

Full Length Research Paper

Teachers' and caregivers' perceptions of gender differences in educational experiences of children affected by parental AIDS in western Kenya

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The purpose of this qualitative case study was to describe the perceptions of teachers and caregivers concerning gender differences in the educational experiences of children influenced by the HIV status of their parents or orphaned by AIDS in 7 orphanage schools of Western Kenya. 12 teachers and 8 caregivers participated in the study. Data were collected over 3 months using participant observation and individual interviews. Findings indicated that no gender differences in educational experiences were noted during preschool. However, during the elementary school years and beyond, participants described gender differences in terms of math, science, languages, and school attendance. Boys were perceived to do better at math and science, while girls were believed to do better in languages. Girls were also more likely to be kept out of school to assist with or take care of family needs when a parent became ill due to AIDS.

Key words: HIV/AIDS, children, orphaned, Kenya, education

INTRODUCTION

Sub-Saharan Africa, where Kenya is located, is one area that is particularly affected by AIDS. About two thirds of all the people living with the disease are in the region. UNAIDS/WHO (2007) reported that 22.5 million adults and children in the region were living with HIV/AIDS and 1.6 million had died of AIDS by 2007.

In 2003, UNICEF reported that AIDS had orphaned more than 11 million children between the ages of 10 and 14 in Africa (UNICEF, 2003). One year later, the Development Gateway Foundation (2004) reported 13.2 million children under the age of 15 had lost a mother or both parents to AIDS. By 2010, the figure is projected to reach 44 million in 34 countries, most of which are in Africa (Development Gateway Foundation, 2004).

Like other countries in Africa, Kenya has not been spared by the AIDS pandemic. The Kenya national AIDS council country report to the United nations General Assembly Special Session on HIV and AIDS (UNGASS, 2008) indicated that in 2007, 1.1 million adults were HIV

positive and 102,000 children ages 0 - 14 were HIV infected. Noteworthy, is the decline in the number of new HIV infections in Kenya. UNAIDS/WHO (2007) reported that the prevalence rate has declined from 6.7 % in 2003 to 6.1 % at the end of 2006 as a result of a reduction in risky behavior.

Many children orphaned by parental AIDS tend to have less access to education (UNICEF, 2003). Findings of a study by UNICEF (2003) showed that children who lost either one or both parents to AIDS have a much harder time staying in school. Some of the factors that lead to school drop-outs are the trauma the children experience as they live with the terminally ill parents who eventually die, discrimination by their peers and plummeting of household income when parents become terminally ill. The study found that schooling is often interrupted and many children are forced to drop out either to care for a sick parent or to earn money. Unfortunately many of those who drop out to care for the terminally ill parents and younger siblings are more likely to be girls (UNICEF, 2003).

Some studies have found a relationship decline in

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school attendance and parental AIDS. The United Nations Foundation (2004) conducted a survey to determine the number of children orphaned by AIDS and their school experiences. The study involved 646 AIDS-orphaned and 1239 non-orphaned children in Kenya. Findings indicated 52% of children orphaned by AIDS were not in school compared to 2% who were non-orphaned (United Nations Foundation, 2004).

However, few studies have been conducted specifically to explore gender differences in educational experiences of children orphaned by AIDS. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to describe the perceptions of teachers and caregivers concerning gender differences in the educational experiences of children influenced by the HIV status of their parents or orphaned by AIDS in 7 orphanage schools of Western Kenya.

The findings from this study provide pertinent research regarding the gender differences in attaining basic education following parental loss to AIDS. It also highlights the gender disparities in performance in various content areas. In addition, the impact felt by children according to age from preschool through middle school is described. The findings are useful to educators, families, and policy makers who work with the children.

METHOD

The study was conducted in 7 orphanages in Western Kenya. Some of the orphanages received children in their school program who were not yet orphaned but whose parental status included at least one parent with an HIV+ status. From these sites, 12 teachers and 8 caregivers participated in the study. 11 of the participants were male and 9 were female. All participants were indigenous Africans with an age range between 20 and 50 years. Their educational levels ranged from upper primary school to college graduates.

The teachers and caregivers played important roles at the orphanages. The teachers' responsibility went beyond regular classroom teaching to that of providing of social support and counselling to the children orphaned by parental AIDS. The caregivers provided more maternal care to the children. They resided with the children in the orphanages and provided consistent care for them. Their duties to the children included providing close care, bathing, feeding the younger ones, washing their clothes, taking them for doctor visits when they felt sick or were infected with HIV/AIDS, reside with them in the dormitories, walk the children to a local church for services, play with the children and provide overall emotional and spiritual support.

Data were collected between October and December of 2006. Participant observation and individual interviews were conducted. The researcher developed an open-ended questionnaire for one-on-one interviews with caregivers and teachers in the 7 orphanages. The interviews were tape recorded and transcribed.

To ensure credibility and dependability of the findings, long-term engagement in the field and triangulation of the data were used. Respondent validation or member checking was also used. This involved soliciting feedback about the data collected from the participants. Participants were frequently consulted to verify the interview transcripts. Repeated observations and interviews at each research site were completed over three months. In addition, rich,

thick and detailed descriptions of the findings using "in vivo codes" were used.

