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Against the tide: Provision of psycho-social support to orphans in a rural primary school in Lesotho

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Even before the coronavirus disease (COVID-19), Lesotho had a significant number of orphans. However, the pandemic has caused an increase in the number of orphans, as some children have lost 1 or both parents or caregivers. Many of these orphans are of school-going age, strategically placing schools to meet their psycho-social needs. With this study we aimed to achieve 2 objectives: firstly, to assess how 1 primary school in rural Lesotho provided psycho-social support to orphaned learners during the COVID-19 pandemic, and secondly, to determine how such support was beneficial to the orphans. We used the social-ecological model of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) as a theoretical framework and collected data through interviews with 17 purposively selected participants, including 1 principal, 8 guardians and 8 teachers. Thematic data analysis was used to analyse the data collected. The study revealed that teachers provided food packages, lay counselling, and referrals to spiritual counsellors to support orphaned learners. While learners benefited from the school's psycho-social services, limited resources and skills posed challenges. We recommend developing comprehensive policies to address the psycho-social support needs of orphans.

Keywords: counselling; orphans; psycho-social support; social-ecological model; well-being

Introduction

Research (Hailegiorgis, Berheto, Sibamo, Asseffa, Tesfa & Birhanu, 2018) indicates that orphans experience lower psycho-social well-being than their non-orphaned counterparts. In a study involving 370 children attending public schools in Ethiopia, only 62 orphans scored higher on the psychological well-being scale than their 107 non-orphaned peers (Tadesse, Dereje & Belay, 2014). When parents pass on, the usual way of caring for children changes. As a result, relatives or older children become responsible for caring for orphaned children (Settergren, Hoohlo & Rathabaneng-Hoohlo, 2018). As such, orphans experience many social ills, such as high deprivation on a multi-dimensional scale that includes poverty, a lack of housing, a low retention rate at school, and poor sanitation (UNICEF, 2018). About 300,000 orphans in Lesotho live in poverty (Kingdom of Lesotho, 2022). These orphans face numerous challenges that can hinder their education, including caring for siblings and lacking basic needs like food, clothes, and money for educational expenses (Lesotho Ministry of Health, 2022). Such challenges are even more intense in rural than urban areas (UNICEF, 2018). The Kingdom of Lesotho (2022) reports that orphans and child-headed families in Lesotho are experiencing increased vulnerabilities due to the COVID-19 pandemic. To help these vulnerable children thrive, improving their psycho-social well-being is crucial.

Since most of these orphans are of school-going age, schools are strategically placed to provide for their psycho-social needs. Schools have been identified as centres of care and support within the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region since 2008 (Armstrong, Khoboko, Moleli-Habi, Rampeta & Lepelesana, 2012). However, schools in rural areas are reportedly poorly resourced and lacking in most required amenities despite being mandated to provide psycho-social support to learners (Armstrong et al., 2012). The problem that we sought to understand with this study was how a school with meagre resources in the rural areas of Lesotho provided psycho-social support to orphans in the face of poverty and COVID-19. Therefore, we aimed to investigate the provision of psycho-social services in one school, X, located in rural Lesotho, during the COVID-19 pandemic. To achieve this purpose, the following questions were asked:

- a) How does School X provide psycho-social support to orphaned learners during the COVID-19 pandemic?
- b) How does the psycho-social support provided at School X benefit orphans?

Literature Review

The aim of psycho-social support is to help individuals and families become more resilient by addressing their psychological and social needs. Respect for their independence, dignity, and coping mechanisms is prioritised throughout providing and strengthening their psycho-social support (Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies, 2018). Psycho-social support serves the dual purpose of preventing and treating mental health issues and it helps reduce the risk of mental health problems. Also, it aids individuals and families in overcoming psycho-social issues that may result from shock and its aftermath (Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies, 2018).

Psycho-social support involves counselling to help individuals enhance their competencies, self-worth, identity, and effectiveness (Mwoma & Pillay 2015). For orphaned learners dealing with grief, specialised counselling can be provided to strengthen their coping mechanisms. This can lead to a healthier, less stressful, and happier life, allowing orphans to express themselves and process their emotions (Gilborn, Apocella, Brakarsh, Dube, Jemison, Kluckow, Smith & Snider, 2006). Counselling helps orphans feel heard and understood and to be able to navigate the challenging experience of losing a parent (Haine, Ayers, Sandler & Wolchik, 2008; Smith Fawzi, Eustache, Oswald, Louis, Surkan, Scanlan, Hook, Mancuso & Mukherjee, 2012). Furthermore, counselling can assist individuals with their psychological well-being and decrease behavioural issues. For counselling to be effective in schools, clear policies should be established to guide the process. Additionally, sufficient financial resources are necessary for recruiting, training, and compensating counsellors (Betancourt, Meyers-Ohki, Charrow & Hansen, 2013; Thompson, 2013).

