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Teachers' Perceptions and Expectations of Community and Government Involvement in Supporting Orphaned Learners

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ABSTRACT This study investigated teachers' perceptions and expectations concerning community and government involvement in caring for orphaned learners. Data was gathered by means of interviews with ten teachers in two primary schools in a rural area in a province of South Africa. A snowballing process was used to identify the teachers who were then interviewed about their experiences with orphaned learners. The purpose of the interviews was to establish the type and nature of support that orphaned learners receive from the community and the government. Most of the teachers reported that they were unaware of any community involvement and support in caring for orphaned learners. Some teachers who had a knowledge of community involvement argued that the available support was limited, due to the poor economic status of the community. There was evidence of poor school-community relationships and a perception of insufficient support from the government, especially from its social services. The findings highlight the need for equipping teachers with the necessary knowledge and skills to build a collaborative partnership with the community to provide for the needs of orphaned learners. Based on the findings of this study, government policies and structural changes to support the school and the community in caring for orphaned children are recommended. More social workers need to be deployed in order to collaborate with teachers and the community in attending to the needs of orphaned learners.

INTRODUCTION

In traditional African society children do not just belong to the nuclear family, but also to their extended family and to the community (Foster, 2000; Chirwa, 2002; Nyambedha *et al.*, 2003). The primary caregivers are the nuclear family, followed by the extended family and the community. The extended family consists of grandparents, uncles, aunts, nieces, nephews and in-laws (Nyamukapa & Gregson, 2005) while the community is comprised mostly of neighbours and people belonging to the same clan or tribe (Chirwa, 2002). Prior to the HIV/AIDS pandemic, it was common practice in many African communities to foster children (Abebe & Aase, 2007; Beard, 2005; Miller *et al.*, 2006). Some reasons for taking in the children of relatives include the death of the mother during childbirth; to give the children an opportunity to be educated; and to help with domestic work (Miller *et al.*, 2006).

In their studies Nyambedha and others (2003) and Nyamukapa and Gregson (2005) found that the traditional caring mechanisms, such as the extended family system and the community, could no longer support orphaned children. The reason for this was the rapidly growing number of orphans and diminishing resources in many African communities - as a result of the effects of HIV/AIDS. Other factors that weakened the extended family safety nets included labour migration, a cash economy, demographic changes, formal education and westernisation (Foster, 2000). In their studies on orphan care Oleke and others (2007) and Thurman and others (2008) found that as a result of poverty many care-givers were unable to provide food, medical care, clothing and education which were needed by the orphans in their care. Some care-givers were unable to provide for their own children and that had a negative impact on their support of orphans in the community (Thurman *et al.*, 2008). Some teachers expect the community to assist in providing support for orphans, while others argue that community resources are already overstretched and supporting orphaned children is no longer possible (Landry *et al.*, 2007).

Contrary to the views that have been expressed of diminishing community capacity to care for orphans, there is a growing body of evidence that confirms the safety net of the extended family and the community as the main sources of orphan care (Chirwa, 2002; Beard, 2005; Sarker *et al.*, 2005; Abebe & Aase, 2007). These researchers argue that the fostering of orphaned children by the extended family is a coping mechanism found in communities that are severely affected by

HIV/AIDS. According to a study by Kidman and Heymann (2009), although there was no organised support structure, households with orphans received support from friends and relatives in the form of private gifts, counselling, food and medical care. Another study which was undertaken in Botswana found that the majority of orphans were cared for by the extended family - with limited support from friends, neighbours and the community (Miller *et al.*, 2006). In the Malawian childcare system, on the other hand, strategies that work are adopted, while others that do not work are discarded along the way (Chirwa, 2002).

