

Orphaned learners' experiences with regard to bereavement support: implications for school guidance and counselling



Simon Taukeni

PhD

Department of Educational Psychology and Inclusive Education, University of Namibia
staukeni@unam.na

Abstract: This study adopted phenomenological design to investigate the orphaned learners' experiences with regard to the provision of bereavement support in six selected primary schools in the Endola circuit, Namibia. The sample consisted of six orphaned learners (two boys and four girls) aged between 11 and 14 years. The sample was selected using purposive sampling. The data was coded, categorised and formed themes of the study. This study revealed that the types of support provided by the primary schools to orphaned learners during and after bereavement include: informing learners about bereavement, consoling orphaned learners, giving them a week off school during bereavement, registration of orphaned learners, provision of group guidance, and peer support. The study recommends that each school should have a Bereavement Plan of Action (BPA) in place that outlines step by step the types of bereavement support the school should provide to the bereaved learners during and after bereavement.

Key words: orphaned learners, experiences, bereavement support, school guidance, counselling

The world, and Namibia in particular, is experiencing an increase in the number of orphaned school-age children who need support and care. UNAIDS (2008) estimated that 15 million children under the age of 18 worldwide became orphans. In sub-Saharan Africa the total number of orphans was approximately 39.2 million by the year 2000 and it was estimated that the figure would increase to 50 million by 2010 (UNAIDS, 2004). In 2001 the Namibian national census reported around 97,000 orphaned children under 15 years of age who had lost one or both parents (Ministry of Education, 2008). During the data collection phase in the 2011 academic year there were about 1,226 orphaned learners in 12 primary schools in the Endola circuit.

In the Namibian context, an orphan is a 'child who has lost one or both parents because of death and is under the age of 18 years' (Ministry of Education, 2008, p5). Accumulating evidence suggests that orphan status is

accompanied by increased levels of psychological distress such as anxiety, depression, intense guilt, shame, and anger (Atwine *et al*, 2005). These challenges may affect children's academic and social development (Weber & Plotts, 2008). Although there is an elevated risk for negative outcomes, many orphaned learners adapt well and do not experience serious problems.

The Namibian government has put in place policies and programmes to protect and care for orphan and other vulnerable children (OVCs) by providing them with health care, access to education, economic opportunities, basic needs and psychosocial support (Ministry of Women and Child Welfare, 2004). However, it is not clear whether the general needs of orphaned learners as identified in the policies and programmes are adequately addressed (Mnubi-Mchombu & Ocholla, 2011). Specifically, it is also not clear whether and how psychosocial support needs as outlined in the policies and programmes are provided

to orphaned learners by schools (Ruiz-Casares, 2004; UNICEF, 2006).

Many researchers and practitioners have found that bereavement support is beneficial, useful and meaningful within the school settings (Haine, Ayers, *et al*, 2008; Levy & Derby, 1992; Longmann, 1993; Marquis, 1996; McArdle, 2001; McDonald, 2000; Sandler *et al*, 2003; Tonkins & Lambert, 1996). Bereavement support in a school setting can potentially assist the bereaved children and their family in strengthening their resources for dealing with the death (Haine *et al*, 2008). More specific benefits of bereavement support include: (1) feeling that one has a better understanding of the grief process; (2) feeling that one has a safe place in which to express one's emotions, developing better stress management skills; (3) being better able to cope with loneliness, developing support systems; (4) improved self-esteem (Souter and Moore, 1989; Rognile cited in US Department of Education, 2007).

Literature provides evidence that bereavement support can provide one of the most sufficient ways possible to work on or resolve incomplete mourning and to prepare the person to move forward with life. Despite these benefits, there are still some barriers to providing effective bereavement support within school settings, including: limited staff expertise and training; funding constraints for mental health personnel; concern about family privacy; and persistent stigma associated with mental illness, which may contribute to orphaned learners' reluctance to disclose their reactions or seek services (US Department of Education, 2007). Hence this study focused on orphaned learners' experiences with regard to the provision of bereavement support in schools. Endola circuit is situated in the rural area where most orphaned learners might become victims of unresolved grief, lack bereavement support or drop out of school (Taukeni, 2004).

Methods and procedures

In this article I report qualitative data gathered from six selected primary schools in the Endola circuit, Namibia. The study was conducted in the interpretive paradigm in which knowledge is established through the meanings attached to the participants of a study to obtain data (Cousins, 2002). The epistemology question of this research was: What bereavement support do orphaned learners experience during and after bereavement at school? Therefore the main aim of the study was to investigate the type of bereavement support provided to orphaned learners at school during and after bereavement.

