



Grandparents raising their grandchildren: Implications for the vulnerable children of Eswatini



Authors:

Ncamsile D. Motsa¹ 
Pholoho J. Morojele¹ 

Affiliations:

¹Department of Education,
Faculty of Humanities,
University of KwaZulu-Natal,
Durban, South Africa

Corresponding author:

Ncamsile Motsa,
ncamsiledaphne@gmail.com

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Background: Studies have shown that caregivers' economic constraints and emotional burdens have a negative implication both on their well-being and that of their children. For children raised by grandparents, age is also an additional dynamic that not only affects the grandparents but also affects the children they raise and other family members. However, poverty, HIV infection and AIDS have forced many children in Eswatini (formerly, Swaziland) to be in the care of their grandparents, hence raising concerns about their educational focus and achievement.

Aims and objectives: The study aims to comprehend the ways in which being raised by grandparents, influence the vulnerable children's schooling. The aim is to contribute insights to our understanding on how these children's education towards academic success could be enhanced.

Setting: Three rural primary schools in Eswatini were involved in the study.

Method: The article draws on social constructionism and the multiple worlds' theory. A qualitative narrative approach was adopted using semi-structured individual and focus-group interviews for data generation. The participants included nine purposively selected vulnerable boys and girls, raised by their grandparents, within the age range of 11–13 years.

Results: The findings indicate that most of these grandparents were far from the reality and were unaware of the importance of education, thus they did not give any motivation or support towards their grandchildren's education. When they became very old, sick and bedridden, they also became an extra burden in ways that ended up affecting the children's schooling.

Conclusion: The study recommends the inception and embracing of social justice and inclusive education in the schools as one-way teachers could tailor their pedagogical practices to meet individual learners' educational needs.

Keywords: education; grandparents; schooling; vulnerable children; Eswatini.

Introduction

Globally, the number of grandparents assuming the parental role and raising their grandchildren is becoming alarmingly high. In the United Kingdom, about 1% of all children are raised by grandparents (Buchanan & Rotkirch 2018); in the United States, 4.8 million children (Nadorff & Patrick 2018) and in South Africa, nearly 4 million children in 2018 were under grandparental care (Hall et al. 2018). Reasons for such a situation are different for each context. In the United Kingdom, children end up being raised by their grandparents largely because they (grandparents) live longer than their parents (Buchanan & Rotkirch 2018). In America, the main reason was found to be drug abuse and parents' incarceration (Polvere, Barnes & Lee 2018). South Africa reported that a number of its children are raised by their grandparents mainly after the death of their parents because of HIV and AIDS (Phetlhu & Watson 2014). Likewise, poverty and HIV or AIDS has forced a number of children in Eswatini, especially in the rural areas, to be under grandparental care (Dlamini 2020).

For a number of years, Eswatini has been rated amongst countries that have had the highest number of HIV infections, as well as reported deaths because of AIDS (Braithwaite, Djima & Pickmans 2013). The effect of HIV and AIDS on the people of Eswatini has also been escalated by poverty that has ravaged the country for decades now (Ngcamphalala & Ataguba 2018). About 72% of the people of Eswatini live below the nationally defined poverty level (Kingdom of Swaziland 2019), and this has, therefore, forced a number of parents, especially in the rural areas,

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to leave their homes in search of work where job opportunities exist (Dlamini 2020). Unfortunately, most of them never return, but rather abandon their children, leaving the responsibly of raising them, by providing for their physical and financial needs to the grandparents (Nadorff & Patrick 2018), who themselves have no means to provide for them. All the above conditions have intersected and made many children in the country vulnerable. According to the Kingdom of Swaziland (2010), vulnerable children are the ones who live in circumstances with high risk and lack the basic needs for their survival. This is mostly because of the effects of the prevailing impoverished situation in the country, HIV infection and or AIDS. Mkhathshwa (2017) further describes these children as those who are from child headed households, are orphaned or are from poor family backgrounds.