Provision of psycho-social support in schools in some Africa countries

Teachers in Kenya struggle to support bereaved children due to their heavy teaching loads and high teacher-pupil ratio. This leaves little time for teachers to provide lay counselling to orphaned learners (Kosgey, n.d.). Additionally, there is a lack of policies guiding counselling services in schools, causing teachers to hesitate to provide support due to concerns about overstepping boundaries (Kosgey, n.d.). In Ethiopia, teachers face difficulties providing effective counselling in schools due to the lack of private rooms designated for this purpose. Instead, they are forced to use classrooms that do not offer sufficient privacy (Arfasa & Weldmeskel, 2018). In Zimbabwe, school counsellors often face difficulties getting cooperation from caregivers and colleagues who believe that when bereaved children misbehave, they should be punished instead of being counselled (Shumba & Moyo, 2014). Shumba and Moyo (2014) further explain that these parents and guardians tend to blame teacher-counsellors for being too soft on bereaved learners. Moreover, teachers in Zimbabwe are not adequately trained in counselling skills, making it challenging to handle learners with emotional problems. Many orphans in Zimbabwe complain that teachers only offer empty promises to bereaved children, leaving them to cope with the loss of their loved ones on their own (Shumba & Moyo, 2014).

In South Africa, Mwoma and Pillay (2015) found that orphans lacked skills like interpersonal communication, assertiveness, managing peer pressure, and prevention of sexual abuse. These

skills are crucial in safeguarding orphans against various social issues. Sadly, the shortage of teachers trained in these areas, coupled with the high number of vulnerable children in schools and the heavy workload, result in inadequate teaching of life skills (Mwoma & Pillay 2015).

Provision of psycho-social support in schools in Lesotho

In Lesotho, more than half of the population live below the poverty line, with 43.2% living on less than 1.25 United States dollars per day. This situation urgently necessitates psycho-social support for orphaned learners (Armstrong et al., 2012). Some children in the country continue to suffer from chronic malnutrition and food insecurity, which harm their survival and growth. The ASSIST Project 2017 study found that nearly 40% of the participants had low economic resilience and could not cover their expected household expenses due to the prevailing poverty in the country (Settergren et al., 2018).

Lesotho has taken steps to enhance the legal framework that supports the psycho-social environment. The government enacted the 2010 Education Act and the Children's Protection and Welfare Act of 2011 to domesticate the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). Moreover, Lesotho has implemented the Lesotho Child Grants Programme (CGP) to mitigate poverty and deprivation, which are significant causes of vulnerability for children (Armstrong et al., 2012). The country has also improved the technical and operational capacity of the Child and Gender Protection Units (CGPU) and the Child Help Line to provide practical, reliable, and responsive child protection systems (Kingdom of Lesotho, 2014). The improved legal landscape and operations increased the capacity to identify and help children in distress and protect their well-being by removing them from dangerous environments where they may be at risk of abuse, exploitation, or neglect. (Armstrong et al., 2012). Despite efforts made by the government, the current provision of services, particularly to orphans, is insufficient, resulting in numerous children having no access to critical child protection systems that are safe and readily available and some orphans remaining multi-dimensionally poor (UNICEF, 2018).

Teachers reportedly need more resources and training and feel overburdened and overwhelmed (Lehohla & Hlalele, 2014; Mohlouoa, 2014; Mosia, 2014; Mosia & Lephoto, 2015). To fill this gap, the Ministry of Education and Training regularly organises 5-day training workshops on counselling skills to address the shortage of skilled teachers in counselling. However, some lay counsellors who attended the workshop still feel inadequate and need more time to offer counselling services at school (Lehohla & Hlalele, 2014). Although it is

evident that learners need counselling in schools, most teachers would instead focus on their core teaching business, leaving learners, including orphans, who need counselling to find their way. This occurs despite it being clear that different learners' vulnerabilities bar them from progressing in school (Mohlouoa, 2014). It needs to be clarified how teachers in a Lesotho rural school carry out a regional mandate of providing psycho-social support to orphaned learners. We sought to close this gap with our study.

