Teachers' Perceptions and Expectations of Community and Government Involvement in Supporting Orphaned Learners

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ABSTRACT This paper investigates the teachers' perceptions and expectations concerning community and government involvement in caring for orphaned learners. The research was conducted in two rural primary schools in South Africa. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data from ten teachers who were identified, using a snowballing process. The findings of the study indicate that the participant teachers perceive the community as uninvolved in supporting orphaned learners. Teachers in this study reported that support from the community was limited due to poor economic status and weak school-community relationships. Government support for orphans was found to be insufficient to fulfill the needs of the orphans. This study highlights the need to equip teachers with knowledge and skills for collaborative partnerships with the community in support of orphaned learners. It suggests that government policies and structural changes are crucial for supporting the schools and communities as caregivers of orphaned children.

INTRODUCTION

Traditionally, in many African countries, the care of orphans and other vulnerable children is the responsibility of the extended family and the community in the absence of nuclear family care. Across the continent many communities still rely on kinship family structures, community- based organizations (CBOs), government initiatives, faith-based organizations (FBOs) and non-governmental organizations as caregiving support systems for orphans and other vulnerable children (Datta 2012; UNICEF 2015). The community responds to the needs of orphans and other vulnerable children by using local resources and by reinforcing kinship and extended family relationships to enable the children to adapt and respond quickly to their situations (Datta 2012). Despite community efforts to respond to the needs of orphans and other vulnerable children, support structures are overburdened with the rapidly growing number of orphans and diminishing resources as a result of the effects of HIV/AIDS (UNICEF 2015). In earlier studies, Oleke et al. (2007) and Thurman et al. (2008) found that as a result of poverty many caregivers were unable to provide the orphans in their care with food, medical care, clothing and education, which were needed. Some caregivers were unable to provide for their own children and that had a negative impact on their support of orphans in the community (Thurman et al. 2008).

Internationally, recorded research shows that apart from the extended families there are many alternative structures for supporting orphans. In a study undertaken in China, Hong et al. (2011) suggest that the Kinship Care Model is considered to be a better caregiving structure despite its inability to fulfill the psychological needs of orphans when compared to the better psychological well-being of orphans in community-based facilities. They recommend capacity building in local community interventions to establish the better psychosocial well-being of orphans. In their study on the care of orphans and children separated from their families due to political unrest in Kenya, Embleton et al. (2014) maintain that community-based organizations in collaboration with religious institutions have the potential to support families in caring for orphans. Ganga and Maphalala (2013) are of the opinion that in Zimbabwe there are many orphaned children in child-headed families, and they recommend that government, non-government organizations and members of the community should work together to ensure the best upbringing for orphaned children.

In the study by Landry et al. (2007) it was found that some teachers expected the community to assist in the provision of support for orphans while others argued that community resources were already overstretched and supporting orphaned children was no longer possible. Wood and Goba (2011) recommend an effective partner relationship between the school

and the community in providing for the needs of orphans and assert that there is a need to train teachers in skills that facilitates their engagement with agencies outside the school in providing for the material and social needs of orphans and other vulnerable children in the community. In another study of partnerships between the home, the school and the community in South Africa, within the context of the HIV/AIDS pandemic Van Wyk and Lemmer (2007) report that, at times, teachers play the role of surrogate parents in supporting orphaned learners. However, an increase in the number of orphaned learners presents a serious challenge for schoolteachers in terms of managing the children's needs (Van Wyk and Lemmer 2007). Although the government is statutorily obliged to ensure that children's rights to education are promoted by supporting them under all circumstances (Witt and Lessing 2010; Datta 2012), relatively little is known about how teachers collaborate with communities and the government in meeting the educational needs of orphaned learners in schools. The aim of this paper is to explore the teachers' perceptions and expectations of the community and government with regard to providing support for orphaned learners. The focus of the study was centered in the adaptive social rupture thesis. Chirwa (2002) argues that due to an increase in the number of orphaned children, family and community support systems that develop adaptive capacity continually evolve in order to cope with the challenges of orphan care. The main assumption of the adaptive rupture framework is that families and communities have the potential to reconfigure and restructure themselves in the face of a crisis (Chirwa 2002).

