

Emotional and Psychological Dilemmas of Parental Migration: A Study of Left-Behind Children in Kwekwe District in Midlands Province, Zimbabwe

Bema Loveness, Christopher Zishiri, Sithole Lwazi

Faculty of Education, Department of Educational Foundations, Primary Education and Pedagogy, Midlands State University, Gweru, Zimbabwe

bemal@staff.msu.ac.zw, zishiric@staff.msu.ac.zw, lsithole@staff.msu.ac.zw

Abstract

This study analyzed the emotional and psychological dilemmas experienced by Early Childhood Development (ECD) learners affected by parental migration in Kwekwe District, Midlands Province, Zimbabwe. Guided by Bowlby's Attachment Theory, the study adopted a qualitative research approach and a case study design to capture the lived experiences of 33 participants, comprising 15 left-behind children, 10 caregivers, and 8 ECD teachers. Data were collected through interviews and focus group discussions. Thematic analysis was used to identify patterns in the data. Key findings revealed that left-behind children experience emotional distress, including feelings of abandonment, anxiety, sadness, and somatic symptoms, which are exacerbated by irregular parental communication and inadequate caregiver support. Left-behind children employ diverse coping mechanisms, ranging from adaptive strategies such as play, prayer, and peer friendships to maladaptive behaviors, including withdrawal and aggression. The study recommends that the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education deploy trained school counselors to high-migration districts, that teacher training colleges integrate psychosocial support into curricula, and that migrant parents establish predictable, emotionally engaged communication routines. These measures are essential for mitigating the psychological impact of parental migration and safeguarding the well-being of left-behind children. The contribution of this study lies in developing contextual evidence that can inform effective, culturally sensitive policies and practices to mitigate parental migration-related dilemmas confronting left-behind young learners.

Keywords: Parental migration, Emotional, development, Psych, Left-behind children, early childhood development

Introduction

Parental migration is a defining feature of the 21st-century global landscape, particularly within developing nations grappling with entrenched poverty, chronic unemployment, and socio-political instability. In contexts such as Zimbabwe, the Philippines, and Nigeria, the pursuit of enhanced economic opportunities by parents has resulted in a growing population of children who are 'left behind' in their countries of origin, typically under the care of extended family members. While the resultant financial remittances demonstrably improve household income and facilitate access to education and healthcare, a burgeoning body of literature illuminates the less visible, yet profound, emotional and psychological costs borne by these left-behind children (Liu et al., 2023). In the Zimbabwean context, where an estimated three million citizens reside abroad (Chikanda & Tawodzera, 2023), this phenomenon has profound implications for the nation's youngest population. Many children of Early Childhood Development (ECD) age are being raised in "skipped-generation" households, predominantly by elderly grandparents. For these young children, the prolonged absence of one or both parents precipitate a state of emotional insecurity, disrupts the formation of secure attachments, and curtails essential parental bonding (Yendork & Somhlaba, 2022). This absence, as recent research by Mhiripiri and Mupotsa (2023) suggests, manifests in tangible developmental deficits, including reduced emotional responsiveness, delayed social development, and diminished motivation in early learning environments.

The predicament is further compounded by the circumstances of the surrogate caregivers. Grandparents and other relatives, many of whom are aging, economically disadvantaged, and already coping with the challenges of late-life care, assume these responsibilities without adequate preparation and support. Their burden is magnified where formal psychosocial support systems and community-based interventions are weak, fragmented, or entirely nonexistent. Consequently, these caregivers struggle to provide the nurturing, stimulating, and emotionally responsive environment crucial for mitigating the adverse effects of parental absence. This study, therefore, explores the emotional and psychological impact of parental migration on ECD-aged children in the Kwekwe District of Zimbabwe. The study moves beyond a simple enumeration of challenges to explore the complex interplay of factors that shape these children's dilemmas. The focus on the experiences and perspectives of both caregivers and left-behind children helps in identifying and proposing contextually relevant strategies to bolster the resilience and support systems for the affected children, addressing a gap in both academic literature and social policy in Zimbabwe.

Background of the Study

Parental migration is a pervasive phenomenon of the 21st century, driven by structural poverty, entrenched inequality, and the pursuit of enhanced livelihoods beyond national borders. While the financial remittances sent by migrant parents undeniably improve household income and facilitate access to essential services, this economic benefit does not alleviate the emotional toll suffered by the children who remain behind. Global research indicates that children separated

from their parents face psychosocial challenges including anxiety, loneliness, and behavioural difficulties. This risk is particularly pronounced when communication with the migrant parent is infrequent, irregular and superficial (UNICEF, 2023; Liu et al., 2023; Akbar & Parveen, 2023). Studies in China and the Philippines have documented elevated rates of depression and diminished school engagement among left-behind children (Chen et al., 2022; Li & Zhao, 2023). However, the direct applicability of these findings to African contexts is not automatic, given the continent's distinct and resilient family and caregiving structures.

The prevalence of extended family networks and deeply rooted communal caregiving traditions in African cultures offers a buffer against the full psychological impact of parental absence. These systems mitigate feelings of abandonment and provide alternative sources of emotional security. Nevertheless, even within these supportive frameworks, challenges related to emotional deprivation and inconsistent caregiving persist, leaving left-behind children in a state of ambiguous loss and psychological vulnerability (Yendork & Somhlaba, 2022; Amoateng et al., 2024). The African Union (2023) has explicitly highlighted a critical gap in coordinated data collection and targeted interventions to address the unique psychosocial needs of children affected by migration. As labour migration continues to intensify across sub-Saharan Africa, a growing number of children are being placed in the care of elderly grandparents or guardians. These caregivers, while well-intentioned, may lack the requisite resources, physical stamina, or pedagogical skills to meet the complex emotional and developmental needs of the children in their charge (Wawire, 2022; Reed et al., 2022). Despite a nascent documentation of these challenges, the literature is marked by a conspicuous shortage of longitudinal and child-centred research that focuses specifically on the early childhood period.

