



Research Article

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Exploring Quality of Education and Psycho-Social Support Programmes Received by Vulnerable and Marginalised Learners in Catholic Schools.Tendayi Lemeyu*¹, Monica Nyachowe²^{1,2}Arrupe Jesuit University, School of Education and Leadership, Harare, Zimbabwe**Article History**

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Abstract: The study aims to investigate the quality of education and psychosocial support programmes received by vulnerable and marginalised children in Catholic Schools. The Catholic Social Teachings underpinned this study, 'The Principle of Preferential Option for the Poor and Vulnerable', a principle that calls for prioritising the needs of the most vulnerable members of society in personal lives and public policy. Furthermore, the study adopted a phenomenological hermeneutic research philosophy and a qualitative research approach, as this enabled the researcher to explore the subjective views, perceptions, feelings, awareness, knowledge, and experiences encountered by vulnerable and marginalised children in Catholic Schools. Bronfenbrenner's Social-Ecological Systems Theory, which examines the child within various structures, including the family, school, and the broader community was further used in the study. The study further employed a phenomenological research design as an interpretative, open, flexible, and responsive method, which enabled the researcher to engage deeply and thoughtfully with the phenomenon under study. Furthermore, purposive sampling techniques was employed to select research participants. In-depth interviews, focus group discussions, observation, and documentary data analysis methods was used to gather data. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis was used to analyse the collected data, and different themes emerge. The findings from the current phenomenological qualitative study suggested that the Catholic schools are providing holistic support services focusing on academic, social, emotional, and spiritual well-being driven by the key principle of 'Preferential Option for the Poor and Vulnerable'. Hence the study recommended the schools to continue with their efforts to ensure that all children, including the most vulnerable and marginalized have the right to a quality education.

Keywords: Quality Education; Psycho-Social Support; Vulnerable; Marginalised; Children Catholic Social Teachings

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INTRODUCTION

One of the greatest challenges for contemporary Catholic schools in many parts of the world is poverty (McKinney, 2023). Catholic education exists to transform individuals so that they become more responsible in their private and public lives. As such, the Church strives to build an educational programme that enriches humanity by upholding Christian values (Muderedzwa, 2021). In Zimbabwe, the Catholic education is rooted in its Christian concepts of life centered on Jesus Christ. He is the one who enables people, gives meaning to human life, and is the model when the Catholic schools offer to their pupils (ZCBC, 2025), and is underpinned by the Catholic Social Teachings, 'The Principle of Preferential Option for the Poor and Vulnerable', a principle that calls for prioritising the needs of the most vulnerable members of society in personal lives and public policy. The current study sought to explore the quality of Education and Psycho-Social Support Programmes Received by Vulnerable and Marginalised Children in Catholic Schools in Harare, Zimbabwe.

Purpose of the Study

The study sought to explore the quality of education and psycho-social support programmes received by vulnerable and marginalised learners in Catholic schools.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Many of the Catholic schools established in the nineteenth century had an explicit mission to the poor. This mission was integral to the aims of Catholic schools, aims that included promoting literacy and numeracy and ensuring the inculcation of the Catholic faith and culture in further generations. By the late twentieth century, care for the poor and the preferential option for the poor described the mission to the poor in Catholic schools. The term the preferential option for the poor originated in Liberation Theology within a very specific sociological and ecclesial context, but the understanding of the term deepened as a key theme in Catholic social teaching (McKinney, 2023). The Catholic school is widely considered to be one of the institutions that offers learners an inclusive environment (Fusco, 2005), as it opens its doors to all

children irrespective of their religious affiliation, race, ethnic group, culture, and background. The Catholic school environment comprises many systems and stakeholders interacting within a unique set-up. For example, the internal system of the school consists of the Catholic Church priest interacting with learners during mass services, the parents interacting with teachers on school consultation days, and teachers interacting with learners in the classroom. The school's external system consists of the external environment that interacts with the school (Muganiwa,2021). The most vulnerable children identified in the study were children who are from very poor families, have families that migrate for work, have a disability, and other vulnerabilities such as illness, divorce, domestic violence, or are orphaned. Clearly, poverty is a significant factor in children's inability to attend school and learn. Poverty results in children needing to work, poor nutrition, bad health, lack of money for school supplies, or for extra classes, transportation, and other school costs.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