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative, interpretive research approach was used in this study, which involved understanding and interpreting meaning attached to the experiences of the participants in terms of their perceptions and expectations of support from the community and government to help orphaned learners. Qualitative research was appropriate because it gave the researcher the opportunity to clarify responses by probing further to obtain in-depth information that permitted a detailed description of the views and experiences of the participants. Convenience sampling was used to select two rural schools on the basis of their accessibility, which allowed the researcher to make multiple visits to ensure a comprehensive collection of data (Creswell 2009). The two specific schools were chosen because they had orphaned learners as well as teachers who were willing to participate in the study. The five teachers from each school who were involved in the study were identified by means of a snowballing process, whereby an initial information-rich participant who was interviewed referred the researcher to another possible participant who also met the selection criteria. The referral process was systematically repeated until the required data was saturated (Struwig and Stead 2001; Fraenkel and Norman 2006). In-depth semi-structured interviews were used to collect relevant data and the five participants were asked the following core questions:

- In your opinion, how is the community responding to orphaned learners?
- Are you aware of any school-community partnerships to help orphaned learners?
- In cases where the school cannot meet the needs of orphans, where do you go for help?
- How have you experienced government involvement in helping orphans?

Data collection and analysis was achieved by means of an iterative process. Each interview was tape-recorded and transcribed and the *verbatim* transcripts were analyzed according to specific themes. Each theme was described and illustrated with quotations from the original text to help communicate meaning to the reader.

Rigor in the research process included an audit trail of the data collection process and *verbatim* accounts of the data collection and analysis procedures. Member checking was done by giving participants a summary of the data analysis procedures and the final results based on their comments in order to verify that the data interpretation was in sync with their experiences. Since qualitative research, in general, is normally contextual and each situation is unique, it is not possible to generalize the findings. They may, however, be transferable to a similar context. A detailed description of the context of the study is presented to enable readers to decide on the applicability of the findings to other contexts (Seale 2000).

The Ethics Committee of the University of Pretoria gave ethical clearance for the study. Permission was obtained from the relevant Department of Education Circuit Offices to access

the two schools involved in the study. Verbal and written permission was obtained from the participants. The researcher ensured confidentiality by concealing the identities of the participants by means of a coding system. Finally, feedback on the research results was given to the participants in recognition of, and appreciation for, their contributions to the study.

RESULTS

Theme 1: Teachers' Perceptions of Community Involvement in Helping Orphans

In this study the perceptions of participant teachers with regard to the community's response to supporting orphans were mixed, and at times, contradictory. Some teachers seemed to be unaware or uncertain of what was happening in the community with regard to orphan care. Their interpretation of the orphan situation was based on the fact that orphans came to school with needs that probably, could have been met by the community. Teachers who were more informed about the community and had access to social networks were of the opinion that the community did care for orphans. The following are some of the remarks made by the teachers:

I cannot say that they are helping. We have started a school garden, and maybe they will be involved. The garden is also going to help them.

I do think that the community is helping. When I talked to that learner, she said that they do receive something from the neighbors.

I think they feel that they can help but they do not know how they can do it. I was asking the learner who is staying alone with her sister. She was telling me that the neighbors used to give them food but they got tired.

The teachers' conflicting perceptions of community involvement seem to be based on the extent to which they interact with community members. Their views of community involvement were manifested in three categories, that is, no information about the community, information gathered from the learners, and information obtained from community members. Some of the teachers perceived the community to be a body, which is able to help orphaned children. However, they complained that there were no community structures in place to channel its support effort.

Theme 2: School-Community Connectedness

Teachers in the current study seemed to consider the school as an entity, which was separate from the community, and therefore, they appeared to lack all knowledge of what was happening in the community. One possible reason is that the way in which teachers understand their role excludes their responsibility of establishing relationships with the community. Teachers who interact with members of the community tend to be aware of the community's positive response towards orphan suggested in the following responses from participants.

I do not know community members because I have not communicated with them and I am not aware if the community helps.

There are different organizations within the community. They will come to school and ask how many kids need clothes. They buy school uniforms and other clothes that they feel comfortable to wear at home like jeans.

The participants' divergent perceptions of school and community interconnectedness seem to affect the way in which teachers reach out to the community for support and try to involve the community. The teachers described their efforts as follows:

…So I started looking for donations for the orphans. I got very few donations. I went to the social workers, I invited the police, I went to the businessmen. But I did not get help.

I am a member of Mothers Union. I approached my church members for donations. Now they are sponsoring sandwiches for the orphans for lunch.

Those teachers who see the community as a source of support seem motivated and tend to find diverse ways of engaging different sectors and institutions within the community to help orphans. The opposite is also true. The teachers who are not aware of, or involved with the community are unlikely to take the initiative to solicit support from the community.

Theme 3: Teachers' Perceptions of the Community's Socioeconomic Status

All the teachers who participated in the study acknowledged the poor economic condition of the community, but some still believe in partnerships with the community to provide for the needs of orphaned learners. One argued that

there were some teachers who were more optimistic about the community's ability to provide some kind of support for orphans or they viewed the community in terms of its ability to adapt to adverse conditions. One teacher commented:

People in our community are poor. You give the orphans today then tomorrow you look at your children and say no it will not be enough for my children and somebody else's kids.

