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AN ECOLOGICAL SYSTEMS APPROACH TO ASSISTING HIV/AIDS ORPHANED LEARNERS WITH BEHAVIOUR PROBLEMS AND UNMET EMOTIONAL NEEDS IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN ZIMBABWE

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ABSTRACT

Behaviour problems are a problem in many secondary schools in Zimbabwe and are common to HIV/AIDS Orphaned learners. This study focused on how these learners with behaviour problems and unmet emotional needs can be assisted through an ecological systems approach. The survey design which was mainly qualitative in nature was used. Fifty teachers and ten parents of learners in secondary schools were purposefully sampled. A questionnaire with mainly open ended items was administered to the teachers and parents. The behaviour problems being manifested by AIDS orphaned learners include disruptive behavior, aggressive and anti-social behavior, telling lies and theft. The findings highlighted important guidelines, which teachers, parents and the community can use to assist and understand behavior problems of AIDS orphaned learners in secondary schools. The study recommended that the parents, school management, and other staff members of the school should join hands in ensuring that a climate conducive to teaching and learning for HIV/AIDS Orphaned learners is prevalent in secondary schools.

Key words: Behaviour problems, HIV/AIDS orphaned learners, unmet emotional needs, Ecological systems approach, Disciplinary problems.

1. INTRODUCTION

In Zimbabwe when children become orphans, they may lack having someone to care for their physical needs such as food, clothing and school, (Mtangadura & Jackson 1998: 8). Often there is no one to support and encourage them in the life issues they face. Financial difficulties and the lack of strong family ties compound the despair of their circumstances. Some orphans may be affected with HIV/AIDS. Life after the death of their parents may see them being “evicted by their unscrupulous relatives, siblings may be split up and their life may suddenly be devoid of any continuity, security, regular food or shelter(Jackson 2002:263)”.

With economic pressures placed upon orphan headed households, the children are truly in a desperate situation. Often lacking education and being too young to work, it is a constant struggle for these children to find food. The inability to pay school fees and to obtain proper health care is also an issue. Learners orphaned due to HIV/AIDS may face prejudice and be neglected by people who are supposed to look after them. In the classroom, shame, grief and happiness have a very real impact on the heart and mind of a child acquainted with death as argued by Jackson (2002:259). They may be unfairly discriminated against directly or indirectly. Those in orphan headed households have new responsibilities as guardians of their siblings. Such problems when carried to the classroom will pose a lot of behaviour problems for the teacher.

The Aids orphans show indications of poor self image and are often unable with negative experiences. Ogunbanjo (2001:3) argues that “aggression, depression, impatience, stubbornness, refusal to carry out teachers’ instructions is some of the behavioural problems which teachers often have to deal with.” The teachers appear to be experiencing substantial difficulty in coping with special needs. According to Weeks (2000:3) “ they often experience themselves as being disempowered and lacking the necessary skills, expertise and knowledge to assist learners (Aids orphans) exhibiting behaviour problems.

The motivation for this study stems from the growing concern about the unmet emotional needs of HIV/AIDS orphaned learners in the classrooms which result in the orphans manifesting behaviour problems. In Zimbabwean schools teachers, are not well equipped



with skills of how to deal with HIV/AIDS orphan learners manifesting behaviour problems which are as a result of unmet emotional needs. There is an increasing number of HIV/AIDS orphan learners exhibiting behaviour problems in the classroom. The teachers themselves feel that they need additional training, as regards how to understand and assist Aids orphan learners with behaviour problems. The ecological model approach in assisting Aids orphan learners with behaviour problems should take into account these problems, the cultural diversity, and the situation that exists within the urban area of Bulawayo.

The manifestations of behaviour problems by HIV/AIDS orphaned learners in the classroom include sexual harassment, aggression, fear, truancy and stealing. The assistance of Aids orphans in the classroom with such behaviour problems remains the task of the teachers and schools. According to Weeks (2000:38) "teachers are finding it extremely difficult to understand and assist learners with behaviour problems in class". The teachers appear to be experiencing substantial difficulty in coping with HIV/AIDS orphans with special needs. In many cases they do not know how to simultaneously understand and assist these learners' diversity of needs. A holistic approach to deal with emotional problems of Aids orphans in the class is needed.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 The Ecological Systems Approach

Teachers need to understand and assist HIV/AIDS orphaned learners with behaviour problems in the classroom. In this study the ecological system approach offers the teachers an opportunity to understand and assist problem behaviour which is a result of HIV/AIDS related orphan hood of learners in the classroom. According to Apter & Conoley (1984:93) the ecological systems model emphasises the fact that "behaviour is determined by the learners' interaction with other role players within his/her environment". In other words the ecological model focuses on the interaction between the learner and the different systems that are part of his/her environment.

