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ORIGINAL RESEARCH

Schooling experiences of orphaned boys in one rural school in the Kingdom of Eswatini

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Abstract

The present study draws on the gender schema theory to explore the schooling experiences of three orphaned boys aged between 17 and 20. These boys were purposively sampled from grade 10 and 11 in a rural school in Eswatini. The study aims to provide insights into how their schooling experiences can be improved to empower them to challenge and overcome discriminatory gender norms prevalent in the Kingdom of Eswatini. The study employed a qualitative narrative method that included semi-structured individual and focus group interviews and photo voice to gather data. The findings of the study revealed that the education of orphaned boys was significantly impacted by the wrong stereotypes attached to the male gender label, which assumes that boys are solid enough to resist any difficulty. The study also found that various factors, such as cruel teachers, students, family members, society, and the boys themselves, acted as impediments to their education. The implications of these findings are discussed, and recommendations for future research are provided. The study concludes that traditional Eswatini societal norms and values impact the education of orphaned boys, as they are often stereotyped as strong and resilient individuals who can overcome any obstacle. To ensure that orphaned boys have a positive experience in school, the study recommends collaborative efforts from the government, schools, families, and communities to change their focus and support these children.

Keywords: Boys; Eswatini; Orphanhood; Rural; Schooling Experiences

Introduction

Orphanhood has been a highly debated issue in recent years due to the increasing number of children who are being orphaned worldwide daily (UNICEF, 2017). Orphanhood refers to the condition of a child who has lost one or both parents before reaching adolescence, and the child who experiences such a loss is known as an orphan (Azlini, Siti Hajar & Lukman, 2020). The world has approximately 140 million orphans, with 52 million living in Sub-Saharan Africa, caused mainly by HIV/AIDS, natural disasters, wars and conflicts, poverty, and mass migration (Nar, 2020). These numbers are staggering and pose a significant threat to the world economy as the number of orphans continues to grow.

In Eswatini, the government is faced with the challenge of supporting approximately 120,000 orphaned children (Vigliani & Nderi, 2021) due to factors such as poverty, HIV and AIDS, and the recent COVID-19 pandemic (UNICEF, 2018; Motsa, 2021). This has increased expenditure and budgetary adjustments, straining an already stretched national budget and fiscal environment (World Bank Group, 2021). Despite these difficulties, the government has made efforts to prioritise the education of orphaned children through policy implementation. The Constitution of Eswatini guarantees every child's right to free education in public schools (Kingdom of Swaziland, 2005, p. 25), and the country has committed to several initiatives aimed at providing education for all children, including orphans (Kingdom of Swaziland, 2011). In 2003, Eswatini established the Orphaned Vulnerable Children Fund (OVCF) to support the education of vulnerable children, including orphans (Kingdom of Swaziland, 2012).

The issue of orphanhood and education has been a significant concern for Eswatini. Despite prioritising education for orphaned children, this field still has several gaps and challenges. Notably, gender dimensions have been overlooked, with limited studies exploring the education of orphaned boys both nationally and internationally. Although several studies have focused on female children's education (Pike, 2020), boys have been poorly motivated and less engaged (Lam et al., 2012), leading to poor academic performance, particularly at the secondary level. This situation highlights the need to address the gender disparity in education, particularly concerning orphaned children (Voyer & Voyer, 2014).

Problem statement

Despite the efforts to improve educational opportunities in Eswatini, many orphaned boys in rural schools still face unjust challenges that significantly hinder their access and success in education. The lack of adequate support and resources for these students has led to a significant gap in their educational achievement, which has long-lasting effects on their prospects. Therefore, urgent action is needed to address these challenges and ensure that all orphaned boys in Eswatini have equitable access to quality education.

This paper draws on the stories of three orphaned boys in a rural high school in the Kingdom of Eswatini. Data was gathered through individual and group interviews, and a photovoice technique was used to examine their experiences in a rural school in Eswatini. By using the boys' voices as voices of experience (Raza, 2017), the paper seeks to understand their schooling experiences from their perspectives and how they further navigate the schooling environments to fulfill their educational aspirations. Through this research, the study aims to identify ways in which positive and life-affirming schooling experiences can be promoted for these boys and further break down the division that harms the education of orphaned boys and perpetuates their discrimination based on gendered expectations. The following research questions guided the study: How do orphaned boys in this context experience school, what challenges they face as they do so, and what means have they adopted to navigate these gendered spaces of their schooling towards education access and success? As such, this research has the potential to contribute to the academic discourse on fostering resilience and promoting academic success among vulnerable populations.

