SETTING THE SILENCES TO SPEAK: "TOWARDS A CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS OF ADOLESCENT ORPHANS."

N.P. MTHIYANE

Abstract

This paper explores comparatively the voices of the orphaned adolescents living in an orphanage and foster homes. Currently the emphasis is on children's rights; it is believed that children have rights to have their opinions heard, to refuse a demand, to voice their dissatisfaction and, in the case of orphans, to question the reasons for their status. This study is qualitative in nature and utilises the discourse analysis approach (analogue and dialogical method). A sample of ten orphaned adolescents (OAs) was randomly selected in an informal settlement in Inanda. Semi-structured interviews and diaries were used to collect data. Critical consciousness is explored in addressing silences using the adolescents' lenses as a platform for meaning-making. Through in-depth interpretation of their problems, self-awareness of the OAs was also attained, which is best for a person to develop and thrive (or not) despite challenges.

Keywords: critical consciousness, adolescent orphans, foster home, orphanage.

1.   INTRODUCTION

This paper reports on a comparative study of the experiences of the orphaned adolescents (OAs) living in foster care with relatives and in an orphanage. Orphaned and vulnerable adolescents in the informal settlement within the context of this paper have been identified as those experiencing socio-political, economic, cultural or physical disadvantage (Mohajer and Earnest, 1992; Mkhonta, 2008). Therefore, this study recognises research for social change in that through the development of critical consciousness, it is aiming to break the walls of silence surrounding OAs by critically engaging them in the discourse about their lived experiences, to make new meanings about their world.

The study also sought to answer the following critical question:

•   How do OAs deal with death and loss, and how do they recreate a sense of purpose in their lives?

In an attempt to break the silence, OAs' lenses are used as a platform for meaning-making to understand themselves and how they cope with psycho-social, emotional and socio-political challenges.

It also amplifies the voices of OAs by utilising critical consciousness through interrogating their disadvantaged and isolated social contexts (informal settlement); being receptive to the new without rejecting the old (their identity). Diemer and Bluestein (2006) in the work of Freire (1993) asserts that critical consciousness represents a consciousness of and critical analysis of socio-political inequalities and motivation to challenge perceived injustices to produce social change. In this paper the researcher offers OAs interactions in foster homes and in an orphanage context through the development of critical consciousness as the key to liberate them, by giving them a platform to be heard.

2.   THE ORETICAL/CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

An eclectic mix of three theoretical sources, namely discourse analysis, constructivism and de-constructivism, that is,   creating dialogue through interviews, the use of language in descriptions, reading, writing and interpreting the text as well as drawing of pictures, were employed. It is through discourse that people come to an understanding of situations, exchange ideas and bring about change. Through interactions language is used. It is a "power to represent thoughts, feelings and experiences symbolically, and a very important tool for thinking process" (Chaffee, 2006: 239). The aim of using the three theories concurrently was an effort to be genuine in understanding feelings of OAs and to be sure if they express their emotions honestly and realistically. In addition, applying a   critical theory perspective proved to be fruitful since it often challenges our common sense and encourages us to critically approach our assumptions about ourselves.

The interactive process between participants and researcher is usually not a naturally occurring social interaction, but engineered, thus discourse analysis is helpful in deconstructing generated linguistic material. In addition to this, it is how the narratives and texts are interpreted and treated in order to meaningfully construct knowledge. It is through the discourse that meaning is constructed and reconstructed based on the previously lived experience. Constructing and de-constructing knowledge to Watson (2006:46) reflects "a reaction to and an interaction with macro changes of recent decades." He further adds that constructivists believe that individuals construct their own reality and their own truth as it lies within the individuals' experiences and from their environment. Therefore, the interaction with orphans applying the constructivist approach promoted critical thinking, a perspective supported by the   views in Paulo Freire's work (1973) of the final stage of "critical transitivity", which is a stage characterized by depth in the interpretation of problems, by testing one's own findings and openness to revision and reconstruction. A focus on linguistic performances are central to discourse analysis theory which Potter and Wetherell (1995: 80-81) describe as "a theory which is concerned with what people do with their talk and writing and also with all sorts of resources that people draw on in the course of practices, how discourse is constructed to perform social interactions and the treatment of the content of what people say or write."

