

Factors that Matter in Building and Promoting Psychological Resilience of Orphans and Vulnerable Children in Shurugwi Rural District Primary Schools in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

The study sought to find out factors that matter in building psychological resilience in orphans and vulnerable children (OVCs) in rural primary schools in Zimbabwe. The four schools in the sample were randomly selected from one of the clusters of six schools (accessible population) within a total of sixty four primary schools in Shurugwi District. Twenty-four teachers out of eighty three teachers in the cluster were randomly selected, eight from each school. Four school heads were purposively selected. Teachers responded to a questionnaire while school heads participated in face-to-face interviews. Data were presented thematically in tables and verbatim. Results revealed that the family which is situated within the community plays the most significant role in building psychological resilience in OVCs, closely followed by the school through educational opportunities, then religion. Some of the strategies which could be used to build and promote resilience include having a supportive parent substitute, involving OVCs in religious activities, forming networks and counselling. Results also revealed that the government in partnership with Non-Governmental Organisations are the main support systems for OVCs. The implications of the study are that OVCs should by all means belong to a supportive family set up within the extended family. Schooling should be prioritised for them. The other implication is that government needs to strengthen its partnership with NGOs in providing psychosocial support for OVCs. The study recommends that the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education should prioritise capacity building for teachers, increase support systems and availing all the necessary resources through partnerships with other stakeholders since these are considered to be key aspects in building and promoting psychological resilience in OVCs.

Key words: factors; psychological resilience; orphans; vulnerable learners; primary school; Zimbabwe.

Introduction and Background

This study sought to examine factors that matter in building and promoting psychological resilience in OVCs in Shurugwi rural district primary schools in Zimbabwe. The study was prompted by the ever increasing numbers of orphans in rural communities in general and also particularly in Shurugwi District where most of the OVCs are poverty stricken and succumb to health challenges and are

subjected to stigma and discrimination by their peers and the community . UNICEF cited by Kathini (2014) reveals that OVCs are at a disadvantage in numerous ways and often devastating ways and they need social support and resilience building to overcome these obstacles and adversities. OVCs continue to maintain a spot at the forefront of the international agenda with millions of children worldwide being at adversity (UNICEF, 2003; UNICEF, 2013). Concerns have been raised by different stakeholders in Shurugwi District that OVCs endure unusual levels of chronic stresses and disadvantages in their lives, hence the need to examine factors which matter in building and promoting resilience in such children. The focus of the study is how to build and promote psychological resilience in OVCs so that they are able to overcome some of the pressures they encounter in their lives and be able to continue with education.

Rutter cited by Sterwart, Sun, Patterson, Lemerle and Hardie (2004:26), define resilience as "...the capacity of individuals, schools, families and communities to cope successfully with everyday challenges, including life transitions, times of cumulative stress and significant adversity or risk." Life becomes a challenge when unexpected changes occur in the lives of children and even adults. For instance the sudden loss of a parent or both parents in the case of a child can cause psychological trauma, but if the child manages to eventually learn to cope with the new situation, then the child has developed some resilience .Although an individual may experience multiple risks, there are certain qualities within a person or in the immediate environment which assist the individual to thrive despite the difficulties. According to Brooks & Goldstein cited in Brackenreed (2010:114-115), "Resilience refers to protective factors that are internal and external to the individual." For instance, a person is said to be resilient when they are autonomous, competent, independent, empathetic and task oriented. Thus, psychological resilience is characterised by the ability to bounce back from negative emotional experiences and by flexible adaptation to the changing demands of stressful experiences. Engle, Castle, and Menon (1996:6) say: "Though resilience may be due to genetic or temperamental qualities of the individual, it is also a function of learned dispositions of an individual and of environmental factors." Resilience is therefore a result of what the child possesses genetically with what obtains in the environment in which the child resides .External influences that may bring about resilience and how OVCs could benefit from them in terms of the development of human capital are an important phenomenon in this study.

