Orphans and Scholastic Performance in Mankweng Circuit: Policy implications for Limpopo Province

Summary

Orphanhood is a global challenge affecting people of all nationalities, races and socio-economic status. In Sub-Saharan Africa, the high rates of HIV/AIDS-related deaths, particularly among adults of parenting age, have exacerbated the phenomenon of orphanhood, thereby significantly increasing the statistics. In 2012, South Africa had approximately 3.37 million orphans, constituting 18% of all its children. The number of double orphans doubled from 360,000 in 2002 to 770,000 in 2012 (De Lannoy, Swartz, Lake & Smith 2015). Previous research has established that there is a correlation between orphanhood and psychological distress which often leads to poor academic performance (Maqbool & Ganai, 2016). Despite this, education systems do not always have the requisite intervention plans or policy framework to address the specific needs of orphaned children in schools. This policy brief draws from the findings of a study which investigated the academic performance of orphaned learners aged between eight and ten years from ten public primary schools in Mankweng Circuit of Limpopo Province. Based on the findings of the study the brief makes recommendations for the provision of afterschool intervention programmes by the Department of Basic Education to cater for the scholastic needs of the disadvantaged learners. The brief also advocates for the incorporation of psychosocial issues and counselling in the teacher training curriculum, coupled with the establishment of healing classroom and learning programmes which will focus on social and emotional issues.

Introduction

Past research indicates an association between orphanhood and psychological distress. This distress is often characterised by indicators such as marked concentration difficulties, feeling discriminated against, (Cluver & Gardner, 2006; Dorsey, Lucid, Murray, Bolton, Itemba, Manongi & Whetten, 2015) anxiety and suicidal tendencies (Bhatt, Rahman & Bhatt, 2015; Sharer,

Cluver & Shields, 2015), and poor emotional regulation (Antwine et al. 2005). This state of mental health can potentially have a negative effect on learners' academic performance.

The correlation between orphanhood and academic performance is acknowledged both globally (Guo, Li & Sherr, 2012; Ganga & Maphalala, 2013) and in South Africa (Chuong & Operario, 2012; De Lannoy et al. 2015). For example, Van der Berg, Wood and le Roux (2002) assert that educational outcomes are a result of the interaction between the learners' home backgrounds, the inputs into the educational process and the educational process itself. Given the significance of the supportive role played by parents in children's education and the impact this role has on academic performance, it is deducible that the academic performance of orphaned children becomes compromised where such support is lacking or non-existent (Daniel, Wang & Berthelsen, 2016). The situation is further exacerbated by the negative effects that the loss of a parent has on the emotional, social, and psychological well-being of a child. For example, a study by Rozana (2009) found that the death of a mother increases the chance of a child not being able to write by 15%, and the inability to read words or sentences by 27%. Limited resource availability in schools usually exacerbates the problem because schools with limited resources struggle to have programmes that can help these orphans. For example, Magampa (2014) shows that in Limpopo's rural schools (from which this policy brief has been drawn), there is limited availability of resources that could enhance learners' academic performance because 28% of the public schools are in quintile 1 (no-fee schools), 24.6% in quintile 2 (no-fee schools) and 24.2% in quintile 3 (Government Gazette, 2014). This implies that 76.6% of the public schools are classified as no-fee schools, which

makes them resource limited and reliant on government subvention. Despite the widely acknowledged correlation between orphanhood and academic performance, there is limited empirical evidence to inform policies on ways to counter the vulnerability of orphaned children, and facilitate their improved academic performance. This situation is aggravated in areas such as Limpopo's rural schools where there are already limited resources to aid in enhancing learners' academic performance as mentioned above. This policy brief provides empirical evidence from a comparative study of academic performances of orphaned and non-orphaned primary school learners in the Mankweng Circuit of Limpopo Province. The brief makes recommendations for the development of policies which facilitate the provision of complementary interventions aimed at supporting learners outside the classroom. The brief also advocates for the incorporation of psychosocial issues and counselling in the teacher training curriculum, coupled with the establishment of healing classroom and learning programmes which will encompass social and emotional issues.

