



## STRUCTURAL CHALLENGES OF HOLIDAY PLACEMENT PROGRAMMES FOR CHILDREN IN SOS'S CHILDREN VILLAGE, ZIMBABWE

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### ABSTRACT

*Response to child protection crisis has essentially seen the placement of orphans and other vulnerable children in residential care institutions, particularly children's homes modelled along Western approaches. Questions have been raised relating to issues such as the extent to which children placed in Save Our Souls (SOS) institutions adjust during community holiday visits, the care they receive from non-relatives, their conformity to societal values and norms and the benefits they realize from the Community Holiday Visit Programme. The study reported in this article had interviews with 19 purposively sampled participants. The study results showed that, children committed to residential care experience a plethora of problems during their holiday placements. These problems included difficulties in adjusting to the standard of living of local communities, stigma, perceived abuse and cultural alienation, among others. It was observed that, challenges faced by children during holiday visits in the community related to structural neglect; that is an imperfect match between institutional and community ways of living. The paper concluded that institutionalization of children has negative consequences in their integration into the community. The authors suggested that this structural dichotomy could be addressed through; pre-visits counselling, community sensitization, child participation in programming and resourcing follow up initiatives.*

**KEY TERMS:** residential care, children, community, SOS Children's Village, Zimbabwe

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## INTRODUCTION

The plight of Orphans and other Vulnerable Children (OVCs) in Zimbabwe is one that yokes all stakeholders to come together for a common purpose to provide protective measures, care and support for them. While the global number of children living in institution is imprecise (van IJzendoorn et al, 2014), United Nations estimates that at least 80 % of children in institutions are orphans or have single parent (United Nations, n.d). However, Article 9 of the UN on Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) states that children should not be separated from parents unless it is in their best interests. In an effort to “humanize” the lives of children in institutions, the government of Zimbabwe through the Department of Child Welfare and Probation Services (DCWPS) set up the National Residential Care Standards in 2010 (Government of Zimbabwe, 2010). These guide the provision of child protection services in institutions so that when children are discharged from the institution they will not find it complicated to adjust to the local community lifestyle. The upbringing of children in institutions is expected to be in accordance with the Residential Care Standards stipulated by the Department of Child Welfare and Probation Services. Hence, it is imperative that these standards are adhered to by both public and private institutions. All Save Our Soul (SOS) Children’s Villages including those in Zimbabwe adhere to locally set standards, which may be different to those set by SOS’ International.

SOS Children’s Villages provide care for orphans and vulnerable children through the provision of accommodation and other appropriate forms of care. In an effort to integrate children into the community and reduce the negative effects of institutionalization, a Holiday Placement Programme was set up as part of the child protection initiative. This programme enables children in institutions to get the chance to go for holiday visits and stay with approved foster families in the community. Consistent with Zimbabwe’s 6 tier system enshrined in the National Orphan Care Policy of 1999, linking up with families or relatives in the community should be considered as an ultimate goal for institutionalized children. Therefore, Holiday Placement Programmes are also part of pre-community integration and contact process which aims at nurturing the institutionalized children into socially acceptable individuals. Communities have shown support and commitment to the programme by allowing orphans and vulnerable children to come to their homes for holiday placements. Social Workers, among other professionals, have a major role to play in this regard (Dziro et al, 2013). The SOS child and youth development officers work together with the Department of Social Services to prepare leave of absence. These are documents to seek permission from Department of Child Welfare and Probation Services to allow children to exit the institution for the stated period of time. This is also according to requirements and stipulations of Zimbabwe’s Children’s Act (Chapter 5.06) of 2001. Probation officers are supposed to conduct pre-home visits to the placement homes where children are supposed to go for holidays. Hence, children are expected to adjust to the new communities without difficulties. However, there have been various reports by children, of the challenges that they face during their holiday placements. It is against this background that this research explored the experiences of children during their holiday visits in the community and suggests appropriate measures to improve the programme.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The model of collective representation by Emile Durkheim has contributed meaningfully in understanding socialisation and character development of children living in institutions. Durkheim’s collective representation comprises patterns of behaviour, attitudes, beliefs and ethics as well as a body of joint experiences (Durkheim, 1987). It also includes the structures of ideas of a particular collection of people, including their values, morals and cultural practices. The theory of collective representation states that specific individual behaviours are as a result of the acceptance and adoption of the norms and standards of the group one is affiliated to (Durkheim, 1987). Institutionalised children are detached from main community network as they live within a closed social system. In institutions, many laws and procedures are applied to protect children but these have much bearing on child development. Systems in institutions become internalized by children and these are mostly in discordant with wider community’s norms and beliefs. Institutions are also miniature communities which does not always resemble the values and norms of wider community in which they co-exist. Despite existing in same wider social realm, community visits by children from institutions is like ‘a tourism tour’ which is characterized by diverging beliefs, experiences and perceptions. This has an influence on how children can adapt or survive during holidays in the community. However, holiday visits should serve a purpose in complementing life in institutions with harmony and social compatibility.

