

Care and Support for Vulnerable Children in Schools: The Case of Child-headed Families

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ABSTRACT A vulnerable child refers to a person who is under 18 years of age. The South African law expects educators to take responsibility for caring for the learner. The common law regarding duty of care is imposed on the educator in loco parentis. This article aims to explore ways and means through which child-headed households can be cared for and supported in schools. Reference is made to the seven roles of the teacher, with special focus on the pastoral role in the context of these children. The questions addressed are: How can schools better care for children in child-headed households? Are practising educators empowered to deal with challenges facing learners both at home and at school? The main method of data collection is document analysis. Initial findings indicate that children in child-headed households need support and protection in dealing with their unfortunate circumstances.

INTRODUCTION

This article investigates the extent to which schools care for children in child-headed households. It looks into the role played by educators and the school in trying to help these learners. While HIV/AIDS is regarded as the main cause of orphanhood among children, this article does not recognise it as the only cause. Whatever the cause of orphanhood, these children need support from the government, schools and society. These orphans are vulnerable. They also have to work harder than their peers to ensure that they get food and money to pay for other necessities. They often take on the role of head of the family by looking after their siblings. The method of investigation is based on literature analysis and on the researcher's experiences.

As an example, half of the children heading households in Pietermaritzburg, KwaZulu-Natal, were school dropouts. Reasons provided for the situation range from being punished for being late, failing tests or being unable to complete homework due to their responsibilities at home, and not having appropriate shoes or school uniforms (Ewing 2004).

The abovementioned statements are a reflection of what happens in disadvantaged schools in South Africa where child-headed households do not receive particular attention. The article argues that schools must pay particular attention to pastoral care roles meant for all learners who experience the circumstances of not being

cared for. Child-headed households can also be viewed as children in crisis, as their behaviour is maladaptive in terms of societal expectations (Le Roux 1994: 84).

Children from child-headed households can also be considered special children, in the same way as all other learners in a school. They need to be loved and taught how to love themselves and others. Schools can make a difference in the lives of vulnerable children.

Objectives of the Study

This study is meant to highlight the plight of vulnerable children in schools, and what a school can do to support them. Child-headed households are also vulnerable and, in the absence of a parent, the teacher must play this important role. These children also need support from members of the community. The aim is to help them be resilient and survive under adverse circumstances.

INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

This phenomenon of vulnerable children is not localised. It occurs all over the world. This article includes statistics from the perspective of the African continent. Vulnerable children are found in African countries such as Zambia, Tanzania, Kenya, Rwanda and Swaziland. These are only examples of some countries in which this phenomenon occurs. As of 2007, Kenya had

approximately 1.4 million child-headed households, Rwanda had approximately 220 000, Swaziland had approximately 56 000, Uganda had approximately 1.2 million, Tanzania had approximately 970 000 and Zambia had approximately 600 000 (Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS 2008). Uganda has a track record of putting child laws in place based on international treaties and obligations. In Uganda, most vulnerable children are those in prisons, the floating and the homeless (Lubaale n.d.). Orphans and vulnerable children are not a homogeneous group. Certain types of vulnerable children found in communities are those so-called child mothers, children in child marriages and institutional children. Lubaale (n.d.) found that some children aged 10 years and above were in child marriages. The number of child mothers increased exponentially with the increasing age of the child, and by the age of 17, more than one in four girl-children were mothers.

WHO ARE VULNERABLE CHILDREN?

Vulnerability alludes to those people who are regarded as being unable to cope with things that impact negatively on their lives. They are also exposed to various risks in their lives. Socio-economic situations like poverty, abuse and social injustice determine the quality of their lives. The context under which they live defines who they are. Vulnerable children include orphans, ill children and those who are disabled. Further descriptions of vulnerable children refer to those who have suffered the loss of their prime caregivers due to various reasons. These prime caregivers are parents, other family members and guardians. Vulnerable children have been deprived of love, care and guidance in their lives. This negatively impacts on their wellbeing and development. Other people discriminate against them by treating them differently. They are often counted among the abused. They lack education and often face death.

