

## Chapter

# Mitigating the Unmet Psychosocial Support Needs of Left-behind Learners in Child-Headed Households: Exploring ‘Educare’ Support at a Zimbabwean School

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## Abstract

Following parental labor migration, the family unit is disrupted contributing to the formation of a unique form of child-headed households (CHH) among the left-behind children (LBC). Parental migration creates a gap in terms of children support, care, and protection leading to unmet psychosocial support needs among the LBCs in child-headed households. This research chapter sought to explore the fusion of education and care (Educare) in schools as a holistic system of support for the left-behind at a school where LBC spend most of their time. This elevates and transforms the school from just being centers for education excellency but also centers for care and learner well-being. The chapter draws from qualitative data in which twelve left-behind learners and ten education and community informants participated in a focus group discussion. Findings revealed that the school has great potential to support learners in adverse living and learning situations through the curriculum, extra-curriculum clubs, peer groups, and school personnel (teachers in loco parentis). However, the same school environment was found to be associated with negative typecasting of LBC’s that sometimes affects the support system. This chapter recommends building the support base for LBC within school through sensitizations, capacitation, and tapping support from community resources.

**Keywords:** Educare, left-behind learners, psychosocial, learning, child-headed households, Zimbabwe

## 1. Introduction

“Schools are not just place where we learn facts and numbers but also place where we learn how to live” Dewey (1899).

The vision shared by John Dewey in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries about the school is still relevant today, more so, when world order and, in particular, parenting practices are under threat from global trends and most recently the

COVID-19 pandemic. Globalization and the economic crises have triggered labor migration trends in Africa and part of the developing world [1, 2]. Adults, who are also parents in the developing world, take the option to migrate to local and international destinations seeking employment opportunities. This process has significantly transformed, destabilized, and reconfigured the traditional parenting and family structure [3]. Following parental labor migration, the key tenets that define parenting such as co-residence, care, and guidance are sometimes delegated or neglected, thus exposing the left-behind learners to unmet psychosocial needs. The parent is made to perform parenting duties from a distance, which limits them in terms of carrying out the expected interaction, care, and guidance responsibilities [4]. In some cases, the migrating parents were also incapacitated in terms of providing for the needs of LBC's due to challenges associated with the then prevailing COVID-19 restrictions. It is in view of these complications that this book chapter sought to explore the potential of the school in supplanting parental roles and become not only a center of education but also care and learner well-being (Educare).

This research paper acknowledges extensive research on left-behind children and child-headed households [3–5]. There is, however, limited scholarly attention when the two components are combined. The combination of LBC and CHH settings could be described as an abysmal combination as regards the psychosocial functioning and educational outcomes. This book chapter sought to expose the potential of the school as a stopgap measure to address the unmet psychosocial needs of the LBC's. The utilitarian definition and understanding of the school as a center for life lessons and pillar for care for learners is used. A more holistic understanding of education is used in which performance is not only measured by performance in traditional subjects such as Mathematics, languages, or Sciences but life lessons. Schools become centers for both education and care (Educare) in which issues to do with learner well-being are prioritized.

## **2. Background**

Parental labor migration has been part of the history of many of the developing world countries, and in Africa, traced back to the days of colonization. This has been accepted as a means for survival and millions of adults migrate largely from rural to urban areas in search of job and life opportunities. Driven by globalization, social and economic challenges migration trends in Zimbabwe, for instance, have taken an international flare [3, 6]. The search for life opportunities is no longer limited by geographical and national boundaries, but parents move to where opportunities are. Parents in Zimbabwe have found settlement in countries such as Australia, United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom, Qatar, and China for employment. In Africa, South Africa hosts the bulk of the labor migrants, (up to 3.5 million) while others have moved to countries such as Botswana, Mozambique, Zambia, Namibia, and among others [6].

