

# Exploring Teenage Orphans' Survival Strategies into Adulthood in Gwanda Community: A Wellness Perspective

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## Abstract

The research study explored the survival strategies of orphaned teenagers in the Gwanda Community. Ten orphans purposively selected in Gwanda community participated in this study. To explore the experiences of orphans, an in-depth interview and questionnaires were used to gather data which was thematically analysed. The researchers employed three integrative theories as lens and these are; Uri Bronfenbrenner's (1977) bio-ecological theory, Ubuntu theory and Hettler's (1970) wellness theory. Findings revealed that some of the orphans were in charge of their households; some orphans are being abused as they will be forced to exchange sex for food and also money for payment of accommodation/shelter. It was also revealed that most of the orphans could not regularly attend school due to non-payment of school fees. This study further established that orphaned teenagers face daily challenges such as failing to afford a normal meal, attending to ill family members at the expense of school hours, failing to pay school fees, inadequate shelter as well as failure to pay rentals. Teenage orphans are exposed to stigmatisation due to ill health of surviving household members, thus they would be isolated and find it hard to adjust to the loss of their parents. In an attempt to survive the challenges, teenage orphans would engage in menial jobs to earn a living. This study recommends that psychosocial counselling services be provided to orphans and surviving family members such that they are able to manage daily experiences.

**Keywords:** Counselling, Orphan, Teenage, Survival Strategy, Stigmatisation, Wellness.

## 1. Introduction

Orphans are a special group of the population as they do not have parents to raise them as compared to non-orphaned children (Nyamukapa & Gregson, 2005). Adolescent orphans need a special kind of care in order to adjust to the loss of their parents. Additionally, they need proper guidance in order to progress through normal developmental stages so that they do not become vulnerable. Lack of parental care and love deprives the children of the much needed family support system thereby making orphaned teenagers vulnerable, and hence they may lack affection, self-esteem, spirituality, economic well-being, proper care, socialisation, recreation and education among many other needs (UNICEF, 2005 cited in Mudavanhu, Segalo and Fourie, 2009). Some orphans may have limited opportunities to education due to non-payment of school fees. Orphaned adolescents may be exposed to HIV infection, sexually transmitted infections and early pregnancy as they may be lacking adult supervision. Teenage orphans may engage in menial jobs such as herding other people's cattle, selling vegetables and young women may engage in sexual activities in order to earn a living.

## 2. Background to the study

In Sub-Saharan Africa, about 15, 2 million young people under 18 years have lost one or both parents to AIDS (Close & Rigamonti, 2007). According to (Ruland, Finger, Williamson, Tahir, Savariaud, Schweitzer & Shears, 2005); about 1 million young people under the age of 18 are orphaned in Zimbabwe. Zimbabwe has an orphan rate of 17, 6 % orphaned due to AIDS (UNICEF, 2003, 2005) cited in (Mudavanhu, et al., 2009). These statistics indicate that there is a large portion of orphans under 18 years in Africa and Zimbabwe in particular and therefore many households could be orphan headed. Sengendo and Nambi (1997) reveal that some orphans could be living on their own; thus constituting child headed families, who could be exposed to some physical and psychological changes. Orphaned teenagers could be facing physical and psychological challenges which may make them find it hard to adapt to bereavement, new life demands thereby manifesting symptoms of confusion, anxiety, depression and even behavioural disorders such as disobedience. Situations that could be stressful to orphaned teenagers are households with limited or no resources (Ruland, et. al, 2005), leading the orphans to engage in unproductive activities such as stealing and gambling, substance abuse in an attempt to cope with life.

