



## Research Article

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**An Exploration of Competence in Handling Orphans and Vulnerable Children among School Heads and Teachers in Public Primary Schools in Harare****Dr. Tendayi Lemeyu\*<sup>1</sup>, Dr. Unice Goshomi<sup>2</sup>, & Dr. Tendai Chikutuma<sup>1</sup>**<sup>1</sup>Faculty of Social and Gender Transformative Sciences, Women's University in Africa, Harare, Zimbabwe<sup>2</sup>Research Programmes Leader (Research, Innovation and Postgraduate Centre), Women's University in Africa, Harare, Zimbabwe**Article History**

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**Abstract:** This study sought to explore competence on handling orphans and vulnerable children among school heads and teachers in public primary schools in Harare, Zimbabwe. One hundred participants were selected to participate in the study, these comprising 10 school heads, 10 teachers and 80 OVC. The study was underpinned by phenomenological research philosophy. The study further employed a qualitative phenomenological approach to explore the competence of school heads and teachers. In-depth interviews were conducted with school heads and teachers, while focus groups discussions were held with OVC. Interpretative phenomenological analysis was employed to analyse data. Findings revealed that school heads and teachers had general teacher qualifications, without professional counselling training. Consequently, teachers and school heads lack critical skills and knowledge needed when handling OVC in schools. The participants further highlighted that this problem was compounded by lack of support from the School Psychological Service Department who are no longer visiting schools frequently and also no longer conducting satisfactory training workshops with teachers and school heads. The study concluded that OVC in public primary schools were not sufficiently receiving normal support services. Hence, this study recommended that the Zimbabwean Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education should collaborate with other relevant stakeholders in education.

**Keywords:** Public Primary Schools, Orphans and Vulnerable Children, School Heads, Teachers, School Counselling

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**INTRODUCTION**

Orphans and vulnerable children (OVC) in public primary schools experience social and educational challenges. These challenges are experienced both home and at school and as a result they intervene with the unfolding of the inherent unique potentialities and capacities of the children (Cooley, 2017; & Majoko 2013) and limiting their most favorable functionality. A study by Thomas *et al.* (2021) established that more than 15 million children under the age of 18 in sub-Saharan Africa have lost one or both parents due to a number of pandemics such as HIV/AIDS and COVID 19. In Zimbabwe, the Zimbabwe Statistical Agency (ZIMSTAT) (2021) revealed that 1.6 million children have lost one or both parents due to HIV/AIDS and other pandemics. Hence, such children are called orphans and vulnerable children (OVC). Likewise, Dekeza (2018) revealed that OVC in primary schools come across various experiences and challenges such as lack of educational requirements, psychosocial distress, lack of food, accommodation, clothing and health care. Most of these challenges and experiences faced by OVC in primary schools may possibly be resolved through effective quality handling of school children by school heads and teachers. It is against this background that this study sought to explore how competent are school heads and teachers in handling orphans and vulnerable children in public primary schools in Harare, Zimbabwe.

**BACKGROUND**

Orphans and vulnerable children in public primary schools (OVC) encounter various and complicated challenges and experiences which need to be addressed in good time in order for them to achieve their full potentials in terms of cognitive, emotional and creative capacities. Seruwagi (2018) indicates that the impact of orphan-hood and vulnerability on children negatively affect their material well-being. UNICEF (2015) states that OVC challenges need professionals who are able to provide adequate counselling sessions. In this regard, school heads have to find teachers who are highly capable, dedicated and ready to meet the challenges of today's classrooms (Hoque, 2014). In a similar study in the UK by Hoque (2014) revealed that approximately 60 percent of a school's impact on children's achievement is attributable to school heads and teachers' effectiveness. Generally, school heads and teachers are perceived by communities as very important people in the spreading of knowledge, information and care for OVC in schools (Dekeza, 2018; & Wood & Goba, 2011). Similarly, in the school structure, the school head as the administrator encourages and motivates his or her teachers to achieve the aims and objectives of the school, which are meant to benefit all the learners. Teacher motivation has become an essential matter given that their responsibility to impart knowledge, skills and caring for learners (Dekeza, 2018). It is believed that satisfied teachers are normally more

productive and can influence learners' achievement (Mertler, 2019). Furthermore, Ifeoma (2015) established that primary school teachers' motivation is influenced by various aspects such as remuneration, success in the classroom, their loyalty to the job, the training they received and the probability of promotion and profession advancements. Studies revealed that the success of any programme hinges on the implementers' knowledge of the programme. Hence, OVC crisis calls for teachers with awareness, sensitivity and psychosocial skills needed to handle challenges faced by OVC in public primary schools, (Wood & Goba, 2011; & Dekeza, 2018).