The Catholic Church is the single largest non-governmental provider of education globally, reaching over 62 million children through education institutions from pre-school through to secondary school (McKinney, 2023). There has been a 112% enrolment increase globally since 1975, mainly in Africa, due to high rates of population growth and gains in educational attainment over time. In Africa, 19.3 million children are enrolled in Catholic primary schools and 5.4 million in Catholic secondary schools (Eldreda, Turner, Fabbri, Nyadombo, Mgugue, Nherera, Nyakuwa, Nhenga-Chakarisah, Ranki, Devries, 2023). Although schools are a primary environment where violence against children can occur, they also have huge untapped potential to function as a safe space that protects children from violence. It is important to note that Catholic education has been constant and original in showing unique contributions to entire national educational packages through primary, secondary, and tertiary levels, especially for students who passed through their schools (Zvobgo,2025). Several studies established that Catholic education was at the forefront of politics both before and after independence. In addition, it has been revealed that the irony of Christian education, which during colonial rule was used as an instrument of sustaining power and consolidating White control in key positions in socioeconomic and political spheres. Free education, therefore, has been somewhat limited (Zvobgo); however, Catholic education was democratic even during the colonial period. Catholic education never segregated anyone as the church continued to build more schools in Zimbabwe, opening doors to marginalised communities and giving them academic space (Zvobgo,2015). Hence, Catholic education has evolved over the past century to match the fast-changing world order. A study by Zinyemba (2017) revealed that the Catholic bishops of

Zimbabwe in 1998 came up with the idea of establishing a university in addition to the fact that they were running various formation and academic houses for priests. Ndlovu (2018) notes that Catholic education emphasises developing students in all aspects: academically, morally, socially, spiritually, and physically. Quality of Education and Psycho-Social Support Programmes Received by Vulnerable and Marginalised Children in Catholic Schools in Harare, Zimbabwe is central to the Zimbabwean education sector. It has a long and rich history in the country. As a result of academic excellence in Catholic institutions of learning, the Catholic Church has carved a niche that has compelled even those of different Christian denominations to enrol their children in Catholic schools (Makwati,2023). This is because parents are interested in the holistic approach of this curriculum, which moulds holistic individuals who can thrive in various spheres of life. Studies established that missionary and colonial educations have been extensively recorded and can be read in documents that escaped wars in Matabeleland. Some of the documents highlight the history, mission statements, vision, and future of Catholic education (Muderedzwa,2021). For years, the general citizenry held the view that Catholic education bridged the education gap in most parts of the country where national programmes had not been possible to implement. Studies revealed that the role of the Catholic Church's policies and contributions over past years in terms of improving education or providing it where government efforts would have been hampered or too insufficient to spread evenly throughout the country (Muderedzwa, 2021). Currently, studies have revealed that Zimbabwe has 90 Catholic primary schools, 80 Catholic secondary schools, 18 skills and technical training centres, and a couple of tertiary institutions, such as the Catholic University and Arrupe Jesuit University, among others. It can be noted that there has been a vertical progression in the growth of Catholic institutions, which in turn continue to grow the identity and nature of the education of the Catholic Church (Muderedzwa,2021). The problem of vulnerable and marginalized children in Zimbabwe is so great that it has a serious negative impact on children, society, and demands immediate interventions.

Studies revealed that Psychosocial Support programmes are basically about the relationships between the child, its family, community, and society 'social'. It is also about how a child feels and thinks about himself or herself and about life ("psycho"). It is often linked to the African philosophy or approach of "ubuntu", 'I am because we are, and we are because I am', 'I am, what I am, through the humanity of others.' or 'A person is a person through the humanity of others. An approach prioritizing the value of human life, human dignity, and respect. An approach with critical implications for all those with leadership roles in education and across professions. Such support includes many different aspects of the child's life: physical, material, psychological, social, cultural, and spiritual.