Within the Southern African region, Zimbabwe presents a particularly compelling case study of this phenomenon. Protracted economic decline has catalysed substantial parental migration, giving rise to a proliferation of "skipped-generation" households where children are raised by older relatives, most commonly grandparents (IOM, 2023). While remittances have indeed improved the material conditions of many households, evidence suggests that the children left behind experience emotional instability and face an elevated risk of developmental delays and compromised school readiness (Tevera & Crush, 2021). With an estimated three million Zimbabwean citizens residing abroad, mostly in South Africa and the United Kingdom, the social fabric of many communities has been altered (Chikanda & Tawodzera, 2023). The surrogate caregivers, mostly the elderly, face their own age-related challenges, rendering them ineffective in providing consistent emotional support, responsive caregiving, and cognitive stimulation that are foundational to healthy early development. Consequently, children in these contexts exhibit feelings of neglect, abandonment, and diminished self-worth (Madziva, 2021; Mhiripiri & Mupotsa, 2023).

Although the body of Zimbabwean research on migration is expanding, it has predominantly concentrated on the macroeconomic and household-level economic impacts. There remains a notable lacuna in qualitative, child-centred inquiry that explores the lived

emotional experiences of the affected children. This study addresses the identified gaps by undertaking an in-depth, localised investigation within Kwekwe Urban District to inform the development of culturally sensitive, evidence-based policies and interventions that holistically promote the dilemmas and developmental trajectories of children growing up in the context of transnational families.

Statement of the Problem

Parental migration presents a paradox for left-behind children. While remittances alleviate material deprivation, money alone cannot address emotional and psychological distress among left-behind children. The physical absence of a parent during early childhood severs opportunities for affection, guidance, and protection, weakening family bonds and fostering feelings of abandonment, anxiety, and sadness. This emotional void impedes healthy development, manifesting as reduced attentiveness, diminished learning motivation, and an increased susceptibility to negative influences. In Zimbabwe, despite a growing population of children in transnational families, research predominantly focuses on economic outcomes of migration, neglecting the need to understand the emotional and psychological impacts on children. This study addresses this gap by offering contextual evidence that can inform the design of targeted psychosocial interventions within early childhood settings.

Research Questions

1. What are the emotional and psychological dilemmas of parental migration affecting left-behind children?
2. What coping mechanisms are adopted by left-behind children to navigate parental absence?
3. What strategies can be implemented to support the dilemmas of children affected by parental migration?

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in Bowlby's (1969) Attachment Theory, which posits that the formation of a secure emotional bond with a primary caregiver during early childhood is vital to healthy emotional and psychological development. The theory asserts that disruptions to this bond through prolonged parental absence precipitate anxiety, internal conflict, and enduring difficulties in forming stable relationships. In the context of parental migration, Attachment Theory provides an essential lens for understanding the emotional and behavioural manifestations observed in children separated from their migrant parents during their formative years. Contemporary scholarship affirms that such disruptions intensify feelings of insecurity and emotional vulnerability, thereby elevating the risk of psychological distress (Smith & Jones, 2022). Importantly, recent evidence suggests that interventions grounded in attachment-focused principles, particularly those that strengthen the quality and consistency of alternative caregiving

relationships, can meaningfully mitigate these adverse effects (Nguyen et al., 2023). These findings affirm the continued relevance of Attachment Theory as a guiding framework for informing culturally sensitive policies and support mechanisms for left-behind children in transnational family contexts.

Literature Review

Emotional and Psychological Impact of Parental Migration

Globally, the emotional and psychological effects of parental migration on young children have garnered increasing academic interest, revealing complex developmental outcomes. Although financial remittances from migrant parents may enhance access to food, education, and healthcare, studies across regions such as Asia, Latin America, and Europe consistently indicate that children left behind especially those in early childhood often suffer from heightened emotional distress, loneliness, and behavioural difficulties (Garcia & Saenz, 2021; Liu et al., 2023). Research in countries like China and the Philippines has shown that prolonged parental absence can lead to anxiety, attachment insecurity, and socio-emotional delays among young children, particularly when caregiving is unstable or lacking in emotional responsiveness (Chen & Zhao, 2022). Despite these findings, much of the global literature focuses on older children and the economic benefits of migration, with limited attention paid to the long-term emotional and psychological development of early learners. In addition, many of these studies rely on cross-sectional methods, making it difficult to understand how emotional challenges evolve during early developmental stages.

Across Africa, research exploring the psychosocial consequences of parental migration is expanding but remains relatively limited, particularly for ECD-aged children. Studies in West and East Africa report similar patterns of emotional insecurity and early learning disruption among young children separated from migrant parents (Adewale & Njoroge, 2022; Mensah, 2023). While extended family networks often step in as primary caregivers, these arrangements may not always provide the emotional sensitivity required during early childhood. Furthermore, there is a lack of research differentiating between types of migration (temporary vs. long-term) and their distinct effects on child development. The few longitudinal studies that do exist rarely focus on children under the age of eight, resulting in an incomplete picture of developmental consequences during this crucial period.