According to Shea and Bauer (1994:7) and Thomas (1996:384) the ecological perspective focuses on the individual developing in a dynamic relationship with and as an inseparable part of the social context in which the individual functions over his life span. Ecology is the study of the relationship of humans with the environment which involves reciprocal association (Shea & Bauer 1994:44). The ecology includes the environment such as the physical, educational, social, cultural and geographical environments. Charlton and David (1993:11) explain what is meant by the ecological model, when they argue that "each individual child is embedded in a number of systems, notably family and school, and that the individual's behaviour can only meaningfully be viewed in that sort of context". This theory shows that deviance or problem behaviours can be regarded as a result of disturbed relationship between an organism (the learner) and the environment (e.g. the home, school and the peer group). It is therefore necessary for the teacher to take into consideration such interaction that takes place, when formulating strategies as to how best he/she can assist Aids orphaned learners in the classroom who are manifesting problem behaviour.

Every component in the ecological systems model affects another component, which in turn is affected by another component. Therefore the ecosystem must be seen as an entity and not as isolated components (Weeks 2000:34). The teacher who seeks to understand the learners with behaviour problems must examine the learner, his/her relationships and must attend to larger intangible forces, like culture, prejudice, to fully understand how a learner experiences the world. In other words sitting at the centre of the ecology of inclusive education framework is the learner. All that occurs within and between each of the components of the system, all the decisions and actions that are taken are done so on the premise that it will benefit the learner.

3. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Behaviour problems of Aids orphans in the classroom result from a combination of factors relating to home, family, school and the community. If the HIV/AIDS orphans in the classroom are to be assisted in the most effective way so that their full potential is actualised, an answer to the following research question should be found: 'How can teachers effectively assist HIV/AIDS orphaned learners with unmet emotional needs resulting in behaviour problems in the classroom?'

3.1 Research Questions

- a) How can parents be involved to support the school in assist HIV/AIDS orphaned learners with unmet emotional needs resulting in behaviour problems in the classroom?
- b) How can the community, teachers and parents assist each other in helping HIV/AIDS orphaned learners with unmet emotional needs resulting in behaviour problems in the classroom?

3.2 The goal of the study



The study sought to find ways the teachers may use to deal with HIV/AIDS orphaned learners manifesting behaviour problems in the classroom using the ecological systems approach. It seeks to appreciate the advantages of using the ecological system approach in assisting HIV/AIDS orphan learners with behaviour problems in the classroom by utilising the environment to satisfy the unmet emotional needs of learners.

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1 Design

The survey design which was mainly qualitative in nature was used. Surveys are normally appropriate for studies that seek to obtain participants perceptions, opinions and beliefs on a phenomenon (Slavin 2007). Since the present study sought to find ways the teachers may use to deal with HIV/AIDS orphaned learners manifesting behaviour problems in the classroom using the ecological systems approach, the survey design was chosen as the most appropriate design for the study.

4.2 Sample

Fifty (25 females, 25 males) teachers and ten parents of learners in secondary schools were purposefully sampled. In purposeful sampling, the researcher selects the participants because they possess particular characteristics or knowledge being sought (Cohen et al. 2007). The teachers and parents have experience of working with HIV/AIDS orphaned learners in the mainstream secondary schools.

4.3 Instrumentation

A questionnaire with mainly open ended items was used in this study. The items focused on how the ecological system approach can be used to assist HIV/AIDS orphaned learners manifesting behaviour problems in secondary schools in Bulawayo. Two inclusive education experts were asked to check on the relevance and clarity of the questionnaire items.

4.4 Procedure

The researcher distributed and collected the questionnaire. He explained the purpose of the study to potential participants that is teachers and parents. Participants were informed that participation was voluntary and that they were free to withdraw from the study at any stage during the study.

4.5 Data Analysis

The data was content analyzed. Content analysis produces a relatively systematic and comprehensive summary of data (Silverman 2004). Recurrent instances were systematically identified and grouped together.

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

5.1 How do AIDS orphaned learners with unmet emotional needs manifest behavior problems in class?

The behavior problem that were manifested by Aids orphaned learners with unmet emotional needs include: defiance of school authority, lass disruption, truancy, fighting and damaging school property, dress code violations, theft and Leaving school without permission. These behavior problems being experienced in schools were also observed by Donnelly (2000) who pointed out that fights, insubordination, little support for educators, a general climate of disrespect, and distrust of the administration the behavior problems being experienced in schools.