Vulnerable children are defined in different ways. The environment and context in which they find themselves often constructs their identity. For example, authors such as Pianta and Walsh (1996: 1) label these children as “at risk” due to the fact that they are not well served by their societies and schools. Such children are said to be performing poorly at school, and efforts to “fix” their performance are regarded as

“narrow, reflexive and reactive” (Pianta and Walsh 1996: 2).

When a child is described as vulnerable, safety is an issue. The parent-child interaction is a major influence in such a child’s vulnerability. Vulnerability is about individual protection. The level of the child’s poverty makes the matter of vulnerability more dangerous and difficult to handle. The author is of the opinion that vulnerable children are “neglected”.

These children are exposed to abuse on an emotional, psychological and physical level. They are not assertive and they are often defenseless. More often than not, they are orphaned. They often lack basic needs like shelter, food and clothing. Their society, and particularly their schools, must take care of them.

This article will look at different ways in which schools can support vulnerable and neglected learners. Vulnerable children respond differently to different circumstances. Some may display anger, aggression, shame or depression. Depending on the type of vulnerability, the following school-related problems can be identified: skipping classes, absenteeism, disruptive behaviour, stealing, helplessness and violent behaviour. Failing to deal with vulnerable children is a system failure for schools. These children are exposed to abuse, including bullying and name-calling. Such psychological abuse torments these learners to even commit crime and suicide. They are overwhelmed by the responsibilities of looking after their siblings. This exposes a need for schools in South Africa and elsewhere to run feeding schemes in the school.

THE LEGAL IMPERATIVES

The Bill of Rights affords all South Africans certain basic rights, such as the rights to have access to health care services, social security, sufficient food and water, adequate housing and the right to live in a safe environment. Over and above these rights, additional protection for children includes the right to basic nutrition, shelter, basic health care services, social services, and protection from abuse and neglect. Some laws have major implications for children specifically. For example, the Social Assistance Amendment Act (Act No. 6 of 2008) addresses social security by regulating access to social grants for children living in poverty. There are seven

types of grants, among which are child support grants, foster care grants and care dependency grants. The Children's Care Act (Act No. 38 of 2005), as amended by the Children's Amendment Act (Act No. 41 of 2007), sets out principles relating to the care and protection of children. The Act recognises the role of early childhood development in children's growth and their preparation for formal education.

The National Health Act (Act No. 61 of 2003) ensures access to free primary health care, particularly for pregnant women and children from the age of six. Inadequate household food security poses serious challenges to children's health. The health and social welfare of children is as much influenced by their access to housing and basic amenities as it is influenced by their access to health care services. The basic right of access to water is guaranteed by the Water Services Act (Act No. 30 of 2007), enacted through free basic water allocation of at least six kilolitres of drinkable water per month per household. Children in informal dwellings are much less likely to have access to basic services, such as water and sanitation, and are more likely to live in areas that are far from schools and major transport routes. This jeopardises both their health and their school attendance (Statistics South Africa 2002–2010: 4). Government's efforts to protect children are the responsibility of the new Department for Women, Children and Persons with Disabilities.

Even though the duty to provide for the basic needs of children is vested in their parents, this does not mean that the state is not responsible for those children. Generally, all children are dependent on the state. The state must build schools and hospitals for its citizens, for example. The South African Constitution guarantees the protection of rights for all, including children. In every matter concerning the child, it is of extreme importance to take the best interest of the child to heart (Davel 2000: v). The Declaration of Geneva expressed an important claim to confirm the principle of "mankind owing to the child the best it has to give" (Kaime 2009). The 5th Assembly of the League of Nations adopted the Declaration of the Rights of the Child (1924), which provided for the principle that "[t]he child must be given the means required for its normal development, both materially and spiritually" (Ibid 2009:12). This implies the fulfillment of Maslow's hierarchy of needs. In this

case, it specifically refers to the basic needs like shelter and food. The above emanates from the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (stipulating that "[e]veryone as member of society has a right to social security... [and] to a standard of living adequate for the health and wellbeing of himself and his family." adopted by the United Nations General Assembly Resolution in 1959. To this end, South Africa and its citizens are morally obliged to improve the lives of vulnerable children.

