

Exploring the Emotional Well-being and School Experiences of Pupils in Child-Headed Households in Selected Secondary Schools of Kabwe District in Zambia

Hellen Malaya¹, Prof Nil Ratan Roy²

¹PhD Scholar, Tezpur University

²Professor, Tezpur University

Abstract

This qualitative study explores the emotional well-being and school experiences of pupils residing in child-headed households in secondary schools in Kabwe district, Zambia. Adopting a phenomenological approach, the research aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the challenges and resilience exhibited by this vulnerable demographic. Through focus group discussions with participants from diverse backgrounds, the study delves into the factors influencing emotional well-being, the impact on academic performance, perceptions of school-based support, and the day-to-day challenges faced by pupils. The findings underscore the intricate relationship between emotional well-being and the secondary school context, emphasizing the need for tailored interventions and enhanced support systems. Recommendations include research and knowledge sharing, policy advocacy and implementation, mental health and well-being initiatives, and enhancing school-based support services. By shedding light on the lived experiences of pupils in child-headed households, this research contributes to the discourse on inclusive education and advocates for holistic support systems that empower and uplift students facing complex family dynamics.

Keywords: Child-headed households, Emotional well-being, Secondary education, Kabwe, Zambia

Introduction

In Zambia, a growing number of children find themselves thrust into the responsibility of heading households at an early age, navigating adolescence while shouldering familial caretaking. These mostly result from the HIV/AIDS pandemic (Chama, 2008; Mokgatle-Nthabu, 2012; Payne, 2012; Nyakaleji, 2020; Mulenga, 2022). But as opposed to these causes, the pupils in this study have parents who are peasant farmers and live in rural areas where there are no secondary schools and cannot afford to take their children to boarding schools. Among the myriad challenges faced by these young heads of households,

¹ Research scholar, ICCR fellow, Department of Education, Tezpur University (A Central University), Napaam, Tezpur, Assam, India, PIN-784028. E-mail: edp22104@tezu.ac.in

² Professor & Head, Department of Education, Tezpur University (A Central University), Napaam, Tezpur, Assam, India, PIN-784028, E-mail: niledn@tezu.ernet.in.

the pursuit of secondary education becomes a pivotal juncture, where the intersection of emotional well-being and school experiences takes centre stage.

As recognized by Coombes et al. (2013), the emotional well-being of students is a multifaceted aspect that intertwines with their ability to engage effectively in the educational sphere. Within the unique context of child-headed households, the emotional challenges faced by pupils demand a nuanced exploration, as their experiences may significantly diverge from those of their traditionally structured peers (Lumbi, 2009; Van der Mark, 2015; Toscano-Hermoso et al., 2020). Despite the evident impact of emotional well-being on academic outcomes, there remains a paucity of research that comprehensively investigates the subjective experiences within the secondary school environment for pupils in child-headed households.

This study endeavours to bridge this gap by delving into the intricate interplay between emotional well-being and the day-to-day school experiences of pupils in child-headed households in Kabwe district secondary schools. Drawing on insights from the fields of psychology, education, and sociology, our research aims to unravel the factors influencing the emotional well-being of these pupils and, consequently, the implications for their overall school experiences.

Through an exploration of existing literature, we identify the existing gaps in understanding and propose a comprehensive framework that integrates emotional well-being as a central tenet in the discourse on pupils' experiences within the context of child-headed households. By examining the lived experiences of these pupils and their perceptions of the support mechanisms available, we hope to contribute not only to the academic discourse but also to inform policies and interventions tailored to address the unique needs of this vulnerable demographic.

Objectives:

1. To explore and document the emotional experiences of pupils in child-headed households attending secondary schools in Kabwe district in Zambia.
2. To examine how the emotional well-being of pupils in child-headed households influences their overall school experiences.