One the respondents had this to say:

“In my class some of the orphaned learners manifested behaviour problems by repeatedly asking to go to the toilet; missing lessons, absconding; smoking in the toilets; playing with matches in class; making rude remarks to the teacher; talking when the learner is supposed to be writing; being abusive to other learners; fighting in class; chasing one another around the classroom and leaving class early”(Participant 8).

Most participants indicated that orphaned learners display negative behavior such as bullying, uncooperative, uncontrollable and disrespect towards the teachers as reflected in the extract below:

Participant 1 had this to say:

Sometimes they are bullies to the teachers. They do not do the given work and make noise in class. In other words these Aids orphaned children refuse discipline; they refuse to be brought up like any other children.

Aids orphaned children disrespected the teachers, (Participant 4).



One of the participants pointed:

They don't co-operate in class, they are bully and use vulgar language (Participant 7).

The extracts above suggest that AIDS orphaned learners are perceived by teachers as manifesting unruly behavior. Most of the respondents indicated that the AIDS orphaned learners were involved in drug abuse as they had no one to help them as a parental figure. The following extracts from some of the participating teachers confirm the above:

These children do not have parental guidance that they see as role models. Those who are close to them are their peers who also take drugs even at school. They behave like street kids in class (Participant 12).

5.2 How does the community handle AIDS orphaned children in their environment?

The parents in this study formed community childcare committees or forums. These committees work together to take responsibility for organizing support for vulnerable children in their community. Childcare forums were set by social workers and volunteers or were appointed by various organizations.

One parent participant had this to say: *These childcare forums look for children in need and try to ensure that they are either linked to welfare services or those members of their family look after their needs (Participant 30).*

The community childcare forums can also take responsibility for helping all children in need to get access to child support or foster grants. They also helped to screen foster parents and to monitor them to make sure that they treat Aids orphaned children properly.

Involving children in community events related to HIV and AIDS is an excellent way for children to learn and to feel less isolated. Community childcare forums looked at ways to facilitate involvement in events by children as appropriate.

5.3 How do schools involve parents when dealing with AIDS orphaned learners manifesting behavior problems within the school?

AIDS-related parental deaths could influence orphans' school attendance, school performance and school completion. Losing a parent to AIDS and facing the potential of losing a parent are significant negative factors to children's school performance. Because parent died from AIDS or were infected by HIV, orphaned and vulnerable children usually lose parental attention. These children may not devote as much time as they need for school work. They may manifest behavior problems within the school.

Disruptive behavior is a concern to schools and parents and to fellow students, whose education may be adversely affected. Therefore, disruptive behavior cannot be ignored, and schools, together with parents, must tailor a well-understood sound behavior and discipline policy. In schools, parents are called to assist in handling the behavior of students especially when it involves drug abuse.

One participant pointed out that:

Parental support in the education of their children is important since supervision and assistance during children's school years seem to be important factor in teaching pupils how to cope with their school, and this prompt study habits(Participant33).

For the efficient functioning of the school, school managements reserve power to control the conduct of students through reasonable rules and regulations. Once these rules and regulations are made, they must be enforced on the problems, which beset secondary schools, indiscipline comes first. Students disobey school rules and regulations with impunity. They have little or no respect for their teachers and even the school administration.

6. CONCLUSIONS

Findings from the questionnaires showed that teachers and parents unanimously affirmed that HIV/AIDS orphaned learners manifested disciplinary behavioral problems at their respective schools. Problems such as swearing, disobedience, telling lies, unable to settle down on tasks, smoking and drug taking, teenage pregnancy and frequent fighting. It can be concluded that given the responses from teachers, schools are experiencing disciplinary behavioral problems which are likely to affect the tone of the school and programmes that involve ecological systems approaches need to be put in place to redress the situation to enhance effective teaching and learning in schools.



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The study findings confirmed that children who head households experience negative conduct behaviours at school resulting in them experiencing negative interaction patterns with teachers and school management team. Given the bad conduct behavior of orphaned learners who head households, there is need for school based counselors, social workers to be appointed to work in collaboration with teachers on a part time basis in providing for the conduct behavioral needs and social interaction patterns as proposed by principals of schools

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are made in assisting HIV/AIDS Orphaned learners with behaviour problems and unmet emotional needs in secondary schools in Zimbabwe.

- ❖ At macro system level, parents have a major role to play in ensuring that proper teaching and learning are attainable in our schools. Therefore, the parents, school management, and other staff members of the school should join hands in ensuring that a climate conducive to teaching and learning for HIV/AIDS Orphaned learners is prevalent in secondary schools.
- ❖ A Code of Conduct for learners and staff is very important in all schools. It serves as an important stepping-stone towards fostering a culture of good behaviour, mutual respect, accountability, tolerance, co-operation, personal development within the school and its surroundings.

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