In order to answer the shortcomings of institutionalization as espoused by Durkheim’s theorization, empowerment theory in social work becomes an indispensable framework in strengthening the lives of looked after children. This empowerment framework is based on three key essential values: self-determination, collaboration and democratic participation, and distributive justice (McCallum and Prilleltensky, 1996). In social work fields, this framework improves the opportunities of the affected individuals through self-realisation and reflection. Children’s institutions in themselves are a society that is made up of individuals with different backgrounds. There are specific moral standards and values, rules and regulations that children in institution

have been brought up on. According to Mararike (2009), every human being has a physical body, a human soul, and a spirit. For humans to perform optimally, these three aspects need to be continuously nurtured and developed positively to survive. Childhood experience of child is an important determinant of human behaviour and adaptation. To this effect, Adjibolosoo (2000) in Mararike (2009) has concluded that the 'human factor' construct recognises that there are six important dimensions of human being, namely spiritual capital, moral capital, human capital, human abilities, aesthetic capital, and human potential, and these components make up the 'whole person' or 'being' as anticipated by society at large. Using social work empowerment discourse increase resource mobilization, children's self-esteem and build up the ability to act on their own in psychological, sociocultural, political and economic situations in the community. It also allows social workers or child protection vanguards in institutions to focus on social situations, groups, families, contexts, and on a local community, organization or network, meaning that develop a children's ability to function within a certain community. This framework further focuses on developing more positive and promising transactions between people and their environments (Cowger and Snively, 2001; Rankin, 2007). Democratisation, self-determination and distributive justice are important in improving the programming of holiday placement programmes.

## STUDY METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted at SOS Children's village Bindura. This is a children's institution that provides care for orphans and vulnerable children in Zimbabwe. SOS Children's Villages in Bindura, like other institutions in Zimbabwe, is making an effort to reintegrate children with the community through its holiday programme. The research made use of the qualitative research design. The adoption of qualitative design invites contextual exploration and releases us from stupor of familiar into a state of wide-awakeness. Thus, in-depth interviews, key informant interviews and focused group discussions were used to collect data from the participants. This design enabled the researchers to investigate the challenges faced by children during their holiday placements. The use of qualitative research ensured that the researchers gather the respondents' perceptions, thoughts, ideas and other concepts that could not be numerically represented. Using availability sampling, the study selected 10 out of 67 children (6 females and 4 males) who ranged from 10 to 17 years from SOS children's villages Bindura. This sampling technique was used to select children who usually go to community placements during school holidays. Only children who have participated in community holidays at least twice were selected as they possessed wider experience of their situations during those placements periods. The study also made use of three key informants who included 4 caregivers from the institution, 4 community foster parents and one probation officer.

The researchers ensured that participants were informed about the purpose of the research before taking part in the study to avoid deception and encroaching people's privacy. The researchers also ensured voluntary participation by informing respondents that they could choose to participate or withdraw from the study. Pseudo names were also used in presenting data to ensure that the principle of confidentiality was observed. Permission from SOS head office was granted to carry out the study in Bindura. The researchers engaged SOS care givers to get the consent of children who participated in the study.