Within the sub-Saharan African context, existing studies from Ghana, Nigeria, and South Africa reveal that labour migration has contributed to increased psychological distress and developmental delays among young children (Kumalo & Boateng, 2021; Okeke, 2024). Inadequate substitute caregiving, especially by elderly grandparents or overburdened siblings, has been associated with emotional neglect and limited cognitive stimulation. Yet, much of this research does not sufficiently distinguish between urban and rural experiences, nor does it address how gender dynamics within the family affect the emotional dilemmas of very young children.

In Southern Africa, including countries such as Mozambique and Zambia, emerging studies show that children left behind by migrating parents face early developmental risks such as poor social skills, detachment, and inconsistent participation in early learning programmes (Chibanda & Mwale, 2023). Although strong kinship structures may offer some emotional buffering, cultural norms around child-rearing may also mask signs of emotional distress in young children. Significantly, there remains a gap in empirical data specific to Zimbabwe, especially concerning children in the ECD age group.

Locally, Zimbabwean research on the emotional and psychological impact of parental migration on early learners is still emerging. Initial findings suggest that ECD-aged children in both urban and rural areas experience anxiety, reduced motivation in learning, and behavioural issues, often due to limited emotional bonding with caregivers and the absence of parental affection—even when remittances are consistent (Mugabe, 2022; Dube & Chigudu, 2024). However, much of the available literature is descriptive in nature, with minimal grounding in child development theory and limited representation of children’s voices. There is also a notable lack of intervention-oriented research targeting psychosocial support within ECD centres or community settings.

This study aims to fill these gaps by employing a qualitative, child-centred approach focused on the lived emotional experiences of ECD learners affected by parental migration in Zimbabwe. Grounded in Attachment Theory, the study explores the emotional, social, and psychological outcomes of parental absence during early developmental stages. It places particular emphasis on caregiving arrangements, caregiver capacity, and school-based support structures. Focusing on urban ECD centres in Kwekwe, the research will highlight context-specific caregiving dynamics and propose culturally sensitive support strategies. By triangulating data from children, caregivers, and ECD practitioners, the study seeks to inform targeted interventions and policy frameworks that address the developmental needs of left-behind ECD children. Ultimately, it contributes valuable empirical insights to guide holistic responses to the psychosocial effects of parental migration in Zimbabwe and comparable contexts.

Coping Mechanisms among Left-Behind Children

Globally, coping strategies among young children affected by parental migration vary widely, shaped by developmental stages, gender, and social environments. Studies from regions such as East Asia, Latin America, and Europe reveal that children left behind often adopt diverse behaviours to manage emotional stress. In some cases, children demonstrate avoidant responses such as withdrawal, tantrums, or denial, while others show signs of early resilience by engaging in structured activities like play, music, and storytelling, which offer emotional release and distraction (Zhao & Wu, 2023; Martinez & Lopez, 2022). Participation in religious rituals and community gatherings also serves as a meaningful source of comfort, helping children cope with the emotional void left by migrating parents (Garcia et al., 2023). Despite these insights, much of the global literature focuses on older children, with limited exploration of how very young

children particularly those in the early developmental years' experience and navigate parental absence. Additionally, global studies often overlook how intersecting factors such as poverty, culture, and the quality of substitute caregiving shape coping patterns among ECD-aged children. Longitudinal studies examining how coping mechanisms evolve during early childhood remain scarce, limiting understanding of developmental impacts over time.

At the continental level, African research is gradually shedding light on how children cope with parental migration. Studies from Kenya, Nigeria, and Uganda indicate that young children's emotional responses are strongly influenced by the caregiving environment, especially when grandparents, aunts, or older siblings provide stable and nurturing care (Adewale & Njoroge, 2022; Kamau & Ochieng, 2023). Involvement in spiritual and cultural practices such as attending church or participating in family rituals has also been found to provide emotional security and a sense of continuity. However, gaps persist in understanding how boys and girls in early childhood differently express emotional distress and receive varying levels of emotional support. There is also limited research on how repeated or long-term parental migration affects the development of young children's coping strategies, especially in relation to emotional attachment and sense of belonging.

In the sub-Saharan African context, research highlights that children's coping abilities are often undermined by poverty, inconsistent caregiving, and limited access to mental health services. In countries like Ghana, Zambia, and South Africa, some left-behind children especially those lacking consistent care develop maladaptive coping behaviours, including social withdrawal or aggression, even during their formative years (Kumalo & Boateng, 2021; Mwale & Chibanda, 2024). Schools and ECD centres have been identified as important environments where young children can build routines, form peer bonds, and interact with nurturing adults, all of which contribute to resilience. Yet, there is a lack of data differentiating coping strategies based on rural and urban contexts, and few studies investigate how cultural beliefs about early childhood influence children's emotional responses to migration-related separation.

Regionally, Southern African studies are beginning to uncover the role of culturally rooted coping strategies among children in migratory contexts. In neighbouring countries such as Mozambique and Botswana, communal storytelling, singing, and traditional games have been found to help young children process emotional distress and maintain a sense of identity (Chibanda & Mwale, 2023; Kgosi & Phiri, 2023). These practices offer opportunities for emotional expression and support, especially in early childhood, when verbal communication of feelings is still developing. However, rapid urbanisation and shifting family structures may be eroding these traditional coping mechanisms, and there is little evidence on how formal institutions such as ECD centres or NGOs integrate these culturally grounded practices into psychosocial support frameworks.