The migration of a parent or parents is often met with lots of joy and anticipation [1]. In Zimbabwe, this is usually driven by the hope for a better life provided by the migrating parent. Lots of sacrifices are made by the family in the attempt to meet the migration cost for the parent. In some cases, some families disposed of their family houses to pay for the air tickets and the visa requirements. The hope is that all that is sold to finance the migration processes will be replaced when the parent settles, especially in the global north. The settling of the parent in the global north marks the onset of "survival circuits" characterized by remittances that keep the left-behind children surviving the economic challenges associated with the global south [2]. The

remittances are not only significant for the family but they also contribute to the economy of the global north countries such as Zimbabwe [2].

Out of the more than 15 million people in Zimbabwe close to 7.7 million are children [7]. The children constitute close to half the population of Zimbabwe meaning they are important in terms of future planning. They need the proper upbringing so that they would be able to take up leading roles in the future. The UNHCR defines a child as someone immature below the age of 18. The immaturity may imply that the child is unable to feed and care for himself/herself. Thus, when the adult parent is not present in the life of the children there is indeed a chance that the children would be adversely affected in terms of their psychosocial functioning.

While the community makes attempts to address the plight of vulnerable children in CHH, the kind of support is described as not cohesive and comprehensive [8]. Support that is ad hoc fails to meet the psychosocial support needs of the left-behind learners. This understanding makes institutions such as the school significant. This study proposes to utilize the school as a center in the bulk, which support for children in adverse living and learning conditions could be coordinated. Outcomes, such as well-being and learner conduct, would be imparted to learners through both the curriculum and co-curriculum in school setups.

### **3. Left-behind learners in child headed household settings**

As parents migrate for labor, several restricting factors to do with immigration and the destination country sometimes makes it difficult for parents to migrate with their children [9]. Traditionally, when parents migrate, children were left in the care of the spouse or the extended family such as maternal or paternal grandparents were asked to assist. However, the breakdown of the extended family network and the prevalence of single parenting made this option difficult to make. Conflict over remittances between the migrating parents and the extended family is cited as one of the major factors leading to children being left in CHH [3]. Conflict usually arises because of remittances; some of the extended family members would feel they receive inadequate remittances, while the migrating parents would feel they are giving more. The result is some children considered “old enough” are left behind in their home country in child only families when parents migrate [10]. It is against this background that in Zimbabwe, there is a new growing population of children in CHH not because they are orphans but because the parents have migrated for labor. Left-behind learners (LBC) refers to children who are left behind for a period exceeding 6 months when parents migrate either to the cities or outside the country for work [11]. Following the breakdown of extended family networks and prominence of the nucleus family, many migrating parents end up leaving children in CHH.

In the developing world, children are more likely to be left in CHH because of single parenthood [12]. The number of female-headed households, in particular, is said to have increased dramatically driven by factors such as divorce and death of spouse [12]. This outcome eliminates the possibility of leaving the children with the other spouse when migrating. Females have also joined the bandwagon of labor migrants from Zimbabwe, and when they are single, they sometimes leave children in child only families. Zimbabwe, for example, has up to 40.6% female-headed households [13]. The feminization of labor particularly in the care field has triggered a massive exodus of women contributing to children being left behind in CHH. This to some extent contributes to the creation of this unique form of CHH [14].

Certain factors are considered by the migrating parents [5] before leaving their children in CHH. Such factors are primarily social and economic (gender, age, accommodation, and security, etc.). Jaure and Makura [1] assert that the gender of the LBC's is a critical factor that the migrating parent takes into consideration. In a study at a school in Zimbabwe and South Africa, Jaure, [1] for instance, observed that boys are more likely to be left in CHH when compared to girls. The possible reason is that they feel boys are less vulnerable as compared to girls [5, 12]. The reason may also be motivated by the general perception that regards sexual abuse as graver as compared to other forms of abuse. The idea that girls more than boys are known victims of abuse, justify this line of thinking.

