

# Striving and Surviving: The Phenomenology of Orphaned Students in Public Elementary Schools

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**Abstract**— The phenomenological study dealt on the experiences, hopes, dreams and fears of the orphaned students in public elementary schools of Division of Compostela Valley for School Year 2014-2015. There were 10 participants for the In-depth Interview and six for the Focus Group Discussion. Results revealed that the orphaned students experienced draining study endeavors, desolate life, rare happy moments, and profound coping with challenges. Their hopes include finishing a course, like becoming a teacher, engineer, doctor, electrician, policewoman, pilot, accountant and soldier. Further, they also hoped for their grandparents' health, happiness, supports for their young brothers and sisters and to inspire other orphans. They also dreamed to be rich, to have family gathering, good job and to acquire a vast parcel of land. They feared of another calamity, influence of bad classmates, to get sick and of losing their love ones.

**Index Terms**— Orphaned Students, Phenomenology, Public elementary schools, Striving and surviving.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) has recognized the Philippine Government which makes significant progress in the convention on the Rights of the Child. Along this line, the Department of Education has set goals to provide the quality of basic education, as one of the basic rights, to all Filipino children obviously including orphaned learners. Orphans Lifeline International (2012) mentioned that of the roughly 34 million children under the age of 18 more than two million are orphans in the Philippines. Some of them are intermediate phase learners in primary schools who exhibit different behaviors leading them to do and do not do well at school (Makhonza, 2006). There are orphans who perform poorly (Dugal & Eriksen, 2004; Livaditis, et.al, 2003; Berlin, et.al, 2001) and perform better at school (Chala, 2002; Ssewamala, et.al, 2010). Understanding orphans at school can assist communities and educators and supporting these children (Henderson & Masten, 1996) to survive.

Orphaned students face myriad challenges and problems (Ogina & Nieuwenhuis, 2010; Kazula, 2012; Cherry, 2014). Hunter and Williamson (1997) have documented problems of children who are orphans; specifically; lack of caring and warmth provided by parents, development of behavioral problems and little has been written about the successful outcome in these children. Makhonza (2006) added that they could even more vulnerable because of the absence of their parents. They who are at the intermediate phase of learning need more guidance and support in academic work since it is the middle phase of their schooling. At this stage, some children still struggle to take care of their basic needs. This indicated that children at elementary level are susceptible to changes in the family structure. Moreover, (Braxton, 1999; Mdanda, 1997; pong, 1998) in their studies emphasized the importance of parental guidance and family involvement in academic achievement of learners. It became clear that students with higher academic records are those who experience

certain home environments and educational activities that are conducive to learning (Makhonza, 2006). The mentioned information revealed that being a parent carries great responsibility (Responsible Parenting Handbook, 2007) which is applicable no more to orphans for they have lost parents who, supposedly, have enormous duties and responsibilities to them. It would then take a long period of time for orphaned students to do some adjustments and it could be a hard thing for them to accept this reality.

Subsequently, orphaned children undergo hardships which may affect psychological and emotional balance (Gatumu, Gitumu, & Oyugi, 2009). These children whose parents died are often burdened, losing not only the attention, care and love that parents give but also losing access to basic resources such as housing and land (Naar-King, et.al, 2008). In addition, economic hardship arising from condition of orphanhood leads to interrupted schooling, which has long-term effects of poverty (Atwine, 2005). As such, orphans are likely to have fewer opportunities to acquire human capital are vulnerable and will have more difficulty in securing gainful employment when they become youths and young adults. It has been also been put forward that vast numbers of children are forced into precarious circumstances exposing them to exploitation, violence, the risk of abuse and disease (Viva Network, 2005).

Sharma (2006) further added that orphans might fall short compared to non-orphans for discrimination from other relatives or household members where the investment in the orphaned child is not taken into consideration. Crawley (2001) shed light on discrimination when he discussed that orphans are often treated as second class members of the household and that discrimination can involve everything such as food, education, abuse and being forced to work. Another reason of orphan's downfall as addressed by Sharma (2006) was trauma from the death of parents and the loss of parental guidance and support may lead to the child being unable to perform in school and in turn, affecting the decision to attend school. Shimamura and Carter (2001) added that orphans are likelier to repeat grade level in school because they have experience a parental death and its consequences. This might lead to an interruption of human capital accumulation and the orphan's

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educational progress may lag behind. This delay in educational progression can then affect the orphan's schooling decision in a negative way.

