Bridging the Gaps between Institutional Care and After Care: Insight from Lived Experiences of Youths Discharged from a Children's Home in Harare Zimbabwe

Reverend Faustine Mhlanga & Francis Mutema

Msc. in Counselling Psychology, Great Zimbabwe University, Masvingo Zimbabwe

ABSTRACT

This paper sought to bring to the fore gaps that lie between the life in an institution and life after leaving the institution. The research focused on the lived experiences of children who have been living in an institution and later reintegrated into the community. The study adopted a qualitative approach to explore the experiences of children discharged from institutions. Using purposive sampling, 10 participants were selected to participate in the study. The findings suggest that issues arising on discharge included adjustment challenges and lack of social and life skills.

Keywords: Institution, discharged, home, youths, care leavers

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Every child is entitled to basic human rights such as shelter, health, food, and education. However, this has not been the case for all children. Some children, due to circumstances beyond their control, end up leaving their homes and living on the streets and in institutions for most of their childhood (Dziro & Rufurwokuda,2013). These children are meant to be in the institution up to eighteen years of age, and they are discharged back into the community, which could not take care of them in the beginning. Children are brought into homes mainly so they can enjoy the benefits of care, just like those who grew up in a typical family setting. They are expected to be able to fit into society socially and culturally after their release from the children's homes. A holistic package that includes training the children in the Southern African philosophy of "unhu/ubuntu", which can be literally translated into meaning (humanness), "I am because we are, I can only be a person through others" (Mbigi, 2004). What it simply means is that one becomes what he/she is because of observing the good behaviour displayed or shared by others. This aspect of social life is difficult when one is in an institution where the child is only exposed to those living in the same house with him/her. Children are therefore likely to face integration challenges after they have been weaned from a particular home or institution without proper training (Murray, 2009; Penglas, 2007).

In African culture, the children of a deceased member are supposed to be looked after by relatives of those deceased people. The practice is, however, slowly becoming obsolete due to poverty and the disintegration of the nucleus family. This is exacerbated by pandemics like the HIV pandemic, which decimated some families. Concomitantly, the children of the deceased usually drop out of school and end up in children's homes. Some of the children leave their homes due to physical abuse like corporal punishment, child labour, torture, and even sexual abuse.

Even though children's homes have been identified as the solution for children without relatives to care for them, they have their own weaknesses (Mupedziswa, 2005, as cited in Dziro & Rufurwokuda, 2013). As much as the institutions may really need to thrive to meet the expected standards of childcare, their hands are tied due to a lack of the necessary resources. Most children's homes are donor-funded, and due to donor

fatigue and, in some cases, political reasons, many donors are withdrawing their support, leaving children in poorly resourced institutions.

Within the institutions, some care givers who lack adequate skills continue to look after the disadvantaged children as a way of earning a living. Children may develop low self-esteem. At times, the children are insulted using their backgrounds, which also adds to the already existing abuses they would have encountered before being admitted to the institution (Penglas, 2007).

Institutions strive to give the necessary attention to the children, but due to human and financial resource constraints, certain areas are left unattended to. Usually, institutions concentrate on the physical needs without considering the cultural, emotional, and probably physiological needs. It is, therefore, important to note that challenges emanating from institutions create other challenges that make children not fit into the community where they are supposed to be accepted (Dziro & Rufurwokuda, 2013).

The transitions of youth populations in different social contexts vary considerably, reflecting variances in livelihood pathways and outcomes. Although youths face different hurdles in their transitions to adulthood, those in the welfare system experience significant challenges resulting from their past experiences of harm, neglect, abuse, and separation from parents and relatives (Cooker and Allain, 2013). Growing up in institutional care is further complicated by lived experiences within institutional facilities (Murray, et al .,2008).

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The research used a qualitative research design. The primary purpose of conducting qualitative research is to understand the individual's thoughts, feelings, opinions, and reasons behind these emotions. Qualitative research tries to preserve the voice and perspective of participants (Cresswell, 2014). By using qualitative research, the researcher intends to understand the perspective of those who have experienced the after-care life as community members. The researcher used the phenomenological study method with the aim of examining human experiences through the descriptions provided by the people involved. This type of research is used to study areas in which there is little knowledge (Donalek, 2004). The respondents were asked to describe their experiences as they perceive them, and the information was obtained by interview guides.

Selection of participants

Purposive sampling was used to select the participants. Purposive sampling is a technique widely used in qualitative research for the identification and selection of information-rich cases for the most effective use of limited resources (Patton, 2002). This involves identifying and selecting individuals or groups of individuals that are especially knowledgeable about or experienced with a phenomenon of interest (Creswell et al., 2011). Creswell (2014) suggests that being purposeful in identifying participants might provide insight into your research question. The participants included the youths that were discharged from institutional care between 2019 and 2022, and some community members from the areas where the youths are currently residing. A total of ten participants were identified. The participants included five community members and five youths. The youths included two who were reunified with family members, two who went to foster parents and one who had to live an independent life after being discharged.