According to Gergen (2009), an individual's reality is a mere subject tied to the environment and conditions of their livelihood. Similarly, Osher et al. (2020) are of the view that parents and the context of livelihood can develop and inculcate a child's competency or fail to do so. This is because the kind of parents that children have is not only critical for brain development and their life, in general, but also has a huge influence on how they develop. For example, the strong emotional bonds and warm social relationships between grandparents and their grandchildren could be a good source for children's resilience (Lee & Blitz 2020), and help them cope and navigate the difficult challenges in life, including challenges with their education (Dijk-Groeneboer 2020). Agreeing with Bronfenbrenner & Evans (2000), children's individual resilience and proximal processes could be developed by the context of their own development. However, grandparents' emotional stress and increasing financial costs that come with the responsibility of raising their grandchildren, have an implication on the children they raise (Nadorff & Patrick 2018), in ways that can have dire consequences on their education. Likewise, the grandparents' level of education, as caregivers has an effect on the grandchildren's educational attainment, further determining if they are in a position to give learning support or not (Li & Liu 2019). Hence, the physical and cognitive development of children raised under such grandparental care, where the grandparents are not educated, may suffer when compared with those raised by their parents (Buchanan & Rotrick 2018). For example, children raised in these environments usually perform poorly, do not have motivation to learn (Cooper & Cefai 2013) and end up dropping out of school or fail the academic year (Li & Liu 2019).

Whilst Eswatini as a country cannot afford to have the education of its children compromised or have any of its learners drop out of school – for children raised by grandparents escaping the enduring effects and consequences of being raised by grandparents, especially on their education is almost impractical. Yet, poor educational performance and achievement for the vulnerable children would mean the perpetuation of their cycle of poverty and vulnerability (Madegwa, Piliyesi & Katundano 2019). This also has a

negative implication on their communities' and country's economy at large. However, if indeed the education and welfare of all children in the country are valued and warrants being prioritised as enshrined in the country's constitution (Kingdom of Swaziland 2005), these children's family developmental contexts need to be considered in any efforts towards improving their schooling experiences (Madegwa et al. 2019), as one of the means to align them for success.

Eccentrically though, the 2005 constitution of the Kingdom of Eswatini has neither constitutional obligations towards families headed by grandparents (Kingdom of Swaziland 2005), nor does the Swaziland Educational Sector Policy acknowledge the needs of these children (The Government of the Kingdom of Eswatini 2018). Again, in Eswatini, research has focused on the universal schooling experiences of the vulnerable children (e.g. Reference deleted to maintain the integrity of the review process 2017), orphanhood and children living in child headed households (e.g. Mkhathshwa 2017). Research that seeks to understand and take into consideration the relationship between the family developmental contexts of learners affected by vulnerability, their schooling life and the academic performance, has been side-lined for studies and in major debates. Yet, for years now, grandparents have contributed immensely in the learning and educational life of the children they raise in either positive or negative ways (Buchanan & Rotkirch 2018). With the prevailing situation in the country, whereby a number of children are raised by their grandparents and noting that the social problems that lead to grandparents raising their grandchildren in the country are not likely to disappear in the near future (Ngcamphalala & Ataguba 2018), it is therefore imperative that an immediate solution is found. This study, therefore, seeks to explore the learning experiences of children raised by their grandparents as one of the means towards social justice, inclusivity, equitable and efficient learning experiences for these children.

Theoretical framework

The tenets of social constructionism and the multiple worlds theory guided the study. Social constructionism views children's ways of engaging with school and education as being generated by socially and historically constituted relations around them, including the relations they have with their grandparents (Gergen 2009). According to social constructionism, it is on these grandparents' values and discourses of school and learning that the children in the study's own constructions of the two are imbedded (Lorber 1994). According to Gee (2011), discourse is the societies' distinct culture and tradition, the people's way of talking, thinking and doing things, which makes them distinctive from other communities, and for these children, the grandparents are the first crucial unit of their society (Grace, Jethro & Aina 2012). In essence, the children's constructions, attitude towards and view of school and education are not only closely entwined with their developmental contexts together with their grandparents' ideologies and beliefs on

school and education (Gergen 2009) but also governed and affected by, amongst other things, the grandparents' experiences, actions, attitudes, support and or lack of all these. Supportive grandparents and contexts support children's development, cognitive and educational competence, at the same time cushioning them from the effects of their life situations, whilst the opposite is true for unsupportive grandparents and contexts (Osher et al. 2020). The same way as the resources provided by the grandparents including support could maximise or constrain the vulnerable children's drive and zeal to accomplish their goals (Cooper & Cefai 2013). Indeed, the vulnerable children's schooling experiences in this study were found to be inescapably immersed in discursively symbolised and regulated social relationships with the grandparents. Sadly, some of these relations and contexts had the consequence of thwarting the vulnerable children's resolve towards education and educational success.