Gunnestad (2006), basing his own studies on previous research reviews, identified a number of protective factors that promote resilience in children. Protective factors are those factors found within the child and in the child's environment. It is these factors which give the child strength, skills and motivation to cope in difficult situations and to re-establish normal life. Gunnestad (2006) grouped these factors in three categories which are networking factors, abilities and skills and meaning,

value and faith. The interaction of these mostly inborn qualities with the network around the child and many practical situations determine how resilient a child can become. Osher, Kendziora, Van DenBerg and Dennis cited in Makhonza (2006) indicated that it is not the individual characteristics which are important in building resilience in children but addressing the social factors that enable those conditions to occur. Werner and Smith (2001) indicates that there is accumulated evidence that some individuals appear to thrive despite the characteristics and conditions of problems. These successful individuals were deemed to be resilient. OVCs living in rural communities need social support and resilience building in order to overcome obstacles and adversities.

Family support has been found by researchers to be critical in promoting resilience and general health and wellbeing of OVCs. (Andrews and Dods cited by Robinson 2010). Blackburn and Newman (2008) posit that the presence of at least one unconditionally supportive parent or parent substitute may be of importance to the child as it is the individual and environment that surrounds her or him that contribute to the individual's success. Socialisation is another contributory factor to building resilience and the family is the principal source of socialisation as well as the basic unit for the growth of the child. Bernard cited in Stewart et al (2004) says that the availability of social support can reduce and yield positive outcomes. Concerning the above issue Stewart et al (2004) say any family that emphasises the value of assigned chores, caring for brothers and sisters, and the contribution of part-time work in supporting the family helps to foster resilience. Werner and Smith (2001) observed that grandmothers play an important role in giving emotional support for children who are vulnerable. Grandfathers are believed to provide skill training such that these children become active members of society. Studies have shown that children become attached to adults who are sensitive and responsible in their social interactions to them, and remain as consistent caregivers for a long period. Richter, cited by Chiastolite Professional Services (2008) says that young children are dependent on the care they receive from others. All the child's physical and psychological needs must be met by people who understand what they need in their lives in order to build resilience in them.

School is an important socialising agent in the development of a child. Formal education can reduce the vulnerability through increasing knowledge, skills, awareness and opportunities Nugent, Masuku, & Zee (2007) indicate that a lot of physical activities should be encouraged as this will help to relax children faced with adversities. Mahere and Kavishe (2005) say that securing universal access to basic education has been one of the universally recognised human rights and major aspects of the United Nations efforts to protect the rights every child. Resilient children have been described by Garmezzy cited in Meichenbaum (2006) as those working and playing well and holding expectations and have often been

characterised by using constructs such as self-esteem, self-efficacy and autonomy. Bernard (2004) contends that resilient children have high expectations, a meaning for life, goals, and inter-personal relationships in solving problems. In itself, education is a right which allows the full exercise and enjoyment of other rights. Thus, when children get an education, they are protected in terms of their well-being through learning. Learning opportunities also promote the social, emotional, cognitive and physical development of children. Both formal and informal education, if well-structured builds resilience and stronger personalities (UNICEF/TACRO, 2013).

Makhonza (2004) cited a study conducted by Cerin (2003) which reveals that resilience can be built in the early years of school. The study was conducted in an economically deprived urban area and focused what makes learners resilient. The study focused on three protective factors which are, family, school and community. Makhonza (2004) concluded that children can do something when they are taught. This was after orphans and vulnerable children were involved in a beading making course and after completion of the training course, they were then required to train other students in their school.

The promotion of resilience is a skill that will help OVCs to do better in school work, have a healthier relationship, live a happier and longer life (Aos, Lieb, Mayfield, Miller, & Pernuccit 2004). Good counselling can help a child who has been abused feel better again. Children need help to regain self-control, rebuild self-esteem, and live a more satisfying life. Children should therefore be encouraged to talk about their problems as this is considered essential for the child's recovery (Schofield and Beek, 2005).

Characteristics of teachers are considered to be the key elements for the learner's personal success. Mallmann (2002) says that OVCs look up to teachers for a number of things. Teachers need to do some extra teaching while at the same time building trust so that these children will develop attachment. Teachers should be able to assist OVCs to develop self-esteem and self-confidence to set realistic goals. For many children, school is an oasis of normality in a harsh world. While teacher's job is mainly to teach so that children can pass examinations, encouraging the child's resilience becomes a priority if OVCs are to do well in these examinations. Teachers promote resilience by making the most of social capital in identifying and harnessing community resources, thereby buoying vulnerable children. These relationship-driven support networks mitigate the effects of cumulative risk.

