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Analysis of Psychosocial Support Needs for Orphans and Vulnerable Children in Primary Education: A Case Study of Public Schools in Harare, Zimbabwe

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Abstract: This study analysed the psychosocial support needs for orphans and vulnerable children in primary education. The particular focus was on public primary schools in Epworth, Mabvuku and Tafara. These schools were located in Harare of Zimbabwe. The analysis of this qualitative research study was based on the perspectives of 10 school heads, 10 teachers, 5 school counselors, and 80 orphans and vulnerable children, making a sample of 105 participants. These participants were drawn from 10 public primary schools in the areas mentioned above. A purposive sampling technique was used to select the participants. The study used interviews and focus group discussions to collect data. The data that were collected were analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. Results revealed that while OVC in the research setting received some form of assistance from either government or NGOs, the assistance packages provided were not adequate to address the basic needs required to sustain the concerned children. The most pronounced insufficiencies were in the areas of educational, food and counseling support. The study recommended that the government and NGOs should coordinate and synchronise to ensure that the assistance provided to OVC in public primary schools in Epworth, Mabvuku and Tafara, addresses their basic needs.

Keywords: Psychosocial Support, Orphan and Vulnerable Children, Public Primary Schools, School Counselors, Stakeholders, Child Rights.

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INTRODUCTION

It is estimated that globally, at least 5.2 million children have been orphaned as a result of losing their parents or caregivers by the end of 2021 due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Other pandemics and diseases also add to the increasing number of children who are orphaned. In Africa, the number of orphans and vulnerable children is frequently underreported in places like Africa. Nevertheless, both reported and unreported orphans and vulnerable children, especially those of primary school going ages suffer a variety of orphanhood hazards. These hazards include but not limited to domestic violence, sexual violence, sexual exploitation, teenage pregnancies, HIV infection, suicide, child labor and dropping out of school. The thinking in this paper is that the protection of the most vulnerable sections of society is the hallmark of a progressive society. One of the building blocks towards the realisation of this noble endeavour is to ensure that every child, including the most vulnerable such as those living in the streets, are provided with the psychosocial support they need to enable them to have access to education the provision of psychosocial support could be one of the measures to assist orphans and vulnerable children to reduce the hardships and suffering as a consequence of their orphanhood and multiple vulnerabilities they faced. This study analysed the psychosocial support needs of orphans and vulnerable

children in public primary schools in Harare of Zimbabwe.

BACKGROUND

The number of orphaned children is increasing in an alarming rate at the global level in general and in Africa in particular. According to Myovela (2012), an estimated 12.3 million orphans live in Sub-Saharan Africa, and their numbers have grown quickly in recent years to the point where the problem has become a crisis that appears to be overwhelming the entire region. Recent studies have also shown that there was a high prevalence of orphaned and vulnerable children in Zimbabwe (Bennell, 2021; & Gotora, 2021). These studies found estimated that more than 1.3 million children in Zimbabwe were orphaned mainly as result of the HIV/AIDS pandemic is to blame. Furthermore, Gotora (2021) claimed that over 50,000 families in Zimbabwe were headed by children under the age of 18 who have lost their parents. Traditionally, orphaned children in Zimbabwe were typically taken into the custody of members of the extended family including grandparents, aunts and uncles among other relatives. However, this once reliable extended family network has been eroded by the pressure of pervasive economic hardships that have eroded extended families' capacity to assume responsibility of orphaned children. Consequently, orphaned and vulnerable children in Zimbabwe were left to cope not only with the stress of

losing their parents between also the hardships that are associated with being an orphan. Notwithstanding the fact that all vulnerable groups across the globe suffer from the effect of poverty, orphans who are still minors suffer the most (Alem, 2020; & Kibachio & Mutie, 2020). These children experience a variety of problems including poor malnutrition leading to ill health, psychosocial problems, developmental glitches, lack of emotional and social support and inadequate educational opportunities among others.