Understanding orphanhood in South Africa

In Sub-Saharan Africa the high rates of HIV/AIDS-related deaths, particularly among adults of parenting age, has exacerbated the phenomenon of orphanhood. There are various definitions of orphanhood globally. UNICEF (2017) defines an orphan as a child less than 18 years of age who has lost one or both parents to any cause of death. This resonates with the World Bank's definition of an orphan as a child aged zero to 17 years whose mother, father, or both have died (World Bank, 2005). UNAIDS on the other hand defines an orphan as a child who has lost its mother or both parents before the age of 15 years (Jooste, Managa

& Simbayi, 2006). Locally, the South African Department of Justice through the current Children's Act number 38 of 2008 defines an orphan as "a child who has no surviving parent caring for him or her." The current study therefore defines an orphan as a child who does not have a surviving biological parent looking after him or her.

Policy framework around orphanhood, mental health and education

Globally there are policy initiatives that are aimed at supporting orphaned children. For example, the United Nation General Assembly Special Session on Children, held in New York in 2000, declared that governments globally should have developed and implemented national policies and strategies to build and strengthen governmental, family and community capacities to provide supportive environments for orphans and children infected and affected by HIV/AIDS, by 2005. Such national policies should include, among other matters:

- provision of suitable counselling and psychosocial care for orphaned children,
- ensuring enrolment of children in schools,
- facilitating access to housing, good nutrition, health and social services on an equal basis with other children,
- protection of orphans and vulnerable children from all manner of abuse, violence, exploitation, discrimination, trafficking and forfeiture of inheritance (article 65).

To date there is no evidence suggesting the implementation of the above commitment by South Africa. It is one of the signatories of the Declaration.

Inclusion of orphans in the White Paper 6 on Special Needs Education

The interests of orphaned children are given a focus in the South African White Paper 6 on Special Needs Education of 2001. In this White Paper the Ministry of Education undertakes to develop and implement appropriate and timely programmes focusing on strengthening its information system. This will enable the establishment of a system to identify orphans, and coordinating support and care programmes for such learners. The support will involve putting in place referral procedures for educators, and developing teaching guides on how to support orphans and other children in distress. In this regard the ministry will work closely with provincial departments of education, the Departments of Social Development, Health and the Public Service Administrator. Thus far, there is no indication of implementation at school level.

Exclusion of orphans in the White Paper on Education and Training

The White Paper on Education and Training, Notice 196 of 1995, advocates for the inclusion of Education Support Services (ESS) and education for learners with special education needs. ESS encompasses all education-related health, social work, vocational and general guidance and counselling, and other psychological programmes and services, and services to learners with special education needs (LSEN) in mainstream schools. The White Papers do acknowledge that thus far the services tend to function separately and with poor coordination. The Papers further acknowledge that low levels of funding for black education have relegated ESS and LSEN services to the periphery, resulting in meagre delivery of ESS provision for African learners. Learners with special needs include those who have physical impairments or disabilities.

The learners who are emotionally challenged through orphanhood are not categorised as having special needs while emotional challenges are more intense and draining than physical impairment. In another bill, the *Integrated School Health Policy* of 2012 focuses on health barriers to learning and development and it recommends planned ways in which the health of learners can be enhanced to improve performance in schools. However, the policy pays more attention to physical aspects of health than those of psychological and emotional health, which affect orphans. Mental health for children is addressed through the *Policy Guidelines on Child and Adolescent Mental Health* of 2002. These guidelines are a framework for establishing mental health services for children and adolescents at national, provincial and local levels within primary health care using the intersectoral approach. The policy intervention strategies include among others, the provision of a safe and supportive external environment; provision of information; building skills; counselling; and lastly the accessibility of health care services. The above strategies are said to be implemented in settings where learning and development happen, such as the home/family, school, the church and the health institutions. Despite this, there is no evidence of implementation of this policy. This necessitates development and implementation of evidence-based interventions and strategies to take care of orphaned children.

