

# **AN EXPLORATORY STUDY ON CHILDREN AT RISK: A CASE OF ORPHANS' SOCIAL AND INTELLECTUAL WELLNESS IN MASVINGO URBAN, ZIMBABWE.**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*The human and social costs of HIV and AIDS pandemic have enormous effects on the lives of children in Zimbabwe in general and Masvingo in particular. This paper based on a generative qualitative research approach and a naturalistic ethnographic research design conducted over a period of one year. The study gathered data from 16 purposively sampled orphans, 4 guidance teachers and analysed documents within a primary school in Masvingo Urban in Zimbabwe. This paper established that orphans in Masvingo Urban, are at risk and experience academic challenges, that their socialization process is severely compromised and that the support structures in Masvingo are inconsistent and inadequate. Among the findings is that female orphans are the most affected and show much distress than their male counterparts. A recommendation is made that policy intended to strengthen the provision of intellectual and social wellness of orphans be implemented and that more awareness advocacy be conducted to highlight the problem.*

**Keywords:** Children at risk, Intellectual Wellness, Masvingo Urban, Orphans, Social Wellness, Vulnerable.

## **INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND**

There are now 40 million people living with HIV/AIDS in the world, out of whom 29, 4 million are living in Africa. The highest level of HIV/AIDS are found in Southern Africa, with prevalence rates exceeding 30 percent among the adult population in Botswana, Lesotho, Swaziland and Zimbabwe (UNAIDS, UNICEF & WHO 2006), consequently, leading to an increase in the number of children in sub-Saharan countries who are affected by HIV/AIDS. Mangoma, Chimbari and Dhlomo, (2008) maintain that, HIV and AIDS have led to a drastically increased number of orphans in the world. UNAIDS estimates that almost 90% of the world's children with HIV are in the sub-Saharan Africa. Zimbabwe like any other sub-Saharan African country is faced with

the devastating effects of the pandemic. HIV prevalence rate as at 2005 was 20, 1% (The Herald, Harare 2007). Mahati, Chitiyo, Mashange, Chibatamoto, Mupambireyi and Chandiwana, (2006) established that a number of children in Zimbabwe are orphans. Currently, in Zimbabwe the estimated adult HIV prevalence according to the National AIDS Council for people between 15-49 years is 37, 7%. This has resulted in the number of orphans rising to 1, 14% million as in 2009 (UNICEF, 2010). Sadly, only 95 000 of those students went to school. Children in this study have been classified under the banner “children at risk” because they often face loss of family and identity, increased malnutrition and reduced opportunity for education (Wagt & Connoly, 2007). HIV/AIDS deepen poverty and increases inequalities at every level, from household to global (Whiteside, 2002). Over 34 million children aged 0-14 years at their last birthday are currently believed to be orphaned in Africa (Nyamukapa, Foster and Gregson, 2003). Children and youth affected by AIDS typically face a wide range of stressful events and circumstances, including poverty, the loss of caregivers and loved ones, having to drop out of school, the burden of adult-like responsibilities, and social isolations. Due to inadequate care and support, these children are exposed to exploitative child labour and abuse, hence facing increased vulnerability to HIV infection. Therefore the research questions were asked:

*What are the social and intellectual wellness challenges orphans in Masvingo City experience? And how can support be given to alleviate resultant impact of those challenges?*

## **THE RATIONALE OF THE STUDY**

Not much research has been done in line with social and intellectual wellness in Zimbabwe. As a result, the gap in literature is that studies that explored the social and intellectual wellness of orphans in Masvingo City are almost nonexistent. Mahati, Chitiyo, Mashange, Chibatamoto, Mupambireyi and Chandiwana, (2006) established that a number of children in Zimbabwe are orphans. Whilst these scholars mention the social deprivation of the orphans, the real issue is that very little has been written about the wellness of orphans in general and Masvingo in particular. Therefore the following aim and objectives were therefore stated.

## **THE AIM AND OBJECTIVES**

The central aim of the study was to explore the social and intellectual wellness that orphans in Masvingo City experience as a result of being children at risk. In order to answer the research questions the following objectives were stated:

- To describe the social and intellectual wellness challenges orphans in Masvingo experience as a result of them being children at risk?
- To assess the effectiveness of social support systems that exists in Masvingo to address the social and intellectual wellness of orphans?
- To suggest how existing support systems could be improved to address the challenges of social and intellectual wellness of orphans of being children at risk?