Similarly, Khumalo (2019) highlighted the following needs as critical for orphans and vulnerable children:

- Physical and material needs, for example, food security, accommodation, clothing and proper health care;
- Schooling needs, for example, books, school fees, uniforms, shoes, trip funds and income-generating skills; and
- Emotional needs, for instance, parental attention, guidance, love and care.

In Zimbabwe, studies established that just like many other developing countries specifically in the sub-Saharan Africa, is finding it difficult to meet very basic needs of the growing population of OVC (Dekeza, 2018). Studies further revealed that the number of OVC in Zimbabwe was increasing due to factors such as poverty and poor socio-economic situation of the country (Ringson, 2017; & Chinyoka, 2013). Similarly, Ringson (2019) established that one of the major drivers of vulnerability of children in Zimbabwe is HIV/AIDS. Similarly, UNICEF (2018) posits that poverty contributes heavily to child vulnerability.

Studies by Majoko (2013); & Mapfumo (2016) revealed that in 1983, the Ministry of Education, Sport, Arts and Culture of Zimbabwe set up the School Psychological Service Department to improve the effective management of school guidance and counselling services requirements for children in both primary and secondary schools. The government through its Ministry of Education, Sport and Culture came up with Circular 23 (Zimbabwe, 2005) which introduced and guide the execution of school guidance and counselling services in schools. The abovementioned circular entitled, 'Implementation Guidelines for the Institutionalization of the Guidance and Counselling Programme in all primary and secondary schools' was in line with the Nziramasanga report (1999) which recommended the provision of school counselling services to children in schools. The circular referred to previously further brought in entire new programme of School Guidance and Counseling, which made school counselling a teaching subject, compulsory from Early Childhood Development to Form 6 thereby providing the

legal framework for school counselling services provisions for all children in Zimbabwean schools (Majoko, 2013; & Mawire, 2011). Furthermore, Dekeza (2018); Mutepefa *et al.* (2007) established that in Zimbabwe, the provision of education is based in making sure that the quality and support of education for children, particularly OVC is consistent with the principles and objectives of general education as suggested by the Nziramasanga Commission (1999).

More importantly, Chireshe (2013); & Majoko (2017) articulate that various international and regional policy documents to which Zimbabwe is a signatory to such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) (1989), the African Charter on the Rights of the Child (1990), the Jomtien World Declaration on Education For All Report (1990), the UNESCO Salamanca Report and Framework For Action on Children with Special Needs (1994) and the UNESCO Dakar Framework For Action on Education For All (2002) preserve the inclusion and support of children, orphans and vulnerable children (OVC) included.

Globally, school counselling services provisions presides over the educational discussions because they have proved to be universal remedy for most of various challenges experienced by children, particularly OVC in schools (Ringson, 2019; Morgan & Brand, 2009; & Cobia, 2007). Similarly, in Zimbabwe, the Education Act of 1987 as amended in 1996, 1999, 2006, 2013 and 2020 mandates the inclusion and support of all children regardless of race, disabilities, economic and social statuses of each child. In the same vein, Charema (2017) posits that the provision of school counselling services to all children, particularly OVC in public primary schools in Zimbabwe is consistent with the pro-inclusive education policy and legislation of the country. However, internationally and regionally the provision of school counseling and other support services to children, especially OVC is a resource-intensive and difficult process loaded with various challenges whose solutions are yet to be completely established (Bemak & Cornely, 2018). Equally, Ringson (2019); & Majoko (2013) established that the provision of quality handling of school children, particularly OVC in Zimbabwe is highly loaded with challenges whose opportunities are yet to be recognised. The current study therefore sought to explore school heads and teachers' competence on handling orphans and vulnerable children in selected public primary schools in Harare, Zimbabwe

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the study was to explore school heads and teachers' competence on handling OVC in selected public primary schools in Harare, Zimbabwe.

