

Schooling despite all odds

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Summary of the Thesis

The PhD dissertation titled “*Schooling Despite All Odds: Evidence from Lesotho on Female Child Carers who Stayed in School*” aimed to examine perceptions of stakeholders, including in-school female child carers, teachers, policy makers, civil society organizations, and community volunteers, of conditions under which female children who are the primary carers in their households are still able to regularly attend secondary school. The focus of this study is Lesotho, a country based in Southern Africa, where the impact of HIV and AIDS has been greatest (UNAIDS 2016) and child carers have been identified as being vulnerable (Government of Lesotho, 2012; Tanga, 2013).

Children, from time immemorial, have contributed to the caregiving responsibilities in the home. However, when this stretches beyond the normal expectations of domestic chores (Robson et al., 2006) and becomes more substantial and significant (Becker, 2000), then this adult role denies children their childhood and deprives them of their rights as children (UNICEF, 2011). In sub-Saharan Africa, the effects of the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) have resulted in a change in household composition, with children increasingly taking up caregiving roles. Recently, there has been a shift in caring patterns due to parental AIDS deaths, leaving grandparents increasingly taking up this role (Ardington & Leibbrandt, 2010) and the emergence of child-headed households (Foster et al., 1997). It is within these family structures that children may be taking up caregiving roles beyond what may be considered the norm.

Caregiving responsibilities have been cited as one of the factors affecting regular school attendance (Lewin & Little, 2011; Nyabanyaba, 2009; Stearns & Glennie, 2006; UNFPA, 2012). However, some children will still attend school regularly, despite facing adverse circumstances (Cluver et al., 2012). Such children who thrive despite adversities are considered resilient (Condly, 2006; Katz, 1997). Lesotho policy documents, such as the *Lesotho Education Sector Strategic Plan 2015-2015* (Government of Lesotho MOET, 2005), the *National Policy on Orphans and Vulnerable Children* (Government of Lesotho, 2006), and the *National Strategic Plan on Vulnerable Children 2012-2017* (Government of Lesotho, 2012), acknowledge child

carers as part of the vulnerable children population in need of social services. Academic literature also cites the child carer phenomenon in Lesotho, with one author attributing the rise of child-headed households to the inability of the extended family safety net to take care of orphans (Tanga, 2013).

I examined the perceptions of stakeholders on how individual, family, school, and community factors influenced female child carers regularly attending secondary school. I adopted the definition of school attendance by Lewin and Little (2011) as “regular attendance of at least 80% of the time.” (p. 333). Lesotho’s education system has a five-year secondary school program that runs from Form A to Form E, with an official age range of between 13 and 18 years (Classbase, 2012), although older students are not excluded from attending. The main research question is: Why and how do some girl child carers regularly attend secondary school, despite adverse situations?

Using Urie Bronfenbrenner’s socioecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 1994) as the guiding framework, the subquestions that I sought to answer in this research study were:

- What is the care-work provided by the female child carers?
- What are the challenges faced by the female child carers, and how do these pose a potential risk to school attendance?
- What individual-level factors facilitated secondary school attendance?
- What family-level factors facilitated secondary school attendance?
- What school-level factors facilitated secondary school attendance?
- What community factors facilitated secondary school attendance?
- What interaction occurs amongst individual, family, school, and community factors to facilitate secondary school attendance?

This dissertation employed a qualitative research approach and employed an in-depth semi structured interview guide with 58 participants, comprising 28 female child carers attending secondary school, nine secondary school teachers, five policy makers, two civil society staff, and 14 members of community-based organizations. I chose this approach because it allowed me to purposefully sample my participants (Creswell, 2003), especially the child carers whom we do not know much about and who have been referred to as a “hidden” group of children

(Becker, 2007; Moore, 2005b; Rose & Cohen, 2010). My research sought to obtain girl-carers' views on, and experiences with, caring and schooling and stakeholders' perspectives of child carers and schooling.

I took into account ethical considerations to ensure that the rights of all the participants were protected by explaining the purpose of the study and their rights and protection (Blumberg et al., 2011). For the interviews with children, I included other ethical considerations recommended by Noble-Carr (2006), including "informed consent, privacy and confidentiality..." (p. 5). The content of the consent form was read to the child in either English or Sesotho, ensuring that the child also understood that only pseudonyms would be used in the study.