This can be referred to as “holistic” development (REPPSI, 2007).

Many experienced educators and school managers find that the learning abilities of children are directly related to their well-being at home and in the community. Children who are affected by violence, poverty, and hunger, displacement, or illness in the home often struggle to reach their full learning potential (REPPSI, 2007), while children whose emotional, social, and physical needs are met within a caring environment may go on to reach this potential, despite the difficulties they have faced in life. UNICEF (2021) established that there are approximately 140 million orphan children worldwide who have lost one or both parents. These children experience multiple challenges that require an assortment of interventions in order to help them to develop coping mechanisms, as well as enabling them to forge ahead with their lives. Hence, such support or assistance can be conceptualised in terms of psychosocial support. Studies established that by addressing psychosocial issues and needs of learners, significant barriers to learning and to holistic development can be removed. The concept of psychosocial support (PSS) has gained acceptance on a global scale (Christopher & Moshia, 2021). The goal or the relevance of psychosocial support is to make the lives of less fortunate minors, especially orphans and vulnerable children, and the marginalised better (Alem, 2020). According to Mavambo Orphan Care (2018), a Catholic community based organisation in Zimbabwe, highlighted that the scope of children requiring psychosocial support is diverse. This institution conducts PSS programmes for OVC and the marginalised families. Most OVC in these programmes are broken-hearted due to parental loss, those who are experiencing stigma and discrimination for one reason or another, and those who are experiencing various forms of abuse, including emotional, sexual, and physical.

Studies established that certain aspects of life endanger children. Being orphaned by the death of one or both parents, living on the street, in poverty, with a disability, affected by armed conflicts, abused by parents or other family members and caregivers, being HIV positive and affected by HIV and AIDS, being marginalized, stigmatized, and even discriminated against, being child laborers including domes (UNICEF, UNAIDS, PEPFAR, 2006; UNICEF, 2007). Furthermore, studies revealed that orphans are among the most vulnerable children because the majority of them have few opportunities in life (Skinner & Davids, 2006; Chin et al, 2020). While the scourge of HIV/AIDS appears to have subsided, Covid19 arrived with a bang, upending economies and severely affecting the livelihoods of the world's children. Even though they have lost their parents, their learning has been disrupted, and they have been denied the psychosocial support that they would normally receive from schools (Ntshuntshe,& Mathwasa, 2022). Early identification of

orphaned children in school and timely referral to appropriate treatment, according to Toros (2013), improves academic outcomes for many orphaned children. As a result, teachers must have the knowledge and skills necessary to successfully identify orphaned learners. Early identification of learners results in appropriate assistance in improving academic performance, obtaining financial assistance, improving behaviour, and providing learners with moral and emotional support (Ntshuntshe & Mathwasa, 2022). Early identification of orphaned children also provides them with access to various services such as social grants, school uniforms and food parcel structures, fee exemption, and regular and punctual attendance in school was achieved through school nutrition (DOSD, 2005; Magome, 2006; Ardington & Leibbrandt, 2010; Davids et al, 2006; Ntshuntshe, 2012). Hence, schools should take an active role in identifying orphaned learners so that they can access services where teachers are at the forefront of providing support. In some schools, all teachers work with the LO teacher to identify orphaned learners in need of psychosocial support, though coordinated structures are required for maximum learner support.

Studies established that quality Catholic education combines strong academics with a moral and spiritual foundation, aiming to develop the whole person. Catholic education values are more than classroom lessons; they shape how children understand themselves, others, and the world through the lens of faith. Rooted in dignity, respect, service, and community, these values guide students not only in school but throughout their entire lives (Monte Cassino, 2025). The Catholic vision of education is rooted in its Christian concept of life centred on Jesus Christ. He is the one who ennoble people, gives meaning to human life, and is the model that the Catholic school offers to its learners. The catholic Faith is a body of truth that is to be faithfully handed on through education, and this handing on is the Christian mission and duty of parents, clergy, religious men and women (ZCBC, 2025). The Catholic Church’s teachings require that Catholic schools be places where each learner is respected and valued and where the stages of faith of each individual are recognised realistically and responded to sensitively (ZCBC,2025). Learners come to school with a range of experiences with regard to religious faith and religious concepts. Teachers too are representative of the diversity of out multi-cultural society, bringing to the task a wide variety of experiences and varying levels of faith commitment in drawing up and implementing schemes of work, all involved must respect not only the requirements of religious education as a serious academic discipline, but also the complexities and challenges to religious faith encountered by learners, their families and teachers. Catholic schools are inclusive; guided by inclusive education principles or rights-based approach, aimed at providing equal and fair educational opportunities for all learners in schools, and recognize that every child has the