However, the Multiple Worlds theory aims at understanding how children's family developmental contexts, peers and the school contexts come together to influence their educational engagement, experiences and success (Phelan, Davidson & Yu 1991). According to Cooper and Cefai (2013), each of these contexts has its own values, beliefs, expectations and ways of doing things. Hence, the family developmental contexts of these learners coupled with their penurious situations not only set them apart from other learners not affected by vulnerability but also make it hard for them to align with the school values and expectations (Madegwa et al. 2019). At the same time, these varied contexts combined have the propensity to frustrate and constrain their efforts towards academic success (Phelan et al. 1991). For instance, the vulnerable children are raised by grandparents, who because of generational difference and/or poverty do not value education and are not educated themselves (Li & Liu 2019). When these children get into the school contexts, where the value of education is emphasised and they are obliged to meet certain requirements by the school like studying and meeting deadlines for assignments, it becomes more challenging and at times impossible, hence making educational success a farfetched dream (Cooper & Denner 1998). Indeed, this theory provided a platform to understand how these different contexts come together in the vulnerable children's lives to construct their schooling experiences in this context and how they navigate and also rise above their challenges towards educational success.

Research design

Geographical and socio-economic context of the study

Eswatini is a tiny kingdom in Southern Africa ruled by an absolute monarch and is made up of four (4) administrative regions, namely; Manzini, Hhohho, Lubombo and Shiselweni. The population of Eswatini is slightly above 1.3 million people and about 72% of the populace lives way below the nationally defined poverty level (Kingdom of Swaziland 2019).

Eswatini is also rated amongst countries with the highest prevalence of HIV cases (Braithwaite et al. 2013), which has primarily led to 56% poverty level for the child population (UNICEF 2017). The study targeted three primary schools in the rural areas of three of the four administrative regions of Eswatini. That is, Muntu primary school is located in the rural area of the Lubombo region, the poorest region in the country and the hardest hit by the effects of HIV and AIDS (UNICEF 2009). This also makes Lubombo to have the highest number of vulnerable children in the country (Braithwaite et al. 2013). Mjikaphansi primary school is located in the rural Hhohho region, and most children here (both boys and girls) were found to be roaming the dirty roads and imbibing alcohol. Finally, Mazingela primary school is located in the rural areas of the Manzini region. In this community, most families live in one roomed houses, in the form of squatter camps, with most parents working in the nearby industrial town, Matsapha, as cheap labour.

Participants

This study is part of a PhD study whose participants were 30 children affected by vulnerability, nine parents or caregivers and nine teachers. However, only 12 purposively selected vulnerable children aged between 11 and 13 years, who were being raised by their grandparents, were selected to participate in this study. This study targeted learners who were in the sixth grade, aged between 11 and 13 years and raised by either a single grandparent or both. Purposive sampling was utilised, and from the three schools, about 19 learners fitted the criteria, however seven had not attained the grandparents' consent by the commencement of data collection, hence finally only 12 participants participated in this study. Nine participants were either single or double orphaned, and three had been abandoned by their parents either because of work commitments or because of marriage in other regions of the country.

Data generation

The qualitative narrative approach was chosen for its credibility to comprehend human experiences in their context (Creswell 2014). Through this approach, the study was able to examine the children's individual experiences as being framed within their family developmental contexts (McMillan & Schumacher 2010). The narrative inquiry was chosen based on the perspective that people are storytellers, and lead lives that are full of stories (Connelly & Clandinin 1990). Hardy (1968:5) asserted that people 'dream in narratives, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe, doubt, plan, revise, criticize, construct, gossip, learn, hate and love by narrative'. Through the participants' stories, the author could comprehend their daily lived learning experiences as predicated by their contexts (Creswell 2014), hence the perfect way to understand their realities.

