



African Journal of Social Work  
 Afri. j. soc. work  
 © National Association of Social Workers-Zimbabwe/Autor(s)  
 ISSN Print 1563-3934  
 ISSN Online 2409-5605

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## Intensifying psychosocial support for child headed household learners in schools for sense of belonging and sustainable learning

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### ABSTRACT

The paper addresses the social challenges which affect learners from child-headed households (CHHs) and impact them psychologically in learning. The observation of poor academic performance emanating from different challenges they experience, specifically in school, suggests a need to intensify psychosocial support. CHHs in South Africa, as in other countries, is an increasingly significant problem noticed since 2000. Through Critical emancipatory theory and participatory action research (PAR), different stakeholders from the society in Xhariep district were identified, meetings and open-ended face-to-face free attitude interviews were conducted with six CHH learners as key role-players to gather suitable data. The research found that anger, low self-esteem, learner behaviour and lack of appropriate life skills were main challenges experienced. Critical discourse was helpful in analysing data. Consequently, different workshops were conducted as a means of empowerment and intensifying psychosocial support (PSS), leading to the emergence of an appropriate framework. The study concludes by highlighting amongst other recommendations that this phenomenon's existence be acknowledged in different societies and communities, also psychosocial support as intensified be implemented in all other schools with CHH challenges and even similar challenges.

**KEY TERMS:** Child-headed households, intensify, psychosocial support, sense of belonging, sustainable learning, South Africa

**KEY DATES:** Received: October 2023 | Revised: November 2023 | Accepted: December 2023 | Published: April 2024

**KEY DECLARATIONS:** Funding: None | Permission: Not applicable/UJ Grant 1819 | Conflict of Interest: None | Ethics approval: Not applicable/UNZA Ethics Committee/AIEC

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Current and previous volumes are available at:

<https://ajsw.africasocialwork.net>



### HOW TO REFERENCE USING ASWDNET STYLE

Lepheana, A. & Alexander, G. (2024). Intensifying psychosocial support for child headed household learners in schools for sense of belonging and sustainable learning. *African Journal of Social Work*, 14(2), 83-91. <https://dx.doi.org/10.4314/ajsw.v14i2.4>

## INTRODUCTION

Child-headed households (CHH) are a concerning phenomenon due to the emotional impact it has on vulnerable children. In 2015, there were 50,000 CHHs with 90,000 children affected in South Africa (Stats SA, 2015). Additionally, in 2018, 58% of children aged 15-17 in the child population lived alone, and no increase was identified in the proportion of CHH children in 2019, with statistics remaining between 0.55 and 0.88 (Statistics SA, 2022). Given the vulnerability of these children and their psychosocial challenges, this study aimed to intensify psychosocial support (PSS) at schools in the Xhariep district of Free State province, focusing on creating a sense of belonging for CHH learners to promote sustainable learning. These learners were of school-going age and were heading their families without adult support, facing various psychosocial learning challenges. The study employed critical emancipatory research (CER) to identify activities and feelings of oppression and suggest alternative possibilities to emancipate those who feel marginalized (Merriam, 2009). Participatory action research (PAR) was also used to facilitate a collaborative approach to understanding and changing the world around these learners for their liberation. Various stakeholders, including CHH learners, academic practitioners, social workers, and community members, participated in the research to intensify support. The paper provides background information on the challenges facing CHH learners, followed by a literature review, theoretical framework, methodologies employed, findings, and discourses. Data analysis leads to recommendations and a conclusion.