right to education, and must be allowed to achieve and maintain an acceptable level of learning. Furthermore, Catholic schools are communities that are open, welcoming, and inclusive. The schools may include learners who adhere to other religions or other stances for living, while mindful of their duty to educate in the distinctive beliefs, values, and practices of the Catholic community, teachers will bear witness to an attitude of respect for and appreciation of all. Social justice in inclusive education and in the Catholic schools is a commitment to upholding the dignity of every person and acting for the good of the community, guided by the principles of Catholic Social Teaching. Catholic schools or Catholic educators must have the greatest respect for those learners who are not Catholics, and they should be open at all times to authentic dialogue, convinced that in these circumstances the best testimony that they can give of their own faith is warm and sincere appreciation for those who are honestly seeking God according to their conscience (LCS42).

Several studies established that Catholic schools, Colleges, and Universities offer a holistic approach to education, which is rooted in communities where they form a central part of everyday life (ZCBC, 2016). While Muderedzwa (2021) highlighted that Catholic education exists to attempt to transform people so that they become more responsible in their private and public lives, and as such, the Church strives to build an education programme that enriches humanity through upholding Christian values. The current study sought to explore the quality of education and psychosocial support for vulnerable and marginalised children in Catholic schools. These involve assessing how schools address academic needs while also providing emotional and social support, which can be impacted by factors like poverty, lack of resources, and staff training (Ntshunshu & Mathwasa, 2022). Developing a school-based child protection intervention in Zimbabwe, the ZCBC's child-safeguarding journey started in 2012 and included six years of formative research, learning collaborations, and pilot-testing. This focus on strengthening child protection structures within the Catholic Church in Zimbabwe long predates the Vatican's recent attention to issues of child abuse. Here, we describe the process that led to the development of a school-based, child-protection intervention (Eldred, Turner, Fabbri, *et al.* 2023).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Catholic Social Teaching and the preferential option for the poor

The preferential option for the poor can manifestly be understood to be a fundamental principle of contemporary Catholic Social Teaching in the post-Conciliar period, a period refers to the era in the Catholic Church following the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), characterized by significant reforms in liturgy, doctrine, and church law, as well as profound, often contentious, structural and social changes. The

Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church is an obvious source for the key themes of Catholic Social Teaching and, therefore, could be presumed to be a useful starting point for a discussion and development of the preferential option for the poor (Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, 2004). One of the core principles of Catholic Social Teachings is the option for the poor and vulnerable. The Principle of Preferential Option for the Poor and Vulnerable', is a principle that calls for prioritising the needs of the most vulnerable members of society in personal lives and public policy. The Principle of Preferential Option for the Poor and Vulnerable' is a principle that calls for prioritising the needs of the most vulnerable members of society in personal lives and public policy. The principle is rooted in biblical teachings and the consistent message of the Church to serve Christ in "the least of these" (Matthew 25). Furthermore, the principle actively prioritizes the well-being and basic needs of those who are oppressed, poor, or otherwise excluded. In today's academic and cultural context, the Church's call to prioritize the poor resonates deeply with the values of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). Furthermore, diversity affirms the God-given dignity of each person in their uniqueness. Equity seeks to dismantle unjust structures that prevent full participation. Inclusion ensures that all, especially those historically excluded, have a seat at the table (Theroux, 2025). Catholic social teaching has always affirmed the dignity of every human being, regardless of race, gender, ethnicity, ability, or background (Theroux, 2025). In addition, the study further employed Bronfenbrenner's Social-Ecological Systems Theory, which examines the child within various structures, including the family, school, and the broader community (McKinney, 2023).