Teenage orphans are more likely to be vulnerable to poverty, may be forced into early marriages, or take care of younger siblings, suffer economic hardships and or discriminated against because of the HIV status of family

members (Chase, Wood & Aggleton, 2006; Close & Rigamonti, 2007; Ruland, et. al, 2005). This therefore implies that orphaned adolescents may be exposed to hard times of not even affording a normal meal daily, falling to unplanned pregnancy, and or isolated from social activities due to discrimination. Audemard, Vignikin and Desgrees Du Lou (2006) state that orphaned children might not only be prepared to face the realities and challenges of orphan hood and hence they are also rejected by the society they live in. This then may lead to orphaned children turning to life of crime, prostitution, substance abuse in an attempt to survive. The survival of orphans is affected by shortage of food and shelter. The report by SADC Secretariat (2008) indicates that orphans are deprived of their basic developmental and growth needs due to the absence of their breadwinners. As a result orphans drop out of school, engage in care giving roles, get involved in sex work, engage in child labour as well as commit petty crimes in an attempt to survive. The need for basic survival determines their behaviours, which may result in some turning to destructive behaviour like prostitution, substance abuse, crime, among other anti-social behaviours.

Some orphaned children may be in abusive situations where relatives or friends abuse them. Sabula, Hussien and El-Refae (2015) report that orphan hood could be composed of various forms of abuse wherein orphans may be sexually, emotionally and financially abused, exploited, neglected by those who look after them, be they relatives or institutions. Orphans, in their state of confusion, promiscuity, criminality, substance abuse and other negative living conditions set in, all done in the hope to earn a living. A survey carried out by Save the Children UK (2001) reports that, most children who are orphaned completely survive on their own. This then implies that survival becomes a priority and the only objective for orphaned children.

Orphaned children drop out of school as soon as they are orphaned due to the pressure of providing for themselves without proper support. An observation by Case, Paxson and Ableidinger (2002) reveals that teenage orphans are less likely to be enrolled in schools when compared to non-orphaned teenagers. Orphans who live with distant relatives and non-relatives account for a higher percentage for lower enrolment at school. Therefore orphaned children may be lacking proper education; both primary and secondary education. Nyamukapa and Gregson (2005) indicate that maternal orphans have lower primary school completion rates than non-orphans in Zimbabwe. Sometimes orphans miss out on school because they are the only ones doing hard household chores while non-orphans are at school. The fact that orphans become responsible in the home also affects their performance in school activities resulting in many of them failing to complete their education. Some orphans may lack important national documents like birth certificates and identity cards which are required when enrolling for training in institutes and thereby failing to sit for public examinations. Without proper education, orphans would face challenges in finding high paying jobs.

Health and nutrition of orphans could be poor, as they may not be informed about good nutrition, thus compromising the health of the orphans. A study by Kikafunda and Namusoke (2006) reveals that inadequate food supply and poverty, poor knowledge about nutrition cause malnutrition, stunted growth, underweight and high infant mortality rate. Some orphans might not able to afford a proper meal hence lacking balanced diet leading to malnutrition, stunted growth and high infant mortality rate. The quality and quantity of food given to the orphaned children as well as lack of formal education of caregivers about nutrition may lead to malnourishment. The death of parents can cause psychosocial distress among the orphaned children. Orphans could be stigmatised as HIV positive by peers, school mates or communals as their parents could have died of HIV and AIDS thus leading to isolation of the orphaned adolescents. Harms, Jack, Ssebunnya and Kizza (2010) state that the feeling that peers, school mates, relatives and communals abandon them may cause pain to orphaned youths. They may be laughed at by others, as they may be wearing tattered clothes, ask for food and thus they lack respect. Some orphans receive comfort and strength through subscribing to religious beliefs (Mudavanhu, et al., 2009).

### **3. Statement of the problem**

Orphans face various challenges in daily lives and in cases where they lack positive coping skills, they are forced to engage in antisocial behaviours such as committing crimes, substance abuse and drug deals, and prostitution in an attempt to earn a living. Despite some organisations assisting the orphaned youths to improve in their living standards, orphans still find life even more stressful. As a result, this creates a gap in terms of literature on which coping strategies are being used by orphaned children in Gwanda community to manage daily challenges.

### **Significance of the study**

The study encourages rigorous research activities for improved care of the orphans. The counselling field would assist by generating new knowledge to enhance coping strategies that orphaned young people can use to earn

productive livelihoods.

### **Purpose of the study**

The research study explores teenage orphans' survival strategies into adulthood, such that orphans learn positive ways to earn and improve their lives. The study also sought to explore the experiences and challenges faced by orphaned teenagers. The paper justifies the importance of counselling services such that orphans act responsibly and live productively.

