

When Home is not Home: Challenges Faced by Children from Orphanage after being Reintegrated back into Society

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Abstract

This qualitative study sought to explore the experiences of children at an orphanage when they reach adulthood and they are expected to move out of the orphanage which would be the only home they know. A phenomenological research design was used to describe the experiences of graduate orphans; the sample was made up of 13 participants (1 administrator, 5 caregivers and 7 graduate orphans). Data was collected through in-depth interviews. Data were coded, categorized and analysed through identification of themes (any specific analysis method that was used). The findings showed that orphanages offered opportunities for graduate orphans to survive effectively and independently after being reintegrated back into society, however they were facing challenges with emotional and psychological adjustment to the new environment which was influenced by the way they were socialized in the orphanage. It emerged during the study that they had challenges with locating relatives, failure to bond, bitterness, isolation, self-identity, forgiveness, dependency syndrome, securing employment, cynicism, and lack of support system. This study recommends that policy makers should introduce policies that promote fostering and adoption in Zimbabwe and create awareness on the benefits of removing a child from the orphanage and raising them in home set up.

Keywords: Graduate orphan • Orphanage • Reintegration • Children

Introduction

Usually it is expected that when a child is born, he or she would be nurtured and cared by parents or relatives. Muguwe et al. [1] state that traditionally childcare in Zimbabwe was the preserve of the nuclear family, extended family, clans and communities. However due to AIDS and other diseases, natural disasters, forced displacement and extreme poverty many children end up orphaned, separated or on the brink of family breakdown [2].

Children in orphanages are supposed to be taken care of whilst the stakeholders are finding a foster home or an adoption family. Unfortunately, not all children are reintegrated into society at young age, some of them end up staying for long in these institutions until they reach the age of 18 years of which they are required to leave the institutions. Dziro et al. [3], states that most institutions do not prepare children for the life after institutionalization. Even if the institutions equip these children with life skills it is believed that this is inadequate for them when they leave the orphanage. Williamson et al. [2] have noted that orphanages do more harm to children than good because long stay at an orphanage affects the emotional, self-esteem and psychological wellbeing of the children.

The Government of Zimbabwe, as early as 1999 and in response to the impending crisis, developed and adopted a National Orphan Care Policy,

which sought to support traditional methods of care and discouraged forms of care which removed children from their communities and culture [4]. This policy recommended foster care and adoption as the desired alternatives for children who did not have extended families. It clearly stated that placing a child in an orphanage should be regarded as a last resort and utilized only after all efforts to secure a better form of care have been exhausted. The convention on the Rights of the Child outlines these obligations; Article 20 is specifically concerned with alternative care for children, though several other articles relate to childcare and protection [5]. Regrettably, the fundamental 'best interest' of the child is not as honored as most orphans and vulnerable children end up in children's home than with families.

Children placed in orphanages are not meant to stay for long, but only for a while whilst they are waiting for reintegration back to their families, adoption, or foster care. Unfortunately, adoption is not a popular practice in Zimbabwe. In Zimbabwe, the Department of Social Services, Head office, indicated that there were 70 registered children's homes with an enrolment of 3200 children by 31st December 2011 [3]. On average per year, there are only 15 adoptions that take place [6]. This slow uptake is caused by the cultural beliefs of people. People are afraid of avenging spirits in the event that the child dies in his or her adoptive family and due to the prevailing socio-economic challenges confronting families [7]. In the areas that are supported under Child Protection Fund, the numbers of households that were mobilized and that were interested in fostering children in 2013 were 50. In 2013 alone, 79 children were placed in formal foster care. This is a small margin compared to 5000 children in various orphanages in Zimbabwe [8].

Children raised at the orphanages are supposed to be weaned at the age of 18 unless the institution decides to let the child stay due to the support they still need. Results from various institutions worldwide have shown that orphans fail to cope in the community, with research results showing antisocial behaviors, unlawfulness, and poor assertive skills [9]. However, in Zimbabwe little is known of what happens to these graduates after they leave the institution as for most of them relationship with the institution ends the day they leave. Some are not well prepared to face the new environment and survive on their own and they also lack the support system they had at the institution.

The main problem, according to experts, is not being raised at an orphanage but that children who grow up in these institutions are totally unprepared for real life [10]. The authors further explain that for a child, leaving a home is like landing on the moon, where nobody knows them. And this is how they spend the rest of their life, in a spacesuit since nobody takes any interest in them.