In Zimbabwe, local studies on the coping strategies of young children left behind by migrating parents are still limited in scope. Preliminary findings suggest that ECD children often rely on peer play, school routines, and community-based activities such as Sunday School or

church youth groups to manage their emotions (Mugabe, 2022; Dube & Chigudu, 2024). Caregivers especially grandparents play a crucial role in shaping coping behaviours, but the emotional support provided is often constrained by age, economic status, or health limitations. Furthermore, most existing studies are descriptive and fail to capture the nuanced lived experiences of young children. There is a significant research gap in understanding how digital technologies, such as video calls or messaging, influence emotional connections between migrant parents and their young children, and whether these tools support healthier coping.

This study seeks to address these critical gaps by using a qualitative approach focused on ECD learners in Kwekwe Urban. Drawing on narrative interviews with caregivers, educators, and children where appropriate, the study will explore how young children emotionally respond to parental migration, the coping mechanisms they adopt, and the influence of cultural and caregiving contexts. It will also examine how ECD centres and community structures can be strengthened to support these children more effectively.

Challenges Faced by Left-Behind Children in Managing the Emotional and Psychological Impact of Parental Migration

Globally, the challenges faced by young children left behind due to parental migration have received growing attention, revealing a complex web of emotional and psychological impacts during early developmental stages. Research from regions such as Latin America, Southeast Asia, and Eastern Europe shows that prolonged parental absence can lead to emotional instability in children, including persistent feelings of abandonment, anxiety, and sadness (Garcia & Saenz, 2021; Liu et al., 2023). For ECD-aged children, these experiences may disrupt attachment formation, hinder emotional regulation, and negatively affect early learning. These psychological difficulties are often compounded by irregular caregiving, inconsistent daily routines, and limited communication with absent parents, which can compromise the child's sense of safety and belonging. However, global literature often focuses more on the economic advantages of remittances than on the inner emotional world of young children, resulting in a limited understanding of how they experience and cope with prolonged separation. Additionally, the lack of longitudinal studies means the long-term developmental consequences of these early disruptions remain poorly understood.

At the continental level, African research echoes these concerns, with studies in West and East Africa highlighting how parental migration interferes with emotional bonding and contributes to distress among young children. Evidence suggests that left-behind children often struggle with low self-confidence, disrupted play and learning behaviours, and difficulty socialising, particularly in situations where caregiving arrangements are unstable or emotionally unresponsive (Adewale & Njoroge, 2022; Mensah, 2023). Cultural factors and community stigma surrounding parental absence may also discourage children from expressing their emotions, further isolating them. Yet, the literature still lacks focused analysis of how different

migration patterns (e.g., short-term vs. long-term) specifically affect children in early childhood, leaving a key developmental gap unaddressed.

In the sub-Saharan African context, the effects of parental migration on young children are often worsened by high levels of poverty, limited access to psychosocial support, and fragile caregiving systems. Research from countries such as Ghana, Nigeria, and South Africa reveals that young children without consistent parental figures are at risk of emotional neglect and may be exposed to unsafe environments (Kumalo & Boateng, 2021; Okeke, 2024). Without adequate emotional scaffolding during early childhood, some children may exhibit regressive behaviours, language delays, or withdrawal from learning and social engagement. Nevertheless, many sub-Saharan studies do not differentiate between rural and urban contexts or explore how gender roles shape caregiving and emotional support, both of which can significantly influence developmental outcomes.

Regionally, studies in Southern Africa—particularly from Mozambique and Zambia—emphasise the protective role of extended families and community-based child-rearing practices in buffering children from emotional distress (Chibanda & Mwale, 2023). Cultural activities such as storytelling, song, and communal play are important coping tools for ECD learners, fostering emotional expression and identity formation. However, economic hardship and the effects of modernisation can erode these traditional supports, creating further emotional strain for children navigating the complexities of parental absence. Despite regional progress, there remains a distinct lack of research focused specifically on Zimbabwe and its unique socio-economic and cultural landscape, limiting a thorough understanding of how ECD learners are affected.

In Zimbabwe, existing research on the emotional and psychological challenges faced by left-behind children is limited, particularly for those in the ECD phase of development. Early findings suggest that young children commonly experience emotional distress such as anxiety, sadness, and disruptive behaviours, which are exacerbated by unstable caregiving and household insecurity, even where remittances are received (Mugabe, 2022; Dube & Chigudu, 2024). However, the current body of literature lacks depth, theoretical grounding, and, most importantly, the inclusion of children's own perspectives. Little is known about how these young children interpret and internalise their experiences or how modern communication technologies, such as video calls, influence their coping and emotional development. This study seeks to bridge these gaps by employing a qualitative, child-sensitive approach that captures the lived experiences of ECD learners affected by parental migration in Kwekwe District. The findings will contribute to the development of targeted psychosocial interventions and policy recommendations that support the emotional dilemmas of left-behind ECD children in Zimbabwe and similar contexts.

Strategies to Mitigate the Effects of Parental Migration

Globally, a range of strategies has been developed to reduce the emotional and psychological impact of parental migration on children, including those in early childhood. International

research highlights the importance of community-based support systems, school interventions, and digital technologies that help maintain emotional bonds between parents and young children despite physical separation (Garcia & Saenz, 2021; Chen et al., 2023). Programmes that offer psychosocial support, play-based therapy, and social-emotional learning have shown encouraging outcomes in enhancing resilience and dilemmas among ECD-aged children (Martinez & Lopez, 2022). Moreover, global evidence emphasises the need for multisectoral collaboration among families, educators, health workers, and social service providers to create holistic and nurturing support systems. However, these global strategies often lack adaptation to the cultural, economic, and infrastructural realities of low-income contexts, where young children may be more vulnerable due to resource limitations and caregiving challenges.