The age and level of maturity of the LBC's is a factor [5] for consideration in determining the negative effects associated with parental migration. In a study conducted among LBC's in Zimbabwe, most of the LBC's are relatively mature, above the age of 15, at adolescence stage [10]. Nevertheless, the adolescence stage of development has noted developmental challenges that become compounded by lack of parental guidance. A study, in China, also affirms that the age and gender of the LBC were key predictors of negative psychological effects such as anxiety and depression [13]. Left behind girls tend to be affected by parental migration more than boys because in accordance to African culture, they are made to shoulder the household duties [7–24]. In that regard, girls are said to be affected more by parental migration as compared to boys.

#### **4. Unmet psychosocial support needs**

As parents migrate, LBC find themselves experiencing unmet psychosocial support needs that in turn affect their learning outcomes. The LBC attending school becomes left-behind learners in the context of a school. Left-behind learners find themselves with unparalleled psychosocial challenges attributable to lack of parental supervision, set boundaries, love, guidance, and support [16]. This elucidates the significance of the adult parent in the home. Literature to date associates such learners with social and emotional challenges at home and at school making them a vulnerable group [1]. Findings drawn from several studies on LBC indicate that such children are associated with challenges such as hyperactivity, emotional, and peer problems [5, 17, 18]. This implies that the children fail to function properly and fail to relate with peers and siblings due to parental absence.

The lack of support systems contributes toward psychological problems that affect mental health including depression, poor psychological well-being, and health problems [19]. This is further elucidated by comparative analysis on the LBC compared to children living with their parents. The comparisons reveal that LBC's fare badly in terms of mental health as compared to those children who reside with their parents [20].

LBC's have also been associated with negative outside behaviors that are attributed to the absence of their parents. Separating internalizing from externalizing effects of parental migration is complicated because they are interdependent [10]. It is usually the inside effects such as loneliness, depression, and anxiety that lead to negative outside behaviors, for example, conduct challenges. The social and emotional maladjustments significantly affect their outward behavior. The outside behaviors noted in several studies on LBC include violent, aggressive behavior, drunkenness, and risky sexual behaviors [21–23]. Such behavior and conduct problems become significant learning problems that affect educational outcomes. In Zimbabwe, the LBCs are associated with wild parties commonly known as *Vuzu* parties in which they abuse



drugs, alcohol, and experiment with sex [10]. Children with both parents as migrants were noted as having lower scores for psychological well-being and higher scores for emotional symptoms and literacy problems when they are compared to conventional families [14]. This implies that parental care is an important factor that can influence well-being. The absence of the parent can trigger unmet psychosocial support needs that manifest through internalizing- and externalizing behaviors.

## 5. The unique form of CHH

LBC in child-headed households are a recent development that partly owes their development to the demise of the extended family system [1–4, 6–13, 15–24]. This unique form of CHH has with its similarities and differences with the traditional CHH. Similarities and differences are noted in the composition and effects on children. A close analysis of the similarities and differences is significant in the process of trying to expose the unmet psychosocial support needs of the LBC's.

The traditional definition of a child-headed household carries with it connotations of orphans, poverty, or misery [8]. Discourse on CHH refers to children whose parents would have died, and the children live and fend for themselves [24]. Fending for themselves in this case implies that they provide their own meals, with no adult to care for them. The immediate family and the alternate carers who are usually drawn from the extended family are not available to provide care [8]. A qualitative study, conducted in Zimbabwe by Maushe and Mugumbate, [8] reveals that children who live and care for themselves have challenges with basic provisions such as food education, and clothing. There is also no adult to guide, love, and supervise the children. This, in turn, explains the poverty that the children are often associated with. Because of parental death the children left in child only homes become destitute and experience challenges in terms of school fees payment and are deprived of basic amenities [8].