The study

The study from which this policy brief was drawn was carried out in the Mankweng circuit in Limpopo. In terms of living arrangements of orphaned learners, 58% are under the guardianship of a grandparent, 26% are under the guardianship of their uncles and aunts and 16% are in child-headed households. The study employed a randomised sampling,

and sampled 100 orphaned learners and 100 non-orphaned learners, aged between eight and ten years, from public primary schools. These learners' academic performance was compared in the learning areas of Sepedi (mother tongue), Numeracy, English and Life Skills. More data was collected through document analysis of teachers' schedules. The learners' examination scores in the four learning areas under investigation were obtained from the respective teachers. The scores were categorised into three levels as indicated in the following table:

Table 1: Score categorisations

Score percentage	Assigned level
0–49	1
50–69	2
70–100	3

Findings from the examination scores

Data from the examination scores also reflected marked differences in the academic performance of orphaned children and non-orphans in all the studied learning areas. The table (Figure 1) on the following page shows the score results in Sepedi.

This data in Figure 1 reflects that 51% of orphaned learners obtained scores of 49 or below in Sepedi when compared to only 18% of non-orphans who obtained similar scores. Thirty-one per cent of orphaned learners obtained scores ranging from 50 to 59 as compared to 45% of their non-orphaned counterparts who obtained similar score ranges. Only 18% of orphaned learners obtained 70–100 compared to 37% of the non-orphaned who obtained the similar scores. The same pattern of disparities was identified in the results of Numeracy as Figure 2 on the following page indicates.

This data In Figure 2 reflects that 51% of orphaned learners obtained scores of 49 or below in Numeracy when

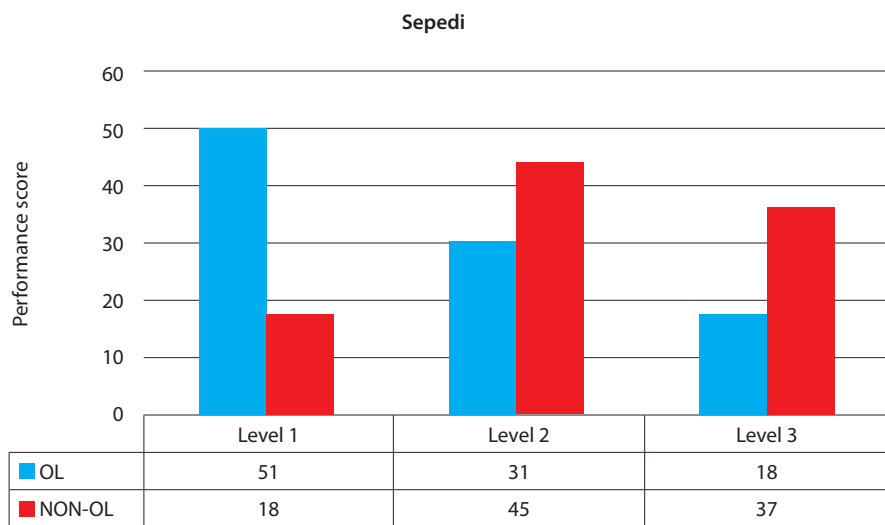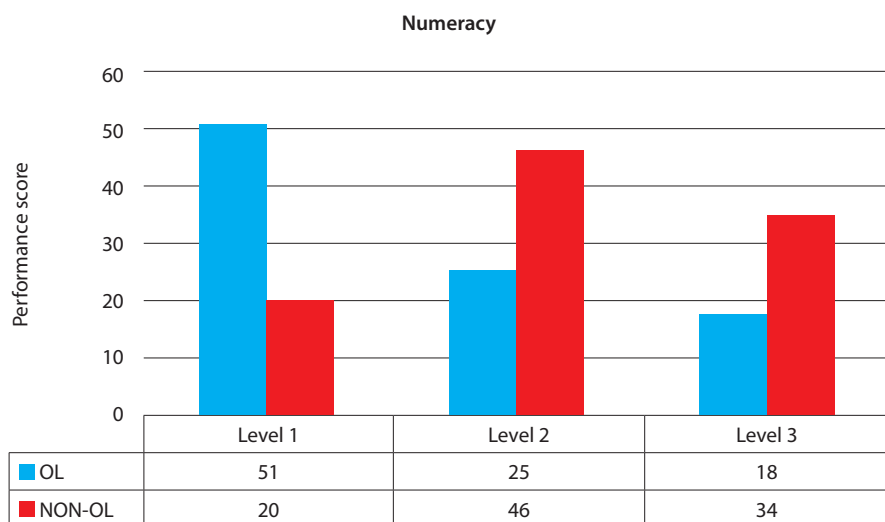**Figure 1:** Results for Orphans versus Non-orphans in Sepedi (Mother Tongue)