## BACKGROUND

The number of CHHs increased between 2008 and 2015 as parents died due to HIV and AIDS. (Muchacha, Dziro & Mtetwa, 2016) The mortality rate was too high between 1990 and 2000 but much as 35% HIV incidents declined between 2015 and 2000, many children were orphaned leading to CHH development, totalling an estimated 50,000 CHHs in 90,000 children (Stats SA, 2015) and increasing every year thereafter. A statistical report on population published in 2016 counted 15 million orphaned children, though not all were head of family (Kurebwa & Kurebwa, 2014:236). According to Mentjies, Hall, Marera and Boulle (2010), 90% of CHHs were in the Limpopo province. Investigation of various psychosocial challenges focussed on learning (Lepheana, 2010; Human & Van Rensburg, 2011), for instance, poverty, anger, fear, lack of emotional support at home, absenteeism caused by lack of food, low self-esteem, lack of motivation, discrimination, and emotional distress. These were affecting behaviour in the classroom and evidently one led to another, a phenomenon recorded in other countries (Lepheana, 2010; Human & Van Rensburg, 2011; Mtetwa, Dziro & Takaza, 2013).

One secondary school in the disadvantaged Xhariep district of Free State province was identified for its high enrolment of double orphaned learners and large number of CHH learners by the Free State Department of Education's Education Management Information System (FSDoE EMIS, 2012 & 2014). It was one of 25 secondary schools out of 76, including independent and farm schools, to have one teacher for each subject. The end-of-year results were not meeting the benchmark of 80% over consecutive years, with the 2016 overall pass percentage being 73%, 77% in 2017, and 78% in 2018.

Unacceptable behaviour, including absenteeism, missed homework, incomplete and improper dress was observed by dining staff during break, with some learners pushing and causing commotion. Teachers cited these as accounting for the poor academic performance, repeatedly indicating how most learners did not have parents or caregivers who could represent them during teacher-parent meetings. The school-based support team (SBST) dealing with misbehaviour and socio-related challenges alleged that most learners with whom they interacted were living alone. Despite such challenges, learners were expected to attend school for future opportunities (White paper 6, 2012; Mamotshere, 2016: 60). Though not all CHH learners were under-performing, the presence of caregivers in children's lives played an important role in supporting and meeting PSS challenges (Mamotshere 2016:46). All parenting role-players were considered as participants (Sustainable series number 6, 2009:6), and since CHH learners are regarded as disadvantaged due to absence of a family structure (Mushunje & Mafico, 2014), the envisaged objective was to assist them in facing psychosocial challenges and so equip them with necessary life skills. This would strengthen their endurance and resilience (Sustainable series number 6: 2009) and reduce vulnerability, a crucial initiative and one of the significant factors in providing quality education as outlined by the South African Council for Educators (SACE review, 2010:14).

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Some studies on CHHs highlighted learning challenges (Lepheana, 2010) and challenges to academic performance, for instance, one conducted in Lesotho, Zimbabwe, Uganda, Kenya, and Malawi that focussed on orphans and vulnerable children found they were less likely to attend school when they reached adolescence (Mishra & Assche, 2008:59). This signifies that it is not easy to cope with academic demands while having to play adult roles in their households (UNAIDS, 2010: 8), often exacerbated by poverty (Mtetwa et al., 2013). Since learners are unique and their learning styles differ it is important that PSS takes into consideration how they respond to adverse situations based on their age and gender. Other Southern African Development Community

(SADC) countries face similar challenges, for instance, Mozambique, Tanzania, and Swaziland had to focus on developing the wellbeing of children from CHHs. Having conducted psychosocial support workshops for wellbeing of children and the effects of these on learning, the foundation of their definite care and support was child participation. Tanzania implemented a Complimentary Basic Education (COBET) programme in which learners set their own lesson times and kept each other accountable, consequently reducing absenteeism. In Zambia, BELONG (Better Education and Life Opportunities for Vulnerable Children through Networking and Organizational Growth) used performing arts in the theatre to disseminate information on HIV and promote model behaviour (Department of Basic Education: Action step CSTL pilot project, 2010:54). In South Africa a guideline known as *HERO Book* was developed in mainstream PSS for the benefit of both learners and teachers in the Western Cape. Positive reports by Regional Psychosocial Support Initiatives (REPSSI, 2012) indicated a sense of increased confidence, academic performance and attitude and, interestingly, giving and receiving peer support.