Parental migration has redefined the child-headed household family setup. Firstly, the parents or parents are very much alive but because of labor migration, they reside separately from their children [10]. The parent can elect to continue playing a significant parental role in the lives of their left-behind children. In that regard, the parent is unable to perform parental duties full-time. When parents migrate, there is so much anticipation on the part of the left-behind children and other relatives. The idea that the parent would have migrated to better economies is the major reason for hope. The children sometimes become the envy of the community as the parent can provide the basics and luxuries. The migrating parents are said to make up for their absence by providing even more than what the children require. The migrating parent can also continue to interact with the LBC's through internet or mobile communication tools. This to some extent retains a level of intimacy between the LBC and the migrating parent.

Owing to parental labor migration, parenting is transformed from being a full-time responsibility to being done remotely or part-time. Research indicates that in countries such as Zimbabwe and South Africa, labor migration is also responsible for the creation of this unique form of child-headed household [10].

LBCs represent parenting reconstituted and reconfigured. The traditional model of parenting and family model is represented by cohabitation and proximity [16]. The family resides under the same roof and shares meals. In the family setup, there are set responsibilities for the parents and for children. However, when parents migrate, the parental roles are sometimes performed at a distance. The parent could still provide for the children through remittances. The parent can also share love over the phone

or other social media platforms. In some cases, the eldest child would assume some of the parenting roles for younger siblings [10].

## **6. Traversing the COVID-19 pandemic complications/challenges**

Circumstances following the declaration of non-governmental pandemic have unsettled and disrupted order among this growing population of left-behind learners in Zimbabwe. The negative impacts are even more pronounced among those left behind in child-headed households (CHH). Such children are made to do without parental social and emotional support, parental guidance, parental love, and monitoring over prolonged periods of time. These ensuing environments are perceived to disadvantage them in terms of their psychosocial functioning and educational proficiency [14]. The plight of such learners is further compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic that to some extent, have crippled the traditional sources of their support, that is. return visits and remittances. Cross-border mobility became limited and made it difficult for the parent to make return visits [4]. This further prolonged the period of separation between the migrating parent and the LBC's.

A survey conducted in South Africa during the national lockdown induced by the COVID-19 pandemic, reveals that two out of five adults lost their source of income and ran out of money to buy food [25]. South Africa is of interest in this study because they house the bulk of the labor migrants from Zimbabwe [6]. When the migrating parent is incapacitated, it would also follow that remittances would be limited. Thus, children left behind in their homes are equally affected by what happens in the host country. The COVID-19-induced lockdowns affected the well-being of LBC's.

This makes it prudent to explore other schemes of support that would improve the psychosocial functioning and prevent or modify conduct problems among left-behind learners. The goal is to ensure that left-behind learners and other learners in adverse living and learning conditions learn how to 'live.' In this case, 'live' entails coping and striving for improved well-being in the face of challenges associated with parental absence due to migration. The goal is to promote the acquisition of requisite social and emotional competencies (of LBC) for improved well-being and improved learning outcomes.

### **6.1 Methodology**

This study followed a qualitative route and had the following objective (i) explore schemes of psychosocial support for LBC's in the context of the school. Focus group discussions were held with purposively selected participants drawn from one secondary school in the Midlands province of Zimbabwe. The participants were seven left-behind learners (n = 7) and eight education and community informants (n = 8). Separate sessions were held for learners and adults (n = 7 + 8). The education informants were teachers, the school head, a senior teacher, and a school psychological services representative. The community contingent comprised a representative of the police community and liaison office and a representative of local nongovernmental organizations. To contextualize the envisaged support, participants were asked to outline psychosocial challenges at school and at home. Thereafter, participants were asked to identify support systems within the school that could be utilized in building psychosocial support or mechanisms for the LBC's. Permission for the study followed an ethical clearance from the Central University of Technology (FRIC 21.18/2), permission was also granted by the Zimbabwe Ministry of Primary and

Secondary Education. Written consent forms were completed by the adult participants. Participants' names were coded to protect their privacy. The discussions were recorded on a digital recorder by the main researcher and later transcribed verbatim. This was to ensure an accurate record of the proceedings. Data analysis followed the thematic approach (Thematic analysis) in which codes and themes were used. The collected information was coded and categorized after it was transcribed. Coding entailed systematically analyzing the transcribed data and disaggregating it into similar constituent parts (code clustering of data sets). After coding, data were organized or categorized into themes. Each theme entailed a unique aspect, which we elaborate in the results section. The analyses were used to arrive at conclusions, notwithstanding the goal of the study and the study's research objectives [26].