In Zimbabwe, there is a pressing need for development in orphan education. For orphaned and vulnerable children in Zimbabwe, access to a quality primary education remains a challenge that hinders the effort to get every child enjoy the right to a basic education as enshrined in the Constitution of the country. Orphans and vulnerable children in Zimbabwe often struggle to access their basic needs including attending school on a regular basis, resulting in them missing out on this life changing activity which empowers them to operate as productive members of society. Given this challenge, it was apparent that the need for providing psychosocial support to these orphans and vulnerable children is imperative, especially for orphans and vulnerable children who attend public primary schools. This gap has motivated the conduct of this study.

Research Question

This study addressed the following main research question; what are the psychosocial support needs for orphans and vulnerable children in public primary schools in Harare, Zimbabwe?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study was guided by Bronfenbrenner's Bio-ecological Systems Theory (BEST), which explains how elements of the environment impact and shapes the development of children (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), including those who need psychosocial support services (Khanare & De Lange, 2017). This theory was used in this study because it places a developing child at the center of concentric systems of the environment in which they grow. According to Bronfenbrenner and his disciples of his bio-ecological ideas, an individual's ecological environment comprises a collection of layered systems, ranging from micro to macro, and chrono systems. Each of these subsystems is nested within the others, creating concentric circles with the developing child at the center (Biggeri & Cuesta 2021; Mabhoyi & Seroto, 2019; Bronfenbrenner 1979; & Pollard, 2014). According to the Bio-ecological Systems Theory, the person's ecological environment comprises five sub-systems; the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem and chronosystem (Bratanoto *et al.*, 2022; Bronfenbrenner, 1994; Donald *et al.*, 2010; & Rathus, 2006). Neal & Neal (2013), unlike Bronfenbrenner, refer to the ecological subsystems as social "networks," which are

made up of overlapping structures that are all directly or indirectly connected to one another through the members' social interactions.

The microsystem includes the child's relationships with others in the more immediate natural environment, such as at home, school, and in after-school groups (Chinyenze, 2017 citing Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Bronfenbrenner, 1994; & Dawes & Donald, 2004). The interconnections between several microsystems, such as the home, school, clinic, or general practice, make up the mesosystem. When there are issues at home, OVC at the mesosystem may require psychosocial help from the school, a neighbor or classmates to enable them to cope (McLloyd & Wilson 2017). The exosystem constitutes the systems that do not have direct contact with the child, but that affect the quality of childcare they received (Dawes & Donald, 2004; & Chinyenze, 2018). At the ecosystem, other institutions can also provide psychosocial support to OVC who may not be getting the support they need from the schools. The macrosystem entails the interaction between the developing child and the larger subsystem such as policies, culture and the economy among other factors that the child has no influence over. In adopting the Bio-ecological Systems Theory as the guiding theory, it was considered that it was the most suitable model to provide an understanding of the interaction between OVC and those who are better placed to provide their needs in terms of psychosocial support services within the context of public primary schools the use of the Bio-ecological systems perspective therefore, enriched this study's attempt to explain how orphans and vulnerable children in public primary schools could receive their psychosocial support needs within the public primary schools. The thinking was that, when OVC are enrolled, the public schools should assume the vital role of providing support and care, that should be ordinarily provided by parents and caregivers in a family setup

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

According to UNICEF (2021), there are approximately 140 million orphan children worldwide who have lost one or both parents. These children experience multiple challenges that require an assortment of interventions in order to help them to develop coping mechanisms as well as enabling them to forge ahead with their lives. Such assistance can be conceptualised in terms of psychosocial support. The concept of psychosocial support (PSS) has gained acceptance on a global scale. There is convergence of scholarly view that the term "psychosocial support" refers to the full framework of initiatives or engagements made to assist OVC in managing their emotional, psychological, social, academic, and behavioral issues (Christopher & Mosha, 2021; Ringson, 2020; & Fawzi *et al.*, 2012). The goal of

psychosocial support is to make the lives of less fortunate minors, especially orphans and vulnerable children, better (Alem, 2020). According to Mavambo Orphan Care (2018), the scope of children requiring psychosocial support is diverse. It includes orphans and vulnerable children (OVC) who are brokenhearted due to parental loss, those who are experiencing stigma and discrimination for one reason or another and those who are experiencing various forms of abuse including emotional, sexual and physical. Similarly, the assistance which comprises psychosocial support services is also wide ranging. It includes but not limited to the assisting OVC with their educational needs, school-based feeding, assisting OVC to obtain birth certificate and medical assistance among other critical aspects (Christopher & Mosha, 2021; Kibachio & Mutie, 2020; & Khanare & De Lange, 2017).