Through de-constructivism real motivational factors in OAs self-perception, that is, knowing yourself, was attained by some of the OAs where they tended to fake their emotions.

3.   LITERATURE REVIEW

Studies conducted internationally and nationally prove that there is a growing number of orphans (Africa's Orphaned Generations Report, UNICEF, 2009; UNAIDS, 2007 and 2009; Report on Annual Schools Survey, 2007 and 2008). For example, more than two million learners enrolled in ordinary schools in 2007 were orphans and KZN had 742 206, followed by Eastern Cape with an estimated number of 358 315 (Report on Schools Survey, 2007; 2008). An attempt to respond to the issues of children has been made very clear through the international and national policies, for example, UNCRC (1989), SACA (2005), the Children's Act 38 of 2005, UNICEF (2009) and the S.A. Child Gauge (2009/2010). These policies and programmes put the children at the centre of every decision made. The policies' intentions are unquestionable; however they seem to be as far from reach to OAs (micro level versus macro level). Social exclusion perpetuates restricted access of orphans to social benefits and other aspects of community life which denies them the social justice, respect for human rights and dignity a privilege for all citizens enshrined in the Constitution of South Africa.

South Africa has been, and continues to be, subject to enormous socio-political and economic changes, with several factors leading to many children becoming orphans (Mthiyane, 2003 and Holley, 2009). These factors include, the pandemic of HIV/AIDS, unemployment which leads to unhealthy lifestyles, political and criminal violence, and the massive geographical and emotional dislocations of people. According to Kiggudu and Oldewage-Theron (2009) orphans are a part of all communities and yet they have always been perceived negatively and referred to as minority or marginalized groups.

A critical consciousness of macro-level inequity, feeling empowered to produce social change may serve an agentic function in helping marginalised youth overcome the socio-political barriers (Diemer, Kauffman, Koening, Trahan, and Hsieh, 2006; Diemer, Wang, Moore, Gregory, Hatcher and Vought, 2010; Scott, 2009), and not to be treated like passive "objects" but be engaged in interacting with multiple life challenges (Edstrome and Khan, 2009). In other words it stresses the inclusion of the marginalised groups (OA) in both orphanages and foster homes in the informal settlement. The level of consciousness allows for avoidance of distortions when perceiving problems and pre-conceived notions when critically analysing them. Informal settlements are characterised by poor, underprivileged individuals, families, communities and societies who are denied equal access to resources.

For adolescents who are in the stage of great change in their lives, who struggle with issues of identity and independence as they are moving away from childhood to adulthood (Donald, Lazarus and Lolwana, 1995), this poses a great challenge. OAs are members of the society and some of the values and conditions of the members of society are citizenship, democracy and justice. Further, Diemer et al. (2010) argues that helping others in one's community who are similar, oppressed or marginalised (OAs) in the informal settlement is consonant with critical consciousness (Freire, 1973; 1993). McLaren in Roseboro (2008: 97- 98) also sees critical pedagogy as "not about teaching students to question only, but to situate social phenomena in broader structural relationships and to ask questions such as who benefits from these relationships, how unequal relationships are being produced and how individuals interpret their situatedness in a system of unequal economic, racial and gendered relations." However, Renchler (1992) concurs but argues that in order to achieve this it is very important to cultivate a sense of self-determination first to OAs, which he defines as "ownership or control over a situation" before individuals will become motivated to act.

3.1   Experiences of orphaned adolescents

Worldwide adolescence is a concept defined by numerous researchers as encompassing physical and emotional stages of transition from childhood to adulthood (Donald et al., 2005; Fong, 2007; Operario, Cluver, Rees, Macphail, and Pettifor, 2008; Nagar, Sharma and Chopra, 2008; Mohajer and Earnest, 2009). The silence that surrounds OAs and other vulnerable children is perceived to perpetuate marginalisation, stigma and discrimination, which are a concern for social justice. This can deny OAs an essential opportunity to advance in life and result in poor self-esteem or inferiority complexes. But, fostering critical consciousness can bring about social change personally and in communities by realising that democratic citizens are sometimes regulated by the forces of power and deceit and these need to be challenged (Steinberg and Kincheloe, 2010).