### **Research questions**

- What are the survival strategies of teenage orphans into adulthood in Gwanda?

Sub-questions

- What are the challenges encountered by teenage orphans?
- Which support systems can orphaned teenagers turn to?

### **Objectives of the study**

The objectives of this study were to:

- Identify the survival and coping strategies of teenage orphans.
- Establish challenges faced by orphaned teenagers in Gwanda community.
- Establish support systems of orphaned teenagers which can help them.

## **4. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

This study integrates Hettler's wellness theory, Ubuntu theory and Bronfenbrenner's theory as lenses to this study. Urie Bronfenbrenner's Ecological system theory (1977) is an approach to understanding human development within the context of the system of relationships that form in the juvenile offender learner's environment (Donald, Lazarus & Lolwana, 2010). This theory offers a framework in which a systematic approach would encourage the community to pay attention and respond to the identified needs of the orphaned children. It recognises the interactive relationships between the orphans, family relatives, learning environment and the learning context, the community and the wider government structures in providing support, not only for the orphans, but also to all other systems that may impact on orphans (Donald, et al., 2010).

As the levels of the ecosystem (Micro-system, the Meso-system, the Exo-system, the Chrono-system and Macro-systems) progress toward the centre of the system, they more closely represent the literal interactions of the orphans with the environment (Donald, et al., 2010). The Ubuntu principle emphasises the importance of ubuntuism to people within a given community, through the spirit of mutual support and the principle of caring for each other. The Ubuntu principle, as described by Letseka (2013), is about human interconnectedness, valuing human life, harmony, loving others, civility, caring for others, having respect for human dignity and morals among other things, thus in essence, the principle is suggesting that human beings do not exist in isolation. The Ubuntu principle is very relevant in this study since the study is exploring orphan survival strategies. It also looks into the assistance orphans are getting from the responsible authorities and other stake holders, relatives and family members, to enable them to cope with life through their survival strategies. In this way, the principle of a human being attaining recognition and selfhood through others (*Nguni- umuntu ngumntu ngabantu*), will have been fulfilled. Hettler's (1970) wellness theory, maintains that a person's state of optimal health or total wellness, is achieved when a balance in the six wellness areas and these being; the physical, emotional, intellectual, spiritual, social and occupational wellness.

Hettler's theory submitted that wellness is an active, lifelong process of becoming aware of choices and making decisions toward a more balanced and fulfilling life (Anspaugh, Hamrick, & Rosato, 2004; Hettler, 1980). Guidance and counselling will enable orphans within Gwanda community to be able to make wise decisions towards a life career. Witmer and Sweeney (1992) referred to wellness as an orphan's total approach towards improving the quality of life, health and psychological strengths, in proactive and positive ways, both as an orphan and a member of the community. The wellness model encompasses six dimensions such as academic, physical, emotional, social, spiritual and occupational wellness. In using the wellness model in this current study, the researchers were able to employ the three theories as lenses in exploring experiences and survival strategies of orphans in Gwanda community. The researchers wanted to see the ripple effect among the subsystems (micro-system, meso-system, exo-system, chrono-system and macro-system) regarding the consented efforts of stakeholders towards orphans in Gwanda through guidance and counselling as well as help rendered.

## 5. METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

The study was embedded in a qualitative interpretivist paradigm (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2011; Creswell, 2013). The interpretive research paradigm was used to help the researchers to get a deep understanding of the meanings that participants attached to specific social phenomenon (Henning, Van Ransburg & Smith, 2010). These authors view participants in the social setting to be in a better position to explain their behaviours because they have a better interpretation of their situation. The researchers therefore viewed orphans as ideal spokespersons of their circumstances. In other words, the methodology bases on the notion that, behaviour is determined by the phenomena of experiences rather than by external objective and physically described reality. A case study has a boundary and its aim is to explore an event or a process in depth (Creswell, 2009). The researchers used a case study which was qualitative in nature to gather data in one community in Gwanda. The main aim was to get the voices of orphans on strategies they are employing to face life challenges. Ten orphans participated in this study. Questionnaires and an in-depth interview were used as data collection instruments. In this research, sampling of participants was done purposively because the research method of this study was qualitative. Purposive sampling is the selection of the most knowledgeable participants with regard to the topic under investigation, and these participants must fit the criteria of desirable participants as per the researcher(s) knowledge of the topic (Henning, et al., 2010). Each interview session was conducted within the range of 25 to 30 minutes. While individual interview sessions were being conducted, others were given questionnaires to complete.