## **7. Results**

Findings from this study revealed the different school-based avenues that have potential to be optimized for the support of left-behind learners affected by parental migration. Participants in the focus group discussion saw the essence of psychosocial support for left-behind learners in view of the unmet psychosocial support needs attributed to lack of parental support, monitoring, and discipline hand. By inference, this envisaged support is considered relevant in the face of threats posed by the COVID-10 pandemic. Participants saw potential support as being housed in the curriculum, extra curriculum, school leadership, school culture, and in teacher-learner relationships.

Teacher participants acknowledged the significant role that is shouldered by the school in support of learners in adverse learning conditions. Teacher participant TR3 "We are teaching students from diverse backgrounds, some are orphans, some have parents in the diaspora and some are in poverty meaning to say now more than ever, as teachers we need to be innovative. The school is their hope, and the community expects the school to step in and make a difference." The school, in this case, is made up of diverse learners with diverse challenges. What stakeholders in the school expect is the transformation of the institute through innovations so that the diverse learners are accommodated and supported.

Participant TR1, who is an experienced teacher remarked, "So much is expected from the school in today's world, the teacher must play different roles depending on circumstances. Sometimes you are the father, mother, teacher, or even aunt, learners come to class with many different problems, and as a teacher, they look up to you for solutions." This implies that the teacher sometimes must play caring, teaching, and advisory roles among the learners. In playing the different roles the school as an institution goes through a transformation. The teacher is expected to be innovative and come up with solutions that would facilitate teaching and learning. Such an understanding of the teacher's role is significant in exploring the utilitarian role of the school in the support of learners. The key roles expected of parents, such as guidance and protection, are assumed by the teacher.

### **7.1 Curriculum-based support**

Participants revealed the critical role that the curriculum play in the support schemes of learners disadvantaged by adverse living conditions such as left-behind learners. The school curriculum in Zimbabwe has undergone several changes possibly to be apt to the transformation of society. More recently (2021) the Zimbabwe

Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education launched the updated national curriculum. Participants also saw great potential in the support of left-behind learners within updated school curriculum. This was particularly pronounced in the guidance and counseling (G&C) course, and generally in crosscutting themes in all the learning areas. In this regard, a school head participant (SH) shared, “the new curriculum gives hope to disadvantaged learners because of its emphasis on guidance and counseling. True, left-behind learners need guidance and protection. If not, some end up abusing drugs and alcohol. We have several cases of learner dropouts because of pregnancy among these children of diaspora parents. This, G&C course, gives a fighting chance for left-behind learners because of its emphasis on life skills. Learners acquire decision-making skills, problem-solving skills among other skills.” In other words, the school becomes a place where learners learn how to live according to Dewey [27].

Teacher participant TR2 also shared, “Indeed the G&C course is an important component of the curriculum, the only problem is that teachers fail to take it seriously and so learners fail to benefit much from its teaching. My suggestion is the Ministry need to train at least one full-time teacher.” The learning area would teach and tackle real-life challenges and promote well-being among the learners.