While resiliency, according to Lavretsky and Irwin (2007) is defined as a general capability or a psychological strength to deal successfully with stressful life situations and to withstand risk factors, Radebe (2007) further suggests that tied to resiliency is empowerment that includes both a psychological and personal control of own lives and which is not a gift from the powerful but a multi-dimensional social process. Given that, it must also be understood that OAs are not simply a passive, targeted group to be aided, but capable actors and important resources to engage in community solution (Children's Act, 2005). By facilitating empowerment and engaging OAs in their social setting, Ebersohn and Elloff (2001) stress that it is equally important as in applying one of the functions of problem-focused coping which is to change the troubled person-environment relationship by acting on the environment itself. It follows that setting silences to speak and critical consciousness, the empowerment for OAs will thus bring about new hopes for their future.

Zizzi, Rye and Ohara-Thompkins (2009: 2) seem to concur with the above view where they contend that "youth can contribute by participating in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of related projects and prevent and mitigate life challenges in their communities."

3.2   Families, communities and coping strategies

Coping strategies in Reber and Reber (2001: 157) are defined as "conscious, rational ways of dealing with the anxieties of life." The environment that children experience affects their overall growth and development and how they cope with undesired experiences and challenges of life. Using Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems which place emphasis on the interconnectedness and interdependence of relationships in all systems (micro to macro), the emphasis on psycho-social development of the individual is the importance of social support. The most important factors in the child's environment are at home (family), the school, the community and the society (Mwamwenda, 1995; Donald, Lazarus and Lolwana, 1997; Donald, Lazarus and Lolwana, 2002; Visser, 2007; Singh, 2009).

Together these influence   how individuals learn to accept or not accept culture, codes of behaviour, norms and standards and values in their social contexts. All these, coupled with formal intervention programmes, are seen as key social factors in the lives of adolescents to challenge injustices (Campel and McPhail, 2002 in Lewis and Lee, 2009; Kiggudu and Oldewage-Theron, 2009). Within communities, relationships change easily over time, for example, change caused by loss or death can change relationships and roles of the individuals. There are also cultural influences in any individual's life, community and society , and therefore assuming that all children should be able to adjust to change and adapt with ease, for some OAs it is an added burden. Loss through death is a traumatic experience that evokes emotional experience. Therefore, it is imperative for governments, communities, relief and development organisations and civil society groups to support, educate, engage and empower the world's most vulnerable citizens, adolescent orphans.

4.   RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A qualitative methodological approach was adopted in this study. Qualitative approaches, according to Nieuwenhuis (2010) are preferable where the goal is to seek an understanding of a process or phenomenon in context. This was congruent with the researcher's aim in that she sought to understand the role of critical consciousness and coping strategies of OAs in real life situations, in the informal settlement. A case study approach was adopted which seemed appropriate for OAs as the issue of death and loss is deeply personal in experience for them. A case study is about interpersonal relationships and individual responses to having the meaning of one's life shaken and changed. Nieuwenhuis (2010:75) views that "a case study opens the possibility of giving

voice to the powerless and the voiceless," and this approach seemed to be appropriate to understand the perceptions of OAs in their context. Equally important in this study was to explore the richness of the OAs' capacity to survive adversity and triumph and to develop personally, and accept and be accepted in a diverse democratic society.

4.1.   Setting

This research study was conducted in the Inanda informal settlement area which is in the North of Durban. All interviews were conducted in a high school (randomly selected out of 12 schools in the Inanda Central Circuit) and the orphanage (in the same vicinity of the school) of the choice of study.

4.2.   Sampling

Guided by Teddlie and Tashakkori (2009) and Walliman (2009), a sample of five orphans was randomly selected in an orphanage and five orphans out of the population of 16 from the school, who were living with foster parents or relatives. This provided the researcher with 10 orphans, four boys and six girls. The choice of these two contexts was deliberate in the sense that it provided the comparative experiences of the OAs. The age differences of adolescents (14 - 20) and grades were considered in both institutions.