Research Questions

1. How do pupils in child-headed households describe and make sense of their emotional experiences within the secondary school environment?
2. What are the key factors within the school environment that impact the daily experiences of pupils in child-headed households?
3. How does the emotional well-being of pupils in child-headed households shape their perceptions and engagement in the secondary school setting?
4. What are the pupils' views on the support services provided within secondary schools, and how do they perceive the effectiveness of these services in addressing their emotional well-being?

Literature Review

The experiences of children in child-headed households (CHH) have been a focal point of research, with notable studies addressing the challenges faced by these vulnerable populations. Bhengu's (2021) exploration in South Africa and Goronga's (2018) study in Chinhoyi emphasized the resilience processes within CHH, shedding light on the complexities of their daily lives. In Zambia, Chama (2008) discussed a program approach tailored for child-headed households, aiming to address the unique needs of this

demographic. MacLellan's (2010) work in Rwanda delved into the challenges and livelihood needs of 'child'-headed households, contributing to the understanding of the broader socioeconomic context.

Educational transitions, particularly persistent school dropouts among girls, have been investigated in the Zambian context. Chaponda's (2016) study in Nakonde District highlights the challenges that girls in selected secondary schools face, offering insights into the factors contributing to discontinuation. Day's (2015) exploration focused on young people with caring responsibilities in Zambia, providing a comprehensive understanding of the intersection between education and employment transitions.

Sibling-headed households, often affected by AIDS, have been a subject of research, exemplified by Evans' (2011) examination in Tanzania and Uganda. The study illuminates life transitions and caregiving within the context of AIDS-affected households. Psychosocial support and coping strategies employed by child-headed households have been discussed by researchers such as Kwatubana and Ebrahim (2020) in South Africa and Kurebwa and Kurebwa (2014) in Zimbabwe. These studies contribute valuable insights into the mechanisms that enable children in CHH to navigate their challenging circumstances.

Lumbi's (2009) work on emotional well-being and social adjustment among orphans and vulnerable children affected by HIV/AIDS further enriches the literature. The study emphasizes the emotional dimensions of the challenges faced by children, highlighting the need for comprehensive support mechanisms. Mabaso's (2017) exploration of learners living in child-headed households in Osizweni township contributes to the nuanced understanding of the experiences of this demographic.

In Zambia, Mulenga's (2022) study examines the challenges faced by pupils from child-headed households in selected public schools in Kabwe urban district. The research sheds light on the specific educational hurdles encountered by these pupils. Newlin, Reynolds, and Nombutho's (2016) work addresses strategies for improving the academic performance of children from child-headed households in schools, providing insights into potential interventions.

The challenges faced by pupils from child-headed households are not unique to Zambia, as evidenced by Nigus' (2014) assessment in Ethiopia. The study delves into the roles, experiences, and challenges of child-headed households affected by HIV/AIDS in Silti District. Nxumalo's (2015) case study on the scholastic experience of learners in a secondary school adds to the growing body of literature on child-headed families.

Msiza's (2023) exploration into turning learning difficulties into opportunities for learners from child-headed families in Johannesburg South mainstream Primary Schools emphasizes the agency and potential for growth within this demographic. Payne's (2012) study in Zambia embraces 'everyday agency' in social interventions with child-headed households, offering a nuanced perspective on their resilience.

Taggart's (2008) research on the educational and psychological support of educators for learners from child-headed homes in urban classrooms addresses the crucial role of the education system in providing a supportive environment. Finally, Ngqushwa and Mkhomi's (2023) examination of the lived learning experiences of learners from child-headed households offers a contemporary insight into the current educational landscape for this demographic.

Methodology:

Research Design

This qualitative study adopts a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of pupils in child-headed households in secondary schools of Kabwe in Zambia. The focus group technique was

employed to facilitate dynamic group discussions, allowing participants to share their perspectives and insights.

Participants

Participants in this study consist of pupils currently attending secondary schools in Kabwe district who are members of child-headed households. The selection criteria include twenty pupils; ten boys and ten girls who are between fourteen to eighteen years old. A purposive sampling method was employed to ensure participants had firsthand experience with the research topic.