While the debate related to the extended family and the community as care-givers continues, it is important to explore the expected role of care-givers in the education of orphaned children. Some studies acknowledge the critical role of the school in supporting orphaned learners in communities affected by HIV/AIDS and recommend strategies that could be implemented to support such children (Richter, 2003; Giese *et al.*, 2003; USAID, 2001; McBride, 2002; Loots & Mnguni, 2006). Van Wyk and Lemmer's (2007) study of partnerships between the home, the school and the community in South Africa - within the context of the HIV/AIDS pandemic - report that, at times, teachers play the role of surrogate parents in supporting orphaned learners. However, the increase in the number of orphaned learners presents a serious challenge for school teachers in terms of managing the children's needs (Van Wyk & Lemmer, 2007; Giese *et al.*, 2003). Although the government is statutorily obliged to ensure that children's rights to education are promoted by supporting them under all circumstances (Republic of South Africa, 1996), relatively little is known about how teachers collaborate with the community and government in meeting the educational needs of orphaned learners in schools. The aim of this article is to explore teachers' perceptions and expectations of the community and government with regard to providing support for orphaned learners. The focus of the study is centred in the adaptive social rupture thesis. Chirwa (2002) argues that due to an increase in the number of orphaned children, family and community support systems that develop adaptive capacity continually evolve in order to cope with the challenges of orphan care. The main assumption in the adaptive rupture framework is that families and communities have the potential to reconfigure and restructure themselves in the face of a crisis (Chirwa, 2002).

II METHODOLOGY

A qualitative, interpretive research approach was used in this study which involved understanding and interpreting the meaning attached to the experiences of the participants in terms of their perceptions and expectations of the support from the community and government to help orphaned learners. Qualitative research was appropriate because it gave the researcher the opportunity to clarify responses by probing further and obtaining in-depth information that permitted a detailed description of the views and experiences of the participants. Convenience sampling was used to select the two schools on the basis of their accessibility and allowed the researcher to make multiple visits to ensure a comprehensive data collection (Creswell, 2009). The two specific schools were chosen because they had orphaned learners and teachers who were willing to participate in the study. The five teachers involved in the study were identified by means of a snowballing process: an initial information-rich participant who was interviewed referred the researcher to another participant who also met the criteria used to select the first participant. The referral process was systematically repeated until it was saturated (Struwig & Stead, 2001; Fraenkel & Norman, 2006). In-depth semi-structured interviews were used to collect relevant data and the five participants were asked the following core questions:

- In your opinion, how is the community responding to orphaned learners?
- Are you aware of any school-community partnership in helping orphaned learners?
- In cases where the school cannot meet the needs of orphans, where do you go for help?
- How have you experienced government involvement in helping orphans?

Data collection and analysis was an iterative process. Each interview was tape-recorded and transcribed and the *verbatim* transcripts were analysed according to specific themes. Each theme was described and illustrated with quotations from the original text to help communicate meaning to the reader.

Rigour in the research process included an audit trail of the data collection process, *verbatim* accounts of the data collection and analysis procedures. Member-checking was done by giving participants a summary of the data analysis procedures and the final results based on their comments in order to verify that the data interpretation was in sync with their experiences. Since qualitative research, in general, is normally contextual and each situation is unique, it is not possible to generalise the findings – they may, however, be transferable to a similar context. A detailed description of the context of the study is presented to enable readers to decide on the applicability of the findings to other contexts (Seale, 2000).

The Ethics Committee of the University of Pretoria gave ethical clearance for the study. Permission was obtained from the relevant Department of Education Circuit Offices to gain access to the two schools involved in the study. Verbal and written permission was obtained from the participants. The researcher ensured confidentiality by concealing the identities of the participants. Finally, feedback on the research results was given to the participants in recognition of, and appreciation for, their contributions to the study.

III. RESULTS

Theme 1: Teachers' Perceptions of Community Involvement in Helping Orphans

In this study the perceptions of teachers with regard to the community's response to supporting orphans were mixed and, at times, contradictory. Some teachers seemed to be unaware or uncertain of what was happening in the community with regard to orphan care. Their interpretation of the orphan situation was based on the fact that orphans came to school with needs that, probably, could have been met by the community. Teachers who were more informed about the community and had access to social networks were of the opinion that the community did care for orphans. Some of the remarks by the teachers:

I cannot say that they are helping. We have started a school garden, maybe they will be involved. The garden is also going to help them.