Research Objective

The study seeks to explore the quality of education and psycho-social support programmes received by vulnerable and marginalised learners in Catholic Schools.

METHODOLOGY

The current study employed Phenomenology as the research philosophy. The focus of phenomenology is on a specific aspect of life that affects a group of people who share common experiences. Earlier and modern scholars (Husserl, 1970; Howitt, 2010; van Manen, 2014; Vagle, 2018) concur that phenomenology aims to enable the researcher to provide a detailed description of the subject matter, the phenomenon being studied. Specifically, Zahavi (2018) argued that as a research philosophy, phenomenology is concerned itself with the essence of phenomena as they are experienced by people in real life. Vagle (2018) further highlighted that a clearer view of a problem (phenomenon) affecting people in society could be perceived better if described by the people who experienced it in everyday life. The study draws in findings from a qualitative phenomenological approach, which sought to understand the existing quality of education and psycho-social support

programmes received by vulnerable and marginalised learners in Catholic Schools in Harare. The researcher found this approach relevant as it allowed the researcher to examine the perceptions, views, awareness, knowledge, and feelings of learners/children who are vulnerable and marginalised. The study utilised document review to provide a more complete picture of the phenomenon under study. Data sources included published literature, library resources, observations, and in-depth interviews. The collected data were analysed through Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis provides the researchers with the best opportunity to understand the innermost deliberations of the life experiences of research participants; hence, IPA is participant-oriented (Alase, 2017).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings from the current phenomenological qualitative study suggested that the Catholic schools are providing holistic support services focusing on academic, social, emotional, and spiritual well-being driven by the key principle of 'Preferential Option for the Poor and Vulnerable'. The findings of the study are presented and discussed.

Child Protection and Safeguarding Policies

The study revealed that schools are often sites where vulnerable and marginalised children experience violence from peers, teachers, and other school staff. The study noted that more than 60% of children report emotional and physical violence from peers, and 11% report sexual joking, teasing, and negative labelling due to their physical or social status, and other harassment. The study further established that though schools are a major environment where violence and all other forms of child abuse can occur, schools also have huge potential to function as a safe space that protects children from violence and child abuse, particularly for those who are vulnerable. It emerged from the study that the Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops' Conference (ZCBC) has a Child Protection Policy, which is a comprehensive document designed to prevent and respond to child abuse, exploitation, and neglect in Catholic institutions such as Catholic schools, parishes, and colleges across Zimbabwe. Its purpose is to create safe environments for children through various measures, including clear procedures for handling allegations, providing guidelines for educators, and promoting a "no harm" approach. The policy is based on the Catholic ethos and is supported by national and international legal instruments protecting children's rights. This is in line with a study by Eldred, Turner, Fabbri, *et al.* (2023), which revealed that the Catholic Church in Africa has committed itself to the strengthening of safeguarding systems and child protection as a priority area, making Church-sponsored schools an ideal platform to reach children. The study established that children spend more time in school than in any other place outside the home. Schools dominate many roles in child development; in addition to