Despite these countries providing guidelines to mainstream PSS in schools, CHH learners were not catered for, a concern that they also experienced emotional trauma. Hapunda (2015:3) has argued that feelings of rejection and anguish contribute to depression and emotional distress, affecting social functioning and academic learning. South Africa has many areas which are poverty-stricken, in which households still fail to meet basic needs such as healthcare, food security and appropriate shelter. PSS entails helping children, families and communities to improve well-being by encouraging better relationships and assisting learners in their education through life skills empowerment for the future (Mamotsheare, 2016:70). In this paper, PSS embraces efforts geared to supporting the emotional state of CHH learners and reinforcing the relationship between teacher, learner, and all other stakeholders in the education sector. The team, strategic plan, activities and priorities were informed by challenges experienced by learners.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The critical emancipatory research (CER) lens was employed, firstly, for its emphasis on group of people or individual introspection, reflecting on an issue challenging them and finding means to free the feelings of oppression and liberating the marginalised in communities (Habermas, in Merriam, 2009), also as Osborne (2001) argued, it is useful in helping develop democracy in the education system. A major objective was to find ways to emancipate individual CHH learners in schools, so the theory's foundation in socialism meant the views of different stakeholders, besides teachers and learners, would be taken into consideration. The author acknowledges that transformation depends on people socialising, mediating, talking, and questioning their strengths and weaknesses to obtain a solution (Braune, 2013: 18). Secondly, CER allows participants to engage through listening, observation and communicating with CHH learners and teachers. This helped us understand their experiences through interrogations then move towards empowerment and transformation (Mahlomaholo & Netshandama, 2012: 44), eventually strengthened PSS. It anchored the study since CHH learners realised the right to self-introspection, identifying obstacles and the purpose of liberation. Thirdly, empowerment would assist in overcoming poor performance and allowing emancipation of learners from CHHs through PAR and inculcation of a sense of belonging. Similarly, policy framework of care and support of orphans emphasises family as the best environment for children, so we sought to create family warmth for CHHs in schools (Muchacha, Dziro & Mtetwa, 2016). Another envisaged outcome was all stakeholders realising their value through collaborative engagements with the school community and the common vision of intensifying PSS in schools. Purpose of the paper is to reflect on the development of an approach for PSS.

## METHODOLOGY

### Research design

Based on the aim of the study, challenges such as emotional distress, hunger, anguish, anger, insecurity and fear lead to learning challenges (Lepheana, 2010, Mentjies, Hall, Marera & Boule, 2010). Consequently, participatory action research (PAR) was employed to facilitate the unfolding of activities towards strengthening PSS. Kemmis and Wilkinson (1998:21) regard the aim of PAR as being to help individuals or groups to investigate reality and change their view of life. The first step was to develop a strategic plan using important procedures and stages to be followed, such as identifying the school, establishing the team and profiling participants. The team consisted of five learners from CHHs, ages varied between 14 and 18, one Life Orientation (LO) teacher, a representative of the SBST, the school principal, school governing body (SGB) chairperson, education officials, such as the Chief Education Specialist (CES) of inclusive education, an education psychologist, a local social worker, a Families and Marriage Society of South Africa (FAMSA) NGO, and the author as driving project researcher. These were people who interacted with schools sometimes or interacted with learners every day, believing that they could assist with strategies since they knew some challenges faced by schools and learners in general. Participating would afford them an opportunity to realise challenges experienced by a certain group of learners in the school community and so help cater for them in their daily planning and policies. PAR was favoured because

it allowed voices of the troubled to be heard and focussed on empowering a group of people or community to improve a specific performance (Yang, 2013:3).

To gather more relevant data, the Free Attitude Interview (FAI) was identified as a flexible tool that gave participants freedom to speak, suggest and participate in identifying gaps and deciding on activities that could strengthen PSS (Godfrey, 2015:2). Being unstructured it simplified interactions while facilitating group discussion and giving participants freedom to speak without following a specific order. Also, it helped us realise the challenges and identify means to intensify support in school, providing an opportunity to hear real opinions and feelings experienced by learners from CHHs first-hand.

