funds of knowledge in child-headed households: a Ugandan case study

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introduction

• child-headed households (CHHs): situation in which one child has taken primarily responsibility for his or her siblings (parents may be unable to maintain care of children due to disease, addictions, neglect, etc.)

• CHHs = a group of children under 17 living on their own in one household

• we know little about children living in these circumstances (Thurman, Snider, Spencer & Brown, 2006)

• majority of research on CHHs in Africa has focused on children’s risks and vulnerabilities (Skovdal, Ogutu, Aoro & Campbell, 2009)
The study

• **purpose:** in this pilot study we investigate the “funds of knowledge” and means of learning new knowledge of children living in CHHs in Uganda’s Rakai District

• **global understandings of children and childhood:** we advance the view of children as resourceful, competent, and knowledgeable, highlighting their skills and abilities to build on, utilize, and acquire new funds of knowledge in conditions of extreme poverty, adversity, and stigma
• communities in rural Uganda have traditionally relied on extended family structures to care for orphans

• current scale of the problem has completely over-saturated family safety nets

• first cases of CHHs (children under 17) identified in late 1980s in Uganda’s Rakai District (highest HIV/AIDS rate in UG)

• District POP = 470,000 → 1000 households headed by children [1+ in 80]

• not a short term emergency, rather a new reality of poor and very vulnerable extended families and communities operating at the limits of their resources
research site
challenges

• stigma of HIV/AIDS, emotional burden of parents’ death, distress of family unit collapsing, decreased attention and affection coupled with a severe decline in the family’s economic power

• effects are exacerbated because children lose their primary channel for receiving traditional and new knowledge about critical issues such as health care, livelihood, family history, and social and cultural values and beliefs -- knowledge that has a significant bearing on their future well-being

• girls are particularly disadvantaged because they typically are responsible for caring for the sick as well as their younger siblings; they also have primary responsibility for household/domestic chores
conceptual focus

**social practice research** (Heath, 1983; Street, 1984): learning as socially situated

- **funds of knowledge:** “the essential cultural practices and bodies of knowledge and information that households use to survive, to get ahead, and to thrive” (Moll & Greenberg, 1990, p. 21).

- a F of K approach to research, which involves first hand experience with families, affords a powerful way to represent existing resources, competence and knowledge, viewing families in terms of strengths and resources rather than deficits; children are seen as informants about their own lives (Hardman, 1973).
• **multimodality/social semiotics** is concerned with “how human beings use different modes of communication, like speech, writing, images, gesture, and sound to represent or make meaning in the world” (Stein, 2008, p. 871).

• **zone of proximal development** (Vygotsky) -- “a space in which social processes and cultural resources of all kinds are involved in the child’s construction of her future” (Scribner, 1990, p. 92).

  • to understand sibling reciprocity, we need to move beyond the metaphors of scaffolding, collaborative learning, and guided participation (Gregory, 2001).

  • anthropology of childhood (Lancy, 2008; Montgomery, 2008); culture and human development (Rogoff, 2003)
phase 1: the families

• **Research Q:** What are the funds of knowledge of children living in CHHs and how do these children draw on their knowledge and learn new knowledge to meet the ongoing needs of their family members?

• 5 CHHs purposively selected (children under 17 living on their own)

• Data collection over 8 months (1-2 family visits per month)
  
  participant observation, ethnographic conversations, life history interviews, focus group discussions, and visual methods (drawing, photography, mapping) [Barton & Hamilton, Heath, Prinsloo & Breier, Purcell-Gates, Street]

• Thematic analysis: (descriptive codes within and across the data sources, abstracted themes, theme clusters/domains, global themes -- practices/knowledge/global themes) (Attride-Stirling, 2001)
2008 participants

**Family 1:**
Gerald (18), Vincent (17), Lawrence (16), Jane (13), Michael (10)

**Family 2:**
Fred (17), Gabriel (15), John (10)

**Family 3:**
Annet (15), Juliet (14), Christine (13)

**Family 4:**
Barbra (14), Lydia (11), Raymond (10)

**Family 5:**
Ibra (12), Winnie (10), Irene (8)**, Emmanuel (6), Enoch (4), Malijad (3)

red = in school, ** = missing
phase 2: the teachers

**Research Qs:**
1. What are teachers’ and other educators’ perceptions of children living in CHHs?
2. How do teachers (and schools more broadly) address the unique learning needs of children living in CHHs?
3. What current ministry level policies are in place to support and address the learning needs of these children?

