

accomplishing the parental role. This study is concluded with recommendations to teachers on how to assist Black girl learners who head households in the Xhariep District.

Key words: child-headed households, orphanhood, learning challenges, need fulfilment.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION AND MOTIVATION OF THE PROBLEM

1.1 INTRODUCTION

In South Africa, child-headed families are increasing every day, mainly due to numerous deaths that are caused by the HIV and Aids pandemic (Masondo, 2006:1; Leatham, 2005:52; Nkomo, 2002:16). In the different provinces in South Africa there are large percentages of children who have to carry the responsibility of being a family head for different reasons such as, the death of parents caused by HIV and Aids, chronically sick parents, disintegrated families, low marriage rates and mobility related to job seeking (Newell, 2008:11; Roby & Cochran, 2007:20; German, 2006:149). It is indicated that, there are about 66 500 child-headed families and 118 500 children who stay in child-headed families in South Africa (UNAIDS, 2006:1-5).

A study conducted in three provinces in South Africa, namely Limpopo, Kwa-Zulu Natal and the Eastern Cape indicated that about 49% of children in child-headed families are aged 15 years and above. More than 70% are 12 years and older, while 9% are 5 years or even younger. Approximately 183 708 children under the age of 19 serve as heads of families (Statistics South Africa, 2008; Ziehl, 2002:441-442). In a situation analysis of the impact of HIV and Aids on education in the Free State, the province where the research was conducted, it is indicated that 34% of Grade 10 learners have lost one or both parents, 3.3% are maternally orphaned (do not have mothers) while 6.2% are double orphaned (lost both mother and father) (Leatham, 2005:52). Leatham (2005:52) further postulates that, approximately 5 million children in South Africa will be double orphans due to HIV and Aids by 2015. This implies that some of these learners will definitely become heads of households.

Studies conducted internationally and nationally on child-headed families indicate that the challenges experienced by children who are heads of households include *inter alia* the

following: poverty, abuse, financial problems, emotional problems and dropping out of school (Alliance, 2009; Mokoena, 2007: 57-58; Masondo, 2006:4).

Studies conducted in Cambodia found that social functioning is affected because the child-head spends most of the time taking responsibility for playing a parental role while he/she is not even well developed for that (Mokoena, 2007:49). Furthermore, one in five children had to start working within six months after losing parents due to HIV and Aids in order to support their families (Mokoena, 2007:49).

A study conducted by Leatham (2005:74) on the lived experiences of adolescent learners from child-headed families supports the first study. It is indicated that children heading families are still developing towards adulthood. It is only after completion of initiation rituals related to different cultures that they can be regarded as adults (Leatham, 2005:74). Against this background, the question arises as to how well an immature learner will cope with the responsibilities of adulthood and academic school work?

Learners who are heads of households are vulnerable to abuse which involve prostitution and dealing with drugs in order to make money for survival. They fall prey to exploitation and abuse because of financial problems (Mokoena, 2007:49). In addition to this, Masondo (2006:5) indicates that learners who are heads of households are traumatized due to sickness and the ultimate death of their parents and they are therefore in need of coping strategies to work through the trauma.

It is also indicated that absenteeism from school among learners who are heads of households is escalating, leading to the frustration of teachers because the level of academic performance is decreasing (Moffet, 2007:4). This implies that child-headed households have a negative impact on the academic performance of learners who head these households.

Mokoena (2007:52) further identifies the possibility of antisocial behaviour in children who are living alone without the care and love of parents. Various emotional problems that

children who head households experience have been identified by researchers. They include sadness, pain, uncertainty, being scared and unmotivated (Leatham, 2005:108).

The psycho-social effects of HIV and Aids on orphans were highlighted in research conducted in Zambia, Zimbabwe, Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania. These effects indicate a high rate of depression, anxiety, loneliness and low self-esteem (Mokoena, 2007:52).

The growing number of child-headed families is problematic, particularly in the Xhariep district where I am employed. Statistics that are kept for this district show a large number of double orphans, namely 1 968 learners without both parents (*cf.* Appendix F). It could then be assumed that a number of these learners would have to act as heads of households. Most of the participants who took part in previous studies conducted with learners who are heads of households were females (Leatham, 2005:93; Nkomo, 2002:71). It therefore appears that the girls who head households are the ones who are mostly affected because they replace both the mother and the father, trying to fill up the gap in the family. They usually go out of their way to sacrifice for the siblings, trying to make ends meet. They are often withdrawn from school, having to seek jobs in order to get money for different needs (Moffet, 2007:58). No studies could be located that researched the phenomenon of child-headed households in the Xhariep District in South Africa, and none of the cited studies specifically documented research related to the **learning challenges** that especially Black girl learners at Secondary School Level who head households in the Xhariep District, may experience.