Powell, et al. [11] states that children go through a transition from the moment they move in into an orphanage. Children must adapt to the new environment and try to create bonds with the people around them. The issue of attachment is critical for the child as they first have to develop trust with their caregivers. However, when the children reach the age of 16 going upwards, they start wondering about their future. Berridge, et al. [12] states that many childcare professionals still believe that orphanages are bad for children. Supposedly, young children fail to develop as they should, socially and psychologically. The prospective harm is even more certain if children are admitted as infants and remain for several years. According to Smith et al. [13] Children in orphanages often lack maternal love. When the children reach certain age, usually 18 they must leave the orphanage. The Faith to Action Initiative [14] states that these youths (care leavers) are frequently unprepared for independent life.

Aim

The aim of the study is to explore the experiences of children raised at an orphanage when they reach adulthood and must be weaned out of the orphanage they know as home.

Objectives

The objectives of this study are to:

To ascertain if orphanage offer opportunities to the children when they leave the institution?

Evaluate the challenges faced by orphanage graduates after being reintegrated into society?

Assess the orphanage's reintegration process?

Methodology

Population

The target population were the caregivers at the orphanage and former children of orphanage located in Bulawayo.

Sample and sampling techniques

A total of 13 participant participated in this study. This included 1 administrator, 5 caregivers and 7 orphanage graduates. Purposive sampling was used to identify the administrator and caregivers. Through snowballing sampling technique, the institution unveiled the contact of two graduates that were still in communication with the orphanage and these graduates also referred the researchers to other graduates. The sample size was achieved through data saturation.

Data gathering instrument

The researcher used in-depth interviews as a qualitative research technique that involves conducting intensive individual interviews with a small number of respondents to explore their perspectives on a idea, program, or situation. It enabled the researcher to get detailed personal information.

Procedure

The researcher obtained a research letter from the Department of Psychology at the Midlands State University. This letter was presented to the Ministry of Social Welfare and Labor together with the research proposal who approved the research study. The orphanage provided contacts of two graduates who also provided the contacts of other graduates. Participants were informed of the purpose of the research and consent was sort from each participant prior to data collection.

Design

The researcher conducted phenomenological research, which involves trying to understand the essence of a phenomenon by examining the views of people who have experienced the phenomenon [15]. Phenomenology is interested in the individual experiences of people. It involves long, in-depth interviews with subjects.

Data analysis

This involves collecting open-ended data, based on asking general questions and developing an analysis from the information supplied by the participants (Creswell, 2009). The qualitative data collected was developed into themes; Creswell [16] calls this thematic analysis. These themes became the basis for analyzing the text from interviews to identify main themes. Codes were assigned to the themes to classify the responses or contents of the notes under different themes. These were displayed through a hierarchical structural chart showing various themes leading to a specific main theme.

Results and Discussion

The results of this study show that children who grow up in orphanages face challenges when they reach adulthood and are weaned off from the orphanage. They realize that the institution they regarded as home is no longer their home. The graduates informed the researcher that growing up at an orphanage has greatly influenced who they were and how they viewed the world around them.

Integration process

The researcher found out that there was an institution integration plan in place which was drafted by the orphanage. However, there was no integration plan designed by the government except that which is stated in the constitution which stipulates that when a child reaches 18 years, he or she is an adult and can take care of himself. The process was not meant for the institution to keep the child received for a longer period but shows that the institution was supposed to be a temporary measure. However due to lack of people who foster and adopt, the children end up staying at the orphanage for longer until they are weaned as they have nowhere to go. According to Dziro et al. [3], Zimbabweans are not accustomed to fostering or adoption of non kin children as they fear introducing alien spirits into the family or upsetting their own ancestral spirits. Muchanga, [17] (1999) also states that due to economic hardships it is difficult for families to add on another person to take care of in their families.

The study revealed that even though the children are supposed to be weaned or reintegrated back into society at 18 years the institution continued to look after them until they were able to look after themselves. The other reason is that the children would still be at school and the orphanage must continue paying for their education. This is contrary to what Dziro et al. [3] states that when children reach 18 years at the orphanages, they are required to leave the institution.

Graduate reintegration

The administrator stated that the Zimbabwean government regarded a child who had reached 18 years old as an adult who could care for himself of herself. This means the institution could release that child to leave the institution. However, the institution has values of creating belonging for the children, being committed to the children and restoring their dignity which mandates them to continue caring for these children until they have finished their education as it is of paramount importance to them.

The Administrator emphasized that "the reintegration process was not only a physical act, but the children are prepared emotionally, financially, psychologically and spiritually."

Caregiver E said "we are always telling these children that this is not their permanent home and they should not relax and forget that one day they will have to fend for themselves."

Reintegration packages

The administrator stated that the Ministry of labor and Social Welfare do not issue reintegration packages to orphanage graduates. All graduate participants stated that the institution only gave them basic utensils to start up their life.

Participants G stated that "it is hard to start settling on your own with nothing; the institution should provide us with outside accommodation, payment of rent for the first three months, they only give utensils like pots, plates and spoons."