Theoretical Framework

The study findings were interpreted using UNICEF's social ecological theory, which comprises five levels that can negatively or positively affect an individual. These levels are individual, interpersonal, community, organisational, and policy/enabling environment. This framework's core is the individual children and their characteristics, such as age, gender, goals, values, and self-efficacy, which influence behaviour and behavioural change (Pells, Morrow, Matemowska & Potts, 2018). There is reciprocal interaction between the individual and the environment. A child, using his/her characteristics, interacts with the environment, and the environment responds following its characteristics (Pells et al., 2018). The second level is interpersonal, which includes formal and informal social networks and support systems, such as family members, peers, classmates, and co-workers, that influence individual behaviour (Pells et al., 2018). The third level is the community level, consisting of organisations, institutions, and information networks. The fourth level is the organisational level, which comprises organisations and social institutions that follow specific rules and regulations, affecting the quality of services provided to individuals and groups (Obregon, Muhamad & Lapsansky, 2021). Finally, the fifth level is the policy and enabling environment level, which includes local, national, and state laws governing resource and service allocation, including the lack of such laws and policies (Obregon et al., 2021). The theory identifies various factors that can impact learners positively or negatively. This is relevant for our study because it helps to understand how various personal and contextual factors affect orphans attending School X. The findings in our study can be explained better by applying this theory.

Methodology

Research Paradigm

A research paradigm describes a worldview that determines a researcher's approach to a study. It is a shared understanding of reality based on similar assumptions (De Vos, Strydom, Fouché & Delport, 2011; Neuman, 2011). In this study we used the

interpretivist paradigm (Creswell, 2014). Interpretivism asserts that knowledge is socially constructed and liable to change according to people's interpretations. Our study benefited from interpretivism, allowing us to obtain rich, in-depth data from participants (Babbie, 2014). According to Neuman (2011), interpretivism enables the generation of detailed data on providing psycho-social support to orphans at School X.

Research Approach

We applied qualitative methods, which, according to Creswell (2014), are particularly useful for understanding the subjective perspectives of individuals and groups on a particular issue. Qualitative research focuses on how people interpret and make sense of their experiences and surroundings (Babbie, 2014). In this case, qualitative methods allowed the participants to share their views on providing psycho-social support to orphaned learners at School X.

Context of the Study

School X is a church school located in a remote rural area in the foothills of the Maseru district. The school provides education to learners from nearby villages, including some who are orphaned. Many of the orphans live with relatives or in child-headed families. The school runs from Grades 1 to 7, with one class for each grade level. The lower grades, Grades 1 to 4, have 40 to 60 learners per class, while the upper grades have 35 to 50 learners per class. The school has many orphaned learners, with around 15 to 20 orphans in each class. These orphans' guardians are mostly elderly and unemployed, relying on old-age pensions or subsistence farming. This particular school was chosen due to the high number of orphaned learners who attend. We were interested to know how the school supported these learners despite limited resources.

Participants

We purposively selected 17 participants, including one principal, eight teachers, and eight guardians. Purposive sampling denotes the selection of participants who meet particular criteria (Creswell, 2014). The criteria for selection included the principal, who oversees the school's welfare processes and is, therefore, informed of all efforts to provide psycho-social support to orphaned learners. In order to gather information on providing psycho-social support to orphans at School X, we selected qualified teachers. These teachers were chosen because they may have been trained to identify learners with psycho-social problems and knew how to deal with them effectively.

Additionally, teachers interact with learners daily and are more likely to observe their needs and

develop solutions to address these. As a result, such teachers are likely to provide valuable insights into providing psycho-social support to orphans at School X. The guardians were chosen because they were thought to have valuable information about providing psycho-social support from the school. Since they had raised orphans who attended School X, they were likely to have observed the school's efforts in addressing the psycho-social needs of orphaned learners.

The principal was a female who held a bachelor's degree in education and had been teaching for 18 years, with 7 years as the head of the school. The length of service of the participating teachers was significant because we felt that teachers who had worked at School X for at least 2 years could have invaluable information on the matter at hand. The eight teachers, four males and four females, held various teaching qualifications and had been teaching for 6 to 30 years. A mix of males and females was necessary because different sexes could have different views. Five of the guardian participants were male, and three female. All guardians had basic literacy skills, with four having passed the Primary School Leaving Examinations (PSLE), two held the Junior Certificates (JC), and the other two held the Cambridge Overseas School Certificate (COSC).