The researcher is a native of Swati, and all interactions and interviews with the participants were conducted in the native language, siSwati. This allowed the participants to talk and

express themselves without any linguistic restrictions (McMillan & Schumacher 2010). To generate data, the study used in-depth individual and focus group interviews. This placed the participants at the centre of the study, making them both active participants who can contribute to a drive for change and co-researchers who have a credible voice in matters affecting their lives (Gallacher & Gallagher 2008). The participants were urged to describe the kind of relationships they had with their grandparents, feelings around the whole family setup and its implication on their education. With permission from the participants, a digital voice recorder was used to assist in the accurate capturing of what each participant said, and to make up for data not recorded in notes. Field notes were used to record the participants' emotions and body language. The tone and voice of the participants were also closely monitored to comprehend their emotions. Even though there were psychological counsellors on call for each school, considering the sensitivity of their vulnerability, none of the participants needed their services.

Data analysis

All interviews were conducted in the native language, Siswati. After all data were generated, these were then translated from Siswati to English. An inductive process of analysis was then followed, where themes and patterns were derived from the data (Creswell 2014). Data were then organised linking pseudonyms with the respondents. This was then followed by reading line by line, and listening to the recordings again for familiarity with the data and to identify emergent themes related to the study. These themes were then discussed in view of the theoretical frameworks of the study.

Ethical considerations

To respect the rights of the participants, the study had to observe and stick to various ethical considerations. Schools being under the Ministry of Education and Training in Eswatini, permission to conduct the research was, therefore, sought from the director of schools. Each of the schools' principals also provided written consent, after which the University of KwaZulu-Natal research office was approached for ethical clearance. Once the study was cleared by the university, consent letters were written to the grandparents in Siswati clearly stating the issues of confidentiality, privacy and voluntary participation. Consent letters were also written to the children, considering that the study viewed them as competent human beings who can decide on issues that concern their lives (Christensen & Prout 2002). Trust and respect were maintained throughout the research process with all the research participants. It was also clarified to the participants that they could withdraw from the study whenever they desired so, and for this, they would not face any consequences. For the purposes of confidentiality, pseudonyms are used in this article to depict all schools and participants.

Findings and discussions

We are loved and cared for ...

The children in the study really valued the relationships they had with their grandparents. Despite the conditions of their livelihood, the unconditional love and caring they received from their grandparents made them somehow content with their lives. However, most of the grandparents' complacent attitude towards education was rather discouraging and not supportive of their schooling. The narratives illustrate:

'[M]y grandmother is so caring and understanding ... and that is why I enjoy staying with her. In fact, I am really okay with my father being away. I rarely miss him ... even though he left us in poverty and hasn't been home for the past 2 years ... Ohh that man can be very strict. He always expected me to be in my table studying as early as 7 pm yet when he is not around, by that time I am usually not even back in the house ... but out playing with my friends.' (Nonto aged 12, a single orphan: Father re-married and stays in another region [she estimated her grandmother to be 63 year old])

'I really love staying with my grandparents – I just love them. They always give me life advises and teach me on how to be an abiding citizen. Just that they never help with my school work ... in fact (big smile) my grandfather doesn't like education ... (giggles) ... he believes it is the reason for moral decay in our society.' (Bobo aged 13, never met his father: Mother working and staying far from home [the grandfather was turning 81 years and the grandmother was 69])

'I like reading novels but one day my grandfather saw me reading a novel and he shouted at me ... Reminding me of the things I need to do as a 'woman' ... things that would make me a good wife ... instead of being lazy. I still read novels though ... but I need to hide from him. But then, besides the struggles we have as a family, staying with him is fun ... I am happy.' (Busiswa aged 13: a double orphan, and has been living with her 69-year-old grandfather since she was 3 year old)

The above-mentioned narratives underscore the importance of positive social relationships for the children's view and commitment to school work and contrariwise (Gergen 2009). The warm relationships shared between grandparents and grandchildren enabled the vulnerable children to effectively cope and adapt to their reality that is being raised by the grandparents and not their biological parents (Lee & Blitz 2020), and at the same time embracing their adversity, 'poverty' and 'struggling' life situations. However, even though these relationships were commended, considering how much children in vulnerable situations need love and care (Guiney 2018), but most of them proved to be destructive and a major source of risk for the children's education and educational success (Osher et al. 2020). Again, the narratives highlight how the children's commitment and attitude towards school and school work are predicated on the grandparents' own attitude towards both school and school work. For example, Nonto's narrative highlights how grandparents' 'loving and caring ways' could foster indiscipline and uncouth behaviour (Rosita & Truong 2015) that would consequentially impact children's schooling.