“Cross-cutting issues within the updated curriculum can also help in resolving behavior problems among learners negatively affected by labor migration” (TR1). Cross-cutting themes in most of the learning areas in the syllabus include teaching on human rights, sexuality, Ubuntu, good citizenship, and social responsibility. Such themes when inculcated among learners would go a long way in assisting with coping strategies when challenges arise. Ubuntu is a guiding principle and an African philosophy that lays emphasis on humanity to others (‘I am because you are’). The word Ubuntu comes from Xhosa and Zulu languages of Southern Africa. This social justice philosophy emphasizes love, generosity, collectivism, sharing of resources for the common good, and respect for one another. It is essentially a guiding principle in the realms of societal leadership, governance, and leadership. Fundamentally, it is premised on the notions of kindness, compassion, and individuality. The curriculum becomes a tool for capacitation, empowerment, and inculcation of Ubuntu principles. Learners, who are educated on human rights and sexuality, are more likely to protect themselves from issues such as abuse. The Ubuntu philosophy can also foster collaboration, respect, and social responsibility among the learners. It is through such courses that LBC’s are empowered to deal with their unmet psychosocial support needs.

## **7.2 Teachers in the support schemes**

The teachers, who deliver the curriculum, were also revealed as a special group that could be utilized in the psychosocial support schemes of left-behind learners. Teacher support was suggested to be through lesson delivery, initiating a conducive learning environment, and through fostering positive relationships with learners.

Teachers have capacity to introduce classroom management philosophies that foster positive behavior among learners. Participants brought to perspective the concept of loco parentis. According to SH, “teachers at college level are trained on the concept of loco parentis. This means that they are the local parent and can step into the shoes of the parent.” This view suggests that the teacher is sometimes expected to play parental roles that may include emotional and physical support for learners going through challenges. Teachers in this regard take a leading role in educating the whole child as they do not concentrate not only on academic issues but also on the socio-emotional development of the learner.



### **7.3 Positive school environment**

Participants shared that when the school environment is positive, it may occupy the young minds of learners thereby minimizing on negative behaviors. In that regard, the school leadership plays a major role in cultivating a positive school environment. School psychological services representative (SPS1) shared, “...every school has its tone, the school administrators are supposed to develop the correct school tone so that learners from diverse backgrounds would be comfortable at the school.”

To achieve that end, participants, for example, TR1, TR2, SPS1, and SH1 identified key virtues that need to be nurtured in creating a positive school environment, for example, empathy, respect, working together, and discipline. In such a school environment, learners negatively affected by parental migration could easily get support. When the correct school environment is nurtured at school and develops to be a school culture, the support base for learners negatively affected by parental migration widens. “When the school has developed the correct environment, everyone has potential to support those who are down” (SPS1). The school would have a wide support base with the learners and teachers equipped with virtues such as empathy and respect.

However, participants noted that when the school environment is not positive the left-behind learners end up being negatively affected in terms of their psychosocial functioning. According to participant SPS1, “the problem at most schools is that left-behind learners are negatively type casted and vilified by teachers, school administrators, and even by their peers, they are labeled troublemakers, truant, and spoilt.” This labeling sometimes affects the learners socially and emotionally.

## **8. Discussion**

In the face of challenges associated with parental migration and compounded with the COVID-19 pandemic, the school was revealed as a potential source of support for left-behind learners. The school as an institution has capacity to define what needs to be learned and, in this regard, can teach well-being and coping strategies for learners affected by parental migration. This would be part of what Dewey (1938) described as teaching on life. Appropriate support schemes would facilitate improved psychosocial functioning among learners negatively affected by parental migration.

The school was also revealed as having potential to step into the shoes of the migrating parents. The concept of loco parentis shows that the teacher can step in and provide emotional and social support for learners. Social relationships are an important factor that influences well-being. This concept resembles the responsive classroom approach in which the teacher facilitates a joyful learning environment in which learners thrive both socially and academically. Such an environment would ensure that the learners thrive socially and academically. The goal is for the school to move from concentrating only on academic subjects but to also facilitate learner well-being.