Recruitment Process

Participants were recruited through collaboration with secondary schools that have direct connections with child-headed households. The purpose and nature of the study were explained to potential participants, and written informed consent was obtained from both participants.

Data Collection

Focus group discussions were conducted using a semi-structured interview guide developed based on the research questions. The guide covers topics such as emotional experiences, school challenges, support mechanisms, and day-to-day experiences.

Audio-Visual Recording: The focus group discussions were audio-recorded to capture participants' responses accurately. Participants are assured of confidentiality and anonymity.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to identify themes and meanings within the collected data. Themes and sub-themes were then identified, discussed, and refined through iterative processes of analysis.

Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) ethical guidelines by getting informed consent from participants, ensuring confidentiality, and also prioritizing voluntary participation.

Limitations

Some participants were shy to respond in a group setup while others were just repeating whatever they heard from the other respondents. This led to some biased responses.

Findings

Objective 1.

To explore and document the emotional experiences of pupils in child-headed households attending secondary schools in Kabwe district in Zambia.

Most of the responses pointed out that attending secondary school while being in a child-headed household is both challenging and empowering. Challenging in the sense that one needs to take up the responsibilities of parents and learn to stay independent. "it's tough because I carry a lot of responsibilities at home – taking care of my siblings, managing household chores." Said one boy. On the other hand, it is empowering as a person is trained to make serious decisions, be accountable, and take responsibility from an early age. This results in having a mixture of feelings. At one point one is happy, and at another, sad and worried about what is to happen next. An example was given of when a pupil is in class trying to pay attention to the lessons and is happy at the moment, but immediately a thought comes to mind about the food shortage at home and that it is up to that pupil to sort out the problem, then concentration is diverted from a particular lesson. This results in poor academic performance.

Objective 2.

To examine how the emotional well-being of pupils in child-headed households influences their overall school experiences.

When asked about the aspects of the school environment that contribute to or hinder their emotional well-being, their responses included statements such as, "The school environment provides us with a mix of support and challenges. We have some of the teachers who are understanding and friends who know about our situations that come through to help us. However, it is usually emotionally draining when we see our peers with more stable family situations. Sometimes, it feels like we are isolated. The workload and pressure add to the stress, especially when we have a lot to handle at home." Most of the girls are termed to be moody and at times aggressive. Others resort to peer pressure, involving themselves in truant groups, dogging from lessons, absenteeism, and substance abuse.

Among the major challenges or stressors related to their child-headed household situation they find most impactful on their emotional well-being at school, are issues of financial struggles. As most of the parents of these pupils are peasant farmers living in rural areas, it is very difficult to provide them with their daily needs. Mostly, they have to search for part-time jobs which adds more stress. For girls, they end up engaging in sexual activities that result in sexually transmitted infections, or unwanted pregnancies. Insecurity also came out as another major problem. As these pupils rent small quarters in shanty compounds, sometimes they experience theft cases of their belongings. As such, their concentration in school is compromised. Apart from grade teachers who act in the role of their parents within the school premises, these pupils lack support when emergency problems arise such as sickness or counsel. There is usually a breakdown in communication with their parents in villages due to network issues. Absenteeism from classes was yet another challenge; pupils would absent themselves from school to go back to their parents to collect food and other provisions. In other cases when parents are the ones to travel, still their children would have to go and meet them during lesson times because transport in those areas is mostly available during weekdays.

Discussion

Emotional Well-being within the School Context

The responses from participants consistently highlighted the intricate relationship between emotional well-being and the secondary school context. Pupils in child-headed households articulated a complex emotional landscape influenced by their caregiving responsibilities at home. These findings align with previous research by Lumbi, (2009); and Taggart (2008) that emphasizes the impact of family dynamics on adolescents' emotional well-being. This implies that the emotional challenges experienced by pupils underscore the importance of acknowledging and addressing the emotional well-being of students in child-headed households within the school environment.