### **Research Question**

How competent are school heads and teachers on handling OVC in selected public primary schools in Harare, Zimbabwe?

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Bronfenbrenner's (1977; 1979) Ecological Systems Theory informed this study. The core of the Ecological Systems Theory is that the environment affects every person's development. The current study views OVC in public primary schools as the developing persons whose environment is separated into five various compositions; these include microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem and chronosystem (Donald *et al.*, 2010). Each and every one these five levels in one way or another influences child development depending on the nature of the impact. The Ecological Systems Theory considers each and every child within structures such as the family, school and community at large. In this study OVC live within their families and some as child headed households within local communities. A study by Garira (2019) revealed that whilst Ecological Systems Theory is applied in education, many different structures in education which includes at national level, provincial level, district level, school level and at classroom level have to collaborate in order for OVC be able to receive adequate quality education and other forms of support services such as counselling. More importantly, Ecological Systems Theory facilitates the establishment of relationships amongst schools, homes, health centers and various other interested systems in handling OVC in public primary schools. Hence, school heads and teachers should be trained in handling OVC in schools since this is very crucial in the provision of care and support to OVC in public primary schools. In line with the Ecological Systems Theory, school heads and teachers would cultivate and nurture school environment in which OVC would be comfortable to when doing their educational activities and when sharing their life experiences with teachers. The Ecological Systems Theory was an appropriate framework for this study, since its main principles are consistent with the principles of child development, which prioritise individuals within a community (Mbatha, 2015). The above explanation is in line with the purpose of this study which sought to explore school heads and teachers' competence on handling OVC in selected public primary schools in Harare, Zimbabwe.

## METHODOLOGY

The current study employed phenomenology hermeneutic philosophy by Van Manen (2014) which is centered on the lived experiences of research participants in their natural settings. This philosophy as it is aligned with well-known scholars of the past and present such as (Husserl, 1970; Van Manen, 1990; Reiners, 2012; Vagle, 2018; & Ringson, 2018) who are of the same mind that the purpose of phenomenology is to allow the researcher to provide a detailed narration of the studied phenomenon from participants in their lived experiences. The current study tapped from the participants' worldview in trying to understand whether school heads and teachers were competent enough to handle OVC in 10 selected public primary schools in Epworth, Mabvuku

and Tafara. In doing so, the study has used the qualitative phenomenological approach (Merriam, 2009; & Yin, 2009). Furthermore, Merriam (2009) states that the use of a qualitative phenomenological approach gives in-depth understanding of complex research phenomena. Based on the mentioned approach, this study found a qualitative phenomenological approach most relative as it allowed the researcher to examine the perceptions, views, awareness, knowledge and feelings of school heads and teachers on their competence when dealing with OVC in public primary schools. The study also adopted phenomenological research design. Purposive sampling was employed in selecting 10 public primary schools which took part in this current study and further to select 10 school heads, 10 teachers and 80 OVC in selected public primary schools. Data was collected using in-depth interviews with school heads and teachers, while focus group discussions with orphans and vulnerable children. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was adopted in this study as it gives the researcher the greatest opportunity to understand the personal thoughts of the lived experiences of research participants, hence IPA is participant oriented (Alase, 2017). More significantly, the researcher adhered to all the required measures prior to the study. The researcher sought permission to carry out the study in 10 selected public primary schools from the ministry of primary and secondary education, and permission was granted. More importantly, the study was guided by ethical principles including informed consent and assent for OVC. Orphans and vulnerable children signed assent forms after their parents and caregivers were informed about the study, while school heads and teachers signed informed consent forms before participating in the study. The issue of confidentiality and anonymity of participants were assured and observed.