Data Collection

In August 2020, when some lockdown regulations were lifted, the first author conducted semi-structured interviews with each participant to generate data. Semi-structured interviews involve asking open-ended questions to gather information and allow for follow-up questions to clarify responses (Babbie, 2014). Although semi-structured interviews can be time-consuming, they were used because of their ability to generate various ideas based on participants' experiences (Neuman, 2011). Each interview lasted 35 to 45 minutes. Participants at school were individually interviewed on the school premises, while those absent were interviewed at home. In the discussions we focused on the support provided by the school to orphaned learners and the challenges faced in the process. We created the interview guidelines and tested these with participants from another school with similar characteristics before using it in this study. No revisions were needed as the guidelines were clear. The first author explained the purpose of the study to the participants and asked for their consent before conducting the interviews. To ensure safety during the activity, we followed COVID-19 protocols. Hand sanitiser was provided, and the researcher and participants maintained appropriate distancing. Additionally, both the researcher and participants wore face masks.

Data Analysis

Thematic data analysis was used to analyse the data collected. The data collection and analysis for this study were carried out simultaneously. Each interview was transcribed verbatim right after it was conducted, and field notes were typed and assigned a reference number for easy retrieval. We carefully reviewed the transcripts and typed field notes to understand the respondents' responses, interpretations, and observations at the research sites. Then, we manually colour-coded the data, classified it into named categories, and generated themes across the study for analysis. As Babbie (2014) indicates, thematic data analysis provides the opportunity to find new themes from rich, varied data gathered from interviews. Thematic data analysis is essential as it reveals experiences, meanings, and the reality of participants (Creswell, 2014) and in our study, thematic data analysis enabled the understanding of the provision of psycho-social support to orphans in School X, particularly during the COVID-19 period.

Trustworthiness

In order to increase the reliability of the results, we involved both guardians and teachers in confirming each other's perspectives. The procedures were thoroughly explained to ensure that the study could be replicated elsewhere. To ensure that all information provided by participants was recovered, interviews were recorded. Transcriptions were also shared with participants to ensure accuracy. Additionally, using exact responses provided by participants helped improve accuracy of the qualitative data.

Ethical Considerations

In our study we took all ethical concerns surrounding research into account. Before conducting interviews, permission was sought from the Ministry of Education and Training and the principal. The participants were fully informed about the purpose of the study and were allowed to withdraw from the study without penalty at any time. Those who agreed to participate were required to sign consent forms with the assurance that their identities would remain confidential and that the information collected would only be used for academic purposes. To protect the participants' identities, pseudonyms were used to name the participants and their school.

Findings

In this section we discuss how School X, a primary school in rural Lesotho, supports orphaned learners with their psycho-social needs, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. We identified three main ways in which the school provided support: counselling, spiritual guidance, and providing food

parcels. However, we also found challenges in providing this support, such as a lack of skills, financial constraints, and time limitations.

Counselling

All eight teacher-participants said that the school provided psycho-social support to orphaned learners through counselling. This included learners with behavioural issues, low self-esteem, and communication difficulties with their guardians, teachers, and peers. The participants clarified that they counselled learners with behavioural problems, including poor discipline, sub-par performance, and loneliness. Some learners with behavioural issues tended to disobey their guardians and preferred to do as they pleased, which could cause conflict in the home. Guardian 3 shared that orphans under their care struggled to follow instructions and reacted negatively to reprimands. A few learners sought counselling as they tended to isolate themselves and steer clear of their classmates at school. Teacher 2 emphasised that they focused on shaping orphans' behaviour and instilling discipline to address these issues. The desired outcome was to produce orphans with the necessary skills to succeed in school and beyond. Teacher 1 explained: *"Some orphans have low morale, which is likely to affect their performance in school, and immediately when we realize such behaviour as teachers, we refer such orphans to counselling services."*

The counsellor referred to by Teacher 1 was a lay counsellor. In Lesotho schools, lay counsellors are teachers who have received at least one course in counselling during their initial teacher training and an additional 1-week workshop. At School X, one teacher has been trained as a lay counsellor. Whenever teachers cannot counsel their learners in the classroom, they refer them to the lay counsellor.

The guardians emphasised that learners received counselling when they misbehaved. All eight guardians attested to the importance of counselling provided by the school. Guardian 3 explained that the lay counsellor was beneficial because the guardians reported to them when an orphan misbehaved at home, and the child's behaviour improved after consulting the counsellor.

Ha a sa batle ho mmamela (khutsana eeo ke lulang le eona) ke ea sekolong sa hae. kea tseba ha ke kopane le Teacher 3 ka mo qoqela ka boitsoaro bo bobe ba khutsana eo hang feela ea fetoha. U tla bona ha e tlohella ho iketsa poho ea khothu lapeng mona hore o chenchile [when he (the orphan I raise) does not want to listen to me I know if I report his bad behaviour to Teacher 3, immediately he changed. You will realise he has changed when he stops being unruly at home.]