4.3 .   Data Gathering Techniques

Semi-structured interviews and diaries were the means chosen to record the stories of the OAs. The interactive and reflective participation enabled the marginalised voices of OAs to be heard because (inner) dialogues are mostly accompanied by similar dialogue with others (communication) acknowledging the power of language. Language, according to Gay and Kirkland (2003), has power to perpetuate racism, cultural hegemony and marginalisation. The use of interviews, drawings, poetry and drawings allowed OAs to think deeply and analytically, convert knowledge from one form to another, and to also examine their feelings and experiences (positive or negative) by sharing and receiving constructive feedback. The purpose and the value of using the diaries specifically in this study gave participants time to reflect on the responses that are thought out and thoroughly sort them out, the use of choice of written text or suitable language that is not spontaneous as it can be in a verbal conversation, the degree of openness and the level of creativity using language and to validate what is said with what is written. Therefore, diaries provided different ideas for participants to organise and construct their versions of language in the absence and influence of the researcher as these were completed in their own time but reviewed at the end of each week. The researcher also needed to find out how responsible the OAs were, which is a skill they need for future endevours.

Consequently, for validity, triangulation was used, which is the multiple use of different data collection instruments. This helped to deepen the understanding of daily experiences and emotions experienced which may sometimes, as has been highlighted in the case of diaries, be difficult to understand and explain fully when verbalised in discussions or interviews.

4.5 . Data Analysis

Discourse Analysis (DA) or dialogical methods were adopted. DA, according to Parker (2005), is the organisation of language into certain kinds of social bonds. Further, it is concerned with how language is used and how individuals are used by it to position relations of power as 'subjects' in the society. Potter and Wetherell (1995:80-81) concur with Parker. They contend that: "DA is concerned with what people do with their talk and writing and also with the sorts of resources that people draw on in the course of these practices." DA involves four key ideas, namely multivoicedness, semiotics, resistance and discourse. First, multivoicedness of language is concerned with looking at how one particular word is different in the sense that it positions the self and others differently to fit certain categories, for example OAs. In this study the social settings or context seemed to be critical to most orphaned adolescents in the way they perceived themselves comparatively, hence the importance of understanding these multi-voices. Second, semiotics is putting language together in discussion and how we are organised by language in creating meaning by our choice of words and sentences. Thirdly, resistance sees language not as describing the world only, but doing things by keeping power and power relations in place or challenges them. The fourth idea links multi-voicedness, semiotics and resistance by organisation of language in certain kinds of social bonds which include and exclude certain people or groups. Since the DA theory (Drew, 1995) focuses on linguistic performances, the texts generated by means of interviews, drawing or writing a poem and diary entries were treated as constructions of meaning through the discourses available to OAs. They were given an opportunity to practice self-reflection and to engage in critical conversation or dialogue verbally and in writing. Phun (2009) and Danielewiez (2001) in Gay and Kirkland (2003: 155-156) explains the following about self-reflection:

> "Reflexivity is an act of self-conscious consideration that can lead people to deepen understanding of themselves and others not in the abstract, but in relation to a specific social environment."

To offer the reader enough textual evidence of the interviewees' own voices, themes were identified and categorized into three different sub-themes as they provided for organisation of data.

5. ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Orphaned Adolescents are vulnerable and scrupulous attention was paid to obtaining informed consent from guardians (the head of foster families) and

the orphanage director.

Ethical clearance and permission from the department of education as well as schools was sought. The children, as adolescents and able to understand the idea of research, were also approached for their consent. For available professional assistance, social workers and psychologists based at the University of KwaZulu-Natal Westville Campus were contacted. Assurances of confidentiality, however, were frequently made during contact session and maintained by giving each of the participants a pseudonym.

6. DATA PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION

In this section the researcher presents and discusses data under the themes that emerged from the analysis. The following themes and sub-themes emerged from the study: loss, trust and motivation. For the purpose of this paper the researcher concentrated on the themes: loss and trust.