The above declarations, among others, had a significant impact in shaping Child Law in South Africa. The relationship between the child and third parties, including the school, has changed significantly (Davel 2000: v). The Child Care Act (Act No. 74 of 1983), as amended, requires that "every dentist, medical practitioner, nurse, social worker or educator, or any person employed by or managing a children's home, place of care or shelter, who examines, attends to or deals with any child in circumstances giving rise to the suspicion that the child has been ill-treated, or suffers from any injury, single or multiple, ... shall notify the Director-General or any officer designated ..." (De Waal et al. 2001: 165). In any matter affecting the child, the expectation is that the Director-General or any designated officer should be informed. Section 28 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (Act No. 108 of 1996) includes the right of every child "to family care or parental care, or to appropriate alternative when removed from the family environment." Educators have a responsibility to take care of the learners based on the legal principle of *loco parentis* (De Waal et al. 2001: 151). The educator is, therefore, obliged by the law to report and protect the child against any harmful activities. It is against this background that the educator, as a classroom manager, is expected to perform the 'community, citizen and pastoral role function', among the seven roles of the educator. Educators need skills to perform this function. In this article, the concept 'child-headed households' is explained as households where all members are under the age of 18 years. Such households only have children as household members (Meintjes and Hall 2009). Pastoral care is a concept that is complex, multidimensional and embraces issues related to discipline. Slabbert (2003) regards an educator playing a pastoral role as empowering and providing a supportive environment for the learner. Such an educa-

tor also responds to the educational and other needs of the learner. Schools, like organisations, share the same vision, and thus belong to the school community. This simply means that educators are responsible for caring for learners who are without parents.

Meintjies and Hall (2009) are of the view that most children in child-headed households are not AIDS orphans. The 2006 Households Surveys found that only 8% of children living in child-headed households were children who had lost both parents, whereas 80% had a living mother. The perception is that child-headed households mainly comprise orphans that emanate from HIV/AIDS families, but research disputes this. This article further confirms that child-headed households are not only the result of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. The approximated number of child-headed households in South Africa is 122 000 (Meintjies and Hall 2009). Many of the problems experienced by child-headed households are no different from those experienced by other people, with poverty being the main problem. Other problems are unique, like the inability to obtain grants (Horsten 2005).

The South African Constitution grants its citizens the rights to equality, dignity, health and privacy. The vulnerability of a child in a household creates a possibility of added barriers to accessing health care services.

It is less likely for child-headed households not to live in formal dwellings (Meintjies and Hall 2009). They will live in informal dwellings with minimum amenities like water and ablution facilities at their disposal. The abovementioned statements are a reflection of what happens in disadvantaged schools in South Africa, with child-headed households not receiving particular attention. The article argues that schools must pay particular attention to pastoral care roles meant for all learners experiencing the circumstances of not being cared for.

Child-headed households can also be viewed as children in crisis, as their behaviour is maladaptive in terms of societal expectations (Le Roux 1994: 84). The children, their social and educational environment, and their interaction with their environment determine whether they are in crisis or not (Le Roux 1994:84). A combination of the abovementioned factors renders a child-headed household member vulnerable, and thus in need of support.

THE ROLE OF THE SCHOOL IN CARING FOR CHILD-HEADED HOUSEHOLDS

The educator is ideally placed to protect the learner. There is an outcry over the fact that educators have had minimum or no training with regard to protecting learners in this way, and thus lack confidence (Kay 2003).