### Research protocol

Tables 1 and 3 indicate how data was collected and outline the framework of the strategic plan informing activities in their order of importance, some unfolding as workshops, information and debriefing sessions. Table 1 presents the strategic plan for the 7 series of meetings held and indicates the purpose, the agenda and the persons responsible for running them.

Table 1: Strategic plan for meetings

Meeting	Agenda	Responsibility
Team members' introduction	<i>All meetings and workshops started with opening, welcome.</i> Introduction Purpose Operational plan, sharing responsibilities.	Researcher All team members
CHH learners, teacher interviews/discussions	Tone setting Discussions: challenges experienced by learners, suggestions on interventions	Researcher All participants present
Feedback, reflection, way forward	Briefing the principal Reflection on main challenges SWOT analysis Way forward guided by an operational plan	The principal Researcher All participants present
Briefing curriculum officials	Presentation on the purpose of the study Presentation on CER and PAR 2 <sup>nd</sup> and 3 <sup>rd</sup> meeting briefing. Presentation of a strategic plan Discussions on the role to be played by the CES, Curriculum officials and their contribution towards intensifying PSS. Closure	The CES  The researcher
Discussions with the SGB	Purpose explained.	The researcher SBST teacher representative.
Briefing by the psychologist		The researcher, Psychologist and the DCES inclusive directorate
Feedback, reflection	Reflection and review	The researcher

Table 2 outlines objectives, outcomes and participants during data gathering as tabulated in Tables 1. After team establishment, meetings (Tables 1 & 2), feedback, discussions and workshops (Table 3) took place for the participants to know each other and fulfil the aim of the project. The reason for involving all team members participating was to develop evidence based on a person-centred package (Whillatch & Orsulic-Jeras, 2018: S58).

Table 2: Procedure

Meetings	Participants	Objectives	Outcomes
First meeting Through FAI	5 x CHH learners, LO and SBST teacher	Free discourses	Lived experiences through open ended questions
Second meeting	Researcher, principal	Feedback, SWOT, way forward	Invitation of motivational speaker for the learners
Third meeting	CES inclusive, the SMGD, subject advisor as curriculum officials	Timeframe on implementation of activities	Training of Phuthullohang School Management Team and six from other schools Self-esteem workshop for all grades 11 and 12 learners Psychologist's one-on-one session with CHHs
Fourth meeting	Psychologist, CHHs	Dealing with anger	Workshop on anger management
Fifth meeting	Principal, psychologist, CHHs, SBST teacher, SGB chairperson, Researcher	Feedback session for meetings 1-4 Role of the SGB chairperson	Presentation of phenomenon CHHs to SGBs of other local schools, CHHs keeping diary for their daily feelings & causes. Also tasked to assist each other as their responsibility. Team members exchanged telephone numbers

## FINDINGS

For this paper, the discussion is combined with the findings to improve readability. The different gatherings in the form of meetings and debriefing sessions revealed issues that required attention to intensify support. For instance, learner behaviour, building self-esteem, anger management and counselling sessions were identified as challenges that required workshops to address them in order of priority as presented in table 3.

Table 3: Workshops

Findings	Activity/ workshop	Presenter	Purpose
Unacceptable Learner behaviour	Group participation	School management governance and developer (SMGD) and the principal	Expected behaviour: facilitated through questions and answers from learners. Presentation of Standard Signal Positive Values Evaluation, closure
Lack of self- esteem	Building self- esteem	The researcher and LO subject advisor	Self-esteem: What is it? Its composition, its link to one's strength? Evaluation, closure
Anger portrayal	Anger management	Psychologist	What is anger? its causes? dealing with one's own anger? managing anger. Evaluation, closure
Inadequate life skills	Life skills equipment	The researcher	Time management, budget, basic parental skills, communication skills

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) was employed to help us understand the social problems experienced and to reveal hidden power relations (McGregor, 2003:3), therefore, the team looked at the positive and challenging aspects of the CHH phenomenon. CDA was understood as a medium of critical reflection in which norms were questioned and minds transformed (Taylor & Crafton, 2012: 316), with the social problem of CHHs in schools that perpetuates inequality and power relationships examined through dialogue.

