

Enhancing Psychosocial Support through Positive Youth Development: Narratives from Orphans in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

Due to the AIDS pandemic more and more youths are losing their parents. They are usually left with caregivers and in Zimbabwe these are usually people from the extended family. Many studies have focused on orphan hood challenges in line with the deficit model. Research in the past years has challenged a dominant stereotype of youth as carriers of risk and focused instead on their strengths and potential. This qualitative exploratory study interrogates aspects of positive youth development among the orphaned youths in Zimbabwe. Data were collected from a purposive sample of 23 adolescents (15-19 years). Three focus group discussions with five participants per group were done. In depth interviews were done with 8 participants and these were not the same as those who took part in the focus group discussions. Interviews were done at the premises of two NGO that provided the adolescents with food, school fees and other material needs. Data were thematically analysed. Results suggested that the participants experienced positive development in the following areas- personal experiences, relationships with significant others and help from the community. Subthemes were also derived from the main themes above. It was recommended that psychosocial support programs mainly focusing on positive youth development be implemented to enhance the wellbeing of orphans in Zimbabwe.

Keywords: Positive psychology; wellbeing; Orphans; Zimbabwe

Introduction

The number of orphans is increasing worldwide [1,2]. 85% of orphaned children live in sub-Saharan Africa [1]. In Zimbabwe many orphans have been orphaned due to HIV/AIDS and the number continue to rise in a country where one-fourth of adults are HIV-positive [3,4]. Orphans and vulnerable children (OVC) experience psychosocial problems. However, the psychosocial needs of OVC usually neglected [5-7]. In Zimbabwe the economic challenges that the country has faced in the past years has made it difficult for the integration of orphaned children. The high death rates has also led to the saturation of the extended family system leaving orphans with no careers. The ecological model and the positive youth development model were used to unpack the risk and protective factors among orphaned children in Zimbabwe.

The ecological theory helps as a conceptual framework to unpack the risk factors among orphans. The theory argues that to understand any component (in this study the child) there is need to look beyond the child to the child's immediate family environment and the wider community. The factors that influence the orphans are found at the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and the macro system [8]. There is a bidirectional relationship between orphaned children and their environment and this has both negative and positive effects on the child's wellbeing [9].

The micro level concerns the interaction of the orphans with the immediate family members. Problems at this level may include distress, trauma, being out-of-school, being cared for by a non-parent, inadequate care, child labour, physical abuse, and stigma and discrimination and loneliness [10]. The mesosystem provides the

connection between the structures of the child's micro system [11]. Examples include the connection between the child's teacher and his parents. Challenges that the orphan may face in this domain may encompass rejection, stigmatisation, termination of schooling, migration to a new home, with separation from friends and often siblings [12-14]. While the exosystem is the layer that defines the larger social system in which the child does not function directly. The structures in this layer impact the child's development by interacting with some structures in the child's care arrangements after parental death. Death of parents may affect access to basic needs and services for HIV infected children which may include food, education and health services.

The macrosystem is the layer that may be considered the outermost layer in the child's environment. It comprises of cultural values, customs, and laws [11]. Orphanhood problems at this stage may include increased workloads, loss of love, guidance, socialisation, and skills transfer by their parents, [12-14]. In terms of mental health challenges, orphaned children experience more internalising problems compared with non-orphans [14]. They experience depression, generalized anxiety disorder, and reported to feel scared or worried, having frequent difficulty sleeping, headaches or stomach aches, guilt, sadness, trouble concentrating and fatigue [5,15,16].

The Positive Youth Development model (PYD) is a holistic, ecologically orientated theory with five components that focus on the interaction between people and their environments. The Five Cs conceptualize PYD as (1) Competence or a sense of mastery and self-efficacy, (2) Confidence or a feeling of self-worth, (3) Connection or a sense of being a part of family and community, (4) Character or possessing values and a social conscience, and (5) Caring or a sense of compassion [17]. The Positive Youth Development (PYD) movement focuses specifically on facilitating the development of the youth.