The African child's circumstances and needs were first acknowledged in the Declaration on the Rights and Welfare of the African Child in 1979. In contrast to earlier treaties, the 1979 Declaration was designed specifically champion the rights of the African child (African Charter, 1999; Chinyenze, 2018; & Kaime, 2009). Furthermore, African countries adopted the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC) (1990), which builds on the provisions of contained in the Declaration and Welfare on the Rights of the African Child of 1979. Researchers (Chinyenze, 2018; Ncube, 2014; & Muthoga, 2010) analysed that the 1990 Declaration was developed to ensure that the rights of the African child were recognised and upheld regardless of their disadvantaged circumstances. Many other regional protocols such as the SADC Protocol on Education and Training (2000), SADC Protocol on Gender and Development (2008) and SADC Protocol on Health (1999), were also developed to complement the founding declaration to ensure that every child including orphans and vulnerable children, have access to basic needs.

Although scholars tend to agree on the activities involved in the provision of psychosocial support, there is no agreed universal parameters of this contemporary practice in terms of the scope of the support that can be provided. Nevertheless, as a practice, psychosocial support is internationally accepted as an intervention method for the protection and care of orphaned and vulnerable children (Christopher & Mosha, 2021; Disassa & Lamessa, 2021; & Biggeri & Cuesta, 2021). Recent studies have shown that psychosocial support programs are designed to ensure that disadvantaged children grow up in settings that support their psychosocial and developmental needs (Lawrence, Makhonza & Mngomezulu, 2022; Disassa & Lamessa, 2021; & Chinyenze, 2018). Such a setting should ensure safety, continuity of appropriate care, and provision for all children's needs, including those related to their physical and mental development. Given these recent

views, psychosocial support services can be conceptualised in terms of a collection of policies, rules and programs that are necessary in a functional society, particularly social welfare department, education, health and security among a variety of other vital protective measures (UNICEF, 2012). This entails that a wide range of players are involved in creating and putting into place safeguards for OVC. In the case of OVC in public primary schools, policies and rules govern the psychosocial support services that are given within the context of public primary schools (Gurupira & Chikutuma, 2017). According to the code of psychosocial practice, providing psychosocial support for children entails taking any measures necessary to safeguard them against harm, and those measures that aim to alleviate any hardships that stem from abuse, neglect and ill-treatment among other risks (Zimbabwe Children's Act, 2001: & Chinyenze, 2018). However, the quality and range of psychosocial support services available to orphans and vulnerable children depends on a variety factors such as context, preferences and financial resources of a nation as well as commitment by those in key positions in public institutions including primary schools. These factors are vital and should be taken into consideration during the designing and implementation of needed interventions.

Generally, studies have shown that psychosocial support challenges faced by OVC in educational settings manifest through lack of school fees, stationery, uniforms, food, health and clothes among other basic needs (Bennell, 2021; Alem, 2020; & Tigere, 2016). Evidence have also shown that OVC in public schools are also exposed to crime, violence, child prostitution and child marriages, resulting in poor academic performance among this needy group. Even in cases where the psychosocial needs OVC are identified, essential competences and expertise are oftentimes missing in most public institutions that deal children who are suffering from certain vulnerabilities. Recent studies (Alem, 2020; & Mabhoi & Seroto, 2019) found that skills relating to psychosocial support are often entirely not there at the school level. In cases where such competences and skills are present, they are more likely to be inadequate.