Nonto roams the streets late at night, and the grandparent has allowed such unruly behaviour without considering how her education is being affected.

Again, such an act does not only expose her to danger, rape and sexual exploitation in the night but also act as a compromise to the amount of time she spends with her books (Li & Liu 2019). Nonto's behaviour and negative attitude towards education have heightened to such levels that she no longer 'miss(es) her father', only because the father is 'strict' and forces her to study. Indeed, this proves how Nonto has adopted her grandparent's sloppy attitude towards school work. Yet, such 'strict' parental style is what Nonto needs to focus on her school work (Rosita & Truong 2015), as one of the investments towards her education (Madegwa et al. 2019). Without parental supervision, motivation to succeed, coupled with such lazy and unrestrained behaviour, cognitive development and academic success for children like Nonto cannot be assured (Li & Liu 2019), hence, making their poverty dominant and inflexible. To retract such behaviour from the children would call for the government of Eswatini to sensitise grandparents who raise their grandchildren with a focus on their discipline and setting limits for their grandchildren (Rosita & Truong 2015). Even though they are normatively allowed to 'spoil' their grandchildren (Li & Liu 2019), it should not be on the detriment of these children's education. They need to understand that effective limit setting and a firmer parental style could help the grandchildren walk on the right path towards educational success, for their own development and the development of their families (Madegwa et al. 2019).

On a more serious note, Bobo's grandfather's dislike of education can be traced to the wider societal discourse, especially prevalent in the country's rural areas, which traces promiscuity and moral decay to education (Julius 2019). Sadly, such constructions of education are rather demotivating and discouraging towards the children's education at the same time proving how far removed these old people are from the importance of education, especially in alleviating penurious life situations (Madegwa et al. 2019), including their own. However, such negative constructions besides underscoring the influence of culture and tradition could also be attributed to generational differences (Madegwa et al. 2019) and also the burden that comes with caring for the grandchildren, especially within wanting and economically deprived family situations (Doyle 2020). The grandparents might be stressed or busy focusing on other things for the general upkeep of the family, than ensuring that their grandchildren like Nonto are 'studying as early as 7 pm'.

It is, however, commendable that Popo's grandmother understands that education is one way towards a better livelihood (Madegwa et al. 2019). Hence, she rejects and repudiates the societal discourses that were found to be prevalent in these rural contexts, to construe education as one way out of 'slavery'. Popo narrates:

'[M]y grandmother is so loving and always gives me life's advices. Just the other day, my grandmother was telling me about the importance of education and how much she doesn't want me to follow on my mom's footsteps, 'working like a slave', she said.' (Popo aged 12: a single orphan, living with her 61 year old grandmother – her mother works in the textile firms and rarely comes home)

Popo's grandmother is probably equating the long hours Popo's mother works in the textile firms to 'slavery', because even though the pay is not good, she rarely has off days to come home and check on her family. Such constructions of education were likely to indeed motivate Popo to do well at school so that she would not end up being a 'slave' like her mother. Busiswa's grandfather, on the other hand, does not put stress on education but is only concerned about his granddaughter's future marriage. Again, probably emanating from the Swati people's societal discourse that 'umfati sibili ukakhe' meaning a 'real woman' is one who is married and stays at her in-laws (Fielding-Miller et al. 2017). In essence, the greatest achievement for women within the Swati culture and tradition space is marriage and not education. However, socialising children along this discourse is problematic in the sense that it is already laying them on the path of being interpreted as a 'man's subaltern, a constructed subject, an abject . . . [the] dependant other' (N'guessan 2011:198), whose value in society is pleasing and having the capability to keep men happy. The only choice women have is to be submissive and venerate men in all aspects of life (Fielding-Miller et al. 2017), which highlights inequitable gender relations. Again, Busiswa's grandfather says nothing is being said by the grandparent about developing her self-efficacy for future independence and academic success (Osher et al. 2020), as one of the means to break the cycle of poverty for herself and her family.