## FINDINGS

In-depth interviews conducted with school heads and teachers and focus group discussions with OVC presented various issues. The presentation of findings is based on the research question which sought to explore whether school heads and teachers are competent enough in handling OVC in 10 selected public primary schools in Harare, Zimbabwe. Interpretative phenomenology analysis was employed and three themes emerged, thus lack of counselling skills and knowledge, lack of school counsellors training and lack of adequate resources and support.

### Lack of Counselling Skills and Knowledge

It emerged from the study that both school heads and teachers in public primary schools are well trained and well qualified as general primary school teachers. They were trained in well-established Teachers' Colleges and obtained Diplomas in Education, while others had furthered their education and were holders of Bachelors' Degrees in Education and Masters' Degrees in Education from different universities. It further emerged from the study that both school heads

and teachers who act as school counsellors were not sufficiently offering counselling services because they lack specialised skills, knowledge, attitudes and understandings to manage and administer quality handling provisions to OVC in public primary schools including counselling services. This study revealed that both school heads and teachers did not receive training in handling OVC and counselling which made it difficult for schools to run effective counselling programmes. It further emerged that school heads and teachers though had diplomas and degrees, these qualifications had no specialization in counselling children, particularly OVC in schools. School heads also revealed that in public primary schools, there are no teachers who specialised in counseling children. Due to that teachers lack confidence when assisting OVC who need psychological support. All this was compromising the quality of counselling services offered to OVC in public primary schools. One of the school heads highlighted that this problem was compounded by lack of support from the School Psychological Services Department who are no longer visiting schools frequently and also no longer conducting training workshops with school heads and teachers. The findings are supported by the following quotes:

*“Our teachers are well trained and qualified teachers who are capable of handling learners in their classes regardless of their status. Yes, our teachers sometimes lack counseling skills needed when working with OVC in school.”*

*“Schools used to have staff from the School Psychological Service Department visiting schools and providing counseling and conducting workshops with teachers and heads, but currently it is very rare to have such visits and training.”*

### **Lack of School Counsellor Training**

School heads and teachers interviewed revealed that they had limited knowledge and skills on handling OVC issues in schools and that compromised their work. The study established that all the school heads and teachers in public primary schools did not receive counselling training or any other training concerning handling of OVC in schools during their pre-service teacher training. In addition, the study established that schools and the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education were no longer organising and facilitating effective workshops and trainings for teachers and school heads that may possibly empower them with necessary knowledge and skills required when handling OVC in schools. Both school heads and teachers further highlighted that trainings and workshops were needed if they were to effectively handle OVC issues in schools. The study further established that teachers from three primary schools were partially trained by non-governmental organisations on conducting counselling and other psychosocial support activities with OVC in schools. These teachers revealed that they were trained to conduct memory work whereby tools such as Journey of Life were used; here children were asked to draw

pictures for example that made them happy or sad and shared their life stories and experiences. These activities enabled OVC to open up about their life experiences and that gave teachers more information on how to provide OVC with necessary interventions. It further emerged from the study that school heads and teachers need in-service training and school staff developments on ways to handle OVC in schools. The findings are supported by the following quote:

*“We lacked training and because of that we do not have proper skills and knowledge on how to handle OVC in schools. At one point we attended a workshop at one of the Non-Governmental Organisations and teachers were trained on how to conduct counselling and psychosocial support with OVC in schools.”*

*“Teachers need in-service training and school staff developments on counseling skills especially for those who conduct counseling sessions with children.”*

### **Lack of Adequate Resources and Support**

Both school heads and teachers revealed that teachers were ineffective in assisting OVC in public primary schools since they lack adequate support from both school administration and the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education. Teachers further revealed that they were failing to employ various teaching methods due to lack of resources; the use of media had been forgotten due to lack of funding and lack of teaching materials. Teachers highlighted that they were finding it very difficult to effectively deliver lessons as teaching and learning materials were very few or not even available at all and learning materials such as textbooks were not enough and that negatively affected the learners particularly the OVC. It further emerged from the study that teachers were failing to provide adequate support to OVC issues due to poor conditions of services such as too much work load and poor remuneration. Teachers also highlighted that schools lacked computers which was an anomaly considering that the new curriculum had made Information and Technology a core subject at all levels. The quotes below highlight the findings:

*“Our schools do not have enough teaching-learning materials. With the current economic situation, schools are no longer providing stationery for OVC and all learners due to financial constraints. Education moves with time, with the introduction of technology, we would like computers that could be beneficial to teachers and learners.”*

*It seems the school administration does not support or rather value the work we do with OVC. We are not provided with resources we need in carrying out our mandate. There is no counseling room at this school and that compromises the quality of counseling service we offer to OVC.”*

*“Because of poor remuneration teachers are developing a negative attitude towards their*

*work and that negatively affects OVC in schools. The workload is too heavy; we are just like any other teacher and we are allocated a normal teaching load per week and at the same time expected to conduct counseling with children. This compromises the quality of services we provide to children.”*

## DISCUSSION

Based on the school heads and teachers interview responses, the study established that school heads and teachers were finding it difficult to provide adequate counselling and other support services to children, particularly OVC in public primary schools (Lemeyu, 2022). The study revealed that if there would be professional preparations and trainings of school counsellors in school counselling to empower them with specialised skills, knowledge, attitude and understanding in order to address the unique educational, social and psychological needs of OVC in public primary schools (Ringson, 2017; & Majoko, 2013). The findings of this study are further in line with Majoko (2013) and Barr *et al* (2018) who established that the majority school counsellors are unproductive and incompetent in carrying out and conducting counselling services provisions for children because they lack in-depth training in counselling. In the same way, Alutu & Azuka (2016) revealed that school counsellors who are not professionals in counselling render watered-down responsive services to children with psychological problems. Studies by Shumba & Moyo (2015); & Dekeza (2018) revealed that teachers are ill-equipped to assist OVC in schools. The responsibility of schools in supporting OVC was clearly stated by Ansell (2018), who recommended that in circumstances where parents fail to play their responsibilities of caring for and supporting children, schools should step in. Similarly, (Pufall, 2014; Nyamukapa, 2010; & Fanelli, 2015) recommend various programmes that schools may start on to empower themselves to deal with OVC, for example schools may conduct staff development workshops and setting up peer counsellors.

Participants highlighted that training and workshops were needed if they were to effectively handle OVC issues in schools. Some of the participants further revealed that they were partially trained by non-governmental organisations on conducting counselling and other psychosocial support activities with OVC in schools. These activities include memory work whereby tools such as Journey of Life were used; here children are asked to draw pictures for example that made them happy or sad and shared their life stories and experiences. These activities enabled OVC to open up about their life experiences and that gave teachers more information on how to provide OVC with necessary interventions. More importantly, if school heads and teachers are effectively trained, they can put into practice school-based programmes designed to support OVC these include counselling and supporting child-friendly activities to

mention just but a few (Martin, *et al.*, 2011; & Shumba & Moyo 2015).

The study furthermore established that some of the teachers attend workshops organised by Non-Governmental Organizations and these workshops were not consistent, hence teachers always need to be trained and retrained so that they could always be up to date with child issues. The findings of the present study concur with Brigman & Lee (2018); & Burnham & Stansell (2015); & Desmond *et al.* (2017) who all found that school teachers' lack of training in school counselling is a worldwide cause for concern. Equally, Majoko (2013) established that many school counsellors are incompetent to holistically address the educational and psychological concerns of OVC due of lack of professional training in counselling. Similarly, study by Ncube (2018); Mapfumo & Nkome (2013); & Chireshe (2006) revealed that many school counsellors mishandle counselling provision because of professional incompetency since they are just general teachers with no counselling education.

Furthermore, the current study established that public primary schools were not thoroughly conducting counselling sessions due to lack of support from school heads. Participants, particularly teachers highlighted that school administration was not providing teachers with relevant resources needed when conducting counselling, hence compromising their mandate. The teachers complained that there was a lack of counselling rooms where one-on-one counseling sessions with OVC could take place resulting in providing poor counseling services to OVC in schools as teachers ended up having counseling on open and noisy places. When teachers responded to the interview question on suggesting ways which teachers could be capacitated to deal with challenges faced by OVC in school; teacher revealed that having proper training could equip them with relevant skills and knowledge that enable them to adequately handle OVC issues.