Before conducting the interviews, the researcher explained to the participants the purpose of the study, and they signed consent forms. All the data that was obtained during the study was anonymised to maintain confidentiality. The participants were assured that the researcher would only use their information without

identifying the source of the information.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis has been applied to the research. Thematic analysis is a method for systematically identifying, organising, and offering insight into patterns of meaning (themes) across a dataset (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Through focusing on meaning across a dataset, the researchers made sense of collective or shared meanings and experiences, thus identifying what was common amongst the participants. The participants' responses were tape recorded in vernacular language and then transcribed. The transcribed records were then translated into English. The transcripts were read several times to establish major themes.

FINDINGS

Adjustment problems

Findings have indicated that most of the discharged youths face adjustment problems when they are discharged. Most of them indicated that they never took their caregivers seriously when they were told that life in the institution is totally different from life out in the community. One of the respondents had this to say:

"I could not imagine having to survive with only two meals a day when I had been used to eating wheneverI felt like eating. Life is very unfair. Why did people not tell us the truth about our future life?"

For those who were reunified with family members, they expressed that it was not all that easy to accept that these were really their close relatives. Instead, they continued to seek assistance from the institution's staff which they were used to. They all agreed on one thing which they continued to grapple with. One participant reported:

"If they were really our relatives, why then did we have to spend part of our lives in an institution and not be part of the families?"

This was supported by another participant who said:

"Those care givers who took care of us in the institution are our relatives because they really cared for us. They are the ones who knew what we had to eat on daily basis and even knowing the type of clothes we wore. You cannot just come today and say you are our relatives, where have you been all along?"

The community members had this to say:

"It takes time for the children to adjust, hence there should be some community-based support programmes where the community is taught how they can assist in the success of the children's transitions. Thecommunity needs to be made aware that the children need to be loved the way they love their own children."

Overprotection

Some of the participants pointed out that during their stay in the institution, they were never allowed to move around on their own. They found a totally different scenario when they were discharged. One participant had this to say:

"The protection that we got when in the institution is no longer available out here, hence there is great need for us to change our mindsets and move on with life independently. We were not allowed to go anywhere without the company of an elder and relevant documentation of approval, now we are on our own".

One of the community members had this to say:

"*The way these children are treated while in the institution does not prepare them for the harsh conditions that are out in the community. They must be exposed to the situations they are going to face when they are discharged so that life will not be all that difficult for them*".

Lack of social skills and other necessary life skills.

Findings indicated that some of the children discharged from Institutional care endured chronic abuse and emotional deprivation, which gave rise to a lasting inability to form loving and trusting relationships. Especially girls, they really thought that getting married was the greatest solution to their problems.

One participant had this to say:

"*We were really confused because as we joined the community, we did not have the courage to make decisions on our own since everything was being decided for us, so we ended up making careless decisions that landed us into problems.*"

One of the participants reported:

"*We did not even have the simplest skill of shopping groceries for our own use, buying meat from a butchery was new to us. Considering that most people are now using gas for cooking, I was sent to buy gas,I did not even know where to go and what to do. These simple skills are very essential in life, but we do not have them so at times if you are not very careful you will fall prey to criminals or tricksters.*"

The respondents also echoed that decision making skills are very poor amongst most of them as a result most have suffered due to poor decisions that they have made either hurriedly or unknowingly.

One of the participants had this to say:

"*Especially for girls, when you go out you attract boys' attention, so if you are not smart you will fall into the trap. Some rushed to get married, but the marriages did not last long.*

One of the community members echoed that:

"*I was surprised to find that most of these children are not even able to mend a torn garment even to sew on a button. Such simple skills that you expect youths of their age to be well versed in. A lot more should be done for them whilst they are still young so that they will not be surprised when discharge time comes.*"

treatment in the new communities

One respondent reiterated that it is not pleasing to stay with people you are not used to or related to especially if you were not given enough time to form relationship. They had this to say:

"*The reception that we were given by the families we joined was not all that pleasing, hence there is need for bond formation to be made before one is discharged. There is also stigmatisation that continues to prevail in the new communities that we joined after discharge. They do not believe we can do something good in life basing on what might have happened long back. This has led to low self-esteem among us, we no longer have confidence in whatever we will be planning to do.*"

One participant echoed the same sentiments:

"*You can see for yourself that there is a place to stay, but the other members in that house don't welcome us. They don't see us as intellectual people, which is very hurtful. Nothing good is expected from us which*

really puts us down emotionally".

Poor Discharge Plans

Findings have also shown that discharge plans for the institutionalised children are not done in time to help the youths make successful transitions after discharge.

The respondents sounded that:

"It is difficult to receive a pleasing welcome from people you have never lived with or people you have been attached to for just a short period of time. You appear as if you are disturbing the prevailing peace in the home, you have been discharged to. Because of this, most girls prefer to get married early even with someone she has not been engaged to for a long time."