It is worrying, therefore, as to how children who are raised within contexts where education is abhorred and are also discouraged can do well at school where the importance of education is obviously emphasised (Cooper & Cefai 2013). How feasible is it for these children to manoeuvre, combine and balance their diverse worlds – the home and the school, with their incongruent educational beliefs and expectations? Indeed, this highlights a congruence between learners who were supported by their parents and those who were not. Indeed, the negative, unsupportive and indifferent attitude, as being displayed by most of the grandparents in the above narratives, reveals the wanting family developmental contexts in which these children's education is predicated and determined (Gergen 2009). Instead of buffering them and inculcating self-reliance against future adversities through education, most of these contexts and relationships open these children up for life failures, struggles and a continuous cycle of their indigent life situation (Osher et al. 2020). In the bigger scheme of things, these stories expose not only the diversity of learners in the school contexts as predicated by their family backgrounds and contexts but also the inequality in educational attainment prevalent in the schools. For the children raised by grandparents, their

cognitive development is likely to start from a point of mental emptiness – without meaning and purpose, no motivation to succeed, no definite goals and no resolve towards educational success (Li & Liu 2019). Hence, as all children enter the school contexts, the educational ground is not level and most children raised by grandparents are already lagging behind and see no value in education. In essence, even though all learners may be exposed to the same educational contents and may go through the same syllabus with the aim to pass, but for learners raised by grandparents, their reality not only compromises their education but also makes them different from other learners (Osher et al. 2020). Indeed, this removes them from the idealised educational equality envisaged by the country (The Government of the Kingdom of Eswatini 2018).

However, teachers could be the catalysts for change and aid these children to effectively navigate their family developmental contexts, and align with the school culture towards educational success. That is, helping them not only deconstructs the ideologies created and socialised in the family developmental contexts which unfortunately belittles the importance of education but also effectively combines their family worlds with the world of school for effective educational achievement (Cooper & Cefai 2013). These vulnerable children's stories also reveal the need for equitable education and school spaces that recognise diversity and individual learners' needs at any given time and contexts. Education is '... mutually shaped to meet their [educational] needs', (Bell 1997:3) and thus, the dominant structural barriers to their education must be considered. Teachers could also be encouraged to embrace social justice in the schools. Linking the principles of social justice and adopting a complex understanding of their learners' diverse identities could help modify and guide their teaching in ways that meet the real needs of all their learners. At the same time, inculcating self-efficacy skills would not only help these children to dream beyond their situations but also individually navigate and outwit their compromising realities whilst finding purpose and meaning in their adversity. In essence, providing social relationships and contexts influences individual children's development and resilience towards educational success (Gergen 2009), simultaneously finding effective ways to promote education equity for these children, so as to obtain a favourable balance towards their educational access, progress and achievement (Li & Liu 2019).

Caring for our grandparents can be emotionally draining

Despite the affection experienced under grandparental care, being raised by grandparents later turned to be emotionally and mentally draining for most of the children in the study. This is because, with old age, the caring roles changed and the grandchildren had to take care of their grandparents' every need. This included taking care of them when they were sick and doing all the household chores. Again, the

worry that came with the grandparents' ill-health brought emotional turmoil for the vulnerable children. Such responsibilities and feelings were not only overwhelming but also crippling in ways that affected these children's schooling (Osher et al. 2020). The narratives illustrate:

'[T]he relationship I have with my grandmother is very good (saying it with a smile). Even though at times we go to bed without having had anything to eat. She is turning 95 this year and because of sickness, she is now blind and is unable to do any house chore. This hurts us. We take turns with my younger brother (11 year old) to take care of her and at times the one whose turn is caring for her, needs to skip school. It hurts me though when I have to skip school, because at school, we are given rice and beans every day. I remember this day I had to stay at home and not come to school, yet there was a school function and lots and lots of food (closing her eyes), but then I had no choice ... I had to take care of my sick grandmother.' (Zonke, boy aged 13: A single orphan but mother's whereabouts unknown [the grandmother was turning 95 years])