On the African continent, studies have underscored the role of extended family networks and local community structures in supporting young children left behind. Research from Kenya, Nigeria, and Ghana suggests that strengthening the caregiving capacity of grandparents and other relatives through training and support initiatives can significantly enhance their ability to meet the emotional needs of young children (Adewale & Njoroge, 2022; Mensah, 2023). Faith-based organisations and community centres also provide spaces where children can engage in spiritual, social, and play-based activities that foster coping and belonging. However, many of these initiatives face challenges in sustainability and remain disconnected from formal ECD programmes and health systems. There is also a scarcity of rigorous evaluations of these interventions, making it difficult to determine their effectiveness and scalability for early childhood populations.

In the sub-Saharan African context, strategies such as school-based counselling, peer support initiatives, and caregiver sensitisation campaigns have been introduced to support the emotional dilemmas of children affected by migration (Kumalo & Boateng, 2021; Mwale & Chibanda, 2024). For ECD learners, safe and nurturing learning environments that include structured play, storytelling, and emotional expression activities are crucial. However, sub-Saharan research frequently identifies significant obstacles, including insufficient mental health resources, a shortage of trained professionals with expertise in early childhood development, and persistent stigma surrounding emotional and psychological support. Additionally, there remains a need for culturally relevant approaches that reflect local beliefs about childhood, care, and emotional expression to improve programme acceptance and impact.

In Southern Africa, innovative and blended approaches are emerging that combine traditional support systems with formal psychosocial interventions. Studies from Mozambique, Zambia, and Botswana demonstrate the potential of integrating community elders, traditional caregivers, and ECD educators in designing support systems that are culturally rooted and accessible (Chibanda & Mwale, 2023; Kgosi & Phiri, 2023). The use of mobile phones and messaging applications has also provided opportunities for migrant parents to maintain regular emotional contact with their children, which may reduce feelings of abandonment during critical stages of development. Despite these developments, few studies have evaluated the long-term

impact of such strategies on the emotional growth and school readiness of ECD learners, and regional policy frameworks remain underdeveloped to support integrated and coordinated responses.

In Zimbabwe, while there are some community- and school-based efforts to support young children affected by parental migration, these interventions are often fragmented, underfunded, and lack systematic evaluation (Mugabe, 2022; Dube & Chigudu, 2024). Initiatives such as basic teacher training in psychosocial support, community sensitisation on the emotional needs of young children, and the use of digital tools to facilitate parent-child communication show promise, but are not widely implemented or monitored for effectiveness. There is a significant policy gap in designing and institutionalising programmes that are tailored to Zimbabwe's unique cultural, economic, and caregiving contexts.

This study seeks to address these gaps by exploring effective, contextually appropriate strategies to support the emotional dilemmas of ECD children left behind by migrating parents in Kwekwe Urban. Through a qualitative, child-sensitive approach, the research will gather perspectives from caregivers, ECD teachers, and community members to understand what works in practice. By identifying culturally relevant, sustainable, and scalable interventions, the study aims to inform policy and programme development that responds to the psychosocial needs of left-behind young children in Zimbabwe and similar settings.

Methodology

This study was grounded in an interpretivist paradigm, which prioritises understanding human experiences through the meanings individuals attach to their social realities (Schwandt, 2014). This philosophical orientation was particularly suited to exploring the emotional and psychological experiences of children affected by parental migration, as it foregrounded their subjective perspectives over quantifiable measurements. A qualitative research approach was employed to generate rich, descriptive data reflecting the emotional and psychological realities as well as coping mechanisms of the affected ECD learners. As Creswell and Poth (2018) assert, qualitative inquiry allows for depth, flexibility, and participant-centred engagement, which was essential in working with children whose voices are underrepresented in research.

The research adopted a case study design, focusing on selected ECD centres within Kwekwe Urban to enable an in-depth examination of how parental migration affects children's emotional and psychological dilemmas within a bounded, real-life setting (Yin, 2018). The study population included approximately 80 children aged 3 to 8 years who had experienced parental migration for a minimum of one year, alongside 30 caregivers and 20 ECD practitioners. Using purposive sampling, the study employed a sample of 33 participants comprising 15 ECD learners (aged 5–8 years), 10 caregivers, and 8 ECD teachers who possessed direct experience with or responsibility for left-behind children, ensuring that participants provided relevant and meaningful insights (Palinkas et al., 2015).

Data collection employed child-sensitive, age-appropriate methods including semi-structured interviews with visual prompts, storytelling, and drawing exercises, allowing young participants to express their emotions and experiences in developmentally suitable ways (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Interviews with caregivers and ECD teachers provided complementary adult perspectives, while focus group discussions facilitated data triangulation. Ethical clearance was obtained from the appropriate institutional review board, with informed consent secured from caregivers and assent from children in a child-friendly manner (Israel & Hay, 2006). To safeguard emotional dilemmas, all interviews were conducted in supportive, familiar environments, and referral procedures for psychosocial support were followed when signs of distress emerged.

Thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework, was used to analyse the data through familiarisation with transcripts, systematic coding, and iterative theme development until saturation was reached. Analysis was supported by qualitative data software to enhance rigour. Trustworthiness was ensured through data triangulation across children, caregivers, and teachers, prolonged engagement with participants, and member checking with caregivers and educators to verify key interpretations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). A reflexive journal was maintained throughout to document personal biases, decision-making processes, and observations, thereby enhancing transparency and dependability.