According to Elder cited by Stewart et al (2004) religious communities share values and are committed to the success of the child. This is evidenced by a study which was carried out in the Main Street Baptist Church in Biloxi, Mississippi after Hurricane Katrina caused extensive damage to all buildings along Mississippi gulf coast and caused the evacuation of New Orleans (Stewart et al 2004). After the hurricane

children from the poor neighbourhood joined the church and their academic performance improved. The church's social life influences children from poor families and communities more than what doctrine does. Church attendance is also believed to improve the physical, social and emotional health of students. Beliefs also give hope to children with problems because the children have a sense of rootedness and coherence. Religious groups believe that things will work out despite unfavourable odds. According to Gunnestad and Thwala (2011) in a study on 'Resilience and religion in children and youth in Southern Africa', found out that among the different religious coping strategies, prayer and intercession were the most popularly used. Someone else prays for the child or the child prays for himself/herself. Psychologically, prayer becomes therapeutic since it is delivered after the person who needs to be prayed for has explained the problem first. Emotionally, it is soothing to be listened to while pouring out one's heart. The problem is taken care of spiritually through prayer. So religion in the research by Gunnestad and Thwala (2011) is viewed as an outlet for negative emotions, replacing them with peace of mind and tranquillity. OVCs are able to handle stigma and discrimination in a spiritual way.

The discussion enlightens the reader on factor which matter in building and promoting resilience in OVCs. However there is a dearth of literature in the area of resilience in Zimbabwe. To the researchers' knowledge, no researches have been carried out on the topic of resilience of OVCs in Shurugwi district schools and this necessitates the present research given the large number of OVCs in the district. The study therefore focuses on factors that matter in building and promoting resilience in OVCs in Shurugwi district primary schools.

Objectives

The study seeks to:

- Examine factors which are considered important in building and promoting psychological resilience in OVCs.
- Identify strategies which can be used in building and promoting resilience in OVCs.
- Identify support systems which can be put in place to build and promote psychological resilience in OVCs.

Methodology

The study employed the mixed methods approach and the descriptive survey research design which utilised both qualitative and quantitative methods for triangulation purposes. Chiromo (2006) defines a research design as an overall plan for collecting

data in order to answer one's research questions. In other words, a research design may be taken as procedures that are employed by the researcher to gather data related to the research questions or hypothesis.. Punch (2005) observes that if a study adopts the descriptive survey, correct sound measure information will be collected from a small sample and the results can be generalised to the large population. The four schools in the sample were randomly selected from a population of a cluster of eight schools out of sixty seven primary schools within Shurugwi District. Twenty-four teachers out of an accessible population of eighty-three teachers in the cluster were randomly selected, while school heads were purposively selected. Maree (2007) asserts that in purposive sampling individuals are selected due to some defining characteristics that make them the holders of specific data needed for the study. The teachers responded to a questionnaire while school heads participated in face-to -face interviews.

Results and Discussion

This part focuses on discussion of the findings with regard to factors that build and promote psychological resilience in OVCs in rural primary schools in Shurugwi District. The accessible population was made up of four schools with a total of 83 teachers. Twenty four teachers who were randomly selected responded to a questionnaire, while four school heads participated in face-to-face interviews. Results were presented under the following themes; Factors that matter in building and promoting psychological resilience in OVCs; strategies used in building and promoting psychological resilience in OVCs and support systems used to build and promote psychological resilience in OVCs.

Theme1: Factors that matter in building and promoting psychological resilience in OVCs.

The researcher sought to find out responses from teachers on the most important factors in building psychological resilience in orphans and vulnerable children in rural schools. Reference is made to the table below.

Table 3.1: Teachers' Responses: Factors for promoting resilience in OVCs :(n=24)

Item	Frequency	Percentage%	Rank
Family	24	100	1
School	20	83.3	2
Community	18	75	3
Religion	15	62.5	4

Data revealed that 'family factor' was ranked number 1 (100%), followed by the school which was ranked number 2 (83.3%). Community ranked 75% Some participants (62.5%), indicated that religion is important. The impact of religion is being felt by children in different ways. This showed that the family plays the most significant role in building and promoting psychological resilience in OVCs, closely followed by the school and the community. When asked to identify the most important factors in building psychological resilience in OVCs, heads of schools responded as follows:

- *OVCs need both primary and secondary socialisation just like any other children. That is how they can be helped to be resilient.*
- *The factors include social support from relatives and the community.*
- *Psycho-social support and socialisation is a must for such children.*
- *Counselling, financial and material support are important factors.*

School heads revealed that OVCs need to be socialised, they need psychosocial support from and resources. They also need counseling since they are affected by their situations. In line with the findings, Andrews and Dods cited in Robinson (2010) say that family support is critical to the promoting of resilience and general health and wellbeing of orphans. Children are better equipped to resist stress and adversity, cope with change and uncertainty and recover faster and more completely from traumatic events or episodes if they get the support that they need. Blackburn and Newman (2008) posit that the presence of at least one unconditionally supportive parent or parent substitute may be of importance to the child as it is the individual and environment that surrounds her or him that contribute to a successful life.

Theme2: Strategies used for building and promoting psychological resilience in OVCs.

Table 3. 2. Teachers' responses: Strategies for promoting resilience in OVCs (n=24).

	Strategy	Very important		Somewhat important		Not important	
		N	%	N	%	N	%
1	Keeping siblings closely bonded	24	100				
2	Supportive parent substitute.	24	100				
3	Interactions	5	20.8	15	62.5	4	16.7
4	Food, love, safety	24	100				
5	School Counselling	14	100				
6	Socialisation	24	100				
7	Child Friendly Schools Approach	15	62.5	2	8.3	7	29.2
8	Life skills and peace education	24	100				

Data in Table 2 revealed that all participants (100%) considered strategies which include keeping siblings closely bonded, supportive parent substitute, food, love, safety, socialisation and life skills and peace education to be very important, followed by Child Friendly Schools Approach (62.5%). Interactions were rated lowest (20%) and yet interactionist theory is a micro perspective which encourages interaction as a means of identifying the psychosocial needs of children. The strategy of keeping siblings together has gained a lot of importance in recent years because of the advent of child headed families due to mainly the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Life skills, School Counselling and Child Friendly Schools are rated as very important since it is most likely that teachers could be basing their responses on school policies which are being implemented.

School Heads made the following responses on strategies which schools can use to build and promote psychological resilience in OVCs:

- *School counselling is a must, but the problem is that teachers do not have the skills to carry out professional counselling.*
- *Careful planning of activities to develop life skills.*
- *Putting into practice the concept of child friendly schools*
- *Psychosocial support through Basic Education Assistance Module to pay school fees helps such learners to like school.*
- *Non-Governmental Organisations play an important role in the provision of psychosocial support in terms of food supplements, educational kits and school fees.*

School heads revealed that counseling should be highly prioritised. However teachers lack skills to meet some of the psychosocial needs of learners. Socialisation is a contributory factor to building and promoting resilience in OVCs. Makhonza (2004) says that a study conducted by Cerin (2003) shows that resilience can be built in the early years of school through socialisation. Child Friendly School Approach also aims at building resilience in vulnerable children. It also aims at introducing necessary life skills and promoting inclusive learning environments thereby improving the quality of education for such learners (Boyden and Copper, 2007). Good counselling can help a child who has been abused feel better again. OVCs need help to regain self-control, rebuild self-esteem, and live a more satisfying life (Schofield and Beek, 2005). Resilient factors can include the ability to cope with stress effectively, having problem solving skills, being connected with others, helping others, finding positive meaning in the trauma and many others.

The researchers sought to find out if teachers were aware of skills which could be developed in OVCs which build and promote psychological resilience. Reference is made to table below.

Table 3.3: Life Skills which promote resilience in orphans and vulnerable learners (n=24)

Type of Skill	N	%
Assertiveness	24	100
Self-efficacy	20	83.3
Capacity to reflect	8	33
Learner interactions	24	100
Sports	24	100
Problem solving	18	75
All of the above	24	100

Data revealed that basically all skills listed are very important, with assertiveness, learner interactions and sport being singled out (100%). Self efficacy was at 83% followed by problem solving at 75%.Capacity to reflect scored lowest, at 33%.