Understanding the social contexts in which youths live may reduce risk and promote positive development [18].

The model emphasises the need to build resilience and strength among vulnerable groups for example imparting coping skills [19-22]. There is need for positive parenting among carers of orphaned children [23] and a trusting relationship [24]. Positive parental bonds and better communication may reduce emotional distress [25-28].

Having supporting people has been shown to buffer orphanhood problems [7,25,29-34]. Support for mourning and emotional recovery helps in the emotional adjustment of orphans. [15,35]. Cultural sensitivity is important in helping orphaned children adjust [33,36,37].

The study sought to explore a) Psychological factors lead to the adolescents' positive development, b) Recommendations by study participants that could aid in their positive development.

Methodology

This qualitative exploratory study sought to explore positive experiences among adolescent orphans. The qualitative approach is mainly used in studies that are aimed at describing the nature of certain issues and to gain deep understanding of a phenomenon particular phenomenon [38]. Research among orphaned youth has tended to focus mainly on the negative developmental aspects, which is a deficit model of mental health. The main thrust of this research was to find out the nature of positive experiences among the adolescent orphans.

Sample

Twenty-three (23) participants aged 15-19 were purposively sampled from the registers of two non-governmental organisations that offer support to orphans in Gweru, Zimbabwe. Eighteen of the participants were still at school and 5 were school leavers. 15 participants were females and 8 were males.

The inclusion criteria was that the adolescent should have lost both parents, was between the ages of 15-19 and was willing to participate in the study. Purposive sampling was thus used to select participants for this study. Those who met the criteria were picked as they visited the NGO premises for various reasons. Some were phoned by the NGO administrators to attend the interviews.

Instruments

A Semi-structured interview guide was constructed in English. The semi-structured interview guide was used to collect data from eight participants. Data saturation was used to determine the total number of individual interviews that had to be conducted [39]. The duration of the interviews was between 45-60 minutes. Based on the PYD model and the ecological model the interview guide probed into experiences of positive development in the following domains- personal sphere, significant others and the community at large as well as their recommendations of what they deemed appropriate practices in insuring positive youth development among orphans. Some of the questions that were included are: What are some of the positive experiences that you have had from your significant others? What are the positive experiences that have had from the community at large? What are the important factors that you would recommend for positive development of adolescent orphans? Probe questions were also used to clarify issues.

Three focus group discussions (one with males and two with females) were also done. Those who took part in the focus group discussions did not participate in the in depth interviews. Each focus group had five participants. The administrators at the NGOs helped to arrange the convenient time for the focus group discussions. The focus group interview guide had questions that were similar to the semi-structured interview guide. The focus group discussions were meant to validate information obtained in the individual interviews (Flick, 2006). The focus group discussions were done in the local language Shona. The author JM conducted both the individual interviews and the focus group discussions with the help of a research assistant.

Permission was sought from the two NGOs in Gweru to have some of the children they assist take part in the interviews. All adolescents who were approached agreed to take part in the study.

Data analysis

Thematic content analysis was used to analyse data. Data from the interviews were transcribed into English by the author JM. Data analysis involved familiarising with the data through reading and re-reading of the transcripts and audio recorded information, generating themes from the data and naming themes to give meaningful explanations of the data and to provide a clear sense of the themes. Narratives with the same meaning were therefore put together to develop a theme [40].

Ethical issues

The psychological wellbeing of the study participants was respected. A qualified counsellor was on standby to attend to the needs of participants who would have felt emotionally distressed as a result of the interview process. Written informed consent was obtained from each individual participant. Permission was sought from each participant to have their responses tape recorded.

Findings

The adolescents who took part in the current study reported that they experienced positive personal experiences, growth through the relationships that they had with significant others and also from their relations with the community at large. Participants recommended education of caregivers as important in their positive development.

Theme 1- Positive personal experience

Participants said that the vision that they had in their lives, personal motivation and the need to prove a point throughout their lives helped them to remain focused and helped in their positive development.