Boys' experiences of schooling in Eswatini

Most Emaswati are characterised by their predominantly rural residence and unwavering attachment to their cultural heritage and tradition (Nyawo, 2023). This profound sense of connectedness instills in them a deep patriotism and a strict adherence to their cultural norms, particularly when it comes to matters related to gender and boys' masculinity in all avenues of social life, including the school context (Motsa & Morojele, 2019). The cultural discourses surrounding all boys, indeed, place the orphaned boys within the same category as their non-orphaned peers despite experiencing dissimilar life circumstances that are bound to affect their schooling experience.

Again, such constructions have failed to take into account their vulnerability and life situations, hence having a compromising effect on life and education experiences in general. For example, Mkhatshwa (2017) noted that, even though both boys and girls were orphaned in a rural school in Lubombo and needed both psychological and financial help, the attention of the school staff was on the girls disregarded the boys because they were considered to be emotionally intense and inventive hence did not need any help. These boys, like in most contexts in the country, were expected to affirm their masculinities and navigate these compromising experiences even in situations where they could not, lest they be viewed as weak and not real men. Indeed, such masculine constructions do not only falsify the real schooling experiences of the orphaned boys, further highlighting the limitations of cultural expectations in the education of these children in Eswatini schools.

In light of these cultural homilies that permeate schooling contexts in Eswatini, it is imperative that all educational stakeholders understand how orphaned boys are culturally defined and constructed (Shefer, Stevens & Clower, 2010) to facilitate their positive schooling experience.

Gender schema approach as a theoretical framework

The gender schema theory framed the study. The Gender Schema Theory, introduced in 1981 by Sandra Bem, argues that gender is a product of the norms of one's culture, and the gender binary between male and female has become one of the basic organisational structures in human society (Viney, 2019). It further explains how individuals become gendered in society and how sex-linked characteristics are maintained and transmitted to other members of a culture. It further explains how people in society become gendered from an early age and how this gendering impacts their cognitive and categorical processing throughout their lives (Starr & Zurbriggen, 2016). The gender schema theory postulates that gender-based schematic processing, a generalised readiness to process information based on the sex-linked associations that constitute the gender schema, is responsible for the phenomenon of sex typing (Bem, 1983).

In essence, this means that orphaned boys, for instance, have been socialised to sex-type their behaviours as per the dictates of the environment because of the ubiquitous societal insistence on the gender dichotomy (Bem, 1983). By their instincts, human beings are prone to judgment due to their high expectations and competencies regarding the male gender stem (Zahn-Waxler, Shirtcliff & Marceau, 2008). This shows that the behaviour of human beings, including children, is shaped by certain gender norms, which are 'controlled' and pinned down on individuals by the family and society to which they belong (Maina, Sikweyiya, Ferguson & Kabiru, 2020). It is important to note that most learner environments have become judgmental spaces, especially for boys because society perceives them as more robust in all aspects of their lives (Morojele, 2019). It is, therefore, significant to be conscious of the gender systems in which orphaned boys are defined and created to comprehend their masculinities (Raza, 2017).

The Study Context

Eswatini is a small kingdom in Southern Africa, bordered by the Republic of South Africa and Mozambique. According to the Kingdom of Swaziland (2015). Eswatini is divided into four regions: Manzini, Lubombo, Hhohho, and Shiselweni, with the latter being the poorest. The research was carried out at a school situated in the Shiselweni region. The people in this region depend primarily on subsistence agriculture, which has been adversely affected by severe drought caused by diminishing rainfall patterns (Armstrong, Khoboko, Moleli-Habi, Rampela, & Lepelesana, 2012).

The largest employers in the area are the forest plantations, which employ both adults and children (Quinn, 2017). The Shiselweni region of Eswatini faces severe challenges related to poverty, unemployment, and education (Kunene, 2019). The effects of the HIV and AIDS epidemic have further aggravated the situation, with many children losing their parents and struggling to access necessities. The government's OVCF program is a step in the right direction to address this issue, but more needs to be done to ensure that all children in need have access to education. The government has taken the initiative to address this issue through the Orphaned Vulnerable Children Fund (OVCF), which aims to educate these children (Ministry of Education Report, 2015). However, with the dwindling fiscal environment of Eswatini (Fakudze, 2022), the OVCF has been challenged by a lack of funds and diminishing resources, making it difficult to provide education to all children in need (Nsibande & Botha, 2023).