The choice of the sample is closely related to the study design (Brink, 2006). In this study however, one of the basic characteristics of interpretive phenomenology is that researchers select a small number of cases which they can investigate in great depth and detail (Smith, 2004). The interpretive phenomenological design involves a close

investigation of the experiences and meaning-making activities of individual participants and then a process of comparing and contrasting each participant's accounts in order to identify shared themes and experiences. Sometimes they may draw on the accounts of a small number of people, usually not more than 15 (Reid, Flowers & Larkin, 2005). The study included a total of four orphaned girls and two boys. There were more girls because there were more orphaned girls than boys in the six selected primary schools. OVC registers for schools and class teachers assisted the researcher in selecting the sample. Purposive sampling procedure was used to select orphaned learners as participants 'who have lived the experience that is the focus of the study, who are willing to talk about their experience, and who are diverse enough from one another to enhance possibilities of rich and unique stories of the particular experience' (Polkinghorne, 1983).

The participants are identified as: P1, P2, P3, P4, P5 and P6. Participants were aged between 11 and 14 and had been bereaved of one or both parents between 2000 and 2010. All children were now living with other family members. The majority of participants had been bereaved through illness with the exception of one participant whose mother was said to be 'bewitched'.

Data analysis was done using the following five steps: i) Bracketing and phenomenological reduction; ii) Delineating units of meaning; iii) Clustering of units of meaning to form themes; iv) Summarising each interview, validating it and where necessary modifying it; v) Extracting general and unique themes from all the interviews and making a summary.

Each orphaned learner's substitute consent form was signed by the class teacher in consultation with orphans' caregivers and guardians who had given a final authorisation. The informed consent agreement form was explained to participants at the beginning of each interview. The participants also understood that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time. Face-to-face interviews were carried out after school within the school environment as agreed with the participants. All interviews were held in the presence of a social worker who provided counselling to the participants before and after. Interviews were conducted in *Oshikwanyama*, which is the native language of all participants. Interviews were recorded with the permission of the participants.

Findings of the study: The emergent themes

This section presents evidence of participants' subjective experiences with regard to the types of bereavement support provided by their schools during and after bereavement. Participants related how they were informed about their parental bereavement, how they were consoled by their schools, the number of days given by schools to

mourn their parents, the registration of orphaned learners, and peer support.

Informing learners about bereavement at school:

Information was communicated in individual classes by class teachers. The whole school was also informed about bereavement by the principal during assembly. Findings showed that the schools protected bereaved learners by asking school mates not to provoke them when they returned to school. It was explained to other pupils that the loss of a parent is a sad event in life and should be taken seriously and the bereaved pupil should be treated kindly. P1 stated 'I remember that sometimes the class teacher would tell us that there was a learner who had lost his or her parents. It is also announced to the whole school by the principal in school assembly'. P2 stated 'When you return to school other learners are warned at the school assembly not to provoke you'.

Consoling orphaned learners: Participants related their experiences regarding the way they were consoled when they went back to school after the funeral. They stated that school principals asked them not to feel sad. Some of the teachers shook their hands to show their sympathy. Another support participants received was teachers shaking their hands after the burial of their parents. P1 noted 'When the orphaned learner returns to school he or she is told not to feel sad. It is done by either the class teacher or the school principal'. P3 said 'Some teachers shook my hand. They did not say anything'. P1 said 'I don't stay alone at school. I have friends with whom I play'. He added 'Since we are just two friends at school [when one of us has some money] we go to buy cakes and eat together'. P2 explained 'My friends made me feel good when I returned to school after bereavement. When I told my friends what happened, they said it was okay'. P6 also stated 'We tell each other funny stories and eat our cakes together'. Another way of peer support was through playing with friends at school. The majority of the participants related that they spent most of their time at school playing with their friends. They took time out to play different games in order to make each other happy. P2 said 'I always play very well with my friends at school'. P4 disclosed 'My relationship with my friends, is good, we play games to make each other happy at school'. P6 stated 'We play together at school and we keep each other company and we have fun together'.

Provision of a week off during bereavement: Participants were given a week off after bereavement. This practice was evidently intended to enable participants to mourn their parents. However, participants did not say how the week off to mourn their parents benefitted them and whether the time for bereavement was adequate or not. P2 said 'The school said, stay two to three days at home

with your family'. In his case P3 confirmed 'I was given the whole week off'. In the researcher's view a week off for bereavement seems to be acceptable. Any longer and the child might be left behind in school work and find it difficult to catch up.

Registration of orphaned learners: Another important bereavement support experienced by the participants was the registration of orphaned learners by class teachers for planning and monitoring purposes. Registering and keeping up-to-date information on the number of orphaned learners at school can also be helpful when giving support such as school uniforms, grants and provision of psychosocial support. P3 said 'Class teachers write down the names of orphaned learners in their classes so that when orphans are given something you will also get it'.