According to guardians, the counselling services provided in school improved the orphans' behaviour at school and home. The guardians felt

that they would struggle to raise orphans without access to the counselling services offered by the school. Unfortunately, during the COVID-19 lockdown, orphans could not receive counselling as all learners had to stay home.

Spiritual Support

Four of the eight teachers reported that orphaned learners received spiritual counselling from a priest. If such learners did not appear to improve after the counselling sessions, they may be referred to the priest for spiritual counselling. Some orphans may respond poorly to counselling due to insufficient skills. Teachers highly recommended that learners attend church services regularly to gain access to Biblical verses that could serve as a constant source of strength for them. Teacher 4 expressed: *"Though each and every student must attend church services as per the proprietor's request, we as teachers ensure that orphans attend church services where they can feel the supernatural love of GOD."*

The data collected show that teachers intentionally invited orphans to attend church services, especially when they noticed that such orphans were overwhelmed with household tasks. Going to church allowed the orphans to have a break from their responsibilities and take some time for themselves. Teacher 5 explained:

We try by all means to make sure that orphans are the main target of spiritual support provided by the priest by enforcing the rule of the school that learners should support the church by fully participating in church activities. Those orphans who are overburdened by household work will also get the opportunity to attend church services where they can be spiritually healed regularly.

Teacher 5's assertion revealed that participants knew that their guardians did not adequately treat some children because they were overloaded with work. However, instead of addressing the matter with the guardians, the participating teachers encouraged orphans to leave heavy household chores behind and go to church.

Six of eight guardians were in favour of providing spiritual counselling to orphans. They believed that attending church strengthened the orphans' spirits and offered relevant scriptures for their situations. As a result, these guardians allowed orphans to attend church every Sunday as they regarded prayer as the best solution. Guardian 3 also testified: *"Le boitsoaro feela boa fetoha, ke lithuto tseo ba li rutong kerekeng"* [A child's behaviour changes due to the church's teachings]. Guardian 5 attested that attending church positively impacted orphans and benefited their guardians and themselves because counselling could lead to well-behaved orphans, resulting in a peaceful household. It further emerged from the collected data that some guardians permitted the orphans to participate in church services due to

their shared Catholic beliefs and adherence to such teachings. Guardian 3 continued:

Joaloka ha ke le mo-K'hatholike le nna, ke paki hore ba fumana lithuto tse ba khothatsang kerekeng ele likhutsana, ba rutoa hore ba se ke ba lahla ts'epo lefatseng leha ele likhutsana. [I am a member of the Catholic Church and can attest that the teachings provided to orphans give them hope and encouragement to remain strong despite their circumstances.]

Collected data further revealed that not all guardians valued the orphans' church attendance. Two guardians expressed frustration that their orphaned learners went to church on Sundays instead of completing household chores despite already being in school for 5 days. The assertions of these two guardians point to the status of some orphans who were expected to do heavy duties at home, and a few hours of church service resulted in the guardians complaining.

Food Parcels

Four of the eight teachers who participated mentioned that the school offered food parcels to orphans to address their nutritional requirements. Orphans often needed food due to the poverty among them. The school had a feeding programme backed by a non-governmental organization (NGO) and a large field where crops like maize were grown. Sometimes, the school provided food to the most impoverished orphans from these two sources. Teacher 4 explained: *"If there are some food parcels at school, we normally select orphans who are more vulnerable than others and give them food to take home."* Teacher 4's assertions highlighted that the food parcels were not given to all orphans in the school but only to those who were considered to be very needy. Consequently, some orphans in dire situations might not be considered for food parcels as the selection criteria were too subjective.

The food provided to very needy orphans was meant for lunch. The food is cooked for all children to benefit from. However, compassionate teachers used the food to prepare food packages for the orphans. Teacher 5 emphasised:

I cannot hide the fact that there is no policy or authority from the donor that we should take the food donated to school out of the school premises, but you may find that some of these orphans are struggling, I mean struggling. Do you get it? So we sneak those food parcels for those we find incredibly vulnerable. Furthermore, we are putting ourselves at risk of being labelled by parents as stealing the same food, but we have no choice. Seeing an orphan coming to school hungry in the morning is touching.

Teacher 5's statements indicates that certain orphans were in a critical situation, leading teachers at School X to breach the school feeding guidelines set by the donor and the Ministry of Education and Training.