Sepedi

	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3
■ OL	51	31	18
■ NON-OL	18	45	37

Performance score (y-axis: 0–60)

Figure 2: Results for Orphans versus Non-orphans in Numeracy

Numeracy

	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3
■ OL	51	25	18
■ NON-OL	20	46	34

Performance score (y-axis: 0–60)

compared to only 20% of non-orphans who obtained similar scores. 25% of orphaned learners obtained scores ranging from 50 to 59 as compared to 46% of their non-orphaned counterparts who obtained similar score ranges. Only 18% of orphaned learners obtained 70–100 compared to 34% of the non-orphaned who obtained the similar scores. In the scores for English a similar trend was evident as is shown in Figure 3 on the following page.

The data in Figure 3 reflects that 60% of orphaned learners obtained scores of 49 or below in English when compared

to only 20% of non-orphans who obtained similar scores. Twenty per cent of orphaned learners obtained scores ranging from 50 to 59 as compared to 49% of their non-orphaned counterparts who obtained similar score ranges. Only 20% of orphaned learners obtained 70–100 compared to 31% of the non-orphaned who obtained the similar scores.

The data in Figure 4 for Life Skills on the following page reflects that 58% of orphaned learners obtained scores of 49 or below in Life Skills when compared to only 20% of non-orphans

who obtained similar scores. Twenty-four per cent of orphaned learners obtained scores ranging from 50 to 59 as compared to 48% of their non-orphaned counterparts who obtained similar score ranges. Only 18% of orphaned learners obtained 70–100 compared to 32% of the non-orphaned who obtained the similar scores.

Summary of findings from interviews with teachers

Beside score assessments, the study also conducted in-depth interviews with ten teachers from the sampled schools. The interviews revealed that orphaned learners as compared to non-orphaned learners are not doing well academically and have difficulties in concentrating in class, fail to do home-work, and are often absent from school. Besides poor academic performance, the study revealed that orphaned children displayed emotional and behavioural problems such as disrespectfulness, bullying, non-cooperation, feelings of isolation, rejection, poor self-esteem and lack of confidence.

The study revealed a difference in performance between orphaned and non-orphaned learners in the four studied learning areas. A higher percentage of orphaned learners in the four learning areas fell in level 1 which are the scores 49 and below, while a high percentage of non-orphaned learners also fell in level 2 which are the scores ranging from 59 to 69. The lowest percentage for orphaned learners fell in level 3 which is the scores between 70 and 100, and the lowest percentage of non-orphaned learners fell in level 1 which is the scores below 49. The results of the study imply that orphaned learners are being outperformed by their non-orphaned counterparts in four learning areas investigated. Though there is a difference in performance between the two groups, it is worth noting that not all orphaned learners are