Heads of schools were asked to identify skills which can be taught to OVCs in order to promote psychological resilience in learners and they came up with the following responses:

- *Well, orphans are quite vulnerable and the way out is to develop in them a lot of confidence, coupled with assertiveness and positive self esteem.*
- *These children need to be taught how to defend themselves, where to report when they are abused .They also need counseling.*
- *Orphans are very vulnerable. They are prone to abuse too. They need to be knowledgeable of people who can help them and also they should be taught karate for self defence.*
- *I think orphans should have undergo counseling sessions for them to be able to cope .Different orphans have similar experiences but most of the time they have very unique experiences. They need special attention.*

Responses from school heads revealed that orphans need skills such as assertiveness, confidence, self esteem and sporting skills. They also need counseling. School heads's responses could have been influenced by their vast experiences with the issues of orphans and vulnerability in schools.

The Life Skills Education sessions encourages children to acquire psychosocial skills, in order to reduce their vulnerability, to cope effectively with risky situations. Children can acquire these skills only if they are able to learn and practice them in a supportive environment of peers and family (USAID India,2007).

Theme 3.4: Support systems to build and promote psychological resilience in OVCs.

The researchers wanted to establish whether there are support systems in schools which are in place for building and promoting resilience in OVCs,

The following were some of the responses from teacher participants:

- *Here in our area we have NGOs like CAMFED, UNICEF, Tag International and Mashingaidze Trust Fund which with payment of school fees.*
- *Government assists through Basic Education Assistant Module and National Aids Council.*
- *Nowadays there is child line and child friendly schools to help with child protection.*
- *There is Pakame childrens'fund which assists with school fees.*
- *We receive help from a group of women called Agape.*
- *Government has no money. Most help come from NGOs and well wishers.*
- *Orphans get food hampers, uniforms, book and fees from NGOs.*

Teachers' responses revealed that NGOs play a pivotal role in providing psychosocial support to children. In responding to the same item, school heads gave similar responses to what the teachers had revealed. One school head suggested that a rural orphans' fund should be set up since most orphans in rural settings do not even go to school. School heads and teachers indicated that there are support systems which have been put in place by the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education to promote resilience in learners. They also indicated that schools are doing a lot in building and promoting psychological resilience in OVCs in rural primary schools in Shurugwi district.

Meichenbaum (2006:15) indicates, 'Interventions to nurture resilience need to target multiple systems since research indicates that the total number of risk factors present is more important than the specificity of the risk factors in influencing developmental outcomes.' For instance, life skills training programmes should be put in place. Interventions must address many different facets of resilience since there are multiple risk factors such as gender, culture and age of children. These interventions must be applied early enough and must be on going for successful outcomes.

The foregoing presentation of data and discussion of findings of the study has clearly elucidated what stakeholders could do to build and promote psychological resilience in OVCs. The discussion of the findings paved way for the researchers to draw some conclusions in tandem with the research objectives.

Conclusions

In light of the findings on factors which are considered important in building and promoting psychological resilience in OVCs, the study concluded that the family, networking, community, school and religion are factors that matter and worthy of consideration in planning interventions for OVCs in schools. Grandparents are the main caregivers of learners who are in adverse situations as these provide love, care and psycho-social support. The implication is that, teachers should be well informed of such factors through capacity building workshops at the school level, district level and/or national level. This will in turn assist them in handling OVCs in schools. Child development studies reveal that in order for a child to grow up as a healthy fully functioning and productive member of society, a sense of permanent home and family is key. Children benefit from a stable, nurturing family lives, positive school environment and networks of caring friends, relatives and neighbours.

The study also concluded that OVCs need supportive parent substitutes, counselling and psychosocial support for them to thrive well against all odds. For instance, grandparents are the main caregivers of OVCs who are in adverse situations as these provide love, care and psycho-social support. Adequate support can help a child to perform well academically, have positive health and mental health outcomes. Children can in turn develop good relationships and social skills that can enable them to become successful adults.

On support systems needed in building and promoting psychological resilience in OVCs, the study concluded that the government and NGOs were the major support systems for OVCs and these played a major role in the provision of basic needs. This implies that stronger and long lasting partnerships should continue to be established between government and NGOs for the betterment of the lives of OVCs.

Recommendations

After drawing some conclusions, the study made the following recommendations:

- The Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education should conduct workshops to equip and empower teachers and heads of schools on the importance of building and promoting psychological resilience in orphans and vulnerable learners.
- A permanent relationship between families, schools and the communities should be established.
- Provision of support and care for OVCs through psycho-social support systems needs to be maintained.

- Partnerships between government and NGOs should be upheld and strengthened in the provision of resources so that the lives of OVCs continue to be improved through resilient building.

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