Factors Influencing Emotional Well-being

Family Structure and Socioeconomic Factors: Participants identified family structure and socioeconomic factors as central influences on their emotional well-being. Financial challenges and concerns for the well-being of siblings emerged as prominent stressors. These findings are consistent with the broader literature on the psychosocial impact of economic hardships and family structure on adolescent well-being Bhengu, (2021); Mabaso, (2017) Kwatubana, & Ebrahim, (2020).

Impact on Academic Performance

Interconnected Nature: Participants revealed a nuanced interconnection between emotional well-being and academic performance. When emotional well-being was stable, participants reported better concentration and academic engagement. The study's findings are corroborated by research indicating that emotional well-being significantly influences students' cognitive functioning and academic outcomes. Van der Mark (2015), Ganga (2013), and Newlin, et al(2016).

Perceptions of School-based Support

Mixed Experiences: Participants described both positive and negative experiences with school-based support. While some praised understanding teachers and peers, others expressed a desire for more comprehensive support services. The varied responses highlight the need for schools to assess and enhance their psychosocial support resources to better meet the diverse needs of students in child-headed households. These findings are similar to Ursula, (2013)'s paper which highlighted the care and support for vulnerable children in schools.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the findings of this study offer valuable insights into the lived experiences of pupils in child-headed households within the secondary school of Kabwe district context in Zambia. The discussion underscores the importance of recognizing and addressing the emotional well-being of these students, understanding the factors influencing their experiences, and enhancing support systems within schools. These insights contribute to the ongoing dialogue on inclusive education and advocate for tailored interventions that empower and uplift students facing complex family dynamics.

Recommendations

Enhancing School-Based Support Services

Provide targeted training for educators to increase their awareness and understanding of the challenges faced by pupils in child-headed households. This training should emphasize creating a supportive and inclusive classroom environment. **Establishment of Support Teams:** Schools should consider forming support teams or committees focused on the well-being of vulnerable students. These teams can collaborate with external organizations and community resources to enhance the range and effectiveness of support services.

Mental Health and Well-being Initiatives

Integration of Well-being Education: Integrate well-being education into the school curriculum, emphasizing emotional intelligence, coping strategies, and mental health awareness. This can contribute to building resilience among pupils. Ensure that counselling services are readily accessible within schools. This can include on-site counsellors, peer support programs, and partnerships with external mental health organizations.

Policy Advocacy and Implementation

Inclusive Policies: Advocate for the development and implementation of inclusive policies that address the unique needs of pupils in child-headed households. These policies should encompass financial support, academic accommodations, and psychosocial services.

Research and Knowledge Sharing

Encourage continued research on the experiences of pupils in child-headed households, with a focus on

diverse contexts and cultural nuances. This ongoing research can contribute to an evolving understanding of the challenges and strengths of this demographic.

