial instability at home. As a result, they can be more vulnerable to social exclusion and may require additional support from schools and communities to ensure equal opportunities.

Low Psychosocial Support

When asked whether they provided psychosocial support to orphaned learners, one teacher responded:

No, we do not provide psychosocial support at this time. (S1, T1)

At school, we sometimes provide psychosocial support and sometimes don't. (S2, T1)

One challenge confronting orphaned learners at school is a lack of psychosocial support. This problem plagues rural schools, and the finding matches that of Nyangarika and Ngasa (2020), who found little evidence of such a service. Ringson (2020) avers that psychosocial support is not being provided in schools. As the research revealed, teachers in schools provide little psychosocial support to orphaned learners. Orphaned learners need psychosocial support so that they can lead relatively normal lives. Although S1 T1 and S2 T1 revealed that there was no psychosocial support on offer at their respective schools, S2 T1 suggested that they provide support through guidance and counselling and by attending funerals when a learner loses a parent or guardian. The study established that at School 1, only the guidance and counselling teachers provided limited psychosocial support to the orphaned learners in their care.

Limitations of the Study

While this study provides valuable insights into the challenges faced by orphaned learners in rural Hurungwe District, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study was confined to three primary schools in a single district of Zimbabwe, which limits the generalisability of the findings to other rural contexts in Zimbabwe or to other countries. The use of purposive sampling, while appropriate for phenomenological research, may have introduced selection bias, as participants were chosen based on specific characteristics that may not be representative of the broader population of orphaned learners. Second, the study relied on self-reported data from learners and teachers, which may be subject to social desirability bias, particularly given the sensitive nature of orphanhood. Third, the cross-sectional design captured experiences at a single point in time, limiting the ability to observe changes over time or establish causal relationships. Fourth, the study focused primarily on challenges and did not extensively explore the coping mechanisms and resilience strategies employed by orphaned learners, which may have provided a more balanced understanding of their experiences. Finally, the absence of data from guardians or caregivers represents a gap that could have provided additional perspectives on the challenges faced by orphaned learners in the home environment. Despite these limitations, the study contributes significantly to understanding the plight of orphaned learners in rural Zimbabwe and provides a foundation for future research that could address these gaps.

Conclusion

This study investigated the challenges faced by orphaned learners at the primary level in selected rural Zimbabwean schools. As reported, these learners lacked their parents' support. Financial constraints limit their ability to fully exercise their right to education, forcing them to drop out of school, attend irregularly, or attend without the necessary stationery or uniforms. Also noted was that these learners experience bullying and discrimination that negatively correlate with their holistic



development. Such situations give rise to myriad psychological hurdles, including low self-esteem and confidence. As the findings further revealed, the participating orphans had difficulty accessing basic necessities such as food, shelter, and clothing. They received low psychosocial support, in addition to there being no school feeding programme to keep them in school and cushion them against the effects of orphanhood. Although various studies have examined the challenges faced by orphans, this study makes an invaluable contribution by addressing the plight of orphaned primary school learners in rural Hurungwe. Informed by this study's findings, we hope that policymakers and other stakeholders will devise strategies to economically empower orphans so they can develop autonomy. Rather than merely developing new policies, the government must ensure that existing regulations are enforced and funded at the local level in Hurungwe District. This will guarantee the provision of stability vital to children's optimal development.

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