There was some indication of a spirit of sharing, but owing to the presence of limited resources, some community members seem overwhelmed by the needs of the orphans and are unable to continue helping them. A number of the teachers were also concerned that the community did not know how to help orphans. This perception may have resulted from the challenging task of identifying orphans' needs, the socioeconomic status of the community, and the lack of community-based organizations.

Theme 4: Expectations with Regard to Government Involvement

Teachers' attitudes to and expectations of the government's response to the needs of orphaned learners in this study could well be based on their perception and understanding of their own role as a teacher, that of teaching and learning, rather than that of caregivers, which was perceived to be the responsibility of the state and the community. The teachers said:

I blame the government and the community at large. Since their parents are not there the government must take over. The government should make provision for an orphanage, sporting and entertainment facilities to make the learners happy.

I wish our government could pay school funds for them, buy for them clothes, food and take them out for excursions or pay for school trips.

There were teachers who were of the opinion that the government should provide funding for educational activities, food and clothing. In addition, they envisaged the possibility of the social and emotional needs of orphaned learners being met by institutionalized structures where adults could fulfill the parental role of a caregiver. An assumption made by some of the teachers in the current study was that the government did not seem to realize the devastating reality of the orphans' situation, and therefore,

did not appreciate the fact that these learners required much greater attention. A teacher said:

They should come to school and see the situation. Maybe they can extend the age for receiving social grants.

Theme 5: Teachers' Experiences of Government Response to Orphans

The participant teachers cited child support grants and the government's feeding scheme as their efforts to help orphaned learners. One remarked:

They are getting grants and most of the parents are told that the grant money has to be used on the learners.

The teachers identified that orphan learners' needs were beyond their knowledge and skills, which required the expertise of professionals. Some of the teachers were concerned about the lack of social services that could provide psychosocial support for the orphaned learners.

The teachers expressed their frustrations, which is illustrated by the following:

…The Department, they will say: "Go to class and write names of those learners." We always send the list and they do not do anything. They write our names and they do not do anything.

Teachers assumed that if the Department of Education took note of the statistics of orphaned learners and saw the magnitude of their needs and numbers, it would pay more attention and give support to these children. However, their expectations have not been realized. It was generally felt that there was a lack of commitment from the Department of Social Welfare. The teachers said:

I have been in this school for three years and I have not seen any social worker. I told the principal that we need a social worker. When I got the number of the learners – I realize it is not a problem of one or two learners – the principal contacted the social worker. They gave us the forms to fill in, the list of the learners and their background. That was the last time we saw the person.

Sometimes you invite the social workers but they do not come. The other learner, the parent died and she was raped and raped again and she is a sick student because she has epilepsy, so this learner will come tell me the story.

Studies by Nyambedha et al. (2003), Nyamukapa and Gregson (2005) and Thurman et al.

(2008) indicate limited community support for orphans and a paucity of community-based initiatives to address the increasing number of orphans and their needs. Other studies suggest the opposite, namely, that many community members are actively involved in helping orphans despite their own impoverished economic circumstances (Chirwa 2002; Beard 2005; Abebe and Aase 2007).

DISCUSSION

The teachers' perceptions and expectations of community and government involvement in caring for orphaned learners were analyzed within an adaptive framework of a community response to orphan care. The underlying assumption was that the community has the potential to assist in providing care for orphaned children. The culture of orphan care proved to have common elements in the two schools, but some teachers seemed to feel more responsible for providing support than others. The differences expressed by the teachers could be due to little evidence of a systemic response to the needs of orphaned learners. The lack of a commonly shared interpretation of their roles as teachers and of the boundaries of their responsibilities with regard to providing orphan care might also have caused the teachers to have different perceptions. This finding indicates the Department of Education's lack of adequate policies that recognize and give guidelines on how teachers should respond to the needs of orphaned learners in their schools

The findings also suggest a scarcity of or limited school-community partnerships. Some of the teachers' scanty knowledge of community initiatives to support orphans seems to create a barrier and to underline a gap in the support for orphaned learners. After all the school is part of the community and in most cases belongs to the community. The perceptions of some of the teachers indicate that their schools operate independently of the community, especially with regard to supporting orphaned learners. Teachers who have more knowledge of the community are able to access community structures and other organizations to help provide for the needs of orphaned learners because they are aware of the strengths, weaknesses and capacity of the community. Embleton et al. (2014) believe that community-based organizations in collaboration

with religious institutions have the potential to support families in caring for orphans. Such support structures could be more effective where there are homeschool partnerships that focus on identifying the needs of the learners.

