RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Effectiveness of Psychosocial Services Offered at a Residential Care Home in the Philippines in Preparing Residents for Life After Care

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ABSTRACT

Leaving home is a major milestone in every young adult's life, often a time of excitement and some apprehension. However, for individuals who grow up in residential care, this is a time of significant change as they are thrusted into what the literature describes as 'instant adulthood'. Research indicates that young people who leave residential care services, or "care-leavers", experience higher levels of unemployment, poverty, homelessness, and poor health compared to young people who leave familial homes. The majority of the literature that exists on the experience of care-leavers comes from high-income countries where kinship placements and foster care are more common than residential homes. Many developing countries, on the other hand, depend on residential homes to care for high numbers of orphaned or abandoned children. Little is known, however, about the services that are offered at these homes, especially from the perspective of residents themselves. This study aimed to qualitatively explore and evaluate the psychosocial services offered at a children's care home in the Philippines and their role in preparing residents for life after care. Semi-structured interviews were used to investigate the experiences and opinions of care-leavers and staff members. Data was analyzed using thematic framework analysis using NVIVO 11. Overall, participants viewed the support they received as effective in preparing them for life after care, although they did face challenges including economic instability, lack of belonging, and challenges adapting to the 'outside world. Several recommendations were suggested by participants to better support future care-leavers, including provision of counselling services and extended stays to allow for completion of mandatory schooling. More research is needed to strengthen the evidence base in order to champion policy and regulatory change.

INTRODUCTION

There are approximately 2.7 million children living in institutional care globally [1]. Research indicates that children who grow up in residential care (institutional care provided in a non-family-based group setting), experience higher levels of unemployment, poverty, homelessness, and poor health when compared to young people who grew up in familial homes [2]. In the Philippines, residential care is the primary response for orphans when kinship placements are not possible. Due in part to high poverty (over 20% nationally), kinship placements are often not an option [3]. The exact number of children in care is unknown, as there is no central record-keeping of care-providers. These children are generally under the care of some 197 privately-operated homes across the Philippines, which are residential homes operated by licensed, non-state providers, making it difficult to assess the

the needs of this population and regulate service standards [4]. Services that develop life skills, build resilience, and support community integration are endorsed by the international community for promoting well-being and better outcomes for the young people who leave residential care services, or "care-leavers" [5,6]. However, little is known about residents' own feelings towards these services, potentially leading to suboptimal or poorly targeted interventions that fail to address the full range of challenges they face. The aim of this research was to explore and evaluate the psychosocial support and services offered at a care home in the Philippines for preparing residents for their transition out, in an effort to identify potential opportunities for improvement.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative study was used to explore the perceived effectiveness of psychosocial supports offered at a residential care home in Subic Bay, Philippines, in preparing residents for life after care. This study, conducted in June 2018, utilized semi-structured interviews (n= 10) and thematic framework analysis to understand the perceptions of care-leavers (n= 7) and staff (n= 3) of the aging out process and the difficulties faced by youth upon leaving residential care, an appropriate design for an exploratory study focusing on understanding the 'lived experience' of the participants [7]. Ethics approval was obtained from the University of Leeds prior to commencing the research. Each interview was conducted, transcribed, and anonymized by the lead researcher. Data was analyzed with NVIVO 11 using a thematic analysis process [7]. Codes were generated inductively, generating a framework matrix of emerging themes which was used to index subsequent interviews. No data was excluded.

RESULTS

The ten interviews highlighted that transitioning out of care was "*really different*" and "*emotional*" for for care-leavers, with the main challenges being:

Economic: Financial difficulties were the most

discussed challenges. Some struggled with budgeting; one told us, "*sometimes I don't eat because… I spend my money not [on] food, sometimes so many expenses in school.*" Others described needing to support their families. Staff supported these points expressing that care-leavers often wished they could return to the home due to financial challenges.