'I love my grandmother ... a lot. It hurts to see her being this sick ... and honestly speaking, I cannot even concentrate in class – what if she also dies! When I get home, I always find her sleeping ... that is all she does these days – and she literally does nothing. She cannot even make her bed. This is very sad ... in the past, I would always find her doing her work and I was always assured of a meal each time I came from school, but now it's completely different. I have to do all the work ... but then at times my friend Soso* comes to help. Hard as it is, I will not give up on my education.' (Kholi, girl aged 12: A double orphan, raised by her 66 year old grandmother)

'One day, as I was coming from school, I saw a man coming out of our house running towards the bushes. I was scared but I was more concerned about my grandmother who was inside the house. Only to find that she had been raped. For a long time after that, I wasn't able to concentrate in class, worried about her ... but then I cannot stay home and look after her all the time, I need to be at school. She has been a sad and miserable woman since that incident, and she always tells me that she wants to die ... and that hurts me every day when I think of it.' (Wakhi, a boy aged 12 and a double orphan. Raised by his 59 year old grandmother)

As observed before, the good relationships these children had with their grandparents is unquestionably admirable. However, with the changing aspects of caregiving, the children are affected in ways that are more complex. These children are not only affected emotionally and physically but the dynamics of caregiving also compound in ways that are detrimental to both their welfare and education (Li & Liu 2019). Taking care of a sick person is a taxing and traumatic responsibility for an adult person, it is, therefore, incomprehensible how a 13-year-old child like Zonke or his 11-year-old younger brother navigates such stress and obligation. For example, as Zonke says, 'one day I had to stay at home ... yet there was a school function and lots and lots of food', one could see the pain in his eyes, probably because their penurious situation meant that they at times went 'to bed without having had anything to eat'. It is evident that for children like Zonke and his brother, school has become not just a place of educational attainment but also a place to

ensure their food security (reference deleted to maintain the integrity of the review process 2017). Not going to school on particular days, therefore, meant that they missed both the days' lessons and the only meal they are assured of, and that is the 'rice and beans' provided by the school. Again, this shows no educational support in any way or form from the sick, stressed grandparents (Nadorff & Patrick 2018).

Again, the emotional turmoil experienced by these children is bound to have a huge negative implication on both their welfare and schooling. As Zonke takes care of his grandmother, he is worried that the old woman could die, leaving him and his brother without a parental figure. The same way Kholi is worried that her grandmother could also die any time. The constant worry of losing a parental figure, especially for a child who has had so many losses in life, is obviously crushing (Guiney 2018). Probably in similar ways as having a loved one 'raped' weighs heavily not only for the victim but also for the 11-year-old Wakhi. For these children, their vulnerable and indigent life situations already intersect with their schooling and another dimension has been added (Raza 2017), and that is, the emotional stresses emanating from being caregivers of their 'blind', 'sick' and/or emotionally disturbed grandparents. This is in ways that undoubtedly removes them further from sustainable education. It is incomprehensible how this young children can navigate such hurdles and emotional disturbances towards educational excellence (Cooper & Cefai 2013). Indeed, this not only makes their concentration levels in the school wanting but also makes educational success for them a far-fetched dream (Li & Liu 2019).

Again, if it is not caregiving that constrains their focus towards education, the huge amount of work that these children have to do on their own is not only overwhelming but also bound to compete with their school work. Having to do all the household chores for children who are barely adults as the grandparent/s '... literally does [do] nothing' is bound to put a great strain on them. It is unconceivable again, how these children could get time to study, write homework and do well at school, in their contexts and background, which is not only limiting but has now become a source of distress and apprehension (Osher et al. 2020). It is laudable though that despite such challenging and overwhelming situations, children like Kholi and Wakhi are determined to continue with education probably because they are aware that it is one of the ways they could change the course of their lives and establish a better future for them and their families (Madegwa et al. 2019). This calls for the redirecting of the country's educational culture and the widening of the scope of social justice and inclusivity in schools, in ways that not only focus on enabling school access for the vulnerable children but also consider the effect of their developmental contexts as another additional dimension to their schooling. Pointing to the immediate need for teachers to adopt reflexive and adaptive mechanisms to respond to hyper-diversity within their learners at the same time addressing the varying

levels of the children's educational needs to ensure that all children are afforded the basic human right, education (Gaynor & Wilson 2020).