In line with international and regional instruments, Zimbabwe has a number of legislative and policy frameworks to support orphaned and vulnerable children. The foundation law in this regard is the Children's Act of 2001, which provides that all children in need of care should be protected and placed in a safe environment that is conducive for their development. With regards to the education of children, the pillar constitutional provision is the Education Act of 1987, as amended in 1996, 1999, 2006, and 2013 and recently in 2020. This framework requires that all children of school going age, must have access to education regardless of their socioeconomic background. In terms sexual abuses, the Sexual Offences Act of 2004,

protects children against sexual exploitation. The Domestic Violence Act (2006), protects children from all abuses emanating from abusive parents or caregivers at homes as well as any harmful cultural practices such as forced genital mutilation, early marriages, virginity testing and pledging of teenage girls for marriage purposes. In terms of the ensuring the health wellbeing of children, the Public Health Act of 2018, has provision for free medical assistance for all children especially those who are under the age of 5 years as well as orphaned and vulnerable children. Another legal framework aimed at furthering the welfare of OVC is the Birth and Registration Act of 1996, which affords all children including OVC, the right to access identity documents in order to facilitate access to other rights such as access to education among many other basic necessities. The National Orphan Care Policy of 1999, specifically makes provisions for basic care and protection of orphans and vulnerable children in Zimbabwe. According to Kurevakwesu and Chizasa (2020), the National Orphan Care Policy of 1999 also commits the Government of Zimbabwe (GoZ), through the responsible Ministries, to allocate resources to enable children facing different vulnerabilities to access education for its accepted worth. The assistance provided in this regard is achieved through the Basic Education Assistance Module (BEAM), which is administered through the Department of Social Welfare. BEAM only pays school fees and examination fees assistance to OVC in public primary schools. Further to this assistance program, the GoZ alleviates the challenges faced by OVC, through the Public Assistance to Vulnerable Families Programme, a program which is designed to assist vulnerable children with basic living costs and health cover. While all these legal frameworks were meant to benefit children in need of various supports, what was obtaining on the ground was that cases of OVC requiring various forms of support service, referred in this study as psychosocial support in public primary schools in Harare of Zimbabwe, was increasing instead of decreasing. This problem provides the rationale for the conduct of this study which analysed this problem and proffered solutions by way of recommendations.

METHODOLOGY

This study was guided by the hermeneutic phenomenological research philosophy. This philosophy is anchored on the idea that the real-world experiences of research participants is the best way of understanding problems which human beings face in their everyday lives (Nigar, 2020; & Van Manen, 2014). The procedures of this philosophy provided this study with a set of primary data that were generated from the study setting, making the resultant findings rich in contextual validity. The thick descriptions of data produced a thorough explanation of the studied phenomena, an advantage which created knowledge and understanding in this particular study which is located in research practices in education. In using the

hermeneutic phenomenological research philosophy, it was considered that it was used successfully by renowned academics (Husserl, 1970; Van Manen, 1990; Reiners, 2012; Vagle, 2018; & Dibley *et al.*, 2020) in both ancient and contemporary times. Recent studies (Kafle, 2011; Ringson, 2017; Barrow, 2017, Ringson, 2020) have used phenomenology as research philosophy and came up with resounding outcomes. As a research philosophy, the base utility of the hermeneutic phenomenology lies in its primary goal, which is to enable researchers to provide detailed description of the phenomenon under study from the participants' lived experiences. In similar view, this study employed the phenomenology ideas to analyse psychosocial support needs of OVC in selected public primary schools in Harare of Zimbabwe. It came out that hermeneutic phenomenology was the most appropriate philosophy guide the conduct of this study. In a nutshell, it can be concluded that this study derived value by adopting a hermeneutic phenomenological research philosophy because it was found to be useful in unpacking the underlying issues surrounding the provision of psychosocial support needs of orphans and vulnerable children in primary school settings. This conclusion aligns with Dangal & Joshi (2020), who argued that the methods of hermeneutic research philosophy are credible and rigorous, to the extent that they provided researchers with innovative ways of addressing the various aspects of a subject being studied.