Research Design

The study used a qualitative narrative approach. This approach explores participants' beliefs, values, and experiences through their stories and narratives. The study focused on three orphaned boys between the ages of 17 and 20, single and double orphans in grades 10 and 11. The data was collected using semi-structured individual and group interviews and a photovoice technique. The semi-structured interviews allowed the participants to share their experiences and beliefs naturally and comfortably. The photovoice technique enabled the participants to share their life stories and socio-historical contexts through photography to share their experiences and beliefs. This approach facilitated their involvement in the study and made it more relevant to their experiences (Wang & Burris, 1997). All interviews were conducted in English, and a tape recorder was used to capture all the discussions, yielding rich data. The data was analysed using thematic

analysis to identify patterns and themes in the participants' narratives. This approach allowed the researchers to understand the beliefs and values that motivated and justified the boys' actions.

Data analysis procedures

In order to obtain reliable and valid findings on the schooling experiences of orphaned boys, the researcher employed the inductive method (Thomas, 2016). During the data collection phase, a recording device was used to capture the interviews, which were transcribed verbatim. Subsequently, the data was analysed by breaking it down into smaller themes for a more straightforward interpretation (Cresswell, 2002). The related themes were then compared, resulting in more significant, well-informed themes (Merrium, 1998). These themes were coded for further analysis (Di Cicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). The coding of these themes enabled the researcher to conduct further analysis, which helped support the study's research questions and theoretical foundations (Di Cicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Finally, the researcher discussed all the data generated in the study, focusing on the research questions, theoretical foundations, and available related literature.

Ethical considerations

Ethics play a crucial role in research where the participants are treated respectfully (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001). To ensure this, the study sought approval from the Director of Education in the Ministry of Education and Training (MoET), Eswatini. Consent was also obtained from the principal of the school under study. Letters of consent were also sent to the parents/caregivers of the participants of the study, and their consent, as the participants, was also sought. Pseudonyms are used to maintain the anonymity of the participants. Ethical clearance was obtained from the University of KwaZulu-Natal, and the participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time if and when desired.

Findings and Discussion

The study findings are presented below in the narrative format, with photographs generated using photovoice to support some of the narratives. The data was broken down into smaller sub-themes to ensure proper presentation.

The family and society's expectations are unattainable…

The findings revealed that the education of orphaned boys was greatly influenced by social and familial stereotypes regarding how boys should behave and what is expected of them (Nyawo, 2014). This had a negative impact on their education as society placed high expectations on them as males, which disrupted their learning. The respondents had this to say:

Most of us are from poor family backgrounds where boys do not have a say in family matters. My father says a boy's upbringing should be rough to train him to become a responsible man. This makes even our extended family members abuse us under the disguise of teaching us to be strong as men. We perform numerous errands, sleep very late, and are too exhausted to do any schoolwork. Sometimes, we risk being bitten by snakes as we sleep in the bush when we fail to locate all the cattle, and no one bothers where we sleep and what we eat as boys. This, at times, leads to us being absent from school. Our schoolwork suffers, and teachers take turns scolding you by the time you return to school.

(Robert, a 20-year-old grade eleven male single-orphaned boy, focus group interview)

Alternatively, I often attend school hungry and sometimes sleep on an empty stomach. There is no one to ask for help, as even my aunts would say whenever I get that rare opportunity to plead with them, 'You are a man, so grow up and stop behaving like a child. I am still young, so how can I behave like a man? It pains me a lot because I know that being a boy does not make me different from other children who feel the same effects of hunger. It is even worse when you get the same treatment from community members who also think you are just a 'crybaby' seeking their attention. I cannot change the fact that I am a boy! Seeing all these people expecting too much from me breaks my heart. I cannot stand it; making me feel like it is not worth living.

(Kim, a 19-year-old grade ten male double-orphaned boy, individual interview).

The narratives reveal that the orphaned boys spend most of their time exhausted, worried, and frustrated by the demands of their families, as some even doubled as breadwinners, stealing a lot

of their valuable time that would have been directed to their studies (Gomba, 2018). These traditional family or societal dynamics are so stressful that they affect the schooling of orphaned boys by depriving them of quality time to focus on their schoolwork (Nyawo, 2014). Factors like coming to school late, absenteeism, exhaustion, and frustrations emanating from family backgrounds were said to be affecting the education of orphaned boys, all combined acting as a stumbling block towards their success (Muntoni & Retelsdorf, 2019). These boys were still considered influential and expected to be inventive, even when they did not know how to cope (Gomba, 2018).