During the COVID-19 lockdown, the school distributed food parcels to extremely needy orphans who were called to the school to receive them. The teachers believed that the school was the last hope for these orphans. However, some guardians expressed disappointment that the orphans under their care did not receive food parcels. This situation arose because the school could not provide food parcels to all orphans and only focused on those deemed highly vulnerable. Consequently, some guardians were dissatisfied with the selection criteria used. Guardian 5 explained:

Ache kannete ha ke tsebe hore na ho phalleloa bana ba joang ka lijo le liaparo sekolong sena. Lebaka ke hobane enoa oa ka ha a so fihle le ha ele ka phofshoana kapa eona phahlo eo a reng e tsoa sekolong joaloka ha e le khutsana le eena [Really I do not know the criteria that are used to select children to be donated with food and clothes in this school. My child has never brought any food parcel or donated clothes at home, though she is also an orphan.]

Guardian 5's assertions show the disappointment that she experienced because of the provision of food parcels at School X. She asserted that she did not understand the criteria used to select the benefactors of the food parcels. This suggests that the allocation of food parcels likely resulted in conflict between the teachers and the guardians.

Further investigation on the distribution of food parcels revealed that some families with orphaned children who did not receive donations had more stable living conditions. These families primarily relied on subsistence farming for income, including animal husbandry and crop cultivation. Some guardians were employed and used their earnings to support their families. Orphaned children under their care may not have received school donations because they were not considered destitute.

Lack of Skills

Based on the data collected, all the teachers who participated said that teachers needed to be equipped with sufficient counselling skills. Counselling involves complex skills that cannot be learned in a week. Therefore, the teachers responsible for counselling orphans were doing their best, given the circumstances. All the teachers interviewed mentioned that their initial teacher training and the workshops that they attended did not provide them with the necessary skills to meet the requirements. The principal explained:

I have not gone to any training on counselling services, so there is no way I could even supervise teachers who wish to provide counselling services to orphaned learners. Instead, every teacher would interpret counselling how he/she feels appropriate at a given time. Furthermore, imagine the disaster we are causing the children if teachers

fail to provide detailed counselling for orphans, including me as a principal.

The principal's role is to lead the teachers in the school. If the principal lacks the necessary skills, it can negatively impact the quality of the counselling provided but also the overall management of the school. If the principal delegates all responsibilities to the teachers, errors and oversights are possible.

Financial Constraints in Providing Psycho-social Support

All participants reported that one of the main challenges in providing psycho-social support services for orphaned learners was the need for more funds. This shortage affected various support aspects, including providing basic needs and the quality of counselling services. Some orphans relied on food parcels and donated clothes from school, but there were instances where they went home empty-handed while others received something. Even within a single household, some orphans may have received gifts while others did not, causing a sense of disparity. Guardian 3 elaborated:

Ke holisa likhutsana tse peli, oa mora le oa morali. Ho ee ho etsahale hore ka nako e ngoe e mong a fumane e mong ebe ha a fumane haholo ha ele liphahlo. [I am raising two orphans, one for my son and another for my daughter. It usually happens that one would get something while another one would not, especially clothes.]

Guardian 2 explained that the school relied on donations from former learners to provide clothes for the orphans. However, sometimes, insufficient funding did not cover all the children's needs. Despite this, Guardian 2 remained understanding and accepted any assistance, recognising that funding was challenging.

Orphans often received inadequate counselling services due to a lack of funds. Lay counsellors needed help to refer them to professional counsellors, as the school could not afford such services. Instead, orphans may be referred to a priest who quoted scripture rather than addressing their needs. The poverty experienced by the school and the families caring for the orphans further limited their access to high-quality psycho-social services.

Lack of Counselling Space

During interviews with participating teachers, it was revealed that counselling services were compromised due to the lack of private rooms. According to five teachers who participated, counselling required a confidential and safe space, which the school did not have. Class teachers had to use their classrooms or open spaces outside, which failed to provide privacy as multiple classes shared one room. Additionally, teachers were still

in the classroom when all learners were out for break or lunchtime, compromising confidentiality. The school has attempted to solicit funds to build a counselling laboratory but has yet to succeed. Teacher 3 explained:

We cannot even have a private room where teachers and students can have privacy during counselling sessions. Matters are worse when such an orphan cries during the session, and other learners ask him/her what is happening. Therefore, you can see that we cannot maintain confidentiality when trying to provide counselling services just because the school cannot afford to build such a private room mainly for counselling.