The study also used a qualitative phenomenological research approach to critically analyse the psychosocial support needs of OVC in the research setting. The decision to adopt a qualitative research approach was motivated by the prospect to gain rich and relevant data from credible sources using naturalistic methods of data collection. Informed by qualitative research principles, this study used interviews and focus groups to gather data. The participants were selected using purposive sampling techniques. This sampling technique was used to select 10 public primary schools in Harare of Zimbabwe, where 10 school heads, 10 teachers, 5 school counselors and 80 OVC in public primary schools, were drawn. The data that were collected were analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Throughout the process of this study, various ethical considerations were observed as outlined in the relevant code of conduct applying to social science research. Prior to the conduct of this study, permission to carry out the study in the selected public primary schools, was obtained from the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education. Informed consent was also obtained from the participants. In the case of children, consent to participating in this study was obtained from their respective parents or caregivers. Other ethical considerations observed during the conduct of this study are confidentiality of information, anonymization of

data to protect participants and respect for privacy and personal integrity of participants.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The goal of psychosocial support services should be to establish and sustain stable nurturing environment for vulnerable children. Based on this thinking, this study analysed psychosocial support needs of orphans and vulnerable minors. The aim of the analysis was to determine the quality of psychosocial support services received by OVC in public primary schools in Harare, Zimbabwe. The analysis showed that a diverse legal framework was in place in Zimbabwe, on which a variety of psychosocial support services were located. Some of the psychosocial support services available to OVC but not fully availed to in public primary schools in the research setting included educational assistance, basic counseling, food and health care, facilitation of birth registration and related assistance, and child-rights awareness. The delivery of these psychosocial services differed mainly because they were provided by non-governmental organizations and faith-based organizations working in the communities of Epworth, Mabvuku and Tafara. The findings of this study are discussed separately in the paragraphs that follow.

Insufficient Educational Support

The BEAM programme as psychosocial support intervention for OVC in schools was only providing school fees to a limited number of OVC in public primary schools in Harare. The study revealed that the BEAM funds were inadequate to cater for all orphans and vulnerable children who required this assistance. As a result, several deserving OVC were left out of the programme, a problem that contravenes the right of every child to education as enshrined in the legal frameworks. However, it emerged from the data that OVC whose education needs were supported by NGOs and FBOs, were coping well as they were able to attend classes without being disruptions because their basic educational needs were being met. Participants in Mabvuku and Tafara, indicated that OVC who were enrolled in public primary schools in their areas were receiving a comprehensive educational support package to including school fees, school uniforms and stationery. These participants further disclosed that OVC were also provided with textbooks for the whole year and return them to the supporting organization at the end of the respective school calendar year. In contrast to the comprehensive educational support provided by NGOs, OVC who whose educational support was guaranteed by the GoZ, were struggling to receive such critical support. The participants explained that payment of school fees for OVC under the BEAM program, was problematic. As a result, it compromises the performance of the concerned children who were forced to miss classes and in worst cases, end up dropping out of school. In appreciation of the

educational support from NGOs, one participant confirmed that;

Non-governmental organisations are bridging the gaps which are inherent in the BEAM programme. NGOs pay our children's school fees every school term and they are also provided with uniforms and stationery. We appreciate BEAM for paying schools fees, but the payments are not made on time. Furthermore, BEAM assistance just focuses on paying school fees and neglects other basic educational needs such as stationery and school uniforms.

The school heads and teachers interviewed seem to appreciate the contributions made by NGOs and FBOs in providing educational support to OVC in public primary schools. The participants highlighted that at the beginning of each year, OVC receive exercise books to cover their requirement in the main subjects. This implied that some the support in this area of need was not adequate to cover the needs of the affected children. A statement by one of the participants revealed this undesirable state of affairs;

We appreciate the educational support being offered by NGOs in our primary schools. In addition to paying fees for OVC, some of them even provide school uniforms and basic stationary once in a while. However, the majority of OVC in public primary schools in our district remain in dire need of other educational requirements such as exercise books, pens and other school related items that facilitate learning. This problem has contributed towards the poor academic performance which characterise public primary schools in this district.