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

This study is underpinned by, two theoretical frameworks which intersect in their emphasis on a holistic and interrelated approach to the achievement of wellness. The frameworks are the bio-ecological systems, by Bronfenbrenner's multidimensional model of human development (Donald, Lazarus, & Lolwana, 2008) and the hierarchy of needs to self-actualization by Maslow (Passer & Smith, 2011). These two theoretical frameworks will be used as lenses to interrogate through exploring how the social and intellectual wellness of children at risk in Masvingo is being promoted. Maslow's hierarchy of needs was an alternative to the depressing determinism of Freud and Skinner. Bronfenbrenner's theory has recently been revised and renamed the "bio-ecological system theory" of development to emphasize that a child's own biology is a primary environment fuelling her development (McMurray, 2000), as is reflected in figure 2.2. The theory illustrates how the systems and contextual settings, within which people and groups live, develop as well as influencing an individual (Landsberg, Kruger & Nel, 2005).

Bronfenbrenner's theory defines complex "layers" of environment, each having an effect on a child's development as well as the interaction between factors in the child's maturing process (Donald, Lazarus, and Lolwana, 2008). This theory also gives light to how the immediate family/community environment and the societal landscape fuels and steers child's development. Changes or conflict in any one layer will ripple throughout other layers (Donald et al, 2008). This therefore implies that, it is not enough to study the life experiences of a child focusing only on the child's immediate environment instead also look at the child's interaction in the larger environment. By employing an integrative lens, the researchers were mainly tried to get a better perspective and a deeper understanding of children at risk's social and intellectual wellness in Masvingo Urban, Zimbabwe.

Maslow's hierarchy of needs demonstrate the different aspects which an individual needs to have satisfied and accomplished in order to move on to the next step. According to Maslow, an individual is ready to act upon the growth needs if and only if the deficiency needs are met. Each level of the pyramid is dependent on the previous level (Koltko-Rivera, 2006). Thus, human needs are arranged in a hierarchy. For example, a person does not feel the second need until the demands of the first have been satisfied. Maslow thought people are basically trustworthy, self-protecting, and self-governing. Thus humans tend toward growth and love. Further, Maslow postulated that violence is not what human is meant to be like. However, violence and other evils occur when human needs are thwarted. In other words, people who are deprived of lower needs such as safety may defend themselves by violence and this does not mean to say that these people enjoy violence, or that they enjoy stealing or cheating.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This study is situated in the interpretive (naturalistic/constructivist) paradigm. Thus a generative qualitative data collection process was followed during this study. Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. Thus things were studied in their natural settings, in an attempt to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings brought to them (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Interviews, observations, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos

which makes the world visible are tools used to study objects in their natural setting in order to bring a clear picture and a clear meaning to the world in general, in particular of what was happening in a specified context (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000:3). In this study interviews, a test, observations and document analysis were used to collect data.

This study adopted an ethnographic research design since the research focused on studying orphans in a naturally occurring setting in order to capture their social meanings and ordinary activities while in a particular social system (Brewer, 2006).

### **Context, Study Area and Selection of Participants**

This study was carried out in Masvingo Urban City, Zimbabwe over a period of 12 months. Masvingo City is the oldest city among other cities in Zimbabwe. The study population was defined as children aged 10–16. The sample included two groups of respondents: a) four double orphans (those orphans who lost both parents), were purposively selected from each of the four primary school in Masvingo Urban (a total of 16). b) A school guidance teacher from each of the four schools was included as a participant in the study. Thus, the participants in this study were a total of 20.

### **Sampling Procedure**

The researchers used a purposive convenient sampling technique to select participants who were affected by the phenomenon under study. Four orphans were selected from each of the four Primary schools under study and school guidance and counseling teacher was selected from each of the four primary schools. Guidance teacher were selected because they dealt with the learners directly and their experiences were central in getting a rich data.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Whenever a researcher is conducting any research study, it is a professional responsibility that the researcher should adhere to ethical principles throughout the course of the research process. In this study, the researchers considered the following research principles; permission to conduct the research, informed consent, confidentiality, privacy, protection from harm, deception of participants publications of findings. Access to the research site was sought through the Provincial Education Director (PED) in Masvingo, from the ward councilor, and consent was obtained from the guardians of orphans to engage them in taking part as participants in our research study.