Based on the information related to completed research, I decided to conduct research to understand the learning challenges that girl learners who are heads of households, may have to face. With my research, I thus contribute to the present research based on learners who head households, as well as fill the gap by extending the research based on the learning challenges that specifically Black girl learners at Secondary School Level who head households in the Xhariep District experience.

1.2 PROBLEM STATEMENT

Based on the above information that highlights the seriousness of the impact of the phenomenon of child-headed households, and in the absence of research studies that focus specifically on the learning challenges that girl learners who act as heads of households in the Xhariep District may face, this study intends to gain a deeper understanding of the learning challenges experienced by Black girl learners at Secondary School level in the Xhariep District.

1.3 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Based on the aforementioned, the main research question was formulated: **what are the learning challenges experienced by Black girl learners at Secondary School Level who head households in the Xhariep District?**

Within this central question the following sub-questions arise:

- What are the learning challenges that could be experienced in general by learners who head households?
- What are the perceptions of Black girl learners at Secondary School Level who head households in the Xhariep District regarding the learning challenges that they experience?
- What suggestions can be made to support Black girl learners at Secondary School Level who head households in the Xhariep District with regard to the learning challenges that they experience?

Based on the formulated questions the aim and objectives of the study were identified.

1.4 AIM AND OBJECTIVES

The central aim of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of the learning challenges experienced by Black girl learners at Secondary School Level who head households in the Xhariep District. The central aim was operationalised in the following objectives:

- by determining, by means of a literature review, the learning challenges in general that could be experienced by learners who head households;
- by gauging, by means of qualitative empirical research, the perceptions of Black girls at Secondary School Level who head households in the Xhariep District regarding the learning challenges they experience; and
- by formulating suggestions to support Black girl learners at Secondary School Level who head households in the Xhariep District with regard to the learning challenges that they experience.

1.5 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

A number of definitions prevail in the literature for each of the concepts that are central to the study. A brief explanation or description of how the concepts in this research were conceptualized is provided below. Each of the concepts will be extensively elucidated in Chapter Two.

1.5.1 Child-headed households

Child-headed households will be conceptualized according to the views of Leatham (2005:26) and Smith (2004:172) who indicate that child-headed households refer to families in which young children survive as main caregivers to younger siblings. The children heading these households are faced with numerous challenges such as discrimination (Nicholson & Jefferson, 2008:411), violence and abuse (German, 2006:149-158), psycho-social problems (Leatham, 2005:63), extreme poverty (Mokoena, 2007:57),

limited opportunities for education (Martinus, 2009:302) and carrying the responsibility for their other siblings and the household in addition to their school work (Newell, 2008:6).

1.5.2 Learning challenges

Learning challenges will be framed within the explanation of Calitz (2001:20), who asserts that learning challenges can arise when learners are left alone with nobody to look after them. This is particularly relevant to the circumstances of learners who head households. Linked to the explanation provided in 2.6 the learning challenges experienced by learners who head households in the context of the study, will be linked to the challenges emanating from their socio-economic environment (*cf.* 2.6). It is difficult for these learners to cope with the classroom situation as they are mostly preoccupied with family conditions. They are often inactive: do not take part in anything given at school. Normally they are absent from school, having a lot to do at home or due to being ashamed of not having done the work expected from them (Hartell & Chabilall, 2005:12). The majority of learners who head households do not make it at school. They give up and drift along without hope to escape from their situation, due to challenges that result from a lack of basic needs such as school uniforms and other school requirements or basic necessities (Shilubana, 2005: 104,106).

1.6 EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

The research was conducted in two phases which comprised a literature study and an empirical investigation. Each of the phases will be briefly explained in the following sections.

1.6.1 Literature study

Primary and secondary literature sources were reviewed in order to obtain an understanding of the circumstances of learners who head households, as well as the learning challenges that could be experienced by girl learners in particular. Primary literature is the original research studies or writings by a theorist or a researcher. They contain the full text of a research report or a theory and are therefore more detailed and

technical, while secondary literature provides a quick overview of research development on the topic (McMillan & Schumacher 1997:122). The North-West University Library and the University of the Free State Library as well as public libraries were visited to obtain literature sources. The following databases were used to conduct the literature search: Eric, EBSCOHOST, SABINET and Dialogue. Key words and phrases that were used to conduct the literature search were: *child-headed families/households, female heads of households, child development, fulfilment of needs, learning challenges and factors that influence successful learning*. The information obtained from the literature review assisted me as the researcher in compiling the interview schedule.