Evidently, our traditional stereotypes as a nation, which have existed for years, continue to influence and change many family perceptions about the boy as a child (Zahn-Waxler et al., 2008). This has led to having the exact expectations from all boys, yet the orphaned boys have experiences that intersect and compromise their gender performances, yet they continue to be judged based on these (Zahn-Waxler et al., 2008). Kim* further raises painful scenarios of sometimes going for days without food to staying alone with no family member bothering how he survived, which is proof of how EmaSwati believe putting high expectations on all boys, including orphans, is the best way to groom them to become better citizens (Mamba, 1997), yet in many ways affecting their educational experiences. This underlines the need for Emaswati to deconstruct their mindset of subjecting orphaned boys to pressure and hardship, which is believed to be the best way to train them to become men (Nyawo, 2014).

Robert's experience of "being left in the cold at night as he looked for the lost cows" further shows that Eswatini's traditional family structures alienate the boys because of their gender. This has created deep emotional scars on them (Ntuli, Mokgatle, & Madiba, 2020), as attaining these high family anticipations seems like a far-fetched dream. Emotionally drained and psychologically affected boys were bound to perform poorly at school (Huynh, 2017) and, in most cases, resort to suicide (Gomba, 2018).

All these expectations interfering with their schoolwork justify why some orphaned boys drop out of school (Mkhatshwa, 2017). This implies that there were still orphaned boys in rural Eswatini societies who were still 'slaves' of family misinformed perceptions. The evidence points to Eswatini family-societal structures still holding back and thwarting the efforts of orphaned boys as they try to make the best out of their situations through education. Surprisingly, this is happening at a time when there is a transition from the traditional Eswatini mentality to modern trends of empowering orphaned boys to challenge inequalities (Ratele, 2015). Ratele continues to note that seemingly, the gender gap in Eswatini schools is at the expense of boys, and violence against orphaned boys should be taken as a priority through interventions, policy discussions, and making.

Schools need to be more tolerant and understanding towards disadvantaged children, mainly orphaned boys, who do not have the same level of support as other children. To make orphaned boys feel more welcome in school, teachers should strive to embrace diversity and act as parental figures to provide the love and support that motivates them to attend school regularly. Additionally, the Eswatini government should provide counselling services to all schoolchildren to help them overcome any challenges they may face.

Cruel teachers ill-treat us…

The findings exposed the torturous experiences that orphaned boys were subjected to at the hands of teachers. The boys were found to be mistreated by teachers who seemed not to be conscious of the magnitude of the challenges they were experiencing. Orphaned boys give out their testimonies of the kind of life they lived in the hands of teachers:

Sometimes, you doubt if our teachers have children. The way they treat us is very inhumane. We are sometimes cruelly beaten for petty issues like late coming or performing tiresome errands as punishment for coming late while other children learn. Even if you try to explain, you are not listened to. I usually come late because I am a breadwinner at home, and I must first attend and provide for my siblings before coming to school. We feel as if we are treated as slaves in our school!

(Kim, 19-year-old grade ten male double-orphaned boy, focus group Interview)

You will hear teachers exclaiming, "Umfana uvuka lokwa kuseluvivi, kodvwa bukani nine nati kulala nikhamise imilomo yenu lemikhulu" [a boy wakes up very early just before dawn, but look at you, the only thing you are good at is sleeping while your big mouths are wide open. Some of you are very old to be still here. Making matters worse was that this was said in front of other learners. To us, quitting school is the best solution.

(Boro, a 17-year-old grade eleven male double-orphaned boy, focus group interview).

On one of the good days, I was chatting with one of my closest friends, Sibusiso, who was seated next to me when a History teacher, Mrs M*, entered by the door. We were laughing together, and the worst happened. Before she greeted the class, she exclaimed by swearing at me, "Hey you (she pointed at me), why are you laughing and disturbing my children when you are supposed to be at home with your wife and children? Your colleagues have wives and families now; instead, you are busy laughing at funny things like children". I was so heartbroken by such utterances.*

(Robert, a 20-year-old grade eleven male single-orphaned boy, individual interview).