Orphaned learners might feel uncomfortable with the lack of privacy and confidentiality, which could lead to them being questioned by their peers. This could deter some from attending counselling sessions as they might not want others to know that they were seeking help.

Time Constraints

One of the challenges in providing psycho-social support to orphaned learners faced by School X was the increased pressure caused by time constraints. According to four participants, including the principal, teachers had too many responsibilities to handle and, as a result, could not spare enough time to focus on orphans' psycho-social needs. The participants explained that each teacher was responsible for teaching all subjects in their class, and providing counselling to learners was an additional burden. The school had many orphans, increasing the teachers' roles. Teachers had to work as social workers, counsellors, caregivers, and educators, which caused them to feel stressed and unable to cope with providing psycho-social support to orphans. Teacher 6 explained:

Though we may try to meet orphans' psycho-social needs as much as possible, the teacher-student ratio is so high that we cannot meet them. Most of the time, we leave some of the issues unresolved, not because we are unaware but simply because there is no time. Remember, in the end, the inspectors from the Ministry will need our lesson plans and expect us to have covered the syllabus.

Teacher 6 claimed that the school's and external organisations' demands pressured teachers, like the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET). MOET's inspectors required a specific level of responsibility, which could distract teachers from addressing the orphans' individual needs. Instead, teachers focussed more on academic matters like completing the syllabus and creating daily lesson plans. Teacher 6 said the following:

There is no time for teachers to provide high-quality psycho-social support for orphans in the school. We may need to provide such services, but the time is not ours. For example, it takes almost a

day to package all these food parcels and deliver them to the orphans, so if we, as teachers, can concentrate on the quality provision of psycho-social support, when will we make lesson plans? The inspectors will not consider that we took some time to provide services such as counselling for orphans during school hours.

Teachers faced competing demands at school, as they had to prioritise their academic duties and compromise the provision of psycho-social needs of orphaned learners. However, due to time constraints, they were unable to provide sufficient support to these learners. Additionally, the school's limited time, according to the Ministry of Health's safety protocols during the COVID-19 outbreak, further hindered the provision of psycho-social support. The principal emphasised the need to prioritise academic responsibilities while being mindful of the learners' psycho-social needs. The principal indicated the following:

It is highly impossible to provide psycho-social support to address orphaned learners' individual needs. There needs to be more time to cater to the psycho-social activities of such a significant number of orphans in the school. We are forced to squeeze all the activities within the school time, and more is needed. Sometimes, the school provides food parcels during the weekends due to the time constraints caused by a short school day in the COVID-19 era.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, primary schools were required by the MOET to limit their operating hours from 9:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. to control the spread of the virus, which resulted in the schools running for only a few hours per day.

Discussion

The school provided lay counselling to orphaned learners, which helped them in and outside of school. This service was highly regarded by guardians, who requested it whenever it was needed. According to UNICEF's social ecological theory, orphaned children are part of the school community and have unique personal needs that may go unmet without parental support, suggesting negative interpersonal relations. The social-ecological model further views the characteristics of orphaned children as affecting their interaction with guardians and lay counsellors, either positively or negatively. Such potentially harmful interactions resulting from the guardians' temperamental responses could result in each party's contribution to the conversation being temperamental. However, the availability of a lay counsellor at school improved the situation, turning negative experiences into positive ones. While some guardians can fulfil these needs, others may struggle due to poverty. These living conditions can lead to depression and isolation for some orphans, which is when teachers may offer or refer them for lay counselling. The guardians' living conditions directly impacted the orphans'

interpersonal level, including their support system (Pells et al., 2018). Children with working guardians tend to have positive experiences as they can provide for their daily needs. However, orphans with elderly or non-working guardians are more likely to experience poverty. Younger guardians are better equipped to care for children and seek help when needed, often turning to teachers for assistance with behavioural issues. This collaboration between schools and families results in positive experiences for orphans who receive the help they need. These findings challenge previous research (Mwoma & Pillay, 2015), which suggests that teachers and guardians only occasionally worked together to support orphans.

We found that teachers who offered counselling required additional skills. Their initial teacher training needed to include adequate training in counselling. The MOET needs to improve the adequacy of its training workshops. This suggests that the orphans' interpersonal relations were crippled by teachers' lack of skills in counselling, which prevented orphans from getting the best counselling service. This finding aligns with findings from different African countries where studies (Shumba & Moyo, 2014) revealed that teachers who were not adequately trained provided counselling to bereaved learners. It was further noted that the overarching fifth level crippled orphans' interpersonal relations at School X. The country's policies do not seem to mandate institutions of higher learning to train teachers in providing counselling and psycho-social skills. As a result, these institutions of higher learning only provide an introductory course that does not impart adequate skills to teachers. Consequently, teachers have to cope with the situation with little help.