Polit and Beck (2008) maintain that every researcher should give correct/true and relevant information to all participants about the research process for them to be able to make informed consent. The researchers explained the contents in the consent form to grandparents since they could not comprehend the information in the form which was written in English Language. After all participants had understood the research process, participants signed in the consent forms to grant permission to the researcher. All participants were told that they were free to withdraw from the research process any time they felt like even, even after they have signed in the consent forms. The purpose of the study and the data collection process were explained to the participants. Pseudonyms names were used throughout the interview and research process to ensure anonymity (Polit and Beck, 2008).

### **Data Collection**

Semi-structured Interviews, a test, observation, document analysis were used to collect data. Researchers used a voice recording machine to capture detailed sets of notes during interviews. This method enhanced the accuracy and trustworthiness of data collected. This approach reinforces Deem's (2002:840) idea that "in interviews, it is important for the researcher to record as much detail as possible. In accordance with the above, Creswell, Ebersohn, Ivankova, Jansen, Nieuwenhuis, Clark, & van der Westhuizen, (2011) maintain that, data collection in ethnography involves prolonged observation of a group, mostly through participant observation; interviews; field notes; working closely with participants. The homes of orphans were visited and observations were made about how they lived and engaged into the vending process. Thus we observed day-to-day occurrences in their homes, in their community as well as in their school. To determine orphans' level of intellectual wellness, all learners in the class orphans and non-orphans wrote a test and their scholastic performances were analyzed. The researchers then compared the scholastic performances of orphans and non-orphans. Collected data was then analysed. Table: 1 presents a summary of data collection process and activities:

<b>Technique</b>	<b>Activity</b>
Semi-structured Interviews	4 Guidance teachers were interviewed 16 Orphans were interviewed
Observations	16 Orphans were observed at their homes
Test	16 orphans and 16 non-orphans wrote a test
Documentary analysis	Researcher analysed documents i.e. Register, individual record books and a mathematics test

## **Data Analysis**

In analyzing data all the folders/tapes were transcribed for easy coding and analysis (Henning, Van Rensburg and Smit 2004:34). The transcribed folders were printed on hard copies to enable easier clustering of similar topics. At the beginning, all the transcriptions from all participants had to be read carefully. While reading, the main ideas which were coming out of the responses on the right hand side of the responses were written. As this was done there was a realization that new codes and patterns of similar meaning led to categories and were identified within orphans' social and intellectual wellness. The following four themes emerged:

- Orphans face academic challenges especially in Mathematics
- Social wellness compromised lack of play due to household chores
- support for orphans is inconsistent
- Female orphans reported more trauma, stress and psychological distress than male orphans

## **FINDINGS**

The findings were derived from triangulated data collected from sixteen orphans and 4 school guidance and counseling teachers and analyzed documents. The following four themes emerge:

### **Theme 1: Orphans face academic challenges especially in Mathematics**

Basing on the observation from the individual record book of the school guidance teachers who are respective class teachers to the selected orphans, orphans in their class have an erratic school attendance due to lack of school fees or proper school uniforms. These erratic tendencies may

eventually result in orphans performing poorly intellectually compared to their counterparts as has been depicted in the findings. See table 1.1 and table 1.2.

Table 1.1 Intellectual performances in Mathematics of orphans and non-orphaned learners

ORPHANS		NON-ORPHANS	
ORPHAN	PERCENTAGE SCORE	NON-ORPHAN	PERCENTAGE SCORE
A	45	A	65
B	50	B	74
C	54	C	64
D	35	D	76
E	50	E	74
F	55	F	76
G	62	G	74
H	45	H	65
I	50	I	70
J	48	J	74
K	55	K	68
L	40	L	72
M	50	M	60
N	55	N	76
O	46	O	68
P	58	P	75

In Mathematics, where concept building is cumulative, missing one Mathematics lesson may adversely affect the grasping of future concepts within the same unit. Orphans from extended family households are often absent from school than learners from parent-headed families, for reasons articulated earlier, erratic attendance which was revealed in the class register.