In school, children learn and accomplish something easily when they have self-esteem. Nemours Foundation (2005) stressed that having self-esteem is important because it helps one to hold the head high and feel proud of oneself, have courage to try new things and the power to believe in oneself, is more cooperative, enthusiastic, assertive, respectful and high hope. Conversely, people with low self-esteem avoid trying new things, feel unloved and unwanted, pretend to feel emotionally indifferent, are unable to tolerate a normal level of frustration and are easily influenced. They do not perform tasks when they are abused, forced and mistreated. At the same time Badshaw, et.al, (2002) and Reinglich (2006) observed that limited or constrained resources may prevent orphaned children from attending school. Failure to attend school makes them extremely susceptible to exploitation and abuse at the hands of people who appear to be well meaning. Their future is likely to be quiet uncertain and the negative implications are intensified with lack of education and financial scarcity (Charaensuk, et.al, 2004).

Despite the factual reasons of what these children have demonstrated and undergone, their struggling life as an orphan has significantly revealed an enduring spirit to surmount any adversity this world has to offer (Zivor, 2009; Masten 2001, Kessey, 2012 & Kimani, et.al, 2012). It is just short amazing that there still among them who remain irrepressible and resilient. As cited by Luistro, (2014), students should achieve more for themselves, for others and for the country in spite of obstacles may stand in the way. They see the ray of hope in the faith and joy they share with each other even in the most trying times of circumstances. They may be battered but definitely never be defeated.

There are environmental disadvantage and stress leading to behavioral and psychological problems among children; however; there are children who overcome these difficulties to become well-adjusted adults. It reveals more on academic success and social adaptation rather than academic failure (Luther & Zigler, 1991). The more resilient young people are the less likely they are to get into serious trouble in a range of risk behaviors (Masten, Best and Garmezy, 2003). All students can overcome adversity in life if important effective factors are present in their lives (Krovetz, 1999). They must be provided with love, care, understanding, guidance and counseling.

Besides, resiliency theory indicated that defining the protective factors that exist with in the family, school and community is the first thing to do for the successful child or adolescent. It was also stated that members of one's family, community and or school care deeply about that person, have high expectations and purposeful support, the person cared for maintains faith in future and can overcome almost any adversity (Krovetz, 1999). Some of these children may take these life's adversity and negative circumstances positively in order to build strength as they continue moving on. Palmary and Moat (2002) pointed out in their study that many young people in South Africa do not grow up in families when they learn respect, warmth and good interpersonal relations, but there

are still young people who overcome severely traumatic childhood experiences and become productive and well-adjusted members of society.

In the midst of these orphaned learner's grief, unpleasant experiences and life's desperation there are some, it not most, still consider all these occurrences as "blessings". This was revealed in Duvall (1989) experience as an orphan. As theorist Bandura (1993) defined this as self-efficacy that sees how people perceive their work of obstacles. It is the belief in one's capabilities to produce a certain outcome or achieve a certain goal—a belief that one maintains when facing an adverse event or challenge in life; a belief that they will overcome, by controlling their thoughts and rejecting negative thoughts about self and their abilities (Osher, et. al, 1999 and Bandura and Locke, 2003). The fears have been transformed to hardened hopes to face new life's challenges (Kazula, 2012). Consequently, they become optimistic and resistant.

This rare and unique outcome should be taken into account. It is in light that the researcher, a teacher, and a school principal herself, was encouraged to explore the experiences of this orphaned students and their hopes, dreams, fears and aspirations in life in striving and surviving towards education. Moreover, this study differed from previous researches for the subject-participants of the study were orphaned students found Philippine public elementary schools particularly in Comosela Valley, whose parents, fortunately, died not because of HIV/AIDS diseases as other orphaned children in some foreign nations do.

#### Research Questions

1. What are the experiences of the orphaned students in public elementary schools?
2. What are the hopes, dreams and fears in life of orphaned students in public elementary schools?

#### Delimitation and Limitation

This study focused on orphaned students in public elementary schools of the Division of Compostela Valley and their experiences on how they strive and survive in their basic education as well as their hopes, dreams, fears and aspiration in life.

The study was limited to sixteen (16) elementary students, ten (10) for in-depth interview and six (6) for focus group discussion. Only those double orphaned students were included, who were Grades 5 and 6 students during the school year 2014-2015. The study was not generalizable because of the limited samples involved in this qualitative research.