Some educators continue to claim that procedures in child protection are an additional burden (Kay 2003). The role actually played by educators is not as expected. The level at which educators involve themselves in supporting such children is not always at the level of their training and expertise. Child-headed households need love. It is the prerogative of the school to ensure that vulnerable children are identified and known to their educators. Schools must ensure that these children are safe from any form of abuse within and outside the school. These children must be empowered with independent coping skills.

These vulnerable children must be in a position to be protected against sexual exploitation. It is the responsibility of the school to improve their attendance. Vulnerable children have emotional, physical, psychosocial, personal and intellectual needs. These needs may be fulfilled by the school, depending on the nature of the child. Schools are expected to function according to a set of values that will fuel love, respect and peace. Schools need to give these children hope. This is because teaching is a moral act based on values. This article argues that ethics (right and wrong) is one of the vital roles schools play in helping child-headed families. Schools must increase their caring role to child-headed households

Catholic schools are of the opinion that, when education is referred to as transformative, its role is to recognise the wholeness of the learner (Flynn 1993). In that way, pastoral care is described as the school's expression of concern for individuals (Ibid 1993). The school is expected to play the following roles in helping child-headed households in their development:

- ♦ **The Learning Mediator:** In dealing with vulnerable children, the teacher must be sensitive to the diverse needs of these children and construct an appropriate learning environment, demonstrate sound knowledge of the learning area or subject and be inspirational to these children.

- ♦ ***Interpreter and Designer of Learning Programmes and Material:*** The teacher must be able to understand and interpret existing learning programmes and design his or her own learning programmes. The sequence and pace of learning should be sensitive to the needs of the learning area or subject and those of vulnerable children.
- ♦ ***Leader, Administrator and Manager:*** The teacher must be able to manage learning in the classroom with an understanding that learners in the class consist of vulnerable children. In managing the class, the teacher must be flexible and deal with issues in a democratic way. As a leader, teachers must persevere and be able to manage their frustrations in dealing with vulnerable children.
- ♦ ***Researcher, Lifelong Learner and Scholar:*** Teachers are expected to pursue their personal, academic, occupational and professional growth so as to influence the lives of vulnerable children in a positive way.
- ♦ ***Community, Citizenship, and Pastoral Role:*** The teacher must develop a sense of respect and responsibility towards others, upholding the Constitution and promoting democratic values and practices in schools. Vulnerable children need to be provided with a supportive and empowering environment. Valuable information and issues that affect communities, such as HIV/AIDS, must be communicated to vulnerable children. Teachers must develop supportive relationships with parents and vulnerable children, as well as organisations that have an interest in the lives of these children.
- ♦ ***Assessor:*** Teachers need to understand various purposes of assessment, including identifying the needs of their children, planning learning programmes, tracking learner progress, diagnosing problems and helping vulnerable children to improve their work. In helping vulnerable children, teachers must be able to judge the effectiveness of learning programmes and assess their own teaching. Teachers must be able to design and manage both formative and summative assessment and be able to keep records of learner performance (children with parents and vulnerable children).
- ♦ ***Learning Area, Subject, Discipline and Phase Specialist:*** Teachers must be well grounded in the knowledge, skills, values,

principles, methods and procedures relevant to their field. This means that these teachers must know different approaches to teaching and learning, and be able to contextualise their knowledge to suit the needs of vulnerable children (Potenza 2002).

Educators' seven roles are associated with competencies, and affect the norms for educator development (Slabbert 2003). This article puts more emphasis on the importance of the pastoral care role with regard to the learner. The issue of pastoral care is the responsibility of the whole school, and must occur on a continuous basis. Children can experience emotional neglect, which refers to the parents' failure to meet the child's need for love, security, positive regard and praise. Emotional neglect can also be associated with a parent who is psychologically unavailable to the child (Kay 2003). This will actively affect the child's emotional and psychological wellbeing, encouraging the child to seek a close relationship with the educator or other staff member (Kay 2003).