Belonging: Care-leavers described a lack of belonging and challenges fitting into life outside the residential home. One participant expressed difficulty living somewhere where "*nobody loves you*", while another felt jealous of peers who had families that could attend events at school.

Increased Responsibility: All past residents expressed difficulties balancing work, studies, budget, cooking, etc. Staff framed this increase in responsibility as "*facing reality*" and "*entering the real world*".

Shock: Staff observed the home as a sheltered community. "*They live with the other kids, the houseparent's, they go to school [together], they go to a church [together]… so it's like one world that they have*", one staffer explained. Consequently, once residents leave, they are exposed to people with differing beliefs, values, and circumstances. One past resident described feeling alarmed when people used curse words, partied, and drank alcohol. Another staff member expressed concern for those transitioning out of care because they had experienced people "*being swayed*" to participate in those kinds of activities and "*going wild*".

Independence: Freedom was considered by all as the best part of leaving care. One care-leaver saw their new independence as a chance to grow and stand on their own. Another stated, "*I want freedom, I can go wherever I want… I can do what I want".* One staff member explained that children may want to be free because the house rules are not imposed by their 'real' parents/family and therefore might see them as restrictive or unfair.

Effectiveness: All past residents felt that the support they received from the home was effective

in preparing them for life after care, while staff viewed effectiveness as dependent on the individual. One told us, *"those who've experienced living with their own families, when they come to [the home] at... 10, 12 years-old they actually know what it's like so it's not as difficult for them, they appreciate more the things you do for them. As opposed to those who come at... 4 or 5 they feel like they're enclosed in this community."* Staff also associated a resident's relationship to their family and God as important factors for effective aging out.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Participants were asked for recommendations for strengthening current services. Recommendations included lengthening the stay at the home until residents completed school, increasing availability of health check-ups, and setting up bank accounts for residents. Two participants spoke about the need for more counselling and psychological services. One said, *"my suggestion [is] counselling, they need that to know [how to] express their feelings. Not all of us likes to express our feelings."* A staff member also expressed a need for access to professional psychological advice, especially when dealing with children from troubled backgrounds or difficult behaviour.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The purpose of this research was to explore and evaluate the psychosocial services offered at a Filipino care home for preparing residents for life after care in an effort to identify areas of improvement.

This study identified the main challenges faced by care-leavers as economic insecurity, lack of belonging, increased responsibility, and adapting to the 'outside world', echoing findings from other studies [2,8,9]. Such difficulties are also experienced by those leaving parental care; however, residential care-leavers often face these challenges alone upon turning 18 and aging out [10]. This study indicated that despite facing various challenges, care-leavers regarded the support they received while in care as effective in preparing them for independent life,

even in some cases encouraging a sense of excitement for the opportunity to be independent. The strong community cultivated by the residential home allowed residents to stay connected even after they turned 18. Indeed, many previous residents worked at the home or continued attending the in-house church. It is likely that continued involvement in the home is an important component of care-leaver's social support system and may mediate the challenges associated with the transition to independent life.

This study brings attention to the needs of an oft-overlooked population, adding to the growing body of literature documenting the experiences of residential care leavers in the Philippines and beyond [2,9-11]. It was initiated with the intention of informing service expansion at the host organization, but whose findings and recommendations could be used to spark reflection and action at similar homes nationally. One such recommendation was to provide consistent access to psychological support or professional counselling to help address feelings of isolation and stress experienced by care-leavers, aligning with international advocacy for greater emotional support for children in alternative care [6].

This study had several limitations. As this research focused on just one home, the generalizability of findings and recommendations is limited. Additionally, participant selection relied on a staff gatekeeper within the residential home, potentially producing sampling bias. Therefore further research should focus on sampling from a larger, more diverse population to ensure greater representation and provide better insights into the needs of care-leavers.

This research on a traditionally unrecognized group about their experiences in residential services can help future generations of care-leavers through the identification of the strengths and weaknesses of services in a residential care home in the Philippines.

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