Vision: Some participants reported that having a vision pushed them to achieve in their lives. They said they had a vision of a better future and did not let their backgrounds taint their future. They said they always aimed for a better future. The following are the extracts from the participants:

"I always wanted to make it in life and I always dreamt of a better future. So I worked hard to be someone in my life". (FDG 1 participant)

"My vision propelled me in life because I believed there are no limits to life. I valued myself because I had a vision. I know what I wanted and thrived to become whatever I wanted". (Participant 2)

So most of the study participants aimed to make an impact in their lives and the lives of their siblings. They said that they did not want their backgrounds to define their future.

Motivation: Participants reported that they were inspired by other people who had achieved in their lives. This gave them the hope that they would achieve whatever they wanted. Some participants spoke of intrinsic motivation where they said that they always had this fire in them that helped them to forge on and to hope for the best in their lives. Others reported that the motivation that they had was from God. The following excerpts illustrate the role of motivation in the participants' lives:

"I was always inspired by our neighbour's children, the four of them went to university and I always wished to be like them. So this motivated me to forge ahead and to be positive in whatever I do" (FDG 3 participant).

"Within me is this hope that things will be okay one day. I look forward to have a decent job and to have a stable family and to provide for my family" (FDG 1 participant).

"Before I do anything I always ask God for guidance and I feel God is giving me energy and always motivates me. When I feel low I read the bible and that uplifts my spirit. When things are tough for me and when everything is on a standstill I always trust that God has an answer for my prayers and this really motivates me." (Participant 4).

Need to prove a point: Research participants said that they were doing well in life because they had this urge in them to prove a point. Most of them said that many negative things have been said about them and they felt that they had to show the world that as orphans they could also achieve and were not created to beg. The participants' need to prove a point were illustrated in the following extracts:

"I ran away from my father's relatives who used to take care of me and became a street kid for more than two years. I just wanted my freedom and to show people that I could do it. I was not just meant to suffer" (Participant 5).

"I am a victim of verbal abuse. I went under the custody of my brother when both my parents passed on. His wife was very abusive even if I did a very good job she could always scold me. I used to stay alone at their rural home when I was 12 years old I planted a vegetable garden and would sell the vegetables. When she came it was as if I had done wrong. I grew up with this urge in me to prove that I am someone worthy and someone who could achieve in life" (Participant 1).

Theme 2: Positive development from relationships

The study participants said the experiences that they had either with close relatives or the community at large really helped them to cope with stressful events in their lives and were a pillar of strength. Some study participants also reported the healing effect of the attachment that they still had with their deceased parents. They reported that their parents would advise them and give them direction whenever they felt lost. Comfort and peace of mind was reported to have resulted from their interactions with friends.

Connection to deceased parents: Some participants said that although their parents were dead they always had a special place in their lives. They influenced whatever they did and they felt their spirits guided them in their day to day lives. The following narrative illustrates

the role of connection with deceased parents in the adolescents' positive development"

"My parents always guide me whenever I am making a decision. Before I do anything I always ask myself what my parents could have done in this particular case. For example at one time I felt that I had to run away from my mother's sister's home because of neglect. I thought of my parents and knew that they would never approve of such behaviour. I then persevered and kept on hoping that things were going to be well" (Participant 1).

"I always dream of my parents advising me whenever I fail to make decisions. I like the moments when I dream of my parents and wish they could come and talk to me in my dreams every night. I can feel their presence and it's like they are always with me" (FDG 3 participant).

Relationship with friends: Having close friends to confide in was reported as inspiring and motivating by the study participants. They said that friends especially those from the same socio-economic background helped them to share concerns and experiences. The importance of friends in positive development is illustrated below:

"I always had friends who helped me and were there for me all the time. Some would help me with clothes that they did not want and some would ask their parents for money to donate to me so that I could buy books and the other things that I did not have" (FDG 3 participant).

"Having friends who were concerned about my welfare has taught me a fundamental lesson. I have learnt to also give and share the little that I have with those who are in need I have this vision that when I grow up I also want to start an organisation that will look into the welfare of orphans because I appreciate what has been done by others in my life" (Participant 7).