Analysis of the above excerpts from participants demonstrated two pertinent points. First, the OVC in public primary schools were receiving educational support from both NGOs and government. The second point was that while such educational support was critical towards keeping OVC in in classes, it was not all OVC who needed such support who got it. As a result, the affected children end up dropping out of school, perpetuating further disadvantages in their future life. While it was the responsibility of the government to provide the psychosocial support needed to keep OVC in the education system, this service was not being implemented in line the full provisions of the available legislative frameworks. The GoZ, as the primary responsible authority for the protection of every child in the country, was reneging on its commitment to ensure the rights of children. The

Inadequate Food and Malnutrition

Another key finding that emerged from the analysis relates to the problem of lack of nutritious food faced by orphans and vulnerable children who were

enrolled in the participating public primary schools. This finding confirms prior findings recent studies (Sewnet *et al.*, 2021; & van der Berg *et al.*, 2022) that found that inadequate food and malnutrition undermine healthy development and hinder children from achieving their full potential. Kamath (2017), described malnutrition as a condition that arises from consuming a nutrient-poor diet. According to the estimations provided by participants, several orphans and vulnerable children in the communities of Epworth, Mabvuku and Tafara suffered from this problem. The majority of participants were agreeable that measures were in place to alleviate hunger and better the lives of the OVC in public primary schools in the research area. However, the problem was with the quantum and quality of the food offered against the swelling number of children who needed this particular support. Though the food assistance was meant to feed every child at the respective schools, the actual feeding was limited to selected OVC on the basis of the extremeness of their hunger. The participants explained that both the GoZ and NGOs were mostly concerned with paying school fees for the OVC, while neglecting other important aspects such as food support. During interviews and FGDs participants revealed that the number of orphans and vulnerable children was escalating in primary schools in Epworth, Mabvuku and Tafara. One of the participants, a teacher at one of the public primary school which had a running feeding program for orphans and vulnerable children, claimed that:

Hunger is one of the major challenges faced by OVC at this school. Some OVC leave their homes without eating anything. So as the school we try to feed them whenever we receive food from the government and donors. The major problem is that these continue increasing while the food remains inadequate.

It was apparent from the data that the lack of support in terms of food assistance was a serious plight among OVC in public primary schools in Harare, particularly in Epworth, Mabvuku and Tafara. Furthermore, lack of food affects children's thinking skills, behaviors and health. All these factors may impact negatively on the academic performance of OVC in schools as hunger may cause developmental challenges that tend to cause irreparable harm to the affected children. Evidence is awash that malnutrition contributes to poor academic performance, which may lower chances of success by affected OVC. It was apparent that the problem of lack of food and the resultant malnutrition, could be addressed through the provision of comprehensive and quality psychosocial support services. This view aligns with findings by Sewnet *et al.* (2021), who emphasised that development of OVC is negatively affected by lack of nutritious food.

Inadequate Counseling Services

The analysis of data revealed that most OVC who were enrolled in public primary schools in

Epworth, Mabvuku and Tafara were encountering psychological challenges that affected their academic performance and social life in general. These psychological problems included stress, depression, lack of love, stigma, lack of concentration in class, loneliness, isolation and dejection. Although the participating schools had teachers who provided counselling services, these teachers were not qualified professional counselors. Hence, they lacked the requisite skills and knowledge required for the delivery of effective counselling services. The majority of the teachers and school heads who participated in this study, were adamant that there was not commitment by the responsible Ministry to conduct capacity development programs to enhance the skills of teachers who were responsible for providing counselling services in public primary schools in Harare. Participants indicated that staff from NGOs also provided counselling services to OVC who required this support. However, the counselling sessions were intermittent since school visits by the supporting NGOs were not frequent. The following extract from one of the participants revealed the gist of this problem.

Once in a while, professional counsellors hold sessions with the orphans and vulnerable children they support at this school. While these staff effective enough to help the children to cope with their challenges, their effectiveness is undermined because the sessions are not frequent. There are no immediate follow sessions to help the affected children to progressively capacitate affected children to deal with their distress.