1.6.2 Empirical research

1.6.2.1 Research paradigm

This study was framed in an interpretivist paradigm with a qualitative research design (Creswell, 2009:12). This paradigm was chosen as the study strove to understand how girl learners construct meaning in their everyday lives and explain the events of their worlds and the impact thereof on learning. In this type of research, it is acknowledged that reality is constructed by people and the researcher needs to analyse the participants' discourses (Maree & Van der Westhuizen, 2007:34).

1.6.2.2 Research design

A research design is a plan or procedure for research that spans from broad assumptions to detailed methods of data collection and data analysis (Creswell, 2009:3). In the context of my study I utilized qualitative research as it allowed for documenting real events and recording what people say verbally. Qualitative research enabled me to seek answers to questions by understanding various social settings and individuals who inhabit these settings (Berg, 2004:7). A qualitative research design assisted me in understanding the research phenomenon (learning challenges of learners who head households) according to the view of the participants (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005:94), hence interviews were chosen as the data collection instrument for the study. As indicated by Denzin and Lincoln (2005:1),

in many of its forms qualitative research serves as a tool for power and truth, and as a field of inquiry in its own right (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005:1). This design also assisted me in studying the way individuals, in this regard female heads of households behave and interact in their social settings (White, 2003:24). I could gather data gathered by interviewing and playing the role of an eye-witness (Lankshear & Knobel, 2004: 68 & 69).

1.6.2.3 Research strategy

A research strategy is a plan that directs the arrangement of conditions for collection and analysis of data in a manner that aims to combine relevance to the research purpose with economy in procedures that can be interactive or non-interactive (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006:26). In order to focus on an experience with face-to-face interaction, I chose a phenomenological strategy. According to McMillan and Schumacher (1997:427), interactive phenomenological research is an analytical description of social sciences, individuals and groups that recreate their shared feelings, beliefs, practices, artefacts, folk knowledge and action. I interacted with participants in their personal settings to understand their circumstances in order to derive at conclusions regarding the learning challenges that they, as heads of households, experience.

1.6.2.4 Participant selection

In the context of this study I made use of purposive and criterion sampling (Nieuwenhuis, 2007c: 80; Creswell, 2003:184). In **purposive sampling** the researcher identifies the site and participants who will best help in the understanding of the problem and the research question (Creswell, 2003:185). It is not necessary for participants who are purposively selected to make up a large number. Creswell (2003:185) further indicates that the most important thing is where the research will take place, who will participate and the nature of the events thereof. The main idea behind using purposive sampling is for the researcher to have the most suitable people who can assist in the research process (Henning, Van Rensburg & Smith, 2004:71). As I work in the Xhariep District, I purposively wanted to make a contribution to the circumstances of Black girl learners at Secondary School level who head households specifically in this district. Three sections of the Xhariep District and

schools in these sections with high numbers of heads of households were purposively selected for this study (*cf.* 3.4.5).

Criterion sampling refers to deciding on the typical characteristics and the number of participants that can be included in the research (Nieuwenhuis, 2007c:80). Nieuwenhuis (2007c:80) further adds that there are different criteria that can be decided upon such as gender, age, place of residence, language and many more. The criteria used for the selection of the participants are indicated in Chapter Three (*cf.* 3.4.5).

1.6.3 Method of data collection

Data collection methods assist the researcher to gather the required information needed for the research study (Petre & Rugg, 2007: 2). The most common way to gather data for a phenomenological design is by means of interviews (Henning *et al.*, 2005:37). An interview is a popular form of data collection that can provide a rich source of material, such as life histories and perspectives on issues, when well conducted (Lankshear & Knobel, 2004:35; White, 2003:29). Interviewing involves the intensive questioning of participants. It frequently refers to probing for the meaning of answers, usually in an unstructured situation (Lues & Lategan, 2006:20).

For the purpose of this research, I used semi-structured one-on-one interviews (Merriam, 2009:89) to elicit desired information from the participants. Semi-structured interviews were chosen because they more closely resemble a conversation within a relatively loose set of guidelines. Questions are open and in a flexible format to enable the researcher to explore the world from the perspectives of the participants and to understand how participants make sense of their experiences (Merriam, 2009:89).