education and skills training, part of the fundamental mission of Catholic schools in Zimbabwe and most countries is to support children's socio-emotional development. Catholic schools or Catholic education can actively promote children's pro-social behaviours, mental health, and resilience by promoting safe and respectful relationships, fostering feelings of belonging amongst students, and encouraging engaging and collaborative learning and teaching practices. In 2012, the Jesuit congregation in Zimbabwe initiated a childcare and protection project across their 18 schools, "Value Based Approach to Education and Safeguarding." This work was implemented in three phases. The first phase mapped the current state of child protection mechanisms within the 18 Jesuit schools. The second phase involved training and capacity development for key stakeholders within these schools, with a specific focus on school counsellors. The final phase integrated the Jesuit child protection policy into school practice and established reporting mechanisms. The study by Eldred, Turner, Fabbri, *et al.* (2023) further revealed that in 2012, the Jesuit congregation in Zimbabwe initiated a childcare and protection project across their 18 schools, "Value Based Approach to Education and Safeguarding." This work was implemented in three phases. The first phase mapped the current state of child protection mechanisms within the 18 Jesuit schools. The second phase involved training and capacity development for key stakeholders within these schools, with a specific focus on school counsellors. The final phase integrated the Jesuit child protection policy into school practice and established reporting mechanisms. The ZCBC's child-safeguarding journey started in 2012 and included six years of formative research, learning collaborations, and pilot-testing. This focus on strengthening child protection structures within the Catholic Church in Zimbabwe long predates the Vatican's recent attention to issues of child abuse, which led to the development of a school-based, child-protection intervention. The study established that Child protection is the acceptance that children in schools are vulnerable. This, therefore, becomes an attempt to make sure that all those vulnerable, at all levels, are cared for and protected.

Inclusive Education

At the centre of inclusive education is the human right to Education for All philosophy, which was declared in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 (UNESCO). Inclusive Education in Catholic schools is a practice rooted in Catholic identity and Catholic Social Teaching, aiming to include and support all children, including those with disabilities, diverse cultural backgrounds, or other special needs, by providing equal access to learning within a supportive community. Furthermore, Inclusive education in Catholic schools means welcoming *all* students, including those with and without disabilities or diverse needs, to learn together in regular classrooms with tailored support, guided by Catholic Social Teaching and legal requirements. This approach focuses on belonging,

differentiation, and maximizing participation, although challenges often involve securing resources and staff training. These schools adapt curriculum, environment, and assessments to ensure equitable access, using strategies such as the Universal Design for Learning (Bonfiglio, 2025). The study established that the Catholic schools do not take only children who are Catholics, but also children from other religious backgrounds. Several stakeholders, including children, parents, teachers, administrators, and other staff members, felt that being affiliated with the Catholic school offered them values and an emphasis on inclusiveness and protection of children, and that they supported this. It further emerged from the study that even those who are not Catholics or even not Christians want their children to do good. The established that Catholic schools in Zimbabwe, and in general, are inclusive in the sense that they foster a safe and child-friendly environment, in-depth faith formation, whilst respecting human diversity, and a culture of life-long learning.

PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT PROGRAMMES

The study established that Catholic schools do have psychosocial support programmes, which are often integrated into a broader pastoral care framework that includes counselling, spiritual guidance, and social support. These programmes aim to enhance student well-being, promote resilience, and provide assistance for social and emotional challenges, with support offered through roles such as guidance counsellors and chaplains, as well as structured programmes and activities. There are also several programmes and resources available in schools that are meant to support our students' social-emotional learning. The goal of psychosocial support services is to establish and sustain a stable, nurturing environment for vulnerable children. It further emerged from the study that Catholic schools in Harare, and Zimbabwe in general, recognise learners as unique individuals and always try to meet their social-emotional needs above and beyond academic learning. The study established that many of the learners are experiencing serious mental health and social-emotional challenges due to the isolation and stress associated with poverty, economic challenges, HIV/AIDS, and child abuse. It has been established that Catholic Schools are providing guidance to teachers on how to respond to the social-emotional needs of learners in need of care and protection. This is done through various workshops and staff development meetings.

The study further established that Catholic schools are providing for learners in need through several programs, including educational support, spiritual guidance, and child protection, often collaborating with governments and many relevant stakeholders, such as NGOs, with a focus on orphans and vulnerable children. The provision of food, school fees, school uniforms, clothing, and sanitary ware for girls in schools, often accompanied by menstrual hygiene education, to fight period poverty, keep girls in school, and promote dignity.

The study revealed that sometimes teachers conduct home visits and advocate for child rights, though challenges remain in coordinating efforts and overcoming doctrinal resistance. Furthermore, the study established that Catholic schools in Zimbabwe, supported by the Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops' Conference (ZCBC), are actively implementing programmes such as peer support and psycho-spiritual initiatives to foster holistic well-being, emotional resilience, and address mental health challenges among learners, training teachers in behaviour change, and offering integrated counselling.