### Data Analysis

The qualitative data was thematically analysed as outlined by (Henning, et al., 2010). This was done manually leading into categories. The researchers brought order to the data by hand coding phrases which had similar meanings as categories. The categories were eventually merged into themes. The following themes emerged from the interviews conducted with orphans as well as the questionnaires and these were used as the basis for discussing the findings:

- Orphaned teenagers face challenges
- Failing to pay school fees and erratic school attendance
- Orphans need proper guidance and counselling to face life challenges
- Need for support systems for orphaned teenagers

## 6. DISCUSSIONS OF THE RESEARCH FINDINGS

### Theme 1: Orphaned teenagers face challenges

Findings in this study revealed that orphaned teenagers in Gwanda Community are facing a lot of challenges due to lack of parents or elderly relatives who can give proper care. These findings are in harmony with (Audemard, et al., 2006) who assert that after the death of parents, there is loss of household income sometimes caused by medical bills and funeral costs which leave the orphaned children impoverished. In addition to the economic challenges, the orphaned children would be quickly disposed of their inheritance by close family members thereby further increasing the economic problems.

The research study report by (Kikafunda and Namusoke, 2006), points out that lack of health leads to malnutrition, stunted growth, underweight and high infant mortality rate. Food consumption can drop by more than 40% after orphanage, thereby putting orphaned children at risk of malnutrition, stunted growth and high infant mortality rate. This implies that the health of orphans, especially those in the care of the elderly and young siblings is poor when compared to the health of non-orphaned children. In the same vein, orphans who care for elderly or young care givers may not be informed about good nutrition, thus compromising the health of the orphans. The nutritional status of orphans would then deteriorate. A 2003 nutritional survey for Zimbabwe shows that a higher percentage of orphans are malnourished than non-orphans (UNICEF, 2003), thus increasing the risk of stunted growth and malnourishment (Kikafunda and Namusoke, 2006). Malnourishment and stunted growth pose danger to full physical and intellectual capacity of human development. According to (Save the Children UK, 2001; Harms, et al., 2010), many children are stigmatised by the death of their parents and to make matters worse, the communities they live in also add to the problem by laughing at the orphan's sheer poverty depicted by tattered clothes, lack of food and school opportunities. The death of parents can cause psychosocial distress among the children left behind.

### Theme 2: Failing to pay school fees and erratic school attendance

Findings in this study indicated that orphans lack adequate finances even to pay for their school fees. They are

even less likely to be enrolled in schools when compared to non-orphaned teenagers (Case, et al., 2002). This eventually impacts negatively on their intellectual wellness. Orphans who live with distant relatives and non-relatives account for lower enrolment at school. According to Case, et al., (2002), households allocate resources towards children with whom they have a close relationship and discriminate against children whose ties are distant. Sometimes orphans play truant because they are the only ones doing hard household chores while children of the house are at school. Salaam (2004) asserts that among challenges faced by orphans are school fees, food and clothing yet they should be provided with care, protection and assisted to meet their needs. The fact that orphans become responsible in the home also affects their educational opportunities. For the few who continue with their education, after school, the orphans have to perform household chores without resting after school. This excessive workload outside school affects the individual orphan's performance in school activities. The report by Sabates, Akyeampong, Westbrook and Hunt (2010) acknowledge that many orphaned children drop out of school and do not complete school, thus they leave school without acquiring the most basic skills. The failure to acquire education increases the chances of little hope for the future of the orphaned children and thus they become vulnerable to abuse, exploitation, diseases and poverty. Some relatives end up abusing the orphans by taking them as extra labour to work in the fields or for domestic chores thus they may perform poorly at school. White and Morton (2005) concur that orphans contribute more than is normally expected of their age for their own upkeep.