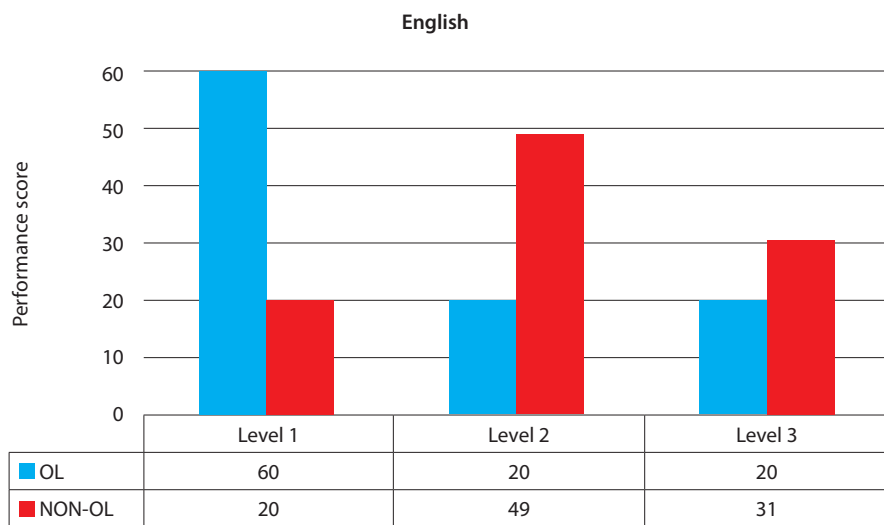**Figure 3:** Results for Orphans versus Non-orphans in English

English

	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3
■ OL	60	20	20
■ NON-OL	20	49	31

Figure 4: Results for Orphans versus Non-orphans in Life Skills

LIfe skills

	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3
■ OL	58	24	18
■ NON-OL	20	48	32

doing badly, and not all non-orphaned learners are doing well. There are a number of orphaned learners in all four learning areas that are doing quite well, falling in both levels 2 and 3.

The difference in academic performance of orphaned learners coupled with their behavioural and emotional challenges calls for new interventions and approaches to address the problems of orphaned children in schools. Such interventions should be strengthened by more large-scale and in-depth research than the current study, and relevant policies. Given this scenario and the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made.

Recommendations

1. *Large scale research on factors that affect academic performance of orphaned children.*
   The study recommends the commissioning of province-wide research by the provincial Department of Education so as to establish the scope of the problem in the whole province. The commissioned research will also inform interventions and predict possible outcomes.

2. *Establishment and expedition of the afterschool programmes.*
   The provincial Department of Education should facilitate the development and subsequent implementation of policies that will cater for the formation and expediting of afterschool programmes aimed at generating positive outcomes for primary school learners. The programmes should be designed to help orphaned learners, particularly those who are in the care of guardians who cannot read and write or help with homework, projects and other school-related work. In order to maximise the impact of these programmes, the assistance of retired teachers, retired lecturers and university student teachers, appropriately incentivised, should be made available.

3. *Incorporation of psychosocial issues and counselling in teacher training curriculum coupled with the establishment of healing classroom and social and emotional learning programmes.*
   The provincial Department of Education should facilitate the development and implementation of policies that will speak to the incorporation of psychosocial issues and counselling in the teacher training curriculum and therefore train teachers in the management of psychosocial issues and psychosocial support. This will potentially result in a gradual increase of skills that can be deployed widely to ensure that the needs of orphaned and vulnerable children are timeously and adequately addressed in schools. The Department should at the same time expedite the development of caring approaches in classrooms and social and emotional learning programmes in which distressed orphaned and vulnerable learners are empowered with the necessary skills aimed at

improving their self-esteem and boosting their confidence levels.

4. *Facilitation of play and creative arts programmes in schools and in communities.*
Programmes aimed at encouraging children to continually engage in play activities and creative arts should be facilitated by the provincial Department of Education and be put in place so as to help facilitate social cohesion with peers, among other things.

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