Based on the participants' assessment of the counselling support services provided to OVC in the research setting, it was clear that this particular aspect of psychosocial support was not adequate. This study argues that to be effective and achieve desirable outcomes in terms of helping those who need it, counselling sessions should not be conducted in an ad hoc manner. The sessions should be conducted systematically so that the counselee could be capacitated gradually to build the resilience to forge ahead with their lives without being bogged down with the diverse challenges associated with orphanhood. In the absence of systematic provision of counselling services to distressed OVC, the issue of the provision of quality psychosocial support services remained farfetched and remote in public primary schools in the research site.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of psychosocial needs of orphans and vulnerable children in public primary schools in Zimbabwe demonstrated that the concerned OVC in the areas of Epworth, Mabvuku and Tafara, were exhibiting both physical and psychological symptoms of apprehension, uncertainties, fears, emotionally detached, agony, sense of loss and solitude among a

host of many other stressful experiences. As attested by the teachers, school authorities and other stakeholders who interact with these children, these factors were negatively impacting on the development of the affected children in a variety of ways, and this ultimately affected their chances of recovering from the reality of deep loss they suffered when they lost their parents. This outcome from the analysed primary data from participants who interacted with these children on a regular basis, confirms findings from recent studies (Sewnet *et al.*, 2021; Bennell, 2021; Kibachio *et al.*, 2020; & Alem, 2020), which showed that orphaned children struggle to receive the basic needs that they require in order to experience normal development.

This study found that OVC in public primary schools in Harare, specifically those who were enrolled in public primary schools in the areas of Epworth, Mabvuku and Tafara, were not being adequately assisted by society, government and the donor community. As a result of such inadequate assistance, these children were affected in many ways including poor academic performance and health problems including malnutrition among a range of other needs which are part of children's rights. The study further found that while various forms of assistance was provided to OVC in the research setting, the assistance was not adequate to cover the needs of the recipients. In terms of educational, food and counselling support, the situation was dire to the extent that the affected children were exposed to multiple sources of exploitation such as child labour and sexual abuse, resulting in the high rate of school drop-out among OVC in public primary schools in the three study areas. Based on these findings, this study concluded that provision of a comprehensive psychosocial support services could be a vital remedy to a host of challenges faced by OVC in public primary schools in the studied cases of Epworth, Mabvuku and Tafara, all of Harare, Zimbabwe.

Additionally, this study found that even the scarce and mostly ad hoc psychosocial support services in the research areas were not coordinated and synchronised. As a result, some OVC who were enrolled in the same school or in different schools within the same districts, were overlooked and were not accessing the support they needed. Given this disparity, it was apparent that the quality of psychosocial support needs provided to OVC in the participating public primary schools, required enormous improvement. Based on the above observation, this study concluded that the provision of a wide-ranging and synchronised psychosocial support services could facilitate the realisation of positive outcomes for OVC in public primary schools in Epworth, Mabvuku and Tafara, in line with the aspirations of the Sustainable Development Goals, which clearly captures the importance of ensuring not only inclusive and equitable access to quality education but also the provision of a whole spectrum of psychosocial support required for the

attainment of the well-being of all children regardless of their vulnerabilities. In this regard, this study concluded that the restoration of the dignity and coping mechanisms of OVC in public primary schools in Epworth, Mabvuku and Tafara could be attained through the provision of school fees, uniforms, clothing, food, water, shelter and counselling services. These needs address the psychological, social, economic, emotional and behavioral challenges that confronted the studied OVC in the three studied areas located in Harare of Zimbabwe.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the key findings of this study, it was recommended that;

- Government should enforce the implementation of policies that relate to the provision of psychosocial support services to orphans and vulnerable children in public primary schools.
- All organisations that provide psychosocial support services to OVC should coordinate and synchronise their activities to ensure that all deserving orphans and vulnerable children are not left out.
- The psychosocial support services provided to OVC in public primary schools in Epworth, Mabvuku and Tafara, should holistically address the psychological, social, economic, counselling and behavioral needs of the concerned children.
- A comprehensive policy framework should be put in place to ensure that orphans and vulnerable children receive the support they need.
- Teachers should be capacitated to receive training in the diagnosis of psychosocial issues as well as management techniques.
- Seminars and workshops should be conducted to capacitate school heads, teachers, parents and the community at large, on the importance of providing a comprehensive psychosocial support package to OVC in public primary schools in Harare in general and Epworth, Mabvuku and Tafara in particular.

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