I do think that the community is helping. When I talked to that learner, she said that they do receive something from the neighbours.

I think they feel that they can help but they do not know how they can do it. I was asking the learner who is staying alone with her sister. She was telling me that the neighbours used to give them food but they got tired.

The teachers' conflicting perceptions of the community seemed to be based on the extent to which they interacted with community members. Their views of community involvement were manifested in three dimensions: no information about the community; information gathered from the learners; and information obtained from community members. Some of the teachers perceived the community to be a body which was able to help orphaned children, but complained that there were no community structures in place to channel its support effort.

Theme 2: School-Community Connectedness

Teachers in the current study seemed to consider the school as an entity which was separate from the community and, therefore, they lacked all knowledge of what was happening in the community. One possible reason is that the way in which teachers understand their role excludes their responsibility of establishing relationships with the community. Teachers who interact with members of the community tend to be aware of the community's positive response towards orphan suggested in the following responses from participants in the study.

I do not know community members because I have not communicated with them and I am not aware if the community helps.

There are different organisations within the community. They will come to school and ask how many kids need clothes. They buy school uniforms and other clothes that they feel comfortable to wear at home like jeans.

In this study the divergent perceptions of school and community interconnectedness seem to affect the way in which teachers reach out to the community for support and try to involve the community. The teachers described their efforts as follows:

... So I started looking for donations for the orphans. I got very few donations. I went to the social workers; I invited the police; I went to the businessmen. But I did not get help.

I am a member of Mothers Union. I approached my church members for donations. Now they are sponsoring sandwiches for the orphans for lunch.

Those teachers who see the community as a source of support seem motivated and tend to find diverse ways of engaging different sectors and institutions within the community to help orphans. The opposite is also true. The teachers who are not aware of, or involved with, the community are unlikely to take the initiative to solicit support from the community.

Theme 3: Teachers' Perceptions of the Community's Socio-Economic Status

All the teachers who participated in the study acknowledge the poor economic condition of the community, but some still believe in partnerships with the community to provide for the needs of orphaned learners. One argued that there were some teachers who were more optimistic about the community's ability to provide some kind of support for orphans or that they viewed the community in terms of its ability to adapt to adverse conditions. One teacher commented:

People in our community are poor. You give the orphans today then tomorrow you look at your children and say no it will not be enough for my children and somebody else's kids.

There was some indication of a spirit of sharing, but owing to the presence of limited resources some community members seem overwhelmed by the needs of the orphans and are unable to continue helping them. A number of the teachers were also concerned that the community did not know how to help the orphans. This perception may have emerged due to the challenging task of identifying orphans' needs; the socio-economic status of the community; and the lack of community-based organisations.

Theme 4: Expectations with regard to Government Involvement

Some teachers' attitudes towards, and expectations of, government response to the needs of orphaned learners could well be based on their perception and understanding of their own role as a teacher – that of teaching and learning – rather than that of care-giver which was perceived as the responsibility of the state and the community. The teachers said:

I blame the government and the community at large. Since their parents are not there the government must take over. The government should make provision for an orphanage, sporting and entertainment facilities to make the learners happy.

I wish our government could pay school funds for them, buy for them clothes, food and take them out for excursions or pay for school trips.

Some of the teachers were of the opinion that the government should provide funding for educational activities, food and clothing. In addition, they envisaged the possibility of the social and emotional needs of orphaned learners being met by institutionalised structures where adults could fulfil the parental role of care-giver. An assumption made by some of the teachers in the current study was that the government did not seem to realise the devastating reality of the orphans' situation and, therefore, did not appreciate the fact that these learners required much greater attention. One teacher said:

They should come to school and see the situation. Maybe they can extend the age for receiving social grants.