### **Learner behaviour**

A workshop was conducted by the SMGD on the type of behaviour expected from learners at school, informed by an observation raised by learners: *"We do not know how to behave at school as there is no one at home who could guide us"*. Learners' behaviour in a classroom, according to the Department of Education (DoE, 2020), affects how much and how well they learn; hence it is important to ensure they know what is expected from them. Continuing, the principal focused on behaving in a society that is building their morals so that they can be accepted in the community. Also based on the DoE support for the idea of schools receiving assistance from the community to deal with problematic behaviour, focus was placed on what constitutes a learner, aims at school, roles and responsibilities, rights, behaviour in the classroom, and the Phuthullohang school's code of conduct. A positive response was raised by one learner participant who said: *"It is actually not difficult; it is just for us to comply in order to be better persons in the future."*

Direct questions were posed and the group discussion approach was followed to evoke learners' thoughts and discourse.

The SGB chairperson focused on roles expected from the community, encouraging good behaviour: *"As neighbours you should play a role just by showing a concern, show that you care if the learner is not at school. That will make them feel that they are considered in the community they belong."* The session took 150 minutes and was concluded by presenting aspects of standard signal positive behaviour.

### **Anger management**

The session was the responsibility of the psychologist and took the form of providing support and intervention for CHH learners. The workshop was informed by a learner who said: *"Sometimes I feel anguished asking myself why my life is difficult."* Another added: *"I also get angry and feel lonely when I don't have food."* Consequently, the focus was on how to deal with anger, loneliness, and despair. As a one-on-one session between the psychologist and learners, issues of confidentiality had to be observed, hence other participants were not part of the second session.

### **Self-esteem**

As the responsibility of the LO teacher, SBST member and the researcher, with a focus on individual identification of strengths and building self-esteem. Overall opinion about oneself is important as it informs one's abilities and limitations, facilitates re-examination of one's values, and develops new and changed perceptions accompanied by a sense of belonging (WSU, 2020). The targeted group comprised CHHs and grade 11 learners so they could still be observed the following year. A positive attitude towards challenging life experienced by learners was observed, with learners beginning to state visions and have the courage to express what they thought or wished to do after completing their studies. This would assist in increasing the frequency of school attendance, irrespective of obstacles which might be encountered, and improve academic performance.

Anger management and loneliness workshop as a psychologist's responsibility was informed by one learner participant's reflection: *"I also get angry and feel lonely when I don't have food."* Again, it was necessary to conduct a workshop as educators indicated that there were learners who were often showing a difficult face and fighting with other learners over trivial issues. Only learner participants from CHHs attended the workshop, and the psychologist defined anger, its causes and ways to deal with it. This activity was concluded by emphasising the use of a diary in which to record anything that made one angry and what strategies were implemented to deal with it. The main aim of this activity was to help learners to express their feelings in writing and identify possible solutions.

### **Teacher empowerment**

Informed by what the SBST has raised: *"We don't know how to assist learners from CHHs, we were never trained to deal with such learners from CHHs."*, the CES held a workshop to help teachers understand their role in providing care and support for learners from CHHs. The success of the workshop was in helping teachers realize that care and support were their responsibilities and that they play a crucial role in creating a positive learning environment. One participant noted that giving advice and support can bring happiness to learners, acknowledging

her role as a teacher and parent “*Essentially it is not about solving all problems, but just giving advice in some cases on which steps can be followed. It brings light and happiness to learners.*”

Adapted from the SACE code of professional ethics, the presentation focused on the conduct of teachers in their profession and to learners, colleagues and community, as well as parents.

It was also necessary to share useful treatment (Hendricks & Tanga, 2019) in the form of life skills empowering CHHs, hence discussions on time management, budgeting, communication and basic parenting skills were conducted.