Data analysis

Interviews were transcribed and the reflective notes and observation protocol notes were typed. Data were analyzed using QSR-N6, a software used in analysis of qualitative data. The following specific steps were followed in data analysis. First, the researcher read all descriptions of the educational experiences of the orphaned children in their entirety to obtain the general ideas of the participants. Secondly, the researcher extracted significant statements from each description. Data were coded so that the materials were organized into related themes for analysis. Thirdly, the statements were formulated into meanings, then to themes and issues. Finally, the researcher integrated the themes into a narrative description. A tree node carrying all the themes and sub themes was generated with QSR-N6 (Creswell, 1998; Creswell, 2005; Denzin and Lincoln, 2003). The purpose of this paper is to describe the theme related to gender differences in educational experiences as described by the participants.

RESULTS

No gender differences regarding academic performance were expressed concerning children at the preschool level. Pam, an administrator in orphanage 6 reported, "At the preschool level, there is no gender difference. A child is a child and we give an overall progress report of the child in all areas not just in class work. They all do well, boys and girls alike."

Teacher, however, reported gender differences for children at the elementary level. The majority of the participants reported that girls performed better than boys in grades 2 through 5. Opish, a teacher in orphanage 5 suggested, "Boys do well at the upper primary but at the lower primary, girls do better than the boys. Girls are more active and they perform better."

Teachers also stated that as the children develop towards adolescence, particularly in grades 6 through 8, boys do better than girls. Tommo, a teacher and an administrator in orphanage 2 said, "My boys are doing better than the girls. Generally, the boys are better than girls as they continue to increase in age." Phil, the caregiver and manager of orphanage 4 concurred with Tommo. He stated, "so far, I can say that the boys are performing better than the girls. I have 3 boys and 2 girls who do very well but eventually the boys outshine the girls."

Joshi, a teacher in orphanage 1 thought that the gender differences in performance was as a result of cultural influences. He suggested: "Yes...boys are better overall than the girls. Maybe it is a cultural influence. If a boy performs better than the girls, it is very normal. But is not normal for the girls. That is a cultural belief."

Other participants believed that if the girls overcame some of the grief over the loss of their parents, they could perform as well as the boys. One teacher made the fol-

lowing comments. "Overall, boys tend to do better than girls. But I think that if the girls can get over the loss faster they will all perform well. I told you earlier that it takes girls time to catch up, but once they do, they work extra hard and do better. The girls are always serious. In some cases boys display 'don't care behaviors' (with regard to academics)."

Many participants suggested that boys tend to do better in math and science compared to the girls. On the other hand, girls tend to perform very well in languages as compared to the boys. Adosh, a teacher in orphanage 6 said, "The boys are very good at mathematics and sciences. Girls fear math but they do well in languages. They have a very high command in English and Kiswahili compared to many of the boys."

Rosh, a teacher in orphanage 2 believed that girls did not perform well in Math's and the sciences because they lacked appropriate role models in these areas. Rosh makes an effort to challenge girls in science and math. He gave an illustration of girls in his class. He reported

"I had three girls who were not doing well as the boys in math. I realized the girls thought that they did not need to do well in math to be lawyers in the future. They were actually counting the number of prominent women who were engineers from their area and they could not find any. So, I was able to encourage them by giving some examples of prominent women who are in leadership, in the judiciary and other sections of the government. Eventually they realized that women can perform equally well as the men in science and math. I actually took them on a trip to a big supermarket that was being built here in town and they saw young women doing electrical engineering work such as electrical wiring of the facility. I found that thereafter they improved in math and science. They now have the motivation to be like those female engineers. Gender differences were also described in terms of school attendance."

Participants reported that they saw many children drop out of school when the parents reached the final stages of AIDS. Some children, especially the girls, dropped out to help the sick parent and prepare meals for her siblings. Nema, a teacher gave the following example

"Yes...I can tell you about one girl in my class. She is about 12. She has a brother here too. Her father had died of AIDS and the mother was sick too. So she was not happy most of the time. She would cry and weep every time. At times she would miss school to take care of her mother and get her drugs from the hospital. Her mother would not be able to cook for them sometimes. So, she stayed home to cook for her and the brothers. Occasionally when her mother felt better her face brightened up in school. So I keep inquiring how her mother is doing.

I could [tell] when her mother was down because the girl could not concentrate in class. Her mind was elsewhere, on the sick mother."

DISCUSSION

While no differences in educational experiences were described for preschool children in Western Kenya with regard to the HIV status of a parent, this study found that caregivers' and teachers' believed that boys influenced by the illness or death of a parent by AIDS did better than the girls under similar circumstances in the areas of science and math during elementary school and beyond. Girls, however, were perceived to do better in the area of languages. Differences in educational experiences, in terms of school attendance, were also described by the participants. When a parent became ill due to HIV/AIDS, girls were more likely to be kept out of school to tend to family needs such as administering drugs or caring for younger siblings. Cultural influences were suggested by some of the teachers and caregivers to be a major influence in the perceptions of these gender differences.

The themes from the study arose from perceptions of the participants expressed over and over again during the interviews. In vivo codes, the words of the participants have been used to describe their perceptions of gender differences in more detail. Though the perceptions are subjective and will not be generalized to all teachers and caregivers working with children orphaned by parental AIDS in other parts of the world, they do reflect what the authors believe accurately describes the perceptions of the teachers and caregiver's about gender differences in the educational experiences of children orphaned by parental AIDS rather than their self fulfilling expectations.

This exploratory study only scratches the surface of gender differences among children in Kenya affected by the HIV status of a parent or orphaned by AIDS. Clearly, more research needs to be conducted to determine what psychosocial factors, cultural influences, and other entities are involved in teachers' and caregivers' perceptions of gender differences with regard to this special population. Further, applied scientific studies should be developed and implemented to determine what constitutes best practice for children and youth influenced by parental HIV status which often results in the loss of one or both parents.

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