When learners are equipped with social, emotional, and academic learning skills, the whole learner is educated [28, 29]. It is important that appropriate capacity development programs be in place to professionally develop the teachers for such roles. Negative typecasting of the LBC’s negatively impacts on the learners’ well-being. The disruptions associated with left-behind learners among other social challenges warrant the need to adopt the concept of educating the whole learner. A socially deprived learner would not thrive academically. Thus, the goals of teaching and learning would not be met. This makes it impossible to separate learner well-being with education.

## **8.1 Educare in schools**

A school is often defined as an institution for the acquisition of knowledge in a formal way under teachers [10]. However, over the years the defining features of the school have been transformed beyond this limit as the expectations of society from it widened. More so, many began to see potential in the school that goes beyond just teaching and learning. According to Dewey [29] it is at a school that we “learn how to live,” implying that the school is for the greater good for society. This view regards the school as a dynamic institution that also facilitates the adaptation process among learners. The school is transformed to become a center for both education and care for learners (Educare). Learners are capacitated through the school to cope with their changing circumstances. Educare describes a holistic approach in which education and care are equally important and inseparable [25]. Care is defined as a process of responding to needs, and according to Noddings [28] “needs do not stop at the entrance of a classroom door.” The child, who comes to school with unmet needs, would still be deficient when he/she enters the classroom. It is the onus of the teacher to totally ignore such needs or to try and facilitate measures to mitigate. Addressing the psychosocial needs of the learners would also enable the teacher to pursue his/her own teaching objectives. The school environment should be supportive and be ready to take over support when need arises.

For learners left in CHH, the school would provide the much-needed care. The school steps into the roles of the absent parent and provide guidance and supervision for the LBC. The school steps in to provide socially and politically desirable skills, knowledge attributes, and skills among learners [27]. John White in response to his own question on what schools are said schools should be institutions that promote human happiness and well-being [27]. By implication, when life, happiness, and well-being are under threat, the school is expected to step in. The societal expectations of the school are not fixed as change in society is not constant. New threats and challenges to happiness, well-being, and life continue to emerge, and the school is expected to be apt to the changes and challenges. The school is also defined as a self-determining institution. That is to say: it has capacity to “define what needs to be learned and unlearned, and in what ways” [27]. Thus, the school has potential to facilitate the acquisition of skills and outcomes that it wants among its learners. This potential and capacity of the school are what this study believe is essential when support for left-behind learners is envisaged. Different avenues were scouted within the school culture, curriculum, extra-curriculum, school leadership, and classroom management for well-being support for learners affected by parental absence due to migration.

## **9. Conclusions**

The COVID-19 pandemic yielded far-reaching ramifications on left-behind learners who were already made vulnerable by parental migration. The lack of parental protection and support exposes left-behind learners to vulnerable conditions. This, in turn, affects the educational outcomes of the left-behind learners. This, therefore, calls to the return to the philosophy of Dewey in which education goes beyond words and figures but should equip the learner with life skills. It also calls on society to embrace Ubuntu in relating the LBC. This study revealed support in the school being housed within the curriculum, the teachers, and the school environment. It is of importance that the school environment be positive and enabling for learners to

thrive. When the environment is positive, and enabling support would be available to everyone. Conversely, when the environment is not conducive and characterized with negative typecasting and labeling of left-behind learners, negative outcomes would be expected. It becomes the key responsibility of the school leadership to nurture a conducive learning environment through continuous engagements. In the face of adversity, the school has potential to be a center for hope.

A widened understanding of the school is vital and relevant in view of the threats posed by globalization, parental migration, and compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic. This paper calls for going back memory lane and adopt Dewey's lenses. The school becomes a place where there is hope, as learners learn life lessons. This transformation is significant considering that most children spend three-quarters of their waking time at school. The teaching staff needs to be capacitated through professional development to effectively play their loco parentis roles in the school realm. The teacher becomes a specialist for both education and care (Educare). Such approaches will surely mitigate the unmet psychosocial needs of left-behind learners in child-headed households in contemporary times.

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## **Conflict of interest**

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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