Theme 3: Community role in positive development

Most of the children appreciated the help that they had received from the community at large and said this helped them to be resilient

Sense of belonging: Study participants appreciated the role that some non-governmental organisations had played in their lives. They felt their provision of material support had helped them to feel just like any other children who had parents and this had helped boost their self-esteem and self-confidence as given in the illustrations below.

"I remember I was in grade 3 when this NGO came to our school and identified all orphaned children. They would give us food, fees and clothing and above all they allowed me to interact with other students with a similar background. This was the first time that I felt my situation was better than that of others and this helped to boost my confidence" (FDG 1 participant).

"Through the work of the NGO that was working in our area I developed the sense of belong. That sense that I was loved and that there were people who cared about me. Previously I was very isolated and believed that no one cared about my circumstances" (FDG 1 participant).

Being loved: Study participants said throughout their lives they had met people who had taught them to love. Through the caring and love that were shown by these people the study participants reported that in turn they could also love and show compassion to other people because some people had shown them how to do this. They were like role models as illustrated in the narratives below:

"I was expelled from the school when I was in form one because I did not have money to pay for my fees. This female teacher from the school took me into her house and started paying for my fees. I became her child. She was caring and motherly something that I missed my whole life. For the first time I had someone who was prepared to listen to me and to value me. She taught me to love other people" (FDG 1 participant).

"When I went into the streets I met this other social worker from an organisation that provided us with food and clothing. She would treat us as her own children. She could hug us and gave each one of us time to talk to her privately. We had time to air our fears and concerns and she comforted us" (Participant 2).

"I grew up with my paternal relatives and they were strong Christians. The church pastor always had special time with orphaned children. I learnt a lot from him. He taught us Ubuntu, how to respect elders, how to become responsible people and to pray. His teachings were very helpful in my life as I am a changed person and I can now interact". (FDG 3 participant).

Recommendations for positive youth development

Several recommendations were put forward as important by the study participants so as to foster positive development among orphans. These included better living conditions for children in institutions, respects of the orphaned children's needs, better attachment relationships, education of caregivers, self-esteem and confidence building workshops.

Better living condition for children in institutions: Three of the study participants had lived in institutions at particular times in their lives. They lamented the poor living conditions in institutions. Below are some of the observations that they made:

"I have been in three probation hostels and I would always run away from these and go back to the streets. Life at probation hostels in Zimbabwe is like life in jails. There is no attachment and people who work for these homes only care about their work and are not really concerned about the psychosocial development of children. I believe that those who work for these homes should be approachable and the setting should be really be like a family setting"(Participant 5).

"people who man children's home should be taught to love children at the home because this will go a long way in fostering positive development among the children" (FDG 2 participant).

"I stayed at a children's home for two years until I was taken in by my maternal parents. Besides the food, clothing and the fees that they used to pay for us they did not teach us how to relate and to stand up for ourselves so much that when I was taken in by my maternal relatives I had a difficult time trying to fit into the family" (FDG 2 participant).

Respect for the orphaned children's needs: Some study participants felt that those who care for orphans should respect their needs and have time to discuss with them their expectations and needs. Most said many times they were not consulted when decisions that mattered to them were to be made. And the few times that they were consulted there was no implementation of their recommendations the consultations were more like unnecessary rituals. This point is illustrated in the excerpts below:

"As for me I would rather keep quiet about my orphan hood status. For me it's a no go area and I don't want anyone discussing my

background. I disclose my background to people I trust and I don't want them telling people about my story. That's what I want and feel that that should be respected" (Participants 6).

"At one time my teacher told the whole class that I should not be failing but should be working hard since I did not have parents. I got so angry that I left the school and never returned. Teachers also need help in the best practises when dealing with orphans since we spend most of our time at school. They should be more accommodative" (FDG 2 participant).