The narratives show that the schooling of orphaned boys is affected by the bad treatment they receive from their teachers. Teachers cite various reasons why they punish the children, including late coming. Orphaned boys, especially in rural areas, usually come late due to numerous errands they perform before school, which takes much of their time (Ntuli, Mokgatle & Madiba, 2022). They also walk long, laborious distances, and by the time they reach school, it is already late (Sukati, 2013), and teachers not understanding the plight faced by the children punish them unconsciously. Sometimes, the anger from the teachers might be triggered by the 'everyday' late coming of the children due to the incessant problems they face. This might have conditioned the teachers to jump to wrong conclusions and label the children stubborn, hence the need to correct them through punitive measures. This implies that the learning spaces for orphaned boys in Eswatini schools are still hostile (Nsibande, 2022), as teachers still believe that the best way to instill discipline amongst children is through inflicting pain on them (World Vision Eswatini, 2022). This has, however, proved that such disciplinary procedures which have been put in place by teachers to shape the children have instead frustrated orphaned boys (de Ruiter, Poorthuis, Aldrup & Koomen, 2020) to a point where they contemplate abandoning school (Mkhatshwa, 2017).

Children, especially those disadvantaged, are exasperated by this act as they do not understand why they are punished in the first instance because they assume the teachers know their predicament. Kim* expresses his disappointment and frustration with the conduct of the teachers by asserting that they are made to perform tiresome errands while other children are in class. As a breadwinner at home, even if he tries to explain, teachers seem not bothered to listen. This is proof that orphaned boys are still being judged and abused by teachers (Judson, 2006) in schools of Eswatini. Performing punitive errands while other children learn shows that the Rights of orphaned boys to access education freely are infringed, forgetting that the boys, like all other children in Eswatini schools, should learn in comfortable and conducive environments (Eccles & Roeser, 2011). Orphaned boys are also called names and lambasted in full view of other children, which further shows the kind of victimisation they must endure for them to access education. This implies that education in Eswatini schools is still not fully accessible for orphaned boys; this challenges teachers to listen to all grievances brought forward by all children so that they can understand why children sometimes behave the way they do. This will avoid cases of judging the children unfairly, which in most cases results in making the wrong decisions about them.

The painful experiences raised by Boro indicate the kind of ill-treatment orphaned boys are exposed to in schools of Eswatini. The children are abused and menaced by boisterous teachers (Judson, 2006) who mistakenly assume that they will find the courage and immediately change their behavioral patterns without being nurtured. The boys were targeted mainly due to their masculine construction, which comes with the belief that they are independent and self-reliant (Motsa &

Morojele, 2019). This has resulted in teachers treating orphaned boys differently from other children, which is an indication that the learning spaces in most of the schools in Eswatini were still discriminatory (Zimba, 2011). This indicates that within the 'four walls' in most schools where education is supposed to be taking place, orphaned boys are still wrongly judged and perceived by teachers (Wood & Goba, 2010), mainly due to their status as boys. To be singled out amongst other children, as Robert* divulges, also shows that the teachers were practising social exclusion (Wright, Mannathoko & Pasic, 2009) and breeding hatred, which might end up causing orphaned boys to shy away from the very same teachers meant to help them. Poor learning outcomes are anticipated without good collaboration between the teachers and orphaned boys, which may lead to demotivation. Further corroding the relationship the teachers have with orphaned boys are the teacher's destructive tendencies of mocking them about their ages in front of other children in the classroom. In most rural schools of Eswatini, the boys, especially when they are older than their classmates, get agitated whenever they are mocked about their ages because they usually start schooling very late (Sukati, 2013). Besides that, this represents another form of victimisation, humiliation, and intimidation (Collins & Coleman, 2008), which violates the Rights of orphaned boys (UNICEF, 2021) and deprives them of conducive environments for learning. Although some of the teachers are poorly equipped when it comes to treating orphaned boys equitably (Fyles, 2018), it is still very wrong to subject them to such inhumane practices at the expense of their education. Allowing teachers to continue abusing orphaned boys within schooling spaces might create a cycle of discontinuation (Skinner, Tsheko, Mtero-Munyati, Segwabe, & Chibatamoto, 2004), as children nowadays turn to dislike schooling and opt to drop out whenever they are punished (Najoli, 2019). Realistically, schooling is meant to generate a gate away for them to escape the jaws of poverty, which is common in many rural communities of Eswatini (Elofsson & Jartsjo, 2012).