## FINDINGS

### Experiences of children during their holiday visits

#### *Perceived abuse*

Although, the participants identified abuse as one of the reason why they did not enjoy their holidays, its severity differed across homesteads. For instance they were told to work in the fields from early in the morning up until late hours and when they went to rest, Tumulumbe (not real name)'s foster parents would say:

*Asikana simukai munoshanda ndozvamakauya kuzoita (Girls you need to go and work in the fields because it is part of the reasons why you came here) (Tumulumbe).*

Children interpreted this as a form of abuse since it involved physical work. Upon probing, probation officer reported that the issues of children participating in laborious farming activities remain a cause for concern. It is normal, among communities, that children do participate and help their parents in domestic activities. It was not clear from the study, in terms of time spent in fields, to quantify or qualify it as a form of abuse as children also have responsibility to help their parents. The findings from the study, however, revealed that children's foster parents had inadequate knowledge pertaining to the purpose of the holiday placements. One of the key informants noted that:

*They see children as a form of additional labour. Foster parents sometimes believe children*

*participate in the holiday placement programme in order to help them with their work especially during the harvest season-(Alumbwe).*

The study showed that child abuse is not well understood or it remains controversial. There were some discrepancies on how children and foster parents understood abuse. However, some children expressed enjoyment and pleasure over holiday placements. It was noted that they enjoyed broad and more interactive community life. Networking was cited as a great benefit as they were able to make some friends.

#### *Adjustment to different standard of living*

The study revealed that children were finding it difficult to adjust to the traditional rural lifestyle of the homesteads. Some parents noted that children are used to eating good food such as spaghetti, being given allowances and sleeping on comfortable beds at the institutions. This made them to feel uncomfortable when eating traditional food in the community. It was also indicated that some activities such as water and firewood fetching made life unpleasable among most children from institutions. One the children noted that:

*At times we are made to go and fetch water at a well far away with heavy containers yet we are used to just getting it from the tap-(Chipo).*

The above revelations stand to support the variances that exist between the institutional ways of doing things and the real community life. However, some parents indicated that girls were slow to adjust to community life than boys.

#### *Culture alienation*

Some of children found it difficult to adjust to the traditional culture of the members of the local communities. They felt being forced to participate in traditional ceremonies which became a challenge to most children because they identified themselves as Christians. The situation was aggravated by the fact that all children and their caregivers in institutions were Christians. This works in antithetic to traditional and cultural activities. As a result, children perceived participation in traditional ceremonies as demonic. The following is one case of a child who faced cultural incongruity.

#### **Edith's Story (Not her real name)**

*My aunt could continuously send me to collect traditional herbs from local traditional healers against my will. Initially, I wanted to deny but I was being forced to take part even in traditional rituals that were conducted at the homesteads. The traditional ceremonies made me feel very uncomfortable and reduced our enthusiasm for going to holidays.*

Traditional ceremonies like *kubika doro* (brewing beer to appease ancestors) were unusual, foreign, and alien to children. The key informants reported that the major reason why children found it difficult to identify with traditional local culture was because they were raised in the Christian faith which discouraged and denounced such practices.

#### *Stigma and discrimination*

The information gathered from children indicated that stigma and discrimination were among the major reasons which made children feel unhappy during the holidays. This involved isolation and unfriendly name calling. Some children experienced unfortunate experiences usually from neighbours and other members of the community who could label them as “*Nherera*” which means an orphan. One of the children reported that when he was playing with the other children, one parent said:

*Usatamba nenherera idzo dzeku SOS, dzinokufurira kuti urase hunhu (Do not play with these orphans. Associating with them will lead you to disregard norms, values and morals) - (Motion).*

Most of the children who participated in the study, felt the impact of stigma and they were always regarded as strangers even if they have gone for holidays to the same house several times. This situation becomes more common and serious when a child deviated from expected behaviour. The study revealed that there was unequal treatment between the guardian's biological children and the respondents. Some respondents noted that they experienced emotional distress and were saddened by their circumstances.