LOSS	TRUST
Moving and separation from siblings	Silenced emotions
Absent father	Orphanage life and family life
Loss	Safety

6.1 Loss

Under the theme of loss the researcher has incorporated the themes of moving, an absent father, death and separation from siblings. In this section, the researcher presents a number of extracts from the texts generated in dialogue with the children which explore what becoming an orphan has meant to them. According to Buchanan and Flouri (2001), the loss of one or both parents may places an additional risk on orphans' critical need for family support in young adulthood.

The words in the "texts" provided by the OAs, together with the researcher's observation notes on their facial expressions and non-verbal "language" were interpreted for themes and sub-themes. By "setting the silences to speak" it is an emancipatory construction of how orphans perceived themselves and their situation in their context. Loss and being "an orphan" for the adolescents meant the change of identity and family environment and structure as well as bearing the stigma of living in an institution and to be labeled as an orphan. They described the situation (loss) and meaning around being an orphan in the way each one wanted or made them feel comfortable, for example:

"In most cases, one cannot differentiate some children from me."
"In an orphanage... they look down upon you, they say we starve here."
"I've got people around because if not, I would be on the streets without a place of which

I can call home."

Some responses especially with reference to "place I can call home", "cannot differentiate", implied something of what Visser (2007: 118) calls social embeddedness and negative disconnectedness for most orphans in an orphanage as they stressed feelings of isolation, stigmatization, prejudice, and the attitudes of others towards them. In this view, White (1999: 73) as cited in Astoiants (2007), said the following about children living in institutions: "They are different from the other children as a consequence of a large number of various stigmatizing processes which they experience in school, in relations with neighbours and the public world of social services, evidently because they are excluded physically and socially." This perception by OAs and what White says is also supported by constructivist theories where it is believed that by engaging in a dialogue, people interact with the environment and try to understand it, being guided by past lived experiences.

The death of a mother was a great loss to most adolescents especially with the absence of fathers in their lives.

> "I grew up not knowing my father."
> "I don't know my father."
> "They are both dead now..."
> "I do not know my father or my mother."

It was interesting to note that two children mentioned the death of their fathers with an "I don't care" attitude, viewing them as "irresponsible", dads who they could not feel proud of. Most of them quickly changed the topic about their fathers spoke about their mothers. The two AOs said this about their father's death:

> "I heard that he was knocked down by the car and died on the spot".
> "He fell sick from a headache and then died... when I heard I just said 'oh' because my mother also fell sick..."

Most of the children emphasize that they were the eldest in the family, and also that they were responsible for their brothers and sisters, now and in the future. They chose to repeat the words "younger" and "eldest" to clarify their position:

> "I'm the eldest."
> "I have got one other brother and one sister…. I'm the eldest."
> "They live on the farm with my step mother. They are younger than me."

Again, birth order and the number of siblings are emphasized which denoted power and responsibility that awaits them with their younger siblings in future. Further on the question of separation and moving to new social stations, the analysis suggested that all these children both from an orphanage and in foster homes were obliged to move and were left with no choice, but to agree to the decisions made for them by those with power (family members).

> "My aunt said we must come."

> "When my mom died, my aunt took us to her home."
> "…I was forced to come and live here in this home."

Edstrome and Khan (2009) concur with the objectives of the South African Youth Policy (2008-2013), NCS Policy for Life Orientation (2003) and Life Orientation CAPS (2010), and state that vulnerable children or adolescents should not be seen and treated like passive "objects" instead should be seen and engaged with as agents to their maturation and in interacting with multiple challenges in life. To be silenced is critical to development and has negative implications, for example, decisions taken for one of the OAs to be separated from other siblings affected her in overcoming her grief. She wished to share with her siblings the special moments they had with their mother as they were growing together. What is noticeable throughout the "texts" is the selection of common vocabulary, common preoccupations and common avoidances or silences about experiences that seemed to be too painful to express. Given that most of the OAs had experienced a secure base by having an especially close relationship with their mothers, this helped them to cope better, and they were intrinsically and extrinsically resilient in their new social settings. An exceptional case though was that of one AO who yearned for the feeling of attachment. He said:

> "I don't know both my parents… they left me… even my name and surname is not my real one…. I wish… but, it doesn't matter now…"

Culture (Lago and Thompson, 1996: 34) affects people's ways of being, their behaviour, their interpersonal relationships, their notions of meaning. Knowing who you are and where you come from is part of our culture, and we are shaped by that. Culturally in the traditional African society (Zulus), it is the responsibility of the male adult to provide security at home. Male OAs in an orphanage took it upon themselves to be responsible for the safety of younger boys, girls and the female orphanage director (their granny). This formed part of who they are, their culture and how they are seen by others. Hook (2007) argues that in Lacanian psychoanalysis, it is assumed that the other is always there and it accounts for power where it appears, whenever the subject is confronted with symbolic structure or a challenge. The OAs had this to say about safety in the informal settlement:

> "It is not safe here."
> "….the boys… they look after us…"
> "Things ….like girls drink alcohol, little children will grow up and copy bad things..., which are not right.".
> "You see people fighting for no apparent reason anytime and anywhere".
> ".. This neighborhood is not safe for kids and girls…"

6.2   Trust

Under the theme of trust the researcher has incorporated the sub themes of silenced emotions, safety, orphanage life and family life. The evidence established in this study also supports Varma (1993) who contends that if one has unsolved psychological and emotional problems it is not easy to achieve

self-confidence, feelings of security and freedom from threat.

Challenges of low self-esteem and the use of silence as a coping strategy were evident in OAs in an orphanage with the frequent use of words like: "stupid" , "don't want to ask for help" and "identity" in their responses. This use of silence as a coping strategy is also viewed by Lazarus (1993) as a powerful psychoanalytic concept associated with a particular defensive style. Variations in the use of language are important in building the trust and to unlock meanings that might remain inaccessible, but, it was evident that lack of trust and silenced emotions were experienced by these OAs. One boy said:

> "I don't believe in talking to someone about how I feel. I just keep it to myself. It helps me. Even if I'm very angry I just keep quiet. Most of the time I don't like to ask for help from another person."

Acknowledging that feeling secure helps a child to cope effectively, develop self-confidence, have positive self-image and knowing who they are (communication trust) as the basis of self-disclosure (Mertens, 1998; Mthiyane, 2003; Mertens, 2009). Caution was maintained in not making the mistake of assuming homogeneity within OA groups. One of the hierarchical views of coping and its principles is that it is a process, which may be useful for adaptation for different individuals. As a process, it changes over time depending on the situational context (Lazarus, 1993). Most adolescents form attitudes towards themselves on the basis of what they are told about themselves (Mwamwenda, 1995:68). They sometimes become very reserved, sensitive to how they are seen, where they come from (their backgrounds) and what is said to them.

7.   CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to comparatively understand the experiences of orphaned adolescent in an orphanage and in foster care with relatives. (Dis) empowerment and (dis)empowered communities (informal settlements) pose a challenge in the socio-political context. Some communities are so disempowered that even through the guidance of policies where they could challenge the socio-political barriers, they were not critically aware. This perpetuated oppression, marginalization and social exclusion by those in power. A case in point would be, for example, where some political parties manipulate the socio-economic challenges of the disempowered individuals and their social contexts to get support and to eventually keep them in power. This study is important in that it suggests that by utilising critical consciousness, interventions and critical engagement in pursuit of transformation in a democratic society and through critical self-reflection, social justice for everyone, including OAs, will be a respected value. OAs and other oppressed groups might develop emotionally, psychologically and socio-politically, as well as participate in society as critical and active citizens. They will actively involve themselves throughout their adult life, not to allow exploitation or to be silenced through engagement and contribution to

changing the socio-political structure or context of South Africa.

This feeling of empowerment may consequently lead to OAs understanding themselves better, their own culture as well as taking charge of their own lives and their social stations, a prospect they all looked forward to.

8.   REFERENCES

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