CHALLENGES FACED BY VULNERABLE CHILDREN

Vulnerable children face many challenges. These children assume different roles, especially as caregivers for their siblings in child-headed families. They struggle to get food, shelter, access to health facilities, clothes and other essentials. Some face the risk of being sexually and emotionally abused or exposed to child labour in order to supplement their daily needs. These children are also vulnerable to child prostitution. They do not have an adult to take care of them. Generally these children struggle to access government grants, as some of them do not have the necessary documentation. The reason for this is that they stay with extended families or their grandparents who may not have the necessary information about these children.

These children are vulnerable to hunger, and poverty is particularly severe in these families. Hunger and poverty subject these children to stress and health problems. Generally, these children are vulnerable to poor living conditions. According to Statistics South Africa (2002–2010), 19.6% of all children in South Africa, representing approximately 3.6 million individuals, are orphaned. The largest percentage of orphans are found in KwaZulu-Natal (26.9%), followed

by the Eastern Cape (24.7%) and the Free State (21.9%). Less than 10% of children in the Western Cape are classified as orphans. Black children are more likely to be orphaned than children from any other population group. This argument is supported by the large percentage of paternal orphans in three provinces that are generally considered to be sources of migration workers, namely KwaZulu-Natal, the Eastern Cape and Limpopo (Statistics South Africa 2002–2010:6). The largest percentage of maternal, paternal and double orphans is found in KwaZulu-Natal, followed by the Eastern Cape and Gauteng.

THE PASTORAL CARE TEACHER

With regard to pastoral care, teachers dealing with vulnerable children are responsible for promoting and safeguarding the health, welfare and safety of vulnerable children – working in partnership with parents, support staff and other professionals and with vulnerable children – and providing advice and guidance to vulnerable children on issues related to their education, as well as contributing towards good order and the wider needs of the school. This article views pastoral care as a process in which every teacher must be involved.

In providing pastoral care, the teacher must give personal support to the needs of vulnerable children. Vulnerable children need support in the school curriculum, vocational support, as well as personal and social support. Briefly, in providing personal support, pastoral care teachers must deal with issues of attendance, late coming, health, and other personal welfare matters. In providing curricular support, the teacher must concentrate on the curriculum itself, learning and teaching, progress, and reporting on the vulnerable child's attainment of academic goals. With regard to vocational support, the teacher must concentrate on career education, vocational courses, and educational activities or industry-related and higher educational requirements that can suit vulnerable children.

The teacher, in assuming the role of the pastoral caregiver, is expected to take an active interest in and monitor the attendance and punctuality of vulnerable children, and offer them support. The aim must be to improve the rate of attendance and punctuality of those children. In supporting vulnerable children, teachers must take an active interest in the health and wellbe-

ing of these children and offer them support. With regard to learning and teaching, the teacher must take an active role in encouraging them to raise and maintain their standards. These teachers need to advise vulnerable children on assessment and examination requirements.

This article identifies a pastoral caregiver teacher as someone who collects information and monitors absent vulnerable children, communicates with staff, and is aware of any change in the general wellbeing of vulnerable children. A pastoral caregiver teacher is able to highlight issues relating to the curriculum and time table, check homework, ask learners how they are progressing, and advise them on basic study skills (Local Negotiating Committee for Teachers 2004).

HOW SCHOOLS CAN INCREASE SUPPORT FOR VULNERABLE CHILDREN

Schools can support vulnerable and often orphaned children in different ways by focusing on providing essential services. Kenya is an example of a country with programmes for orphaned and vulnerable children (OVC). One of the key strategic objectives of the OVC programmes is to mobilise and strengthen communities to support these children. Trained service providers include teachers, community youth and workers in children's homes, religious and community-based organisations. This kind of training will enable the formation of kids clubs within their communities. It is essential to note the important role played by teachers in supporting OVCs. South Africa can learn some valuable lessons with regard to extending a supporting hand to vulnerable and orphaned children (Olive Leaf Foundation 2008).