To help orphaned boys achieve their goal of becoming educated, collaborative efforts from the family, community, and school must be amalgamated to protect the children from all forms of discriminatory tendencies and violence. Teachers should love, exhibit modelling behaviour and be of help to orphaned boys as a way of stopping the violence against them (Reza, 2007). The male teachers should be gentle and caring men presenting an alternative vision to masculinity (Fyles, 2018). The boys should be treated without victimisation, judgment, or intimidation and taught with love and respect. Schools should also ensure they love all children, including orphaned boys, by shifting from punitive measures against them to instilling positive behaviour through positive discipline (Lekule, 2014).

Other boys threaten us…

Orphaned boys also voiced out their frustrations and anger at being mistreated by other children at school, especially older non-orphaned boys. This means that besides the orphaned boys being victims of teachers, they were also taken as 'prey' by other uncompromising boys, which added to their woes. The boys express themselves in the narratives below:

Unruly boys terrorise us in front of other children, uttering unpalatable expletives. Sometimes, you feel like fighting and ignoring the school rules. Some teachers hear and see while we are being abused but turn a blind eye, and this is so demotivating as we expect to be protected. Although we are all orphans, the boys always target us.

(Boro, a 17-year-old grade eleven male double-orphaned boy, focus group interview).

Our learning is made difficult in this school. You wake up at home knowing exactly that you will be laughed at by the older boys, alternating in mocking you. It is even worse if you are a double-orphan because they will tell you in the face that you would not do anything to them because they know you do not have parents. They will threaten, beat, and swear at you. This has disturbed my schooling.

(Kim, a 19-year-old grade ten male double-orphaned boy, individual interview).

Schooling has become a nightmare for orphaned boys as they are constantly harassed and mocked by older boys, especially those who are not orphans. These painful accounts represent the power struggles that occur in the male schooling environments of Eswatini, pointing to the

existence of different boy regimes that create different options and perform different types of masculinity (Kessler, Ashenden, Connell, & Dowsett, 1985). It is common for boys to fight one another as they usually associate viciousness with authority and respect (Ratele, 2015). Orphaned boys, however, are usually the victims of abuse due to their vulnerability as they do not have the much-needed defence structures in the form of parents. The sarcastic treatment they receive from non-orphaned older boys might be triggered by the abuser's pressure to be recognisable, which is inseparably linked to their quest as well to attain an acceptable form of masculinity (Adler & Adler, 1998). This experience is expected in a school set-up with a hierarchy of masculinities, each having its dominant form of masculinity, which gains ascendancy over and above others (Connell, 1990). Teachers also witness these incidences, which, in most cases, they struggle to handle, indicating that schools in Eswatini still fail to adequately maintain the discipline of learners. Such disciplinary tendencies amongst the boys are usually informed by gendered socialisation and discourses (Trickett, 2009), which are mainly attributed to gender roles for males in Eswatini being restrictive, contradictory, and confusing, thus ending up promoting dysfunctional conduct (Connell, 1995). This again symbolises that bullying is still prevalent in many schools of Eswatini, and orphaned boys continue to suffer because of teachers failing them.

The frustrating experience, as narrated by Boro*, shows that orphaned boys are targeted for being orphans, which corners them to a tight spot where retaliation seems to be the solution. Further angering orphaned boys is that this is occurring within the proximity of some teachers and confines of school rules, which to them should act as a shield of protection against all forms of enslavement. This implies that some teachers are still not fully supportive in trying to stop the victimisation of disadvantaged children like orphans. According to the (Swaziland Ministry of Education, 1988), it is misconduct for teachers to let violence occur in their vicinity without attempting to stop it. As a result of the wrong treatment, orphaned boys, as Kim* accounts, are no longer motivated to attend school, which places them in danger of dropping out (Ullah & Ullah, 2019).

To keep orphaned boys at school and make them feel welcome, schools should be free from any kind of violence, where boys can demonstrate signs of being non-vicious, thus creating a space for them to express themselves academically (Ratele, 2015). Collaborative efforts between teachers and orphaned and non-orphaned boys are necessary to bring a transformative impact to the lives of orphaned boys in school contexts (Minerson, Carolo, Dinner & Jones, 2011). Teachers should also be encouraged to work collaboratively with the boys as this can be effective (Dworkin, Hatcher & Peacock, 2013).