**Data sources (4 months):**

- informal interviews
- questionnaires
funds of knowledge

- school communication
- family history, values, and beliefs
- communication (sign language)
- social knowledge (relations with neighbours)
- school knowledge (school books)
- HIV/AIDS knowledge
- food gathering (digging)
- animal care (goats, rabbit)
- household management (childcare, cooking, budgets)
- trade/business (selling coffee; odd jobs)
- construction (home repair)
- religion (moral knowledge and ethics)
Negotiating to stay in school -- Family values and beliefs

Global theme: Preparing for the future

WINNIE: For education… When our mother died, we decided to talk to the teachers at school and explain to them that we had lost both parents and that we were the ones looking after ourselves... the teachers couldn’t believe it, so they told us to go and get a letter from the LC Chairman to confirm what we had said. We went there despite the fact that we were so young, we told him what the teachers had said about giving us a letter to take to them confirming that we had lost our parents. Then the chairman decided to go there himself and explain to the teachers, he did so and explained to them. They decided to leave us study.
Visiting neighbours/looking at family photos -- family history knowledge

global theme: constructing identity/remembering who we are

DEBBIE: How do you remember or record [document] your family history? How do you remember all that? Is it through story telling, do you have photos or others?

WINNIE: OK, when we go to the neighbour, we see the things they are doing, so we come back and tell ourselves stories from school.

DEBBIE: What helps you remember all that you told me the other time about your family history?

WINNIE: OK, some things we see from people.

DEBBIE: And you remember?

WINNIE: Yes. For instance when we see people doing what daddy and mummy used to do, we remember them.

IBRA: We remember by seeing the photos.
Signing to brother with special needs -- Sign language knowledge
Global theme: Maintaining the family unit/communicating

M/D: How many signs have you taught him so far that he can also do?
WINNIE: Sending him a saucepan from the house, food, knife, salt or plates and washing, you show him how to do it and he does it.
M/D: Is that all you have taught him to do?
WINNIE: No, also sweeping.
M/D: Approximately, how many do you think you have taught him?
WINNIE: I think like 20.
M/D: OK, how did you come to know that he needed to be communicated to using signs and when did you start doing so?
WINNIE: We saw it from some mute guy who used to stay in the neighbourhood, they would do for him signs and times touch on things for him to understand because he wasn’t talking.
M/D: And so, how did you come to know or think that this one too was a mute?
WINNIE: We couldn’t understand what he was saying or talking and so decided to start using signs.
Enoch (4) and Emmanuel (6)
Singing in the evening -- Family values and beliefs

Global theme: maintaining ethnic identity and social relations/remembering who we are

Song: “You have sat well our dear visitors, oh you have sat well, and we shall pay you. Thank you for keeping peace our dear visitors oh you have sat well, we shall pay you oh oh you have sat well our dear visitors thank you for keeping peace (law and order). Clap for me so as Buganda kingdom feels happy, oh you have sat so well… Laughter… we shall pay you, thank you for keeping peace our dear visitors you have sat so well. Beat the drum so as Buganda can rejoice and dance around oh you have so well, we shall pay you, thank you for keeping peace our dear visitors…” [translation from Luganda]
Helping siblings with homework -- School knowledge
Global theme: building knowledge/preparing for the future

M/D: How about homework? Do you support or help each other with it?
WINNIE: Yes.
M/D: How do you do it?
WINNIE: The one who is a class higher than the other helps out the one who is in a lower class for instance. I do help Ibra because I have already learnt what he is studying and others of course and the young ones too.
Singing to siblings -- HIV/AIDS knowledge

Global theme: not repeating the past/securing the future

IBRA: I learn how to beat the drum and play the xylophone and get a song from it.

DEBBIE: OK. Go ahead and sing for us one that you use to communicate to others!

IBRA: Tusana tukomye buli kive eki sibye mu kenenya wetunakuza Uganda nyafe okugenda mu maso… Kyaba nga kyasonyi nabuswavu mu je kinana omuntu okumanya nti waliwo lumala Bantu…

Trans.: We ought to stop or end the practice that is leading to the increase of HIV/AIDS so as our dear mother country Uganda can go ahead. It was a shaming in the 1980s one to know that there is a killer disease that finishes people [To prevent myself from getting or acquiring the killer disease HIV/AIDS.]
Leaving baby at home -- Childcare knowledge

Global theme: the limits of the family’s resources

IBRA: There wasn’t anyone who came to assist us or even check on us after the death of our parents.
DEBBIE: They left you in this house?
IBRA: Yes.
DEBBIE: Even that baby?
IBRA: Yes.
DEBBIE: You mean you are the one who have taken care of him till today or up to where he is? … Now, tell me about this young one, where do you leave him when you are going to school?
WINNIE: When we are going to school, we leave the young one in the neighbourhood with leftovers to eat at lunch time, then pick him up in the evening when we come back.
DEBBIE: Doesn’t he cry?
WINNIE: We have nothing [else] to do.
conceptual focus

• **funds of knowledge**: “the essential cultural practices and bodies of knowledge and information that households use to survive, to get ahead, and to thrive” (Moll & Greenberg, 1990, p. 21).