*Inadequate basic needs*

Some of children reported that they did not get enough food and diet for their survival. One child identified that at times his foster parents failed to meet his dietary demands because he is diabetic. He said that they were not able to provide a supplementary diet for him. It was noted that the foster family could hardly afford basic food due to poverty and unemployment. On other hand, there was a belief that their foster parents did not use the money they are given to buy basic needs during community visit. A certain number of the children noted that the numbers of meals per day that they witnessed during their placements in the community were less as compared to what they were used to in the institution. However, caregivers indicated that the majority of the foster parents in Zimbabwe live in deep rooted poverty. This made it difficult for parents to feed children more adequately.

**Perceived causes of the challenges faced by children during community holiday placements***Negative attitude of the children towards the programme*

Caregivers revealed that the children already had a negative attitude towards the holiday placement programme before they went for the holidays. They became anxious because of the uncertainty of whether the person that they would stay with would become a part of their lives or could abandon like other caregivers. The key informants further noted that attachment disorders created anxiety among children because of the various circumstances they experienced during childhood. This contributed greatly to negative perceptions towards the holiday placement programme among institutionalized children at SOS Children's Village Bindura.

*Differences in lifestyles between the local communities and the institution*

The findings showed that the beliefs and attitudes of the foster families differed from those of the children's caregivers in the institutions. The way the children are brought up in institutions is highly Western as the institution adheres to the standards of SOS Children's Villages International. The key informants confirmed that there is a wide discrepancy between communities and the institution which often pose problems when the children go for holidays. Children noted that when they are at the SOS Children's Village, their caregivers did not beat them but rather punished them as compared to being beaten when they go for holidays. However, it emerged from the study that caregivers in institution did routinely talk to the children whenever they misbehaved. One caregiver noted that in institutions they teach children to participate in activities like gardening and sporting as a form of punishment. However, children did not take community activities lightly during holiday visits.

*Poverty of the community foster parents*

Local communities have shown support and commitment to the holiday placement programme by allowing OVC to come and stay with them during the holidays. The study, however, revealed that most of the community members were living in poverty. This made it difficult for children to adjust to their ways of living because, at SOS Children's Village, their needs and wants were met unlike when at a foster parent's home. At the institution, they got allowances that ranged from \$90 to more than \$150 a month for clothing and any other needs and wants; a situation different from community life. The Probation officer further noted that children's situation is worsened by foster parents' lack of financial resources to meet their needs. The government did not provide the required resources to conduct pre-house visits where children went for holiday since the Department of Social Services did not have adequate resources in form of finance, human capital and transport. Government Social worker often relied on resources provided by the institution to participate in holiday placement programme which compromised through assessments that they are expected to do during the fostering process.

*Lack of beneficiary engagement*

The study revealed that children were not clearly aware of the significance of going for holiday in the community. Information gathered from the children shows that they did not know that the holiday placement programme is meant for them. The Probation officer confirmed that most children under the programme participated in it without a clear understanding of the impact it was supposed to have on their lives. It emerged that, the programme did not engage the children when it started which made it difficult for some of them to commit to and participate in the programme.

## DISCUSSION

Various authors e.g. Dziro et al, 2013; Powell, 2006, noted that children brought up in residential children's homes tend to face a superfluity of challenges, including compromised emotional, intellectual, verbal, social and physical development. Information gathered in the study revealed that the children felt being exploited by their foster parents when they went for holidays in the community. This was then perceived as an abuse of children; and an act that is against the law with specific reference to provisions of the Children's Act (Chapter 5:06). The complexity of such matters was exacerbated by discrepancies on how exploitation and abuse were understood between by children and local communities. These findings are consistent with previous study by Muzingili and Mutale (2015) which showed that, interpretation of child rights is more cultural than legal in most communities. While the key informants confirmed that, at times, community members lack understanding of the purpose of the holiday placement programme towards child development, children noted that they felt abused when they were beaten for things they had no control over. However, Dziro et al (2013) note that, caregivers feel that the regulations which ruled out corporal punishment disempowered them by forbidding them to properly discipline children in institution. Children also highlighted that they were being verbally abused by their foster parents. According to Piaget (1980), verbal abuse has extremely harmful somatic consequences. Verbal abuse often leads to low self-esteem and self-rejection. It is evident that, if the community members were thoroughly informed, the children's circumstances could have probably been different. Regardless of this, Tizard (1986) concluded that children who do not live with their biological parents have increased chances of being exploited or abused.