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School Feeding Programmes

It emerged from the study that Caritas Zimbabwe runs school feeding programmes in most Catholic schools, providing learners with daily porridge (often Corn Soya Blend) prepared and shared at break time. The initiative, supported by partners such as CAFOD and Trócaire, uses local volunteers to prepare

meals, addresses the right to education, and has led to increased school enrolment, especially for girls, making education accessible during crises. Through this programme, Caritas Zimbabwe is helping create a more consistent and conducive school environment during a time of uncertainty. A study by Kawadza (2025) revealed that school feeding programmes in Zimbabwe's Catholic schools are critical, church-led initiatives aimed at combating hunger, reducing dropout rates, and enhancing learning, particularly in rural and drought-stricken areas such as Matabeleland North, Mashonaland East, and Manicaland. Meals are prepared by local volunteers, many of whom are parents and community members. In addition, the study also observed that vulnerable children are provided with stationery and other school requirements from various donors, organisations, and individuals. The study further established that Mavambo Trust, one of the Catholic organisations, offers psychosocial support to orphans and vulnerable children aged between 6 and 17 years to access education through payment of school levies after screening/assessments. Children receive comprehensive support that includes stationery, uniforms, and textbooks; hence, this educational support is only meant for learners in primary and secondary schools. It emerged from the study that Catholic schools have responsibility for maximising the learning outcomes and well-being of all students and for providing access to a high-quality education that is free from discrimination. All children are entitled to quality educational experiences. Students should feel that they are included in an environment of high expectations where they are both able and enabled to learn (Maphy, 2024).

The study established that nutrition and health are challenges that learners from vulnerable households and vulnerable communities face, as parents and caregivers are failing to provide adequate feeding to their children. The study revealed that Caritas Zimbabwe runs a school feeding programme in most Catholic schools, providing learners with daily porridge (often Corn Soya Blend) prepared and shared at break time. The initiative, supported by partners such as CAFOD and Trócaire, uses local volunteers to prepare meals, addresses the right to education, and has led to increased school enrolment, especially for girls, making education accessible during crises. Through this programme, Caritas Zimbabwe is helping create a more consistent and conducive school environment during a time of uncertainty. The study also observed that vulnerable children are provided with stationery and other school requirements from various donors, organisations, and individuals. In supporting the Government's efforts, many stakeholders, such as NGOs, FBOs, CBOs, Local business people, and individuals are providing food in schools. Hence, school feeding programmes in Zimbabwe are supported by various partners such as Feeding Minds Trust, ActionAid Zimbabwe, Mavambo Trust, Mary's Meals, and many others. Mary's Meals provides nutritious meals to more than 179,000 children in Zimbabwe across more than 350

schools. Learners are provided with porridge, sadza, beans, dried *kapenta/matemba* fish, as well as Maheu (a nutritious drink). The study revealed that school feeding programmes greatly improve children's education and health outcomes, and reduce school dropout rates and improve learner attendance. It also improves learners' concentration and likely helps learners improve their academic performance and behaviour. Boost school enrolment. In general, the school feeding programmes play an important role in promoting the overall health and well-being of children.

CONCLUSIONS

Many experienced educators and school managers find that the learning abilities of children are directly related to their well-being at home and in the community. Children who are affected by violence, poverty, hunger, displacement, or illness in the home often struggle to reach their full learning potential. On the other hand, children whose emotional, social and physical needs are met within a caring environment may go on to reach this potential, despite the difficulties they have faced in life.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommends that:

- Catholic schools should continue their efforts to ensure that all children, including the most vulnerable and marginalized have the right to a quality education.
- Catholic schools should continue promoting education projects that encompass a range of activities, including early childhood development, inclusive education, school feeding programmes, in primary and secondary education, as well as in both formal and non-formal settings.
- Catholic schools should further continue providing education that it is relevant to the local context and children's background, inclusive and responsive to the diverse needs of each learner.
- Catholic schools should strengthen their provision of holistic support services focusing on academic, social, emotional, and spiritual well-being.

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