Summary

The meaning drawn from the findings in this section was that, even though children were provided with emotional support, it seemed they were not given the opportunity to relate how they felt when they lost their parents. These findings imply that schools did not provide guidance and counselling support to orphaned learners during and after bereavement.

Discussion of the findings

Informing learners about bereavement

In most schools, one is highly likely to encounter a grieving learner almost every day, even if one does not see any visible signs of grief. Participants said that school principals and class teachers told learners and the school community about the bereavement at the school assembly. Nelson & Rae (2004) confirm that at the outset it is important that members of the orphaned learner's peer group are made aware of the loss and given an opportunity to discuss their feelings in the absence of the bereaved child. It is important when the news is announced to find the right words to talk about death. Also, the information needs to be verified first and family members consulted to determine what they would like to have disclosed to the school community. When a pupil returns to school after bereavement, teachers and school staff should be told about the learner's situation. The orphaned learner or learners should be informed that the staff is aware of their situation.

The school and the learner should together negotiate a contact person who should be available to the bereaved pupil or pupils when they need to talk (Nelson & Rae, 2004). This may be a member of the teaching staff or a member of the support staff who may well have developed a relationship with the child before the loss. The findings of the study showed that when a bereaved learner returned to school other learners were made aware of his or her return

and they were warned by the principals not to provoke the bereaved child. Instead, they were to support him or her.

Consoling of orphaned learners

When the participants returned to school after bereavement some school principals and class teachers talked to them about not feeling sad. However, participants did not relate how they were supported to express their emotions about the loss. Sengendo & Nambi (1997) confirm that in most cases orphaned children are not given the required support and encouragement to express their emotions nor are they guided to deal with them. It is, however, necessary to note that death affects children even throughout adulthood. Therefore children should be given proper attention and provided with adequate grief support (Thompson, 2002) and an opportunity to express their pain, which was found lacking in this study. In the researcher's view, it would be better for schools to sit with the bereaved child and give him or her opportunity to express their pain and find out how the child wants the school to help. By doing this, the school can offer immediate and specific help to the bereaved child in order to cope meaningfully (Conley & Woosley, 2000).

A few of the participants reported that their teachers shook their hands when they returned to school. They did not say anything to them, simply shook their hands. This finding might imply that the teachers were being sensitive by approaching the bereaved with great caution so as not to arouse their emotions or it may be a cultural practice not to say anything when shaking somebody's hand during or after bereavement. It is a common practice in some Namibian communities including the Ovawambo for people to shake hands as a way of showing sorrow and sympathy. Usually, this is the first thing one does to mourners. After the handshakes, greetings are exchanged and mourners are given the opportunity to express their emotions as they narrate how their beloved died and what exactly happened. What seemed lacking in the context of the study was the opportunity to let the children sit with their teachers and tell their stories of how their parents died and to express their feelings after bereavement.

Riches and Dawson (2002) suggest that the difficulties in providing bereavement support might arise from the mismatch between the school's culture and the culture of bereavement. This implies that each school should have a culture of caring and providing bereavement support to the bereaved children in their midst by considering the bereavement practices or culture of the child. Bereavement support is important for orphaned learners to be able to integrate into the school community without feeling rejected, stigmatised, discriminated against or isolated. What the study seems to show is lacking is a follow-up check on how the bereaved learners are coping. McDonald (2000) notes that successful bereavement support for

orphaned learners in schools results in productive activities, and fulfilling relationships with other people, and the ability to adapt and cope with the loss. It is therefore an integral part of effective primary care for the child.

It was also evident that the participants relied on the social support of their friends at school. They related that their friends made them feel good when they returned to school after the bereavement. When they told their friends what happened they said it was okay. They helped them to accept what happened. Blake, Bird & Gerlach (2007) suggest that having supportive friends in times of bereavement is an important psychological support mechanism. Friendship may be an important source of support for friends and classmates. Even normal social activities such as inviting a friend over to play, going to the park, playing sports, watching a movie, or a trip to the mall may offer a much needed distraction and sense of connection and normalcy (NASP, 2003). Most of the participants in the study believed that playing with their friends was one of the bereavement supports they received at their schools.

McArdle (2001) confirms that play provides opportunities for children to feel comfortable and in control of their feelings by allowing the expression of emotions in acceptable ways. Play provides children with the opportunity to negotiate and resolve conflict. The peer support the participants related in this study showed the closeness they shared with each other which in itself was an emotional support. It emerged that the participants' friends treated them very well when they returned to school. Participants spoke of the encouragement and reassurance they got from friends. This finding suggests that schools should make more use of peer support for bereaved pupils.