Children found it difficult to survive under the circumstances of the poverty-infested homesteads and unpopular norms and values in the community. Institutional and community life were not in harmony with what they expected due to structural dichotomies. Dietary differences and inadequacies, name calling, cultural alienation and stigma were major source of frustrations for children during holiday placements. Gavvon (2014) believes that one probable reason for name calling, teasing and insensitivity is the lack of information, curiosity, a genuine desire to learn and an inability to question constructively. Other studies like Dziro et al (2013) found out that most of the institutions in Zimbabwe are funded by donors and they have the capacity to ensure the provision of quality services to the children in institutions. These donors supply sufficient funds and donations which enable children to be raised in an environment where the standard of living is arguably high as compared to other poor families in the community. While foster parents did not have control over poverty issues; the practice of name calling is considered normal as it has been practiced for a long time because of the belief systems of the VaShona (Hamandishe, 2013). These validates the collective representation theory by Emile Durkheim (1987) where one's lifestyles is related to a group he is affiliated to, and it then becomes difficult for the individual to adapt to a lifestyle that is different from their own. However, the use of social work empowerment framework which emphasizes on; democratization, self-realisation and freedom of participation of affected persons can improve the circumstances of children in institution. . The study also noted that most children in institutions are often left unprepared for the community life. As observed in the study, this creates some challenges when the children are being reunified with the local communities. Be that as it may, some children successfully enjoyed the benefits of holiday placement through networking. Therefore, empowering both institutions and communities through participatory programming is fundamental in strengthening holiday placement programmes.

Many factors were as contributory to negative experiences among children during their holidays in the community. According to Piaget (1980), children experience the lack of caregiver permanency in their early stages which in turn has a negative effect on his/her development. Differences in lifestyles between the local communities and the institution cannot be undermined in influencing the situation of children during vacations. There is a sharp contrast between the type of socialisation of children in institutions and that of the local traditional community members (Dziro et al, 2013; Hamandishe, 2013). More so, poverty in families is also a major issue. This concurs with the study findings which revealed that, the majority of foster families failed to meet basic needs of the children. Lack of wider consultation and engagement of children was one of the culprits that complicated the life of children in the society. Scholars like (Foster et al, 2001; Muzingili and Chidyausiku, 2016) believe that, if participants are not involved in programmes that are intended to benefit them they might be unwilling to participate or might not see a need to commit to such a programme. Therefore, Ndlovu (2015) suggest that children should be involved in devising interventions for safeguarding their wellbeing to ensure that they are committed to such programmes. This explains the reasons to why children showed no interest in going for holidays. To ensure the success of holiday placement programme, children should be empowered and nurtured constructively so that they can own the programme.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### Pre-visit counselling

Counselling will enable both children and their families to embrace the essence of these visits, and their value in child development. This can become feasible when people responsible for children are aware of the circumstances of family to be visited.

### Dialogue and communication

The study revealed that most children were unaware of the purpose of the holiday placement. Therefore, there is need for the provision of adequate and quality information to children about the programme to ensure their participation throughout the process.

### Resource mobilization

In response to inadequate monitoring and follow-up programmes, government should avail adequate funds for the situational assessments on the children's placements so as to ensure their security.

### Community sensitization

The challenges faced by children indicate the gaps that still exist in making the holiday placement programme a success in reunifying the institutionalised children with the local communities. Hence, there is need for the sensitization of community members on the importance of safeguarding the welfare of the children during placements.

## CONCLUSION

The study revealed that children committed to residential care face a plethora of problems during their holiday placements. The discrepancies between institutional and community life made situation hard for children from residential care. Thus, institutional and community systems lack structural consensus on patterns of living and this give children from institutions new set of life during holiday visits. The government as a part child protection macro system was not providing adequate support to make follow ups; and this compounded the situation of children. The study, therefore, concludes that the long term institutionalisation of children has negative consequences in their integration in the community. Thus, despite, holiday placement programme being necessary to increase contact between the orphans and vulnerable children and their local communities, institutional system need to be perfected to reflect the values of the mainstream society.

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