Orphaned and vulnerable children have to be cared for not only in a school setting, but also by community structures. Governmental and social interventions must continue to give orphaned and vulnerable children hope for a bright future. Kenya advises that there is a heightened intervention at school level, where these children are well supported. Kenya has also declared all children living in communities that face serious threats of HIV/AIDS and poverty as being children at risk, who need care and support. Issues of health, safety and the psychosocial wellbeing of children cannot be emphasised enough (Williams 2010).

CONCLUSION

This article concludes that schools should pay more attention to the pastoral care role played by educators in trying to alleviate the challenges experienced by child-headed families in schools. In understanding the plight of child-headed households in South African schools, this paper views these children as children in crisis, as their behaviour is maladaptive in terms of societal expectations. These children are vulnerable and are likely to become school dropouts as a result of being punished for coming late, failing tests, and being unable to complete their tasks due to their responsibilities at home. They also have the challenge of going to school without proper school uniforms, for example, attending school without shoes. Schools lack the expertise to deal with the challenges faced by child-headed families in their midst as some of their educators do not have appropriate skills.

Finally, these children need love, which the schools and extended families need to provide.

In conclusion, this article is of the view that the solution to the plight of vulnerable children can be minimised by establishing drop-in centres and databases of child-headed households, providing grants by the Department of Social Development, and establishing child-care forums. The problem of dealing with child-headed families needs a multipronged approach where goodwilled people, churches, the government, communities, schools and the entire society are involved.

There are many ways of dealing with the challenges of vulnerable children. This article concludes by giving some of the ways of managing vulnerability in schools and communities. There should be coordination between local government and community structures. Funding mechanisms should differ from case to case. There should be monitoring and evaluation by officials from the Department of Social Development. Institutional care and transition homes should be taken care of. Corruption should be prevented and rooted out in all structures. There should be community involvement at all levels to help vulnerable children. Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and any other service providers should be involved in building the capacity of extended families and other structures to train these family members to care for vulner-

able children. Lastly, government should address the culture of dependence on government grants for those who do not qualify for benefits.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This article argues and recommends the following strategies:

In trying to highlight the plight of child-headed families, this article is of the view that educators should refer learners to bodies or structures such as the Department of Home Affairs, psychological services, the school's Life Orientation Department, churches and other relevant bodies or agencies.

Adoption could be one of the strategies that could be used by communities. In adopting these learners, proper legal procedures should be followed in order to protect child-headed households. According to the South African Constitution, Section 28 (1) (b), every child has the right to family care or parental care, or to appropriate alternative care when removed from the family environment; (d) to be protected from maltreatment, neglect, abuse or degradation. According to Section 28 (2), a child's best interests are of paramount importance in every matter concerning a child. Extended families should be involved in the adoption process. There is an African idiomatic expression that says: It takes a village to raise a child. This article therefore argues in favour of the involvement of extended families.

The issue of vulnerability can be managed by using appropriate communication strategies to ensure equal access for vulnerable children in the same way as people with disabilities.

Training programmes should be developed for teachers to manage vulnerable children in schools. There should be no discrimination in dealing with these children. Generally, people with disabilities need additional assistance. Similarly, vulnerable children should get extra assistance to benefit from education in the same way as children with a parent at the head of the household would enjoy.

This article further recommends that child-headed families should be given grants by provincial departments of Social Development. Furthermore, communities should establish child-care forums where these vulnerable children can tell their stories and share their frustrations. These forums can be therapeutic in the long run.

There should be drop-in centres in the communities where these children live so that they can access basic commodities such as blankets and food. In these drop-in centres, philanthropists and goodwilled people can donate items for the benefit of these children. Again, this article recommends the establishment of databases of child-headed families in all provinces.

This article provides another perspective on how to deal with vulnerable children who have suffered emotionally. Schools should involve government officials, NGOs, extended family members, education specialists and educational psychologists in trying to understand the behaviour of vulnerable children.

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