Education of caregivers: Most of the study participants said that as a result of their experiences caregivers be they maternal or paternal relatives, caregivers from institutions or anyone who lives with orphaned children has to be educated on how to raise the orphans to become responsible citizens. The following illustrations illustrate this:

"when I was in 14 years old I was taken by my father's brother. He had just married and I was the only child. We had misunderstandings and I felt they did not love me. But when I look back at that experience I feel pity for them because here they were staring a family, expecting babies but the first child is an adolescent going through his own developmental milestones. At least they should have had someone to talk to them about what to expect from adolescents and general adolescents behaviour by that they could have been in a better position to assist me. And this could have helped reduce our differences" (FDG 3 participant).

"I stayed with my brother when both of my parents passed on. I was eight years old at the time and the family was staying at the rural home. A year later my brother got a job in Harare and he moved with his whole family. I was left at the rural home and I was just nine years old. I had to look after the cattle and goats as well as go to school. Most of the time I absented myself from school. At least if someone had talked to them and convinced them that I was as important as their own kids life was going to be better for me" (Participant 6).

Workshops on psychological wellbeing: The study participants recommended that orphaned children should be taught issues to do with psychological wellbeing. This they said would help them in becoming holistic. They recommended workshops on Ubuntu, self-esteem, leadership, confidence building and resilience as given in the extracts below:

"As orphaned children we grew up in environments where people do not believe in us and many times we lack confidence and self-esteem. If NGOs that assist orphaned children would help them in this area" (Participants 4).

"I stayed in the streets for more than 2 years and yes we would get people who would provide us with food and clothes. But in terms of Ubuntu there was nothing that was taught. Simple things like greeting elders were very difficult for me when I was taken in by a foster parent. I could not fit in because no one had prepared me for that" (FDG 2 Participants).

Discussion

Findings from the study were that some adolescent orphans had a vision of a better future that propelled them to have courage and to move on even when they felt discouraged. The positive youth development model puts across the fact that through pursuit of relevant goals youth can direct their development [41]. The model is positive and holistic and does not look at human deficiencies [20].

The study participants reported that from within and at personal level they were motivated to archive high and to excel in their lives. In support of this Ssewamala et al. [42] indicated that although orphans face difficult circumstances it has been shown that they also have high educational plans and aspirations. There is need to provide psychosocial support for orphans who have been orphaned but this does not mean turning a blind eye to their negative experiences like living with ill parents and the death of one or both parents. Joining a support group resulted in higher levels of self-concept not reduced levels of anxiety and depression among AIDS orphans [25]. Resilience as a positive attribute that helped in their positive development was reported by the study participants. The negative circumstances that they had been through helped them to forge ahead and to be strong.

It emerged from the study that some study participants still felt a strong closeness with their deceased parents. Through dreams some said they could communicate with their parents and others said parents helped them in making the right choices. Contrary to this finding most studies that have been done on orphans mainly bring out remembrance of deceased parents as failure to cope with their death thus anything to do with deceased parents is construed as negative and pathological [5,15,35]. Kayombo et al. [36] reported that traditional methods are important in helping orphans cope with orphanhood.

Study participants reported that the experiences that they had with caring adults provided them with a sense of belonging and helped to boost their self-esteem. A study on YHAB has shown that youth participants felt they personally grew through their experience of building external support structures in their school and community, increasing both internal and external developmental assets. It is important to encourage orphans when they feel down, help them feel positive and help build their self-efficacy. Encouragement helps youths find their role in life and an inner strength that inspires them and improves their self-esteem. This helps them to positively progress with their lives [41].

Youth who took part in this study acknowledged the role that the community as well as friends had played in enhancing their development. According to Iwasaki et al. [42] the community can be safety net that allows people to support each other. They further observe that a community can be created among a reliable network of people who have the interest of the youth in mind. When youth are part of the community they feel a sense of solidarity and belonging. Research has also revealed that interventions that help foster peer relationships among HIV- affected children may delay use of substances and build resiliency [43].