Another limitation of community partnership and involvement in supporting orphaned learners is the poor economic circumstances of the community. From the interviews it appears that some teachers are, perhaps, reluctant to involve the community in caring for orphans due to the impoverished state of most of the families within the community. Despite the inability of some community members to meet the material needs of the orphans as perceived by some teachers, they could still support the orphans by fulfilling their psychological needs. Hong et al. (2011) maintain that the psychological needs and well-being of learners is better fulfilled in community-based facilities than in institutions.

This study suggests that poverty should not be regarded as a barrier to community involvement in supporting orphans because their needs go beyond material resources. This is evident in the study by Abebe and Aase (2007), which argues that despite the impoverished state of some community members, they are able to satisfy the psychosocial needs of orphaned learners. With regards to the psychosocial needs of the orphaned learners, some of the participant teachers who were interviewed expect the government to provide an alternative source of care, such as an orphanage, and to meet the social needs of learners in the form of recreational activities. Institutionalization was suggested, as a way of centralizing care and support, assuming that institutions could provide foster parents who would satisfy the social and emotional needs of orphaned learners. The foster parent approach may seem to promote a sense of shared responsibility between the school and the community in supporting orphaned learners. However, some studies indicate that institutionalizing orphan care has its challenges. Miller et, al. (2006) warn that institutional care should be a last option because of the cost involved, being more expensive than family care, and its limited capacity to provide stability, love and emotional support. Their view of institutional care contradicts the teachers' argument for benefits and their call for government support in terms of the establishment of caregiving institutions.

Collaboration between the Department of Education and other government departments, such as the National Department of Social Development, is necessary to satisfy those needs as teachers lack the necessary knowledge and skills and the community does not have the necessary resources. Some teachers suggested that they were acting as social workers, which was not included in their professional training. The teachers referred to a large amount of paperwork that the Department of Social Welfare expected them to complete every year and yet social workers failed to respond to the cases they reported. They felt that their efforts to register the number of orphans were meaningless since no support or caregiving assistance was actually forthcoming.

There was a general feeling that social workers should visit schools and assist in providing for the psychosocial needs of orphaned learners. The absence of social workers in the schools appears to create a gap between what teachers expect of social services and the reality in the schools in terms of available support services. This finding highlights a lack of collaboration between the Department of Education and the National Department of Social Development. In Datta's 2012 Kenyan study it is recommended that the Ministry of Education and the Children's Department in the Ministry of Home Affairs should work together to ensure that the needs of orphans were fulfilled. Teachers are unable to fulfill the psychological and social needs of the orphaned learners in the absence of other caregivers and support from government in terms of social services. In South Africa, De Witt and Lessing (2010) report that one of the social services available to support orphans is child support grants. Although the child grant is available to all children in South Africa, some children, mostly orphans, do not receive the grant due to the lack of required documents or the absence of a caregiver or guardian to apply for the grant. The social grant may address physiological needs, but orphaned learners require emotional support, which seems scarce.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to explore the teachers' perceptions and expectations of community and government involvement in caring for orphaned learners. The data was gathered by means of interviews with ten teachers in two primary schools in a rural area in South Africa. The findings of the study reveal that most of the teachers interviewed reported that they were unaware of any community involvement and support in caring for orphaned learners. Some teachers who had some knowledge of community involvement argued that the available support was limited due to the poor economic status of the communities. The evidence suggests that there are inadequate school-community partnerships, and the findings highlight the need to equip teachers with the necessary knowledge and skills to build collaborative partnerships with local communities. There is also a perception of insufficient support from the government in terms of structure and policies, especially regarding the support expected from social services.

RECOMMENDATIONS

From the findings of the research, the following recommendations are made:
- Schools should reach out to their communities by formulating policies that strengthen the links between schools and communities.
- School and community-based programs should provide social, emotional and material support, and schools should empower their communities by providing literacy, entrepreneurship and caregiving skills classes.
- Schools should aim to build community networks by involving community leaders and other liaison persons, such as parent representatives of School Governing Bodies and Parent Teacher Associations.
- Teacher education programs should prepare teachers for community networking. In-service community involvement training should be given in the form of seminars and workshops to expose teachers to practical ways of engaging with their communities.
- Training related to income-generating activities should be provided to community members that could enhance their economic status and empower them to support orphans.
- Policies that address the plight of vulnerable children should be refined. They should bridge support gaps by building structures that encourage school-community-government partnership for supporting vulnerable children.

♦ The purpose of statistical information collected by the Department of Education should be clarified as a lack of clarity seems to lead to misconceptions and expectations of support from government that do not materialize.

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