Research Findings and Discussion

The study drew on the perspectives of 33 participants, comprising 15 Early Childhood Development (ECD) children, 10 caregivers, and 8 ECD teachers, whose demographic characteristics provide essential context for interpreting the findings. The child participants, aged 5 to 8 years, represented a foundational developmental stage during which emotional security, attachment, and consistent caregiving are particularly crucial. The group included 11 girls (55%) and 9 boys (45%), a slight female majority that is methodologically significant: recent research suggests young girls may be more expressive in discussing emotional issues and more willing to engage in supportive school-based activities, potentially enriching the data on emotional experiences (Karanja & Mwangi, 2022). The balanced inclusion of both genders enabled the study to explore emerging patterns of gender-based differences in emotional expression and adjustment during early childhood, an area of growing scholarly interest (Zhao & Wu, 2023).

Caregivers in this study ranged in age from 40 to 75 years and were predominantly female (70%, n=7), with the majority being grandparents and extended family members. This profile aligns with established patterns across sub-Saharan Africa, where grandparents and grandmothers in particular commonly assume primary caregiving responsibilities for children affected by parental migration (Adewale & Njoroge, 2022). The advanced age of many caregivers reflects the deep reliance on extended family networks, a culturally embedded support system that nonetheless faces significant challenges related to caregivers' physical health, intergenerational communication gaps, and limited access to material and psychosocial resources

(Mensah, 2023). The overwhelming representation of women in caregiving roles further underscores the gendered nature of childcare in Zimbabwe, where women continue to bear primary responsibility for young children's emotional and physical dilemmas (Nkosi & Mbatha, 2024).

The ECD teachers who participated in the study ranged in age from 26 to 55 years, with females comprising 62.5% (n=5) of the group, a composition that reflects the national trend of female dominance in early childhood education (Moyo & Chikwava, 2021). Notably, this educator cohort was relatively well-qualified: three teachers held diplomas in ECD, four possessed bachelor's degrees, and one had obtained a master's degree. Their teaching experience ranged from 3 to 20 years, with an average of 11 years, indicating a knowledgeable and seasoned group of professionals. This is significant, as previous research has demonstrated that teaching experience is positively associated with educators' capacity to recognise emotional distress and provide nurturing, developmentally appropriate support in early learning environments (Kamau & Ochieng, 2023). The involvement of such experienced practitioners lent credibility and depth to the study's exploration of how schools respond to the needs of left-behind children.

The demographic composition of participants reflects broader trends documented in the regional literature, particularly the caregiving role of older female family members and the prominence of experienced female educators within the ECD sector. However, the heavy reliance on grandparent caregivers and the corresponding absence of younger adult caregivers signal potential vulnerabilities in the support systems available to left-behind children. Grandparents, while deeply committed, struggle to provide the sustained emotional and psychosocial care that children require, particularly when contending with their own age-related health challenges and limited formal support. Furthermore, the complete absence of specialised support personnel such as child psychologists, counsellors and social workers within the study's participant framework may negatively impact the study findings.

Emotional and Psychological Dilemmas of Parental Migration

The emotional and psychological toll of parental migration on children is a distressing theme throughout the interview dataset. Early Childhood Development learners articulated their experiences of loss and confusion with a raw simplicity that underscored their profound vulnerability. For instance, a 6-year-old girl (C1) captured this feeling poignantly, stating, *"Sometimes I cry at school because I miss my mummy."* She elaborated, her voice softening, *"She used to hold my hand and tell me stories after school."* This sense of personal loss was compounded by feelings of abandonment and misunderstanding, as expressed by C5, a 7-year-old boy who claimed that: *"When my daddy left, I thought he didn't like me anymore. I got so cross, even when my teacher tried to help me."*

Many children struggled to reconcile the abstract reasons for their parents' absence with their tangible need for their presence. The permanence of the separation was a difficult concept to grasp. As C12 remarked, *"They say my mummy went to work in another place... but I just*

want her to come back and stay with me.” Such expressions of yearning and bewilderment highlight the critical disruption to attachment and daily routines, which are fundamental to a child’s sense of safety and belonging during early childhood.

Caregivers left to manage these emotional repercussions corroborated the children’s accounts, describing observable and worrying changes in behaviour. CG2, a grandmother caring for two children, conveyed her own helplessness. *“These little ones ask hard questions, like ‘Why did my mum go away?’ Sometimes I just do not know what to say.”* The shift from a happy disposition to one of persistent sadness was a common observation. CG6 noted, *“My granddaughter used to laugh and play with her toys. Now she just sits quietly and looks sad most of the time.”* Another caregiver, CG10, emotionally highlighted the insufficiency of material remittances in addressing this emotional void, stating, *“Even when money or clothes come, they do not match the same happiness when her mother comes.”*

The classroom environment provided further evidence of the children's distress. Teachers reported a range of emotional and behavioural disruptions, from social withdrawal to aggressive outbursts. T3 observed, *“Some children just sit alone and look down. Others become noisy or angry, even when we try to help them.”* The transformation in individual learners was particularly telling. T7 shared a specific case. *“One of my learners used to be very talkative and bright. Since his mother left, he barely speaks and often stares out the window.”* A significant concern raised by educators was the lack of institutional support to address these complex needs. T2 stated plainly, *“There is no school counsellor here, and yet we have children who clearly need help. We try to listen, but we are not trained psychologists.”*

The psychological impact manifested not only in observable behaviours but also in the children's internal worlds. Some described somatic symptoms and the suppression of their emotions. C14 revealed, *“When my daddy went away, I started having bad dreams. I am scared he might not come back.”* Feelings of otherness and social exclusion were also common, as C18 explained, *“Sometimes I feel like I do not belong. Other kids talk about their daddies and mummies, and I just stay quiet.”* For some, this resulted in a conscious decision to internalise their pain. As C16 put it, *“I keep everything inside. I do not want my friends to think I always cry for my mother.”*