Conversely, the learners from parent-headed families have few chores as the parents come to their aid. In some cases, they hire house helpers who do virtually all the domestic chores. Moreover, in



parent- headed family, the adults normally provide for their children. As such, there is no need for primary school learners to perform adult duties as a way of raising money for food, school fees or clothing. These factors put learners from parent-headed families at an advantage, thus ensuring better intellectual achievement in general, and in Mathematics in particular. Psychological peace and a sense of security are other compelling evidence which account for the differences in the academic performance of children from the two cohorts. Orphans usually have many uncertainties about their future. Brooding over the way one’s parents died or separated can lead to mental torment, leading to academic underachievement, especially in Mathematics; this was characteristic of the orphans.

It was observed that most of the learners from extended families are often tired and hungry, resulting in some of them fainting during class. Mathematics requires specialised assistance and concentration. While orphans did poorly in subjects requiring high intellectual function such as mathematics , its seemed as though in languages e.g. English they were not performing as poorly, but there was still an indication that more support was needed to improve their scholastic achievements.

Table1.2 Intellectual performances in English of orphans and non-orphans learners

ORPHANS		NON-ORPHANS	
ORPHAN	PERCENTAGE SCORE	NON-ORPHAN	PERCENTAGE SCORE
A	76	A	77
B	76	B	75
C	96	C	65
D	60	D	95
E	74	E	74
F	68	F	70
G	75	G	74
H	68	H	70
I	70	I	72
J	72	J	70
K	65	K	68

L	68	L	65
M	70	M	70
N	72	N	70
O	68	O	69
P	65	P	68

## **Theme 2: Orphans’ socialization is compromised**

The study also established that orphans have limited time to study and socialize after leaving schools as they have to perform domestic chores including in income generating activities in a bid to raise money for food, payment of school fees as well as for rentals. Consequently, the orphans are robbed of their childhood, as the additional responsibilities present very little time for developmentally appropriate activities such as playing, forming friendship as well as participation in other social and recreational activities (Cree, Kay, Tisdall & Wallace, 2006). Indirectly, this may impact negatively on the orphans’ physical and emotional wellness.

One of the interviewed orphans showed a lot of anxiety and a sense of insecurity of her future especially concerning physical needs (accommodation, food, clothes and medication), hence impacting negatively on their social and emotional wellness hence he echoed;

*It is very hard to know whether this month I will be able to sell enough to raise cash for paying for our rentals and remain with extra money for my grandmother to buy food because the municipality policemen are always chasing away from the shop verandas yet this is where we are getting most of our good buyers.*

When asked whom they play with at home after school, one of the orphans responded saying;

*Playing at home is word of the past in our vocabulary. We only play with peers while at school especially during tea break or lunch break. At home I do not have any friends or time to play. If I opt to play, then no one will sell the vegetables and sweets and all things will go onto a stand-still. My grandmother is very old and can not perform strenuous work. Life is very difficult for us. Those with parents enjoy their play with friends.*

The other who was asked whom her friends were in her community? She indicated that she echoed;

*My friends whom I play with do not stay in our community. I just meet them at school that is where we have time to play. They stay in B Suburb. In our suburb, I do not have any friends because I do not even have the time to play because I will be very busy either with household chores or selling at our vegetable market or in the streets. It's even worse with us girls because the work becomes more and more.*

### **Theme 3: Social support for orphans in Masvingo is inconsistent**

In answering the question; how adequately do existing support systems address the challenges of social and intellectual wellness? All the school guidance and counseling teachers indicated that the support systems in Masvingo City are being overwhelmed by the increasing number of orphans in the City. Consequently, the social support system rendered is inconsistent. This study established that there is a higher percentage of inconsistent support towards orphans' social wellness. Eighty percent (80%) of orphans in this study indicated that support from the community or the religious community is inconsistent. Additionally, they felt they were being abandoned by relatives and friends in times of needs. They reported not having any adults to talk to about problems except at school to the school guidance and counseling teacher.