The current study further revealed that due to poor teachers' remuneration, teachers' morale was currently very low thus impacting negatively on the services they provided to OVC in public primary schools. It emerged from the current study that unfavorable condition of service for teachers including too much work load and very low remuneration compromised services given to OVC in schools. Due to poor remuneration teachers were demotivated and OVC's psychological needs and academic needs were usually neglected. The findings of this current study further concur with Smart *et al.* (2016) who highlighted that schools are rights-based organisations and as such should provide psychological support to all children. Furthermore, the current study revealed that there is excessive teacher-pupil ratio that is affecting quality of education and other support services teachers are to provide to OVC in public primary schools; hence their

performance at work was not that effective. Studies in Zimbabwe by Chamba (2010); & Dekeza (2018) further revealed that teachers in Zimbabwe are not well-equipped to assist OVC in schools, and this situation needs a speedy action by the government and other stakeholders to address this anomaly

The findings of the current study further revealed that the teacher-pupils ratio was too high which made teachers' work environment difficult by increasing workloads and putting pressure on the limited educational resources available. Proximately there are about over 84% of classrooms which had over 40 pupils per teacher (UNESCO, 2016). In the same way, Kalai (2014) revealed that Sub-Saharan Africa has the largest teacher-pupil ratio with Congo having a teacher pupil ratio of 1:54, Mali 1:55, Mozambique 1:67, Rwanda 1:65, Ethiopia and Malawi having around 1:70. UNESCO, Institute of statistics (2018) established that the excessive teacher-pupil ratio in various developing nations is an end result of huge enrolments following the quest for universal primary education and the increasing teacher shortages. With such high enrolments and reduced number of teachers, the current teachers encounter severe impediments in an attempt to handle over-crowded classes. Similarly, King & Schielman (2017) argue that these high enrolments have caused low competence in schools which is one of the main reasons for the poor quality of education offered in many primary schools in the developing countries. Brigman & Lee (2018) confirmed that when teachers are overloaded, they may not fully pay attention to the children in class. This implies that effective teaching and learning may not take place as the teacher may not be able to identify learners with problems such as OVC which means these children were likely to suffer more. The findings of the current study revealed that excessive teacher-pupil ratio compromised the quality of education and other support services for OVC in public primary schools. The findings further revealed that all teachers who are counsellors had too much workload as they were also expected to teach on full time bases with their own classes to teach, and at the same time conduct counseling sessions with OVC. Similarly, the findings concur with Ncube (2014) who revealed that school counselors were overloaded and attending to psychological needs of OVC could be not easy. More importantly, Smart *et al.* (2017) highlighted that schools are rights-based organisations and as such should provide psychological support to all children.

## CONCLUSIONS

The study concluded that school heads and teachers were not competent enough in handling OVC in public primary schools in Harare, Zimbabwe. The study further concluded that OVC in schools were not sufficiently receiving typical support services in schools because school heads and teachers lack specialised skills, knowledge, attitudes and understanding to handle and manage counselling services provisions and other adequate support services to OVC in public primary

schools. Furthermore, the study concluded that there were limited workshops and training offered to school heads and teachers on handling OVC in schools. This study further concludes that lack of professional school counsellors compromised the support services needed by OVC in public primary schools. Work load, high teacher-pupil ratio and poor remuneration also compromise teacher's effectiveness towards OVC in public primary schools.

## Recommendations

Based on the research findings, the study recommends that:

- School heads and teachers should be capacitated to receive training in the diagnosis of psychosocial issues as well as management techniques.
- A comprehensive policy framework should be put in place to ensure that OVC receive the support they need.
- The Government should provide adequate resources to School Psychological Services Department so that they could be able train and conduct workshops for school heads and teachers on how to handle OVC issues.
- The Government should improve teachers' morale by improving their conditions of services and remuneration.
- Counseling should be integrated into the pre-service teacher training curriculum to make sure that every qualified teacher has basic skills and knowledge of handling OVC in primary schools.
- Officials from the government should always monitor and evaluate OVC programmes in public primary schools.

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