• **multimodality/social semiotics** is concerned with “how human beings use different modes of communication, like speech, writing, images, gesture, and sound to represent or make meaning in the world” (Stein, 2008, p. 871).

• **zone of proximal development** (Vygotsky) -- “a space in which social processes and cultural resources of all kinds are involved in the child’s construction of her future” (Scribner, 1990, p. 92).
key findings: phase 1

- **funds of knowledge** (Moll & Greenberg, 1990): the children in our study demonstrated knowledge within a wide range of communicative/multimodal practices and across diverse domains that they used in productive ways to survive and attempt to move forward (this family was not yet thriving)

- **networks of support**: they were able to build on these funds of knowledge by accessing community resources such as neighbors, teachers, town council, friends, and our research assistant as a primary means of building on and acquiring new knowledge

- **collective ZPD** (Scribner, 1990): they were highly creative at collectively pooling their funds of knowledge and using existing resources to learn new knowledge that would allow them to meet their immediate needs and remain together as a family unit

- **conceptions of identity**: how knowledge is used and constructed is mediated by the children’s constructions of identity and community, real and imagined (Norton & Toohey, 2003; Kanno & Norton, 2003)
summary: phase 1

1. Our research demonstrates that children living in child-headed households are highly creative at collectively pooling their funds of knowledge and using existing resources to meet their immediate needs and remain together as a family unit.

2. How they use, build on, and acquire new funds of knowledge is mediated by a strong sense of who they want to become and what they want to contribute to their families and communities.

3. Future research focusing on children’s networks of support are necessary to better understand the role played by community members in general and teachers in particular in supporting children in child-headed households to remain together despite extreme adversity.
data collection: phase 2

Research Qs:

1. What are teachers’ and other educators’ perceptions of children living in CHHs?

   What is the relationship between the children’s funds of knowledge and teachers’ perceptions?

2. How do teachers (and schools more broadly) address the unique learning needs of children living in CHHs?

3. What current ministry level policies are in place to support and address the learning needs of these children?

Data sources (4 months):

   informal interviews
   questionnaires
Research on rural education in the context of HIV/AIDS identified a lack of adequate teacher competence in addressing the learning needs of children who had been impacted by HIV/AIDS (Kakuru, 2006). E.g.,

- teachers did not recognize the effect of HIV/AIDS on students’ access to learning materials
- some students reported being punished or at least ridiculed for coming to lessons without school supplies
- students complained that teachers punished them for arriving late or missing school.

Children seek out school as a place of belonging/community; many identify teachers as their only source of adult support and guidance (Athanasopoulus, 2009; Maqoka & Dreyer, 2007)
Teacher questionnaire responses
May 2010
1. As a teacher, what experiences have you had with children living in child-headed households?

**Example 1:**
- These children lack basic needs like food, shelter and education. Their rights are early violated. These children are at high risk of getting HIV/AIDS. The very much lack scholastic materials. They perform poorly in academics. They are ever late at school.

**Example 2:**
- These children many times have a lot of freedom at home. This enables them to enjoy a lot of leisure activities excessively, many of which may not be fit for them, e.g., films, disco dances, etc.… Others tend to be overloaded with domestic work. Others cannot at times get the needs that support them in school so a greater percentage of them drop out at the primary level.
2. What are your perceptions or impressions of children living in these circumstances?

Example 1:
- As children stay alone, they end up not getting what they are supposed to get.
- Some end up being street kids and others resort to early marriages.
- They also end up acquiring HIV/AIDS at an early age.

Example 2:
- I’m afraid these pupils’ future is greatly limited as many of them resort to truancy or go in for work, or early sex/marriage. Such greatly affect their future. This is mainly due to total absence of adequacy of parental guidance. So many times these children do things in an experimental manner thinking they will succeed that way.
3. Do you think these children have different or unique learning needs that warrant special attention?