The dissertation is presented in eight chapters as follows:

Chapter 1 provides an introduction to the research.

Chapter 2 provides the theoretical framework guiding the dissertation, outlining prior literature on educational resilience using the socioecological framework. The chapter starts with a review of the prior literature on child carers, the reasons for caring, the nature of care, and how this relates to school attendance and educational resilience.

Chapter 3 outlines the methods used to conduct the research and provides the rationale for the research approach and site selection. Furthermore, the chapter describes the sample and details the data collection and data analysis processes.

Chapter 4 presents the profile of the child carers in the study, describing the factors that may have caused them to be caregivers, the nature of care they provided, and who their care-recipients were. The chapter also describes the challenges faced by the child carers and how these may pose a potential risk to school attendance.

Chapter 5 discusses study participants' views on how and why individual attributes play a role in keeping female child carers attending secondary school despite the challenges they experienced due to their caregiving roles. It also highlights the collaboration between individual factors and external factors, such as family, school, and community.

Chapter 6 is an account of the perceptions of study participants of how school-related factors such as the school environment, teachers, and student peers contributed to child carers being able to regularly attend secondary school.

Chapter 7, which contains two parts, first highlights study participants' perceptions of the roles that the immediate and extended family plays in influencing female child carers' school attendance. I further discuss the role of neighbors, community leaders, and community-based organizations in influencing school attendance.

Chapter 8 concludes the dissertation with a discussion, conclusion, and policy considerations.

The findings showed that child carers experienced challenges related to caregiving responsibilities, both at home and at school. My study established that caregiving goes beyond providing care in the home. The key point to note from my study is that even though child carers devised coping strategies to ensure that they were able to attend school, the pressure of caring weighed heavily on their minds even while at school. Attending school alone is therefore not sufficient when the quality of learning is being compromised as a result of anxiety and stress outside of school. The findings showed that a child carer's vision for a better future was the key individual attribute that kept the child in school. External support and a conducive environment within family, school and community all played a role in nurturing this resilience and providing protective and mitigating support that influenced child carers school attendance. The study however demonstrated that there was no "one size fits all" approach that seemed to be responsible for child carers' staying in school, but a combination of factors, that needed to interact with each other for positive outcomes.

My study leads to the following considerations for policy, to better improve the chances of effective quality schooling for child carers: free secondary schooling, teacher training to provide psychological support, more inclusive school bursaries, in-school peer-support programs, and community programs supporting those that help vulnerable groups. This study was conducted at an opportune time when the global community has formulated the new sustainable development goals (SDGs) and the subsequent Education 2030 Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action (Declaration, 2015). The Incheon Declaration is committed to ensuring the "provision of 12 years of free, publicly funded, equitable quality primary and secondary education" (Declaration, 2015, p. iv). Advocating for free secondary education is therefore not far-fetched, as it aligns with the global agenda. I

recommend free secondary education because the data demonstrate that providing school fees was one area of support that families, schools, and communities put efforts in covering. It is critical that government and nongovernmental organizations enhance teachers' skills in providing specialized psychosocial care. Teachers seem to be playing a big role beyond what they are required to do. Both preservice and in-service teacher training should include a component of specialized counseling to focus on the psychological wellbeing of the child.

Insufficient finances to cover school costs was cited as a challenge that teachers, family members, and communities went to great lengths to address. Chapter 4 also highlighted some bottlenecks to accessing the government bursary. This was an indication that existing bursary schemes may not be reaching some vulnerable children, such as child carers. My recommendation for policy consideration is that government and nongovernmental scholarship funds should revisit the targeting criteria in order to make it more inclusive.

The fact that the girl-carers continued worrying about their care recipients even while at school calls for a more comprehensive community-based response that addresses the challenges faced by the children at home. To mitigate this issue, government and civil society organizations should implement a household-based approach in supporting child-carers. The unintended benefit of old-age pensions as a source of financial support for caregivers of grandparents is worth noting. The government should, therefore, consider extending the social grant to child carers living in such households.