## **IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATION**

The emphasis was a need to support CHH learners to reduce the inequalities experienced while presenting a practical example of what can be done. All stakeholders deemed essential were invited since learners' problems are sometimes linked to their social circumstances. Included were CHHs since solutions are embedded in the active participation of those who are destitute and marginalised. Through CER and PAR, data-gathering meetings for information sharing and a way forward were conducted frequently to determine progress, CDA was utilised in finding support then activities were monitored. Based on the aim of the project it was recommended that the phenomenon of the CHHs be acknowledged by all societal stakeholders, communities and families. This would make it easier for the CHHs to be listened to while facilitating the relevant support intensity, and a recommendation made to implement the project in all schools.

### **Monitoring**

Monitoring as a regular observation of activities taking place in a project was understood as a way of receiving feedback on its progress. The information on all aspects throughout the process and progress of the project was gathered to gauge reaching the objectives (Bartler, 2011:1). For this project particularly it was necessary to have a system and a tool in place that could monitor and evaluate progress. Curriculum officials decided to amend the existing tool to accommodate PSS and an inclusive directorate decided to use the existing one. In the School Management Team, heads of department would report their observations of learner behaviour and performance progress, with monitoring informing decisions on what needed to be improved in PSS. As a result, the following factors were found essential:

We learnt that Education, appropriate services and information sharing about the life and needs of CHH learners were important,

It was advisable to encourage learners to form support groups by themselves to avoid isolation, rather than increase social support (Whitlatch, Orsulic-Jeras 2018: S60).

Care collaboration/coordination (Whitlatch & Orsuis-Jeras, 2018) played a major role in strengthening PSS and so reducing distress.

Sharing coping and resilience strategies during destitution was helpful.

It also became evident that communication amongst stakeholders was a skill that played a significant role in the success of intensifying PSS.

### **Weaknesses in the project**

The study sought to involve stakeholders who were thought would play a major role in the PSS of the CHH learners. However, a religious representative from the council of churches could not participate, meaning a spiritual side of care and support was not reached. Finally, as much as the PAR was relevant to the project it was time-consuming. This project took 21 months in one school so to implement it in other schools would require more research personnel.

## **CONCLUSION**

The study ascertained challenges faced by learners from CHHs and steps to be explored in intensifying PSS assisting them in schools. It was necessary to follow PAR to give CHH learners a chance to self-introspect and share their views on finding a way to freedom through the lens of CER. This would empower those who regarded themselves as the most marginalised. Dialogue and discourses were relevant tools; hence FAI geared the study to obtain first-hand information on lived experiences and allowed participants to speak about their feelings. Formal and informal meetings were conducted in which different activities, such as workshops and information sharing, were identified and presented in their order of priority. Identified themes were also outlined, notably building self-esteem, anger management, learner behaviour and life skills equipment, eventually, outcomes of different activities from their operationalisation. Notable success was the comments made in discourses through CDA, also measured through monitoring. Being couched by CER, which is driven by emancipation, empowerment, and society's knowledge construction, questioning new ideas for easy adaptation instead of setting fixed claims for

individuals to enjoy their future, was achieved. Similarly, we can confirm that CER carried us through its philosophy of freeing human beings from constraints to their ways of thinking (Merriam 2009:22). Therefore, the study critically explored empowerment strategies to intensify PSS for CHH learners in schools. Being equipped with different skills for approaching various life challenges would empower them and reduce the impact of emotional distress. Despite these successes, the paper acknowledges the shortcomings which may have weakened the project.

### **Declaration**

We (Alice and Gregory) declare that the work submitted is our original input, we acknowledge the assistance of Professor Hlalele who played a major role in the preparation of ethical clearance and guidance from UFS. The work will not be submitted to other publications unless rejected or withdrawn. Great gratitude is also directed to the co-author, Professor Alexander who patiently prepared for the ethical clearance from CUT the current host institution, his unwavering contribution to the finalisation of the paper. The marvel of Dr Andrew the language editor will always be applauded.

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