While some children attempted to maintain a connection with their absent parent through phone or video calls, these interactions reinforced their sense of loss. The irregularity of communication was a source of significant anxiety. C7 shared, *“Sometimes I wait the whole week for mummy to call. If she does not call, I feel like she forgot me.”* This feeling underscored the fundamental truth that no material substitute could replace the emotional sustenance of a parent, a sentiment powerfully summarised by C10. *“Even when she sends money, I still feel sad. I want my mother to hug me every day when I come back from school.”*

Data from children, caregivers and teachers converged to paint a stark picture of the emotional and psychological distress experienced by ECD learners affected by parental

migration. The findings reveal a need for the development and implementation of structured emotional support systems.

Coping Mechanism among Left-Behind Children

In response to the emotional upheaval caused by parental migration, the children who participated in the study demonstrated a diverse range of coping mechanisms, spanning from adaptive, resilient behaviours to more concerning patterns of withdrawal and risk. Most of the children directed their emotions into positive, constructive outlets. Play, in particular, served as a vital escape and a source of comfort. For example, creative expression became a means of maintaining a symbolic connection with the absent parent. C11, a cheerful 5-year-old girl, shared, *"When I sing my mummy hears me from far away."*

Academically, some children appeared to channel their energy into their schoolwork, viewing educational success as a way to honour their parents' sacrifice and maintain their approval. C8, aged 7, articulated this quietly, stating, *"I try to be clever so my mummy and daddy will be happy."* Such strategies not only provided a sense of purpose but also helped the children sustain hope and an emotional connection across the physical distance. However, a significant number of children exhibited internalising behaviours, coping through emotional withdrawal and concealment. This quiet suffering was not lost on educators, who recognised that a lack of disruption did not equate to emotional dilemmas. T5 observed, *"Some children just sit quietly during play time. They are not disruptive, but you can tell they are not okay."*

Caregivers provided further insight into the private and often ingenious ways children attempted to manage their feelings at home. Some found solace in symbolic rituals. CG3 explained, "My grandson writes notes to his dad every week, even though we don't send them. It helps him feel close to him." Others sought community and structure outside the home. CG8 mentioned, "My granddaughter joined the church children's group. She looks forward to Sundays because she says it makes her happy again." Faith and prayer emerged as a significant emotional anchor for several children, offering a framework for hope. C4, a thoughtful 6-year-old, expressed this simply, saying, "When I pray, I ask God to bring my daddy back safely."

Conversely, a subset of children displayed externalising or avoidant behaviours as a means of coping. For some, this involved seeking alternative social groups that offered a sense of belonging without emotional scrutiny. C6, aged 7, revealed, *"I started going with big boys outside. They do not ask anything. They just let me play."* Teachers noted that such behaviours could escalate, with aggression becoming a misguided expression of strength in the face of loneliness. T6 explained, *"One boy kept skipping class and fighting other kids. He told me it made him feel strong when he felt alone."* This shift towards secrecy was identified by caregivers as a critical warning sign. CG9 noted, *"Sometimes the children stop talking to me and I get worried."*

Despite the pervasiveness of emotional difficulty, remarkable resilience was also evident. Some children coped by adopting a mature, protective role within the family structure. C20

shared with determination, *"I miss my parents but I must be strong because I am the big sister."* Furthermore, consistent, albeit often limited, communication with migrant parents proved to be a powerful protective factor. C15 shared brightly, *"Mummy calls me on Sundays. I tell her about school. It makes me feel like she is with me."* Teachers corroborated the tangible benefits of this connection, noting its positive impact on a child's overall demeanour. T4 affirmed, *"You can tell when a child talks regularly with their parent. They smile more and behave better."*

Collectively, the narratives reveal a complex spectrum of coping behaviours among left-behind children. The strategies ranged from adaptive strategies to maladaptive responses, including emotional withdrawal and engagement with risky peer groups. These findings underscore the need for early emotional guidance and the establishment of consistent, supportive adult relationships. They also highlight the urgency of implementing school-based psychosocial programmes designed to help young children process their feelings in safe, constructive, and developmentally appropriate ways.

Strategies for Mitigating Parental Migration Dilemmas

The findings discussed in the preceding section illuminate not only the emotional and psychological dilemmas faced by left-behind children but also the resourceful, though informal, strategies employed by children and caregivers to navigate these challenges. This section discusses the five key mitigation strategies that emerged from the data. The strategies include maintaining consistent parent-child communication, fostering supportive school environments, leveraging peer friendships, engaging with community and faith-based organisations as well as the provision of school-based professional counselling support.

Consistent and Meaningful Parent-Child Communication

The findings indicate that regular, emotionally engaged communication with the migrated parent serves as a primary anchor for children's emotional security. For many children who participated in this study, the simple act of a phone call was a source of comfort, suggesting that auditory connection can momentarily bridge the physical gap and reinforce a child's sense of being remembered and valued. Furthermore, the use of technology for video calls adds a vital visual dimension to the interaction, serving not only as emotional comfort but also as a means of alleviating anxiety regarding the parent's well-being. When parents actively engage with their children's daily lives, such as by inquiring about school, these interactions transform from mere check-ins into meaningful exchanges that bolster the child's resilience and self-worth.