Theme 5: Teachers' Experiences of Government Response to Orphans

Most of the teachers mentioned the child support grants and the government feeding scheme as the government's efforts to help orphaned learners. One remarked:

They are getting grants and most of the parents are told that the grant money has to be used on the learners.

The teachers identified orphan learners' needs that were beyond their knowledge and skills and which required the expertise of professionals. Some of the teachers were concerned about the lack of social services that could provide psycho-social support for the orphaned learners.

The teachers expressed their frustrations as follows:

... the Department they will say: "Go to class and write names of those learners." We always send the list and they do not do anything. They write our names and they do not do anything.

Teachers assumed that if the Department of Education took note of the statistics of orphaned learners and saw the magnitude of their needs and numbers, it would pay more attention and give support to these children, but the teachers' expectations were not realised. It was generally felt that there was a lack of commitment from the Department of Social The teachers said:

I have been in this school for three years and I have not seen any social worker. I told the principal that we need a social worker. When I got the number of the learners – I realise it is not a problem of one or two learners – the principal contacted the social worker. They gave us the forms to fill in, the list of the learners and their background. That was the last time we saw the person.

Sometimes you invite the social workers but they do not come. The other learner, the parent died and she was raped and raped again and she is a sick student because she has epilepsy, so this learner will come tell me the story.

The studies done by Nyambedha and others (2003), Nyamukapa and Gregson (2005) and Thurman and others indicate limited community support for orphans and a lack of community-based initiatives to address the increasing number of orphans and their needs. Other studies suggest quite the opposite, namely, that many community members are actively involved in helping orphans despite their own impoverished economic status (Chirwa, 2002; Beard, 2005; Abebe & Aase, 2007).

IV. DISCUSSION

The teachers' perceptions and expectations of community and government involvement in caring for their orphaned learners was analysed within an adaptive framework of a community response to orphan care. The underlying assumption was that the community had the potential ability to assist in providing care for orphaned children. The culture of orphan care proved to have

common elements in the two schools, but some teachers seemed to feel more responsible for providing support than others. The different roles exhibited by the teachers could be due to the lack of evidence of a systemic response to the needs of orphaned learners. The lack of a commonly shared interpretation of their role as teacher and of the boundaries of their responsibilities with regard to providing orphan care might also have caused the teachers to have different perceptions of their role in this regard.

The findings of this study suggest a lack of, or inadequate, organisational capacity to care for orphaned learners as there is an absent or limited school-community partnership. During the interviews the teachers identified factors that were both imperative for providing orphan care and important and necessary for building relationships with the community. Some teachers were able to form relationships with the community, while other did not know much about the community. The teachers' lack of knowledge of the community seems to be a barrier to establishing community partnerships and to the community's involvement in orphan care. Teachers who have more knowledge of the community are able to access community structures and organisations to help provide for the needs of orphaned learners because they are aware of the strengths, weaknesses and capabilities of the community. Van Wyk and Lemmer (2007) report that schools with a poor understanding of their learners' circumstances are unlikely to develop or implement effective home-school partnerships. This finding suggests a lack of teacher preparation in terms of knowledge and skills to support orphans and involve the community in caring for the orphaned learners.

Another limitation of community partnership and involvement in supporting orphaned learners is the poor economic status of the community. From the interviews it appears that some teachers are, perhaps, reluctant to involve the community in caring for orphans due to the impoverished state of most of the families within the community. This finding is in agreement with Abebe and Aase's (2007) pessimistic social rupture theory which maintains that due to overstretched resources extended families can no longer support orphans. They also argue for an optimistic view of social resistance that believes in the traditional child-care system and its capacity to support orphans. This study suggests that poverty should not be regarded as a barrier to the community's involvement in supporting orphans because the needs of orphans go beyond material resources. This is also evident in the study by Abebe and Aase (2007) which argues that

despite the impoverished state of some community members, they are able to satisfy the psycho-social needs of orphaned learners.