## 2 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Using the process of numeration (Smith, et.al, 2009) in analyzing the results of the in-depth interview and focused group discussion, four themes emerged in answer to the first research questions which were the basis in discussing the experiences of the orphaned students. The themes are draining study endeavors, desolate life, rare happy moments and profound coping with challenges. For the second research question, based on the answer of the participants during the in-

depth interview and focus group discussions, three themes emerged. These are: hopes, dreams and fears. The results and corresponding discussion of the themes are as follows:

### Experiences of Orphaned students

The in-depth interview and focus group discussion had revealed the different experiences of the orphaned students. Their honesty and sincerity in sharing their stories have laid down diverse situations but common themes in going through the challenges of being orphaned students.

**Draining study endeavors.** The sharing of experiences among orphaned students had common lines in terms of their difficulty in schooling. For them, it is so hard having no parents to support them financially, emotionally and morally. They felt so exhausted in doing with their assignments, homeworks and projects, and in dealing with work and schooling activities with no parent to care for them.

Orphaned children undergo hardships which may affect psychological and emotional balance (Gatumu, Gitumu & Oyugi, 2009). These children whose parents died are often burdened, losing not only the attention, care and love that parents give but also losing access to basic resources such as housing and land (Naar-King, 2009). In addition, economic hardships arising from condition of orphaned leads to interrupted schooling, which has long-term effects of poverty (Atwine, 2005).

**Desolate life.** Being alone and isolated had led the orphaned students to feel pity for themselves. They lost their parents in various settings and time, which made them desolate and lonely.

Crawley (2001) shed light on discrimination when he discussed that orphans are often treated as second-class members of the household and that discrimination can involve everything such as food, education, abuse and being forced to work. Another reason for orphan's downfall as stressed by Sharma (2006) was trauma from the death of parents and the loss of parental guidance and support may lead to the child being unable to perform in school and in turn, affecting the decision to attend school.

Orphaned students are among of the most vulnerable members of society often lacking of basic needs (food, clothing and shelter) and services related to better education (Kazula, 2012; Kudzai, 2010; PEPFAR, 2012). The first area to be affected when a child is orphaned is their academic performance and self-concept. In school, they become vulnerable in any possible circumstance, either pleasant or unpleasant, as they suffer the plight of orphanhood. Most orphans feel something missing for they are used to have complete parents who provided them proper nurturance, guidance and care particularly in doing their assignments, projects and homeworks. This is supported by the idea of Braxton (2001) that orphaned children are faced with empty homes after school for no one has to cooked for them. They have no one to share bad and/ or good experiences that they may have at school everyday. Some of the orphans had no adults caring for them, thus they were forced to head families themselves (Chala, 2002). However, some just embrace the reality that they could never get away from being an orphan. Something has changed and that

pushes them to move on and rise up into the world.

**Rare happy moments.** Despite of this real scenario, orphans and vulnerable children need to combat those lost years living together with their biological parents. They remain optimistic and pro-active in finding the right way of not giving life up, letting them exercise their rights as part of the community and welcoming them wholeheartedly as member of one's family give great impact to these affected children. These children would likely start looking happier when they are with people around them, like their relatives and friends. They would start behaving like normal children and their school work improves (OSISA, 2012).

The participants despite of their struggles and fights to survive they had still mentioned their rare happy moments. According to them, they felt happy when receiving scholarships and donations. They were happy when they were with friends and with relatives during reunion times.

**Profound coping with challenges.** Striving and surviving, the orphaned students adopted profound coping with challenges. Among these are praying hard, having industry, perseverance, studying harder and continuous support to the love ones who cared for them.

The orphaned students need to become strong independent people in order to develop high-spirited values. They ought to believe, strive and survive (Banduara, 1994). Similarly, Friis (2013) stated they must learn to use their grief and anger to do something good and self-fulfilling journey in this tremendous world. They must learn to rise above their sorrow in order to find their inner peace and completeness. Palmay and Moat (2002) also indicated that when young people make successful adaptations, despite exposure to high-risk conditions their ability to survive and succeed as been attributed to three causes. Firstly, personal attributes such as intelligence: secondly, a warm responsive and responsible family and lastly, adult support.

Benard (1991) commented that whether or not the attributes are strong enough within the individual to help that person bounce back from adversity depends on certain protective factors in his or her life. Also, the access of orphans and vulnerable children to education would be possible if basic needs would be provided. The basic rights of the child as stipulated in the Child and Youth Welfare Code states that children have a wide range of needs - including love. That every child has the right to standard of living for the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development.

### Hopes, Dreams and Fears of Orphaned Students

In their struggles to survive, the orphaned students shared their hopes, dreams and fears. In school, children learn and accomplish something easily when they have self-esteem. Nemours Foundation (2005) stressed that having self-esteem is important because it helps one to hold the head high and feel proud of oneself, have courage to try new things and the power to believe in oneself, is more cooperative, enthusiastic, assertive, respectful and high hope.