Participant F said "It is hard to get jobs and the government should prioritize us when employing and offer us jobs within the civil service."

Challenges faced by orphanage graduates after being reintegrated into society

Locating relatives: The study revealed that most of the graduate's challenges were not physical but psychological and emotional. The graduates had a need to find who they are, their roots and wanting to belong to a lineage of a family. They had an urge to belong to a tribe, have a culture

and have self-identity. The study revealed that the graduates faced challenges with locating their biological family or relatives. This is because most of the orphans in the institution have a living parent or relatives. However, trying to locate them is a challenge for some graduates as they cannot trace their records and some of the children are picked up after being abandoned. This is because most of the children at the orphanage are not completely orphans or children with no relatives but brought in as vulnerable children. Williamson et al. [2] says majority of children in orphanages still have one parent alive and are not double orphans and most have had parents or relatives who for one reason or another felt they could not care for them. SOS Children's Home International [6] says most children in orphanages have relatives that are known who have the impression that an orphanage is beneficial to a child because it fulfils some of his or her basic needs. Some respondents who did not know their relatives stated that their main goal when they left the orphanage was to locate their relatives. However, this was difficult due to lack of information. Respondent C stated that "When I left the home, I tried to locate my relatives, but it was hard because when I was brought here, I was given a new name and surname. No one knew my parents or relatives since I was found abandoned. The institution only had the name of town and hospital where I came from. I tried to go there for more information but there were no records."

Forgiveness and bitterness: The researcher found that graduates from the orphanage develop anger and bitterness towards their relatives when they get to connect with them. This emanate from the feeling of being neglected, which caused them to end up at an orphanage. Also, the feeling was towards those who abused them or their family for failing to protect them. Respondents had challenge with forgiving their relative. Some of the respondents said they had to look for their relatives after being reintegrated back into society. However, at meeting them they realized that they were angry towards them for neglecting them or not being part of their live growing up. Two respondents said that after their parents died their relatives neglected them until they were sent to the children's home by the ministry of social welfare. This has made them angry and unforgiving to the relatives for neglecting them.

Respondent F said "I cannot seem to forgive my aunts and other relatives for neglecting me and my sisters to the extent that we had to grow up at an orphanage. Now that I am working, they are getting closer to me yet when we were at the institution they never used to come to visit. I am bitter about that. Now I even resent them, I do not want anything to do with them"

Failure to bond: Failure to connect and bond with relatives, foster parents and spouses was revealed as a challenge by the study. Four of the respondents said that they failed to bond with the foster parents and their relatives as they could not relate to them. Santrock [18], remarks that as adults, individuals that had an avoidant attachment style as childhood find it difficult to develop relationships and bond as adults. Graduates had difficulty in bonding with the foster parents or relatives. Four of the respondents said that they failed to bond with the foster parents and their relatives as they could not relate to them. They felt that they were strangers to them. One respondent A stated that "It is hard to start a relationship with my relatives as an adult because they are strangers to me. Though I visit them I feel I do not fit in."

Dependency syndrome: In this study one respondent said that growing up at an orphanage had influenced him to be over reliant on other people to do things for him because of being orphan. The respondent had developed dependency syndrome and was used to being given everything. According to Erickson theory in Gross (2010), failure to integrate perceptions of the self into coherent whole results in role confusion, which affect inability to plan or being self-sufficient. One respondent said that growing up at an orphanage meant that they had no worry about food, clothes, and fees. All things were supplied by the institution and donors. Now that they were staying alone, they struggled to buy themselves anything. They had developed dependency syndrome as they expected things to be done for them because they were orphans. They also expected everyone to understand them and feel pity for them. The respondent had this to say, "I miss not being responsible for anything and as an orphan you expect to be pitted every time and be given things by donors. However out here no one gives you anything you must work for everything. I even struggle to buy my own clothes as I was used to be given by my foster parents and donors."

Isolation: Respondents A, C, F and G said they were used staying with others at the orphanage and now that they were out, they felt isolated and lonely. They did not have many friends outside the orphanage. Respondent G said, "At the home everyone become a family and you are never alone, however here it's lonely because I have no family and it is difficult to trust people."

Employment: The researcher found that like many people in Zimbabwe the graduates were struggling to get jobs after finishing their courses. They lacked networking skills. This was described by the National Action Plan for OVC (2007) as the main challenge most orphanage face after reintegration and usually this led to having delinquency behaviors. Like many people in Zimbabwe the graduates were struggling to get jobs after finishing their courses. They also lack networking skills which contributes to them failing to get information about job opportunities and recommendations. Respondent G said "It is hard to get employment; you have to know someone at the company for that company to employ you. This makes it hard for me because I have no network with many people."