Some of the teachers interviewed expect the government to provide an alternative source of care, such as an orphanage, as well as to meet the social needs of the learners in the form of recreational activities. Institutionalisation was suggested as a way of centralising care and support - assuming that institutions could provide foster parents who would satisfy the social and emotional needs of orphaned learners that the teachers were not able to fulfil. Some teachers felt that institutional care would ease their responsibility to care for the orphans. To the teachers, the option of institutional care, probably, seems to be a holistic and centralised solution to the problem of providing care. However, significant challenges have been noted by other researchers and the issue of institutional care for orphans as an alternative care-giving strategy is widely debated. As indicated earlier, Miller and others (2006) warn that institutional care should be a last option because of the cost involved – being more expensive than family care - and its limited capacity to provide stability, love and emotional support. Their view of institutional care contradicts the teachers' argument for benefits and their call for government support in terms of the establishment of care-giving institutions.

Collaboration between the Department of Education and other government departments, such as the National Department of Social Development, would be necessary to satisfy those needs as teachers lack the necessary knowledge and skills and the community does not have the necessary resources. Some of the teachers suggested that they were acting as social workers, which was not included in their professional training. The teachers mentioned a great deal of paperwork that the Department of Social Welfare expected from them every year and yet the social workers still failed to respond to the cases they reported. They felt that their efforts to register the number of orphans were meaningless since no support or care-giving assistance was actually forthcoming. There was a general feeling that this showed a lack of commitment from Social Welfare Services as social workers were not assigned to visit the schools and assist in providing psycho-social support. The absence of social workers in the schools creates a serious gap between what teachers expect of social services and the realities in the schools in terms of available support services. A similar situation is described in the study by Giese and others (2003) who report teachers' frustrations caused by the non-delivery of assistance from social workers when children were referred to them. In a study by Schierhout and others (2004), teachers reported that they

had high expectations for social workers to become involved in supporting orphaned learners. However, a gap exists between welfare infrastructure and the capacity to meet the needs of orphans (Miller et al., 2006). The authors recommend capacity building, management training, additional staff and an increase budget for social services to facilitate better care for orphaned children.

V. CONCLUSION

This study set out to explore teachers' perceptions and expectations of community and government involvement in caring for orphaned learners. The data was gathered by means of interviews with ten teachers in two primary schools in a rural area in a province of South Africa. The findings of the study reveal that most of the teachers interviewed reported that they were unaware of any community involvement and support in caring for orphaned learners. Some teachers who had knowledge about community involvement argued that the available support was limited, due to the poor economic status of the community. The evidence suggests that there are inadequate school-community relationships. The findings highlight the need for equipping teachers with the necessary knowledge and skills to build a collaborative partnership with the community. There is also a perception of insufficient support from government in terms of structure and policies, especially regarding the support expected from social services.

VI. RECOMMENDATIONS

- Schools should reach out to the community by formulating policies that strengthen the link between the school and the community.
- School and community-based programmes should provide social, emotional and material support and the school should reciprocate by empowering the community by providing literacy, entrepreneurship and care-giving skills classes.
- The school should aim at building community networks by involving community leaders and other liaison persons, like parent representatives of School Governing Bodies and Parent Teacher Associations.

- Teacher education programmes - should better prepare teachers for community networking. In-service community involvement training should occur in the form of seminars and workshops to expose teachers to practical ways of engaging with the community.
- Training on income-generating activities would enhance the economic status of community members and further empower them to support orphans.
- Policies that address the plight of vulnerable children should be refined. They should bridge support gaps by building structures that encourage a school-community-government partnership for supporting vulnerable children.
- The purpose of statistical information collected by the Department of Education should be clarified as a lack of clarity seems to lead to misconceptions and expectations of support from the government that do not materialise.

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