The impact of support to orphaned students has taken a high degree of emphasis. In the midst of their struggling journey due to difficult events they have encountered, they

ought to be placed in right direction. The importance of being cared of, recognized and appreciated leaves desirable feelings among these children to keep their heads up. This reduces burdens and gradually eliminates trauma and disruption (PEPFAR, 2012; UNICEF, 2008; OSISA, 2012).

**Hopes.** The orphaned students have a big hope for the future. They shared their desires to become professionals like becoming a teacher, engineer, doctor, electricians, policewoman, pilot, accountant and soldier. Moreover, they wished for grandparent's health, happiness and to inspire other orphans to be good in studies and work.

Despite the factual reasons of what these children have demonstrated and undergone, their struggling life as orphan has significantly revealed an enduring spirit to surmount any adversity this world has to offer (Zivor, 2009, Masten, 2001, Kessey, 2012 & Kimani, et.al, 2012). It is just short amazing that there are still among them who remain irrepressible and resilient. As cited by Luistro (2014), students should achieve more for themselves, for others and for the country in spite of the obstacles may stand in the way. They see the ray of hope in the faith and joy they share with each other even in the most trying times of circumstances. They may be battered but definitely never be defeated.

Miller (2008) quoted the statement of an orphan who gave much value on education. The orphan cited that without education there was a little hope for her future. An education would afford the children the opportunity to acquire good jobs and support her in her old age.

**Dreams.** To be rich, to be free from financial difficulties, to have good job, and to acquire vast parcel of land are the major dreams that the orphaned students shared during the In-depth Interview and Focus Group Discussion.

In the midst of these orphaned learners' grief, unpleasant experiences and life's desperation there are some, if not most, still consider all these occurrences as "blessings". This was revealed in Duvall (1989) experience as an orphan. As theorist Bandura (1993) defined this as self-efficacy that sees how people perceive their work of obstacles. It is the belief in one's capabilities to produce a certain outcome or achieve a certain goal—a belief that one maintains when facing an adverse event or challenge in life; a belief that they will overcome, by controlling their thoughts and rejecting negative thoughts about self and their abilities ((Osher, et al. 1999 and Bandura and Locke (2003). The fears have been transformed to hardened hopes to face new life's challenges (Kazula, 2012). Consequently, they become optimistic and resistant.

**Fears.** Having experienced the desolation and pains of being an orphaned, the students emphasized their fears in life. These are to lose their relatives who are taking care of them, not finishing a course, to get sick and to experience another calamity.

Tadesse (2003), presented another challenge faced by orphaned students is trauma related to the illness and death of

family members which leads to difficulty in concentrating in classroom and in acquiring the skills and knowledge offered in school. In the same study, pointed out the need for orphaned children to work and care for ill adults are one of the reasons for absenteeism.

### Implications for Practice

Based on the findings, implications for practice may be embraced by the Department of Social Welfare and Development authorities that may lead them to review their plans and programs for the orphaned students. They may sponsor various seminars and tap the coordination of other agencies in helping the orphaned grow in a positive community. The impact of support to orphaned students has taken a high degree of emphasis. In the midst of their struggling journey due to difficult events they have encountered, they ought to be placed in right direction. The importance of being cared of, recognized and appreciated leaves desirable feelings among these children to keep their heads up. This reduces burdens and gradually eliminates trauma and disruption (PEPFAR, 2012; UNICEF et.,al, 2008, OSISA, 2012).

For the Department of Education, the personnel may revisit their plans and programs in strengthening the support of the community to the academic journey of the orphaned students. The Education for All (EFA) Movement is a global commitment to provide quality basic education for all children, youth and adults. Most likely all learners are given attention to fulfill this goal. This constitutes the orphans who deserve to be treated normally as part of the society. The benefits of educating orphans are enormous. Investing in children's education is important to avoid the greater long term costs of not educating them and leaving them vulnerable (Miller, 2008). For being vulnerable, they are prone to abuse, exploitation and academic failure. Moreover, security for the orphaned students' education will bring huge relief and hope for them to prosper in the future. The success of these learners can be attributed with various factors. These factors are considerably important to help these orphaned students excel academically and develop prospective that might help them to becoming the persons they want to become.