### **Theme 3: Orphans need proper guidance and counselling**

This study revealed that orphans in Gwanda Community need proper guidance and counselling to progress through normal development stages. Adolescence is a transitional period full of critical decisions and turning points for which proper guidance should be provided (Samanyanga & Mafumbate, 2014; Close & Rigamonti, 2007). In a way to survive through adolescence experiences (Chase, et al., 2006) posit that young female orphans engage in early marriage as a way of escaping and alleviating poverty. This is a negative approach to handle adolescence challenges and could be a result of lacking sex education thereby putting young orphans at high risk of contracting and transmitting Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs). With reference to a rapid assessment by UNICEF (2003) young female orphans cited the need to earn money as the factor to enter into prostitution. This also indicates that girls have a higher probability of being sexually abused and forced into prostitution as a survival strategy (Sabula, et al., 2015). The teenage orphans may be lacking health and reproductive education, thus counselling would equip them with life skills for the newly acquired responsibilities in order to protect them from HIV and AIDS and other psychosocial challenges.

### **Theme: 4 Need for Support systems for orphaned teenagers**

The findings in this study indicated that orphans need strong support systems from various stakeholders to manage life challenges. Traditionally in African culture, orphans were cared for by the extended family thus the burden was shared amongst a large group of relatives (Mudavanhu, et al., 2009) enhancing the principle of Ubuntu which maintains that *"umuntu ngumntu ngabantu-munhu munhu navamwe-a person is a person through other people's help."* This then implies that orphaned children need support from their relatives and communals, such that they develop psychosocially, know their culture as well as have a sense of security and belonging. On the contrary Ruland, et al., (2005) maintain that over stretched household resources may hinder collective responsibility in rearing orphaned young people by extended families.

Young orphans may engage in talking to friends, meet up with peers, play games as well as talk to older siblings (Chase, et al., 2006), in an attempt to seek support to cope with challenging issues. Mudavanhu, et al., (2009) assert that some orphaned children would have their school fees paid for by charitable organisations, receive food through *Zunde ramambo* or *Insimu yeNkosi* scheme, and get relief aid from government in times of drought as well as counselling services. It may be surprising to realise that orphaned adolescents could not be receiving counselling services to manage transitional experiences to cope with the development of secondary features of reproduction; hygienic issues related to menstrual cycles and sexual relationships. Orphaned adolescents may fall vulnerable to HIV infection, STIs, early pregnancy, substance abuse, and other risky behaviours thus leading to psychosocial and economic distress. A report by UNICEF (2003) suggests that there is need to provide psychosocial counselling and support to orphaned children and their care givers to assist them provide the best possible care. Some orphans could be living with no extended family members (Ruland, et al., 2005), and thus lack adult supervision. Who then assists with advisement and counselling services in a child headed household? A study report by Behrendt and Mbaye (2008) indicates that orphans are at risk to depression, psychosomatic problems and or anxiety. Therefore, the lack of a parent figure to orphans exacerbates the social, psychological and spiritual problems attached to growing up. Hence, there is need to strengthen child care skills and capacity of caregivers with regards to early childhood development.

## 7. Conclusion

The study revealed that orphaned teenagers face challenges. Most of them are failing to pay school fees resulting in erratic school attendance. It also emerged from the study that orphans need proper guidance and counseling to face life challenges. Orphaned adolescents need protection and care, economic support, psychosocial support, emotional support and other forms of support. Some orphaned adolescents are being exposed to daily life challenges including lack of food, abuse or exploitation by close relatives whom they are not able to resist leading to negative impact to their wellness.

## 8. Recommendations

- A systematic approach would help sensitize communals about the concerns of orphans such that leaders in the community take action in supporting and nurturing orphans. A systematic approach would encourage the community to pay attention and respond to the identified needs of the orphaned children.
- Counselling services would help orphans with supportive information such that they develop life skills and be able to express themselves freely without fear of stigmatisation, discrimination and exclusion from communal activities.
- There is need for strong support systems for orphaned teenagers from various stakeholders to promote orphan welfare and in this way; the principle of Ubuntuism will be promoted.

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