In addition to receiving lay counselling, orphans must attend church services on the first Friday of every month and Sundays. While no individual services were provided, teachers and parents believed that the readings from scripture provided valuable teachings for orphans. According to UNICEF's social-ecological perspective, this is considered as the third or community level. The community includes institutions like churches and provides a positive experience for orphans by caring for their spiritual needs. However, the church services may not always address the specific needs of individual orphans, as all learners are required to attend, and the teachings may not be relevant to their current situations, thus creating a negative experience at the community level.

Needy orphans in child-headed families or orphans living with unemployed elderly guardians were occasionally provided with food packages by School X. However, the distribution of these packages could be more frequent, although it

depended on the availability of food. During the COVID-19 lockdown, daily lunches were no longer served due to school closures, so the school provided these packages instead. COVID-19, according to the social-ecological theory, is at the organisational level and negatively affected all levels beneath it. People who usually had direct face-to-face interactions, like teachers and learners, were barred from having such interactions to contain the pandemic. This left learners, particularly orphans, in dire need of food as they could not access the usual lunch at school. This situation was further aggravated by the lack of church services that provided learners with spiritual nourishment. With the closure of churches due to the pandemic protocols, some learners could not leave their heavy duties at home to go to church and were, therefore, affected negatively. The school's location in a rural area of Lesotho where many orphans lived in absolute poverty, meant that it had limited means of production, with only a small field to produce food for vulnerable learners. The country's policies do not allow the school to provide adequate food packages, resulting in some orphans not receiving any assistance. While the packages provided temporary relief, some orphans were left without any food. This problem (the fifth level of the social-ecological theory) was particularly severe for those who needed help.

Limitations of the Study

The study was only conducted in a single school with limited participants, so the findings cannot be generalised to other contexts. The study used more female participants because most primary school teachers in Lesotho are women, which aligns with the population from which the participants were drawn. Although more male guardians participated, this was unlikely to skew the results, as the school's psycho-social services were provided equally to all participants, regardless of gender.

Conclusion

With this research we examined how a rural primary school in Lesotho, School X, supported orphans through psycho-social assistance. We concluded that School X offered various psycho-social support to orphaned learners, such as traditional lay counselling, spiritual counselling, and food packages. However, the teachers required additional resources, particularly in terms of staff. Only one teacher had received training as a lay counsellor. This situation had to be improved to meet the psycho-social needs of the orphaned learners. Despite this, the guardians of the orphans appreciated the psycho-social services provided by the teachers, even if they did not fully understand counselling. Unfortunately, the school did not have a counselling laboratory, which made it challenging

for orphaned learners to receive private help. Therefore, it is necessary to create such a facility to cater to the psycho-social needs of the orphans.

The orphans' social environment has both positive and negative aspects. The school's counselling and food packages were received well by the guardians and learners. In terms of the socio-ecological model, the contribution made by the school was vital in addressing various levels of the model. However, the obstacles that the orphans faced were significant and made the efforts of the teachers, guardians, and priests appear insignificant. School X's efforts were vital in addressing the orphans' needs. However, they barely covered such needs.

Practical Implications and Recommendations

Given the conclusions made, we realised the following practical implications and recommendations:

- A proposal is made to the MOET to create professional counsellor positions in schools to address orphans' and other vulnerable learners' needs. With appropriate qualifications, such counsellors should be at school like teachers, provide for learners' psycho-social needs, and develop strategies to prevent possible problems. Given the country's current financial situation, this recommendation may only be realised much later.
- Schools and the Ministry of Education must collaborate to provide counselling services by seeking funds to build and equip counsellors' offices. School X is drafting proposals to seek funding from various governmental and non-governmental organisations to establish a counselling laboratory fully furnished with all necessary resources to cater for individuals of all ages. However, the support of the Ministry could strengthen this effort.
- According to the MOET (2016), orphans often leave school due to their status as orphans. To help these and other vulnerable learners, the Ministries of Education and Training and Social Development should develop policies that provide psycho-social support and address orphans' needs in order for them to remain in school.

Authors' Contributions

BK conceived the study as part of his masters' degree and RM was his supervisor. The two authors designed the questionnaire and BK conducted the data collection and analysis. Both authors wrote the article, with RM strengthening the literature review, methodology and the general style of the article.

Notes

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