The school administrator as well shall tap the support of the local government units and private sectors in sponsoring scholarships for the orphaned students. By doing so, the students shall be assured of a better education, and financial obligations shall be a burden anymore. School explicitly teaches student how to learn. As stated in the EFA goals and objectives school is a place where learners are shaped and developed in various aspects: intellectual, social, emotional and moral. This is a place that promotes an environment free from coercive treatments. Teachers should have been equipped to deal with issues that arise as a result of having orphaned and vulnerable children in their classrooms.

The fosters of the orphaned play great role in the educational endeavor of their children, thus, it is recommended that they shall be reoriented of their roles as the prime foundation in nurturing and molding the students into better and wholesome individuals. A study by (Mthembu, 1996) on parental influence on academic achievement, suggested that parents should ensure that children receive material and emotional support so that children could become motivated to acquire the educational and occupational skills necessary for achieving socially accepted goals. The same study indicated that, in the society where the opportunities for reaching the objectives have been denied due to socio economic status, the next of kin would in most cases serve as a parental substitute in providing fees. Furthermore, other agencies are sometimes helpful to students, but the parents remain the main source of influence in the students' academic achievement. It was further mentioned in her study that the relationship between students and their next of kin (other than the parents) was not as natural as that of parents themselves, and as a result high academic achievement was not attained.

On the other hand, there were some factors as identified by Hess and Holloway (1984) which enhanced academic achievement: the structure of parents and encouragement provided at home to explore various aspects of the larger environment. There are more factors which can be explored so as to be able to deal with challenges facing orphaned learners. The associations between child outcomes and continuous measures of parental behavior, such as: support, involvement, warmth, approval, control and monitoring (Ainsworth – Darnell and Roscigno, 1999: Broxton, 1999. Mthembu, 1996). Giving emphasis on the association between a child without parents and his or her academic achievement is important. It became clear that students with higher academic achievement records are those who experience certain home environment and educational activities that are conducive to learning (Miller, 2008).

The teachers, as second parents and on the front line of the educational pursuits of orphaned students shall sustain their motivation and inspiration to the young children, which would eventually provide strength to the students to move on despite their challenges living without their parents.

The loved ones and relatives of the orphaned students who take care of the students may continually share their generosity to the students by accepting them as valuable part of the family, and that their presence, love and care are strong weapons to consider for these children to survive. Bernard (1991) listed caring and support by peers, parents and the community and the ongoing participation between the child, community, the school and peers as factors to consider in making child to surpass educational challenges. These help them stand up, the school and peers as factors to consider in making child to surpass educational challenges. These will

help them stand up confidently and unchain the complicated traumatic experiences.

For the orphan students, their stories shall be a paragon of their courage, strength and perseverance, which would inspire other orphans not to lose their hopes, aspirations and dreams, and for them not to fear on the challenges of life. In the study of Krovetz (1999), he pointed out that all students can overcome adversity if important protective factors are present in their lives. In his study, the emphasis was on the children who came from "at risk" backgrounds who became healthy competent adults. This supported the study of Benard (1991) when he commented by saying, "Whether or not the attributes are strong enough within the individual to help that person bounce back from adversity depends on certain protective factors in his or her life. Moreover, support systems mutually deliver beneficial ways to OVC. For example, efforts to keep children in school have positive impacts on accessing education (Cho, 2011). Creating and enabling environment for orphan helps reduce stigma and discrimination. These children must receive social and emotional experience that positively affects their lives and their futures.

### Concluding Remarks

My desire and interest to come up with a phenomenological study has been realized with this study. With the calamity that struck Compostela Valley Province where many lives were lost, including parents of the elementary students, my motivation to write stories, experiences, hopes, dreams and fears of the orphaned students has grown stronger, that immediately, I offered this study as part of undertaking in my professional advancement.

When I heard their stories during In-depth Interview and Focus Group Discussion, I had a heavy heart knowing that at their young age, they are placed in a difficult situation of living a life without the guidance of their parents. So sad to note that while they are left with their relatives, there again hardships they faced with poverty and cruelty sometimes of the environment. However, I also found out that these orphaned students are strong individuals, since they still they uphold their dreams and hopes that someday they could live a life that is free from life's difficulties and challenges.

The parents are considered the life of the home, the shelter and protector; that losing them is a kin to a down fall of life's direction and care. The stories of the orphaned students have awakened the deepest recesses of my emotions, and I come to realize that I as a mother, teacher and school administrator, I have to give my sincere care, love and attention not only to my children but to my students. By doing so, I can be an instrument for these students to live a life with inspiration, guidance and strength. These will certainly add meaning and colors to their lives.

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