Time off after bereavement

It was clearly stated by the majority of the participants in the study that their schools permitted them a week off to mourn their parents. Some were told by their schools to stay two to three days at home with their family.

The expression of trauma is not rigidly set, but comprises a continuum based on the type and severity of the trauma, the past experiences of the victim, the prevalence of dissociation, age, gender and many other factors (Scaer, 2000). It is therefore difficult to determine how many days a school child should be allowed stay away after bereavement – there is no correct way or length of time to express grief. It is determined by the factors listed above. Even though some ways appear to lead to more effective recovery from the distressing aspects of trauma, factors such as age, gender, culture and type of death determine the actual days of bereavement. Wimpenny (2006) asserts that orphaned children do not just move on and end their relationship with the deceased parent(s). Di Ciacco (2008) agrees that most children in primary schools

lack the experience to deal with loss and their undeveloped coping skills cause them to be more vulnerable than adults. Adults have lived multiple experiences and developed coping mechanisms to handle their losses.

Grieving is a process, not an event. Parents and schools need to allow adequate time for each child to grieve in a manner that works for that child. Pressing children to resume normal activities without the chance to deal with their emotional pain may prompt additional problems or negative reactions. The more losses the child suffers, the more difficult it will be to recover. This is especially true if they have lost a parent who was their major source of support. NASP (2003) concludes that the times it takes for learners to adjust to the loss will vary, but most children are not over a loss in six months or a year. As such, appropriate support should be planned for the immediate aftermath, the months following the loss and for the long-term. Schools should try to develop multiple supports for children who suffer significant losses.

Registration of orphaned learners

Most of the participants reported that their class teachers wrote down their names in a register for orphans and other vulnerable children so that when orphans were given anything they would now be included. This finding is consistent with Mutandwa & Muganiwa (2008) who note that all identified orphans are recorded in the master register. Given that the number of orphaned children is quite high, prioritisation is necessary to ensure that the limited resources are channeled towards the neediest children (Mutandwa & Muganiwa, 2008).

Other information in these registers included the age, status, gender and type of support the orphaned child received. Lorey & Sussman (2001) confirm that at the

local level, registers of OVCs are helpful for record keeping and monitoring and usually include information on names, location, ages, health status and needs of OVC and assistance or support given. OVC records can also be used as a means of monitoring and evaluation through which national plans of action, national development plans and all policies and programmes concerning orphans and vulnerable children are framed and enacted (Ministry of Women and Child Welfare, 2004). OVC registers facilitate identification of vulnerable children, health service provision, school expenses payments, food distribution and counseling (Richter, Manegold & Pather, 2004).

Conclusion

Even though the majority of orphaned learners were provided with bereavement support such as a week off to mourn their parent(s) and the teachers showed their sympathy by shaking their hands when they returned to school, these supports did not help them to express their emotional feelings about the loss. Most of the participants showed the need to express their emotions after the loss of their parents. They were not able to relate how they felt about the loss either at home or at school. There was evidence that class teachers registered orphaned learners after bereavement. However they did not go back to the children to do follow-ups on how they were coping. This could be a source of frustration for some of these children, especially if they wanted to talk but there was nobody willing to listen to them. Thus, they continued to suffer in silence. Schools should use information gathered in combination with existing literature to generate guidelines which schools may find helpful when developing and implementing bereavement strategy.

Table 1 Bereavement Plan of Action model

Support immediately after bereavement	Support shortly after bereavement	Long term support
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consult the family and verify the news • Talk to class teacher and peers • Announce the bereavement • Visit the bereaved child at home with peers • Help friends to write condolence notes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Register the bereaved in the Register for OVC • Class teacher talks to the bereaved child and find out if coping • Talk to peers or form Circles of Friends to avoid isolation • Class teacher referrals to guidance counsellor • Assess his/her needs and look for support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Class teacher monitors the change of behaviour • Class teacher calls in friends to ask about the coping ability • Class teacher/counsellor talks to the bereaved how he/she is adjusting and coping with the loss • Class teacher/counsellor monitors the performance in school work • Encourage the child to stay and finish schooling • Class teacher writes a report at the end of the year on the change of behaviour/progress after the death has occurred

Recommendations

Given the increase in the number of orphaned learners in Namibian schools, each school should have a Bereavement Plan of Action (BPA, see Table 1) in place that outlines step by step the types of bereavement support the school should provide. The BPA may cover support during bereavement, immediately after bereavement and long-term bereavement support. The class teacher/school principal can monitor and assess its implementation and progress. The BPA should be applied to every child who becomes orphaned at school.

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