Sadly…we are also victims of our assumptions…

The findings discovered that orphaned boys are victims of stereotyped personal judgments about themselves. The 'I am a boy, so I should always present a strong mentality' existed in their lifestyles as they were always expected to remain strong and powerful (Motsa & Morojele, 2019), which came because of trying to fulfill both family and societal pressures of being a strong, independent, and capable gender. In trying to conform to such standards, orphaned boys must show their militant efforts despite the prevailing challenges of their orphanhood. The following narratives bear testimony:

We are taught by culture that, as boys, you do not report bad things troubling you. Instead, you find courage. My father, before he died, used to say, 'How can you become a man when you are a crybaby'? I have lost count of how many times I reported to him about my ill-treatment at school, only for him to respond angrily, "You are a man, so be strong; I am not a father to cowards." I grew up with that mentality and that no matter how difficult the situation I face, I will always keep quiet and soldier on. I must admit that it is not easy as, in many instances, I even struggled to concentrate in class.

(Boro, a 17-year-old grade eleven male double-orphaned child, focus group interview).

Orphaned boys have shown resilience despite facing several educational obstacles (Motsa & Morojele, 2017). This has not been easy, as it has demanded that they also conceal evidence of the nature of the challenges they face. Naturally, boys are born more vigorous, making them think

they can deal with any problem they encounter (Mamba, 1997). Seemingly, this mentality has influenced orphaned boys in Eswatini schools to suffer many injustices silently because they think that they are strong enough to handle any situation just because they are boys. This shows how cultural dynamics influence the schooling of orphaned boys in Eswatini (Mkhatshwa, 2017). It has also greatly affected the boys' schooling, as juggling schoolwork and finding resilient strategies has proved complex. This may be one of the significant reasons why orphaned boys have continued to receive less attention (Briggs, 2012).

Boro* laments that teachings emanating from cultural expectations have changed their perceptions about their plight as orphaned boys. This shows that from Eswatini's perspective, the culture of being strong is instilled in boys as they grow up. These experiences, usually inculcated by their parents (the father in particular), have made orphaned boys think lightly about the complexity of their lives. This explains why orphaned boys never report the many incidences of bullying and abuse they experience in Eswatini schools. The quietness preferred by the boys because of the wrong mentality is likely to affect their education as it has not justified that there were no problems currently faced by the children. This has manifested in that orphaned boys have lost concentration in class, compromising their school performance (Ullah & Ullah, 2019). This provides evidence of how cultural practices have infiltrated and affected learning spaces in Eswatini schools (Klika & Linkenbach, 2019). It has further shown that there are so many orphaned boys in Eswatini schools who still suffer in silence to fit family and societal definitions of a real man. It should be noted, however, that these traditional practices have suppressed the voices of orphaned boys (Powell, Smith & Taylor, 2016) and made them think that silence is the best problem-solving strategy.

With all these cultural dynamics revolving around the boy as a gender, it is essential that orphaned boys in all Eswatini schools be helped through empowerment for them to challenge all inequalities in school contexts (Fyles, 2018). The boys should also be engaged to realise their hidden potential (Peacock, 2012) to fight towards changing the existing gender power relations, which are also born out of personal opinions (Ratele, 2015).

Conclusion and Recommendations

The findings signify that the schooling of orphaned boys is deep-rooted in stereotyped constructions of the boy child being a strong gender capable of militating against any obstacle in educational contexts. Such misconceptions were found to have permeated the school environment, influencing the behaviour of both teachers and other children. It was further discovered that these constructions were a result of traditional societal norms and values placing the orphaned boy at par with male adult responsibilities. The high demands and expectations placed by society on boys have heavily affected orphaned boys as they try to find their footing at school. They have found themselves obliged by family upbringing to conform to such societal standards. Traditional rural societies, where most orphaned boys live, have inculcated a culture of power, assertiveness, aggressiveness, and dominance (Ratele, 2015) in most families, which has further resulted in the boy child being portrayed as a strong gender and thus needing no support. This has ignored the fact that orphaned boys were different from ordinary boys, considering the heavy burdens associated with orphanhood, as some were faced with complex family responsibilities like that of heading families. To help shape the education of orphaned boys, the article recommends the following:

- Collaborative efforts from the community, families, and schools should be directed to orphaned boys to find and address what specifically affects their schooling.
- Teachers and the community should be further capacitated about gender awareness and equity and what it entails to remove some of the myths associated with the boy child about male adult gender roles.
- Boys should be empowered to challenge inequalities.
- Orphaned boys should be engaged in designing policies related to their schooling to help them cross the gender barriers in education.

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