Furthermore, providing economical support for these children, and helping them hold-fast on education could be one of the ways to ensure that they navigate their abhorring life situations. As such, the government of the country should go beyond the payment of these children's school fees, to also ensure that their holistic needs are met (Mkhatshwa 2017). At the same time, the state needs to ensure that old people, especially when they get sick, have caregivers who constantly check on them, at times providing security and help where need be. Doing so could go a long way in relieving the children who end up being caregivers from the worry that consequently affect their education. This could be one of the effective ways towards both educational access and success for the thousands of children raised by grandparents in the country (Dlamini 2020). It is also commendable that some children not affected by vulnerability, like Kholi's friend Soso understand their (children raised by grandparents) situation and become handy in times of need. This reveals the importance of caring social relationships for the vulnerable children that are found to relieve them from their daily stresses and overwhelming responsibilities (Grace et al. 2012), in ways that would for a moment make and give them time to feel like children again – time to play with friends and probably concentrate on their studies. Such caring relationships should, therefore, be encouraged. This could be made possible by inculcating empathy from the other learners. This makes them aware of the other side of life, the challenges and the support that would be appreciated by children faced with such a predicament.

Limitations and future research

Although the use of 12 participants provided valuable qualitative insights, the findings of this study cannot be generalised beyond these 12 participants and the time and space within the context in which the study was conducted. A study with a larger number of participants would be recommended. Again, the study missed the voices of teachers and grandparents as the primary socialising agents of these children. These would have provided further insights and a balanced view of the vulnerable children's educational dynamics. Notwithstanding, the current study has a pioneering role in highlighting the plight of children raised by grandparents and how they can be assisted towards equitable education.

Conclusion and recommendations

Ignoring the environments of the vulnerable children's family background was found to imbricate the challenges faced by these children and at the same time letting them go without being noticed. Yet, children's ways of engaging with school and education were found to be heavily predicated and reliant on their grandparents' present realities, experiences, complacent

attitude and discourses around education, in ways that compromised their learning experiences. For example, because of old age and being 'far removed' from the importance of education in the modern era, most grandchildren were socialised in ways that were not only demotivating but also discouraging towards education. Again, the grandparents' love and caring ways, although applauded were found to have an effect on the children's focus to education. This is because in the name of spoiling their children, as normatively accepted (Rosita & Truong 2015), some grandchildren were so complacent and compromised discipline, which inclined towards compromising the vulnerable children's resolve towards their school work. Again, the 'back seat' that the vulnerable children's education had to take as they assumed the caregiving role and prioritised their grandparent's health had a negative effect on their both welfare and education. The same way the constant worries about their grandparents' health and well-being affected their concentration in school work. Hence, considering their socio-economic backgrounds, promoting equitable academic access and success remains an important issue that needs to be addressed tactfully and timeously.

The following recommendations could possibly be adopted as means to enhance the learning experiences of vulnerable children who are being raised by grandparents:

- Helping grandparents deconstruct their held views on education and be supported on how to parent their grandchildren, in ways that would not end up affecting their education.
- Inception of social justice, diversity and inclusive education in the schools as one way to help teachers understand and help individual children by meeting their educational needs at their actual point of need.
- Community caregivers could also aid by taking care of old people in the communities. That would not only relieve the vulnerable children from the overwhelming duties but also the constant worry of leaving their ailing grandparents alone.
- The study also revealed the need for the government of Eswatini to help schools provide resources for these children's resilient affirmation, so as to allow them to transcend experiences where they feel overwhelmed by their family dynamics.

However, the above recommendations would be pointless without accentuating the power of these children's family developmental contexts and the ways in which the contextual relationships foster that development as this could also be an effective way towards providing and ensuring that education in the school contexts is equitably provided.

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The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

Authors' contributions

N.D.M. performed all fieldwork, preliminary data analysis, write-ups and made conceptual analysis. P.J.M. was the project leader and made critical insights and analytical contributions on the study.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (No. HSS/1940/016D).

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Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as this was not negotiated in the informed consent and permission to conduct the study.

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