REFERENCES

1. Bhengu, J. P. (2021). Challenges experienced by children in child-headed households (CHH) in South Africa (Doctoral dissertation).
2. Chama, S. (2008). Program Approach for Child-headed Households in Zambia.
3. Chaponda, C. (2016). Persistent School Drop-outs Among Girls in Selected Secondary Schools of Nakonde District in Zambia (Doctoral dissertation, The University of Zambia).
4. Coombes, L., Appleton, J. V., Allen, D., & Yerrell, P. (2013). Emotional health and well-being in schools: Involving young people. *Children & Society*, 27(3), 220-232.
5. Day, C. (2015). Education and employment transitions: the experiences of young people with caring responsibilities in Zambia. *Labouring and Learning*, eds T. Abebe, J. Waters, and T. Skelton (Singapore: Springer), 1-26.
6. Evans, R. (2011). 'We are managing our own lives...': Life transitions and care in sibling-headed households affected by AIDS in Tanzania and Uganda. *Area*, 43(4), 384-396.
7. Ganga, E. (2013). The effects of double-orphanhood on the learning and cognition of children living within child-headed households in Zimbabwe (Doctoral dissertation).
8. Goronga, P. (2018). Resilience processes in child-headed households in Chinhoyi (Doctoral dissertation, University of Pretoria).
9. Kurebwa, J., & Kurebwa, N. Y. G. (2014). Coping strategies of child-headed households in Bindura urban of Zimbabwe. *International Journal of Innovative Research and Development*, 3(11), 236-249.5
10. Kwatubana, S., & Ebrahim, M. (2020). Psychosocial support provision for learners from child-headed households in five public schools in South Africa. *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, 37, 39-48.
11. Lumbi, P. C. (2009). The emotional well-being, social adjustment, and coping strategies of orphans and vulnerable children affected by HIV/AIDS (Doctoral dissertation).
12. Mabaso, T. M. A. (2017). The experiences of learners who live in child-headed households of Osizweni township (Doctoral dissertation).
13. MacLellan, M. E. (2010). 'Child'Headed Households in Rwanda: Challenges of Definition and Livelihood Needs (Doctoral dissertation, Coventry University).
14. Mokgatle-Nthabu, M. M. (2012). An educational framework for the facilitation of the well-being of orphans living in child-headed families in rural North West Province. University of Johannesburg (South Africa).
15. Msiza, M. T. (2023) Turning learning difficulties into opportunities for learners from child-headed families in Johannesburg South mainstream Primary Schools (Doctoral dissertation, University of Johannesburg).
16. Mulenga, A. (2022). Challenges faced by pupils from child-headed households: a study on selected public schools in Kabwe urban district (Doctoral dissertation, The University of Zambia).
17. Newlin, M., Reynold, S., & Nombutho, M. M. W. (2016). Dealing with Children from Child-Headed Households in Schools: Strategies for Improving Their Academic Performance. *Journal of Social Sciences*, 48(1-2), 51-62.

18. Nigus, T. (2014). Assessment of the Roles, Experiences, and Challenges of Child-Headed Households Affected by HIV/AIDS: The Case of Fifteen Selected Child-Headed Families in Silti District, Siltie Zone, Snnpr, Ethiopia (Doctoral dissertation, St. Mary's University).
19. Nxumalo, T. A. (2015). Exploring child-headed families: a case study on scholastic experience of learners in a secondary school (Doctoral dissertation).
20. Nyakaleji, F. L. (2020). Challenges Faced by Vulnerable Children's Educational Attainment in Public Primary Schools: A Study of Kalumbila District, North-Western Province, Zambia (Doctoral dissertation).
21. Payne, R. (2012). 'Extraordinary survivors' or 'ordinary lives'? Embracing 'everyday agency' in social interventions with child-headed households in Zambia. *Children's Geographies*, 10(4), 399-411.
22. Taggart, N. (2008). The educational and psychological support of educators to include learners from child-headed homes in urban classrooms. University of Johannesburg (South Africa).
23. T. Ngqushwa, M.S. Mkhomi (2023) "We are on Our Own"- Lived Learning Experiences of Learners from Child-Headed Households, *Edulearn23 Proceedings*, pp. 8625-8631.
24. Toscano-Hermoso, M. D., Ruiz-Frutos, C., Fagundo-Rivera, J., Gómez-Salgado, J., García-Iglesias, J. J., & Romero-Martín, M. (2020). Emotional intelligence and its relationship with emotional well-being and academic performance: the vision of high school students. *Children*, 7(12), 310.
25. Ursula Mohlakwana, M. A. (2013). Care and support for vulnerable children in schools: The case of child-headed families. *Journal of Social Sciences*, 36(1), 11-18.
26. Van der Mark, H. A. (2015). Lived experiences of youth living in Sibling Headed Households in facing challenges affecting education (Master's thesis).