Adolescent in this study said they benefited a lot from interactions with other orphaned children that was necessitated by NGOs that operated in their communities. This is supported by Iwasaki et al. [42] who observed that by creating a community of individuals who deal with similar issues youth come to identify themselves as part of the community. Relationship-building has been identified as the most important practise for working with youth who have been through difficult relationships and this can help bridge the gap between the youths and the community that they work with [44]. Culture influences bereavement and grief experience among children [45]. Research has shown that caregiver availability and sensitivity are key in determining children's attachment security [46]. Trusting relationships have been found to be important in helping children to adjust despite their vulnerability (parent loss, parent illness or HIV free) [37]. Securely attached young people perform better in language, academic,

social and emotional functioning [47]. Better social support was found to be related to higher self-esteem and resilience.

Study participants recommended the need for better communication with their caregivers. Iwasaki et al. [42] observed that communication in group settings allows one to understand that there are others who have been through the same situation as them, insures a sense of belonging, allows one to help other in the same situation, improves social skills and gives hope. For positive youth development there is need to accept that youths have knowledge of certain things that adults may not have. Their experience from living and knowledge allows them to be competent and allows them to take initiative. As given by Iwasaki et al. [42] effective communication, trust, feeling respected and positive interactions are the main facets of a relationship and youth need to feel a sense of connection and trust in their relationships. They postulated that if youth know that they have somewhere to turn to when they are stressed they are less likely to engage in ineffective coping mechanisms. Positive relationships should enable an individual to become the person he/she inspires to be. In addition to the importance of interpersonal relationships they also advocate for a relationship with the self where individuals self-reflect, set goals and thrive for personal growth.

The study has revealed that there is need for caregivers to be educated on the needs of children and how best to insure optimal development for these children. Castle et al. [48] found that close relationships with institutional staff can buffer the trauma of parental loss. Furthermore they proposed that quality care can mitigate alleviate the problems faced by orphans. Some youth reported a greater sense of caring for their community, taking personal responsibility to improve it, and helping others stand up for what they believe. According to Adamson et al. [34] with adequate social support children easily reach their full potential without any impediments, they can be hopeful and can make future plans.

The study participants lamented that there is need to respect the needs of orphans. Meaningful youth engagement is a key concept for positive youth development [47]. This includes listening and responding to youth, power sharing between youths and adults and critical reflection [18]. For example, in YouthScape, an initiative in five communities across Canada [44], relationship-building was identified as the top overarching practice for working with youth who often have trust issues and may have experienced difficulties in relationships (e.g., neglect, abusive relationship, lack of intimate and secure relationship). [44] emphasized that the meaningful engagement of marginalized youth requires moving away from the dominant hierarchy of relationships in which adults are providers and youth are receivers, to a more equal, collaborative model of relationships [49-55].

Study participants said they longed for a situation where they got empowered psychologically and given skills that they could not have acquired in their homes due to the hostility of the environment. As given by the positive youth development model empowerment means to enable youth to recognize their abilities and potentials by helping them develop the confidence to implement positive changes in their lives. That is, empowerment is about gaining the confidence and feeling that youth can and will be able to succeed; having the power to conquer the challenges with an ongoing action plan. Support and encouragement are needed to enable youths to recognize and enhance their abilities and strengths. Such support and accommodation should aim to meet youths where they are at personally in order to promote confidence. It is important to learn about each and every youth as an individual [56-65].

Implications of the study

The study helps to inform those who work with adolescents in a low resourced setting, the study brings to the fore the psychosocial needs of the adolescents that would contribute to their positive development. Follow-up quantitative studies may be needed to ascertain the response obtained in this study from a large group of participants.

Limitations of the study

One limitation of the study was that of recall bias whereby participants were asked to recall what had happened in their lives. This could have led to distorted findings as a result of forgetting. The findings may not be generalisable to adolescent orphans in Zimbabwe.

Conclusions

The present study sought to explore positive experiences in the lives of orphaned adolescent. The point of departure is that when the adolescents' positive experiences are identified and fostered this will go a long way in improving their psychological wellbeing. The adolescents who took part in the current study reiterated on the importance of their relationships in fostering positive development. Their experiences even negative ones were said to be important as they helped them gain resilience and motivation to future adversity.

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