Respondent A said "It took me 2 years to be employed as there are scarce jobs."

Cynicism: Most of the graduates had cynicism. They could not trust anyone and where always very conscious of the people around them for the fear of being hurt. They lived in fear that people will not always be there in their live. Santrock [18] states that adults who had ambivalent attachment style in childhood are less trusting, which makes them more possessive and jealous than securely attached adults. The graduates lacked trust for their families when they go back to them after reintegration. One respondent who is married who was neglected by her relatives after her parents died and was abused by uncle, who had remained with them, stated "It is hard to trust again. Sometimes I feel so insecure about my relationship with my husband. I fear he might leave me, and I am so conscious about people around my child I fear they might abuse her."

Self-Identity: The graduates were faced with difficulty of trying to find who they are, their roots, and wanting to belong to a lineage of a family. Those abandoned as infants had no family and could not tell whether originally, they are Shona, Ndebele, or any tribe. The respondents stated that this caused a lot of stress after leaving the home, since at the home all children speak Ndebele.

Lack of family support system: The researcher found that the graduates did not have family support system. This is because once they leave the institution, they felt they could not burden their caregivers with their problems as they were others being taken care of. 60% of the respondents stated that they were lonely, and many times felt isolated even though some of them where married. According to Gross [3], failure to integrate perception causes fear of commitment to or involvement in close relationships due to fear of losing one's own identity which result in isolation. Graduates A, D and G mentioned that they lack family support system when they face challenges in life. This is due to that they feel once they leave the institution, they cannot be burdening their caregivers with their problems as they have the other children to look after. This also contributes to some people take advantage of them because they know they have no family to support and protect them, especially in relationships with others. Respondent A said, "I had problems with my previous boyfriends who used to be abusive verbally and physically to me because they knew I had no family to report to [19,20]."

Conclusions

The researcher concludes that the orphanage is working in the best interest of the child by offering shelter, food, clothes, education, survival skills, family love and spiritual growth to orphans. Through placing children in single family units, they try to represent the normal family set up so that the children can get attention, love, and effective nurturing from caregivers. The above orphanage socialization offers orphans opportunities in life when they leave the institution. This enables them to survive in the outside society.

The orphanage graduates experience a lot of challenges after being reintegration back to society. These challenges emanate from the suppressed conscious of their childhood, the way.

The orphans were socialized at the institution, care they got and the long time they spent at the orphanage. These challenges start by trying to develop self-identify, locate their relative, when they find them, they fail to bond with the relatives and become angry and bitter towards them. Graduates become isolated, lack trust for others and do not develop a sense of belonging to family and the orphanage they came from.

The orphanage has developed an integration plan for the orphanage which the institution follows. The plan does not intend to keep the child at the orphanage but however due to perception by Zimbabweans towards fostering and adoption the children end up staying for longer until they age out of the orphanage. The integration process only has counselling when the child first arrives at the orphanage but does not have counselling before a child is reintegrated back into the society. There is not much preparation for the children for the new environment which they will be going to. This means the graduate is unprepared for the new environment. There was no plan for reintegration packages though the institution sometimes assisted with basic house utensils. Overall, the researcher found that the institution offered opportunities to the graduates which they might not have got if they were not taken in by the institutions. The opportunities being education, sense of belonging, spiritual growth, and survival skills. However, the graduates faced many challenges after reintegration which were identity crisis, locating relatives, getting employment, forgiveness, trust, dependency syndrome, isolation, and lack of family support system.

Recommendations

From the findings the researcher recommends that:

The policy makers should introduce policies that promote fostering and adoption in Zimbabwe and create awareness on the benefits of removing a child from the orphanage and raising them in home set up.

There is need for orphanages to create a child protection policy and safety by giving training to caregivers in areas such as child minding, certificates in community-based work with children and youths and first aid. This allows the caregivers to know the rights of child and how they care for children affects their future. This can also save the institution should there be any libelous issues raised against institution.

There is need for further research on various orphanages on the post life of orphans to generate a psychological theory that will guide their upbringing in Zimbabwe.

The Ministry of Industrial and Social Welfare should set up a fund for continuous assistance for orphans as some still find it difficult to cater for them-selves.

The government should offer employment opportunities in social services to the graduates.

The orphanage should amend their reintegration plan to include programme that locate family members, offer mentoring or business networking, income generating projects at the home, set up post orphanage programmes, offer counselling for children in preparation of reintegration of children back to society.

The orphanage should partner with the affiliated church and other stakeholders to promote temporary or permanent fostering of children so that they familiarize with the outside environment.

Children who are vulnerable, not orphans and still have parents and relatives should not be placed in orphanages but should be placed in safe houses until someone legible can look after them. They should not be brought up as orphans and kept at orphanage until they age out of it.

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