Participants were chosen from three different schools of the Xhariep District and therefore three different interview sessions were held on different days at times convenient to the participants. Interviews were conducted after school hours at the respective schools of the participants so as to avoid disturbing tuition time. Interviews were conducted in the Home Language of the participants to avoid misunderstanding, and tape-recorded with

permission of the participants so as to capture the exact words of the participants. Immediately after the interviews, verbatim transcripts of the exact words of the participants captured on tape were made in English for the purpose of the research. The main purpose of the interview was: to understand the learning challenges experienced by the participants.

1.7 DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

A content analysis was used in this study to analyse data (Merriam, 2009:205-206). The data was analysed using deductive and inductive approaches. Deductive analysis implies that *a-priori* codes were identified before examining the data. These were derived from the literature dealing with the topic (Nieuwenhuis, 2007a:99). I thus had an idea of the type of learning challenges that these learners could be faced with when I set out to analyze the data. According to Thomas (2003:2), an inductive data analysis approach is a systematic procedure for analysing qualitative data where the researcher allows research findings to emerge from the frequent, dominant or significant themes inherent in raw data, without restraints imposed by structured methodologies. A comprehensive account of how the data analysis was conducted is provided in Chapter three (*cf.* 3.4.7).

The qualitative data was analysed and interpreted thematically. According to McMillan and Schumacher (2006:365-376), theme analysis describes the specific and distinctive recurring qualities, characteristics, subjects of discourse or concerns expressed. Aspects of the responses that illustrated recurring themes were selectively analysed (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006:365-376).

1.7.1 Trustworthiness of the interview data

In order to secure the trustworthiness of the interview data, I adhered to the principles of credibility, transferability, dependability and conformability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985:301-327). How I addressed each of these aspects is explained in detail in chapter three (*cf.* 3.4.6).

1.8 ETHICAL ASPECTS

It is important to take ethical issues into consideration when conducting research, especially with people like school teachers and learners. In the context of this study, I paid attention to the following ethical aspects as highlighted by Creswell (2009:87-92), Baumfield (2008: 33) and Henning, Van Rensburg and Smith (2004:72):

- Permission to conduct research
- Informed consent
- Right to privacy
- Respecting the dignity of participants
- Protection from harm
- Honesty
- Providing feedback to participants
- Debriefing of participants

The practical measures that I took to address each of these aspects are presented in Chapter Three (*cf.* 3.4.8).

1.9 DEFINITION OF CONCECPTS CENTRAL TO THE STUDY

The literature review was conceptualized in terms of **child-headed households** and **learning challenges**. How I conceptualized each of the concepts in the context of the study, is briefly elucidated below to set the scene for this research.

1.9.1 Child-headed households

This concept refers to a family which is led by a child who is below the age of 18 years. The child takes responsibilities that are usually carried out by parents, such as providing

food for and taking care of the survival needs and financial matters of other children/siblings in the family (Alliance, 2009).

1.9.2 Learning challenges

Learning challenges refer to factors or barriers that contribute to ineffective learning (Hugo, 2006:46). The barriers can be pedagogical, medical, socio-economic or systemic in nature (Department of Education, 2004:39). Pedagogical barriers *inter alia* refer to the inappropriate application of teaching and assessment strategies to address learner needs (Department of Education, 2004:39). Socio-economic barriers refer to the impact of environmental influences on learning which could be linked to a lack of basic needs, no shelter, poverty, poor medical care, insufficient clothing, poor living conditions and a lack of parental involvement and stimulation (Department of Education, 2004:39). Medical barriers include sensory impairments that could be either visual or auditory, impaired mobility and chronic and infectious diseases (Hugo, 2006:48). Systemic barriers refer to a lack of basic and appropriate learning and teaching support material (Department of Education, 2004:39). In the context of the study the focus was on the environmental influences of the participants that contribute to learning challenges.

1.10 CHAPTER LAYOUT

The dissertation unfolded according to the following chapters:

- Chapter 1: Introduction and problem statement
- Chapter 2: Child-headed household and learning challenges
- Chapter 3: Empirical research
- Chapter 4: Data analysis and interpretations
- Chapter 5: Summary, findings and recommendations

1.11 CHAPTER SUMMARY

Chapter One provided the orientation to the study and the statement of the problem which focused on gaining a deeper understanding of the learning challenges faced by Black girl learners at the secondary schools in the Xhariep District. The problem was addressed by applying the qualitative research that allowed me to document real events, observe and record what was said by the participants. Face-to-face interviews were conducted to gather real information within the field of inquiry (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005:1).

In Chapter Two, the concepts central to the study, namely child-headed households and learning challenges are discussed in detail.