On the other hand, members of the community felt that the children got the necessary advice that is needed for independent living, but some of the care leavers are not appreciative of what is being done for them. Some of them had this to say:

"Children from institutions do not understand that life in the community and life in the institution is different. They expect to get what they were getting whilst in the institution without considering that they need to work for what they want. Spoon-feeding that is done in institutions is really spoiling these children, they should be taught to work hard for them to live the lives they expect."

Positive Outcomes

There were some positive remarks by other care leavers and community members. They appreciated the support they got from the institution, and they accepted that at times they are the ones who failed to follow these teachings.

They also appreciated the training they got in different skills which they are using for survival. Some of

respondents had this to say-

"The institution has facilitated for our education hence those gifted academically were assisted to achieve their goals. Those not academically gifted were assisted with skills training programs".

The other participant also said:

"The institution worked hard to teach us what is needed for us to grow but at times we were not obedient and ended up being disciplined".

DISCUSSION

Findings reveal that a lot must be done to allow for the successful transition of youth from welfare institutions. Some of the respondents have acknowledged the good work that was done by the institution during their stay; however, they feel more can be done to help the reintegration process. Powell (2006) asserts that young people leaving institutional care need programs that enhance their capacity and motivation for independent thinking and living. The programs should aim to build emotional resilience and provide practical techniques and knowledge that will help them find their way in the world. This will then assist the care leavers in quickly adapting to the new ways of living they will be exposed to.

The study noted that institutionalised youths receive little training in life skills and are ill-prepared for the

transition from the institution to the outside world. Powell,(2006) made a similar observation and indicated that the institutionalisation of children is a temporary strategy, as services and support cease upon attaining the legal age of majority. Once discharged, real life begins for the institutionalised children. Participants highlighted the significance of proper training as well as allowing more time for bond formation prior to discharge.

According to Mendes (2011), young people leaving care are associated with negative outcomes and are viewed as the most disadvantaged group compared to youths in the general population. This was also noted in this study. Some of the participants indicated that they were still struggling with ways of adjusting from institutional life to out-of-care life. Life has never been favourable for most, even for those who used to go through foster care during institutional life. While the foster parents provide a suitable home, the treatment and reception from other family members are different as the family members assert that nothing good is expected from children reared in institutions.

Karmel and Liu (2011) assert that a successful transition for youths leaving the welfare system involves good mental and physical health, the opportunity or potential to earn cash, and the ability to acquire marketable skills. This was not the case in this study. Findings have shown the existence of poor discharge plans. Participants bemoaned that they always wanted to be independent, but it was not easy since they were never given that independence due to policy issues.

Wehman (2011), asserts that adequate transition programming should provide services and support that promote self-determination and advocacy, ensure access to post-secondary education and employment, improve collaboration and links between systems of support, and should promote the active participation of youths in all aspects of community life, such as social, recreational and leisure activities. From the findings, most of the care leavers seem not to have gone through such preparations due to policies in place at the institutions. Most of them indicated they lacked the skills needed in day-to-day activities as this has always been done for them; hence, they are struggling to lead successful lives after discharge. The findings concur with Frey et al, (2005) who opined that comprehensive preparations for adulthood are a conscious, purposeful, and collaborative process that must be systematic, developmentally appropriate, and continuous. Preparations are being made, but according to the findings, they are not comprehensive, as well as developmentally appropriate and continuous since they lack some of the aspects of comprehensive preparations.

The Ministry of Labour and Social Services(2010b) emphasised that every child has to have a discharge plan with a range of services, support that facilitates access to continued education, training and work, support and follow up for children with special needs, safe and secure accommodation, independent living skills, information available, social services and benefits, social networks that provide advice and information and follow-up arrangements and support to ensure the care leaver has adjusted to the new living environment. Institutions are expected to provide transition services and support that prepare young people for independent living prior to discharge and follow-up services and support after discharge. The institutions are incapacitated, hence they only provide support services to the children when they are still residents, once discharged, and the responsibility is left for the new carers, who might also be unable to provide the services.

CONCLUSION

It may be concluded that childcare is an ongoing process that entails taking care of the children even after they have been weaned. Just like those who grow up in a typical family setting who continue to go back to their parents for assistance, the same should be available to those who grew up in welfare systems. Children in institutions should be very well prepared by institutions for life after reintegration. Such preparation should help institutionalised children gain experience of the outside world before they are discharged. The

care leavers continue to suffer after care because of some areas of life that would not have been exposed to them.

It is recommended that discharge planning for each child be done on admission. This allows for ample time to trace the children's relatives and form meaningful bonds with them in preparation for life after care. The training done while children are in the institution should include self-sustaining skills like budgeting, shopping, decision making, sex education, relationship building and how to adapt to a changing environment. The children should be exposed to these skills to gain experience. There should be some community-based programmes where the community would be educated on how they can be helpful in the adaptation of the care leavers into these new environments. Programmes should include follow-up and support activities that will help monitor how the care leavers will be adjusting to their new environments.

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