### **Theme 4: Female orphans reported more trauma, stress and psychological distress than male orphans**

There was an indication that female orphans reported more, trauma, stress and psychological distress than their male counterparts, for example one of the female orphan had this to say *"I am not sure how good I can perform at school, I feel so burdened and so insecure, I am afraid of people raping me when walking back home"* The indication was that there was more insecurity and an inability to cope with the stress posed by the challenges of being a female and moreover an orphan at risk.

## **CONTRIBUTION AND RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE STUDY**

The study has confirmed that HIV/AIDS crisis has had an enormous impact on Sub-Saharan Africa. Of particular importance is the result of a dramatic increase of the number of orphans in general (Gundersen, Kelly & Jemison, 2004), and in Zimbabwe in particular. Further compounding these problems is the ever-present deep poverty in Sub-Saharan Africa and the toll that HIV and AIDS crisis has continuously taken on their economies (Dixon, McDonald & Roberts, 2001). The contributions are discussed in relation to how well the study addressed the objectives stated at the beginning:

**To describe the social and intellectual wellness challenges orphans in Masvingo experience as a result of them being children at risk**

HIV/AIDS is eroding the ability of education systems to provide quality education. Its impact is felt through its effect on the supply, demand and quality of education. This has highly affected the children at risk who happen to be orphans in Masvingo. This study established that there is a higher rate of absenteeism among children at risk in Masvingo. Orphans are always under pressure to shift their time allocation toward more household and market labor and less study. The pressure incurred, ultimately affects the quality of the classroom experience. This also leads to emotional pain among children at risk due to minimum socialization and inclusion into classroom experiences.

Comparably, learners from parent-headed families stand a better chance of having their library fees paid for, so that they could have access to a variety of textbooks. This study found that the family environment has a strong influence on one's intellectual wellness. In this regard, socio-economic conditions may be a strong function of academic achievement. Students from well-up families have conducive environments set up for them that stimulate intellectual and social growth (Mafumbate, 2011). This study observed that learners from parent-headed families were more likely to get assistance on Mathematics homework while, learners from extended family heads were unlikely to get such assistance and the former often worked in less conducive environments than their counterparts. Orphans may be more likely than non-orphans to live in poor households and, in the presence of credit constraints, lower household wealth may reduce investment in schooling (Case, Paxon & Ableidinger, 2004).

The study established that orphans in Masvingo's lack of proper care is further exacerbated by the fact that most of the extended family heads who care for these orphans lack adequate resources. Also, they are aged to fend for these orphans or engage into strenuous work in order to earn a living. According to the orphans in this study, most of them are deprived of their social wellness

due to increased household responsibilities and other survival activities. Thus Wagt and Connoly (2007) maintain that these children suffer emotional distress that interferes with school, and they have less money school expenses. Findings from orphans indicated that the extended family heads in this study are grandmothers and they are facing challenges in caring for orphans. This then forces most of the orphans to engage into the selling of vegetables and sweets in streets. This is consistent with UNAIDS, UNICEF, USAID.' (2004) findings which indicated that orphans in South Africa are as well being cared for by grandmothers.

**To assess the effectiveness of social support systems that exist in Masvingo to address the social and intellectual wellness of orphans?**

The findings in this study established that support towards orphans by most of the support systems like the Social welfare, Government and other non- governmental organizations have become very inconsistent. These findings concur with findings by Ostergaard and Meyrowitsch (2008) who maintain that it has increasingly become clear that African governments and International community have failed to protect orphans and provide them with decent opportunities. Further compounding these problems is the ever-present deep poverty in Sub-Saharan African and the toll to HIV and AIDS crises has continuously taken on their economies (Dixon, McDonald & Roberts, 2001).

**Suggest how existing support systems could be improved to address the challenges of social and intellectual wellness?**

It is imperative that the Ministry of Education, responsible authorities and other policy implementers ensure that policies that protect or promote the rights of the children in difficult circumstances are implemented in order to enhance their academic competence. The study recommends that the community leaders encourage communities to have fundraising projects to complement activities done by caregivers and other support systems to promote orphan wellness.

**CONCLUSION**

While the study was limited to one primary school, the study however makes ground breaking findings in terms of the state of intellectual and social wellness of orphans as children at risk in

Masvingo and makes a valuable contribution as to the extent of support required to improve the conditions under which the orphans are living. The study further lays a foundation for further research into the extent to which the female orphans are affected and how that could be alleviated.

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