The positive impact of consistent communication was corroborated by teachers, who observed a direct link between the frequency of parental contact and a child's emotional state at school. Data revealed that children in regular contact appeared calmer and more confident, underscoring the stabilising effect of this strategy. It provides children with a predictable source of reassurance in an otherwise uncertain situation, equipping them with the emotional resources to better navigate their environment and fostering a sense of normalcy that counteracts the

instability caused by parental absence. The data suggests that the quality and regularity of communication are paramount, serving as a lifeline that maintains the parent-child bond across distances.

Supportive School Environments and Teacher Engagement

In the absence of formal psychological support structures, teachers in Kwekwe District have emerged as crucial, albeit informal, providers of emotional first-line support. Their proactive efforts to create safe spaces for expression, such as facilitating classroom discussions or incorporating drawing and story-writing activities, illustrate a responsive, child-centered approach to promoting the emotional well-being of left-behind children. These methods allow children who lack the vocabulary for their complex emotions to externalise their feelings in a non-threatening way. The effectiveness of teacher-support highlights that the act of being heard by a trusted, empathetic adult is, in itself, a powerful therapeutic intervention.

Beyond structured activities, the teachers' role as a consistent and caring figure was fundamental to this mitigation strategy. Usually the first to notice changes in behaviour and to offer a listening ear, teachers demonstrated that schools function as more than just academic institutions. They are hubs of psychosocial support within the community. The support provided by teachers can help to normalise left-behind children's feelings of sadness and anxiety while assuring them that their emotional responses are valid and that they are not alone regardless of the absence of their parents. This form of support builds a vital layer of resilience, creating a buffer against the full weight of the children's emotional dilemmas by providing a safe and empathetic space within their daily routine.

Leveraging Peer Support and Friendships

A significant finding was the powerful role of peer relationships, particularly among children who share similar experiences of parental migration. Friendships provide a unique and essential form of solace, offering a level of empathy and mutual understanding that adults, however well-meaning, may not be able to provide. This shared experience creates a micro-community of coping, where children feel less isolated and different. The simple acts of talking and laughing together serve as a vital emotional release and a powerful reminder that their situation, while painful, is not theirs alone to bear.

This peer-based mitigation strategy functions on multiple levels. Firstly, it provides a space for validation, where children's feelings are mirrored and understood by others in the same situation, reducing the stigma of feeling abandoned. Secondly, it offers a source of normalcy and joy, allowing left-behind children to momentarily step away from their worries and engage in healthful activities of childhood. This mutual support system helps build social confidence and resilience, as children learn to both give and receive comfort. The study data suggest that these friendships are not merely a distraction but a fundamental component of the children's coping toolkit, helping them to navigate their emotional landscape with the support of empathetic peers.

Community and Faith-Based Organisations Engagement

Beyond the immediate family and school, community and faith-based organisations were identified as vital sources of social integration and emotional comfort. Caregivers noted that participation in these groups provided children with a sense of belonging that counteracted the loneliness of their home situation. This engagement offers children a structured, positive environment where they can form connections with a wider circle of caring adults and children, reinforcing their identity as valued members of a community beyond their immediate family. Collective activities, such as singing and playing, provide healthy outlets for emotional expression and foster a sense of unity and shared purpose.

Similarly, involvement in recreational activities served a key function by providing structure, fun, and something positive to anticipate. This practical approach to managing a child's emotional state helps to channel energy into constructive outlets and promotes physical and mental well-being. Acting as a healthy distraction from persistent worries, these activities provide a sense of routine, accomplishment, and social connection. Consequently, they help to build children's confidence and resilience, offering a counter-narrative to the feelings of neglect and sadness that can otherwise dominate their lives.

Professional Counselling Support

While the informal support systems from peers and the community are valued and have proven to be beneficial, a clear and urgent gap was identified from the accounts of participants. Analysis of data suggests that there was a need for professional counselling to help left-behind children cope with the emotional and psychological dilemmas emanating from absent parents. Teachers, positioned on the front lines of observing children's distress, expressed a profound sense of inadequacy in addressing the deep-seated psychological needs they witnessed. This highlights the painful reality that teachers are left as the sole responders to the complex realities of left-behind children. While the teachers are equipped with empathy, they lack the specialised training to provide the professional help they know is required.

The need for professional support was articulated by the children themselves, who recognised the limits of talking to caregivers and friends. The struggle to process and articulate complex emotions like abandonment, fear, and anger points to a need for therapeutic interventions that can help left-behind children not only express their feelings but also understand and reframe them healthily. Thus, a strong and effective mitigation strategy must include the integration of school-based or community-based mental health professionals. Such professionals are essential to address the deeper psychological dilemmas that informal supports, however valuable, cannot fully resolve.

Recommendations

Based on the key findings of this study and the suggested mitigation strategies for parental migration dilemmas affecting left-behind children, it is recommended that;

- Government and Local Authorities should partner with community and faith-based organisations to resource and strengthen recreational and social programs that foster belonging, confidence, and emotional release for left-behind children.
- Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (MoPSE) develops and implements a policy to deploy trained school counsellors to primary schools in high-migration districts and integrate a basic mental health curriculum to address the psychological needs of left-behind children.
- Teacher training colleges should integrate basic psychosocial support and trauma-informed care into teacher training curricula to equip educators with the skills to offer effective first-line emotional support and identify children needing specialised referral.
- Primary schools should establish structured peer support group systems to provide a safe space for children with migrant parents to share experiences, reduce stigma, and build mutual resilience.
- Migrant parents establish a predictable routine of emotionally engaged communication that focuses on the child's daily life to reinforce their sense of being valued and to alleviate feelings of abandonment.

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