Example 1:
- Vary their teaching [...] to cater to individual differences.
- Teachers should struggle to see that they guide and counsel these children accordingly.
- Teachers should teach them to manage time profitably to avoid redundancy.
- Let teachers teach these children the dangers of HIV/AIDS.
- Teaching them craft skills to make them self-reliant.

Example 2:
- These children need a lot of guidance and counselling that could give them support and continue attending school. They need closer monitoring of their activities. These should have been given by the parents.
4. Do you think teachers have a unique role to play in supporting the learning of these children?

**Example 1:**
Yes, I do through doing the following:
- teaching pupils life skills
- through PIASEY Programme
- guidance and counselling

**Example 2:**
These children tend to feel greater independence so many times their characters are not easy to mould for they do not have any body to fear at home. Here the children need guidance and counselling. Their absenteeism rate is high and mobility in schools is very high. All of these affect their studies. Through guidance and support of a responsible elder brother/sister.
5. Do you think teachers have a unique role to play in supporting these children? Why or why not?

**Example 1:**
- Yes, because they are the only immediate parent. They are the parents who can care and give protection to these children. They are the ones to address these problems to government officials so as to give help to these children as far as education is concerned.

**Example 2:**
- The teachers should protect the children from others (peers) in case of stigmatization.
- They should give them extra child study in order that they can find the interests and challenge of these children.
- Teachers should try as much as possible to give them practical skills.
6. Who do you think should be responsible for the well-being of these children and why?

no response

[The children] should understand their situation and work hard to support themselves. They should listen and respect the elders in order to get love and advice from them.
7. Are you hopeful about the future of the children in your classroom/school who are living in child-headed households?

**Example 1:**

Yes, because due to the counselling and guidance acquired they are free about the problems they face, and they can solve them. They have good problem solving techniques which can make them good citizens in the future.

**Example 2:**

It is minimal. For many times these children give[n] minimal monitoring tend to go in for sexual activities at an early age. They drop out of school to look for jobs (babysitting for girls, bodaboda cycling for boys). They tend to drop out when teachers try to put in place disciplinary measures.
Winnie’s eco-map (social support network)  What makes you happy? (visual response)
(new) family photos

What is the role of peers?
participating families: 2010

2008
Family 1:
Gerald (18), Vincent (17), Lawrence (16), Jane (13), Michael (10)

Family 2:
Fred (17), Gabriel (15), John (10)

Family 3:
Annet (15), Juliet (14), Christine (13)

Family 4:
Barbra (14), Lydia (11), Raymond (10)

Family 5:
Ibra (12), Winnie (10)**, Irene (8)**, Emmanuel (6), Enoch (4), Malijad (3)

red=in school

2010
Family 1:
Vincent (19), Lawrence (18), Jane (15), Michael (12) [Gerald married]

Family 2:
Fred (19), Gabriel (17), John (12)

Family 3:
Annet (17), Juliet (16), Christine (15)

Family 4:
Barbra (16), Lydia (13), Raymond (12) [older girls living with grandmother]

Family 5:
Ibra (14), Emmanuel (8), Enoch (6), Malijad (5)
a global perspective: significance to education

- Classrooms today are highly diverse, and include children whose experiences may be virtually incomprehensible to their teachers (Denos, Toohey, Neilson, & Waterstone, 2009).

- There is a need for teachers to recognize, respect, and where possible, cooperate with communities to maintain diversity, in its many forms, and to develop ways of teaching that contribute to the extraordinary social change required in addressing current social issues (Ladson-Billings, 2001).

- Such change requires that we understand diversity differently, and that we discover and build on students’ strengths rather than defining them in terms of what they lack (Denos et al., 2009).

- Bringing deeper understanding to the resilience, skills, knowledge, and abilities of children living in adverse and diverse conditions may open new possibilities for students and teachers in classrooms globally.
issues of concern

- What are the ethics of doing research with CHHs?
- What is role of the researcher?
- How can schooling begin to address the realities of these children (e.g., trauma)?
2010 participating families

Family 1:
Vincent (19), Lawrence (18), Jane (15), Michael (12) [Gerald married]

Family 2:
Fred (19), Gabriel (17), John (12)

Family 3:
Annet (17), Juliet (16), Christine (15)

Family 4:
Barbra (16), Lydia (13), Raymond (12) [older girls living with grandmother]

Family 5:
Ibra (14), Emmanuel (8), Enoch (6), Malijad (5)
seeking support for the families

sharing the children’s funds of knowledge with the teachers

phase 2: questions 3 + 4:

1. How do teachers (and schools more broadly) address the unique learning needs of children living in CHHs?
2. What current ministry level policies are in place to support and address the learning needs of these children?
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